Either Die a Hero

by Kuraiummei

Summary

Garrus Vakarian in canon seemed personally enraged about Saren's actions on Eden Prime. A colony slaughtered. A Spectre dead. Geth, everywhere. He dropped everything he had going in life to see justice done when an opportunity presented itself. That's not precisely normal, not unless the losses and betrayals were personal.
Maybe they were.

Begins the tale of Mass Effect just a little early, starting in 2167, T-16 years until Eden Prime. A story of talented people who are neurodivergent, alien, champions of their struggles, and sometimes a little strange.


Notes

****Feel free to skip any authors notes throughout the story, but please read this section before you begin.****

1. You will likely recognize things I've pulled from other people's mind canon and bastardized to work in this world. I've got permission from the original authors in almost every case, and always credit the origin at least once.

2. We start with a very young Nihlus, and he's much different from his older self. Don't worry, he'll grow closer to the Nihlus in canon by the time ME1 hits, but for now he's youthful and cocky. Don't take the OOC bat of shame to me until you've given him a shot!

3. You can blame this story on the works of authors like Smehur, AceQueenKing, MizDirected, Recidiva, Fistful_of_Gamma_Rays, MosiacCream, Velasa, 11_Gadget_27, ninalanfer, ba_rabby, and, hell, so many others. Their words dragged me kicking and screaming into love with these characters. Another major shout out to the Ao3/Tumblr communities and the people who have been reading, commenting, and supporting me as I write. You know who you are, and I love you all bunchies.

4. *VERY IMPORTANT* This story includes several chapters with YouTube links and snippets of song lyrics that are relevant to the chapter. This is A-OKAY with the AO3/Youtube terms of service. I link to the artist's official YouTube channel where possible. (Snippets of lyrics are okay, just not full songs in fics.) Please don't give me grief by reporting these bits, as I've known fellow authors to have odd issues with story deletion without a proper chance to correct or challenge TOS reports.

5. The compiled lexicon, codex entries, and various bits of helpful fanon lore have been compiled in my: Manifesto of Mindcanon and Plothole Fills. If you're looking for compiled data on ME characters or my OCs, that's a great place to look. As a side note, my characters, concepts, and places are free for use. Credit me if you borrow them please, but feel free to borrow and play with anything I've built.

6. This fic addresses some HEAVY ISSUES, so READ THE TAGS. Be aware that I will not be presenting anyone as perfectly good or evil. There will be just as much hate, racism, graphic violence, and backwards thinking as there is selfless sacrifice, forgiveness, love, learning, and gentle sunlit mornings. Read with care. If you have strong feelings about specific characters, be prepared to witness them facing their demons, and sometimes failing. I promise you a happy ending, but the road through this hell is paved with thorns.

7. Have an issue? A personal comment? I'm always happy to hear you from you guys. Email
me at kuraiummei@gmail.com if you'd like to chit chat. If you find typos and want to let me
know, just leave a comment in the relevant chapter. Thanks!

8. Concrit welcome.

Without further ado...

Either Die a Hero
Wish-fulfillment shouldn't be a dirty word

Chapter Summary

Garrus discovers the high of second hand victory, and comes up with a way to take better care of himself. Saren and Nihlus make it back alive yet another day.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mari/Pari - Turian closed dialect for mom/dad. Informal. (Credit: MizDirected)

Torin or Tarin - Male/masculine/crested or female/effeminate/uncrested adult Turian, over the age of 15. (Credit: MizDirected, but modified.)

Chapter 1 has been edited for clarity, extended by about 1k words, and grammar polished as of 1/15/2018. A big thanks to Marie_Fanwriter for beta-ing the edits, and CristalDePhoenix for catching my typos!

Edited again on 8/27/18.
Edited again on 4/26/19.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not five minutes ago Garrus had been on the edge of slamming his credentials down on Pallin’s desk, and walking out of C-Sec for good. Not exactly a wise career move, especially considering he had less than a year on the force. Still, it was a choice the sniper had been severely tempted to make and damn the consequences… but now?

Now he could breathe, and maybe not walk out on his job.

Garrus stared at the unexpected news on his screen, mandibles splaying outward in happy disbelief. One of the many things dragging down his keel was a big case from last month that had gotten mired in red tape and forcibly shut down.

Word on the street had been that Menir, a slimy Krogan dealer, was selling tainted Hallex to dumb kids looking for an extra kick while clubbing. He’d stumbled on video proof of the crime happening, but his evidence had been obtained without a warrant. Not exactly his fault, as the lead had come at a moment’s notice. Really, he’d done nothing more obtrusive than slip in the back door of a club and set his visor to record.

Garrus had delivered a vid file that caught conversation and a sale, proof of 'knowledgeable endangerment of minors' and 'controlled substance vendoing' straight to C-Sec's Criminal Leads Desk, fully expecting he'd get a call when it came time to raid Menir's location.

The hard evidence he'd taken a risk to get had been flat out dismissed.
Following the rejection, and a thorough dressing down, the determined officer had carefully submitted the triplicate forms and departmental requests that C-Sec academy had taught him to. The documents he couldn’t have thought to fill out in the first place, because no one had prior intel on the dealings. But whatever. The tall detective had figured they would at least open an investigation, because children’s lives were more important than paperwork, right?

His superiors denied the request. Red light, full stop, ‘leave it alone, Vakarian’.

Garrus half suspected it was meant as a punishment, having to watch crime continue because he hadn't perfectly followed regs. It sounded like something his pari would do out of spite...

Living with the choice, and the backwards way things worked around C-Sec in general, wouldn't be so bad if a dozen more young adults hadn't been rushed to various emergency rooms around his ward, seizing and hallucinating with the exact same symptoms. Some had died. Others were brain damaged for life. Those reports sat in a drawer of data pads he wasn't supposed to have, strictly speaking.

The tall detective had expected that pile to just... keep on growing. It wouldn't anymore though. The drug suppliers were dead, and Menir was in custody awaiting trial.

Case closed… though not by C-Sec.

Satisfaction rolled from his subvocals as he minimized the bland status update on his case in favor of the related news link. The words were hemmed in on all sides with other links and advertisements, but he only had eyes for the great- no, magnificent story unfolding on screen. The media-sensationalized recounting of a declassified ST&R operation lay before him like a name day present.

A crime ring based on Talos IV -a pit of slime but not usually blatant villainy- had been raided by a Council agent. The warehouse compound had been full of slave labor and tainted Hallex, with shipping records that connected to drug dealers on five planets, two lunar colonies, and the Citadel itself.

All of it was now gone, wiped out from the roots up.

He leaned back in his desk chair, relieved beyond words.

Red tape had gotten in the way, again. But for right now? That didn't matter, because a Spectre by the name of Saren Arterius had done the job for him. Garrus scrolled up to reread his favorite bit: colorful descriptions of the slaver compound's ragged remains. Rubble, blood, and little else. There were accompanying holos of wide-eyed people, malnourished and newly freed, staggering out of the medical ship that had removed their control chips. Images of the drug making slavers themselves, dead and discarded like so much refuse, left to rot in the dirt. Last among the pictures, but definitely not least, were depictions of Hallex in mounds -small mountains of the stuff- being incinerated in bulk.

A laugh escaped Garrus’ chest, breathy and a little overwhelmed.

As he rushed to pull up the case files, intending to enter a more detailed recounting of it's closure -to make sure the full scope of it was on the record- Garrus decided that even if his pari had forbidden him from the Spectre program it didn't mean he couldn't appreciate his might-have-been colleague’s exploits.

In a moment of mild rebellion, riding on the high of second-hand victory, he also decided that
Arterius was his new personal hero. The Spectre did damn fine work, never mind what the critics said about his methods.

“-as per Council authority, reported by… dated… signed. That’s it. Case closed. Spirits bless.”

“Feet. Off. The Console.” Saren ground out, striding into the CIC of his ship.

Nihlus gave his best attempt at a convincing pout, but the only response he got was narrowed eyes as the other male came to a halt beside said console. Silence filled the room as the younger agent tried increasingly overdone attempts at pleading with his subvocals and expression, practically begging Saren to let him leave his feet kicked up.

The silver-grey torin stood firm, glaring.

Eventually the younger male gave up, their stalemate breaking with his accepting sigh. Dark brown feet tipped in two long, black talons were moved to the floor. Truth be told, defeat had been more or less expected after having lost that exact same battle countless times before. His mentor-turned-partner was naturally fastidious, and rarely put up with anything less than professional behavior, not even when they were on Nihlus’ own vessel.

Oddly though, Saren continued to stand there after he’d won, tense and glaring at nothing in particular. Nihlus leaned sideways, chin coming to rest on a palm as he placidly inquired, “Something wrong?”

With a quiet chuff, Saren crossed his arms under his keel. “Our mission here may have been a success, but it was not... smooth.”

Crest tilting left and right in general agreement of that observation, Nihlus hummed soothingly. The mission really had been kind of a mess -a cluster fuck caused by bad intelligence reports and unforeseen circumstances- but all targets had been eliminated, and all Spectres were alive. That counted as a win, right?

Though their third, Jondum, was admittedly passed out in medbay.

The Salarian wasn’t exactly in bad shape; top-tier clotting augs had kept him in the game until their three person team made it to safety. Even better, Saren’s ship had so much cutting edge tech in it’s medbay that there wasn’t even a need to blaze a trail for medical services.

Nihlus regularly teased Saren about the excessive facilities, but still made use of them himself from time to time. His own ship had an ancient autodoc he’d picked up on the cheap, just a few thousand credits at a junkyard on Korlus. His 'bot could administer painkillers, stop bleeding, and fix bullet holes. Good enough for him. Who really needed a VI assisted tissue printer with six robotic arms and a triple loader microfab anyway? Well... Saren, apparently.

He’d heard of hospitals fighting bidding wars to have one of those.

Whether excessive or called for, the top notch medbay was seeing use. Jon had put himself into medical as soon as they boarded, and the swanky robot had bleeped about various things before sedating the wounded Salarian and getting to work. The automated medical suite probably had all the
microgram bullet shavings picked out by now, and by the time they arrived on the Citadel he
expected the other agent would be fighting fit without any further treatment.

Jondam was a scrappy one anyways, didn't flinch under pain or stress. A good agent to have at one's
back-

"Mmmng."

Another quiet sound of frustration from Saren pulled Nihlus' distracted thoughts back to the other
torin. For lack of anything else to say, he hummed soothingly some more. The mission hadn't been
that bad, really. Just a bit messy. Wasted time, some running back and forth, enemy calls for backup
not scrambled in time...

Nihlus estimated that there were over a hundred dead Blood Pack mercenaries between the three of
them. And that? Was some fine work by any standard. His only injuries were a pair of sore feet and a
moderate burn down his left arm from a crafty Vorcha with incendiary ammo. Saren himself was, as
per usual, mildly dusty and extremely hungry, but that was about it. Most enemies found it hard to hit
someone who could shift time-space around at a whim.

“We nearly lost the data from the second server,” came the eventual grouse from his partner, having
thought himself in circles and settled on what was bothering him the most.

The green eyed torin reached up to pat Saren's arm, the hide of his palm connecting with grey armor
plating to no apparent effect. “True, it was a close one, and it mighta been easier with Tela or Riaz
along, but we got the job done.”

Saren grunted absently and continued to stare off into space, lost in thought. He knew the other
Spectre could wing it with the best of them -Nihlus had seen him let out his brutal and cunning side
on several occasions- but the laconic torin always favored the well planned mission. Saren had a
code of minimum risk for maximum efficacy, one that he’d lectured on repeatedly during his
mentorship. Nihlus wouldn’t say that methodology had gone in one aural canal and out the other, but...

‘...well, at least the glaring’s eased off, and hey, the chaos wasn’t my fault this time.’

Nihlus smiled wistfully at his thoroughly preoccupied colleague. After years of the other male’s
hyper-attentive perfectionism he just found the grumpiness and obsessive nitpicking endearing.

“Let’s head back to the Citadel, report in, and take a week or two of down time, yeah? Been awhile
since our last break.”

Saren's electric gaze turned to bear down on him, the pale ridge of his right browplate lifting
incredulously.

“Okaaaay...” Nihlus drew out the word, mandible quirking to the left in consideration. “One week of
down time? Stop by a bathhouse for some nice... ”

It really was unnerving sometimes how perfectly still and focused Saren could be. His former mentor
did 'nonplussed' like a professional.

“... Four days?”

“...”

Not to mention the electricity in that steady stare.
“Threeeee?”

The silence went back and forth for several moments before, surprisingly, Saren was the first to break with a blink-and-you-miss-it glance at his burned arm.

“Two days,” was all his partner said, leaning over him to access the pilot's console and adjust their course. Nihlus' smile turned smug. Getting the other torin to take two days of down time was in fact a small miracle.

'score, team vacation. heh.'

Nihlus talon rose up to make an imaginary slash in a tally book he kept no track of, but the twinge of pain from his burned hide made him flinch instead. He looked down at the mottled, medi-gel slathered arm with consideration...

'mmmph. ow. ah well... worth it.'

Following the news report that had brightened his day… week… month … and kept him from doing something potentially very stupid, Garrus developed a system. A sort of self-care routine to keep his spirits up when things got rough at work. It went like this: every time one of his cases hit a wall he would add fifty credits to a chit he kept in a kitchen drawer.

A two week delay for a case of domestic abuse due to paperwork processing issues? Add fifty.

Some sleazy politician buys off a security guard before he can get his hands on the video surveillance he needs to solve the case? Another Fifty.

A repeat thief walks free because he couldn’t just follow them around for a few days to catch them at it? Spirits damn it, fifty.

Whenever the higher ups forced him to drop a case because it was 'politically sensitive'? Fifty. Sometimes double. Those pissed Garrus off.

The tall sniper stashed those credits away, not for his savings account, not for his clan dues, and not for bills. No, they were only for him to use to stay sane.

Whenever news hit that Arterius specifically or the Spectres in general, blew up, gunned down, or somehow ended another criminal enterprise he would nab his secret chit, possibly his Viper, and go out for a night of wish fulfillment.

If there were enough credits he’d buy an upgrade for his rifle, install it, and fine tune the new addition at the range. Garrus liked to imagine each shot landing between the eyes of the monsters constantly slipping through his talons. If he was in the mood for technical shooting, that was. Sometimes he wasn’t. Occasionally the itch in his trigger finger just needed to be scratched before he did something stupid.

Those nights he just fired... and fired... and fired.

Sometimes there were so many credits sitting on the card that he would take shots until his shoulder
ached from the recoil, just to forget. One for every single confirmed kill by a Spectre agent since the last time he'd gone out for a night. One for every murderer coming up for parole. One for every body where they never found the killer.

On the bad days Garrus is there pretty damn late. The ‘open late’ range staff sometimes kicked him out when it would hit two hours past closing time and he still hadn’t run out of anger or thermal clips.

It wasn’t always a bad day though.

When he solved a case, Garrus would just go out for drinks instead, looking to unwind after some sort of progress. It was especially great if he was carrying a near empty chit. It meant that things elsewhere were going right too... and well, if he follows someone home those night? All the better, since he knows it'll put him in a solid, calm mood for his next shift. More criminals off the streets, a few drinks, and a decent lay? It was usually enough to restore his will to stay the course his clan had set him on. C-Sec Detective, born and bred, just like his pari.

But if the one time partners he charms often have silver-grey plates and no colony markings, that's... merely a coincidence.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for stopping by to read EDaH! (Or welcome back for all you wonderful re-readers!) Your thoughts, constructive criticism, or even just 'asdnfasbdfasdfsdf;asdf' in the comment box are most welcome! I do read them all, and reply to pretty much every one (eventually? Haha...) For anyone joining us from the Macen/Avitus ship, I've got to warn you that they don't appear for a good 190 chapters or so, when Saren picks up Avitus for Spectre training. No one will mind if you jump forward to there, but you will be missing a bunch of plot that he's going to be wrapped up in! Either way, enjoy.

Fanfic Recommendation: An Anniversary Dinner (3011 words) by AceQueenKing (Nihlus/Saren)
Fubar, that's the world you're looking for

Chapter Summary

In which Garrus is the very bestest multitasker, and Saren does not shoot anyone for being incompetent.

Chapter Notes

So... doing research for a fic, I've discovered, is a great deal of fun. I can find out some neat science, and then mangle it to suit. I can make shit right the fuck up. It's great! Also, I refuse to use female pronouns for Asari. //puts foot down//

Lexicon:
nais - Asari equivalent of a gender pronoun. (pronounced Nah-ees) (credit: MizDirected, mildly modified)
Delugia - The Salarian Goddess of Fortune
Litany of Delugia - a chant, repeated over and over, to evoke Delugia and improve the luck and fortune of yourself or loved ones named in the chant
Torin - Male gendered or crested Turian above the age of majority. (credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: Thermal clips, because the ME1 system is boring.

Edited 11/17/17, Added about 2x the words.
Edited 8/27/18, Worked on flow and tweaked some of Saren's thoughts.
Edited 6/16/19 for extra snark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘FUBAR.’

It was a colorful, short-hand word that Garrus had heard under many, many different circumstances. His translator didn’t exactly know what to do with the odd acronym. The program would sometimes spit out things like ‘interesting situation’ or ‘problem’ into his aural canals, but other times it would give up and send a dictionary definition listing to his visor.

Last week he'd finally broken down and bothered a coworker about it. O'Riley had laughed sheepishly and tried to explain yet another human figure of speech to Garrus. It was an antiquated human phrase, he'd said, a favorite of military personnel from Earth's mid 1900s. The acronym had evolved over the years, falling in and out of common use, and was valid for just about any situation when applied properly.

Garrus had heard it used with fond aggravation in the breakroom to describe the heating unit and it's tendency to burn some foods but not others.

“This situation is just... fubar. Dear God…” had been muttered in grief after finding a serial killer's lair on Kithoi Ward, filled with seven rotting people dressed up as dolls.
On one memorable occasion of oversharing, it had even been used to describe how well someone’s date had gone the previous night.

‘Fucked up beyond all recognition… fits this situation,’ Garrus decided, pulling back into cover and reloading his service weapon.

Fuck was a terrific word. It didn’t translate well into the Turian Closed Dialect but the word had a good, harsh sound to it. Systems Alliance Common usually sounded flat and emotionless to him, but ‘fuck’ seemed to come out with some feeling behind it. Not subvocals, but… something.

The detective finished reloading his pistol and signaled the next civilian to start running toward safety. The terrified pink form sped across the floor trailing shaking tentacles, and the sniper had to push down a surge of empathy at seeing the civilian’s distress.

Instead of letting it get to him, Garrus popped up and started firing, lamenting that the indoor battle was too close quarters for his Viper. Working on a space station, the opportunity to use his ranged weapon of choice didn’t occur anywhere near often enough for his taste... and while he was good with a pistol, he was an artist with a rifle.

Still, he caught one merc in the neck, another in the shoulder, and the Hanar accountant made it across the gap unharmed. Rinse and repeat for two Salarians and an Asari. Garrus dropped back behind the overturned metal desk he was using as cover, slamming a fresh thermal clip into place.

Up. It was a word generally related to positivity. Not that there was much of that to be found here today. He chuffed in dissatisfaction when the next two civilians made a run for it during a reloading lul. Going out of sync was disorganized, and one of them paid the price for that. A manager by the look of him, the sharply dressed Salarian screamed in pain as he was clipped by a round a mere meter from safety. It looked like an arm wound though, so Garrus wasn’t particularly worried. Better a stray bullet to the fool’s arm than a shot to the torso. Salarians rrrreally didn't handle those well.

‘I suppose it’s… something of a small miracle any of them are getting out,’ a darker part of Garrus’ mind mused.

There were at least sixty Blue Suns robbing the main building of the Citadel Central Bank & Reserve, running roughshod over the five hundred some-odd civilians who worked inside the tower. Even worse, the classic tactic of taking hostages didn’t seem to be a part of their game plan. They were shooting to kill.

It took a certain kind of stupid to attempt a violent bank heist on the Citadel, but it took an ever greater madness to just murder on through the building without the safety of innocent people to hide behind at the end.

‘What are you mercs thinking? Where are you going with this…’ Garrus growled, desperate to know how they expected to get away with the attack so he could foil the attempt.

This wasn’t a planet, with a million places to hide and a hundred ways to escape. No, the Citadel may be an oversized, heavily populated tin can run by bugs that melted or exploded if you so much as looked at them the wrong way, but said tin can had ports that were incredibly simple to lock down. Cameras everywhere. This company of Blue Suns was either suicidal, or they had a trick hidden in their collective cowls that he hadn’t figured out yet.

Starting to consider capture and unapproved interrogation -which he'd have to kill to hide or face another suspension- the tall sniper spun out from the side of his cover, moving and firing as he strafed to a new defensive position. Once clear he turned to press his carapace to the wall while his
kinetic shields regenerated, plinks of return fire impacting the wall nearby.

Calmly, he double checked his mental count of the remaining rounds on his current thermal clip, and turned to contemplating the strange human acronym some more while the display for his shield’s energy levels refilled in a corner of his visor.

'Beyond... is neutral, at least. Not inherently positive or negative…'

That was as far as he got on the lighter topic before Garrus’ thoughts tilted back into frustration and returned to considering the possibilities the mercenaries had for escape. The building would have been surrounded by C-Sec at this point, so the front door wasn’t an option. They’d either need to use explosives to blow a hole underneath the building to get into the keeper tunnels, or... they could escape from above, via shuttlecraft?

A couple shots hit the wall a little too close with a tiny spray of sparks, so he made to move.

Sliding between more of the overturned metal desks, which had been holding up surprisingly well under fire, Garrus found himself a new vantage point and scanned for targets.

The fuzzy edged outline of mercs fizzed into place on his visor, the scanning program tracking vitals, giving location, and estimating stature. It wasn’t pinpoint enough to take long range shots with, but it was more than sufficient to help him keep track of hostiles in close quarters while outnumbered.

The blue-eyed sniper took a few pot shots to flush out a hostile on the left, herding them toward weaker cover, then shifted over and lined up a shot when the mercenary obliged his herding. As that one fell he spotted a target of opportunity, catching another in the neck joint of their armor. With that he surged forward and down into a new hiding spot, and started looking for more civilians to evacuate.

Garrus’ motions were smooth as he continued to clear the floor of enemy mercenaries, so far ahead of C-Sec’s other forces on site. The tall detective had started this mess on a team of four in a set of ten teams, but the others had been too damn complacent for his tastes. Too slow. There were monsters knocking down the doors, and civilians in the line of fire, and he didn’t have time for procedure when it meant operating at the speed of smell.

Maybe it was because he’d only been out of active duty for two years, but he was still primed for combat and not complacent half-efforts. Working at C-Sec for the end term of his civil service was supposed to have been a gift from his superiors for exemplary service in the field... but the desk didn’t suit, the regulation un-modded firearms were so underpowered it was depressing, and the standard issue cobalt armor sat poorly on his shoulders.

He’d pay for going solo later, the detective was sure, but… after saving lives.

Garrus reloaded his pistol yet again, waiting for the majority of the nearby Blue Suns to empty their own clips before leaning out and offering return fire. His shots were joined by those of the only effective backup he’d had today: a single, brave Asari security guard who remained on site and alive after the initial evacuation. Their eyes met as the two acknowledged that they’d stumbled into each other’s battlefield again, too busy to stop and chat, but at least they could take care not to blind fire at the other.

The mountainous sniper shifted to a new foxhole while wondering idly if the sprinkler system could be used as a distraction. Probably not, but the thinking was a way to keep his mind busy, and he was quickly running out of letters in the acronym he’d been contemplating. He’d normally talk to the other officers over coms, but the only channels Garrus had access to at the moment were the Citadel
Security channels he’d turned off so he couldn’t hear orders to ‘slow down’ or ‘fall back’.

Yet another stray bullet clipped the edge of the nearby wall with an orangey spray of sparks. A handful of staff screamed in terror, ducking their heads as they jostled deeper into their makeshift hiding place. Garrus hissed in anger.

‘There are too many noncombatants trapped in the nooks and crannies of this damn building. I’m not moving fast enough.’

Garrus tried to push hard, but each new floor was a fresh mess of people dead, dying, or in danger.

The detective’s subvocals wavered in dissatisfaction as he pressed back into his latest cover. This kind of thing wasn’t supposed to happen on his station, and he was especially pissed about it being on his ward. Restraint dwindling further, Garrus went on the offensive as soon as his shields were half full. Rolling across the gap, he took a series of precise shots before dropping back into safety just in time for his barrier to fall with a staticy sizzle. Shields at forty, he popped out to finish the job.

‘There’s one more down. Two... dammit, missed... okay, down. Three, headshot... ...and down. Good.’

The enemy numbers fell, and he could sense the remaining mercs' growing fear. Wanting to prey on that, Garrus targeted a potted plant in the corner and fired. It exploded with a loud shattering sound that tricked several of them into jumping cover. Two of their number didn’t hug the walls well enough to avoid a crack-shot Turian in a piss-poor mood.

With years of service spent in urban warfare to draw upon, Garrus took out the remaining hostiles in the immediate area with similarly unforgiving and creative tactics.

As soon as the proverbial dust settled he called out, "It's clear!” and civilians erupted from the woodwork. The stream of terrified people in business suits and improbable footwear uttered no thanks, but at least some shot him desperately grateful looks on the way out.

Garrus moved on, tangentially aware of the Asari following a-ways back on his four o'clock. He crept along the hallway and approached the next section of the bank, watchful.

This atrium looked much the same as the last. Tall ceilings and fancy decor, desks strewn about. Rays of the Citadel’s artificial sunlight brightened the room from tall windows along the one wall, making dust particles shimmer in the still air. The metal floors turned his every bootstep into a harsh, thudding echo no matter how carefully he stepped. Quieter footsteps from the brave rent-a-cop only added to that dull beat. He shivered, already missing the noise of combat immensely.

The dusty air and scene of shattered normalcy was far too reminiscent of days past, missions he didn’t want to revisit.

The mountainoustorin took a deep, steadying breath.

‘One hostile after another, just keep shooting,’ Garrus told himself as he scanned for targets, steel-blue eyes seeking the signs of passerby while his visor scanned everything near him.

Noise caught his attention from behind a distant dividing wall, and he crouched before moving closer, slinking cautiously between chunks of cover.

Garrus drifted along in quietude and tried to recapture the blasé, unflappable mentality he liked to exude on missions. It was difficult without a squad to rib or joke with, but he needed to be here, in the middle of a shootout saving civilians, lackadaisically contemplating human acronyms… and not
there shooting who he was told to shoot without regard for more than the letter of his orders.

Keeping relaxed was also critically important to his ability to pretend he didn’t care about the countless still forms bled out on the floors behind him. Cooling bodies wearing office apparel and nice watches, sprinkled in glass shards from the framed pictures of their children, senselessly murdered for... probably just credits.

Garrus hated this kind of violence. Battle belonged on the battlefield.

Once more, with a will, he redirected his thoughts.

'Right. Where was I? Fubar. F-U-B-... Mmm... just 'All' and 'Recognition' left.'

*All* was straightforward enough. He supposed, sighting in on the helmet of the next merc he found. The dropping body brought the attention of three more Suns to him instead of the kneeling workers that had likely been seconds from execution. The Asari security guard wounded a second merc with semi-automatic fire from a new gun the nais had picked up from somewhere... probably looted from a kill. That merc dropped too, not having invested enough credits into their shields.

'Too late now buddy.'

*Recognition*... it felt like that part of the phrase was there to add some intellectualism to it. Some witty snark to contrast to the ‘fucked’ part being crude slang.

The rest of the hostiles dropped in minutes. Before Garrus had even finished reloading he heard the echoes of enemy backup incoming. Boots on the ringing metal floors, pounding towards them as he took fresh cover.

'Damn it, reinforcements.'

Deeply wishing he had coms to talk to the Asari with -seeing as no other officers had caught up yet-Garrus listened at the footfalls. Eight… twelve-ish... no, fifteen-ish enemies were pushing into the room. The mountainous detective glanced over at the Asari, who looked back at him from their overturned desk. He smiled in encouragement, and tried to communicate 'fifteen' with hand gestures.

The guard's eyes widened, the end of their lowered firearm trembling.

'Don't panic on me now, please,' the sniper tried to say with his expression, then looked off toward a gaggle of investment bankers and paper pushers that were huddled down the line, quaking in terror as Blue Suns trampled past. One Salarian was outright reciting a litany prayer of one god or another; Delugia by the sound of it.

'Good call,' Garrus admitted to himself, and sent off a plea to the spirits for protection. Not for himself, but for the innocent-ish people trapped here who obviously just wanted to go home.

A crash sounded overhead, drawing the entire room’s attention as a figure smashed through an upper window. The detective dared to lean partially out of cover to get a better look, eyes catching on a trailing blue aura and fluttering black cloth. Pure disbelief tightened his mandibles as the intruder landed in a crouch, long zygomatic horns and bare face very familiar, though only from holos...

"Hnn. Perhaps not the best entry vector after all," the newcomer mused, calmly opening fire on the Blue Suns.

Garrus blinked hard, *twice*, but the infamous Spectre was still there. A pale form bathed in sunlight and blue aura, aiming shots against a backdrop of panicking mercenaries and glittering flecks of light
from the broken glass.

The moment felt absolutely unreal.

Return fire came immediately, but failed to cause more than faint ripples on the other torin’s biotic barrier. Spectre Arterius didn’t even seem to care about taking cover.

‘Right, well then...’ Garrus thought distantly, stunned and unaware he’d started to grin. The tall detective sent out a loud mental thanks to whoever had been listening to his prayers before laying into the mercs nearest the quietly chanting Salarian.

Spectre Arterius was quick on the drop, joining him and the Asari in plowing through the enemies nearest the civvies, then pinning the rest of the mercs down inside of a little waiting area for the offline elevators and a stairwell.

The tide of battle had plunged in their favor.

Sixteen-some-odd targets dropped to six then rose back up to eleven with newcomers. In the heavier crossfire those too disappeared, leaving the remaining civilians to run en-masse for the safety.

In the resulting calm, distant gunfire echoed through the air ducts from upper levels.

The security guard stepped toward them and spoke -well, mostly to him, the Spectre seemed to intimidate the Asari. “Celara Riase. My name, ah... that is. Thank you so much for your help. N-need to keep going...” The nais trailed off and looked up at the ceiling, toward the muted sounds of intermittent popping and screaming.

Garrus moved close enough to put a supportive hand on their shoulder, expression tilted in his most alien-friendly closed mouth smile. For a security guard in a supposedly cushy position, the Asari had completely out performed the rest of C-Sec in his eyes. “Detective Garrus Vakarian, and I agree, we do need to keep going.”

“There are more people trapped upstairs, s-so... yes. Exactly,” the nais replied unsteadily, even as they moved away to scoop up thermal clips from the bodies of the fallen. Movement at the corner of his eye caught Garrus’ attention. Saren was stooped over, liberating some clips of his own, distinctive crest blades in perfect profile.

The tall detective felt a touch of guilty excitement that set his gizzard tingling, still incredulous that The Saren Arterius had just biotically flown through a window, on cue, but... well he couldn’t exactly complain. He had asked anyone listening for help.

‘This is probably costing me a decade's worth of that karma stuff O'Riley was taking about...’

Saren was... displeased when he ran out of ways to occupy his time during the shore leave Nihlus had pleaded for. The first half-day had been fine, however that had not lasted.

Upon arrival to the Citadel they had walked Jondum to the sub-labs of the Citadel Tower, where ST&R kept a rotation of physicians on hand. Then they had jointly given a verbal report to Councilor Sparatus, turned in their paperwork, and restocked supplies before spending the night at
Saren's rarely-used apartment.

The next morning had been similarly busy. After eating a fantastic breakfast of imported foods from Palaven, the two had caught up on rumors and news with a few of their fellow agents and gone shooting at the range.

After lunch, the biotic agent had left Nihlus in the care of Riaz Tio'fore, the lone Drellish Spectre. Her accented greetings were excited, they had apparently come at a good time to play with her latest grenade mods. Which she wanted to do for the entirety of the afternoon.

His partner did so enjoy explosives, so Saren had left Nihlus to it with only a vaguely teasing admonishment not to make any holes in the station.

He had then headed for the Presidium, assuming the quiet vistas would be a welcome change from his partner's high energy.

His day had more or less gone down hill from there.

After leaving them behind, Saren had attempted to enjoy some time at a café called Shazes. A favorite of his, known for clandestine meetings and political gossip. He surreptitiously tucked himself into a table behind yet another of the Citadel's unknown leafy plants -engineered to create allergies in precisely no one- and ordered a drink. There he sat, keeping an aural canal open for useful intel... Yet there was nothing interesting being spoken of today. No one especial visiting the café.

Saren was quickly bored out of his mind.

He was despairing of lasting the full two cycles of shore leave when an interesting notification popped up on his optical implants: a block-wide evacuation order not four kilometers away from Shazes.

The silver-grey torin deliberated only a moment before heading that way. He came to a stop outside a highrise bank at the center of swirling media skyvans and emergency responders.

Saren was sufficiently bored enough to be curious, if not particularly concerned with an everyday bank robbery… until listening in on C-Sec's com channels made the situation more clear. It was not a usual bank heist gone wrong… it was a bank assault by the Blue Suns.

‘Such audacity,’ had been his first thought, cold and calculating, ‘cannot go unpunished.’

The notorious PMC group had chosen a poor day to make their move. The Spectre wondered in passing if they thought it was a good day to die? They surely must. The Citadel, the very center of galactic civilization, was no place for disposable mercenaries to vandalize as they pleased.

He would see to it that they were reminded of that.

‘At least this will more productive,’ Saren mused with something like good cheer as he considered which window would be appropriate to charge through to avoid the blockades and people on the ground level.

Settling on a floor that had activity in the windows, he took a running start and leapt forwards, biotics carrying him further than any Turian should have been able to jump.

He paid no mind to the subsequent crash of glass and startled shouts that followed his arrival, more concerned with a messy landing. The floor had been built up higher than Saren expected, and he touched down harder than was optimal.
"Hnn. Perhaps not the best entry vector after all."

Scanning the room with his implants took no more than a second; two friendlies identified by their uniforms, plus a handful of potential hostages. Most importantly, an array of clear targets in conveniently matching armor.

The silver-grey torin chuffed, and leveled his firearm at them.

With carefully paced application of biotic ability, and the hand-canon he favored as a main weapon, Saren began culling the enemy forces, ignoring the smattering of non-combatants fleeing for safety as the room cleared. When the last of them fell, he crossed to the recently deceased to fetch new thermal clips, not having brought extra with him. An oversight on his part.

In his peripheral, Saren noticed the C-Sec personnel speaking to the security guard in low tones. He caught the nais’ name in the exchange, but missed the torin’s. Raise, and something-karian.

The silver-grey Spectre dismissed the minor trouble. It was no matter, he assumed the officer would respond to a title just as well as a name.

Standing up, the Spectre picked through the handful of thermal clips he had acquired, and discarded one that looked overused. Sufficiently supplied, he started to look for access points, and found the security guard peering around the corner into an elevator atrium. It appeared they were checking for hostiles with... simply their naked eyes. He sighed, quietly.

Considering the bank was likely their place of employ, he assumed the nais knew the building well enough to have the layout, even if they lacked the sense to scan ahead with their omni-tool. Following them would lead him to targets, at the very least.

Saren moved to do so, putting his back to the same wall as the officer that followed Raise. The inordinately tall male turned just enough to catch his gaze, mandibles flitting outward in a friendly grin.

He stared, confused that his presence was accepted not only without qualm but with... that. The Asari glanced back at them both, nodded, and thoughtlessly gave the two torin their back as they crept forward on point.

The Spectre was wary as to why the two were so... trusting. No asking him why he was here? No veiled accusations? It was not the norm after he openly used biotics or inserted himself into C-Sec business. The curiosity turned over in his thoughts as they ventured onward and upward.

The unlikely group took the stairs, climbing them slowly. At the top Saren watched the officer step around the Asari to listen at the access door, peering at a seemingly solid wall with his flickering visor. He nodded approval at the caution, listening and scanning as well. His aural augments allowed for crystal clear hearing at long distances -software adjusted for volume- and the tech in his artificial eyes was top notch. The Spectre assumed the other Turian would find nothing, as he was not detecting any activity himself.

After a moment officer something-karian turned back, subvocals asking for orders as his eyes flicked to the next staircase upward. “I don’t hear anything on this level, and my visor isn’t picking up any targets. Keep going up?”

“Yes,” Saren replied simply at the expected findings.

The officer flashed the Hierarchy hand sign for acknowledgment at him and moved to take point from the skittish guard with a kind sounding murmur to them about experience.
The Spectre followed, accepting that the other male had decided to recognize him as being informally in charge by putting him at the rear. That suited him just fine.

The security guard, however, moved to tentatively follow them both from the rear, mucking up the standardized squad formation when there was a clear middle position left open for them. He resisted the urge to sigh, unable to blame the nearly-civilian Asari for not knowing Hierarchy formation protocol.

The trio made their way up the empty stairwell and toward the next access door. It contrasted starkly with the previous levels by being inordinately clean and undamaged, empty of the signs of violence. They crept up two more levels before the gunfire ringing through the stairwell made it clear that violence was occurring on this particular floor. Not two minutes passed before the trio ended up in a similar situation to their previous engagement, only with an even greater number of hostiles and two extra security guards added to their team.

The Asari purloined a better shield generator off one corpse, and proceeded to physically cover non-combatants over to the entryway. They played ferry to the huddling workers, also providing distraction.

The Asari was being directly helpful. The two new personnel, however, were proving to be worse than useless. A Turian and a Salarian, both providing inaccurate... he hesitated to call it 'cover fire'. They would occasionally work up the courage to reach their sidearms around a corner and fire blindly.

Saren watched one of their bullets ping off the officer's underwhelming C-Sec shielding array.

Glaring, the silver-grey agent called for their attention several times, and when he finally had it, motioned for them to *leave*. They looked absurdly grateful and did so in a hurry.

His subvocals rumbled dismissively as Saren turned back to the action and carried forward with biotic lifts and precision fire from his side arm. This was no place for rookies to learn how to use a firearm... and why they didn’t already *know* how was beyond him. Especially the Turian.

On the other end of the competence spectrum, however, the torin from C-Sec ...

Electric eyes squinted at his most recent target while they fell, mentally estimating the kill count. The other male was something near one-for-one with him.

He reaimed and fired, watching another mercenary drop dead, expression twisted ponderously. Keeping up with a Spectre wasn't exactly something one expected of a cop, and yet the visor-wearing male was managing it.

Opportunity beckoned him with a way to uneven the score: a gaggle of mercenaries holding position behind a good piece of cover, but *far* too close together. Saren tugged at the power behind his eyes and it bloomed vigorously, ricocheting down his spine and out his arm with a smooth memetic movement. The heavy lift tossed five of the Blue Suns into the air. He took out four in quick succession with his pistol, the blue eyed officer catching the last one.

An amused and friendly voice came from beyond office-furniture-turned-cover, floating to him over the debris of datapads and office plants.

“Biotics are definitely cheating. Guess I'll have to up my game.”

The Spectre snorted lightly, subvocals edging on amused. Teasing? Another uncommon reaction to his presence. It seemed the other torin did not hold to their people’s antiquated superstitions about
biotic users... and was also notably competitive.

‘Very well. I—’

Saren paused in mild surprise as the other Turian burst out from behind his cover and shifted into the space of an enemy mercenary. Grabbing the Turian’s crest and jaw, the officer snapped their neck before tumbling again. This time he purposefully rolled into the open to deck a Human across the face, and by the sound of impact it was hard enough to cause brain damage. The officer was augmented then, a good fact to know under the circumstances.

‘-can make use of—’

The other male then dove left, bringing himself into a flanking position for another take down on a Vorcha, breaking both their arms. A few shots landed where the torin had just been as he swung around some filing cabinets, much to the terror of a mercenary using them for cover. Another close quarters offensive, then they spun down on a knee behind newly taken cabinet fortifications -shields barely damaged- and took out two more hostiles utilizing the improved angle of attack. Head shots, the both of them.

‘-that attitude.’

Half a room cleared, mercilessly, in under thirty seconds.

‘Impressive...’ Saren hissed in amusement, *This torin cannot simply be C-Sec...*

Instead of revealing his opinion, the Spectre clicked his tongue and let off a subvocal rumble of mild reproach. “That was reckless officer,” his voice boomed over the din of panicked return fire.

“Maybe,” the male drawled back, sounding unrepentant. “Effective though.”

Saren snorted, the nonchalance reminding him of Nihlus. They moved forward from there, with a few uncertain glances from Riase for what might be considered unprofessional showmanship. It took very little time to clear the floor of flailing, terror-scattered hostiles.

Upward they went. On the next level a single security guard remained holed up in an executive’s office; a lanky brown and red Salarian. The tall officer swept the area and signaled an all clear. Professional, and efficient.

The Salarian was named Torvas, he informed them somberly as he fell in line while reloading.

“When violent activity was detected in the building the local VI will have cut the hard wire connection from all terminals to the bank's servers, shut itself down,” the male elaborated. “Can now only be accessed directly via hardware. If the servers, and credits inside, are the target of the attack, Blue Suns will have to get to them. Three floors up, through an access tunnel.”

Deciding that ‘up’ remained the best option regardless, Saren motioned them onwards. They had made it an additional two floors when a message notification popped up on his retinal implant. The unobtrusive heads-up-display informed him in translucent blue script that it was from his protégé turned partner. He opened the text-only communication with a mental command while the Salarian continued to drone on about the security precautions keeping anyone from getting to the servers themselves.

FROM:1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy
there is a skyscraper on fire suspiciously close to where i left you.

Saren opened a live chat.

CHAT.live//CONNECT:1886039_to_PROXY.spec.8416_to_8466672
Connecting…
...
...
...Connected.
SA: I did not start any fires.
NK: buuuut... you're there.
SA: Yes.
NK: of course you are. i'm on my way.
SA: Check the roof. I have yet to discover how they intended to evacuate after reaching their goal.
NK: who is they?
SA: Blue Suns.
NK: wtf.
SA: Language, Nihlus.
NK: it's appropriate!

CHAT.live//CONNECTION_CLOSED

Not denying to reply, Saren ended the encrypted chat session in favor of paying more attention to his surroundings. Not that anything was happening. They continued through the building, growing ever closer to the top floor, but through surprisingly little resistance.

A few minutes in another message alert pinged him. Nihlus had not found anything of note on the roof, or even a roof-top exit door. Most buildings did not have them, the tops of such towers being too close to the energy fields that kept the Citadel's atmosphere trapped in, and the nebula's radiation out.
The stoic Spectre sent a reply this the younger male to keep searching. To look for other weak points in C-Sec's security line or unauthorized vessels flying around. Anything.

Something was not quite right about this situation, though Saren had not pinned a talon on it... yet.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex Entry] Delugia

Delugia, the Salarian Goddess of Fortune, is often depicted as a small, pale blue female with none of the spots or speckles usually found on Salarian skin. Said to be the last daughter of the Ocean and Sky, Delugia is known for her great compassion, giving good-luck to the deserving who pray for her blessing. Also sometimes known as the Lady of Footprints, her temples are generally found on island beaches, where ocean meets sky on the horizon, and is shown in murals to be constantly wandering the sands leaving footprints behind. Expectant mothers will journey to these temples, and search nearby beaches for footprints to follow in, step by step, while repeating the Litany of Delugia, in hopes of a luck-filled life for her children.

Fanfic Recommendation: Faith and Hope (39404 words) by maqqy96 (Femshep/Saren & Saren/Sovereign)
Garrus was actually a little embarrassed by how much fun he was having. Fighting side by side with his personal hero, saving civilians, and kicking ass? It was like an action vid; they even had a token Asari. The Detective chuckled at his own idiocy, but a smile still tugged at his mandibles.

He was probably going to get absolutely reemed by Executor Pallin, who had put him behind a detective's desk to keep him out of this exact sort of thing in the first place. Garrus couldn't put into words how much he really didn't care right now though.

He was so damn stoked to be fighting alongside Saren Arterius himself that the ghosts of the past, of urban warfare and uncompromising rebels, were far away and quiet. He really needed that today.

The number of trapped office workers dropped as they reached the more exclusively staffed areas, and so had the numbers of mercenaries. Though he still estimated no less then seventy Blue Suns, mostly dead, in the rooms and halls behind them.

It left him time to think, and Garrus realized that kitchen chit was getting seriously emptied tonight - or possibly tomorrow after some sleep- that was for damn sure.

The Detective decided not to mention to anyone, ever, when he started recording on his visor. He hoped that wasn't super illegal to do around a Spectre.

'It probably is. Whooops. Oh well... I'm already breaking the rules, might as well keep it going.'

Eyes sweeping for hostiles as they moved through yet another fanciful corporate corridor, Garrus worked up the courage to make an attempt at conversation. Not... exactly... his strongest suit, but he didn't want to miss the once in a lifetime opportunity to talk with the famous Spectre.

“Spectre Arterius. I, uh... don't suppose you could tell me why a drop ship's worth of Blue Suns are busting up a bank on the Citadel?”

Awful. He was awful at this. That sounded like he thought Saren had something to do with it.
"I have not the slightest clue, beside the fortune of credits they could steal."

Somewhere out there Solana was probably being struck with an inexplicable urge to cackle at him. He groaned internally, and hoped the Spectre ignored his very existence.

"Well, yeah, but..."

Why was he still talking?

"...the chances of even half of them making it out alive, and then getting off the station? Incredibly low..."

Garrus mentally kicked himself, and rushed out a few more words that weren't -hopefully- uselessly stating the obvious.

"... traffic control probably has the docks locked down already. This isn't a viable plan, whatever it is."

Saren hummed thoughtfully and slowed to check something on his Omni-Tool, stepping distractedly over a dead security guard's body. He had as well, though Riase took the time to go around.

“You are correct. All nearby docks have been locked down, and the rest of the Citadel's Customs and Travel Security Offices are on high alert. There is no roof access in this building for an escape shuttle off the building's top floor, and I have yet to see any personnel being held for use as leverage...”

Garrus turned his head to meet the Spectre's steadily glowing optics as the council agent trailed off, surprised to notice that Saren was quite a bit shorter than him. Their gazes met, two sets of subvocals buzzing harmoniously in suspicion.

For a moment he had trouble looking away, caught by the crackling electricity in the torin's retinal implants. After the glance had gone on almost too long Garrus forced himself to face forward, to hide the growing flush of his neck hide if nothing else.

A polite throat cleared behind them.

"Professional mercenary organizations that wear conspicuous armor don't generally attempt criminal things on uncontrolled space stations" added Riase with surprising insight, "Especially the Citadel. Politically, it's suicide."

When the security guard working a soft bank job caught on to the misaligned puzzle pieces, you knew it was a bad job. Garrus had a sinking feeling in his gizzard. Whatever plot had led to this, he was still missing the real story, and he worried he wasn't going to figure it out in time. The disquiet of that fear was contrasted only by a strange, lingering rush from that... whatever had just happened with Saren. The gaze sharing. Thing.

"... the Blue Suns are usually more skilled than we've seen here,” came Saren's quiet input.

"Oh great,' he thought, 'conspiracies are just my very favorite. At least we got most of the civilians clea-'

“By the way, the building is on fire,” Arterius added without preamble.

Oh. Joy.
Nihlus had passed confused and was approaching outright baffled. There was no escape via the roof, unless the mercs had intended to blow a hole, and had an escape vehicle standing by to come pick them up. Even so, at this point C-Sec had the building surrounded. Aerial escape would not go well.

He'd checked the keeper tunnels nearby, the age old trick of escaping the law for Citadel smugglers, but there weren't any that ran directly below the building. Nor sufficiently large sewer pipes. A jog around the block while running an active scan via Omni-tool showed no recent hand-made tunnels. He looked at the adjacent buildings, all evacuated. None of them were particularly close, no connected sky bridges or utility shafts...

'What. The. Hell.'

He could almost hear a quiet 'Language, Nihlus.' in his head as he stood there on the safe side of the police barrier, trying to figure out what Saren had asked him to discover. It was no good. Giving up, he opened a secure chat.

CHAT.live//CONNECT:8466672_to_PROXY.spec.1113_to_1886039

Connecting...

...

Connected.

NK: i've decided they intend to hoverboard off the top floor out the window, after blowing it with explosives, while singing the batarian national anthem.

SA: You have 'decided' this how?

NK: because it makes as much sense as anything else.

NK: the building is surrounded by csec, no tunnels, no connecting architecture, not a daaaamn thing i can find.

NK: so hoverboards and singing.

SA: I see.

NK: share with the rest of the class?

SA: What?

NK: human idiom. it means tell me what you're thinking.
SA: Nevermind. There are hostiles remaining. You are on the entry level?

NK: ya, just outside.

SA: I will be down shortly.

"Lovely." Nihlus groused, absently scratching the hide behind his right aural canal while looking up at the smoking sixth floor. "Like I want to just stand here..."

A large section of offices facing the presidium were now charred and black. The air-mobile firefighting team had managed to put out the flames without entering the building itself, using a mounted turret that sprayed a targeted fire suppressant, but said flame-retardant chemical was now a foamy orange mess streaking down the glass-and-metal side. An expression of disgust pulled at his mandibles. It smelled like roasting Hanar.

So instead of staying anywhere near that, he went in search of the nearest functional café to grab a cup of kava while waiting.

'Fuck', he figured, 'might as well get Saren one of those disgusting triple espresso drinks while I'm at it. Maybe he'll reach peak stimulant-to-blood volume ratio and be too distracted to criticize my inability to find out any fecking thing about this op.'

Nihlus eventually returned to his previous spot with drinks in hand, standing as far from the noxious smell as possible and sipping slowly at the warm liquid in his cup. He watched C-Sec try and wrangle the media, fairly certain that this didn't actually count as down time... and wondered if he could convince Saren to make the break three days long.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Coffee and Spectres (132456 words) by Chromaticism (Saren/Caffeine) (Yes, you read that right... okay, maybe there is some FemShep in there, but really, Caffeine is Saren's OTP.)
Sucks to be you, Honey.

Chapter Summary

In which Saren accidentally scares the crap out of Garrus.

Chapter Notes

My take on Turian fringe/crest/spines words: After much consideration, I've decided that 'fringe', which is usually used to define a type of ornamentation or border for birds or hair, is the shorter spiky bits, including the back flare on the mandible. Then 'Crest', which is the word for the plume of feathers a top a bird's head, is what I'll use to refer to the long spike blades.

lexicon:
Torin - male Turian above the age of majority (credit: MizDirected)
Patrem - Turian for 'father' (credit: MizDirected)
Pari - Turian for 'dad' (credit: MizDirected)
Nais - Asari equivalent of woman. (pronounced Nah-ees) (credit: MizDirected)
Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)
Trireme - Turian colony world, medium population (Credit: Recidiva)

EDIT: 8/28/18 - Cleaned up grammar (How I am I still finding things on like the sixth round of betaing???)
Edited 6/16/19, Mooooore clean up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a bid for some answers Saren left the task of scouting ahead to the underlings he had acquired. Instead trailing behind, hacking his way into the enemy coms and the building’s security feeds.

Their coms were poorly secured, and the chatter on them was largely defeatism. The security feeds opened up to reveal floors he had mostly already seen. The few he had not were empty. Very empty.

Three more small groups of mercenaries milled about on floors their group had passed, and yet there were no further lifesigns on scanner between them and the server banks.

'Interesting... why?'

In his experience, if something was wrong and you could not see the cause, that was because it lay where you had already looked.

The silver-grey Spectre considered his companions with an eye for something out of place.
A cop and two security guards. The other Turian and the Asari had both been killing Blue Suns right alongside him, and their shots had not been suspicious misses or repeatedly non-fatal. Though, there had not been much for the quiet Salarian to shoot at this far.

Something-karian's credentials could not be checked without his name, but the two guards could. They might be able to vouch for each other, though they did not seem to know each other particularly well...

As they walked down the hall, the officer was checking corners and turns for ambush. The Asari was anxiously peering into each office as they passed, whispering 'hellos' and 'it's safe to come out...' Then, his focus slid over to Torvas, who was simply looking dead ahead, focused on moving forward.

Large, dark eyes meet his, unblinking.

The moment of clarity happened right as the Salarian began raising his weapon to the C-Sec officer's skull, arm reaching to restrain the other torin in a choke hold. Saren's own arm rose on instinct, a quick draw borne from years of practice, but he withheld fire. The Asari spun around then backpedaled, face written in clear shock, stumbling into a wall.

'That's telling,' Saren thought distantly as events unfolded. 'The Asari truly did not expect betrayal from him. Which means that, likely, he does work here. They do know each other. It is an inside job. Though... that does not explain the Blue Sun's presence. Why is he taking the officer as a hostage. Why not the nais? Asari are smaller. Easier to get a hold on...’ Thoughts streamed by as he narrowed his eyes at the Salarian, as a deceptively scrawny arm cinched around the stone-plated torin’s neck.

Saren assessed the situation calmly, considering an efficient course of action. He did not actually want to shoot Torvas, yet. More importantly, he wanted answers. He was still formulating a plan when Vakarian burst into motion, the shock of betrayal shaken off and replaced by what was clearly high ranked and hard earned close quarters combat instincts.

Torvas was a few inches taller then the officer, and that proved to be a disadvantage. Saren watched as the blue eyed Turian dropped his weight straight down. A quick snap-and-turn of the knee drove the point of a lightly armored leg-spur up into Korvis’ thigh. It brought a gloss of not-quite-tears to the other torin’s eyes, spurs not appreciating such abuse, but it had the intended effect of loosening the treacherous Salarian’s hold with sudden and sharp pain. The move was followed up by a full powered elbow jab, a half turn, and suddenly the false security guard's uniform was in the officer’s grasp.

Over the shoulder and down went one would-be Salarian bank robber.

The silence of the hall was finally broken by Riase's whispered and furious 'By the Goddess.'

Saren lowered his gun and tilted his head in mild amusement when the C-Sec agent looked up, meeting his eyes with a cocky smirk and a telling lack of adrenaline shakes. He was clearly very comfortable with close quarters.

“I think we may... have a... whew... a clue here;’ came out casually, even though the mountainous torin’s breathing pace was still slowing down from the fast exchange. “I think that... just maybe... our Salarian friend here might've been in on it.”

The traitor in question struggled in place while the torin casually joked about him. Saren could not help but let a small smirk slip his normally passive expression. It... was rather amusing.
Torvas began cursing and hissing at them as the officer drew him up and slammed his frame into a wall none too gently. “What was that, Torvas? If that is your real name. I thought I heard you say something like, 'I am so sorry Garrus! Let me tell you all my nefarious plans so you don't have to beat the ever loving shit out of me.”’

“Language.” Saren added with an eye roll, lamenting that his entire generation seemed to be unable to communicate without swear words. The other male let out an long sigh in response.

“You hear that? Even the Spectre feels sorry for how badly I'm going to hurt you for causing the deaths of so many innocent people. You want to make this easy and spill, or should we wait till we get back to C-Sec? I'm okay either way, buddy, because my T&I stuff is all back at the station.”

Saren had to actively clutch his mandibles to avoid letting further, mildly inappropriate amusement touch his expression at the ridiculous threats coming from the displeased officer. 'Torture equipment at C-Sec? Such as what... triplicate e-forms and stylus holders?'

Apparently, when faced with an insouciant C-Sec officer willing to threaten torture, and an unbothered Spectre still holding a hand cannon, the Salarian remained unconvinced of how precarious his situation was. The only reply that 'Torvas' gave was a long, angry hiss. 'Garrus’ spun him off the wall and into a headlock facing Saren, subvocals asking for back up.

It seemed the officer was used to needing to push the legal line for information, which... said poor things about C-Sec having access to good intel really. Saren squinted at the situation, then chuffed and pulled up his Omni-tool. Unfortunately for the Salarian a quick scan and Spectre access codes to the Citadel Archives revealed not only his identity, but also his rap sheet in record time. Saren hummed in pleasure at the ease of finding the answers he wanted, and began reciting the finds aloud.

“Ah, here we are. Aloran Korvai, from the Salarian colony of Mepuktina, twelve counts of corporate burglary, seven counts of... sexual assault? Interesting... suspected involvement in nine cases of insider trading, repeated illegal use of a false identity, grand theft of a cargo ship on Trireme, and sixteen recorded incidents of illegal hacking of government property, a further thirty two suspected.”

Saren leaned in to be threatening... but a suspicious, rectangular bulge in an odd shirt pocket caught his eye.

“Thought to add one more to the list?” He reached into the pocket as he spoke, coming up with a small uplink dongle pinned between two talons. He stared at it for a moment, thoughts spinning before a plausible explanation came to mind. “Ah, I see. We visit the server room, you slip this into a port while no one is looking, we see that everything is fine and leave, unknowingly escorting the criminal to freedom, while the program you leave behind waits patiently to be activated on a delay. Everyone is questioned, no one knows why Blue Suns went after such a high-risk target, which you probably paid them well to do so, and promised evac that was never coming... hnnn... am I close?”

The Salarian continued to silently glare. Saren pocketed the dongle for future study, and looked up at the officer. “Break his neck, we're leaving.” He turned away and began walking, missing the disbelieving look of terror that bloomed on the Salarian's face. He also missed Garrus blinking at him, and swallowing, steel blue eyes disappearing in a wince.

All he heard was the clear crunch of snapping vertebrae as he began typing a message to Nihlus.

SA: On my way down. Another minute or two, there were a few stragglers.

NK: mmkay.
It turned out that, yes, Executor Pallin was very displeased with Garrus. If by 'very', one meant excessively, and by 'displeased' they meant beyond furious. Garrus suffered through the seemingly unending rant by counting the number of dents and talon scratches on the surface of the heavy metal desk in Pallin's office. Not that the Executor was sitting at his desk, but the evidence of his past temper was amusing to a cynical and possibly self-destructive corner of Garrus' mind.

'Don't be hot headed, he says? Ha. I'm working my way through the proof of your losses of control, Pallin.' He sneered internally. 'Oh, do those count as destruction of government property? I should write you a ticket, old man. I'd love to see your face.'

It was a good thing Garrus could have a sniper's patience when he choose, and had a habit of keeping his face clear of his inner thoughts during dressing downs. Otherwise, he would've been fired a good thirty minutes ago. Then again, when Pallin started going off about the trouble he was in for murdering the suspect, he just... couldn't keep his mouth shut anymore.

Talking over his superior -and wasn't that an unforgivable sin for a Turian- he spoke up. “Sir, I would like to reiterate, as indicated in the incident report I turned in, that the suspect assaulted me first, and when searched by Spectre Arterius, evidence was found indicating further guilt. I was then ordered to finish him. What exactly did you expect me to do? Disobey a Spectre?” Pallin's mandibles pulled in tight as he stormed closer, getting into Garrus' face.

“I expected you to have some discipline!” He roared. Garrus' logic brain finally gave up in the face of that utterly nonsensical statement, and he struggled to remain respectful.

“I. Was. Following. Orders. From. A. Spectre.” He ground out, talking very slowly. Pallin threw up his hands, as if Garrus was just not getting something very obvious, and said, “Out. Get out of my office. You're on probation for two weeks. I don't want to see you anywhere near the station, C-Sec's armory, or anywhere else I might be. Do not go walk your old beat path -thought I didn't know you did that, did you? Go home and think about what you've done. Your patrem would be ashamed. Now, get out.”

Garrus left as the older male was sitting down at his desk to type in the suspension, internally maintaining that he had no idea what he was supposed to be thinking about, and if the Executor thought pari being disappointed with him was anything new? Ha. He had no idea.

Stopping by on the way out, he went to the HR desk to see if the asshole had put him on paid or non-paid probation. He didn't even make it all the way into the room before the older-then-dirt Asari at the front chimed in, “Un-paid. Sucks to be you honey.” Garrus groaned and turned right back around.

'Well, that answers that question.' He thought forlornly.

At least if it was paid probation he'd have the spare credits to spend some of his free time on a public shooting range, or at Armax. He wasn't exactly in trouble, his savings were plentiful enough, but he tried to make sure that number went up, not down. No income meant... well... honestly, it probably meant spending time at home researching local gang activity on the extra-net.

'Really, what do they expect me to do for two weeks? Clean everything in the apartment twenty
Garrus was a detective, a problem solver down to his bones, bank rolled or not. Sitting on his laurels and contemplating nonsense wasn't something he could do and not go insane.

Plus he had it on good authority, from his post-service psychologist, that brooding wasn't good for him. Medical advice to stay engaged? It suited Garrus just fine. Thought the psychologist's other advice also came to mind...

'Maybe I should take the opportunity to visit home, considering pari will be calling to chew me out regardless. At least I could see mari and Sol... spend some time on the long-distance range behind the western wing. I haven't been back to the madulis since... hell, since I started at C-Sec. Yeah... yeah, that'd be good.' Course of action in mind, his next stop was checking his bank accounts, to transfer balance from savings just in case he needed the extra to afford a shuttle ticket to Palaven.

He next considering what to do for lunch, distracted as he wandered up to a foot-path ATM and entered his credentials. His account balance flickered merrily up at him after he entered the code.

'Maaaybe... Aishika's? I think I sort of deserve something niceish after managing to be polite to Palli-- Spirits! What?! What... What.' Garrus realized he had yelled that last part, and was being stared at by a startled Asari and their kid. He smiled nervously, forgetting to keep his fangs tucked away and just making the mother start shuffling off with worried steps, away from the potentially unhinged cop. The tall detective cleared his throat and turned back to close the account access before speed walking away from the spot.

The balance had read something six figures long. He swiftly crowd dodged the distance to a different terminal, braced himself, and cautiously ran his account credentials again.

'That is... that is still not... Huh... am I being blackmailed? Or... an accounting error?' He thoughts not entirely coherent, Garrus turned in the direction of a rapid transit terminal. This called for visit to a bank, and hopefully didn't involve being arrested by his own coworkers.

Saren turned away from the console he was using in the Spectre offices, wiping his usage record more out of habit then paranoia. Paperwork for the incident yesterday filed, he'd had the ID list put together for the criminals killed, including Korvai, and any potential bounties run. Not particularly caring to separate it out precisely, he sent in the kill confirmations, and had half the pay out sent to him, forty percent to Vakarian, and what he considered a generous ten percent to the Asari simply for being helpful getting civilians out of the kill zone so he could work. That done, the laconic Spectre moved out into the commons area, finding Nihlus digging around in the Spectre info networks, mining for leads.

“Find anything useful?”

“I did, actually. It's in your favorite part of space too.”

Saren chuffed at the teasing tone of voice. “I should just buy a small moon somewhere in the Skyllian Verge, and have a quantum entanglement communications array installed. It would mean less travel time at this point.”

“You'd spend too much time working then.”
“It is called being productive Nihlus, perhaps you've heard of it?”

“Nah.”

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: **Always the Quiet Ones** (1597 words) by Fistful_of_Gamma_Rays (ManShep, Tali, & Garrus - Friendship fic)
World keeps turning, but I'd prefer it with you in it

Chapter Summary

In which the Vakarian family shoots some things for stress relief.

Chapter Notes

The beginning of this chapter is going to be a sad, guys, fair warning. Carry on though, 'kay? Saren touches Garrus’ *ahem* rifle, by the end of it. :3

lexicon:
Mari/Pari - Turian words for Mom/Dad (credit: MizDirected)
Nais - Asari equivalent of woman. (pronounced Nah-ees) (credit: MizDirected)
Tarin/Torin – Female/Male adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)
Filian – Turian closed dialect for 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

p.s. MizDirected's work is a goldmine of words for the Turian closed dialect, no really.

EDIT: 8/30/18 - Cleaned up and edited for flow, applied head to desk at how bad some of my writing used to be, polished it up a bit and moved on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus was riding high on suddenly being a millionaire, granted he was just barely a millionaire by adding all his accounts together, but he figured that it counted. He arrived on Palaven expecting the first two or three days to be painfully lecture filled and patience testing... but it turned out not to be.

There was a lot of numb silence instead.

His strong, wonderful mari was... ill.

ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The sound of shattering glass was accompanied by glittering sparkles from exploding bottles, the shards flickering in the bright light of Trebia's afternoon gaze. The weather was obnoxious in how gorgeous it was, despite the low moods present.

A quiet cha-thunk came from the left as his pari's rifle fired, another next glass target shattering into pretty pieces that caught the sunlight as they spun away.

Cha-thunk again, this time from his right.

His filian glared down range, she’d taken the top off her target but the bottom remained standing after
a precarious wobble. Normally Garrus would take a loving dig at her by shooting down the bottom before Solana could reload... Instead, father and son waited solemnly for her to blow the bottom half to bits as well.

Their mari was in the hospital, had just been taken two days ago, and was in a medically induced coma. The disease was Corporalis Syndrome, an underwhelming name compared to the terror of diagnosis. It had progressed 'very quickly', the doctors explained. They suggested Vivienne had purposefully hidden it out of pride, and that perhaps treatment wouldn't be so hard if she had just come in sooner, as if getting sick was her fault. Sol almost decked someone.

Hotheadedness sort of... ran in the family.

The first four or five days of Garrus' leave passed by in liquid time and sweltering afternoons of cha-thunk, cha-thunk, cha-thunk. The shattering of glass. The not-conversation. He'd pay for a lecture at this point, anything was better then the growing weight of fear and worry.

They got a call early in the morning on the sixth day, mari had responded well enough to the initial treatments, and they were waking her up. The family practically curled up around the bed side of Viviene Vakarian as her eyes flicked open, five other pairs waiting with baited breath for the fog of sleep to clear and -spirits please- be replaced by presence and understanding.

It took a minute for her gaze to clear, but then they watched as she took in the situation, calmly folded her hands in her lap, and asked what had happened. As graceful as silk threads in a light breeze.

The two medical staff then explained the repercussions of the disease. She was going to be better now, better then the vacuous, unspeaking condition mari had been in when she'd first arrived after a surprise seizure, but... it wasn't cured. It was degenerative; treatable... but unfortunately incurable. She was expected to live another decade or two before the corrosion on her neural pathways began to become untreatable, and permanent memory loss began.

Eventually long long, winding diagnosis trailed off, and the doctors left them in peace to discuss it. The door to the private room swished open and closed, leaving a ringing quietude in the air after the pneumatic hiss faded away. Garrus couldn't speak, his chest felt too thick, his lungs too heavy. Across the bed, his pari appeared to be similarly frozen. Thankfully, his filian had been born with an inner spark that never failed to light the fires when the rest of the family was too chilled to act.

“This is some varren shit!” exclaimed Sol, “Mari is, what? Sixty four? How is this not curable? Are we in the spirit's damned dark ages!?”

“Sixty Seven, darling, but thank you,” offered their mother, her lightly worn faceplates tilted in a weak smile.

Solana Vakarian growled temperamentally. She clearly didn't want a 'thank you', she probably wanted their mari to live longer then half the projected life span of a Turian. Garrus sat quietly as Sol's rant continued, steeping in his own personal nightmare. Someone he loved was suffering, and he was helpless to do a thing about it. Not his gun, his bank account, his time, or his knowledge could do a damn thing about this.

Helpless. Useless. He hated it.

The rest of Garrus’ suspension passed too quickly by far, the mountainous torin having to tear himself from his mother’s bedside to get back to work. She shooed him off with a nuzzle to his temple and a subvocal rumble of affection. The bulky detective managed to keep the need to keen
trapped in his chest until he was home again, alone and un witnessed.

It was by sheer chance that Saren ran into the torin from the bank again.

He had been in a meeting with the Council and several other Spectres over a variety of miscellaneous matters, mostly of low importance, largely unrelated to him or anything he was working on. His sense of propriety barely hanging on, only just keeping him from searching up something interesting to read on the extra-net while the session wore on.

The notification of a fire fight on one of the wards became the perfect excuse to escape.

“I apologize for interrupting, but it appears there is something amiss. If you will excuse me, Councilors, colleagues? I believe our interests would best be served if the matter was seen to.”

Tela Vasir raised a delicate, hairless brow. “What matter is...” the nais trailed off, receiving and opening the same automated Omni-tool notification. “I see. I agree, it would be best if non-essential personnel were dismissed to handle... this.” Tela sounded mildly perturbed by the very idea that someone would begin a criminal act when a council meeting was in session. The Councilors generously waved them off, Tevos hiding a smile behind their hand. Half the room left for less monotonous pastures.

Now he was being shot at, and there were no less than two hundred idiotic gang members scattered throughout the streets around him. Nihlus was off the station on a solo mission, but Tela, Jondam, and several other operatives had shown up to support C-Sec's Special Weapons and Tactics force. They were entirely outnumbered, but the Spectres and task force had superior armament and training by far. At this point, it was more of a live shooting gallery until enough gang members went down to quell the rest and force surrender.

Saren had cleared out two buildings in his chosen section, and was moving into a third... only to find all of the targets down; clean head shots or physical take-downs used on each. The Spectre tilted his head at a dead Salarian with their neck at a wrong angle. He had the feeling this work was familiar, but couldn't place from where.

Bullets continued to fly, and the gang’s numbers continued to fall. Vasir took a bad hit, reporting it with a mildly pained wheeze over coms. Thankfully the Asari retained the ability to evac back beyond the police blockade for medical treatment and did not require aid, thought Spectre Bau offered. Jondam himself continued with quick and quiet executions, his voice on the com channel subtly forlorn at the waste of life. He was contrasted by O’kara, a vicious Spectre trying out some of Ti'ofore's latest prototype explosives with an amused tone in her subvocals.

Saren continued moving upward through the deserted halls as the com chatter after Tela's injury settled down; floor by floor, heading for the roof to scout his next target. He made it, only to be met with a sudden crunch and gurgle that had him spinning left on the rooftop, barrier flaring. A Turian with obscenely fuchsia markings on yellowed plate was falling to the ground a good ways off, their left temple mangled from the head shot that had ended them. He watched the gangster hit the ground...
in a limp pile, blue electricity fizzing at his fingertips as the Spectre began looking for the origin of that high caliber round. A Turian form waved lazily from two building tops over, then turned to continue sniping anyone out of cover.

Hackles lowering, and curious, Saren scanned the armored figure with his optics using a mental command. The overlay technology in his eyes brought up the results from it's uplink to the Council Archives in a light blue glow off to the side of his vision: a fuzzy render of a Hierarchy ID holo... featuring the officer from the bank incident.

The silver-grey biotic huffed in amusement, rather certain the torin was not a part of the SWAT team assigned to this mess. He walked to that edge of the roof while wondering what the other Turian was doing here. Peering over the edge revealed no traffic or obstacles, but a few gang members on a causeway between two archologies. Saren idly made two kills at distance with his heavy pistol before the rest ducked into cover. He huffed, resisting a smile, when sniper fire from another angle took out the other three. Apparently the other male's competitiveness had not been a one time lapse.

The laconic Spectre brought up his omni-tool and opened the Hierarchy dossier that matched the ID holo. It was... enlightening.

Wanting to know what the former hastatim was even doing here, Saren biotically leapt the four to seven meters between each building top, com tower, and walkway, landing heavily near a make-shift sniper perch amid climate control units. He knew there would be a price for the overt biotic use later, likely exhaustion and rabid hunger, but for now taking the short cut was a sufficiently efficient usage. Taking elevators down, walking over through live fire, and then riding back up would have taken far too long. Seemingly unfazed by his unorthodox approach, Vakarian remained tucked into his safe spot, scope pressed to the glass of his helm as he took two more shots.

“Do they pay you to wind up in these situations Vakarian, or do you simply have terrible luck?”

The sniper finally lowered his rifle and turned, hitting the retraction key on his helm. “Can't it be both?” he replied with a friendly smirk.

Saren shifted his weight to one side, arms crossing under his keel. “Not in this case, unless C-Sec was embarrassed enough about this to call in spare detectives, and did not opt to inform anyone?”

Vakarian chuckled, though his subvocals sounded flat. “Ahh... I don't know if they'll let me keep my badge if my boss finds out I was here. I'm technically on suspension. Would probably have to fork out the credits for a bounty hunter's license, move to Omega, and-” The tall sniper cut himself off quickly, but they both knew what he had been about to say. It was a common joke on the homeworld, after all.

“-and become barefaced?” Saren finished for the other male in dry amusement.

The officer clambered out of the nest in a hurry, stepping closer while meeting his gaze intently. “That was thoughtless of me, and I apologize. I didn't mean anything by it, Arterius.”

The Spectre waved him off with a placid roll of subvocals. “A fair number of sayings include references to having or not having markings. It has long since ceased to bother me when they are used without offensive intent behind the words. Or at all, really. There is a reason I do not have them.”

“Good... I'm glad.” If a grown male that towered over others with seven feet of pure muscle could ever be called 'sheepish', the awkward shuffle that detective was doing would qualify.
New life signs chose that moment to come up on his passive area scanners. Saren turned to look, squinting as he zoomed in with his optical implants and identified them as hostile. Unfortunately the distance was a bit far for a heavy pistol, even his heavily modified ones. Working with what was available, he stepped in and took the rifle from the tall officer’s hands. Too blue eyes widened in surprise, but the other male let the gun go. The Spectre turned and aimed, *chkbang-chkbang-chkbang*, and down went three gang members a block away. Saren handed it back without a word, assuming the follow through had been explanation enough.

The C-Sec agent accepted the return of his firearm without missing a beat. “So, ahhh, maybe I could... take you out to lunch, as an apology?”

Saren blinked slowly at the sniper, then stared.

He could not recall the last time someone had invited him out to eat. Nihlus simply followed him to the quiet, low-lit places he frequented; a permanent carmine plated fixture in his life.

There were meals with targets while under cover, before he killed or blackmailed them as needed. Meetings with intelligence sources at restaurants, using the dining as a smoke screen for data transfer. Surely those counted...? The Spectres sometimes had lunch meetings with catered food, but he was too paranoid to actually consume any of it...

’*Hmm.*’

Garrus had begun to lightly sweat below his crest.

’*I must be mildly insane,’* he thought ’*If I think Saren Arterius has any interest in going out to lunch with me. Well... I had to try didn’t I?’*

Saren stared at him silently, electric eyes inscrutable, and Garrus’ brain began throwing out manic thoughts in his nervousness. Gun fire echoed in the distance.

’*He’s going to shove me off the building for asking.*’

’*That whole joke about biotics being mind readers is a joke... right?’*

’*Those long zygomatic horns are really attractive actually... oh shit, he didn't hear that did h-*’

“I suppose,” was what eventually came out of the stoic Spectre. “We should finish up here first though.”

“Ah, yeah. That's probably a good idea.”

So they did.

Chapter End Notes
Rifle touching occurred, as promised. :D

Fanfic Recommendation: *The Lives and Deaths of Commander Shepard* (189954 words) by MosaicCreme (FemShep/Garrus)
Garrus wouldn't know how to slack off if it hit him in the face like a frying pan. Turns out, this time it might save someone's bacon.

Posting just before bed. There are probably atrocious grammar errors somewhere. I'm always pleased to receive comments correcting them If they happen. Then I can fix them. //yawns//

lexicon for your convenience:
torin - male Turian above the age of majority (credit: MizDirected)
cubitura - Turian sized reclining couch, build for people with pointy bits
nais - Asari equivalent of woman. (pronounced Nah-ees) (credit: MizDirected)

Garrus tossed the stress ball at the ceiling above his bed, it bounced quietly, and dropped back to him. He caught it, and continued tossing.

Lunch with Saren had been a blast. Ten minutes in, he'd gotten comfortable enough not to feel that sense of 'he is going to push me off the building if I... ' with every word out of his mouth. It had been a quiet and mildly awkward start, but after that warming up period, they'd gotten onto the topics of rifle mods, then pirate activity, and then local crime rings. Saren had seemed impressed with the width and depth of his knowledge on Citadel crime, and understanding of the Terminus-Attican Traverse-Citadel Space chain of piracy, slave trade, and drug running.

He'd even come up with a few relevant pieces of intel to pass on... okay to be fair, they were really just related rumors he'd heard floating around the break room, but he'd managed to contribute something to Saren's work, and the laconic male seemed to appreciate that.

Saren was definitely a quiet person, he'd noticed that early on, but when you got him talking about something he was interested in the torin could get on a lecturing roll. Garrus had learned a few things just by throwing out topics and listening; like the tricks slavers in the Skyllian Verge had been using lately to nab humans and disappear them permanently into Batarian space, or the way the Aria T'Loak, a dark spirited nais, was whipping up the infamous Omega into a place resembling lawlessness with rules, if only rules that kept business flowing and Spectres away.
The food was really edible too, and Garrus had paid as promised in apology for his earlier tactlessness. They'd parted ways with amicable nods.

It had been... nice. Really nice. Garrus tried to stop grinning. He'd just gotten back from lunch with his own personal hero, after spending an afternoon pretending in his head that he was a Spectre as well, that they were on a mission together on Council orders...

The stress ball fell and hit him right on the nose. He grabbed it before it could roll off him, and glared at it lightly. Garrus didn't care what the condescending stress ball thought, he'd take what life would give him, and make the best of it. He did it with his pari and his unending expectations, he did it with mari's... illness. Hell, he'd done it in boot camp too, and he hadn't seen a more soul sucking place besides those barracks, except during his days in a hastatim squad. He had always been an optimist, and while he might not be a Spectre, but who didn't pretend, sometimes, to be something they dreamed of?

The opportunity had been too good to pass up, and it'd probably never happen again.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Brrrrmp!!! BrrPING! Brrrrmp!

Garrus woke up, staring blearily ahead at his work terminal.

'Augh, I fell asleep at my desk... again.'

He looked down at the relevant info for his latest case. No drool. That was good at least. His Omni-tool continued to ring.

He blinked at it in confusion, the sender unknown, and hit the haptic key to accept the call. It was voice only.

“Vakarian.”
“...Arterius?”

“I require your assistance.”

“Alright... what is it?”

“Go to the Presidium, level three, there is a potted plant with odd purple spots near the fountain with color changing LED lights, call me when you get there. Go. Quickly.” The call disconnected.

Garrus shook his head, now even more confused. 'Well... technically, I have orders from a Spectre. To be seen leaving C-Sec academy and nonchalantly entering the presidium tower elevator at,' He glanced at the time. 'Four hours into the night shift. This is going to go so well.'

Surprisingly, it did. He made it out of the building, to the elevator, rode up, went down the hall, and found the strange plant. He wondered how he was going to call Saren back with nothing but a 'sender unknown' on his call list. Garrus shrugged and gave it a try, and it worked to his utter bafflement. Did Saren... have a private extra-net address at Sender Unknown?

“You're there?”

Seriously. He did. He really did. What even.

“Yeah, I'm here.”

“That was faster then should be possible from your home residence.”

“...I was at work.”

“Excellent. The door will open in approximately 15 seconds, on a one-time-use emergency signal. Enter quickly, go to the terminal on the far right.” Garrus gave up trying to make sense of the surreal night he was having, and just ran with it.

'See, stress ball? This is me making the best of it. At this point, it's a self defense mechanism.'
He was also tired enough to be remotely talking to his stress ball at home. Not a good sigh, but he was going to just play this in 'wing it' mode, and hope for the best.

“I'm there,” he said aloud instead.

“Check the index, find 'Ria Te'Amon and the Art of Ordinance', bring up the chapter on defusing a telemetric data enabled Neutron bomb, I believe it's chapter 37 or so. Find the section on hacking the telemetric data in order to confuse the bomb's triggering mechanism.”

“Right, ahhh, just a second.”

“No need to rush,” came Saren's dry toned voice, edged with humor, “we have a good twenty five minutes, thirteen seconds before it goes off.”

“I could concentrate better if you didn't make it clear that you were in range of a live Neutron bomb.”

“It was rather obvious before hand, I should think.”

“Lalalalala~I'm not listening.”

Suddenly bright laughter came on the channel. “Who is this guy, Saren? I like him.”

A beleaguered sigh followed. “Garrus Vakarian. A Detective with C-Sec.”

“You let a random cop into the Spectre Offices? BB is going to just love this one.”

Garrus ponderously interjected into the back and forth with half a mind, the other half skimming through pages of the e-book on explosive ordinance. “I thought the Spectre Offices were down in C-Sec Aca-”

“Nope.” Chimed the second voice. “Those are a cover. Welcome to the next several days of your life
my friend, because there is no way out for you until we get back to the Citadel. If anyone sees you there? My advice is to quickly say, 'It's Saren's fault!' and stay very still.”

Garrus chuffed into the dead air of the obviously hermetically sealed, -he hated to say but was quietly thinking it... coffin-, room he'd walked into.

“So who is BB?” He asked onto the channel, skimming becoming more frantic as it settled into his brain that the Spectres on the call were possibly trapped somewhere with a live, extra-lethal bomb.

“That's the code name for the cranky old bat that handles Spectre procedural paperwork. Very picky about crossing your 't's and dotting your 'i's, so to speak.”

Another long sign from Saren. It sounded like the stolid *torin* was having an especially long day. “Nihlus. He may not know what a ‘t’ even is...”

The unknown voice made a sound of disconcert and started humming a pop song when no one replied. If Garrus had to guess, from common knowledge and media, it was probably Saren's protégé Nihlus Kryik who was currently humming this year’s biggest single.

Several minutes passed as the person continued to hum various pop songs in a variety of languages. A short stint of clever mouthed beatboxing even went by before Garrus located the right section in the truly massive e-book.

“I've got the section pulled up. Can you tell me the specs on the OS running the telemetry system or the serial number on the ignition? Need to narrow this down, there are too many listings.”

They spent the next, increasingly more nerve wracking, nine minutes figuring it out.

“It is down. Thank you. There is food and water in the room by the entryway. I would advise avoiding it if you can, eat from the back end of the stacks if you cannot. We will be back on the Citadel in... forty one hours, give or take. I will ensure you are not expected at C-Sec in the mean time. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Don't go in any of the rooms down the left hallway!” Added in the other voice.
“A good point. There is a range down the right hand hallway, and a maintenance closet as well. You can make use of anything in either of those, but I would avoid the rest of the doors, and the stairs.” Garrus looked around, seeing no stairs.

“Riiiight. Okay. Great.” The call disconnected. Garrus looked from the massive battery of consoles on the wall before him to the open door to the break room, with questionable food supplies. Entirely unconvinced the left or right hallway was safe. It looked like a maze back there.

'Screw this.' was the clearest, exhaustion fueled thought in his head. He went to try his hand at hacking the door.

It took him about five hours to cautiously work his way around the best security systems in the galaxy, and then... he went home.

He took the next two days off work regardless, he felt it was well deserved, and read up on the latest in security suites instead.

Saren and Nihlus arrived at the hidden Spectre Office, expecting to see Garrus either half starved or tripping out of his mind. Everyone knew the break room food was spiked, though no one could pin down who kept doing it.

'Maybe Tela could ask the Broker?' Nihlus thought passingly. '...Nah. It's a good lesson for newbies anyway.' Regardless, he'd been nice enough to pick up some dextro take-away on the way here, enough for two and a biotic, and was waiting for Saren to move through the doorway... but he was just standing there, still.

“Saren?” Nihlus started carefully, “...is he dead?”

“My optics show... no life signs in the vicinity, save for down in Operations, Nerra’s lab, and the usual head count in the Intel rooms.”

“Wait, what?” Nihlus leaned around him and peered into the area. Empty.
They entered and checked around. No one around on the upper levels at all. Saren brought up his Omni-tool and called the absent sniper. The video feed popped up to show Vakarian lounging on a *cubitura* style couch, with the distant sound of a dialogue on a vid in the background.

“Vakarian.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Where... are you?”

“...at home.”

“.....”

“You need me to run another errand?”

“No, we... bought you lunch.”

“Oh, that's nice of you. You and... is that Spectre Kryik? Are you, ah, bringing it here, or...?”

“...Yes. Send me your address. We will be there shortly.”

“Alright.”

Saren ended the call.

Nihlus looked at the door way, back at Saren, back at the door way, and again at Saren. One brow ridge raised in silent question.

“I have no idea.”
Cubitura, if anyone cares, is bastardized Latin for 'A Laying Down'. Sort of like, I think, 'he needs a beating' or 'she needed a break'. Garrus needed a laying down. //shifty eyes//

This may, or may not, be something like a linguist's version of an attempt at a smutty pun.

Fanfic Recommendation: **Poetry Slam** (2228 words) by Recidiva (Thane vs Garrus, Poetry Slam. Mmmmmhmmmm. Raise your hand if you have a voice kink? /raises hand/)
Like ill fitting sweaters

Chapter Summary

In which Nihlus’ mind is dirty, just in general, and normal conversation topics are hard to find.

Chapter Notes

lexicon for your convenience:
torin - male Turian above the age of majority (credit: MizDirected)
cubitura - Turian sized reclining couch, built for people with pointy bits
furca - Latin, basically means 'fork'
etomophagous - a type of edible protein, don't look up the details unless are aren't easily grossed out

Fun facts:
A day on the Citadel lasts 20 hours, 6 of which the lights are dimmed for to simulate night time.
The atmo-net only keeps the air breathable up to 7 meters... which means skycars must be built for short distance space travel, and have life support systems.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

’What did they feed this torin growing up?’, was Nihlus’ first thought upon seeing Garrus Vakarian open the door to his apartment. Standing at an even seven feet, Garrus was taller then him by several inches, and Nihlus was already a very tall, lanky Turian. He glanced back at Saren, whose crest only came up his chin. Adorably short, for one of their people.

Nihlus grinned internally at the mental image of what Saren would say if he told him he was adorable in any capacity. His helpful and somewhat suicidal brain also conjured up a picture of... what were those human dolls? The ones where each one was bigger then the last, and they stacked inside each other? He couldn't remember, but was unbothered, having gotten entirely stuck on the idea of 'stacked inside each other'.

’Heh.’
Garrus waved them inside, feeling somewhat bemused to have Spectres delivering him an early lunch, and mildly disturbed by the... effusive and friendly grin in Nihlus' mandibles. Saren remained stone-faced.

Odd pairing, these two.

He coughed and offered them seats on the *cubitura* that took up the better portion of his tiny living room, and sat down at his one person breakfast bar, facing them.

“Thank you for lunch,” he offered.

“No problem,” returned Nihlus, grin having died down to something less perturbing as the *torin* glanced around his apartment. “It was the least we could do after you helped us save that colony.”

Garrus blinked, hard.

“There was... a colony involved?”

Saren, who had begun to open bags and pull out containers, stood and made for his kitchen. “Yes. We could have simply flown off, but your intel allowed us to spare the citizens from an unneeded emergency Neutron bomb. A left over from the Rachni wars I believe, in an old base that had been taken over by pirates. Where are your plates?”

Garrus pointed silently at the cabinet with plates, and reached over to pop open the dining-ware drawer in case it was needed. Saren nodded absently and acquired plates and *furca*, long double-point sporks.

“So,” Nihlus dropped into the silence, “How'd you get out of the Spectre Offices? We'd... ah... sort of expected to find you there still.”

Garrus shrugged. “I worked my out through the door security. Took me a while though.”
He perked up, curious. “You hacked your way out? How exactly?”

“I... ah...” Garrus was trying to think of a way to describe something extremely technical in simple terms and also not incriminate himself in the process... when it occurred to him that Kryik wasn't some flunky in the evidence department, he probably knew his way around computer systems. Likely most Spectres did. He also was unlikely to care about borderline illegal hacking prowess.

Well then.

“I had to trick the door’s security system into thinking my entry program was another layer of security, and not an update or change to existing code. Then I set myself up as an extra data storage area for when the existing storage area filled. Then I flooded it with random data from a bot trying to guess the security code, until it started using my offered storage space to store failed attempts for records. Once I had a few failed attempts, I changed the result of one code set from failed to successful, and swapped it with the data of a failed attempt stored on the internal storage. I resent that fake-success code, and it errored out. The lock disengaged, but the door stayed closed. I had to pry it open with a boot knife. Then I put it all back as I found it, and left.”

Saren nodded thoughtfully, “Clever.”

Nihlus tilted his head, “Pffft. That shouldn't have worked.”

“In a perfect world? No, it shouldn't have. Though I had a few other things I tried first that failed, and a few more ideas to try if that one hadn't. Might want to have someone plug that security hole... though they'll have to dig through an awful lot of code to find why it errored out, I suspect.”

“Indeed.” Saren handed out plates stacked with food, a meal of simple grains and various entomophagous proteins, spiced lightly with tiny salted pebbles. Garrus noticed that they hadn't thought of drinks, and popped into the kitchen to grab water.

He opened the cupboard and was met with his small collection of goofy kava cups, the results of years of white elephant gift exchanges at work on the primary holidays of each species. There were six different races at work, -though the Hanar were represented by a single officer-., so PR insisted on six holidays. Garrus tried in vain to find the least ridiculous ones, bypassing, 'Want to feel safe at
night? Sleep with a cop!' and, 'Officer, only because Badass Motherfucker is not an official job title.'
Saren ended up with 'Patrol is how I Roll.', Nihlus with 'Detective Fuel', and he grabbed his well-worn favorite, 'Sometimes there's Justice, sometimes there's just us.'

They both hummed subvocal thanks at him, and the room descended into silence. Garrus scrambled for a conversation topic to fill it.

Nihlus could see the cop was struggling to find something to talk about, and with Saren being predisposed to not-talking for hours, the lanky torin knew he wasn't going to be any help. Deciding to have mercy, he dug for a topic, eventually settling on ‘When in doubt... bring up work.’

“So you're the C-Sec from the bank, right?”

“Excuse me? Oh! The... yeah. The bank robbery. I was ahh... in the area,” Saren chuffed disbelievingly. “and went in to try and get some of the civilians out. That was a long day.”

“A lot of them did, good work. Though the fire suppressant crap they used to put out that fire on the sixth floor...”

“Smelled terrible?”

“Yeah, like fried Hanar.”

“Fried... Hanar?”

“Yeah, this one time I was-” Saren cut him off with a kick in the shin plate.

“Ow! Hey, what was that for?” Saren looked down at his plate, looked up at Nihlus, and raised a brow plate as if to say, 'Are you stupid? Look what we're doing.'

“Oh. Sorry.” Nihlus turned back toward Garrus. “I should've picked a better topic for conversation
over lunch...” The mahogany torin trailed off, considered it, and tried his second set of go-to conversation starters: the conversation train he used to get laid when bar hopping.

“What do you like to do in your free time?” Garrus perked up, swallowing his current mouthful before answering.

“Modding my rifle, like to spend time at the C-Sec range.” That sounded more like work talk to Nihlus, and he had been aiming for ‘vid watching’ or ‘video games’... but it would do.

“Nice, what rifle and mods are you using?”

The conversation picked up after that, Saren chiming in about a new line not yet available to the general public with a scope that pierced smoke clouds with relative ease. Garrus was immediately covetous, while Nihlus was dismissive. The lanky Spectre preferred to get up close and personal, and smoke just made that easier. The Detective countered that if an enemy had that scope, they could see into the smoke he was hiding in and shoot him, while Nihlus’ mind would think and feel like he was hidden.

The conversation devolved into a soldier’s strategy debate of what-ifs and why-nots between different preferred ranges of engagement.

They ended up moving to a nearby always-open cafe that served kava, of which Nihlus practically inhaled, and Saren savored, while Garrus seemed to simply be exultant at talking to people who seemed to share his interests.

They talked for hours, trailing into the night cycle with talk of favorite teas and pirate activity.

Chapter End Notes

The stacking dolls is a reference to a Matryoshka doll, if you'd like to google what Nihlus was talking about. Don't worry, it's SFW.

Turians have gizzards, it's canon! A gizzard is like... a small rock tumbler before or after the usual stomach along the digestive track. All kinds of things have them; birds, worms,
bugs... and they often eat small rocks occasionally to add to their gizzard. Like how we humans eat ginger or peppermints to settle our stomachs, Turians probably eat rocks! How cool is that? I sort of wish I was that cool... Upset stomach? I'm going to eat some rocks and tell it to shut up. Unf.

Fanfic Recommendation: **They Never, Never Wake Again** (34177 words) by **ba_rabby** (Saren/Nihlus/FemShep)
Not every day, but in the in-between times, come see me

Chapter Summary

In which Garrus struggles with madmen and lunch

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
sal - spice used in Turian colonial cooking. (Credit: AceQueenKing)
torin - A male Turian over the age of majority (age: 15) (credit: MizDirected)

Time line fuckery:
In case it wasn't obvious, I'm mucking with time lines to make this work. In canon, at the start of ME 1, Saren was 44, having been a Spectre since he was 19 (Holy shit, right? Special Forces at 19...) Garrus was supposed to be '2-3 years younger' then Shepard, who is 29 at the time, making Garrus about 26. That is just... hilarious. It is canon that Turians join the military at age 15, and serve for 15 years. So Garrus gets out of mandatory duty at 30, takes no time off, and makes Detective... 1-2 years in advance of his lowest possible age? In a slow to move bureaucratic system where the leadership is likely in his dad's pocket, and his dad has always made him earn every inch? Has developed a burning hatred for red tape, like a career cop who's seen one too many child killers go free? Nope, I think not. It's fucking impossible, unless somehow serving with C-Sec (a foreign military body) is counted as civil service, or he was released early, which is generally a bad thing and shouldn't have been able to qualify him a prestigious job on the Citadel... SO! We're breaking the clock with a base ball bat, and making shit up that makes more sense. The year is 2167, 10 years after the Relay 314 incident (Sorry, a few minor skirmishes does not a war make, I'm looking at you System's Alliance PR department.) Saren took on Nihlus 3 years ago, and passed him after a 13 month training period. I'm basing those statistics off of the fact that these kinds of agents generally die young, and need to make sure the torch can be passed at any time, and also that US Special forces training takes 14-18 months, but isn't individualized like a mentor-ship would be. The Reapers invade in 2183, so we are T-minus 16 years to ME1. Nihlus is our youngest, having been Turian-napped from the Hierarchy for Spectre training, just as Saren was, before his service was complete. It probably involved an official personnel transfer request, and a veritable horde of paperwork. In canon, Nihlus joins Saren after his third squad transfer due to insubordination, so he isn't at the beginning of his term of service. That all said, author-chan declares that Saren is now 28, Nihlus is 25, and Garrus is 29. (Not 10, making him 45 in ME1, still damn young for a 160 year life expectancy.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus stared down at the datapad, willing it to say... anything, anything at all, other than what it did. Thirteen dead; Turian, Human, Asari, a Drell. The datapad was a forensics report, and although it was nearly a hundred pages long, it could be summarized by saying. There is nothing on, in, or
around any of the bodies. We've got no clue, good luck with that.'

He dropped his head into his palms, talons dragging against fringe. There was a serial killer on the loose, no one had answers, and as usual the people in charge were more than happy to make it his problem.

Granted, he had a history of solving some colorful cases that had been almost cold, but that wasn't why they sent it to him. Oh no. They dropped this kind of thing on Detective Vakarian's desk because he was always in some sort of trouble anyways, and his family name kept him from getting fired outright when he had to play the scapegoat for the media.

He'd played this game so many spirits damned times... was it any wonder his pari was always disappointed, if the media was the starting point of how he followed Garrus' career?

Since they didn't talk much... ever...

On the other hand, why didn't he know what the real story was like? He'd spent years at C-Sec before Garrus ever did, surely he knew the bullshit games the upper ranks ran to keep the heat off of the eternally underfunded and understaffed police force?

He was going nowhere at this point, head spinning in circles, thoughts tangled. What he needed was... focus, and his best focus always came when he was behind a scope.

“Hey. Hey, Vakarian.” Garrus turned at the sound of the voice. It was Sergeant O'Riley, looking sheepish. “I know you've got a lot on your shoulders at the moment, buddy, but ah... It's 2 am, and the range is closing. You gotta go home.” Garrus shook himself, noticing cramps and stiff joints from the position he'd held for too long. The fabricated targets set on quick-moving, randomized patterns in the distance were... well, more holes then not.

“Ah, sorry.” He started packing up. “It's 2? I thought the range closed at 1...” Officer O'Riley shrugged carelessly.

“Meh, I had some paperwork I was behind on anyways. Thought you could use the extra time.”
“I could... I mean. I did. Thanks.”

“No problem, yeah? Get some sleep.” Garrus nodded as if in agreement, but the look in his fellow officer's gaze made it clear that he knew the lie for what it was, subvocal understanding or no. They both knew the sniper planned to eat something, and end up back at his desk in an hour.

The easy-going human shook his head in disapproving acceptance and walked away.

It had been thirteen days since the impossible case file had been left on his desk, and Garrus hadn't made any significant progress. Another person had died, same lack of evidence as before, and he was counting the days till the next name was added to the list.

Innocent lives were being snuffed out, one by one, the case was cold even as it happened.

'How' was the big question. If he could just figure out...

"Next! What can I get for you sir?" Garrus looked up to find himself next in line to order at the café where he'd last seen the Spectres. It was stupid, but he kept coming here on his lunch hour superstitiously hoping that some sort of... Spectre-y good luck would rub off on him. Help him get a foothold in this case.

“The lunch special, ahh.. extra sal please.”

“And for the drink?”

“Just water.” He swiped his credit chit.

“Sure thing mister, here ya go!” The cheerful Asari, not a day over 60, handed him a cutely decorated number tag to set on his table and called for the next person. Garrus sat down in a booth by the front windows, setting the number card down and staring off in the distance. It wasn't long
before the waiting staff brought out his meal, taking the number tag with them, absentmindedly
leaving a straw with his water. He would have laughed if he’d noticed, the absurdity of giving a
Turian a drinking straw, but he was too busy giving the opposite bench a thousand yard stare.

“You going to eat that?” Garrus looked up, startled, as Nihlus slid into the bench across from him,
nabbing a vegetable chip off the side without waiting for an answer. Sleep deprived and stressed,
Garrus was slow to reply, but eventually got out, “No, go ahead.”

Nihlus reached for the eating utensils from his side of the table and dug in. “You look glum Blue,
why the heavy expression?”

“Blue?” He responded confused. Nihlus just gave him a crooked grin, and tapped a talon on his own
cheek plate, mirroring where Garrus' stark blue clan markings were thickest.

“Oh. Hmm.” He rolled his neck, bracing his elbows against table top. “On a case...”, -he gestured a
hand vaguely in the air, as if to indicate it's troublesome presence-, ”and it isn't going well. Not
enough information to work with.”

Nihlus gave a low roll of subvocals that said 'I know the feeling'. “Keep at it, yeah? The info you're
looking for is always out there, somewhere.” He added between bites. “You just have to get creative
in finding it.” Garrus smiled lightly.

“Words of wisdom?”

“Yep, got it out of a fortune cookie. Don’t tell Saren.”

“That you are spouting human wisdoms, or that you had dextro chinese?”

“Both.”

“He probably already knows.”

“...Point.” The remainder of Garrus' lunch disappeared, chips and all. Nihlus helped himself to the
water as well. Garrus thought he should have felt offended. Nihlus' every manner, from his accent to
his table manners, spoke of low tier birth and poor colony upbringing, and his lunch was disappearing rapidly; but he couldn't manage to be anything more than vaguely charmed. Don't forget tired. Charmed, and tired. Nihlus stood.

“Well, I've got to resupply and get back to it. Bit of an upswing in pirate activity has us all running around like mad. Take care Blue. Find them and blow their face off, yeah?” Nihlus grinned again, flashing him an alien thumbs up before disappearing, Like a summer wind, he blew in, warmed things up, and blew right back out. Garrus’ smile faded as the upbeat male disappeared.

Scrubbing his face with his hands, he went to order a new lunch.

Garrus fell back on his bed, face relaxed and happy for the first time in almost a month. Finally, that asshole was behind bars. Spirits. That case had almost killed him, but it was over. Over and done, no more deaths. Nihlus had been right about one thing, the information needed had been out there, somewhere, but Garrus couldn't have found it, wouldn't have found it, if he hadn't gotten creative. The killer had a distinct pattern of targets, the nutjob had taken women, Asari, or effeminate men. He'd favored people who had purple markings, tattoos, or clothing. He stayed on one ward, and witness accounts had spoken with the victims just the day before in many cases. Killed in one night, no clues left behind.

So Garrus preempted him instead, pouring personal funds into making small bracelets with tiny press-able emergency beacons, he'd then gone down to the red light district in plain clothes and slipped into and out of prostitution establishments, both legal and not. He'd sat down with defensive and dismissive business owners and laid out the situation. Serial killer. No evidence left behind. 23 dead thus far, 8 of which were sex workers. The owners thawed a bit. He out lined his plan; free trackers for all their workers, ask them to wear purple. He'd be on call, all night, every night, just in case anyone hit their beacon. False alarms wouldn't be punished. A successful capture, or even spotting of the murderer would result in reward for both owner and workers. Expressions showed interest at that, at least.

Almost three thousand fabricated beacons, 67 establishments, over a week of sleepless nights spent in an unmarked patrol car, and a dozen or so false alarms. Then, the killer picked the wrong person to target.

It was a chemist, killing remotely with rapidly broken down poisons and tiny robotic insects. Of all the wild, insane ways to kill someone.
The piece of shit had been grudge killing, his bondmate had left him, unwilling to deal with his poor attitude, -read as domestic abuse-, and even though she'd never be able to bond to another, she'd left one day with no word.

‘Good for her’, Garrus thought sleepily, sinking into the deeply padded sides of his bed.

They had even been able to save the thin slip of a *torin* who'd been spinning tricks on a quiet street, carrying one of his beacons. He'd been rushed to the hospital by the ambulance Garrus had called as he flew in pursuit of the perpetrator, who had *graciously* stayed for a bit to watch his victim die.

A long, fluid sigh left Garrus' chest, and he slipped off into well deserved rest.

Chapter End Notes

100 kudos to anyone who picked out that Nihlus echoed Saren's catch phrase, "Never kill anyone without a good reason. You can always find a reason to kill someone." with his own version, "The info you're looking for is always out there, somewhere. You just have to get creative in finding it." Ahhh, fanon Young!Nihlus. Naive, and yet still ruthless. Yes, by creative he does mean 'Make it up if you have to.'

Give a guy a break, not a heart attack

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
torin - A male Turian over the age of majority (age: 15) (credit: Mizdirected)
tarin - A female Turian over the age of majority (age: 15) (credit: Mizdirected)
dial-side - A navigational term for the tips of the ward arms on the Citadel, opposite the presidium-side

I've decided for the purposes of plot that the atmo net on the Citadel keeps air at normal levels up to 21~ meters, a partial pressure atmosphere up to 71~ meters to allow for low grade mass effect fields to hold comfortable temperatures and air in mid height parking lots and entry ways, and lastly, a weak atmosphere that stretches across the entire inner area left in place in case of traffic accidents and such, just strong enough to give people who are spaced a little extra time to get scooped up by rescuers before the depressurization becomes traumatic enough to kill.

Also, everyone wears helmets, especially when in combat, because why the fuck would they not? Assume everyone has neat Iron Man-esc retractable helmets that they open during non-combat dialogue. Well fitted, camera suite enabled, bullet stopping helmets.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a beautiful day in the wards. Sure, the artificial weather patterns provided that everyday, but Garrus felt like today was particularly nice. He was cruising along in light traffic, accomplishing nothing more than enjoying the drive. It had been that kind of week, over all.

It was, of course, in that very moment of high heartedness that the dispatch channel crackled to life in his ear.

“Attention, 10-80 along the Aroch Ward expressway, heading dial-side. Repeat, 10-80 on Aroch, main expressway. Available officers in units 195 through 220, please respond.” Garrus tapped the key sequence into his Omni-tool to indicate he was en route, and awaiting further details. Then, he flipped on his lights and siren and took off for Aroch, waiting for dispatch to open a line to him. He didn't wait long.

“Hello again, 201. Glutton for punishment, as usual.” Garrus smiled. Yes, he was always fast to reply for ABPs and alerts, and dispatch loved to tease him about it. He had something of a reputation for being quick on the draw, in more ways than one.

"Hello, and yes. Always."

“Wellllll, like I said on the alert, it's a skycar chase, an interesting one though. We've got a yellow Cision Motors 3PL, tricked out for illegal speed boosts, being followed by a dark blue Nezo Trans with no ID, and units 134 and 219 in pursuit. Headed away from the presidium, about halfway to the dial-side of the ward at the moment. Might be headed for the cargo docking lanes, if they're trying to get off station, or Elkross Stadium, if they intend to get lost in the shuffle.”

“They'd have to ditch the skycar to manage that, the Cision 3PLs aren't common.”

“And it's yellow.”

“Aaand it's yellow. Thanks, I'm on it.”

“Good luck 201.” The connection ended, and Garrus hit the accelerator.

“'I still don't understand why you won't let me drive.' Nihlus said, half lounging in his chair, unbuckled.

“You are a terrible driver.” Saren replied, swerving over, around, and under other traffic at eye watering speeds.

“I am not.”

“Yes. You are. I would not trust you with a go-kart, much less a skycar.”

“You're just saying that because I scratched the paint on your ship when we had to emergency land last week. It wasn't my fault the stabilizers were so mangled. Blame the mercs who fired at us.”

“'Scratched the paint' does not aptly describe the five meter gouge that resulted.” They turned sharply, the skycar they were following barrel rolling over the side of the ward's edge, curving itself along the underside of the station, and activating it's speed boost.
“I want to point out I was also high as a kite on pain meds, and full of bullet holes.”

“It was only three, that hardly counts as 'being full of.'” Nihlus rolled his eyes, giving up the argument for the moment.

“You're going to loose her, we don't have a booster.”

“I will not.”

“She's getting awayyy.” Drawled Nihlus in a sing-song voice. Saren glanced over at him, supremely unamused, then cut sideways, aiming to come around the ward's edge several city blocks ahead of their target. The skycar, though lacking boosters, had excellent handling and turned on a cred-chit's edge, the internal gravity compensators preventing the two Spectre's from feeling the physics of the wild chase. They flipped around the edge, and Saren pulled their vehicle into a sharp incline, plunging them through an open air atrium to the utter terror of the occupants.

“I think I saw Tevos back there,” said Nihlus, chin lifted in a tilt and a hand over his brow as he pantomimed peering back at the atrium as it disappeared around a corner. “on one of the benches.”

“I highly doubt it, the Councilor doesn't frequent this area.”

“I totally did, that nais is going to be miffed.”

“You're imagination is overactive. Even so, we simply flew through. The patrons didn't suffer anything more than a heavy breeze.” Saren spun them in another sharp turn, pulling out into traffic not five meters from their target.

“Do I want to know how you know, off hand, whether Councilor Tevos frequents any one particular area?” said Nihlus, as he set the window to roll down, leaning out to take a few shots. They pinged disappointingly off the rear window, and he glared at the bullet proof glass.

“It is relevant to performing our duty.” Came the reply, half-yelled over the mild howl of the wind from the semi-pressurized atmosphere around them.
“.... how??”

Saren merely let out a rumbling huff, subvocals depreciating.

“Perhaps instead your imagination isn't active eno- Get down!” Nihlus dropped without thinking, sliding most of his bulk onto the floor of the skycar, only his upper body remaining draped over the seat. Saren flicked the bar that adjusted the driver's seat, dropping the upper portion straight back. In a desperate bid the tarin driving the 3LP had tossed out a mass effect wireframe device. Intended to be used in groups of 4 to provide a two dimensional shield, the target had gotten innovative, tossing out two, effectively making a temporary mid-air tripwire.

It sheared the top of their skycar off like a cheese cutter, making it tumble away, smacking into buildings as it took the long fall to the station’s surface. An emergency mass effect bubble popped up above them, a battery of alert pings and emergency alarms going off. Saren immediately sat up, correcting their course.

“Those things come in groups of 4!” Yelled Nihlus, and just as he finished speaking three more sets of two came flying at them, spread at wild angles. Saren, not to be caught off guard twice, tilted them at an angle and veered wide, clearing time the trap unscathed. It would have been a perfect dodge, had another skycar not been coming out of an aerial garage without looking where they were going. The abused vehicle took the collision like a champ, the rear right side impacting severely, but the other three sides automatically compensating for the loss of lift and speed. The hit staggered Saren, who used his biotics to stabilize himself. Nihlus, however, went flying.

Saren about had a heart attack, arrested only the sight of a C-Sec patrol car zipping in on it's side, passenger side door open, catching Nihlus like a bird of prey. The blue-and-war car wavered dangerously at his impact, likely right on top of the driver, but evened out. Saren turned forward, unaware he was throwing off biotic sparks like a drive core, eyes narrowed dangerously.

He really only needed the codes secured in the female Turian's briefcase when this started. Now he needed to see her dead. Very, very dead.

Nitnfold

Nihlus came to in a tangle of limbs and with a blinding headache. The nausea hit a moment later, and he reached, carefully, for the stims dispenser on his armor, then the helmet retractor along his collar line.
“You alright?”

Nihlus felt more then heard the rumble of concerned subvocals in a familiar voice.

'Huh... what a coincidence.' He took stock of himself to find that he was face down, and halfway in the lap of his new favorite C-Sec Officer. Not that he hadn't liked the torin before, but Nihlus was fairly certain he now owed the other male a life debt.

“Ahuhhh... yeah. Hnnn. Ow.”

“That doesn't sound alright. I'm still following... that's Saren up there driving? I can leave off for the hospital though if we need to.”

“No. Ugh. I'm... good. Mmmfine.” Nihlus took a moment to breathe, leaning his fringe against the blissfully cold armored thigh beneath him, waiting for the stims to kick in. Nothing felt broken at least, one arm wrapped around the knee by his head, the other folded awkwardly back along Garrus’ chest piece. One spur was throbbing pain in time with his headache, he thought he might've caught it on something during the fall. “You've got... reallly great timing Blue.”

Warm, vibrating laughter echoed in the relative silence of the properly sealed skycar.

“I suppose I do, at that. You sure you're alright?”

“Mmmmyep.”

“Okay. It ah... it looks like Saren rammed your skycar into the back of.... huh. Into the back of the yellow 3LP and is.. hmm... ripping the top off. I didn't know biotics could do that.”

“Saren can.”

“Apparently. They're losing altitude, can you sit up so I can assist him?”
“Don't wanna. Your thigh is... mmmnice 'n cold.” The stims were evidently taking their sweet time. Garrus laughed again, and it made Nihlus smile though his head was rather displeased by the movement.

“I think that's your concussion talking. How about I turn up the air conditioning instead, and you move into the other seat? Easy does it.” Nihlus managed to roll backwards a bit, an armored hand helping him sit. He ended up more on the divider then anything, but it was enough that he wasn't trapping Garrus into his seat. The doors popped open a few moments later and Garrus jumped out, moving forward with his pistol drawn, edging around the side of the fallen skycar tangle cautiously. Nihlus managed to shake it off, half-tumbling out of his side, drawing his sidearm and following. Trying to look less out of it then he was, he peered forward, eyes narrowed in pain. The wreck was smoking, smelled something awful, but he relaxed when Garrus lowered his weapon and walked forward with less caution. Nihlus followed suit, the stimulant cocktail finally mitigating the pain and nausea enough for him to move almost normally. He came even with the officer just as Garrus reached up to tag his com button.

“Dispatch, this is unit 201. The 10-80 is over, Spectres on site. 10-79, one body, Turian female. 2 vehicle wreck to clean up as well. Minor property damage along route due to... ah, debris.” Nihlus walked up and tossed a companionable arm over the shoulder closest to him, leaning on Garrus just a bit to hide the tremble in his legs from Saren, who was now walking toward them, briefcase in hand. Garrus leaned in a bit, a willing crutch, listening as dispatch replied.

“Nihlus.”

“Hey, you got the case! Nicely done. Loved the biotics, bet the little shit pissed herself before she died.” Nihlus smiled widely. “I've got a great idea. Let's drop this by the intel department and go out for drinks.” Saren looked him up and down steadily.

“No. I will turn this in. Vakarian will escort you to the hospital.” Nihlus blanched at the dreaded H word, but by the look on Saren's face he wasn't getting out of it.

He sighed deeply, and mumbled an affirmative. “Alright, alright...”
We remember how we remember, don't judge

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
torin/tarin - Turian adult male/female (Credit: Mizdirected)
mari/pari - Turian for mother/father (Credit: Mizdirected)
nais - Asari pronoun (Credit: Mizdirected)
Cântir - originally bastardized Welsh, translates roughly as landsong

Useless author prattling:
So fun fact, the Turian people have 15,000+ years of recorded history, compared to
Humanity's roughly 5200 years at the start of ME1. Uh. Hot damn! They're in their
151st century, while we're in the 52nd. Good gravy, they would have muuuuurdered us
if the First Contact 'War' hadn't been interrupted. I wonder what their population levels
are? Anyone know?

I apologize in advance, this chapter has me nerding allllll over the place, and then
making shit up as I went along. You'll see what I mean.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren set the box down on his kitchen table, slowly and with an echo of reverence. The ship's audio
system was turned to a mellow Opera score, piping the humming vocals of a tarin from the 113th
century singing a remake of a love story from the 53rd. He flipped the catches keeping the box closed
one by one, two along each side, and lifted the top off, setting it aside.

Inside the box, held very carefully in place by mass effect fields, was a multi-faceted sphere of
prismatic glass. There were flat panels that made up each facet, the colors all some variation of milky
pink, though the shapes varied between squares, triangles, and pentagons. One of the panels was
missing. A small container attached to the side opened to reveal shards of a triangle now broken.

Saren removed the shards for a closer look, held gently between talons. The edges showed signs of
stress fractures that had likely led to the now shattered condition. Setting the shards down on the
immaculate surface, he ran a scanning program to gauge the composition of the material. Results in
hand, he returned everything to the box, closed and secured it, and moved to the navigational
console.

If he wanted to repair the artifact, he needed base material from the original source.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
“-ay, reports are streaming in. The so called 'Baron of the West Canal' is confirmed dead, our sources say a human female was seen fleeing from the sc-.”

Nihlus continued nonchalantly walking down the street, past the news feed, resisting the urge to yell 'Not a human! Also not female! Try again, nais!' He did roll his eyes though, but really, who was he to complain if they got their story entirely wrong? No chips off his crest.

The hoodie pulled up over his head was doing a poor job of blocking the rain fall coming down in a dull and relentless drizzle, but again he had no room to complain as that same rain drenched his clothes and darkened the sky, effectively washing away the blood spatter and masking the numerous small tears from grappling.

None of the blood was his.

Nihlus glanced around casually, looking for the tale-tell ripple in the crowd to see if he was being followed, or for the eyes of anyone watching him closely, particularly Drell. Nothing. He continued forward, slowly, slouching and bland. The only things to note his passage were the security cameras scattered about, and the standard Spectre-grade selective image scrubbing program he’d released into the city's mainframe days ago would take care of that. Viral, self-spreading audio/video scrubbers were very, very illegal. It was a good thing that meant less than nothing to him.

His stomach growled, but he kept walking. Slow and steady. Out past the canal district, into a clothing store. New shirt, new pants, new jacket, a spirits damned umbrella, thank-you-very-much; all purchased on a disposable credit chit. Out the back door, down an alleyway, into someone's house, a quick scan showing no one home. He slipped inside, showered, and changed clothes. It felt good to wash the grit from his plates, but he left the false bio-mask on his face, hiding his markings. Once more under the rainfall, and backtracking to the shopping district again, different walking pace, different carriage of body. No slouch. Nihlus strode forward like a well to do individual, making for the space port as if he had places to be.

A few switched rapid transit rides, an extra loop past a different shopping mall, another set of clothes, and he finally made it to the space port, back to the rented shuttle that he’d ride to his real ship, data wipe, and set to return on auto pilot.

Nihlus 1, Idiot mob boss who though sentient trafficking was a good idea? 0.

Well to be fair, by this point, it was probably more like Nihlus two hundred something, enemies of
the Council 0. It would be that way till the day he died if the lanky male had any say on the matter.

Nihlus sighed, a smidgen bored but mostly content. The PSV Widmanstat was an ugly heap of cobbled together turrets and armor plating, but the ship was his ugly, messy, dextro-pizza-box-ridden heap. It was more or less home, and a considerable upgrade from the slums he'd been in all of last week. It was named for the curiously geometric ribbon patterns that naturally formed in the iron mined near the merc base where he grew up. His pari had shown them to him, and they had shared a fascination with the tiny natural wonder. His mari had found it unimpressive, and had primly told them not to bring rocks in the house. Nihlus had still smuggled a few in, and stashed them in a young torin's 'treasure box' under his bed. He'd been good at sleight of hand, even at that age.

The Widmanstat was currently in geosynchronous orbit with a moon in the absolute middle of nowhere. For the moment he was stuck being, of all things, a secure relay point for intelligence from behind Batarian embargo lines. Not a big deal, really. He'd only been here two days, and might be waiting another week for the agent to get a chance to safely send the data packet without risking their cover.

He was in range of a com buoy, albeit an old one with a slow up/down speed, and so had access to the infinite amusements of the extranet.

'What to do... what to do.' He thought, considering his options for the day. He'd probably run through some calisthenics at some point, if for no reason other then to burn off some energy and stay in shape. 'Wellllll. I spent... most of yesterday playing Galaxy of Fantasy, and that was fun. Ehhhh, but I don't really feel like fighting latency issues again. I disconnected so many times.'

Nihlus let out a long, considering hum. There was always porn to watch, he could find a live stream and pause it to let it buffer a bit if need be. Of course, thinking of sex immediately brought to mind Saren, who... probably wouldn't willingly touch him with a three meter pole. Okay, that was an exaggeration. The torin had literally carried him off the battlefield before, treated his wounds countless times, and patted him on the shoulder a time or two. He'd even managed to steal a hug one time when drunk.

Nihlus smiled fondly in remembrance of that hug. He'd gotten away with it too, which was even better. Oh, there had been a lecture about drinking, mixing uppers with alcohol, and several other things Nihlus now had no memory of, but it had been entirely worth it. Spirits, his mentor smelled good. Edible. Nihlus just wanted to lick him. Just once. Okay, maybe more then once.
Aaaaand now he was aroused.

Plates loose but not open, he browsed for a live stream, vids, or a picture spread even, looking around to see if anything caught his attention. A muscled *torin* scrolled by, vaguely of Garrus' build and colors, and Nihlus grinned mischievously. Oh, the things he'd like to do to that cop. Too bad the chances of a Palaven-born high society clansman sleeping with him were... oh wow, also near zero. He was starting to wonder if he had a fetish for unavailable partners.

The lanky male continued to scroll for a while, finding nothing particularly interesting.

'Okay, so... now I've got an itch... and none of this is scratching it.' Sighing, he gave up the search and decided to call the topic of his usual fantasies instead. Nihlus rather missed Saren, bladed charm and all, but if the other Spectre would answer a vid-call he'd at least get to see and speak to his stoic partner. He'd settle for that much.

The vid-call request went out, and he set it to chime if answered, then proceeded to doze off in the pilot's chair.

Half an hour later the alert noise sounded. He smiled and lifted his Omni-tool, Saren's upper torso filling the screen.

“Nihlus.”

“How're ya doing?” Saren was on screen, and appeared to be sitting at his kitchen table, working on something. Some ancient music was coming through the speakers, quiet but melodic. The other male glanced up at the question, but returned to looking at what he was doing.

“I am well. Is there something you need?” Nihlus leaned to the side, trying to will the camera to show him what was being worked on.

“Oh no, I'm good. I mean, I'm bored out of my mind, sitting in the middle of nowhere, waiting for an intel drop, but other then that good. Just... called to say hi. Missed ya. So what're you doing?” Saren half smiled at the long string of jabber.

“I am attempting to repair a Cântir, almost finished in fact. I was... distracted laying the inset when you first called, hence the delay.”
“No problem, I didn't mark the call send as urgent or anything. Soooo... what's a canteer, and why was it broken?” Saren leaned back from his work, eyes assessing something off screen. The sharp eyed look had Nihlus' talons skimming his waist absent mindedly.

“Truly Nihlus, whoever taught you history should be shot. The gaps in your knowledge base are atrocious.”

“Okay, I learned most of what I’ve got by doing education modules myself when mari was... busy with her friends. Tri didn’t exactly have a lot of schools outside the main colony, so I can really only offer myself as target practice there. Ahh... please no shooting me?”

Saren's quietly aggrieved sigh tumbled into an almost chuckle. “I suppose I can let it go this once.”

“Oh, thanks so much.”

“Well then, a Cântir,” Began Saren, his voice taking on a lecture tone, “is an artifact from ancient Palaven, estimated to have been invented three to four hundred years before the beginning of recorded history. They create a small, unstable magnetosphere that interacts with and diffuses oncoming electrons, creating a wavering display of light that requires no further energy and no complex tech.” Saren stood, walking a short distance to a wall panel, and dimmed the lights. Nihlus was confused for a moment, before realizing he was about to get a demonstration. “Ancient Turians took advantage of our planet's excess of solar radiation, using these as light sources and decoration. The unique, multifaceted shape is called a cantellated dodecahedron, and while not necessary for function, is traditionally how they were made. This particular Cântir... is over nine thousand years old.” Saren's subvocals, normally so bland, rolled past Nihlus like a lava flow; pride and passion spicing the words.

The overhead lights turned low, soft music still trailing in, had created a quiet sense of anticipation. Nihlus leaned forward, watching as Saren turned his camera to include the Cântir in front of him. A soft click sounded as the older male tapped a device off screen. Something hummed to life and suddenly the air around it flickered. Once... twice, in a mellow green. It gradually flared to life, undulating in waves, occasionally flowing into blueish tones. Saren's talons reached out, palm up and fingers curled, running the back of his hand delicately down the side, swirling green fae-light playing against the silver of his hide and plates. “It's similar to the color of your eyes.” He murmured.

“It's...” Nihlus began hesitantly, entranced by more than just the artifact, “It's an aurora? You have an ancient hand made aurora ball? That is... beyond cool.” Saren chuffed.
“It is not mine, it belongs to a museum. They required someone with the time and resources to repair it. A panel was damaged,” -Saren pointed to a particular triangle that looked slightly less worn. “-this one, you see? It was practically non-functional without it.”

“It's amazing. How'd you manage to repair it?”

“It required a visit to Palaven. I had to match the spectroanalysis of the striation and magnetism levels carefully. It was a bit of a dig to reach the material of the correct composition, but relatively easy to narrow down with the planetary deep scans available.”

“How did you even find the time for that?”

“It is called multitasking Nihlus, perhaps you have heard of it?”

“Nah.”

Saren shook his head lightly at another of their familiar call and response phrases, not entirely hiding a minuscule smile.

“I will be back on the Citadel in two days, when do you expect to be?”

“Not sure, I have to wait for the intel to hit... you know, we should probably get to some of those two-man missions piling up, don't you think? Last I saw there were several queued to be handled. Wait for me?” It was probably the worst veiled attempt to finagle their schedules to match up for cooperative missions yet. Nihlus berated himself for his awkwardness.

Saren nodded though, still very distracted by the Cântir lights. Nihlus watched him, wondering at the fascination before suddenly recalling that Saren's lost brother was a major history buff. The idea made his throat tight, that his former mentor was...

It was just like the patterns in the iron, the rocks he still had in the crappy storage box buried in his closet. This was... Saren's box of rocks. Nihlus scrubbed a palm over his face and tried to throw off the feeling.
“Good. Great. I'll ping you as soon as I'm on my way back.”

Saren turned to the camera again. “Very well.” He nodded, and the call was cut.

Chapter End Notes

The patterns in iron are a real thing, called Widmanstatten patterns, if you care to google it. The really are very neat. I shortened the word a bit when I named the ship to make it sound vaguely more Turianish. Also, I hope no Welsh speaking people are offended by my utter murder of their words, I kinda 'pulled an English' on them; ate them up and made them mine without asking nicely first.

Sooo... did I manage to scare anyone with a 'Omg did Saren just find a reaper artifact?!?!' moment? I hope so. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: Mass Effect - Future Imperfect (853060 words) by MizDirected (Garrus/FemShep & FemShep/Nihlus - a loving triangle in a tangled mess of plot.)
Garrus tapped in the key sequence to his door while the petite tarin leaned into his side. Door opening successfully, the mildly drunk pair wobbled past the threshold and tipped over onto the soft, cream colored cubitura. Several minutes passed by in a haze as tongues traced jaw lines and mouth plates nipped at warm hide. A soft chime broke through the fog as his Omni-tool lit up with a priority message. Garrus let out a long bothered groan.
“What is it?” The tarin asked sweetly from above him, nipping along his keel ridge. Garrus ran his hands along her sides from hip crest to rib plates and back, trying to find her name in his mind. Mildly sheepish that he couldn’t recall it to address her.

“...message alert. It had a priority note in the chime...” He sighed as it went off again, and sat the both of them up, nudging her gently off of him. “I've got to check it... sorry... Ah, can I get you some water while I...?” He palmed the side of her neck in a soft squeeze, apologetically. Her mandibles fluttered in a flirtatious, and thankfully forgiving grin.

“You're a cop right? I can imagine this sort of thing happens to you often.” He leaned in for a quick brush of cheek bones before standing and heading for the kitchen, raising his arm to check the message.

“Worst part of the job, definitely.” He called back, subvocals charmingly overdone in a mournful lament over the situation. She laughed aloud at him, falling back into the cushions.

He opened the cabinet absently, pulled out a mug at random, and went to fill it. The walls lit with a soft orange glow as he read the message.

**Priority Alert**

[Attn: Residents of building 12]

A water leak has been found on the 9th, 14th, and 17th floors. Maintenance has discovered an issue with the pressurization systems in the subbasement that may have led to several weak points in the pipelines rupturing.

At this time, we request all residents immediately check the floors and ceilings around the kitchen and bath areas.

If you see any suspicious wetness, please send in a maintenance request right away so as to avoid permanent water damage to the building.

As a friendly note, we'd like to remind all residents that failure to report issues of this nature is against your lease, and will result in a termination of contract.
We thank you for your time and understanding.

-Management

[End Message]

Garrus looked casually around, not seeing any leaks, mildly perturbed to have been interrupted by a maintenance issue of all things.

“Well, the good news is that it’s just a request from building maintenance. ” He walked out around the breakfast bar and brought the water cup to the low table. She ignored it, half lidded eyes following his movement. His body tilted forward of it's own accord, wanting to go right back to that, right now, yes please. He shook it off, the alcohol making his vision swirl, and turned.

“I'll be right back, need to check for water leaks in the bathroom.”

“Mmmmkay.” She replied, arms over her head, a slight whine in her voice. He sort of felt like a jerk... but didn't care to be evicted if there was a leak. He liked his apartment.

Garrus padded down the short hallway and into his bedroom, coming around the corner and flicking a hand over the light panel.

Nothing turned on.

Saren Arterius stepped out of the murky dark, tapping a knuckle to his lower mouth plate, the Turian hand signal for 'shhhhh'. Then motioned for Garrus to move closer.

Heart in his throat he did so, hoping he hadn't done something worthy of being 'disappeared' by a Spectre. The terror was... somewhat dispelled upon finding Nihlus in his bath tub, leaning against the shower side wall. Green eyes crinkled with a smile as he offered a jaunty wave. Saren leaned in, bringing his mouth right against Garrus' aural canal.
“She is a Mumbari.” He whispered, hardly more then a breath. Garrus' eyes widened, then closed tight. He swallowed lightly.

*Mumbari*, a cute little turn of phrase. The Turian equivalent to a 'Black Widow' woman.

*************

The *Mumbari* was a large venomous fly that would land on pillows and crawl it's way into the mouths of sleeping Turians, taking advantage of the gap between mandible and upper jaw. The thing would slide a needle like point, oh so slowly, into the upper palate of the mouth, leaving eggs and poison behind. Then it would steal away in the night, the person it had visited never waking again. Two weeks later, dozens of babies would crawl from the skull of the dead, eating the decaying muscle and living in the plates till adulthood.

Horrific.

It was a significant part of why Turians had developed a cultural habit of burning their dead, which had carried through to modern times, even though the insect itself was mostly extinct.

When referring to a *tarin* as a *Mumbari*, the modern phrase meant 'She's going to have sex with you, repeatedly in hopes of getting pregnant, and then she's going to kill you in your sleep and steal every credit she can find before disappearing.'

*************

Oh... joy. He'd picked up... at the bar...

He felt mildly ill. Then he wondered how in the world these two had known...? Oh no. No no... no.

Garrus was suddenly fairly certain he'd been unknowingly used as a honey pot. Though for the life of him he couldn't figure out how they'd arranged it, besides the location being his usual bar. He narrowed his eyes at them, to which Nihlus smiled brightly and mouthed a soundless, 'Sorry!' Saren firmly pushed him aside, and strode out. Garrus spun, reaching out a hand to stop him. If he didn't have proof...

Nihlus pulled him back by the shoulders, not unkindly, and leaned in whispering.
“You would have been victim number eighteen. We've been on her trail since nine planets and eleven deaths ago. We're... really sorry to have involved you, but the Council and media would have had a shit fit about it happening here.”

“Garrus? Are you-” echoed down the hall, followed by a small squeak, and a sharp crunch. Then silence.

Garrus let out an involuntary shuddering exhale, eyes closed, head dropped. She was... she had seemed...

Nihlus pulled him into a loose hug, elbows low around the torso, hands curled around the back of shoulders. Garrus half lifted his arms to reciprocate, but stalled, feeling dizzy. He dropped his head the rest of the way, landing on a black armored shoulder panel.

“I am... too drunk to deal with this.”

“I know. You have good taste in drinks though, those purple ones with the fruit chunks in the bottom are great.”

“You two... were there? What, the whole time?”

“Pfft. No. We had to leave before you did to get in here, didn’t we?”

Garrus just sighed deeply.

Chapter End Notes

I always got the impression that Palaven was a horrifically dangerous jungle world, between the mutation inducing radiation levels and the general size and stability of Turian anatomy. Obviously, it's probably as safe as a children's park inside the cities and arcologies, but outside of that? On nature reserves and such? I'd bet it's still a mad house.
Fanfic Recommendation: **Prove It** (287 words) by **Ninalanfer** (Saren & Nihlus. Short, yes, but this one is powerful. You won't forget it.)
Chapter Summary

Sometimes even the monsters in the dark need a hug.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
- torin/tarin - Turian adult male/female (Credit: MizDirected)
- mari/pari - Turian for mother/father (Credit: MizDirected)
- Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)
- cubitura - Turian sized reclining couch, built for people with pointy bits
- Nanus - Along with Menae, these are the two moons of Palaven. Their irregular pathing and extremely close orbit made having a standard circadian rhythm difficult for ancient Turians, evolving the ability of sleeping in patches of time, in bright light, or in active situations without trouble. (Author supposition, aka: I made shit up again.)
- Carmine - a general term for deep red colours that are very slightly purplish but are closer to red than crimson is. Some darker toned rubies are colored as 'rich carmine'.

Ylasiun -- The ancient Turian version of heaven. The realm where all honorable warriors spend eternity. (Credit: MizDirected)

-Completely unrelated, mostly joking rambling that is honestly strange, and can be blamed on staying up waaaaay too late. You should just skip this bit...-

This has been your author-chan, making pantomime black helicopter hand motions, wearing her tinfoil N7 hat (because it's pretty), and blasting off again. //bow//

Okay, now onto the actual story:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
'I am... so done... with today.' Thought Nihlus, barely looking where he was going, paying just enough attention not to run into people and not a drop more. He was exhausted and injured with a long trail of dead bodies behind him. Metaphorically, that is. The bodies themselves were back on a space station, well... in and around the not-much-left-of-a-space-station. He'd had to blow it to bits to ensure that a bio-engineered contagion hadn't left the premises. The Council had supported his decisions, Valern especially since it had been an AWOL offshoot of STG that had started the whole mess. A rapid-mutation dual chirality pandemic in a box, able to be communicated by air, water, or touch. When it came down to 'let the 12 shuttles with the contagion go' or 'sacrifice three hundred people', at least two-thirds of which were innocent-ish scientists. He'd had to make a call, and it hadn't been the wrong one, but it hadn't been a good one either.

When depressed, Nihlus Kyrik did one of four things. He went out for a night on the town, went to Armax Arena, bothered Saren, or slept it off.

The first sounded surprisingly unappealing. It was normally his go-to option, but he'd have to take... so many uppers to give enough fucks to be fun to party with right now.

A stint in the arena, or even one of the underground pit fighting rings, was completely out. He looked down forlornly at his brace-covered left arm. Unless he wanted to shame his high scores by playing one armed... well, he had a reputation to keep, so none of that.

Bothering Saren needlessly, while normally an exercise that lead to being amusingly groused at, shoved out the airlock on unoccupied moons for days, endlessly lectured, or getting sexily growled at... well...

He had a feeling that Saren wouldn't particularly care that three hundred people lay dead, nor comprehend why Nihlus was upset about it. Most likely, his comrade would simply get frustrated that Nihlus was upset for reasons he couldn't grasp, decide he was just being difficult and... mnnn... that scenario wasn't what he needed right now.

He adored the curmudgeonly sociopath, but right now he just wanted... something else.

Which left sleep.

'Fine.' Thought Nihlus, turning towards the docks. 'I've got pain pills for the arm. I'll take a dose and crash out, and keep doing it until I can find some fucks to give.' He half waited for a chastisement on his mental language, ridiculously since Saren was no where near him, more since he had specifically decided not to search him out.
It didn't stop the feelings of loneliness.

A quick rapid transit ride and short walk later put Nihlus on the right docking level for the Widmanstat. He threaded through the crowds on that level, the noise of it surrounding him. Weaving past customs and cargo shipments, and then up to the secure docks. There, Nihlus put in his biometrics and stepped into the quiet corridor. Reaching the airlock to his ship, he paused. It was...

He raised his eyes and glanced about. No one around. The empty hall almost echoed with noiselessness. Empty. Quiet. Just like the remains of...

He abruptly turned around, and headed right back into the crowds. The lanky agent made to one end of the docks, then turned around. It took him a good several laps to realize that he couldn't keep lapping the docks endlessly. Security was starting to notice and get curious. ‘Damn.’

The Spectre left the area, and went back out into the wards, making several loops of the busy, -but not too busy-, public areas. Places he felt comfortable wandering in, that he knew well, which had people enough for noise, but not bustling with overt excitement.

The day wore down, like the treads on old boots, and Nihlus came to a stop. He'd gathered, maybe, half a fuck. Enough to lift his gaze and notice the time. Two hours into the night cycle, crowds were dispersing, time to go home.

He didn't really want to go home right now. He rolled his shoulders, thinking hard through the miasma of depression. His half-a-fuck wasn't fueling him.

‘I need to find, haha... hahaha... need to find more fucks. Ha.’ Nihlus wheezed out a little laugh, his own poor attempt at humor making him chortle, cheering him up just a notch. He was always interested in finding more fucks, nothing new there. The wily torin snorted at himself, taking a long draw of fresher air and dropping his head back, crest scratching along the back of his armored carapace, uncaring of the mildly sexual way the position showed off his throat.

He starred off into the long distance, mulling over nothing, until inspiration walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. Literally.

“Sir, are you all right?” Nihlus turned and looked down, a tiny Asari in C-Sec uniform was looking up at him concerned. “Oh!” they exclaimed in recognition at seeing his face. “You're Spectre Kryik,
right? Is.. um... do you need any assistance?” He pulled off a convincingly reassuring smile for her.

“Oh, no, I'm alright. Just have a lot on my mind. Sorry to trouble you, officer.”

She smiled back with uncertain hesitation. “Well, alright. You might want to head home though Spectre, it's getting late.”

He looked around as if just now noticing. “So it is. I'll do that.”

“What about me? I'll do that.”

“Have a good night, sir.”

“You too.” Nihlus chuffed softly as the kind hearted officer walked away. 'Where does C-Sec get their staff? Ylasiun? Is there a convention for these sorts where they go head hunting for really nice people to put in uniform?' He turned to walk away, if for no other reason than to seem to be complying... but he suddenly realized he knew exactly where he could go.

Diing doong, diiiiiing.

Garrus looked up from the desolate wasteland that was his fridge, where he had been contemplating if the left overs from last week were still edible with sufficient microwaving. ‘Or boiling. Or beer. Maybe all three would do it...’

He moved to answer the door, absently scratching at an inch through his shirt. It opened to reveal dark carmine plates and Spectre gear. Nihlus appeared to be trying to smile, and only mildly succeeding.

“Hey Blue. What's up?” Garrus raised an eye ridge.

“Nothing in particular. I was just thinking about dinner. Is there...” He trailed off, glancing left and right down the hallway, “Okay, I'm just going to come out and say it. Is there anything on fire, someone being shot, a serial killer, or is something else going on?” Nihlus managed a small grin.
“I would say the 'something else' category. Dinner sounds good. My treat?” Garrus glanced over him, noticing the broken arm, and mild tilt to his stance, not to mention the... flat glaze in his eyes.

“Yeah, sure. We could hit that cafe again, or... order in?”

“I just got back from... back. Just got. Yeah, so, sitting down sounds good. Can we order in?” He nodded slowly, the verbal stumbling tipping him off that something was amiss. He moved aside though, and gestured for the _torin_ to enter.

“Thanks.” Said Nihlus, dropping onto the _cubitura_ with a slump. His subvocals let off a long, low murmur of appreciation as he curled up in the far corner of the soft and cushioned surface. Garrus smiled wryly.

“You wouldn't be the first person to fall in love with that thing. I once had a girlfriend who I swore was dating me for my furniture.” He moved to sit on the other side, one leg bent at the knee and supporting an elbow so he could face the Spectre.

“Hell, I'd date ya for your furniture. This thing is amazing. Where'd ya even get it?”

_"Mari_ sent it to me when I came to the Citadel. It used to be in our family's _madlis_, but she wanted me to have a piece of home when I moved here long term. I used to sleep on it as a kid when I wore out in the afternoons, after _Nanus_ set.”

“Wow. All the way from Palaven, huh?”

“Yeah. I felt bad about the expense, but I can't complain. It's too comfy.” Nihlus nodded, wiggling deeper into the cushions.

“So, dinner,” Garrus started, bringing up his Omni-tool to search for nearby delivery places. A few favorites automatically pulled up on the top of the list, and he held out his 'tool out for Nihlus to see. “Any of these places sound good?”

Green eyes peered at the screen for a moment before he pointed to one.
“That one looks good, I could go for some curry. You?”

“I can get behind curry, that place has good side dishes too.” Garrus brought up the online order form, and picked out what he wanted, passing his arm to Nihlus to make further selections. He tried to pull his arm back at the end, but the torin held on and pulled out his credit chit. Nihlus smiled as he tapped the chit to pay before letting go. Garrus rumbled a thank you and leaned back.

A few moments passed in tired quietude.

“So... do you wanna to talk about it?” Nihlus blinked, refocusing his gaze on the concerned expression being directed at him. The delay in the Spectre's responses was disconcerting.

“I ah...” Garrus could practically see the thoughts turning over in his eyes, whether to deflect or not, and when Nihlus' face began to morph into an expression of false innocence, blue eyes narrowed at him in a mild glare. The feigned expression fell away, replaced by a long drawn out sigh. “Not, really no. I shouldn't talk about classified mission details, and I'd rather you didn't hate me, so it's probably best if I just...”

“Kyrik, seriously? 'Classified mission details?'” -this was said with a disbelieving tone and finger quotes- “I know what Spectres do. I was... tagged to be one, once. Listen, I'm not going to hate you, regardless of what ever occurred-” Nihlus tried to protest here, but didn't get farther then opening his mouth before Garrus continued on steam rolling his half-hearted denial. “Not to mention, I've practically been on missions with you and Saren before. The bank? The skycar incident? The gang war? Whatever the hell happened the other week with the... yeah. Lots of people dead. Mostly bad guys. So I've got no room to judge, alright, and it's obvious something is seriously bothering you. Also, I'd really like to know why your arm is broken, and I'd rather hear the truth then some made up excuse.” Nihlus looked dizzy from the stream of words, and swallowed.

“That's... the bad guys... it wasn't... it wasn't mostly the bad guys that died this time.” Garrus lowered his voice, laying a hand on Nihlus' shoulder.

“What happened?”

Nihlus dropped his head, pulling his armored legs closer to his frame and half hiding behind his single working arm, thrown over his knees. “There was... a space station. Plague. I had to choose between letting a bunch of shuttles get away with it onboard or three hundred some odd people, most of which were...” He choked a bit here before continuing, “were innocent scientists working on
unrelated projects.” His head ducked deeper into the crook of his arm, and Garrus' heart went out to him. A hell of a choice to have to make. The bullet scuffs in the Spectre's armor, along with the braced arm curled awkwardly around his stomach, painted a picture of the extenuating circumstances the *torin* had likely faced. He looked... so defeated, so *tired*.

A vague drunken memory of a hug given when Garrus had been the one struggling to cope came to mind, and he immediately decided to return the favor. Rolling up onto knees and moving forward, he repositioned himself and pulled Nihlus in, who flailed for a half a moment not understanding what was happening. When the intent became clear he went limp with a soft trill, half falling onto broad shoulders, face pressing into the warm hide of Garrus' neck.

“I killed a whole bunch of people, and I didn't want to.”

“The fact that you didn't want to means everything.” He replied, adding emphasis in subvocal tones, pressing his cheek into Nihlus' fringe lightly. It was quiet for a moment.

“They're still dead.” Was the choked reply, underscored by a subvocal keen.

“How many could have died if that plague had escaped?” Another drawn out pause.

Eventually, “A bunch.”

Garrus adjusted their position again, encircling the *torin* further with arms, legs, and easy unconditional acceptance.

“Probably more then a few hundred?”

“Yeah.” Came out in a rasp.

Garrus leaned back into the seat, tugging the limp form with him, and they sat without speaking for a while. It was obvious that Nihlus knew he'd done what needed to be done, he just didn't want to process that he'd done it at all. Garrus sympathized. He'd been in that place before. Eventually the door chimed, and they wordlessly disentangled so Garrus could answer it. After accepting the food he closed the door and turned around, sitting back down as he pulled out numerous cartons. He turned to Nihlus, holding out a take-out container of curry.
“Hungry?”

“Yeah... thanks.”

"So, your arm?"

"Bad fall actually. Got tossed by a Salarian biotic into some medical cabinets."

"Ahhhh."

After that they ate in relative peace, Nihlus consuming less then perhaps he normally would, but still eating enough that Garrus didn't feel the need to goad him into taking more. He tucked the left overs away in his fridge. Peering back around the corner to the living room, he saw Nihlus worryingly staring off into space. Playing it smooth, he walked back into the room and tapped the wall mounted vid screen across from the seating. A few menus in, and he had the least triggering thing he could think of playing. He flopped back down into a sprawling recline and pretended to watch the screen. Fifteen minutes or so in, he tugged on Nihlus' arm, gently, and the torin tilted unresistingly sideways into him. The vid wasn't even half way over before they were fully tangled up, fast asleep in the best angle Garrus could work out with limited pillows. Nihlus was still in his armor, and it dug into his side a bit, but that was alright.

Chapter End Notes

Can someone, anyone, please tell me if a creature with a gizzard can drink carbonation safely? Like in beer or soda? Can Turians actually drink Tupari, or is it not a soda? I can't find any answers on google! AHHHHH HELP!

**Edit: Thank you for the answers dear readers! <3 I love making up new mind canon with you.**

Fanfic Recommendation: Illusions of Order (1868 words) by Niamh St George (EDI & Liara, distant future.)
A space built for one, welcoming three

Chapter Summary

In which Nihlus overcompensates for being uncomfortable with his own neediness by being very helpful.

Chapter Notes

mari/pari - Turian for mother/father (Credit: MizDirected)
HSV - Acronym for 'Hierarchy Service Vehicle'
Digeris - A Turian core world, the site of the Krogan Rebellion's bloodiest battle (Canon)
Daedalus - father of the famous Icarus, and a craftsman and artist of great skill.
cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur

A big thank you to MundaneChampagne and Rebecca for advice on the Turian digestive system. We've come to the conclusion that yes, Turians can have beer. Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a month or so since Garrus had run into either of the Spectres, but he wasn't particularly surprised to have them show up on his doorstep with no warning. Saren had an offer to make: was he interesting in joining them on a mission? A high priority mission request had come in, and it was a bad situation. The Spectre offices had estimated it to be a three or four person job, and all appropriate agents were engaged. Since neither of them kept any specialists on call, or a ground team onboard, Saren's only option had been to wait an estimated three weeks or more for the return of Tela Vasir, or barring a delay, another two person team would be back in a month. Their target was eight days away in FTL travel and Mass Effect Relay jumps. A potential five week wait just to arrive on site was problematic.

Or maybe, Nihlus had helpfully suggested, they could drag Garrus along instead.

Remembering his previous work, Saren was quite amenable to tagging the officer rather than waiting.

Garrus was pleased to be requested. He'd enthusiastically agreed, and had no intention of ever telling his pari about it.
They wanted Garrus along, Saren explained, for his skills as a sniper primarily and tech expert secondly. Nihlus sent off the forms for paid leave with Spectre approval, considering he was technically being brought on as a C-Sec 'consultant'. According to the paperwork, at least. According to Saren, they were headed for an asteroid-based colony that had gone dark, a metal-works that had suddenly stopped selling their products to legitimate buyers and were instead making bank off of less reputable sources. That needed to stop, immediately, hence the priority of doing it ASAP. Every week the metal works processed around forty cubic meters of Titanium and other common engineering alloys, essentially enough for a heavy frigate. A delay of five weeks meant the materials for five or six heavy frigates in the hands of pirates or worse.

“Not cool.” had been Nihlus' description. “Unacceptable.” was Saren's. Garrus agreed with both assessments.

Saren's gaze turned away from Garrus' retreating back as the C-sec officer went to go pack, and instead wandered about the relatively tiny apartment. He had observed a few things in passing when he had been here before, but now took the time to consider the space further. It was... quite small. He narrowed his eyes, considering that. He was sure the torin could afford better, seeing as he had taken the time to do a background check shortly after the gang incident. Not really needing to know, but somewhat enjoying spying on someone for curiosity rather then blackmail material or having to best predict their actions to ensure galactic stability. Between the interest off his savings, augmented by the bounty cut the officer had received, and the regular income from being a high paid detective... he should not need to live in such a minimal space.

Saren rolled the thought around in the back of his mind, looking around for other clues. An extra large vid screen took up one wall, sitting across from a set of richly appointed cubitura, low table, end table, and post lamp. So, less spacious but nicely furnished. The walls were a brushed light-grey metal, utilitarian and bare. He swung his head around and casually headed for the kitchen doorway. Neat and clean, thought Saren with a mild sense of relief. Nihlus was enough of a mess maker on his own, and thankfully it appeared that Garrus was, if not as fastidious as himself, then at least cleanly in general. Ceiling-hung cabinets sat over an open air breakfast bar, made of the same metal as the walls, but covered by opaque plexiglass doors. No oven, only a single cook top and microwave. Not much of a cook then. He popped the seal on the refrigerator, somewhat amused to find nothing but condiments inside. Not a cook at all it seemed. Pure Turian bachelor aesthetics, so not in a hurry to impress a female interesting in nesting.

'Well', he thought, 'at least if he dies, we will not be bothered by a weeping bondmate afterwards.' Not that Saren intended to let that happen, but if the worst should occur, he would rather avoid any hysterics.

He scowled while moving back to the living room. Not enough clues to explain the choice in living
space to be found. A mystery for another day, he concluded as Garrus returned to them fully armored, carrying two gun cases in one hand and tugging along a sizable Hierarchy issued anti-grav lockbox in the other. He turned to ask, “I presume your case includes a fold out cot and personal effects. Does it contain any food?”

“Just a few emergency rations.”

“Very well. Let us proceed to the docks.”

“Woooo road trip! Maybe we could hit a few tourist traps on the way back for some sight seeing?” asked the lounging figure, just now popping up from the *cubitura*.

“Really, Nihlus?” was the dry response.

Their third number just smiled widely, undeterred.

ooooooooooooooooooooooooo

After they stowed Garrus' things, and set up his cot in a semi-private nook, Nihlus made a ridiculous and grand production of showing off Saren's ship to their tag along. “So watch out for that, oh, and also avoid... over here, ya see those edges jutting out a half meter or so from the ceiling corner? Those are the kinetic boosters he's got to give The Daedalus an extra punch getting out of atmo. Very handy for escaping bad situations, but avoid smacking your head into them if you have to get into that corner. You might need to because there is occasionally an issue with the secondary shield systems. He's overclocked them to the point that they light on fire sometimes. Now this over here is...” and on he went, Garrus trailing behind with an amused tilt to his mandibles.

'This ship is... seriously impressive.' thought the C-Sec 'consultant'. Admiring the shining silver surfaces and sleek design. He also didn't miss the fact that just about every component he'd seen was from a different origin, custom installed to suit Saren's exacting standards. Either the Spectre had a pocket engineer in his armor pouches, or he also maintained all this himself.

Besides being aesthetically pleasing, and a marvel of customized demi-legal ship tech, the Daedalus was also a case study in the life and habits of Saren Arterius. A veritable feast of information to be found, for a quality detective that is. It had two levels: a long deck, boxy and utilitarian, with living space and command consoles, and a three-quarters-height sub-deck that was home to the ship’s hardware, and a small hydroponics setup. The control center crowned a raised dais in the middle of
the ship's front half, a large circular enclosure of holo panels, data feeds, and input consoles set to a light blue. The walkway from the airlock split and curved around it before carrying on along the deck. Surrounding it were walls taken up by a series of terminals, storage shelving, an escape pod, and neatly confined cables and cords.

Farther back the remaining space was divided into four rooms around a short hallway. A master bedroom, locked. A kitchen, doorless, with a multitude of implements and cookery all secured for rough flight. Next, a medical bay, housing an automated operating table that ran on a medical VI and robotics, having likely cost a fortune. Lastly, an armory with a truly massive assortment of armaments. Garrus tried not to entertain thoughts of 'accidentally' breaking an integral part of his Viper as an excuse to use one of the Spectre grade rifles he saw on the shelves. The Viper, at least, really didn't deserve that treatment after all it had seen him through.

Nihlus, who had been helpfully pointing out things that were sometimes obvious and other times 'don't touch this, it's trapped and will kill you' spoke again, catching his interest. “Oh, and this is the main weapons panel, it has-” But Garrus heard nothing past that as his hands came to rest on the access terminal and he began checking system specs, opening up the code behind the OS to see what the firmware was like, and pulling open a command console in a separate window to the side, having it report on previous live fire situations to see what the output had been. He didn't notice Nihlus trail off, coughing a laugh into his fist. “So you're... familiar with weapon's systems?”

“... what? Oh... Yeah, you could say that. Mari had my sister and I while on deployment with the HSV Declaration, -you know, that super-dreadnought that patrols around Digeris?- and after we were old enough to be let out of the daycare... well, Sol and I spent the first eight years of our life in the ship's main battery. Engineers from the cradle, both of us.” After a few moments of furious typing Garrus suddenly leaned backward to see around Nihlus. “Hey Arterius, why do you have quad Idolos V instead of Seprum Series heat sinks on the plasma canon?” Saren spun partially around in his chair at the center of the CIC terminals, his crest in profile as he answered the inquiry.

“Mostly because the Seprums are difficult to find, and thus difficult to replace when they become deformed due to over use. I choose to instead live with a mild increase in cool down time between shots rather than bothering to hunt down new Seprums every other month.” He turned back around and returned to plotting their course into the navigation VI.

Garrus nodded thoughtfully and tuned back into the script flowing by on the console, weaving through code and specifications with ease. Nihlus watched over his shoulder, not half bad at code himself, but a ways off from interpreting drivers on the fly the way it seemed Garrus was.

“So, the Digeris huh? That's a pretty nice posting.”

Garrus hummed in response.
“Did you ever visit the planet while you were there? They've got some really nice parks.”

A vague nod. "Uhuh."

“I hear their North pole has some crazy huge glaciers...”

“Uh... yeah.”

“I think you should buy me a new set of throwing knives... maybe a hooker or two? We could share.”

“Mmmsure.”

Nihlus laughed silently, turning to look at Saren, who had spun his command chair around entirely and was looking at him with a sardonically raised brow.

“So, about those hookers. I was thinking Asari. You'd be cool with that right? A cosmopolitan guy like you?”

“Mmmm.”

“Aha, I knew you were a deviant! How do you feel about Quarians? Elcor?” Nihlus was having trouble keeping his voice even, the ‘Elcor’ coming out in a strangled wheeze.

“Yeah, su- wait, what? What about Quarians and Elcor?” Garrus finally looked up and Nihlus lost it, his laughter bubbling with hysterical trills and hiccups. Confused, the officer turned to look at Saren who had half his face and part of his fringe held in one palm, elbow braced against an arm rest.

“What is he on about, exactly?”

“I am certain I do not know.”
On military deployment and children:
Alright, so I admit to having no knowledge how this works in the real world, but I would assume that a super-dreadnought, which are the size of a metropolis and the pride of the Turian fleets, would have enough personnel to account for people having babies during deployment and with keeping kids onboard. I'm also assuming that tarin, being viviparous but thinly made, would have short gestation cycles, easily handled with light duty. So, Garrus grew up on a ship, and when Momma Vakarian's service contract ended, she retired to the family Madlis to finish raising them. I'd presume she went into politics or high-society after that.

Fanfic Recommendation: Of Kittens and Broken Things (224682 words) by Recidiva (Garrus/Femshep & sort of some Thane/FemShep, but it's complicated.)
Smooth but not technically criminal

Chapter Summary

Joining the Spectre's on a mission, day 1: Travel

Chapter Notes

SUPER LONG AUTHOR NOTES. There is a TL;DR at the bottom, friends.

So, let's presume that everyone is running on a 20 hour day (That's canon), with 10 days in a week, 5 weeks in a month, and 10 months in a year, and also 50 seconds in a minute and 50 minutes in an hour. Modern Galactic civilization started out with the meeting of the Asari and the Salarians, and I can completely see the Salarians being OCD and having even base 10 numbers for all chunks of time. The Asari probably couldn't care less, and conceded on that issue during the political meetings in order to have more say in something they actually cared about. So, standard base 10 numbers for all things because Salarians. It amounts to 500 day years, compared to 365 day long years, buuuut, with 20 hour days and minutes/hours in intervals of 50 it evens out a bit to 21,900,000 seconds in an earth year, and 25,000,000. So a 22/25 ratio, or put another way, Earth years are 22% shorter then Galactic years. In order to avoid making this even more stupidly complicated, we're assuming all ages given are in galactic years, but if you prefer you can jump the extra step to translating that someone who is 30 in Galactic years would be 26.4 in Earth years. If... I've done all my math right. Ha.

Side note: I'm fairly certain Mass Effect Relays are nearly instantaneous, I've ran the math and science back and forth with friends enough times to be pretty confident of that. The travel time in game is actually the FTL travel from relay to relay. They're like walkie-talkie pairs of travel; relay from A to B, then FTL travel to C, then relay from C to D. That sort of thing. It seems like this logic gets squirrley in game because we just get to ANY relay, and click our destination, but that couldn't be how it works, not with how the system is described in the codex and books. We all see how they fling us in a straight line, right? Yep, two way main road, no left turns, or right turns, for that matter. I mean really, how can we have the 'two hours to Ilos jump' scene in ME1 otherwise? So, helllllllooo plot device: travel time.

In order for this all to make sense, I did have to add some relays into mostly canon derived system locations, since not every system had a listing for each Relay it contains. Also: It's a one-at-a-time system, so I'd bet there are travel queues at popular junctions, and Spectres or people of importance can choose to jump the line if they need to, but since they'd have to make everyone else around send a cancel travel request to the Relay's computer system, since I doubt even Spectre's have access codes to override Relay computer systems (Aka Reaper code), doing so would probably piss people right the hell off. Emergencies only?

*Edit: found more data on relays, confirms that some are point to point, and others can reaim to other short-distance relays if they can get a good, non-interrupted by planets angle on the jump.
You guys... probably don't... care about any of that.... ahah... hahahah... Sorry, I'm really a super nerd. I obsess over little details like you wouldn't believe... ^_^;;;

TL;DR – Galactic time runs in groupings of base 10, blah blah blah, age 30 in Galactic years would be 26.4 in Earth years. Also, relays are instant, work in pairs, and there is travel time between them in FTL.

Lexicon:
Torin/Tarin - Male/Female Turian over 15, the age of Majority (Credit: MizDirected)
Relay Defense - A tabletop holo-projected strategy game featuring Turian Military ships in defense and evacuation of a planet. (Canon, you can play it in the Citadel DLC.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The journey from the Citadel to the independently operated metalworks facility was going to take nine days, give or take, so Garrus had come prepared to amuse himself quietly in a corner figuring that the Spectres would be much too busy with important Council business during the trip to bother with engaging him. His assumptions couldn't have been farther from the truth.

After The Daedalus had made the instantaneous jump from the Serpent Nebula's Widow Relay to the Exodus Cluster's Utopia Relay, their captain sent them into FTL travel toward the Asgard Relay, and turned to a work bench along one wall, reading an article on a new series of com jammers while absently making custom grenades by hand using a micro-fabricator to make parts, a box of tiny live ordinance, and miniature tool kit with what looked to be about seventy some odd itsy bitsy tools. Garrus tried not to be alarmed that the silver-plated torin was handling live ordinance in such a small space and with none of them wearing any armor.

He must have been hiding his mild nervousness well, because Saren would make intermittent demands for things from the storage compartments which he and Nihlus took turns getting for him. In between, the two of them had ended up in a two player game of Relay Defense. Nihlus was proving to be a brutal opponent, playing as the invading side.

“I can't believe... This is a new, and improbable, level of bullshit Kyrik.”

“Nah, it's legit. You're just mad that you didn't see it coming.”

“Actually, I'm not entirely certain you aren't just plain cheating. You shouldn't be able to cap your multipliers that fast.”

“Pfft, I would never!” He exclaimed, smoothing out his rust colored muscle shirt as if he were entirely above such things.
“Yes, he would. One of you hand me another case of T5 micro-bolts.” Garrus leveled a suspicious glare at Nihlus' cheeful grin as the Spectre rose to acquire said parts. He looked back down to the board, trying to reason out how Nihlus had managed his last combo move, glad that he'd declined betting on the game's outcome. Nihlus dropped off the bolts and came back to his seat, a cock-sure grin still hanging off his mandibles.

“It's still your turn Vakarian.”

“I'm aware, give me a minute.”

“Mmmhmmm.” said Nihlus, swirling his beer bottle in lazy circles.

They went back and forth for the rest of the game, a sadly small amount of Garrus' refugees making it to the relay escape point before the last of his planet was covered in red, signaling his defeat. He looked up at Nihlus, not trusting the sparkle in his vivid green eyes.

“Good game. Want to go another round?”

“Sure, just no cheating this time.”

“Tsk. You can't prove a thing.” came the reply, devious and sensual in a purposefully inappropriate low-toned rumble. Garrus had a feeling Nihlus just intended to cheat even more this round, and with an exasperated chuff of air, he decided to fight fire with fire.

“Yeeeah. Okay. Start it up. We can go best two out of three. Or until I figure out how you're managing those score multipliers.”

“Talent, of course.” Was the reply as Nihlus reset the board, lounging side-ways in his chair with a casually insouciant air of superiority.

“Uhuuuh. Riiight.”
This time, Garrus was also cheating... sort of. He waited until Saren called for another piece of explosive bobble that was not his to acquire, which he also willfully didn't listen to the name of, and flicked the switch that would change his Omni-tool's video output to his visor. He smiled internally, thankful that he'd left it on out of habit after changing into casuals earlier. From there, a quick extranet search came up with a predictive program for Relay Defense moves, -only 8 credits if you buy it in the next hour-, and quickly stripped it of spyware before running it on their active game. Nihlus returned and made his next move, waggling his eye ridges in a taunting manner. The program immediately reported that their current game state was impossible to achieve under the game rules.

'Knew it.' he thought, before directing a few forces in a new formation. He was fighting extremely defensive this time, trying to catch Nihlus in the act. It wasn't going so well at first, perfectly legal moves giving the Spectre small victories, pushing Garrus' forces back by the centimeter. Until Garrus managed to sneak a bomber through his opponent's front lines, sending it in a suicidal trajectory for a heavy cruiser. Unwilling to loose such a major piece, Nihlus tried to pull a fast one by sacrificing a smaller ship as a meat shield. A completely illegal move that the program shouldn't have allowed him to make.

“Not even Kryik. That one's against the rules.” said Garrus, leaning elbows on the table edge, chin resting behind clasped hands.

“I don't know what you mean. The game let me make the move, didn't it?” Saren turned half around, having apparently been reading, grenade building, and paying attention to their game simultaneously, and inquired as to the moves made.

“He is correct Nihlus, that is an illegal move.”

“But Offic- awwww. Why'd you do that?” Nihlus whined when Garrus reset the board to a new game.

“I said no cheating, I caught you cheating, therefore I win by default.” He replied, with a roguish grin. “Care to go again?”

“Caught me, eh? Alright. I can work with that.” Thus, they began round three.

It was going well for Nihlus, until Garrus managed to launch a lucky assault using the planet's moon as a gravity slingshot. Nihlus slumped in his seat, seemingly studying the board's options.
“You know Vakarian...” he started slowly, “I think you've got a bit of a vindictive streak in you.” Garrus shrugged acceptingly, rolling his hand at the wrist in a dismissive wave.

“I might, sometimes, what of it?” Nihlus' focus sharpened in on icy blue eyes, his voice lowered.

“Some might say that's...” A set of taloned toes slid along the side of Garrus' knee, trailing down the outside of his leg, extending slightly and rasping downward in a slide that ended with one long black talon hooked over a silver-grey spur. He tugged, once, lightly. Garrus swallowed without realizing it as Nihlus looked up at him from beneath low tilted fringe, roiling allure in his subvocals.

“exceedingly attractive. I bet you get... all sorts of... interest with an attitude like that... hiding under the surface of those lovely silver plates.” ‘Lovely' was said with a breathy exhalation. Garrus tugged on his shirt collar, not managing to break eye contact. His neck bloomed in a flush that made his normally tawny brown hide almost purple in tone.

“Well... ahh- not really. I mean... sure, but..” He coughed.

“Your turn.” Nihlus interjected in a purr, tugging on Garrus' spur once again, ever so slightly digging in. Garrus turned to the board, trying to remember what he was doing. The HUD on his eye piece going half ignored. Helpfully, it flickered repeatedly at him that Nihlus was in the negatives for some... points... or something... for moving? He shook his head, trying to move his leg away from Nihlus' reach... the torin was... cheating. This was cheating, for sure. Garrus reached over and flipped the reset key.

“Damnit!” Exclaimed Nihlus tossing a hand in the air, not even trying to pretend that he hadn't been cheating like a fiend. They both looked up in surprise as a wheezing chuckle escaped their third number. Saren's fringe was bowed over his work as he tried to suppress his amusement, only partially succeeding. He finally managed to reduce the rest of it to a long, satisfied sounding exhalation that leaked a few bubbles of remnant laughter.

“Ahhhhhhaha... Thank you Vakarian, that was perfect. It is exceedingly rare when someone manages to shut Nihlus down when he tries to charm his way through something he can not manage otherwise. I wish it happened more often.”

“Oi! I don't use it that much.” Saren offered no reply, simply going back to his work. Nihlus turned a friendly and somewhat apologetic smile to Garrus, who just shook his head in disbelief. He knew he'd nearly fallen for it.

Nihlus Kryik was one smooth son of a bitch.
Fanfic Recommendation: **Ugly Like a Turian** (2,365 words) by **Fourthage** (FemShep/Garrus)
Electric blue eyes flared open in the silence of the ship's only cabin. Saren sat up slowly, digging a palm none too gently into his forehead plates. The nightmare had crept up on him, amidst hazy dream whorls of tech specs and old fights, sneaking in like a thief to steal his rest.

He rolled out of bed, padding softly across the deck, making for the kitchen. Experience telling him that he would not be getting back to sleep any time soon. Not after dreaming of the brave acceptance on Desolas' face as Saren had reached over to hit the activation key for the ship's ground fire cannons that would seal the fate of the only person he had ever... of his only remaining family. He hadn't wanted to let anyone else do what had needed to be done, didn't want to dishonor his brother's sacrifice by leaving the task to another. Sometimes he desperately wished he had.

The night cycle had hit an hour ago, and Saren had slipped away while his two companions had still been finishing up a final game of a Relay Defense. He glanced outward toward the main area as he passed by into the miniature mess hall. Vakarian was tucked away in a nook, only partially visible, lying on his stomach, shirtless. His face buried into pillows. Nihlus was half-on and half-off the seating area's main settee, pillows strewn about; the trailing mass of blankets he insisted on -'It's 'cause your ship is too damn cold, ya ol' grump!' 'I am only a handful of years older than you. Also, language Nihlus.' 'Ha, It's all in your attitude. Case and point.'- mostly fallen to the floor in various puddles of cargo and suede. Saren let the ghost of a smile lay on his face, but it didn't stick.

The main chamber was quiet now, depressingly silent in contrast to the lively conversation that had filled it earlier.

Empty...

Saren shook off the feeling and reached for the cabinet with individually secured drinking containers, square with slightly elongated corners, like the petals of a boxy tiger lily. A design unique to his people, preferring liquids to be poured into the mouth, lacking lips. A piece of biology the other species greatly over-hyped, that was mostly useless or redundant for any other purpose in his opinion.

He leaned back against the wall and studied the cup, trying to focus on the brushed metal sides and cobalt geometric linework, using it to push the memories down and away. In the background he
could hear the healthy hum of his ship's drive core and life support, and beyond that the softly
snoring hum that Nihlus always made when sleeping. Expected a second snore to be rolling
alongside the first...

The blades of his crest tilted with his head as he listened into the dim lighting for the second
occupant's sleeping hum, he paused, then heard it. A low rumble on the exhale, generally the sign of
a deeply asleep torin, and no wheeze or snore on the inhale. Saren huffed. Even the officer's sleeping
patterns were unobtrusive. Everything about him thus far had proven to be unobtrusive and
considerate, strange for such a competent soldier. Usually the best of the best were also a bit off.

Feeling negative, he considered how that might lead the handsome young sniper down a dark path,
to being invited on future missions, to an early grave like all Spectres and their various entourage.

Their's was not a long lived profession.

Not that the anti-social torin intended to let anyone take him out without a fight, nor especially for
harm to come to his protégé or the hapless C-Sec officer that had been pulled into the cause, but...

He missed Desolas so much. Would it be so bad if...?

Saren shook the thoughts off with the same focus he used to discard the fading dreams. He did not
have time to waste on selfish melancholy, and he knew, he knew, that his brother's spirit would be
disappointed with him to hear that such considerations rolled around in his thoughts.

His brother had given everything, in life and in death. Saren would do no less, having taken that light
from the galaxy.

Saren returned the unused cup to it's place and determinedly made for his room. He needed to sleep,
then he needed to eat, then he had some decryption work for the morning, and a series of clues on
potential Prothean artifact smuggling rings to lay out and ponder over during the afternoon. He had
plans, and his weaknesses would not get in the way.

It was only the low lighting that hid the sharp gaze upon him from Saren's watchful demeanor as he
strode about that evening. A curious mind followed his progress from behind eyes that usually
captured the light like icicles on a winter morning, but in the dark were merely icebergs floating in the
placid arctic night cycle. Not an hour asleep and Saren had left his room in a slow and lethargic gait,
glancing about before stepping into the kitchen area. Then silence. No running water nor a pop from
the chilling unit's seal. A clink, a quiet thud, a long intermittent period of nothing but the ship's hum,
then another clink, and back to his room in the stalk of a hunter on the trail of prey. Garrus remained
unmoving, adding these little facts to folder labeled 'Saren Arterius: Council Spectre/Personal Hero'
in the file cabinet of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Supernova (56,631 words) by Just Some Fellow
(FemShep/Nihlus)
Momma love is the best love

Chapter Summary

In which Garrus proves his courage is boundless.

Mari/Pari - Turian closed dialect for Mother/Father (Credit: MizDirected)
Titans - The demi-gods of the ancient Turian religion, the precursor to the current Animism and spirit veneration. Valluvian priests and priestesses would hear the prayers of the people in the sacred temples, and then go on pilgrimages to take their needs and wishes to the Titans, great and powerful elementals of nature that formed the world.

Chapter Notes

You know, just for the record, flames are in fact welcome. If they're helpful, I'll take them to heart and try to improve. If they're useless and empty, they can still cook me some s'mores. Mmmmm s'mores. Damn, now I'm hungry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The second day of travel resulted in the single most embarrassing moment of Garrus' life. This included every idiotic thing he'd done in school, boot camp, as a child to impress his pari... hell, it even topped the time he'd woken up under a bridge in Bachjret Ward surrounded by sleeping vagrants who grouped up there to drink and trade in the evenings, no idea of how he'd gotten there, only a vague memory of going out for drinks the night before.

This, truly, topped them all.

It started with a chiming on his Omni-tool, a call routed from Palaven. Torn between his pari finding out he was on a mission with Spectres and worry over his mari's condition, his finger hovered over the accept key uncertainly. Nihlus, being the ever helpful person he was, intervened.

“Oh you can answer calls still, we aren't anywhere near enough to our target to have to go dark yet.” Then, he proceeded to reach over Garrus' arm and tap the key for him, before flopping beside the now frozen form on the settee.

“Oh Garrus, love, how are you!”
“Hello... Mari. I'm, ah, really great. Aheh. How are you feeling?” Garrus could see Saren's movements over his work slow slightly at the only-very-slightly telling turn of phrase. Damnit.

“I'm doing just fine, the doctors say that the recent damage has been minimal. If it keeps up, I might live a bit longer then expected, I'm rather pleased to say.” Garrus managed an honest smile at that.

“I'm pleased to hear you say it too. How's Pari doing?” Nihlus started to lean into his space, to which he reacted by shoving an elbow into rib plates in an attempt to fend him off.

“Oh, you know him, he has half a dozen clan members running around arranging a banquet dinner to gather funds for research into Corporalis, finding scientists interested in doing new research, another few buzzing about looking into the research that exists currently, while a PR specialist runs the numbers and schedules the meetings he'll need to run for a senate seat next season, all the while he is double checking everything they do anyway, and in the mean time...”

“You don't see him, because he's too busy helping you to be there with you.” Garrus said with no small amount of resigned anger. Classic Castis Vakarian, missing every precious moment in favor of work.

“It's because he loves us that he's like this, you know that. He's always had far too much energy to not be doing something about his problems every moment of every day.” Viviene smiled wistfully, her pale yellow plates glowing softly in the lazy sunlight. Nihlus began leaning in again, undeterred by elbows.

“I... know Mari. I can't say I'm entirely different, but at least I'm not ignorant of what you'd prefer... and I generally answer my calls.”

“Garrus, love, when you have a bondmate someday, you'll understand what it means that their happiness is your happiness.”

“If you say so.” Garrus chanced a glance over at the vivacious Spectre who was crowding him enough to almost be visible on camera. He was about to go for another elbow jab before the starry-eyed look on the torin's face brought to mind some of the details from Nihlus' public extranet profile. No surviving family, lost his father at 16, mother died under mysterious circumstances a few years ago. Crap, now Garrus felt bad.

“I do say so.” Viviene replied, before tilting her head, her lovely orange eyes twinkling deviously.
“Speaking of bondmates, have you found anyone special to introduce me to.” Garrus' insides promptly went hiding in his feet. The furthest possible distance from that question. Nihlus' curiosity and Saren's careful listening-in forgotten for a moment as he fumbled trying to find a response that was both a negative and not a disappointment to his dying mother.

“Well, I...” Nihlus, - ever. so. helpful.- Nihlus threw an arm over his collar and leaned into camera view at perhaps the worst possible moment, wanting in on talking-to-a-nice-mom-on-vid-call so bad that he hadn't picked up on the subtext in the least.

“Hullo Mrs. Vakarian! I'm Nihlus, it's nice to meet you.” He was going to kill the carmine plated Spectre. Saren would likely end him immediately afterwards, but there was nothing for it. It had to be done.

“My mari smiled brightly, but he could practically see the thoughts in her head, 'Oh dear, I suppose I'll be relying on Solana for grandchildren after all'. Garrus wanted to alter this impression, somehow, but couldn't remember how to speak.

“I hope I'm not interrupting, m'am? Garrus didn't mention that you were ill. I hope you're doing okay?” Garrus could see, plain as day, that Nihlus had no idea what he'd just done, what introducing himself at that moment insinuated. 'How could he not?' Garrus wondered passingly, adrift from his body. Nihlus was all smiles as she reassured him that her health was the best that could be expected, and the two proceeded to chat about weather on Palaven and the latest elections. Movement caused him to glance up at Saren, who had swung his chair around, and was very precisely not looking at them while retrieving some obscure part from a storage container. He sort of wanted to melt into the floor and never reform.

“So how long have you two known each other, Nihlus?” Oh spirits. He prayed for them to strike with sudden engine failure. Fire alarm. Anything, spirits, please...

“Gosh, it has been a while now, hasn't it? I think we met, hmm.. it was outside a bank, about 7 months ago?” Engine failure, engine failure, engine failure...

“Oh, my, almost a year already? That's wonderful to hear. I had hoped that Garrus was making friends on the Citadel. He's always been a bit of a quiet type, you know?” Feeling abandoned by the spirits, he instead began to pray to the ancient Titans, just in case he somehow had Valluvian blood somewhere in his ancestry. A last ditch effort.

“Oh he can be quiet sometimes, but I think living on the Citadel must've brought him out of the shell
a bit. He's pretty exciting to be around most of the time.” The Titans were silent as well. Saren was making his way back to his bench, and their expressions met. He pleaded for help with his eyes. Saren blinked at him and sat back down. Feeling alone in a cold, uncaring galaxy, he began to regather his ability to speak. To mount some defense, no matter how feeble, against the tides of fate.

Oh look, more poetry when terrified. His fight-or-flight instincts were actually fight-or-rhyme instincts. He gave a small laugh, like a half-dead-fish on land flailing about in it's death throws. It must've suited the conversation that he wasn't listening to, because Nihlus turned to grin at him before moving his happy expression back to Viviene.

“Is that so! That's wonderful to hear, thank you for sharing it with me. I can't help but worry sometimes, and that puts me at ease. Do you two go out often?” Here, Garrus saw his chance to retake control of the situation.

“Definitely, Mari. Nihlus is a great wingman when we go out to catch a drink. He's a good friend.” Garrus smiled like a shark at Nihlus, willing him to agree or die. Nihlus smiled cheerfully at Viviene. Viviene smiled like she had a new secret to keep. Garrus despaired... if his pari even had the faintest idea that Garrus had no intention of bringing a potential mate home before thirty five or so, as was expected of him...

“I'm relieved that you have such a good friend, Garrus.” Oh, spirits. “It makes makes me feel better about you living so far from home.” He choked a little.

“Mari, half the clan has worked in or with C-Sec at some point. It's not all that far! Pari lived here for years.”

“Yes love, but he communed back and forth with the three week on and two week off schedule. You're there full time... and I just miss you sometimes.”

With an arm of one of the Council's top agents slung over his shoulders, and the most infamous, youngest-accepted-into-their-vaunted-ranks Spectre in history sitting definitely-not-listening-in 3 meters away, Garrus gave the only reply to her that he could, no matter the circumstances.

“I miss you too, Mari.”

The conversation turned into goodbyes, promises to talk again sometime, and not so subtle invitations to the clan Madlis.
The room descended into silence, finally broken by Garrus taking a deep, calming breath and pointing an accusing finger to the settee's other occupant.

"You. Are so oblivious." Then another finger at Saren.

"And you. Are not Sneaky." Saren looked mild affronted at the assault to his skills in subtlety. Nihlus just looked confused.

"What d'ya mean, I'm oblivious? Oblivious to what?"

Garrus just shook his head, and went to take a long hot shower.

Chapter End Notes

Now for some supposition: Desolas and Saren's cheek blades? I've heard them called 'Valluvian horns'. Guess who might have the blood of ancient priests in his veins? Desolas always was somewhat obsessed with their people's history... distant relation to religious royalty sort of thing? Though why he thought to pass that name onto the husks the Arca Monolith made of his squad... pieces of the puzzle, just missing, aren't there? Hmmm.

Update: Garrus' dad's name was originally going to be 'Copernicus' as a tribute to Nicholas Copernicus, who was all like 'Hey guys, I think we revolve around the sun.' and everyone else in that area of the world was all like, 'Nah.' Buuut, we now have a canon name for Vakarian Sr! I'm going through and updating everything to reflect that. If you see any instance that i missed, comments or emails would be much appreciated.

Side note: Garrus says Palaven is a lot like Virmire, and what images we have of it appear to show one giant super-continent. So, let's presume that while Turians can't swim due to the weight of their plates, and that they might not have any oceans at home,
they can do just fine in humidity, shallow water, and rainfall. So steam, baths, and showers are a-okay. I'm also assuming Turian bathing involves more brushing, gritty substances, buffing, and oil then human rituals... and now I have the topic for a much later chapter. I'm thinking hot springs or bathhouse, who's with me?

Fanfic Recommendation: The ThirtySix Stratagems of Wáng Jingzé (89691 words) by Mussimm (Thane/FemShep)
When in doubt, make it worse

Chapter Summary

In which Saren is talked into a game of cards.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
torin/tarin - male/female Turian over age 15

A/N: Sometimes you just have to use plain old human turn of phrases to get the feelings across. Newly made pseudo-Turian phrases are a lot more difficult to write and deliver then single words. I hope no one is disappointed by the phrasing here in, it seemed to suit best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That evening saw Saren reluctantly drawn into a game of cards by a deviously compelling Nihlus, who applied just the right about of annoyance, charm, wit, and guile to get the antisocial Spectre to agree, without crossing any lines that would get his face clawed off. He managed it skillfully.

“You have six cards, Nihlus. Discard one.” said Saren as he played an Age of Knights, upside-down. The green eyed Spectre was cheating again. Somewhat impaired by trying to do so against two very observant individuals. He complied, grudgingly, and played a Song of Autumn.

Garrus smirked at him across the table, pleased to be getting some sort of small vengeance for the vid-call fiasco that morning, and discarded a card, drawing a new one in it's place.

Saren tapped a card thoughtfully on the table, before playing it as well. A Sacrifice of Knights, also played upside-down.

Nihlus sweated nervously, determined to win. The lowest score of the night had to do all of the general chores tomorrow, and he was behind. He despised doing janitorial work with a passion. He discarded two cards, and drew new ones.

Icy blue eyes swiveled between the two Spectres. He was up for the night, and wanted to keep it that way. He looked at the other silver plated torin, a difficult read, the only tell Saren seemed to have
was the occasional light swallow for particularly good or bad hands. His gaze turned to the focus of his revenge. If he lost to Saren, so be it, but he wasn't going to lose to Nihlus.

'Time for some intimidation,' he thought, playing both the Mercy of Songs and the Twilight of Songs at once. He looked up, slowly drawing his eyes up from the table to meet Nihlus' vivid green stare. 'That's right, Kryik. No way for you to get a full suit of Songs now.'

Nihlus let out a slow huff of air from his nostrils.

Saren let out a hum, subvocals flat, and set down a pair in the Daggers suit, played normally.

In a fit of frustration, Nihlus discarded his full hand and redrew. 'Oh... oh yes...'

Garrus flared his mandibles at Nihlus, simultaneously laying down a Temerity of Songs, the proverbial glove tossed.

A tongue-click came from the other side of the table, scalpel sharp talons laying down an Angel of Truth and Angel of Fortitude, giving the older Spectre a 2 pair of positive cards upright, double pair of negative cards, one set up-one set down. A dangerously good spread.

Nihlus began an evil, over-dramatic chuckle. Full-on mad scientist cackles breaking through as he, one by one, laid out The Serpents of Deceit, Avarice, Decay, Sadness, and Remorse, all upside down.

“You've got to be kidding me. You got that in one hand? No way.” he laid out a pair of Knights, Dawn and Roses, upright.

“Read 'em and weep, pretty boy. Five serpents, just for you Blue.” Nihlus drawled lasciviously, and proceeded to make a terrible approximation of a blown-kiss. Saren made a sound of disgust, and quickly set down a single Serpent Entwined Dagger before taking a drink of water.

Having drawn a completely fresh hand after laying them all out, Nihlus' next card was of course, the Angel of Death, ending the game.
“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today... to witness the complete and utter devastation of Garrus Vakarian by the amazing and awe-inspiring Nihlus Kr-Oh shi-!” He was cut off as Garrus dove around the table, checking under the lip of the edge for spare cards, bodily lifting the Spectre up to check under him for spares. There were of course none to be found. Nihlus was far too sneaky for that.

Held bodily midair, trying to not show how aroused it got him that Garrus could literally dead-lift a fully grown Turian, he decided to do what he usually did in these situations. Make it worse. He kicked his legs forward, up over hip spurs, wrapping them around the torin's waist. Tossing his weight forward, and his arms around the attractively looping collar before him, Nihlus leaned in and stage-whispered.

“If you wanted to get up close and personal, all you had to do is ask. You want me to teach you some... card tricks?” Garrus just took a steadying step back, and sighed profoundly, head tilted back and neck barred in an over dramatic gesture of surrender to the whole situation.

Nihlus had to swallow back an appreciative subvocal purr at the sight of all that smooth brown hide. 'Must not bite, must not bite...'

“Arterius, did you teach him these lines? Please tell me he didn't learn pick up lines such as 'You want me to teach you some card tricks' during Spectre training. I don't think I can handle it if it is true. In fact, just lie to me if it is.”

“No. I do not claim responsibility for any of his... one-liners.”

“Thank the spirits for small mercies.”

Chapter End Notes

100 more kudos points to anyone who picked up on what card game they were playing. The rules of which I had to wing-it for, since everyone seems pretty unsure as to what the official rules are.

I'm having a lot of fun trying really hard to write these guys both in-character, and yet let them have some fun together, without it being crack. I'm trying reallllly hard to keep the cocaine to a minimum.

Fanfic Recommendation: Variations on a Theme with Tank and Gunfire (38,574)
words) by ServantofClio (FemShep/Garrus)
Addicted to a memory, holding on to what we used to be

Chapter Summary

It's rare for Saren to be in an approachable mood, and even then it doesn't last long. Nihlus will never stop trying. Saren will never let anyone in. Something has to give, or we'll ride this carousel till we die.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
- pulmentum – dry grain cakes, very inexpensive, fried up and served plain (Credit: AceQueenKing)
- spicae – an ingredient in pulmentum (Credit: AceQueenKing)
- miel - a dipping sauce for meats (Credit: AceQueenKing)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning saw Saren awake, staring at the ceiling listlessly, an hour until the day cycle. Considering he slept the usual four hours a night, and two or three more in naps, it was... within tolerable parameters. He gave up pretending to rest and got dressed, casuals again, instead of armor. They had six or so more days til arrival, though they would be arriving out of FTL today, and making the relay jump to Hades Gamma. Still in safe waters, relatively speaking, till they arrived in the Attican Beta. Casuals would do.

He tapped the open panel for his closet, an impressive but tightly packed collection of his various outfits. Everything an agent of Special Tactics and Reconnaissance would need for undercover, all of his personal wardrobe, and a few items tailored for Nihlus specifically. Nicer things for soirees and pageantry they kept safe in Saren's keeping. They'd learned the hard way that having Nihlus take care of clothing that required delicate care would result in buying him a new suit for each and every event, and unlike Saren, during undercover missions he changed outfits like the color-matching lizards of Earth. In the moment, and modified to suit.

Truly, his protege's ability to blend in and move through a crowd was something to see. It surpassed his own, and though some might blame that on his exotic facial structure, he knew that Nihlus had a knack for blending in and disappearing that few others could match. He would have made an excellent spook for the Hierarchy's black ops division. Saren was rather pleased to have stolen him right out from under their noses.

He further considered what to wear while fingering one of Nihlus' spare jackets, part of a crisp suit in black and mahogany that made the younger torin's eyes stand out vividly. Like green fire. Saren's
eyes slid over to a silver tunic and black pants set of his own that had jewel-toned green geometry on the cuffs and hemming. It would do.

He left the room and padded quietly into the kitchen, tapping on a wall mounted panel to put up a light sound dampening mass effect field. Just strong enough to murmur the sound of pans and plateware. He opened the pantry door to see what they had in stock, the first thing popping out at him was *spicae*, one of the ingredients for... for *pulmentum*. A cheap and easy grain cake his brother used to...

Unwilling to let his demons have their way, he pulled the ingredients for *pulmentum* out, as well as a jar of tangy *miel* to go with a plate of breakfast meats. With care he mixed up the gritty batter and spices, setting a wide pan to medium low heat, and prepping it with a drizzle of oil. He let that heat up, taking the time to lay out long meat slices from the refrigerator on a pan, lightly salted, and set them in the oven to bake.

This was a much improved state of being from laying down in misery. Saren found himself in the frequently visited zen-like state of cooking. Precise, step by step recipes, detailed variations, no others involved, multitasking for maximum efficiency. It was a dance of batter spoons and spices, heat dials and cupboard doors. He'd managed two batches of little round *pulmentum* cakes, half a plate of meats, and tiny tray of dipping sauces when pale knuckles were splattered unexpectedly with sizzling droplets of molten oil.

He jerked back violently, the curse not coming out in words so much as aggravated subvocals.

“Hey, are you alright?” He whirled around, coming around unexpectedly close to his erstwhile apprentice. Nihlus gently tugged his hand out of the protective curl it had been in, ignoring the other hand's half-cocked strike that had been halted mid-throw toward his neck. As if he were summoned on demand by Saren's unusually circling thoughts of him this morning, an out of character preoccupation with his former student. Carmine plating paled out in the bright kitchen light to a rich brown color, as he inspected Saren's hand. The first knuckle on the outer edge had gotten a fairly sizable splash of oil, and had mottled lightly purple in mere moments. Being an oil burn, there was little to do except for ice it...

Nihlus leaned down and blew on it, gently. Concerned brows lowered at the laughably small injury. A shiver ran down his spine at the delicate treatment, and tingled it's way back up again as one of Nihlus' hands slid away from his own. The younger Spectre reached over to the chilling unit and opened the freezer side, pulling one of many ice packs out. He let go of Saren's hand for a moment to wrap the ice in a dish cloth. Said Spectre was still trying to muddle his way through Nihlus' actions, thoughts crawling forward as if soaked in honey, too distracted to stop him from taking the hand back and holding the soothingly cold ice to the burn. It still seemed exceedingly hot, but the chill was slowly sinking in. The whole room, for that matter, felt over-warm. He tried to pull away, but Nihlus held on. Saren looked up into those... damn... beautiful green eyes... that looked back at him with
things he had no intention of ever talking about.

“Are you alright? You never answered. Is everything okay?” Saren didn't know how to answer that, so he just... nodded, trying to talk his legs into moving him away from this... this. How long had Nihlus been watching him this morning?

“You're still not talking...” Nihlus inched closer, scent and height and... concerned subvocals thrumming in the air around them. He felt cornered, starting to feel his anger rise. This insubordinate whelp was... he had no right to...

Nihlus' brow lowered to brush lightly, temple to temple, against his. A warm Turian sign of affection, concern, support... Saren was suddenly much too warm, much too brittle, and it was about to come to the surface like a lava flow, igniting everything in range of the caldera...

A cough sounded loudly in the relative stillness of the kitchen, two sets of eyes turning to face the averted gaze of their tag along. Mandibles tight to his jaw, subvocals wavering in awkwardness from having walked in on them...

“Sorry to interrupt, but... your com terminal is flashing a priority flagged message. It's the.. purple flickering one?” Saren swallowed and seized the lifeline immediately, forgiving the awkwardness of the moment for the sake of a new direction to escape in. It was a full route, he was entirely aware.

“Flickering purple? That is a distress call. Let us see what is amiss.” He flicked the heat off on the stove and stalked out of the kitchen with a glancing glare at Nihlus. He pretended he could not hear the conversation going on right behind him.

“...sorry.” Came the trailing end of another apology from Vakarian. Nihlus responded with self-depreciating laughter that made Saren's throat tighten reflexively.

“Don't worry about it. It wasn't what it looked like.”

“I... wouldn't presume. Or judge.”

“Oh please do, it's probably more interesting then the truth.”
“Ah so... you're... not together?” Nihlus sighed wistfully, and Saren bolted for his command chair in the center of the CIC ring.

“Ahhhh, if only.” He said with an empty smile.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: A Star to Steer Her By (192,625 words) by Shades of Mauve (FemShep/Joker)
A sour green apple that you just can't stop nibbling on

Chapter Summary

Minor plot hole fills and excessively obscure foreshadowing.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin/Tarin - Adult Male/Female Turian (Credit: MizDirected)

Sur'keshi - The main dialect of the Salarian Union, easily translated by Universal Translators, but the program often cuts out the elegant sibilance and plosives it contains when rearranging syllables into the Common Trade language, leaving it flat sounding when heard through aural implants.

Burngrass - A popular export of Sur'kesh, commonly used in terraforming projects on new colonies. (Canon)

Domacalla Bells - The name for the hundreds of resonant bells that range into subvocal tones atop Palaven's largest religious site, the Grand Spirit Cathedral of Cipritine city. Many of the bells have been replaced over time, but some of them date back thousands of years, painstakingly maintained for clarity of sound. (Mishmash word with Irish roots; Domhain (Deep) and Macalla (Echo).)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus stepped up onto the central dais like he belonged there, moving to stand just behind the left hand of Saren's chair. He refused to let the pseudo-rejection get to him, not to show it in his face or leak it into his subvocals. He'd been offering Saren small gestures of affection since... hell, since the day they'd met, the fierce pride of being hand picked for ST&R training the best thing that had ever happened to him. He owed everything to the torin, and would never abandon that debt, never betray or give up on him...

He took a slow breath.

Even if... every other word out of the bastard's mouth was mockery, derision, or annoyance. Or just walking away wordlessly when Nihlus offered his heart on a silver platter. He wished that Saren would just stop and realize that he had a permanent, green-eyed shadow.
Garrus came up reluctantly behind them, stepping to the right side of the platform as Saren finished pinning down the distress signal, sending it up to the holo-screen ring around them. It came up on audio/video, a surprisingly clean feed for an emergency signal, clear as the *Domacalla* bells atop Cipritine's main cathedral. The message had a picture of a space station in the top left corner, with the logo and icon for a well known Salarian medical company below it. The right three-fourths of the screen was taken up by a large window showing an info-graphic with the station's power issues and the tracking beacons of many small dots outside the station's borders. A bar along the bottom began scrolling subtitles like a news stream just as a synthesized voice began speaking in the rapid and hissing tones common to Salarian *Sur'keshi*, helpfully translated by their Omni-tools.

“Emergency aid requested. This is the V.I. Ordoka of the medical research and relief station, Hidoran III. Critical power failure has occurred. Hidoran III is without life support. Personnel have evacuated into escape pods. The station administrator requests all available space craft to assist in retrieving loose pods. Remaining life support in all units is estimated to be [two] hours and [thirteen] minutes. Please provide assistance.”

Saren reached out to activate an audio reply.

“Ordoka, we are unable to assist, but will pass on your status to the Relay's traffic control station.” Nihlus heard more then saw Garrus shifting in discomfort on the other side. He wasn't too happy about not being able to help himself, but they didn't exactly have the facilities to do a thing about it. Their airlock was, maybe, 3 cubic meters in size. Barely enough room for a single escape pod. Saren's decision was the best choice to see that these people received assistance. He turned to look at the C-Sec officer, who turned his neck to look back, and they shared an expression of displeasure with leaving the evacuees behind. 'Nothing for it', he communicated with a shrug. Garrus nodded once and they turned forward again.

“Acknowledged. I will relay your information to the system administrator. Thank you.” The screen returned to it's usual light blue glow as the connection was cut. Wordlessly, Saren turned the ship toward the relay, two planets away from their current location, and began calculating a micro-FTL jump to speed their travel time. If the info graphic's data had been correct a little under three hundred lives hung in the balance, and for some reason no one else had gotten the distress signal. That was...

“Something's off about this.” hummed Garrus, chin tilted and eyes narrowed. Silver-grey mandibles swished back and forth in a considering wiggle that Nihlus found *inordinately* cute. 'Now's not the time, Kryik.' he clicked his tongue at himself and put in his two creds.

“I was just thinking something similar. Exodus Cluster isn't exactly the middle of nowhere. Someone has to have passed by at some point, if not today then recently. It's a major shipping route. Plus, those escape pods should have... days of life support in them. At least. So, what gives?” Saren raised his
elbows to the chair's arm rests, bringing his hands up, fingers pressed together.

“I suspect I have an answer to that.” Leaving the ship's VI to run jump calculations, he spared a moment to bring up a second holo-monitor on the ring, starting up a program for the encryption or decryption of data, and pulled the distress signal’s still-broadcasting alert into it.

“Tell me gentlemen, what do you see?” It was something of a rhetorical question, as anyone with the slightest knowledge of audio/video codex could see that the signal’s encoding was standard work, which is to say it had normal encoding for communication on any modern device, but in between seemingly random chunks was a horde of junk data. When seen from outside by organic minds, it only vaguely resembled readable data from all the muck cluttering the screen.

“Spirits, that's a wreck... corporate espionage, d'ya think?” Saren shrugged at his fellow Spectre, finishing up the calculations for the micro FTL burst that would bring them across the solar system and into range of the Relay. It only took them a split second to arrive, finding a small queue of cargo ships and a private Hanar vessel patiently waiting in line for their turn to jump, no obvious alarm at the state of Hidoran III. Garrus leaned forward as the list of ship names and a traffic report popped up automatically from the local traffic control, or T-Con for short, a tiny space station built within range of each major Relay to facilitate the come-and-go of ship travel.

“Still... No one else picked up on that emergency signal?” Saren shook his head, bringing up a priority communication request for the traffic station.

“The average ship is not equipped to pick up on or subvert sabotage of this level.” He followed that statement by bringing up a tech-spec page for the information and cyber security suite onboard. Nihlus snickered at the half-starved look of a covetous and lustful tech-junkie that took over the C-Sec Officer's face. Garrus Vakarian sure did like his cutting-edge tech, and Saren always did have the very best toys. A video chat flickered to life in yet another window.

“This is the Asgard Relay T-Con, my name is Officer Kel'taig, replying to a priority com request from The Daedalus. What's seems to be the problem, captain?”

“This is Spectre Arterius, Officer Kel'taig, and I am forwarding you an emergency distress call for Hidoran III. I presume you are familiar with the station?”

“Uh, yessir. A distress call you say?”
“It appears they experienced a power failure some time ago, and are experiencing communication issues as well. There are a number of escape pods surrounding the station that have failing life support. Do you have the ability to assist?”

“One moment, Spectre.” The navy blue Salarian traffic officer disappeared off screen for several moments, before returning with two Turians in similar uniform.

“Spectre Arterius?” Began the tarin on the left, her subvocals crisply professional, “My officer is telling me Hidoran III needs immediate evac, can you confirm?”

“Yes.” Saren grumbled none-too-pleased, Nihlus could hear, annoyed with having to repeat himself.

'Oh goodie, and he was already in such a lovely mood today.'

“The station experienced power failure. There are several hundred escape pods with failing life support surrounding it with approximately two hours remaining.”

“I see. While I'm willing help, I have only two rescue vehicles available. I could evacuate perhaps a quarter of that number back to our station in the given time.” Saren's eyes flickered over to the list of ships queued for travel.

“Does that include assistance from the other end of the relay jump?”

“It does.”

“One moment, remain on the channel.” The unnamed tarin raised a brow at the curt order but said nothing further. Saren brought up the ship list, located a cargo ship listed as hauling unimportant Salarian burngrass, likely on a not-time-sensitive run to a terraforming project. Quick fingers typed out a com request for the captain, who answered immediately. The human woman’s expression going from bored to aggravated in moments. Nihlus tried not to smile, imagining that she’d recognized Saren’s increasingly infamous visage, and knew she’d just been roped into something.

“This is Captain Jerrie of the PSV Tortuga, what can I do for you, er... gentlemen?” Saren blatantly ignored the human's ignorance of gender, likely on the female officer's behalf, and filled the blonde haired woman in on the problem thus far.
“...that said, as requested by Spectre authority, you are required by law to provide assistance in the form of a mobile recovery base for the rescue crew that the T-Con station will be providing, as stated in the thir-” Of course the human, annoyed or not with being roped into this and pulled off her hauling schedule, was now even more pissed off at the clear assumption in Saren's words that she would need to be compelled by law to help oxygen starved evacuees. Nihlus waited patiently, uninvolved, having been long used to his former mentor always presuming the worst about human intentions. Either it would result in shots fired -unlikely, but not impossible-, or not -hopefully-, so long as someone got the rescue operations underway soonish... Nihlus really didn't care. Garrus, however, interjected before the growing number of veiled insults got any worse.

“Captain Jerrie. On behalf of the station's personnel, thank you for agreeing to assist. It's very generous of you. If you'll please drop your place in the queue and move off to the side, we'll leave you with T-Con to arrange pick up of the smaller rescue vehicles into whatever open storage space you have, so you can get out there as soon as possible. Thank you again, ladies, I'm sure the families of the people you are rescuing will be very grateful.” His voice remained cordial and even somewhat compelling, humming gracious subvocals to the tarin officer while remembering not to use expressions that showed teeth for the captain.

'Oh, he's good.” thought Nihlus, realizing suddenly that Garrus... probably had not always been a detective. The torin had likely spent years as a beat cop first, responding to domestic disturbances or petty crime; and dealing with all manner of crabby, crying, aggressive citizenry.

All parties settled, Saren entered them into the short relay queue. They were cleared for a Mass Effect assisted Relay jump within half an hour, arriving in Hades Gamma in the Antaeus system. Nihlus casually leaned on the chair back with one arm, long legs crossed, and turned to Garrus while their grumpy-as-fuck-today-and-probably-also-for-the-foreseeable-future leader ran the new navigational calculations for the connecting FTL flight to the relay in Dis.

“Wellllll... this is going to be a nice long flight. If I remember correctly, we've got about four days till we hit Dis, and make the jump to Attican Beta. Thankfully, the Hercules system has both our arrival and departure relays, so that'll be quick." He hummed thoughtfully. "We'll probably go dark upon arrival, no up/down data traffic or broadcasting to com buoys that would give away our position. Soooo... download all your music and porn needs before hand.” He leveled a blasé grin at Garrus' thoroughly unimpressed expression.

“Ohuh. Thanks.”

“No probs.”
[Author's Codex Entry] - The Grand Spirit Cathedral (Palaven, Cipritine Prefecture, Ciprite, District 4)

The Grand Spirit Cathedral, home to the famous Domacalla Bells, sits in the northern most area of Palaven's capital city, Ciprite. The Cathedral faces south, and is surrounded by city on all sides except for it's northern face, which leads into the Towers of Nanus, a series of massive stone towers where in the names, clans, and regiment of the Hierarchy's most honored dead are carved in row after row. Only those recognized by the Senate as having achieved, sacrificed, or provided beyond the call of duty are allowed to be recorded there. As each tower fills, a new one is built. The breathtakingly beautiful grounds on which the Towers of Nanus reside stretch out to the north, far into the country side, the empty land stands waiting and maintained for the towers and names of future heroes.

Fanfic Recommendation: Whatever a Sun Will Always Sing is You (12660 words) by AngelicSentinel (FemShep & Garrus, highly underloved, this one touches on some really interesting concepts.)
Please just let me sleep

Chapter Summary

In which Saren continues to avoid sleeping, thinking about the past, or facing his depression in favor of working himself to the bone instead.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Torin/Tarin: Adult Male/Female Turian (Credit: MizDirected)
Kava: Turian equivalent to Coffee (Credit: Chromaticism)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The steam from Saren's third cup of kava had faded away, the drink going unconsumed in his distraction. It was two hours into the night cycle and the Spectre was still sitting up in the kitchen, never having pretended to sleep at all. The data pad in front of him blurred into illegibility as a jaw popping yawn took hold.

“Maybe you should consider trying to sleep.” He jumped at the sudden voice that broke the room's quiet. Vakarian. He scrubbed a palm over his face and replied without turning around from the small table to face the door way.

“I will do so on my own time. Perhaps you should take your own advice.” He could hear the scrape of bare talons along the floor as footing changed, accompanied by a light thunk. Likely the C-Sec Officer had leaned back against the door frame, legs crossed. A position of causal leaning the torin seemed to take often.

“I napped a fair bit today, after the incident with Hidoran station, so... I'm just fine. You however, barely sleep as it is.” Saren's proverbial hackles rose at the... demeaning chastisement. He swung his head around to pin the sniper with half a glare.

“My sleeping habits are none of your concern, Vakarian.” Garrus just shrugged, his silver-grey crest blades catching the light as he tossed his head in a dismissive gesture.

“Maybe, maybe not. It doesn't change the fact that something's bothering you. You've been keyed up
since I first saw you this morning. You want to talk about it?"

Did he- want to- talk about it?!

'Who does this carbon-copy C-Sec flunky think he is?'

From half asleep at the wheel to angry and ready to fight in twenty five seconds or less. Keyed up did not begin to describe it. Saren lifted his legs and spun on the wide bench of the mess hall's table, planting his feet heavily upon coming fully around. He distantly lamented that his lack of boots kept the sound from being as intimidating as it should have been. He brought his full glare to bear on the other occupant, perfectly still and silent.

Face neutral, with mandibles loosely tucked in and a deceptively placid gaze, Garrus approached slowly and leaned over, reaching down to rest his hands on Saren's cloth covered shoulders. His hands were warm against chilled plates. Less afraid of the Spectre's ire then he really should be.

'Hiding it? Perhaps.'

“Listen. You don't have to talk about it, it wasn't an attempt at coercion. It was an offer. A friendly one. If you don't want to, that's fine, but I offered to hear what's on your mind because I care that you're okay, and today? 'Okay' is not the word I would use. I understand you're a private person, and I'm not trying to encroach where that's unwelcome, but if there is anything I can do to help you relax, I hope you know you can ask. I respect you more than... anyone else in the galaxy. If I can help you out somehow? I want to.”

Saren's mounting anger dissipated in the face of Garrus' heart-felt concern. He wasn't pushing like Nihlus did, but made it obvious that he wanted to be helpful if he could. Vakarian claimed to... respect him more than...

He grabbed for the remaining tatters of his temper and growled softly, subvocals saying 'give me some space'. The sniper moved away to the cupboards and began to making up some sort of drink.

Silence reigned in the kitchen, the only sounds to be heard were those of the ship's systems and the quiet hum of the chilling unit. Saren turned back around gingerly, resting an elbow on the table and his chin on that fist. A fresh drink was set gently before him, but it clearly wasn't kava. He scented the air lightly. It was herbal tea, hot and unsweetened. Garrus sat down across from him, not meeting his eyes, just swirling his own tea cup wordlessly. He tried to work up a mild affront that the Officer
had exchanged his drink for something without caffeine, but it seemed petty in lieu of the quiet companionship and open-ended offer of support that had come with it.

His elbow slid out from under him as he let his fringe drop to the table top to land on cool metal. Still, Garrus said nothing, but reached out a hand to rest three taloned fingertips against the outside of his arm.

“I...” Damn, he was doing this, wasn’t he? Saren didn’t particularly want to, -liar, his mind whispered in Nihlus’ voice-, but he might as well give it a try at least once. “I wish to sleep, but cannot. Do not ask me why.” A low hum from the other torin set the tea in his cup to vibrating, concentric circles forming in ripples on the surface.

“Tried any sleep aids?” He shook his head, rolling his forehead against the table, before managing to lift his torso back to a proper sit fueled by self disgust at his weak appearance.

“Well, tea is a good start. It can be calming.” An unsubtle nudge of the cup pushing it closer to him. “I saw you exercising with free weights earlier, it looked like a good work out, so I'd guess it isn't lack of physical exhaustion... what about music or aromatherapy?” Saren scoffed.

“I have tried peaceful instrumental audio that I normally enjoy. Forcing myself to try and fall asleep to it merely ruins my enjoyment of the piece in general. Furthermore, I do not enjoy artificial smelling... aromas. They give me headaches, if anything.”

“Okay. What about a hot shower?”

“I already took one.” Another thoughtful hum filled the room, making his tea ripple again. He finally managed to drink some, not particularly tasting it.

“May I try something?” Saren looked up, a mistrustful and uncertain expression on his face.

“Such as?” A half-smile finally broke the sniper's emotionless calm.

“Just say yes. I'll try it, and if you don't like it after a few minutes, just say something and I'll stop.” A few moments passed in consideration, the world blurring as his eyes unfocused yet again.
“Fine.”

Vakarian reached for his left hand, the one not curled around a tea cup, and pulled it to his side of the table. Saren watched absently, waiting to see what the _torin_ thought he could do to a hand that would solve chronic insomnia. Grey hands cradled a silver one between them, thumbs coming down to push lightly into the meat of his palm. With talons curled safely away, the second knuckles providing the surface and pressure, the hands moved over his in slow circles. Up to the base of his fingers, and back down, looping several times. Saren started to feel far away. The grey toned hands moved up and began kneading the dense tendons along his finger bones, working gently around joints, rolling into the pads of his finger tips and pressing against the buried base of his talons. He laid his head down, watching the tea cup and it's continued rippling. Which was... odd... the other _torin_ wasn't... humming anymore... if the.. sound wasn't... from him... it must be...

Then he was gone, flopped out on the table like the galaxy's most dangerous bread roll.

Garrus realized belatedly that he had no idea how to get the Spectre back to his bed without waking him again.

Damn.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex Entry] The Turian Pallet: an Overview of Turian Eating Habits and Dietary Needs

Turians, known to be omnivorous, are metabolically very close to carnivorous. This is reflected in their body type which has no fatty layer, is built for speed over endurance, and of course the well documented tooth and jaw structure. That said, it is easy to see why simple carbohydrates, such as sugars, aren't as widely popular in junk foods for Turian audiences as they are with Asari, Batarians, or Humans. Furthermore, diets high in sugar cause rapid decay of tooth enamel in Turians, at a rate 5 times faster then seen in other species; and though Turian teeth regrow with relative ease as needed, a Turian with nutritional habits high in simple carbohydrates will have other health consequences from over indulging. Thus, salt is the flavoring of choice. The Turian pallet can detect 26 different forms of edible mineral salts, and can pick out the quality of a salt's refinement with ease. On the other hand, this doesn't all mean that Turians do not eat sugar or enjoy the occasional sweet treat, merely that their sense of taste for it isn't nearly as developed or as widely enjoyed.

(Oh yeah, you know what that means? Sweaty humans must taste, literally, delicious. :D)
Fanfic Recommendation: *To Catch a Thief-taker* (5,088 words) by BlueKrishna
(Kasumi Goto/Jondum Bau)
Chapter Summary

Inevitably Nihlus gets a hold of everyone's attention. Their responses vary.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Hideth Turram: A popular Turian sport, vaguely similar to capture the flag. (Credit: MizDirected)

Systems Alliance common – The modern spoken tongue of Earth, a widely expanded version of English with blending influences from many other languages. Nearly 3 times the size of old Earth English, at an estimated 2.7 million words in the dictionary, with a minimum understanding of 47,000 words required for full literacy.

Torin/Tarin: Male/Female adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: A big thank you to MizDirected, Recidiva, and AceQueenKing for official permission to use their mindcanons! Thankyouthankyouthankyou! (Isn't our fandom community just the freakin' best?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While Garrus' presumptions about Saren's living habits had been generally correct going into this, disregarding a few unexpected quirks, Nihlus Kryik proved to be a creature of continuing... surprises. His habits were... not just over the top, but right out of the Hideth Turram field altogether.

"Annnnnnd I~~~~~~~~! Will always luuuuv yooOooOooOuuuuuu~~~..."

He was.... singing in the shower, the obscenely dulcet tones coming through the bulkhead from Saren's ensuite bathroom... in mind-bogglingly fluent Systems Alliance common. The reddish brown Specter was crooning... old Earth love songs. Garrus turned to look at their captain, who had on noise canceling headphones that were clearly insufficient, considering his vaguely haunted look.

“Yooooou~~ my darling, you~ Mmmm~.”

He tried to refrain from laughing, and focused in on the data pad in front of him which displayed the coding for the main weapon's system. He was determined to re-calibrate it to handle better thermal uptake and cool down, having spent downtime over the past several days figuring out the finer points of the complex system. He'd tossed ideas around in the back of his head, and thought he had enough starting points to begin messing with the numbers. Not on the live system, of course, but on a copy of
it he’d loaded to a datapad that could also run simulated test fires.

“Bitter sweet... mem~o~ries~~ that is all... I am taking... with mee~e~”

A sideways glance revealed that Saren was determinedly reading an article about the latest problems in law enforcement with illegal drug trafficking. Garrus made a note to peruse that one himself later. He turned back to the datapad, considering whether reworking the algorithms for the plasma containment field would give him enough leeway to allow more time for the high energy lasers to flash boil the contained hydrogen without slowing down the rate of fire.

“Ple~ase, dooon't cry. We both know, I'm not what you.... what you ne~e~eed...”

He scratched a thumb talon back and forth along his jaw, just underneath the left mandible, considering what other options he had to cut down on the rate of fire. The new math for the containment fields would do wonders for the issues with stability of the electromagnetics if he put them in, but it also appeared to add nearly four seconds to the time between shots. Completely unacceptable.

"Annnnnnd I~~~~~~~~! Will always luuuuv yooOooOoooOooOuuuu~~~~~..."

'Ahah!' He thought, 'I can rework the way the capacitors time recharging both the containment shield generator and the high energy laser pulse.' He made a note to refine the power draw later, after he’d finalized the rest of the alterations.

“I~~ ho~~pe life... treats you kind, and I~~ hope... you have all you... dream o~o~of!”

A lightning epiphany struck, somewhere in the middle of reviewing the energy draw requests from the canon’s energy capacitors to the ship’s engine. Some of the electromagnetic energy given off during the release of the plasma bolt during the firing sequence was recycled, recaptured by a series of absorption panels around the mechanism, but he could make it better with some clever timing on the energy draw... Garrus typed furiously, indomitable focus bearing down on his calibrations. It was all coming together.

“But above all~~ this? I wish you... lo~ooo~ooooovee~.”

'Oh, oh yes, I can definitely raise that a bit by... no, no wait, that's going to cause a feed back
problem.’ Garrus was a slave to his muse, happily, bound and determined to solve the self-given puzzle of mathematics and physics breaking.

"Annnnnnd I~~~~~~~! Will always luuuuv yooOooOoooOuuuu~~~~..."

He came to a stop. It looked... good. He ran the test firing simulation, fingers hovering like a hunter waiting to see what his prey was going to do. It came back with a vast improvement to the thermal issues, 8% faster rate of fire and a whopping 24% less stress on the heat exchange, but... damnit, some mild instability issues. He was returning to the drawing board just as Saren threw his datapad at the wall. Garrus blinked at him, the silver plated figure looked... even more unstable and hunted then he had a few minutes ago. His pupils were contracted, one eye narrowed more then the other.

“I will always l~ove youuu~....” came crooning through the wall, only slightly quieter.

Garrus set his datapad down with a mildly apologetic pat, and turned to Saren in a merciful attempt to distract the torin with conversation.

“He must be extremely popular at karaoke bars...” he said with a smile at the grumpy Spectre. Saren just gave him a flat look.

“He is popular at all bars, unfortunately.”

“Unfortunately?”

“Yes. He has a bad habit of attracting people when we are in the middle of intel gathering, and then chatting them up for hours.”

“Wouldn't that help gather information?”

“No. If he spends half the conversation charming them, then the remainder making out like a sex starved teenager.”

“So... no information gets gathered.” In flat tones Saren offered a grudging addendum.
“He tends to lift data off Omni-tools while he is doing it.”

“Ahhhh.”

Nihlus continued his relentless campaign of love songs in different languages, the man was apparently a natural polyglot, for another forty minutes before the water finally shut off. A few minutes later he came wandering out of the bedroom shirtless, wearing nothing but loose beige cargo pants hung low on his hips. Low enough for the upper edge of his pubic plates to peak over the belted waist line, a descending 'V' of layered carapace and scales nestled between deceptively thin bone structure. Garrus felt himself involuntarily swallow as he forced his eyes to move past the figure now leaning against the corner of the hallway entrance.

Between the communal showers and shared quarters in basic training, the disconcern for personal space or covering when wounded in the field, and being a species that had completely internal sex organs, Turians in general wouldn't know body modesty if it hit them in the face with a rock. That said, it had been a long time since basic training, over a month since he'd slept with anyone, and he'd caught sight of Nihlus' unusual full-body markings. Long white trails flowing over carmine colored keel and pectoral plating, down his torso as interlocking segments made way for just a short swathe of soft looking dark brown hide, all of it leading down, down, down...

Garrus immediately began forcing himself to calculate an entirely different kind of thermal dynamics.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex Entry] Turian Bathing Habits
As a species with very few sweat glands, but one that sheds larger amounts of superficial tissue over time, Turians need only clean themselves weekly if they do not become soiled from environmental factors. Though they are known to bathe once or more a day for the pleasure of warm water and feeling refreshed, most Turians will take a once weekly extended period to thoroughly clean themselves. This often includes rubbing bristled brushed into the crevasses between plates, a gritty salt scrub over hide, using a rasp to sharpen or shorten crest blades, and a file to do the same with talons. Oils are commonly applied post drying to seal and cure the semi-flexible portions of plate, and the flexible hide. This can be augmented by occasional trips to bath houses to have spa workers provide those services, and to have one's clan markings professionally
redone. Spas also offer treatments to fill in grooves on worn plates, extend crest blades, and more recently have begun talon-blunting services for those who work around the more soft skinned species.

[Author's Codex Entry] Mass Effect Assisted Ship-based Plasma Canons
Plasma based weaponry operates by using a heating mechanism, generally provided by one or more lasers, on an electromagnetically contained mass of atoms, often noble gases, particularly hydrogen. The laser(s) flash boil the gas into a super-heated lump of plasma, shaped and contained by an electromagnetic field. Though this method alone only gives the round a short lifespan, as it rapidly cools once fired. Acceptable for ground fire situations, but impossible to optimize for ship-based warfare. Modern reinventions of the weapon rely on small attached mass effect field generators that are fired with the plasma, keeping it contained and retaining heat. This allows for not only larger, but long lasting plasma bursts to be fired at distant targets, based on the quality of the canon and the one-time-use mass effect generator.

Interested in reading about Hideth Turram as well? MizDirected has a wonderfully developed codex of sorts for it over here: Confessions of a Mass Effect Addict

Nihlus was singing Whitney Houston's 'I Will Always Love You'. He nailed it.

Why yes, I did slip in a reference to both the Dragon Age: Inquisition's Solavellan romance AND Calibrations in a single line. I'm just that good. Can you imagine Solas saying those lines about indomitable focus to Garrus? It makes no sense, in or out of context, but I'd pay to see that scene. :D

I am inordinately proud of making 'thermal dynamics' into a euphemism for sex with Nihlus.

Fanfic Recommendation: The Reversal (23057 words) by Velasa (Saren/Nihlus)
The time honored traditions of a noble people, also for funsies

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is in it to win it, so he'll enjoy the eye candy on the surveillance footage... later. Now is the time for badassery.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin/Tarin - male/female adult Turian (credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Furniture had been painstakingly tucked away, folded down, and carried out of the room.

All loose objects had been relocated, with promises to replace them later.

The stage was set, positions taken, and then...

Garrus and Nihlus engaged in the time-honored Turian tradition of staving off boredom with sparring matches.

Round one was to be a serious affair, neither knowing the other torin's limits, needing to assess that before diving in. Carelessness, especially between fighters of different skill level, could result in real injury. Not acceptable in a pre-mission lead up.

To that effect, Saren had agreed to referee. If questioned under the influence of many, many truth-telling drug cocktails Nihlus might have admitted he was hoping that Garrus was good, but not too good. He wanted to win, showing off for the electric blue eyes that watched them, and that required both a worthy opponent that could take the hits of his more impressive moves, but also someone he could take down in the end.

He wasn't too worried.
He eyed Garrus up and down as they loosened up. The C-Sec Officer remained impressively tall, even for their kind. He'd have excellent reach. Nihlus considered the torin's thickly built arms and muscular thighs. A heavy weight with all the densified muscle of frequent exercise and top quality gene-mods. His opponent had stripped down to a cobalt hued sleeveless shirt, not much to grab onto for a throw, with charcoal toned cargo shorts that stopped at the knee. Not much different from his own black-and-rust colored set, though his was much more form fitting. Nihlus' clothes didn't give the opposition so much as a single fistful of loose fabric to grab for.

'Huh. A'ight, let's see... he's got a strong root to his stance, good balance... I've gotta avoid direct hits, or redirect the force behind them. Need to push the limits of my flexibility if he is even half as strong as he looks. The recoil on that rifle of his... looks like it's given him extra arm strength. Pffft. What am I saying? Sniper. I got this.'

Garrus nodded at him and took a stance as they finished eyeing each other up. He moved into his own. Saren watched placidly from the CIC chair, intending to toss them away with biotics if anyone got thrown toward the central controls.

The tension hung in the air for a moment, suspended in time.

Then, they moved.

The Officer dropped low, bringing a leg around to trip him up, which he nimbly hopped over; just high enough to make sure it missed his feet, but not so high as to lose control of his position for any length of time. As soon as feet touched down he leaned into a strike, carefully keeping his core rooted, bringing a knee up to clock the other torin under the jaw. It nearly connected, but Garrus had already been rising up, left arm coming around in a light jab at his shoulder. That touched, but Nihlus rolled with it, almost none of the force transferring at the point of impact. In response, he continued that roll, using the motion to launch a kick at silver-grey fringe. The move was a classically female one, used by the much faster tarin fighters to take advantage of their speed. It threw his opponent off, as expected. He'd clearly been anticipating the fight to be a standard Turian male-male brawl, like the matches of all Hierarchy trained fighters.

Nihlus smiled darkly as the hit connected with a solid 'whump', sending Garrus stumbling sideways. You didn't survive growing up on a fringe-world mercenary base by fighting in fair or expected ways.

To his credit, the Officer recovered quickly, bringing his own leg up in a kick aimed for the torso. It scraped a tear through his shirt, rust colored cloth slicing open to reveal carmine plates as he curled into an impressively concave shape. As the kick went by he followed the movement with a drop, landing in a push up position that allowed him to kick his legs up at blinding speeds, straight into a handstand that brought his feet overhead and then crashing down one-after-the-other toward Garrus'
head; who must have been thinking quickly, because side-by-side forearms blocked the strike, taking a long double-scratch from passing toe-talons.

First blood.

They pulled apart to opposite sides of the room as Garrus inspected the mild gash. Blue blood dripped onto the floor as he looked up and nodded in acknowledgement of the point. Nihlus let out a righteously wicked grin.

It faded as he realized that had been a more advanced finishing move, not something he should have used on the first round of a fresh fight. He felt a little ashamed for getting carried away, but... Saren hadn't called a foul for over-aggressiveness, then again... that wasn't exactly surprising what with the other Spectre's known penchant for ruthlessness. The grin returned a bit, hoping his cantankerous friend approved of the... somewhat unintended aggressiveness. He nodded to signal readiness for another go.

Once again the silver-grey sniper came in for the first strike, and Nihlus was pleased and vaguely aroused that it was a very advanced combination of moves. In from the right hand with a feint as the knee came up, the left hand made a grab for fringe, and the hip began the barest hint of coming around for a throw. Nihlus struggled to dodge the multi-strike, but managed it by ignoring the feint, sliding sideways around the knee, and leaving his neck open to avoid the fringe grab, knowing that his opponent was far-and-away too honorable to use the opening to slash at him. As that hip-crest continued to come around for a hip check, he did what came naturally to him of course, by making it worse in the form of leaning into it at just the right angle to end up half-sitting on Garrus' cocked hip. He took a moment to pose, kicking out a long leg fully, the other bent at the knee, leaning back and teasingly tugging on crest blades. He trilled an arrogant chirp, but dared not push the stunt any further, and rolled quickly away.

Nihlus spun around again to see Garrus coming at him with a happy grin. The other torin had enjoyed his cocky showmanship, and that pleased him all the more. He was having fun as they flowed into another series of rapid strikes, pulled back again, and met in an exchange of CQC grappling. Garrus nearly pinned him then, but determined to look good he risked dislocating his shoulder to tumble away. It almost worked except the sniper pulled some sort of follow-up tumble, grabbed him again, and was suddenly sitting on his back.

“Point to Vakarian” Saren drawled.

Nihlus thunked his head on the floor in self-chastisement before getting to his feet as the weight was lifted from his back. Were all C-Sec this good? Couldn't be. He'd won medals at competition before, and took on his colleagues when circumstance allowed, Saren included, more often then not coming out on top against the best-of-the-best. He passingly wondered, not for the first time, why Garrus
wasn't one of them.

He shrugged it off as they jumped into a third round, both of them easing into it with slightly more
tame movements as the inevitable trash-talk rolled off their subvocals.

'Slow. Much too slow.' Green eyes glittered with mirth.

'Careless, going to catch you.' Trilled out in low tones from a tawny brown throat.

'Was that a real try?' Came a mocking tease accompanied by a chin toss.

'Close, very close.' Was the growl that arose from dark silver chest plates.

'Should ask before touching.' Came a teasing hum from the lightning-fast Spectre after a near miss
along his unprotected side.

'I will take what I want from you.' …

Nihlus swallowed lightly.

While he was fairly certain the sniper hadn't meant it that way, it still shut him right-the-fuck-up as he
had to forcefully reject being turned on while determinedly trying to win. After a moment, he tossed
out a flat toned taunt.

'Prove it.' ...and spirits did he.

Garrus came around like an avalanche, tagging his shoulder, pushing in close, and riding him to the
ground. They grappled for endless minutes, Nihlus fighting like mad for a hand hold, -foot hold,
something, anything-, before finding a lucky one and climbing the taller torin like a street lamp,
ending up with one knee wrapped under his chin in a choke hold, leg spur notched painfully into the
collar for support, and each arm outstretched fending off the talons that came in to pry him off.

“Point to Nihlus. The round is over Vakarian, he has put Krogan down with that particular hold.”
Garrus stopped struggling and Nihlus loosened the hold so he could breathe. The Officer sunk down in his stance to allow Nihlus to dismount easier. So polite. He was feeling a bit skittish about turning around to face him after getting down, both riding high on the adrenaline flush, and still fighting down a persistent arousal at the subvocal exchange. Possibly feeling a bit badly about pulling an endless stream of borderline illegal moves...

He need not have worried, as Garrus laughed happily and threw a companionable arm over his shoulders when he continued to face Saren's general direction instead of turning.

“That was amazing! You're the most wily, creative, and -spirits- fastest sparring partner I've ever had. Want to take a break and go again?” Nihlus looked up, hiding his relief, and smiled insolently.

“I could do this all day, Blue.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: You knew the reach and flexibility reference was going to happen sometime. Don't lie, you knew. Hey, at least it was subtle, right? Subtle-ish. Anyway, I've redone the first chapter to make it match the tone of the rest a bit better. I like the new version bunchies... since I don't have a beta, I might go back and reread chapters at random as I move forward. Edit to suit. I'll be sure and let you guys know if I make any major changes.

Fanfic Recommendation: Apocalypse Ascension (45971 words) by Whenever_the_Fancy_Takes_Me
Would you not cut off your own arm to return to those days

Chapter Summary

Saren solves his frustrations involving his erstwhile protege with a little beating. Garrus tries to remain uninvolved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The scent of charred carbon came wafting by...

“Help!!! Help, he's going to kill me~~~~!” Garrus looked up in surprise as a breeze blew past the settee, the trailing 'me' changing pitch in a mild doppler effect as Nihlus sprinted away from a stomping mass of silver plates and rage.

“Not the airlock, not the airlock!” Came next as he'd evidently outmaneuvered Saren inside the bedroom, and came running back out the hallway.

He paused in a moment of schadenfreude, remembering having experienced that same feeling of 'Saren is going to kill me' on previous occasion, though if he remembered correctly, he'd assumed he was about to be pushed off a roof...

“I didn't mean, t-oh shit!-ow ow ow fuck ow, to. Didn't mean to! Accident! Swear it was an accidi-~~~!!!” The normally low rolling, melted caramel sound of Nihlus' voice ended in a squeak, - Garrus had to choke back laughter at the sound- before hitting a high pitched trill. Another breeze went by him as he continued to read his e-book, followed by slow paced stomping like an inevitable death.

He felt sort of unkind for not interfering, and maybe for laughing... but he was also not suicidal.


Garrus sipped his tea.
The younger Spectre continued to plead for several minutes, running out of air trying to out manuever both the physical form that stalked him, and the range of biotics inside a relatively tiny ship space.

It was a good thing Saren wasn't really trying.

“Fine. You will fix it. You will ensure it is exactly as it was before. I am going to... shower. If it is not repaired by the time I am done...”

“Yep-got-it-going-to-murder-me-roger-that-okay-go-take-a-shower-now-please?”

Saren's mildly less heavy foot falls made for the bedroom door, and all was silent for a moment. Garrus turned back to the datapad in his lap. Moments later, Nihlus slid into the seat next to him with a pleading expression.

“Help.”

Garrus tried reallllllly hard not to laugh. He... mostly succeeded.

“What did you do?”

“I was trying to cook dinner...”

“Alright, and?”

“I might have lit a small thing on some fire.”

“On 'some' fire? What, the food?”

“Not exactly.” He eyed Nihlus suspiciously, not buying the butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth expression he was trying to sell. Without agreeing to anything he set the datapad and tea cup aside, and went to go have a look at whatever was, -by the smell of it-, still burning.
The kitchen was a disaster zone. It looked sort of like, no... exactly like a small grenade had gone off in the middle of a lunch rush. Complete with an explosion burn circle on the floor, and an imprint of a fallout cloud made of grain-flour on the walls and ceiling.

“How did you even...?” he choked out.

Nihlus just shook his head back and forth, wordlessly, an over dramatic shell-shocked expression on his face.

Garrus covered his eyes with one hand, leaning on the door frame with the other, and tilted his face to the ceiling in exasperation. After a moment of patience gathering he’d reconciled himself to the next few... probably hours of helping Nihlus clean up this... this. He dropped his hands and lowered his gaze. Catching Nihlus pretending not to have been ogling his throat, the faux innocent expression slipping back into place. He rolled his eyes and turned toward the cache of cleaning supplies.

At least Saren was well supplied on that front.

They did not, in fact, finish cleaning it all up before Saren was done with his shower. Though mercifully, their leader didn't emerge from his room, likely taking the opportunity for an afternoon nap rather then go anywhere near the natural disaster zone that had become of his precious kitchen.

"Truly," thought the C-Sec Officer turned Janitor aloud, while he inspected the remaining grit on the wall, "even the Krogan clans would send relief aid to the survivors of Hurricane Nihlus."

“Shut up. Can you pass me the soap 'n water bucket?”

“Sure, here.” It slid over a meter to bump the hurricane's leg. He was cleaning the grooves in the floor.

“It's like some sort of adhesive formed from the chemical reaction between the grain-flour and the other ingredients. I don't understand how.”

“Neither do I. What were you trying to make, anyhow?”
“Stew.”

“Uhuh.”

“Shhhhh. Zip it. I'm normally pretty good at soups and stuff...”

“If you say so.”

“I made the pot roast we had three nights ago! You liked it!”

“That was technically a roast, not a soup.”

“Pffft, similar cooking requirements.” came the reply with a lackadaisical flip of the wrist.

“By the results? I'd say not.”

“Asshole.”

“Evidence doesn't lie Kyrik, that's why they accept it in court.”

“Fuck you... call me Nihlus.”

“You're welcome for the help, and Garrus is fine too.”

“Thanks Blue.” He let out an amused chuff and kept scrubbing.

“Whatever you say, Hurricane.”
Fanfic Recommendation: The Banner of the First Regiment (4782 words) by thievinghippo
It was the last day of their FTL connection flight before they'd be jumping into the murkier waters of space. The Daedalus would be Relay jumping into the Attican Beta tomorrow, the very edge of the Attican Traverse, far past the edge of Citadel Space, and on the border to the Terminus Systems. No more extranet, as Nihlus had so helpfully pointed out, and armor on at all times in case of sudden pirate attacks. Not that many things could catch up with Saren's speedy little ship, but better safe then sorry... or spaced.

Garrus had finally pinned down the adjustments to the plasma canons, and after Saren had graciously taken the time to review it line by line, they'd sat down to enter it in together, intending to run a live test fire before the relay jump. They had been at it for hours, back and forth, and even managed to improve the tweaks just a hair more before implementing them. Saren had been pleased, offering Garrus the largest smile he'd ever seen the Spectre make.

Of course it took countless hours of work that resulted in a substantial increase of fire power for his ship to make Saren Arterius smile. Of course.

Now to wait till they arrived out of FTL tomorrow afternoon to test fire it... He couldn't wait.

He was also fairly certain that if this was what the life of a Spectre was like? He would never, never, forgive his pari for disbarring him from it. Sparring with Nihlus, talking about tech specs late into the night with Saren, the occasional gun fight on Council orders every week or so? This was Ylasiun, his
perfect afterlife.

He shook off the melancholy with a will, and returned to doing push ups. Suddenly, his back was a whole lot heavier.

“What'cha thinkin' about?” Nihlus had come over unseen, -and unheard, he was so damn sneaky-, and sat down on his back just below the base of the carapace. It felt like the Spectre had sat down facing his feet, legs folded in, and was reclined on his elbows over the curve of his upper back, balancing as he shifted up and down.

Damn, he was heavy. Garrus forced wavering arms to continue, and they weren't pleased about it, but they obeyed.

“Was just. Thinking about. How bored. I'll be. After we get. Done.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. The. Citadel is. Usually pretty. Quiet.” Nihlus made a disbelieving hum. To be fair, every time they'd run into one another there had been extenuating circumstances. He wanted to tilt his neck to the left side and jostle the matching shoulder, the Turian equivalent of a shrug, but the position and the extra weight kept him from doing so.


“So... research heavy crimes.”

“Yeah, I'm. Good at that. But it's. Still boring. Comparatively.”

“If you're into excitement, how come you didn't join the Spectres?” As if it was just a club you applied for. Garrus let out a wheezing laugh. If the carmine plated Turian had asked that question a few days ago, he might have been offended thinking the torin was mocking him. Now? He knew that Nihlus was asking honestly. Sometimes Nihlus was just... startlingly naive about things. For a ruthless killer.
The laughter did him in though, and he lowered himself down the rest of the way, Nihlus still lounging on his back like... what were those human pets? Cats. House cats? Or was it dogs? He couldn't remember off the top of his head, and blamed that on oxygen deprivation.

“Can't join. My pari forbid it.”

“Wait, what, seriously?”

“Yeah. Hates Spectres.”

“...mine's... gone now, but... he would've been damn proud of me...” The laughter went out of the room, like a light switched off, when the younger torin's subvocals cut down to nothing in an obvious attempt to hide the emotion behind that statement.

“He should be.” Garrus added gruffly. “It's an honor to be one. My pari's... stubborn bullshit doesn't reflect onto the truth of that.” He felt more then heard Nihlus shrug and rumble out a soft acknowledgement.

“Can I... ask what happened to him?” Nihlus was silent for a moment.

“He was... murdered.”

“That's horrible. I... did they catch the guy?”

“... I did. It... it was my mari.” The floor just about fell out from under Garrus' stomach at that statement. His matrula did what?

“That's... I don't have words for that. I'm so sorry, Nihlus.” He put every ounce of compassion into his tone that he could manage, trying to also reassure that he didn't pity or judge him for his circumstances. 'Oh, spirits, no wonder he was so enamored with my mari on that vid call. His matrula was a monster. No wonder. Shit.'

“Yeah well... thanks, I guess. I... it's okay. That bitch is dead now, pari can rest easy, ya know?”
“It... I don't mean to sound... okay, there is no not-fucked up way to say this, and I don't mean it to be.. patronizing? But seriously... well done. If I was your pari I would have been proud beyond measure that you had the... strength of will to end her and avenge me. You're an impressive individual all around, I mean that.”

Nihlus didn't speak, but let out an almost-happy purr in thanks. Icy blue eyes slid closed and they let the silence sit for a minute.

’No one should ever have to... kill their own mari because she went, presumably, psycho and offed their bondmate. How could anyone ever raise a hand to their...?’ Bonding was a choice, and it normally locked in Turian behavioral patterns like a cast iron mold. For one person in a bonded pair to attack the other? Either she'd lied and never bonded, or was a seriously disturbed person.

He wanted the rest of the facts, couldn't help it with a detective's mind driving his curiosity, but was entirely unwilling to press for more answers. Nihlus' pain had sucked the air out of the room, and he found himself desperate to bring it back.

“Well, anyway...” He trailed off, struggling to wash away the topic with a gentle touch and not a graceless hammer. He lamented being a terrible conversationalist. “I... did want to join the Spectres, was in the middle of the candidate selection process actually. The part where they run you through scenarios to narrow down the potentials.”

“Yeah? How far'd ya make it?”

“... I was in the second to last testing phase when the general overseeing it had me pulled. Told me that someone had disqualified me, and sent me back to base camp. Found out later it was my pari.” Nihlus let out a long breath.

“That's... really weird. I didn't think anyone could interrupt the selection stuff like that.”

“He pulled some strings, I assume... broke some rules, maybe blackmailed someone. Which is, might I add, the largest load of varren crap ever produced, considering he's lectured me since I was a child about always following the rules. 'Do things right or don't do them at all', he always says. Hypocrite.”

He could feel the Spectre on his back wince in sympathy and let out an empathetic trill of ’yep, that's
bullshit.’ Garrus suddenly realized that Nihlus seemed to hate those sorts of rules too... Rule breakers, the lot of them really.

Suddenly his chest felt warm, his throat tight. Spirits, these two Spectres, that he had just begun to get to know... got him. Not Officer Vakarian, not Vakarian junior, not a scion of the Clan. Nihlus, especially... seamlessly understood some of his basic truths. Saw him as... Garrus. Just Garrus.

He had to clamp down on his subvocals with a will. He managed it after a moment and let out a passably cheerful trill in reply.

Spirits, gods, and Titans... it felt good to have friends.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex Entry] Turian Bonding

While the exact rituals differ from planet to planet, all Turian bonding involves a conscious mental choice to occur. Permanent physiological changes begin at the moment of bond, including not limited to: altered hormone levels, increased reaction to Reverie, sensitivity to the other's smell, and increased desire for intercourse (particularly within the bonded pair). Other aspects of relationships, such as protective instincts, emotions, and mental preoccupation, can occur outside of bond, but are altered or increased by bonding. The altered state of neurotransmitters after bond is different enough that proof of bond will generally show up on a sufficiently thorough medical exam, though it is almost never requested to be provided. Some traditions seal the bond with 'bondmarks', a matching set of teeth marks left to scar, usually somewhere on the neck. Another common tradition, particularly for bonding into or out-of a major Clan, includes a changing of facial markings. This can be as simple as adding to the existing design for a personal touch, or outright stripping the paint away in favor of a new set. There are, of course, a few examples of bond that run outside the norm. Some bonds are never spoken of, no mark or token exchanged. Occasionally, strange incidences occur, such as a pair of single Turians who have both lost their mates being able to effectively re-bond to each other; or another example: where a set of three Turians will swear oaths to each other outside of bond, and a three-way bond will form between the triad. Other, less common, conditions and effects of bond are still being cataloged to this day.

Fanfic Recommendation: Colours and Promises (2395 words) by Flippedeclipse (FemShep/Garrus)
Maybe he's born with it

Chapter Summary

In which Nihlus is bored and rude.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur
Tarin/Torin – Female/Male adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)
Tarini/Torini – plural forms of Torin/Tarin (Credit: MizDirected)
Nais – Pronoun for Asari (Credit: MizDirected)
Caerulea – A mildly derogatory word for an old Asari (Credit: AceQueenKing)
Hideth Turram - Popular Turian sport, somewhat akin to capture the flag (Credit: MizDirected)
Ungentira – A large, ferocious predator native to Palaven’s high mountains, known for taking on prey 3-4 times their size (Credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saren, while not particularly talkative, was constantly working on something. Whether it was non-critical maintenance, custom armor modifications, or even just reading. He read a great deal about the widest, most eclectic variety of things. It was no wonder the man seemed to know something about everything. When not killing enemies of the Council, he was always busy learning, fixing, inventing...

It didn't change the fact that Nihlus was bored as all hell. In fact? It sort of just made him jealous.

The three of them were in the common area, Garrus on one side of the settee, Saren in the single person seat sitting caddy-corner to it, while Nihlus flopped gracelessly in a pile of pillows on the floor. He missed Blue's amazing cubitura, that massive thing could have held them all sprawled out on it.

He spent a good several minutes imagining that sprawling. He started to hum at the pleasant mental images of hide and teeth and tongues...
Saren coughed, loudly.

He quit humming, and rolled over with a huff. A mid-pause game still waiting patiently for him on the datapad by his head. It wasn't really catching his interest though. He'd asked them both what they were doing enough times that Saren had threatened bodily harm if he asked one more time. Then again, their sniper hadn't complained...

He opened up a chat window and forced it to connect directly to the datapad Garrus was reading on.

CHAT.live//CONNECT:1886039_to_PROXY.null[skipped]_to_8892561

Connecting...

Connected.

NK: entertain me

He could see Garrus' fingers move to check the message notification. A moment later he replied.

GV: You are literally holding a device that has a connection to this vast and wondrous thing called an 'extranet'.

NK: yeah, and im still bored

GV: [Link: exnet.vidstream/live_turian_ladder]

Nihlus clicked the link and was amused for a solid twenty minutes watching the circus act that was entirely composed of athletic tarini who stacked, folded, lifted, etc themselves into ladders, bridges, and all sorts of crazy people-made-shapes.

NK: that was awsome! what else ya got?

GV: [Link: exnet.vidstream/badass_primarch_stops_assassins_during_hiddeth_turram_game]

NK: holy shit, I want to grow up to be that cool

GV: Not going to happen.

NK: oi!

GV: [Link: exnet.vidstream/crackshot_sniper_hits_target_3907_meters]

GV: That's who I want to grow up to be.

NK: that is srsly impressive. what's your longest shot?
GV: 3,739 meters

NK: dont liiiie, i wont think less of ya

GV: No, really. It's on record with my old squad, confirmed kill.

NK: no shit. who was the target?

GV: Uh, pretty sure I can't just tell you that, would need permission.

NK: spectre~~~

GV: Point.

GV: Well, her name was Taisamal Anttaria. Secessionist forces.

GV: She'd blown up a bunch of buildings with people in them.

GV: Was planning another. I put a stop to that.

NK: secessionists? what, with a hastatim squad?

GV: ...yeah.

NK: sounds like a story there?

GV: Not a good one.

GV: [Link: exnet.vidstream/quarian_dance_party]

NK: pppffft, subtle. okay, let see this dance party...

NK: unf. those hips dont lie

At that moment, Saren's ire with them typing to each other, very obviously, while in the same room finally reached critical mass. He stole both their datapads with biotics.

“For the love of the **spirits**, use your words."

“We were using our words. Also, by the by, sharing vid links? Kinda hard to do without a datapad...”

Saren just glared, tucking said datapads into the space between his leg and the armrest.

“Welp.” said Nihlus, popping the 'p'. 
About two hours before their FTL travel ended, a communication ping began flashing on the CIC holo ring. Saren rose to answer it, calmly pacing to his chair, -and it was definitely his chair, seeing as no one else was allowed to sit in it-, and accepting the call.

“Good afternoon, Spectre Arterius.” Saren nodded cordially to the Asari on screen, an absolutely ancient looking nais with pink facial tattoos and grey eyes.

“BB! My favorite person in the galaxy! How are you, sweetheart?” Nihlus could practically feel the incredulity on Garrus' face at the vicious subvocals that underlined his otherwise joyful words. Well... no, the Officer was probably too polite to let it show on his face. Probably thinking it though. Nihlus smiled widely.

“Kyrik.” Was the only reply he got from the caerulea.

“Awww, don't be like that. It's so nice to hear from you, don't spoil the mood.”

“Your last report had three spelling errors, eight grammar errors, two misleading statements, an incorrect time stamp, a forged piece of evidence that you could have simply stated was inauthentic, and had a broken link to 'relevant information'."

“Really? Sorry about that, sweetheart. That link was working when I added it.”

“Don't talk to me.” He sighed like his heart was broken, meanwhile letting out a long string of mocking subvocals, using the exclusive language to call her all sorts of creative names. He could practically hear Garrus choking back his reaction. Probably laughter.

“BB. What can we do for you?” Saren, ignoring their active animosity, requested politely.

“I've got some updated intelligence for your current mission. Sending it now.” A data transfer request popped up, and Saren used a strange hand motion to send it to another section of holo-screen, which cordoned itself off with a purple-glowing line.
“Thank you. I appreciate you sending it to me.”

“Of course, good luck on your mission.” The connection closed and Saren let out an aggravated sigh. Garrus had stepped up to his previous spot on the right side of the command chair, putting him closest to the separated file transfer. It appeared to be nearly done downloading already.

“What is it?”

“A trap, of course.” Nihlus pitched in. Garrus turned to look at him confused, and he smiled craftily. “BB is a spy for the Salarian Union. She reports Spectre movements back to STG, and uses her position to hand out spyware riddled mission-critical intel.” Saren grunted in affirmation.

“Indeed.”

“Seriously? If she's a spy why hasn't she been removed?” Garrus' tone, while not sounding particularly surprised about the situation, did sound displeased with the ongoing, intentional betrayal inherent to it. His subvocals were humming 'traitor' and agitation. Nihlus, casually braced against the chair back, swayed closer to Garrus at that sound. The simple and clean honor about the torin like the sweetest perfume...

Saren kicked his heel back into Nihlus' shin. Oh, humming again. Oops.

“She is left in place because she is a known quantity. Most Spectres have figured out her games, and work around them. If we replace her, someone less... ineffective might take her place.” He proceeded to open the file and began tearing away at it, like an ungentira at the stomach of a fresh kill.

“That... is a lot of obvious, inelegant code.”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Yes, Nihlus thinks about sex in public, and makes inappropriate noises. He wouldn't know body modesty, shame, or chastity if it mugged him on a cold day and stole his lunch money. Seriously.

And yes, Garrus really is that much of a sniper badass. You don't even want to know how much farther his record is then the current irl sniper records. Then again, I'm presuming that shot involved a hell of a lot of luck, preemptively known coordinates (Like a specific chair, or a bed even...) and a notable amount of machine aided math.

Fanfiction Recommendation: Glory of the Darkest Winds (17361 words) by theherocomplex
Take my cash, but you know I gotta ask, what made you want to live this kind of life

Chapter Summary

Gathered round the table, they plot and plan. Silver-Silver-Red, they'll do what they can.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin - Male Turian adult. (Credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Intel from the Spectre Office had proven to be, while not critical, certainly helpful. Schematics for the facility in question, accurate as of three years ago. It allowed them to sit down and begin going over potential infiltration paths. The goal was to come in at the opposite side of the planet, breaking atmo at a snail's pace to avoid detection, and then flying in low behind a mountain ridge. The purpose of all this was to allow them to avoid notice, by hiding approach vector, heat signature, and from visual sight, thus allowing them to tap into local communication channels and hack into computer systems.

Listening in on com-channel traffic for an hour, or a poorly encrypted computer record could give them the intelligence needed to handle the situation effectively.

The initial goal was to find out what had caused the sudden switch from supplying legitimate buyers to seeking top dollar regardless of who might be receiving the engineering alloys. The plan they eventually worked out had them landing in the nearby mountains, and if answers or appropriate blackmail couldn't be gotten remotely they'd be tucking the ship into a hiding spot and approaching on foot.

There were three external buildings that could be accessed without having to enter the main complex, and any one of them might have an access terminal to the mainframe. That was plan B, if remote access didn't work. Plan C was direct infiltration, something Saren and Nihlus seemed to be anticipating regardless. Garrus took his cue from them and prepared to act accordingly.

Arterius, for all his growing reputation of wanton destruction, was prioritizing finding an explanation for the situation. Garrus tried to ask about that cautiously, not wanting to inadvertently insult the torin, but keen to understand his perspective.
"I prefer to act once informed."

"What he means is that he's a curious bastard, and likes to know everything about everyone." Saren calmly smacked him upside the head.

"Language, Nihlus."

"Ow fff~fudge. Heh heh. You know you love me." It was accompanied by a cheeky grin.

Their plan evolved into three steps. Step one, acquire intel from maximum distance. Step two, pull out undetected and figure out how best to blackmail, threaten, or outright execute as needed to ensure the massive facility was either returned to selling to government subsidized companies, or taken out of the game altogether. Step three, enact planning from previous step, and safely return to Citadel space to update the Spectre files with any intel gathered.

Nihlus expressed concerned for the workers and their families that might be caught up in all this, but was also excited that they might be blowing something up if the place needed it.

"I'm starting to get the feeling you have a somewhat inappropriate love for incendiary devices."

"I'm not that bad... But, come on, explosions? Yessss."

"A lie. He is precisely that bad." Garrus laughed at the mock-offended look that Nihlus directed at his fellow Spectre.

"So, if we end up having to try the external buildings, you want me.... Here?" He pointed to a spot on the holo map being projected on the mess hall table. "...and if you two are going into the main facility, I move here?"

"Yes, though if you have issues with sight lines, use your discretion. In essence, we primarily want eyes-on from an extra angle, and a sniper's cover fire if it will keep an alarm from being raised before we are ready to be revealed."

"I can do that."
Basic strategies for approach laid out, they turned to discussing the various potential situations on the ground, and what to do about each. Saren was reasonably certain it was a sudden change in leadership that had led to the current state, likely a bullet assisted take over, the would require the same in return. Nihlus was in favor of an elaborate spiel of corporate espionage, then they’d need to follow the paper trail. Garrus had added that it could just be a change of heart on the owner's part. Nihlus just sighed at him and murmured 'adorable', -for which Garrus kicked him in the knee joint-, and Saren had gone on to explain a few pertinent details about the history of trade in the region, as well as a few legal aspects of the contracts broken by the change in buyers. It had far reaching consequences, and the owners should have known that, would have avoided that mess at all costs. It painted a clearer, and unfortunately more likely to be bloody, picture.

"I have to admit, I still don't understand why you are both so sure this will come to a hostile reclaiming. Isn't it possible they'll be terrified into returning to previous buyers just from having Spectres show up asking questions?"

"It is possible the ownership had, as you said, a change of heart. On a facility located closer to the core worlds? Perhaps. This far out however, the reasons for a breach of contract with galactic powers speaks more to criminal activity. Purely as a matter of statistics."

"I can't argue with that."

"No, you could not. Thus, if my best guess is correct, we will be retaking the facility regardless of potential casualties."

Garrus considered the data before them with a concerned expression. He was, without a doubt, happy to be here and all-in for whatever the Spectres asked of him. He knew that might not be a pretty picture, but he was prepared for it. Still, he hoped Saren's pessimistic pragmatism wasn't prophetic.

"Will that be a problem, Vakarian?"

"No..."

He... did sort of want to... he missed... combat. Working at C-Sec was usually just so... tame.

He missed the rush and the challenge and the action. The triumph over evil. It made him feel guilty,
that some part of him wanted things to go south so he could get behind the trigger of his Viper and let loose... but there were a lot of people listed in the dossier of the metalworks staff roster, many of them families with kids living on site. He really didn't want to end up in a firefight with kids around. He'd done that before, working with the hastatim squad, and had absolutely no desire to do it again. He decided, then and there, that he would do everything in his power to make this go smoothly. There was a whole arena back on the Citadel dedicated to providing that thrill, and though it rang hollow next to the real thing, he didn't want to be the sort of torin that valued his own enjoyment over people's lives.

But those tonnes and tonnes of titanium, and high quality alloys... Couldn't be allowed to end up in the hands of criminal elements. He imagined the metals from this place ending up on Karshan, to be used as fuel for the hate machine that was the Batarian caste system.

It made him feel sick. He focused on that, held onto it. 'Big picture, Vakarian, think big picture. Save lives, long term. You want to play at being a Spectre? Then do it right.'

"It won't be a problem at all, Arterius."

Chapter End Notes

I am not certain how much I like this chapter. I wanted to capture the whole, 'badass team sits over map, works through epic plan' feel, sort of like that team meeting right before the Omega 4 Relay. I felt really preoccupied by trying to make sure Garrus' relative inexperience and good nature came through, but also to set up his decent from a higher minded individual to the out-right hot head we see in ME1. As if he was a good kid, then our Spectre boys took him merrily by the hands down the path to 'end justifies means', so that paragon Shepard can bring him back around to, 'we have to reach the end, but we must fight for the best means possible', only for Omega to beat that right the fuck back down. I want Archangel era Garrus to have walked both paths, and found the darker one to suit. o_o Maybe... I'm getting ahead of my self here... Right. Yes. Moving on.

Fanfic Recommendation: Jaws That Bite, Claws That Catch (22916 words) by Fistful of Gamma Rays (Femshep/Garrus)
I'm a leaf on the wind, watch how I soar

Chapter Summary

Arrival on site, it's almost go time.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin - Male Turian adult. (Credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nihlus leaned against the CIC chair, watching Saren expertly pilot them around the dark side of the next closest planet to their target, and then ease into an angle of approach that would bring them quietly around the opposite face of the planet. He rolled his tongue around the roof of his mouth, pushing at the soft and dry pallet, clicking his tongue against the concave shape once before leaning back away from the chair. Didn't want to distract the master at his craft.

Nihlus grinned, wishing he could watch Garrus' reaction to this. Saren was amazing at this part.

Their sniper was cool as a cucumber, which... made him feel a bit jealous. He'd been something of a nervous wreck on his first mission out with the other Spectre. Then again, the torin had made a good point about that the other day. All those interesting events where they'd run into each other on the Citadel... practically counted as missions, if not official ST&R work.

'Poor guy didn't even get paid for saving my ass during that car chase... huh. That's... kind of lame, actually.' He made a mental note to see about doing something nice for Garrus, some sort of 'thanks for saving my life' thing.

He turned back to the holo-ring to find Saren confirming their approach vector, and spinning down all non-critical systems. Reaching up to tap his helmet key, he heard the other two do the same. Life support would be going down, along with all engines, weapons, and other systems that gave them a stronger heat signature. The only things left were a small air/heat cycling unit in hydroponics downstairs, the bare minimum computers for navigation, and a small series of CO2 jets that could give them small boosts of propulsion to course correct if need be.

Next, he tapped a button that released a cloud of electromagnetically charged particles travelling at...
the same velocity as the ship, these would disperse their emissions outward in chaotic patterns, causing most radar systems to error out rather than confirm their location. Just in case anyone was looking.

It was a long, slow drift.

The three of them remained silent, not speaking over coms, all wireless frequency devices momentarily turned off. With no real windows to speak of, and all video-windows powered off, there was nothing to look at but the glow of the minimally powered holo-ring in a sea of black. Nihlus sort of felt like... the three of them were very alone, suspended in that blackness, their platform a tiny beacon of light pressing forward into the unknown. Which, really, was a fairly accurate assessment overall, if a bit poetic for him.

The planetary approach went off without a hitch.

Next up came the most difficult part of a stealth entry: easing into atmo without giving off a massive heat flare that screamed their location, yet still timing the engine restarts properly to keep from crashing.

Said Spectre set the engines to begin running again, a process that took several minutes of start up. The order he brought things online was critical to minimizing their metaphorical foot prints. Silver hardsuit gloves flickered in the dull light of the single working holo-monitor, standing out in the otherwise unmoving darkness. Saren started turning on the systems that received incoming signals, such as com traffic, ship-to-ship location data, radar pings, et cetera. Then, rather then turn on their outbound wireless signals and the like, he routed the inbound into the outbound. Handled by a complex program the blue eyed Spectre had written himself, signals that came in one side of the ship exited out the other, data recorded but not registered as a proxy point.

The whole thing was probably over kill... but no one had ever accused Saren Arterius of being insufficiently paranoid.

He noticed movement in his peripheral vision. Garrus was leaning forward, closely watching the magic. He grinned. Not quite as good as seeing his face, but close enough for government work.

And this show? Government sanctioned game time, hopefully involving 'fireworks'.

Nihlus really did love being on the Council's payroll.
They sank slowly into the atmosphere, assisted by the same mass-reduction drives commonly found in shuttles for ease of breaking atmo, only overpowered into being able to see the small frigate lowered into the planet's airspace like a baby into a bassinet. Their emission trails would skyrocket at the use of element zero, but being behind the planet now made general emissions less important than heat signature. Going slowly down to the surface would keep that signature too low to cause a stir.

The whole set up was poor man's stealth, lacking both a cost prohibitive emissions sink or exceedingly rare optical drives, but it did the trick.

The ship pulled into the plains they'd be flying over en route to the mountain ranges, and the light signaling fully restored ship functions came on. Nihlus immediately lost the helmet.

“Freaking cool, or what?” He asked Garrus. The C-Sec Officer looked deeply impressed.

“I've never heard of anyone pulling something quite like that... it was... wow. Impressive. It was realllllly impressive.” Awwww, Blue was nerding all over the place. So cute. “I saw the particle cloud, go out... I assume for some sort of emissions reduction?”

“Not reduction, no. Dispersion. The particles are charged in a way that causes them to scatter incoming protons and various other radiations into unintelligible patterns. High tech radars can still see right through it, but civilian grade hardware, and the aftermarket equipment that pirates often use, is fooled entirely. Their systems error out, or appear to be glitching for a short while.”

“That's… handy.”

“Very.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Opinions on my poor man's stealth set up? How much pseudo science is too much pseudo science? Anyone have any better ideas? I'm really all ears.

[Author's Codex Entry] Com Units
Modern communications are a complex web of point to point data transfer. The data
begins at the sound of a voice, sometimes augmented by an in-throat subvocalizer. Not to be confused with Turian subvocals, a subvocalizer is a tiny machine that picks up the movement of the vocal chords and throat muscles, sometimes even mouth movements, relaying that data to a recording device, such as an Omni-tool. Combined with a microphone, the spoken words are processed by the receiving software and translated if need be. Universal Translators are included in most communication programs, are self-updating if that is enabled, and encompass almost every known language with a few exceptions. (For more information on untranslatable languages, see the article on 'Closed or Forbidden Dialects'.) When Universal Translators, or UniTs for short, first translate outgoing audio data, their output will sound synthesized. This improves over time as various syllables are spoken, providing sound samples for the UniTs to 'remix' into a closer rendition of the user's voice in the intended recipient's native tongue. Once data has been translated, it is sent via the shortest method available to it's destination, whether that is direct to a nearby Omni-tool, or across a series of comm buoys to another planet. On the receiving end, audio is loaded, and played back directly into aural implants, for crisp sound quality that is unaffected by hearing capacity or local noise.

Fanfic Recommendation: On the Line (2284 words) by pagerunner (Femshep/Garrus. Can anyone say voicekink?)
And I will walk ten thousand miles

Chapter Summary

In which the reality of walking across endless kilometers with a bored Nihlus doesn't bother Saren nearly as much as you might think.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Torin - Turian word for male adult. (Credit: MizDirected)
Ivera Sea - One of only a few significant bodies of water on Palaven. The surrounding area is a wildlife preservation ground, with heavy limitations on development.
Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)
Patrem - Turian word for 'Father' (Credit: MizDirected)

***********

Chapter soundtrack: 'Raise Your Weapon' by deadmau5 (The bass drops, so to speak, around minute 4. Sooo gooood~~ Like liquid chaos sound candy.)

Rippin' my heart was so easy, so easy
Launch your assault now, take it easy
Raise your weapon, raise your weapon,
One word and it's over

Rippin' through like a missile,
Rippin' through my heart,
Rob me of this love
Raise your weapon, raise your weapon,
And it's over

How does it feel now to watch it burn, burn, burn?

***********

Want to know what the planet looks like? GSJensen has a lovely HQ screencap hosted on deviantart: Here.

Heads up: minor edits for continuity have been made to previous chapters, as well as some Author's Codex entries added to end notes, mostly to fill plot holes that are or will be up soonish. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gunmetal grey boots met gravel as Saren stepped out of the airlock of the Daedalus and onto the mossy stone of Nodacrus. As expected, their long range data gathering hadn't turned up much to go
The signal scanners run during the planetary approach were full of dead air and a few useless data pings. The search done after landing, from the small canyon they'd nestled the ship into, showed minuscule com traffic full of standard 'hi mom' type messages. Mostly useless, except for the fact that none of the traffic was marked to head back into Citadel space. Every bit of it was headed to other fringe worlds. Not really telling, but perhaps mildly suspicious.

He spun around slowly taking in the weather. It looked like the sky above them was clear of Nodacrux's usual pollen storms, which was good luck considering that breathing the allergens in could be fatal. Not to mention they reduced visibility, an inclimate blindfold for snipers.

“The weather is surprisingly clear. Just as well, keep your helmets on unless you have a pressing need to remove them.” Vakarian nodded once, the light catching on his well polished blue and black armor. Saren made a mental note to have him scrub it down with a bristle brush to remove the shine for next time. Perhaps paint the vivid blue something less garish. Ah, but perhaps he could not. The cobalt and black were C-Sec colors. The biotic Spectre considered it reasonable to have a civilian task force armored in tones easily picked out in a crowd, but for this sort of business the torin should really have something less telling. He would consider it further another time, for now he turned to acquire confirmation from Nihlus as well, who offered a lazy thumbs up.

The crimson and black armored figure was lightly geared, appearing to carry only a heavy pistol and grenades. He couldn't see them, but he also assumed there was a small horde of blades and thermal clips tucked away. Though Saren didn't think the lighter armaments would stop him from being effective. The younger Spectre never failed to be innovative with limited supplies, and he himself wasn't carrying much more. Just a few tech bobbles, and a silenced offhand.

Finished getting his barrings, he turned to follow the cliff wall that lead to their destination. The monotonous mossy hills rolled out before them, promising a significant hike to their destination.

“This place is really pretty, for an allergenic levo death trap.” Saren couldn't find an ounce of surprise that Nihlus hadn't waited five minutes to begin talking. At least he'd remembered to pipe it through his external speakers rather then send it out as a potentially interceptable signal.

“I don't know. Seems... empty to me. No larger flora or birds? It's all just moss and rocks, with a few giant bugs. Nothing at all like the wildlife back home. Though that thunderstorm off to the east looks about par for the course.”

“Palaven has big thunderstorms?”

“Y~ees... Constantly. You... didn't know?”
“I’ve only been to Menae for basic training, and even there I didn’t... ah... get to see much.” Saren knew how much of an understatement that was.

Nihlus’ smart mouth had kept him trapped on base and stuck doing double duty as his instructors tried to grind the individuality out of him. He had, of course, read all of the torin’s background information before accepting him as a protégé. From the service record, most would have said that Private Kyrik was an unrepentant troublemaker, but he had been rather of the opinion that anyone whose vivaciousness had survived that sort of unending beat down was a survivor. A perfect baseline for Spectre work. His other skills, unpolished and self taught, were merely bonuses that were readily refined in Spectre training.

“Well, ah... I’d carry through with Mari's invitation to the clan Madlis, but I’m pretty sure I’d rather face a thresher maw then deal with the shit storm Pari would throw. I’ve got a spare key to my cousin's vacation home along the Ivera Sea, though. Some fantastic wild life out there, if you ever wanted to take a vacation on Palaven.

“Language, Vakarian.” He wondered why the Officer's patrem would be upset with Nihlus' presence in particular.

“Sorry, sir.” The sniper had begun to show operational discipline again, now that they were on the ground? Saren approved.

“Pffft, don’t ‘sir' him, he’ll just walk all over you with his proper manners and poshiness.”

“Poshiness’ is not a word, Nihlus.”

“See what I mean? But y-yeah. I’d totally like to visit sometime. Maybe we could work it out after this whole shebang is done?”

“Also not a word.” Nihlus let out an overdramatic, mournful trill and Vakarian broke out into laughter. Saren had been about to tell the Officer not to encourage him, but it was... pleasant to see them in such high spirits.

He decided to let it go. So long as they did not keep this up during the actual infiltration.
Scanning the skyline, electric eyes perused the air for surveillance drones. Nothing visible, even with his augmentations. He checked the weather on scans next; the storm cell in the distance seemed fairly lively, but it was centered around a far off cold front, not appearing to be moving any closer. Good.

The walk carried on as the trio went up and down the rocky terrain, moving carefully to avoid a long slide down with loose scree. Their armors' climate control kept them comfortable in temperature as the day went, pressing on relentlessly, though they did slow a bit when the trail became too steep over long periods. Large pollen tufts the size of Elcor floated peacefully by, carried on the wind. They put in the better part of the day trekking around the mountains, finally coming into visual range of the massive complex during mid-afternoon. Taking a break on a ridge with decent cover, they took a moment to do some recon of the facility through scopes. The titanic structure stretched from one side of a plateau, across what looked to be two and a half clicks of land, before backing up into the largest mountain on the horizon. Pipes stuck out at wild angles, working around conveyor belts filled with unprocessed ore.

Saren borrowed Garrus' sniper rifle for the higher distance rating on his scope while the other two tested the air for pollen levels. Finding them acceptable, they retracted helms and ravaged a small pile of rations and water canteens.

In order to maintain and operate the gargantuan refining machines the metalworks was supposed to house approximately sixty staff that oversaw the various forms of equipment. There was also a security force, estimated at twenty members, all with prior military service records. It would not do to have a place this far out guarded by half-wits, thus their dossiers all read out at a certain level of experience and competence.

Yet, not a recon drone or security patrol to be seen.

Curious.

“I know...” The Spectres turned to look at the cobalt armored sniper, who was leaning back into the rocky cover, scuffing a foot in the loamy gravel. “I know I’ve said something to this effect with annoying frequency, but ah... something’s not right here. There should be a larger security presence.”

Saren casually shrugged. “You remain correct.”

“If the definition of madness is trying the same thing over and over and expecting different results when not getting them, then what does it say about someone who does the same thing over and over but manages to actually get the same results?”
'Really, Nihlus?' Carmine mandibles waggled cheekily, unseen, but making an unmistakable rustling sound on the speakers.

They returned to their trudge, keeping inside the developing shadows of the evening.

'No but really, what does it say about them?'

'How about 'Complete Badass'?'

'Pffft. Think pretty highly of yourself, C-Sec?'

'Suu~re do, Spectre. 'Sane' by the way. The opposite of 'mad' is 'sane'.''

'Oh, you just think you're the shit, doncha?' Nihlus' subvocals were struggling to make him sound taunting, but bubbles of laughter kept breaking through the surface.

'Damn straight.'

'You'd better be able to back up all this sass.'

'Language, both of you.' He murmured half heartedly.

Saren continued his forward march, studiously ignoring the fact that he was choosing to disregard their lack of discipline. He'd tell them to shape up when they got to the next stopping point. The walk had been rather long.

Garrus left them with a wave at the next break in the rocky wall, bearing away from the facility. Presumably, he'd be backtracking a bit to find access to higher ground. Somewhere to make a sniper's perch.
Coming up on the first outbuilding with a potential computer access point, Nihlus and Saren belly crawled out of cover, and up to a fence. The com channel clicked twice, a double tap without speaking to confirm that they were clear from Garrus' perspective. Nihlus clipped the bottom section loose and wriggled under first, before holding it out of the way for his partner. They took the last bit of open space in a loping run, making it unseen to a side entrance. Two figured slipped soundlessly inside.

Stealth was nearly lost as they entered the short hall just as someone was passing by, but apparently the whistling idiot was distracted, not appearing to have seen them.

Whistling Idiot also appeared to be a Turian in Eclipse colors.

Taloned grey gauntlets came around his throat and brought him back into the entryway. His Omni-tool jammed, back to the wall, two Spectres staring him down. He gulped.

Electric blue eyes leaned in to address him quietly, glowing with menace in the dim light.

“Why are you here?”

“Fuck y-ggelck!” was cut off with a none-too-gentle throat punch. The silver-grey torin repeated the question, but Whistling Idiot was too busy trying to breathe to answer. They waited patiently for him to catch his breath.

“Shit-fuck-spirits! I'm just security detail, okay!? Fuck.”

“Security detail for whom?”

“Like I'm gunna tell you, barefaced mother fu-ggelck!” Nihlus might have winced in sympathy if he cared more, but Eclipse had a bad, baaaad rep. Entry to their ranks literally involved the murder of an innocent person. So... no 'fucks' to give in return to the many that were being graciously shared today. He could tell that the torin's profuse cursing was quickly getting on Saren's nerves. The older Spectre always expected people to be polite while he interrogated them, much to Nihlus' amusement. As if everyone should have the same level of poise as he did.
They waited silently for him to catch another breath. The mercenary glared up at them from under a ruddy brown brow ridge. When it became clear that he was stalling Saren sparked his biotics around himself in a clear threat. Whistling Idiot's eyes widened in utter horror.

“Oh spirits, fuck no, you're one of those freaks! *Fuckfuckfuck*, no-get-the-fuck-away-from-me. Her name is Moria L’athai, Asari, Tier three Lieutenant, she's upstairs in the main building, fuck don't kill me.”

They immediately killed him.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: **Equilibrium** (1739 words) by **Chromaticism**
Be polite, be professional, and have a plan to kill everyone you meet

Chapter Summary

Saren is annoyed with crass language, and Garrus is trying to be a good person while the darkness whispers sweetly of blood and vengeance, and Nihlus? Nihlus is having fun, till he's not. When Nihlus isn't having fun, nobody is having fun.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Quiritus - Turian Closed Dialect equivalent to 'ladies and gentlemen'. (Credit: MizDirected)
Torin - Turian word for male adult. (Credit: MizDirected)
Nais – Pronoun for Asari (Credit: MizDirected)
Kava - Dextro equivalent to Caffeine (Credit: Chromaticism)

A/N: M-97 Viper, a Rapid-fire military sniper rifle. Incredibly accurate and deadly at long range, these weapons are popular amongst infiltrators and assassins. Very effective against armor; somewhat effective against shields and biotic barriers. Upgrades the Mantis sniper rifle. Rosenkov Materials developed this deadly weapon in response to the rising prevalence of kinetic barriers. While kinetic barriers still offer some protection from this weapon, its sheer power and rapid rate of fire make it capable of quickly killing almost any target, regardless of its defenses. (Credit: Mass Effect Wiki) (A/N: I love this rifle. Garrus uses it, because author-chan says so. He has a combat scanner mod on it, which raises head shot damage by 50%, and a custom piercing mod that boosts the kinetic coil generators for another 40% overall damage, and extra penetration. oola~la~.)

The outbuilding had precisely no computer access, just a lone terminal for checking fluid levels of some kind. They deliberated for a moment between going straight for the central structure, or trying the next outbuilding. More information would be nice, but if Eclipse mercenaries had taken over the facility... it was a moot point.

Garrus chimed in on the coms with a single nonverbal click, a request to speak.

“Go ahead, Vakarian.”
“I've got some bad news, Quiritus. Activity on the far side of the main complex, looks like a few non-combatants being herded to machinery at gunpoint. Looks like... they're doing something to one of the silo-shaped machines. It's got a pressure gauge on it, that's all I can tell you.”

“How many of each?”

“Two armed, five civilians.”

“What are they wearing?”

“They, ah... the civilians are in a uniform, company logo on the sleeve. The other two are in piece-meal armor sets... Eclipse insignia on the pauldrons.”

“Understood. We've encountered Eclipse here as well. Their leader seems to be an Asari, potentially on the upper level of the main building. See if you can get eyes-on.”

“10-4... I mean, affirmative. Sorry, been with C-Sec too long.”

“I understand police radio short hand, feel free to use it if you wish.”

“Alright. Nihlus...?”

“Yep, I'm good.”

“Right well... I'm not seeing anything on the second level. I'll keep an eye on the windows.”

The Spectres moved back to the side door, and quit the building. Cautiously moving around the back side, and then sprinting the distance to cover. This was repeated a few times to get into range of the main complex. They hit the wall of the central metalworks, and crouched along the side. Nihlus ended up closer to the corner, peaking around it for an instant to check for hostiles. Two guards, also bearing the black-on-yellow 'sunflare brand' of Eclipse mercenaries. Nihlus opened up coms at a whisper.
“Hey Blue, can you see the doorway on the south-east side? It's in a bit of a dent, two mooks standing guard.”

“Seriously, 'mooks’?”

“Shoosh, smart ass. Can you?”

“I'm moving around a sizable boulder right now, should have a better angle on the eastern face, just a minute... ... Yeah, okay. I see them.”

“I'm going to take out the one on the right, you take the left. Ready?”

“One... second... yes, ready.”

“On three. One..... Two.....” In the absence of three he spun out of cover, knife in hand. A flick of wrist sent the blade flying, the low speed of the projectile ignored by kinetic shields, and it sunk into the Salarian's head at dead center. Idiot hadn't worn a helmet. Within a heart beat a near silent 'fffwip' sounded, and the other merc's brain matter splattered the doorway. The two Spectres moved in quickly, Saren dropping down to search for a key-card while Nihlus covered them. The first didn't have one, but the second did.

In they went, the older Spectre jamming a nearby security camera that had likely gotten a quick peak at them. A terminal stood nearby. He hacked into it and had the building's remaining security looping it's feed in short order. Then he began to dig for intel, and with mainframe access it wasn't hard to find. The metalworks had been taken over to supply Eclipse directly, an idiotic rank climber among their leadership had seen the target as easy pickings, likely not knowing it's previous clientele had been government contracts. The engineering alloys it was producing weren't being sold at all, they were being shipped straight to an Eclipse ship yard, with a small portion siphoned off to a mech production facility.

Saren's reaction was a study in, 'Let me tell you all the ways in which that is unacceptable.' Nihlus' was more along the lines of 'All of my nope, not just some of it, nono, allllll of my nope.'

“Vakarian.”

“I'm here.”
“Security is disabled, if you see any targets that are out of sight lines from discovery, take them out.”

“Understood.”

Thus began a long stream of stealth take-downs, intended to continue until discovery or mission completion.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Cobalt and black armor turned purple hued in the sunset as Garrus wound along the outskirts of the facility. He had permission to seek out stand-alone targets, and intended to make the most of it. If it had come to a forceful retaking of the complex, he wasn't about to look like a decorative wall hanging when the kill counts came up.

The next unfortunate merc came into view, a lone guard standing outside the second outbuilding.

Breathe in.

Check your numbers, your angles, your environment.

Breathe out.

Aim.

Breathe in.

Wait for low space in between heartbeats.

Breathe out.
Fire.

The Viper rocked in his grip, a quick jerk that was mostly calmed by the internal recoil suppression. A quiet 'cha-thunk' of the internal mechanism called out in time with the jerk, and the hostile dropped.

One shot, one kill.

He pressed forward and down the hill, finding a cleft to slide into, dropping his altitude quickly without a damaging fall. Catching his feet in a pile of scree at the bottom, he moved in a crouch toward a new perch. Still at a good angle, half as high as the main building, he took a look around with his new perspective from the north side.

Another doorway, two guards outside. His rifle had a twelve-shot clip, sure, but two head shots in a row with insufficient cool down time to re-aim fully between shots... he could do it. He'd done it before. No real hurry, for all of the... admittedly pleasant tension running through his limbs, and his team mates hadn't commed back about anything in a while, so Garrus took the time to really check his numbers, and practice the aim-fire-aim-fire twice through.

Breathe in...

Aim.

Wait for the heartbeat to come... and go.

Fire.

Aim.

Fire.

Two shots, two kills.
Admittedly, the second one hadn't been dead center, a hint to the right and lower down. He made a mental note.

An Omni-tool scan of the area showed no major movement of patrols or drones, so he moved on. The sniper trailed farther north, a short climb, a full tilt run along some cliffs heading west, and stopped at a likely perch around the north-west side of the building.

Now this was a good angle. One Eclipse napping, -napping-, on a cargo crate, another set of two by a door to the main complex, and a solo merc by the third outbuilding. None of them in sight of each other except for the two by the doorway. Perfect.

Breathe. Check numbers. Aim. Wait for it... fire… fire… fire... fire.

Four shots, four kills.

Still no word from the Spectres, he pushed farther around the plateau, having to go slower with the limited cover. It was likely why he noticed movement in a window. Garrus paused, seeing no more motion, and moved on seeking a place to get a good look into that window. It was going on full dark now, which made movement precarious, but also let him creep closer without being easily seen.

He came around a small rise, higher up then he wanted to be, but it was enough to see into the room, and get a look at a horror story. The torin had to turn away for a minute and swallow back the bile that tried to escape his throat at the sight. An Asari, not more then twenty five or so, was curled up on the floor. Her naked prepubescent body had only the bruises to cover her. He moved around, using the terrain to get the right angles to scope out that section of building.

It appeared to be a series of storage rooms, only partially climate controlled he would guess by the lack of A/C units on the roof. It's heating and air filtration was bound to be comparatively poor to the rest of the facility. He assumed the mercenaries had taken over the staff's actual living area themselves, and shoved their forcefully acquired workers into this space instead. No access points for runners to escape.

He crept forward cautiously, just close enough to get a scan of the interior and ground beneath. Nothing below it, not even plumbing to provide water. Worrisome. The fuzzy layout results showed around fifty life signs, mostly clumped together. A few, like the young Asari, were alone and horizontal at floor level. He forcibly didn't consider that further. When he had some solid facts to share he taped the coms once, Saren replied within moments.
“Vakarian.”

“Building off to the north west side of the facility, connected by a sky-bridge on the third floor. Looks to be a series of storage units, currently filled with staff, but not enough to be the full roster. Maybe forty or so civilians, and some guards. I'm guessing they let them out to do their jobs in batches, and put them back in here when done. Some are in bad shape, signs of physical abuse. There's no external entrance, just a few windows that don't open.”

“Acknowledged.”

The line went dead. Garrus tried to keep from feeling frustrated. He had half expected Saren to give him orders to move in and... no, no... he wouldn't have. Garrus was here as a sniper. He was supposed to be cover fire, leaving the up close and personal to the Spectres. He really, **reallllllly**, wanted to say 'fuck that', and go rescue those people. Right now. The only things stopping him were that he absolutely did not want to be disbarred from coming on future mission with them, and well... those people were probably safest right where they were, for now. He could help best by finding a really good perch, and killing more potential dangers to them.

A long, steadying breath. 'Alright. *Fine.*'

A quiet sort of rage in his eyes, Garrus Vakarian went **hunting**.

The next several minutes passed by in a haze, his color-washed form darted between boulders in the darkness, nimbly climbing and roughly dropping, finding creative perches and killing *every* group of Eclipse he found. One situation had involved lining up two heads in a row, waiting the half a tic for a double tap, and then re-aiming to a third.

Three shots, three kills.

It was about that time that the alarm was raised, all was still for a moment and then... hostiles began **swarming** out of the woodwork. He risked a com request for location from the Spectres, hoping to get eyes-on in case they needed him. Nihlus replied with vague directions underscored by gunfire, but enough to work with.

More cliffs, more boulders, more sprinting open spaces and leaping crags.
He pulled around the south eastern side of building to see Saren going toe to toe with a triad of Asari in full biotic bloom. Nihlus was running pell-mell from cover to cover, taking down reinforcements. The silver-grey Spectre's fight plunged into the side of a processing center, disappearing into misty shadows of billowing steam. Garrus noticed distantly that the power seemed to have been cut as he began lining up shots.

“Sniper!” Went out the cry, like music to his ears.

'Yes. Yes there is a sniper. Start running, feel free to scream. I'd like to end you while you flee in terror. Those good people you've turned into slaves and brutalized deserve no less.' Some part of his mind was a little sickened at the vicious thoughts, but another part of him reveled in it. Behind this scope he was judge-jury-executioner, and he wanted justice, paid in full.

He reloaded for the second time, shoving the mental high-and-low far away. Now was not the time to enjoy his work, and it was not the place to get emotional. He needed to be calm and focused.

As the numbers started to thin out Nihlus opted to follow after Saren, and Garrus cleaned up any who remained in view. When there was nothing but wind moving outside, he began working his way down to the facility. He wasn't about to sit outside and twiddle his thumbs patiently. He was beyond caring if he got away with it.

Ooooooooooooooooodoooooooooooooo

Lieutenant L'athai was having a rough day, which was unfortunate really, as it had been proceeded by quite a few good days in a row.

The Eclipse's 'Bloody Lohera Sisters' were fighting the upstart Turian who thought he was a real biotic, as if any non-Asari ever really could be. How precious.

Though their side wasn't holding up nearly so well as should be expected before his shitty, graceless onslaught of heavy pistol and warps. How a Turian had gotten to the skill level of tossing out 1700 newtons of force... whatever, didn't matter if he was dead, did it?

So! It was time for a change in tactics. Leaving behind a few people to show them down, the nais took the nearby Eclipse and lead them to the 'luxury accommodations' where they'd left the workers when they didn't need them. Time to see if hostages could be used against the ugly grey asshole.
They only made it part way back through the facility before the red one popped out of a side door, with a cheeky, “Hello there! Miss me?”, given before he leapt for cover. 'Shit. No time... there! You'll do.'

Morai grabbed a young man, one of the brats they'd put to work scrubbing floors, tugging him forward from his hiding spot behind some piping. The smelting equipment in the large room gave off a great deal of steam, which the nais backed into while attempting to begin... negotiations.

Nihlus leveled his pistol at the nais with a seemingly cheerful smile. The whip-thin Salarian boy began crying behind yellow and black gauntlets. He struggled to keep the smile on his face, that poor kid...

"Oh come on, hostages, really? You think Spectres give two shits about damage control? Pfffffft."

Out of the whirling steam came the slow but inexorable footsteps of his former mentor, walking out of the miasma dripping purple from a blood soaked arm, rivulets of Asari blood running down the faux talons of his gloves.

Looks like someone had torn out a throat or two.

"Let the kid go. Now." Came from the... ceiling? Nihlus chanced looking up, his fake-smile fell into a more honest smirk at the sight of Blue crouched in the rafters, no where near any visible way up, his rifle aimed unerringly at the Eclipse leader's head. Protective of children, was he? Spirits, he lo... liked that torin.

'Smoo~th, Kyrik. Lying to yourself?' Came his thoughts, to which he replied while returning his gaze to the situation at hand. 'Not lying... refusing to start that bullshit. It's another never-going-to-happen, just... let it go.'

'Like Saren?'

'Shut up, I'm busy. Yes, like Saren.'
His subconscious laughed at him.

"Well crazy bitch, time to surrender."

"You think I'm stupid? Ha! Eclipse owns this place now. It's ours, you hear me? I'll kill every last worker and blow it to pieces before I let you take it back! It's my ticket to greatness, and the likes of you aren't welcome here!" Nihlus blinked. He hadn't meant the 'crazy' part as more then offhand insult, but by the sound of it he wasn't too far off the mark. Saren stepped forward.

"This facility is to be returned to it's original operation, by order of the Citadel Council. Stand down, and you will be extradited to your respective legal systems for processing. Resist, and die." The nais squeezed the kid's neck in her anger, and it popped alarmingly. Salarian necks were fragile.

"Fuck..." The little boy made a squeak.

'Oh spirits, no.. no no no. He's just a-

"YOU." Crunch.

She dropped him to the floor like so much detritus, one of her lackeys tossing another hostage to her. She smiled at them like a mad dog.

Nihlus was suddenly gone, no sign of the affable torin remained, the bloodless shell that stood in his place rocketed forward to end the child-killer with dead eyes and grasping talons.

Garrus swallowed hard, deeply... something. Upset? Fascinated? Terrified? To see Nihlus change like this.

Saren was unnerving at times, he'd noticed, because nothing really bothered him. Sociopathic. Saren couldn't care less about threats or mission cost or collateral damage. He didn't care if you had family, or not, were good or evil person. He came, he saw, he killed everyone in his way, and he left.
Even keel and unflappable, that was Saren Arterius in combat and in life.

Nihlus was his counter point. He thought he saw why the council not only allowed but encouraged them to pair up frequently. Nihlus tried to evacuate civilians, tried to minimize the disturbance of Spectre work to the people around them, was generally reasonable and good natured.

Optimistic and open hearted, a gentle tug on Saren's rampant destruction when displeased.

Not now.

The moment the nais had killed the Salarian boy for show Nihlus had become cold, instantly, like a snap-freeze. Not emotionless, but icy, icy rage.

Threats hit deaf ears, all bets off, Nihlus moved, aimed like a mac-canon at the monster who'd turned the metalworks into a slave camp, a screech of terror had been the nais' last words.

He'd begun to slaughter the remaining Eclipse forces with extreme prejudice.

'It doesn't suit.' Thought Garrus, feeling a shiver run down his spine, leg muscles primed to run, fight-or-flight instincts buzzing. 'It just does not suit. Nihlus is -supposed to be...- warm. He's summertime. Laughter. Where did this... blizzard come from?'

Garrus wondered, not for the first time, why he felt poetic when keyed up.

He took a few shots, but having issues seeing in the stirring mist, chose to scramble across the rafters to a way down. He circled the room, using the equipment as cover. Choosing targets carefully.

He came around the edge of a machine and caught sight of Saren, joining him in cover. The other Spectre was taking pot shots at the enemies as they scattered in the wake of the... snap freeze. Grenade explosions rattled the room, echoing loudly, leaving a ringing in his aural cavity. Saren leaned over, and laid a startlingly warm hand on his shoulder.
His voice low, he calmly reassured, “It's fine.”

Garrus shook his head once, hard. Realizing that his subvocals had been broadcasting a low note of distress.

“It's not fine. *He*’s not fine. Where did this come from and how to we make it stop?” Saren hummed softly, a soothing purr of subvocals he'd never expected to hear from the *torin*, as he fired upon hostiles that had foolishly turned their backs on the two in favor of keeping aim on Nihlus’ last seen location.

Or maybe not so foolishly, as screams rang out in the murky dark.

“It's not going to stop until there are no hostiles remaining. Nihlus... does not like to see children used in such a manner.”

“Under. Statement.” Saren nodded in easy agreement. Garrus turned back to the... carnage was really the only appropriate word, though that would make it sound as if he could see half of what was going on. Between the smog from the smeltery equipment, and the haze of... so many grenades, it was hard to tell what was happening.

Suddenly Nihlus’ words from that long ago conversation over *kava* trickled into his mind. *‘I enjoy fighting in limited visibly conditions. I'm fast. I don't need to see. I can hear, and I can smell. No one sees me coming. I'm not sure even a scope that can see through smoke and aerial debris would help all that much.’*

'I see what you mean now.' Garrus thought, distantly agreeing with the words he had vehemently disagreed with before. He lifted his rifle, and took aim.

At least he could try and end this quicker. He wouldn't feel right until he could see Nihlus behind his own eyes again. He wanted to bring back summer.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex] Closed or Forbidden Dialects
While most species are happy to have Universal Translators automatically break the language barrier for them, some dialects and languages are not available for automatic translation. The reason for this ranges from difficulty of interpretation, to protection of cultural heritage written into galactic law. Hanar bio-luminescence, for example, has a poetic flow to it's words that are modified by the movement of the speaker's tentacles. This has proven too difficult to fully translate, as each basic color flash has nearly sixteen variations, thus a simplified version is all that comes through on UniT's. Another choice example is the elaborate language of the Turian Closed Dialect, a blending of their unique subvocals, a variety of sounds that aren't entirely verbal, and a semi-formal language used only when in the company of other Turians. Though the Closed Dialect is a complete language unto itself, it is most often used in a blend with the Turian trade tongue, pulling words in that have particular emotional sensitivity to them, such as terms of endearment or family. The Drell and Raloi languages are also available in limited translation, as both have 'high-speak' and 'low-speak', the low speak is used in their day to day affairs, and the high is to be used only for moments of significance, such as religious ceremonies or political peace talks. Lastly, obscure languages that are not widely known, local slang that appears and fades too quickly, and words used out of context can sometimes cause translator glitches that will take a UniTs a bit of time and a few tries to properly convey.

(Credit: Canon, MizDirected, Author blend. It's a mind-canon lovechild, enjoy.)

Fanfic Recommendation: Sound the Clarion (153,255 words) by Amber Penglass (FemShep/Garrus, way AU, takes place mostly on Palaven!)
I want to marathon through the sky with you and dream in unison

Chapter Summary

The slaughter comes to an end and it's patrons shake off the feeling.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin - Turian word for male adult. (Credit: MizDirected)
NPO - Non-profit Organization (IE: Red Cross or UNICEF)
Delugia - The Salarian goddess of fortune.

A/N: For the love, if I am missing a tag I should have, please say so. I almost forgot to add 'Implied/Reference Rape/Non-con' after last chapter, and I would have felt horrrrrrrrible if I'd triggered someone without a fair warning. Thanks in advance. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The battle for the Nodacrux metalworks facility ended like this:

A Batarian man came running out of the mists, an assault rifle tossed to the floor in favor of getting away. From behind a battery of gauges, ringing countless alarms at the numerous bullet holes in the room's equipment, came a blurred streak of crimson and black. The Batarian had no time to dodge, didn't even know he was in immediate danger, when a long blood-slick knife flitted out of a wrist sheathe and into his neck. Nihlus grasped the man, spinning them so that the blade would pull out and the body would fall away from his feet.

Sudden silence, but for the quiet weeping and panicked breathing of the staff that had been stuck in the room with them.

Nihlus' head whipped around as he crouched, one arm braced forward against the metal floors, and the other raised back and to the side with it's blade bared. Left? Right? He spun around looking for his next target... no movement, no hostiles. His senses crooned 'all clear'. He slowly came out of the half-crouch, standing up straight and blinking rapidly.

“...Nihlus?” He turned at the voice, feeling very tired. It was Blue. He liked Blue.
Nihlus stepped forward and leaned into his friend with a sigh. “...Got ’em.” He rumbled softly.

“...I would say so.”

He let off a vaguely happy trill and pulled back, rubbing the back of his hand against his nose.

“Did she get that second kid too? I missed it.”

“No. You ah... separated them and killed her.”

“Oh, nice. Go me.” Garrus let out a choked laugh, sounding relieved for some reason.

“Definitely. Go you.”

“Are you hungry? I'm starving. Hey Saren, will you cook something, I am so damn hungry.”

“Take Vakarian and hot wire one of the Eclipse shuttles, go to the Daedalus. The autopilot has already been programmed to bring it here and land, you need simply activate it. I will... cook for us after you return. Vakarian, use the com suite to send for relief aid. There should be a Salarian NPO called ’Delugia’s First Recourse’ in my address book. Contact them and arrange for onsite medical care.”

“’kay.”

“Will do.”

They rode a garish yellow shuttle back along the mountains, taking only a handful of minutes to make the distance that had required hours to walk. Garrus flew the shuttle gently, and landed them in the canyon with ease. They tripped the autopilot sequence, and Garrus sat down in the CIC chair feeling something like an intruder. Nihlus just trailed backward toward the shower, flaking off dried blood.
The water came on and Garrus felt an inordinate amount of relief to hear Nihlus begin to sing a cheerful love song, something about a frisky Salarian of all things. He took half a moment to let the feeling of ‘all done’ wash over him, before bringing up the com suite on the holo-ring. An endless list of names, organized alphabetically according to their phonetics in the Turian alphabet, came on screen. He scrolled down to the 'D' listings. Finding the correct one, he pinged them a vid call request and waited.

After a few moments, a lavender shaded Salarian girl came on screen with a wide and pleasant smile.

“Thank you for calling DFR, my name is Riri At'sayia, what can I help you with sir?” How exactly did one ask for free medical care in these situations? He was used to the Hierarchy military, in which... well, he'd just have an order sent off to summon in a medical division. He didn't think ordering them like military personnel was going to fly.

“Hello Ms. At'sayia. I'm calling to request relief aid for the victims of a pirate attack. We've got about forty to fifty people who are in need of various levels of medical care. Can you help me with that?”

“I certainly can. I'm sending you an e-form, fill that out for me? I'll wait on the line with you in case you have any questions. Take your time.” She smiled at him.

Paperwork. He should have known that somehow, even this would involve him completing paperwork. He bit back a sigh and returned the smile before filling out the forms with as much accuracy as possible. He was well aware of the red tape that got in the way due to improperly filled paperwork, and he didn't want the remaining staff to experience any further trouble. They'd been through enough.

“Alright, that should be everything. Sending it back to you.”

“Great, give me a moment to look over it... … Okay, it looks good. I'll have a scouting team out there within a few hours, and they'll call for full deployment once the situation has been confirmed by our people. Is there anything else I can help you with today sir?”

So polite. The formality and cordial tone to the conversation left a bad taste in his throat. Did this woman have half a clue what these people had been through? Didn't the situation deserve a more somber attitude? Maybe... it was a self defense mechanism. Emotional distancing. Garrus hoped so. He didn't think he could be half so pleasantly accommodating were their positions reversed.
“No, that's it. Thank you.”

“Have a nice day.” The connection closed and Garrus exited the com suite, and leaned back, resting the underside of his crest atop the chair back and releasing a long sigh. They landed not a moment later.

“Sora o marason, yume o yunizon shitaii~~~” He let out a laugh, wondering exactly how many languages Nihlus knew to be able to sing in such a variety of dialects. Maybe he just memorized them and didn't know the languages themselves?

“Hora~ Catch you, catch you, Catch me, Catch me, matte~~ Kocchi o muite, suki da to itte~” The Spectre was just so spirits-damned ridiculous. From vicious killer to pop star in twenty minutes or less. It was... endearing, for some strange reason. The hatch to the airlock hissed as Saren entered, looked at the trail of blood flakes leading to his bathroom, and let out a snort.

He jumped up out of the torin's chair guiltily. It was a very comfortable chair but he hadn't meant to intrude...

Saren didn't seem to care. “I am taking a shower next. Watch the door. The next in line for command here has been restored, but we are remaining until further aid arrives. They may come asking for medical supplies or food. There, -he pointed to a specific storage bin-, are supplies that may be handed out if asked.”

“You're handing out your own medical supplies?” That seemed rather generous of him.

“Hardly. They were purchased on discretionary funds.” Saren's subvocals sounded somewhere between dismissive and offended. Then he disappeared around the corner yelling at Nihlus to finish his shower. The tone of his words made it sound almost as if the Spectre didn't want to be caught committing generosity, and had fled from his accusations.

Garrus chuckled, and sat back down.

Chapter End Notes
Why yes, Nihlus was singing the theme song from Card Captor Sakura. :D

Translation:
[I want~~ to marathon through the sky, and dream in unison.]
[Hey, Catch you, catch you, Catch me, Catch me, Wait~~ Look this way, and say you love me~]

[Author's Codex] Nationalities of the Salarian Union

The politics of the Salarian Union resemble a series of fiefdoms, large and small, based around the matriarchal system of Dalatrass and Clan. Each micro-kingdom belongs to one of three main provinces: Amrotep, Sivine, or Hiesset. Amrotep is the largest of the three, encompassing Surkesh's main super-continent. Salarians of decent from here are classically yellow to orange tones, with high intelligence and 42 year life spans. They are known for being the tallest and thinnest of the Salarian races. Furthermore, Salarians from a breeding contract with many strains of Amrotepi in them also have little to no sex drive, though they are extremely co-dependent within their networks of friends and clan.

Sivine is the second most common, generally having the blue to grey skin tones, and suffer from lower intelligence but a have much stronger build. Sivinite genetics are originally from the twin continents of Siala and Vin'e, and produce the longest lived Salarians, the oldest on record being 73. In terms of sociology, this nationality also has a low sex drive, but handles loneliness with ease, and will stave off boredom with naps instead of the manic energy that the other two are known for building up. The third race of Salarians, the Hiesset, are the least common, compromising only 13% of the population. Generally colored from green to purple, Hiessetti genetics are a fair balance of strength and intelligence, but are the shortest lived, averaging at 36 years, though they don't engage in sleep unless particularly exhausted. Hailing from a massive chain of islands, this race is considered a valuable mix-in for breeding contracts that have begun to have issues with genetic stability due to inbreeding, having historically remained separate and more homogeneous. They are also somewhat infamous for having a noticeable libido. In the modern age of careful genetic gardening these nationalities have begun to blend, resulting in coveted gene strains of long lived Amrotepi or highly intelligent Hiessetti.

Fanfic Recommendation: Weightless (152,021 words) by RaptorAssassin
(FemShep/Garrus, with the spicy hint of noir.)
'Come into my web' said the spider to the fly, 'okay' said the assassin bug

Chapter Summary

Nihlus bakes and Saren has a pretend cousin.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Assassin Bug: A species of insect that wanders onto spider webs and pretends to be prey, only to kill and devour the spider when it emerges. (Real world)

Amarceru - a bitter, mud-like tea popular with Turians. Also with Quarians, generally diluted. (Credit: MizDirected)

[Galactic] Bingo Book – Ninajed (literally) from the anime 'Naruto', because 'most wanted list' is a stupid and boring name for a wanted list. (Credit: Masashi Kishimoto)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No.”

“Why nooooot?”

“We are not going ‘sight-seeing’. The Council requires our report on the situation's resolution, and I have no desire to waste my time with 'nice views' or 'bar hopping’.” He can not figure out why they are even having this discussion.

“What about that spa I found? Bath houses are the beeeeeeest.”

“No.”

“Really? I thought you would want to go to that one, at least, what with your crest....”

“What about my crest?” Saren reaches up to feel his crest blades, everything seems in order. He narrows a suspicious look at his former protégé.
“It’s well...”

“What.”

“It isn’t very sharp looking. Sort of dull, actually. You could really use a-OW damnit ow. You are so mean.” He smacks Nihlus upside the head. His blades are not dull, thank you very much. They are fine. He doesn't particularly care if they are 'sharp' or not. Such things have no impact on his performance.

Vakarian sips his *amarceru* tea in the corner, Saren glares at the poorly hidden smirk the sniper is trying to conceal.

His crest is fine. It is.

“Okay then, what about the talon sharpening services?” Nihlus holds up a datapad with an e-brochure. “I know you like yours extra pointy.” Carmine eye ridges waggle coersively.

It isn't effective.

“No.”

“*Spirits* you are no fun... what about *after* we drop off the report? Something on the citadel itself? Just a day trip?” Verdant green eyes widened compellingly as he held up the datapad right next to his face. As if being as close as possible to his attempts at puppy eyes would somehow make a trip to a bath house more appealing.

It was... not working. At all.

He maintains that his crest is just fine as it is.

“Listen, Arterius...” Bothersome. Vakarian is joining in. “If it's a matter of not liking public bathing because of... personal reasons,” Saren accurately read that as 'because you're barefaced, famous,
have Valluvian horns, and don't want to deal with the stares. “...there's a bath house on Bachjret Ward that has private rooms for small business groups and the like. A little expensive, but it's a nice place.” He read that as, 'It's expensive because they don't ask rude questions or discriminate.', also probably accurate.

Nihlus fell to his knees in a fit of overdramatics completely unworthy of a discussion of taking a day trip to a bath house. “Pleeeaaassseeeeeeeee~~~”

“Fine! Fine. … Fine. We will go, and you will not bother me about taking another 'vacation' or 'break' for at least a year!”

“One month?”

“A year.”

“Three months?”

“One. Year.”

“Six months?”

He glared and stalked off to the the engineering sub-deck for some personal space. Bothersome, indefatigable, subversive former mentees not allowed.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Nihlus hummed while stirring the batter for the casserole he was making, being careful not to blow anything up again. He wasn't a great cook, but he felt being disbarred from the kitchen entirely would... well, reduce the number of things to do on Saren's ship by one. Which was one too many.

It isn't his fault he gets bored easily. He likes to think of it as an evolutionary mechanism for productivity.
Mealy yellow batter is poured carefully over slices of meat and root vegetable and set into the oven to bake. Not a complex meal, but probably the most complicated thing he can make.

It's a thank-you dinner for Garrus, for backing him up on the bath house idea. Nihlus trills with glee. He is so excited about it.

Opening the chilling unit, he meanders around the available ingredients looking for something else to make. A side dish? Desert? Hmmm.

Most of Saren's pantry is healthy, simple foods or expensive, exotic things that he's never even heard of, and is mildly afraid to mess with for fear of it being some thousand credit jar of fancy-whatsits. Eventually settling on fruit slices, because he really isn't the most epic cook around, he pulls out the cutting board and gets to dicing. He is, however, very good with knives.

The last fruit is only half sliced when the ship's alert ping sounds. Barely having the presence of mind to flip off the oven's heat dial, Nihlus shoves the fruit in the fridge and goes to see what's up.

Hopefully it's not pirates, slavers, or someone with a grudge. Saren has a fair few number of those, and he himself isn't too far behind. Maybe just an unexpected asteroid on the proximity alarm...?


Nihlus grabs onto the chair back, looping an arm around Garrus, and holds tight. He can tell the C-Sec officer hasn't been on a ship during a gravity spike before because he's clearly not holding on tight enough.

'Fawoomp' goes the distant echo of the popping mass effect bubble as the spike hits them, just strong enough to throw off FTL computers into emergency stops, not strong enough to scrap their target ship. Ships are worth a lot more when undamaged after all.

For a few brutal seconds the ship's insides were shaken like a tuning fork. It took a moment, but the inertial dampeneners stopped crying themselves to sleep at night and stabilized them.

An incoming com request, voice only, popped up on the holo-ring.
“Don’t speak.” Saren commands them before activating it, simultaneously running a number of scans on the oncoming vessel. The voice that comes out of Saren’s throat is comically high pitched and scared sounding. Well, to be fair, it probably sounds par for the course to the pirates. Nihlus thinks it’s hysterical.

“This is the Captain of t-the Daedalus. M-my cousin and I are willing t-to negotiate for our lives. P-please.” Nihlus covers his mouth with a hand, trying very hard not to laugh. He glances over at Blue, who looks vaguely horrified at the other Spectre’s self-done voice modulation. A tiny, tiny 1/4th of a snort breaks through, and Saren turns to glare at him in warning.

“Hello Captain.” Purrs an voice over the speakers, sounding like a Krogan and an Asari had a lovechild, and the Asari wasn’t the mother. “Want to live do you, mmmm? Well then. Cut your engines, m’dear, and prepare to dock.”

“Y-yes, m'am. Sir. M'am.” Nihlus is dying with mirth on the inside, imagining a bright blue Krogan with a curly crest and dainty ankles. Saren is busy ejecting a horde of viruses into their poorly protected computer systems.

The pirate ship's complete schematics come on screen, complete with a bounty listing for 3 of the crew, and an old entry into the galactic bingo books for robbing a Volus banking ship a decade past. He wonders in passing what a banking ship is. Why would you need a ship to handle electronic currency? Then again, economics magic really was the bread and butter of the methane breathers. Best leave it to them.

“Vakarian, with me. Nihlus, go out the back way.”

“’kay.”

“Wait, there's a back exit?”

“Yes, though it isn't properly airlocked. It's in the back of the hydroponics section. I'm loathe to let their ship's environment mingle with ours, but it must be done.”

“If you say so, cousin.”

“...I do.”
Nihlus smiles at the half-a-moment pause in reply. He knew Blue's easy acceptance of a cover where they were family had thrown the other Spectre off. Well, they were both blue eyed and silver plated, weren't they? Though that was about where the resemblance ended, it was enough to spark fantasies of sex with silvery twins. Long long twins? Nah, too cliché...

Eh, he'd think of something.

Chapter End Notes

No, but, really... what *is* a banking ship? Writing from Nihlus' perspective actively creates Nihlus-y mind canon. I just wrote about a Volus Banking Ship, and Nihlus doesn't really care what that is, so I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THAT IS. Omfg. Fanfiction writing is dangerous.

Fanfic Recommendation: Ghost, Ghost, I Know You Live Within Me (222,573 words) by theherocomplex (Ghost!FemShep/Garrus)
The Asari pirate 'queen' turned out to be a 90 year old teen-aged nais with stupid amounts of money in a trust fund, a voice modulator, and about thirty too many Vorcha flunkies. The moron plus twenty of those lackeys surrounded them in a docking bay that was set up more like a stage, and even Garrus, -who had never in his life been robbed by anyone-, was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

He turned to look at Saren, whose coward act hadn't survived the airlock, to find the torin eye balling the Vorcha's weapons. Good spirits, the would-be pirate had armed the minions with M7-Lancers. His covetous heart cried out, 'Vorcha do not deserve Lancers. For that matter, Lancers do not deserve Vorcha.'

No wonder the Spectre was eyeing the merchandise, so to speak. He probably wanted one too, if not as a main weapon, then just to tinker with. They were a rare find in the Lancer series assault rifles, and only limited number were made in a short production run just after the Relay 314 incident. Unlike other heat clip and ammo limited rounds, the Lancers combined the cool-down low velocity weapons of yester-year with modern heat sink and velocity tech. In effect, it was a nearly infinite ammo, built-in heat sink gun, but with modern day stopping power. They'd cut the run of them short because they required extensive knowledge to maintain and mod properly, and very few had the dedication to see it done.

'I do. I would.' chimed in his inner gun-loving magpie.
Why did it suddenly feel as if they were the pirates?

“Awww, how precious. Wikkle cousins out in the middle of nowheres? Is it... a family vacation!?" He heard a clear and obvious snort of escaping laughter from the jumble of cargo containers to their left. Two of the Vorcha looked around in confusion. Well, he couldn't exactly fault the Spectre. 'Wikkle'? Who in their right mind calls Saren Arterius 'wikkle' anything?

Said wikkle Spectre did not look amused.

“I can not believe...”

“Mmmmmmyes?”

“That I ruined the air purity levels on my ship for this.” He raised a pistol and shot the nais in the gut. Being a Spectre Master-Gear heavy pistol, it tore right through the shields, tearing out a shriek of shock and pain. Simultaneously, he grabbed Garrus and lit them up with a biotic shield, tugging them in the direction of nearby cover.

The Vorcha began firing at the cargo crates they'd gotten behind, but the containers weren't being torn up as he expected. Actually, they were making hollow 'thunk-thunk-thunk' sounds. He popped open a lid to check... the damn boxes were empty. Garrus just rested his head in his hands. Today was just... very strange. The lackeys continued to fire at them, but it seemed as if the Vorcha firing the Lancers were also the Vorcha who maintained them. In short, they were about as effective as throwing small rocks, not even penetrating the cargo boxes. He doubted they had even installed any mods.

It began to make sense to him, in an odd sort of way. The Asari wasn't after money, no, it was the drama. It was just a very poor choice of ship to follow from the relay gate.

In a moment of classic Nihlus, said Spectre popped out of cover and used one Vorcha's gun while still in it's hands to shoot another in it's ass. The other minion screamed and spun around to see only it's supposed comrade with a smoking gun. It screamed in rage and shot it's neighbor. Another Vorcha saw the 'traitor' and added to the shrill and growling cacophony before also shooting at the literally butt hurt Vorcha.
It... devolved from there.

They mopped up the three or four who held out the longest, and approached the would-be pirate. Saren just stepped up to the nais' little dais, and crossed his arms. Spectacularly unamused.

The form gurgled at him, blood running down a cheek. Garrus winced in sympathy, gut shots were painful and messy. A slow, slow death to boot. He cleared his throat.

“Should we... end the *nais*? A slow death from a gut wound is a bad way to die...” He looked to Saren's left, where he expected Nihlus to be standing, hoping for support. There was no one there. He looked around... ah, there he was. Looting. He couldn't exactly blame him, he reallllly wanted to do the same. Just... one Lancer? He'd take such good care of it...

Saren had pulled out his Omni-tool, and scanned the now weeping fool. Of all things, he sent out a priority video chat request.

A lovely Asari matriarch in a rose colored gown answered immediately.

“Spectre Arterius? I received your ping... is there something I can do for you?” The voice sounded like such a nice person. Saren turned the camera around and aimed it at the dying form.

“Is this one yours?”

“By the Goddess! Lia! What happened? Sweetheart, oh Goddess, Lia. Lia! Spectre please, that's my offspring! Can you provide medical aid? Where is that? Where are you? Oh Goddess! What happened?!” Saren pulled the camera back to face himself.

“Your offspring just hit my ship with a gravity spike, and proceeded to threaten myself and other agents of the Council. As of right now, the charges arrayed are more than enough to account for capital punishment. In lieu of... apparent youth, I have opted to contact you instead. If I offer leniency, I do not want to have this come back to trouble me in the future. I do not particularly want to deal with the situation at all as it stands.”

There was dead silence for a solid five seconds while the matriarch absorbed the absolute mess said
offspring had gotten into.

“Lia... attacked you.”

“Yes.”

“I am... so sorry. Spectre. If you would... if you... Please. Return Lia to me, alive, and I will ensure that you are never bothered again. I will... I will make it worth your while.”

“I do not care for bribes, what I want is to not need to deal with this again in the future. You can guarantee this?”

“Yes. Yes, absolutely, and it is not a bribe, it is a thank you. For calling me at all. Now, please, goddess... medi-gel? Anything?”

“Indeed. We will be on the Citadel in six days, have someone meet us at the Presidium docks.”

“Of course. Spectre Arterius. Thank you.” He closed the call.

Nihlus dumped the bleeding form into the medbay, and let the auto-doctor do it's work. They looted the ship from top to bottom for anything that struck their fancy, most of which Saren intended to sell, killed any stragglers, and then slaved it's navigational computer to the Daedalus'.

Saren decided he was keeping the ship as recompense for the delay. After spacing the Vorcha remains, he declared that the price of their bath house trip was for Nihlus to clean up the remaining mess. He grudgingly negotiated for a Spa day and going out for drinks afterwards in exchange.

They returned to their ship, still docked, but piloting the larger vessel with remote ease. Upon entering the kitchen area for a now much belayed meal, they discovered the oven filled with a gooey mess.

Saren stood over it, left mandible twitching, for several moments.
"Nihlus."

"I'm not, even 1%, at fault for this."

"Nihlus."

"No really. The gravity spike. Completely unpredictable."

"Nihlus."

"Yeeees?"

"Clean this as well."

"Damnit."

"Language."

Carmine forehead met kitchen wall several times in frustration, but he did still clean it up. Even, graciously, made more.

Garrus got his Lancer.

It sat in his lap as they ate dinner. He promised himself that'd he'd do good with it, to make up for the fact that it had been stolen from a Vorcha pirate.

Chapter End Notes

You remember that Lancer that Garrus was carrying when you first met in the Council chambers? The Lancer that you turned into Omni-gel in about 10 minutes? It was an M7 Lancer. You monster.
Fanfic Recommendation: The Thane Krios Experience (4,090 words) by littleblackdog (Garrus/Thane, Garrus/FemShep)
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield

Chapter Summary

Saren has spent so, so long fighting with his own body and mind to sleep. This chapter is in honor of all the sufferers of insomnia's various forms. Posted at 4:16 am. /fist pump/

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin - Male Turian adult. (Credit: MizDirected)
PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, common among soldiers

Chapter title is a Tennyson quote.

Side note: You know you've stumbled onto the geeky side of the internet when the banner ads around the article you are reading about bacterial sex are offering 'Sample size antibodies, now available from R&D systems, a biotechne brand', and 'Pipet Man, simplified repetitive pipetting to improve your results! By gilson.' I'm telling you guys, writing fanfiction does things to you, psychologically. How did I even get to this article...

Side-side note: It's so much fun exploring the works and bookmarks of people who have left kudos, because you all have vaguely similar taste, so we end up getting reading material out of writing this. We find this exchange of data to be acceptable. I. Um. *I* find this... exchange... //shifty eyes// I am not geth. A geth. I am not a geth. …damnit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren stared at the datapad propped on the side of his kava cup, willing bleary eyes to focus. He had found some connections in the Prothean data he'd been aggregating, and was sure there were undiscovered dig sites to be found if he could just follow the data trail...

Annoyed with watery, lazy eyes he reached up through the open front of his black quarter-sleeve tunic to grasp one shoulder with the opposite hand, and dug talons into hide with enough pressure to hurt, but not cut. The pain bloomed and focus was somewhat restored. He went back to reading. Too soon his eyes began to blur again.

Growling, he reached up to dig into his arm again only for a muffled rumble of alarm to be heard behind him. Oh, it was Vakarian. Why exactly did everyone insist on sneaking up on him in his own mess hall? Obnoxious.
“Spirits, what are you- you're bleeding. Hold on.” He looked up at his shoulder to see a set of three shallowly gouged marks welling with blood. A tiny trickle had started down his arm. Hmph. While he had not meant to dig that hard, it was hardly a note worth injury. Saren turned back to the screen and continued data mining. A moment passed and Vakarian sat down beside him, straddling the bench, and began to disinfect and seal the marks with medi-gel.

He disregarded the Officer's attentions and forced himself to focus. The mild sting of antiseptic helped.

“Arterius. … Arterius? … Spectre Arterius? … Saren!”

“Hmmm. What?”

“...You're practically catatonic, what's wrong?” He managed a half-hearted glare at the intrusive concern.

“Nothing.”

“Saren...”

“Go away.”

“...no.” He worked up a solid three-quarters glare to that one, beginning to get angry.

“You are... on my ship. You will follow any orders I give.”

“Sure, as long as they pertain to the job. Convince me this,” -he pointed to the mess of data on screen- “is relevant, and more important than sleep.”

“That is none of your busi-”

“Damnit Saren! You were bleeding. Why were you cutting yourself?”
Silence reigned for a moment.

“I was not cutting myself like some **suicidal idiot**. I was using the pain to stay awake. I have things I need to get done. Now, are you finished interrogating me, Officer Vakarian?”

“Oh no. None of that. It's just Garrus, and no I'm not done talking to you, because you are hurting yourself to stay conscious at three and half hours into the night cycle. Explain to me why you won't go to bed and do this tomorrow?”

“It's none of your co-”

“Saren!”

“Concern!”

Everything... right now... was aggravating. The hum of the ship's drive core. His face and it's perfect Palaven-blue markings. The whine of the chilling unit. Everything. Unable to tamp down on them, his subvocals broadcast his general displeasure with the world. He just wanted to sit in peace and read, was that so much to ask? Sleep held nothing but liquid visions of fire and death raining down on temple walls. It was... wasted time. Time better spent tracking down Prothean artifacts for the Council.

“Visions of fire and death, why would... Oh.” He had... spoken... aloud. His curse came out in a flare of aggravated subvocals.

“**Go away** Vakarian.”

“Garrus.”

“Fine. Go away **Garrus.”**

“You're having trouble sleeping, because you have PTSD.”
“Yes, reduce the worth of the individual to an acronym, well done.”

“That's not what I meant, and you know it. I have it too. From my time in the hastatim squads. I had horrible nightmares after that, and they still resurface occasionally.”

“Wonderful.” It was not possible to put much more deliberate disconcern into a single word then that.

“... Did you see a trauma councilor after Deso-”

“Don't.”

“Alright, okay. Calm down. It's okay, Saren. You're safe. I'm safe.” He realized suddenly that his hand had whipped up to press talons into tawny brown throat. He tried to loosen the grip but his hand was shaking and his muscles were tense from being... so... angry. Vakarian, in a fit of idiotic trust, tilted his head back till crest scraped shirtless carapace, throat bared submissively. 'Idiot, moron, fool. I could kill him so easily.'

That is what he did best after all. Murder.

The sniper's subvocals rumbled soothingly, a low bass that vibrated the dregs of kava on the tabletop. The Spectre pulled a long breath in, and forcibly released it. He did this several times before he could safely remove his talons from Garrus' throat. Managing to do so he leaned back, face turned down and away. Underneath the supporting and comfortable anger was a winding thread of guilt. The compassionate torin did not deserve, even for his obnoxious concern, the purple marks blooming along his jugular.

Garrus took him by the hand that had threatened him, and pulled him to his feet. He went, led unresistingly out of the room. Silver and grey plates shone in the low lighting of the night cycle as he was tugged down the hallway and into his own bedroom. He looked about confused. What, did Vakarian intend to sleep with him? Read him a bed time story? What were they even doing here. He did not want to be here.

“Not that I'd be adverse to sleeping with you if you think it would help, or that I'd mind reading aloud for that matter, but I'd intended to rub your hands again. It put you to sleep last time, but I didn't want to try it in the kitchen again. Not the best place to fall unconscious.” Thinking... out
loud... again. He swallowed back annoyance. Perhaps there was a point to sleeping. Even the nightmares were better then mumbling his thoughts aloud for all to hear. They, at least, were experienced alone.

“...It did give me a crick in the neck.”

“Exactly my point. Lay down?” He did. Garrus proceeded to sit on the bedside by his thighs, and began working over one hand thoroughly, then moved carefully over, no sudden movements, and did the other one. Sleep remained elusive, but he did feel... relaxed.

“... Still awake?” Came a soft whisper from the shadows.

“I am.” A rustle, the flicker of silver plates, and warm hands began kneading at his feet. He felt his eyes roll back in his head at the unexpected pleasure of the simple touch. Their borrowed sniper was also skilled at... ah... soft tissue manipulation? A snort sounded out in the blanketed quiet.

“Generally it's just called a foot massage, and I used to do these for Mari when she was pregnant with Sol, or for girlfriends after they'd had a long day.”

“Are you circumspectly calling me effeminate, Vakarian?”

“Garrus, and no, that's just where I learned it.”

“I do not generally call anyone by first name... except Nihlus.”

“You called me by name earlier.”

“Under duress.” Came out sleepily, followed by a yawn.

“Do you mind that I called you by name?”

“I do not,” -yaaawwwwn-, "particularly care what I am referred to as.”
“Alright then Saren. Work on calling me Garrus, and I'll work on trying not to make you feel like you're under duress.”

“It was... a joke... Vakarian.”

“Garrus.”

“Mmmmm.”

The next day, he vaguely remembered a soft pat on his ankle as the sniper had risen from the bed and padded out of the room, the alarm clock light catching the long line of his crest blades, trailing along them like a lens flare as he passed by.

He slept nearly three hours undisturbed that night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It is incredibly difficult to avoid using female pronouns for Asari, I keep noticing slip ups when I reread of 'she' and 'her'. Even in canon they call their offspring 'daughters', and I know the writers did that to ensure that dialogue flowed properly, and didn't sound awkward, but me? I'm willing to work with a little awkward in order to not be the most culturally insensitive asshole ever. Seriously. They. Aren't. Female. Hell, they reproduce with brain-sex. Might as well be Hanar... or... oh shit, are there female Hanar? Or Male? Or do they... like... pull off a parthenogenesis, like invertebrates? There are some sharks that do that... Hell. Now I'm thinking about Hanar sex and schools of baby Hanars. Neat, and somewhat disturbing.

Fanfic Recommendation: Random Access Memories (1868 words) by broodingmischief
Nihlus hadn't caught sight of the fading welts on Garrus' hide till mid afternoon. In his defense, he'd been distracting himself all day. All morning he'd played Galaxy of Fantasy, and then spent an enjoyable hour or two bothering Saren. The Spectre had been in a good mood, trading dry humor for Nihlus' snark while he gardened down in hydroponics. Eventually leaving sleeping dragons to lie, he'd come upstairs to find Garrus back at the work bench, fiddling with his Lancer.

His eyes narrowed at the mostly healed wounds. They looked sort of like... no, exactly like talon marks. Not deep enough to cut artery, but looked as though they'd been left untreated long enough to scar slightly. His fists had just begun to clench in anger that someone would lay a hand on Blue... before realizing there was only one person it could have been. The anger evaporated into long standing frustration with his former mentor's 'violence is a solution to everything' mentality.

'Spirits, Saren. I adore you, but keep your fucking claws out of good people's throats.' It wasn't the first time he'd said a variation of those words, in his head or out loud, but it was always an interesting day when he meant it literally and not metaphorically.

He sidled up to Garrus like not a thing was wrong, all bored swagger and laid back insouciance.

"What the hell happened to your neck?" He prodded a mark, one just below the aural cavity, and the sniper took a swipe at him without looking. Missed, of course.
"...a wild varren." Garrus replied with a delayed grin, apparently focused on his Lancer.

"Pffft, that you keep where? In your pocket?" He flopped down backwards on another stool at the bench, kicking long legs out onto the walkway, and propping elbows on the surface behind him.

"Fringe rasping accident?" Garrus tried again with an underscore of joking subvocals and a scandalous trill. The carmine plated Spectre swung his neck around, giving a flat look.

"They're puncture wounds."

"How about... 'I lost a fight with a kitchen knife'?" Nihlus snorted.

"An animate kitchen knife? What, it was possessed?" 'Possessed' was accompanied by mysterious finger waggling and a spooky voice.

"It could have been. The spirit of Saren's kitchen would be the kind to stab people, wouldn't it? Maybe I offended it by slicing yesterday's lunch meat unevenly." Nihlus couldn't help but laugh. It was tellingly accurate, wasn't it? He continued playing along with the newest excuse while Garrus carefully pulled apart an incomprehensible nest of gun mod guts.

"It was pretty uneven. I was sort of offended myself."

"What a shame. My would-be greatness is forever stunted by a lack of cutting skills." Nihlus' mandibles swirled as he fought back a smile. He had to turn the conversation back around or he'd never get an answer. He wanted to make sure... he didn't know exactly. Saren was violent with everyone. Hitting his protégé over the head was the closest thing he got to a sign of affection. The green eyed torin didn't want Blue to take it personally, he supposed. Not like he could stop it from happening but... he also didn't want the sniper to be chased off by it. His rifle skills were so damn handy, and that head shot accuracy? Mmmmmm. It made Nihlus want to just... he redirected his concentration back to the issue at hand.

"No but... really, what happened?"
"I may have aggravated Saren."

“And you’re still alive! Good job. How’d you pull that one off?"

"Oh, It was a close one, but I managed to make a good case for future usefulness. Fantastic sniper that I am."

"There's that overconfidence again."

"I prefer the term 'honesty'." Nihlus hid his sense of relief. It seemed like everything was alright...

"Soooo... You okay?"

"Just fine. I might have deserved it, in a sense."

"Yeaaah?"

"Mmmhmm."

"Is... he okay?" How, exactly, do you ask someone if they intend to avoid you and your partner like the plague because said partner can't keep his talons to himself?

"Isn't he generally in a better mood after stabbing people?"

"He generally doesn't do the stabbing to people on our side." Garrus shrugged it off with a soft smile, spinning a tiny hex key in circles to loosen a matching screw. Nihlus thought he'd give up his second best knife to know what precisely that smile meant. “Besides, stabbing is sort of my thing. I have dibs on it. He should leave the stabbing to me.”
"Like I said... brought it on myself."

"So... you're good, and... he's good, and uhh... between you is good?"

"Yep. All good." He let himself swoon dramatically in the stool, pretending a faint of relief over the work bench.

"Whew! Well that's a load off my collar. Didn't want you two to duel to the death or anything, it's so hard to clean blood out of the floor grooves. Plus I reallllly didn't want to have to pick a side."

"You'd pick his."

"I'd feel so bad though!" He clutched at the keel plating over his heart.

"Liar~" Garrus sung, lifting a side panel away to expose yet more tech-entrails.

"I would! You're entertaining and... you know, nice and stuff."

"Nice and stuff?" Nihlus felt a rare blush creep up his neck. 'Wow, 'nice and stuff'? Since when are you so pathetic at flirtatious compliments, Kyrik?' His subconscious was laughing at him again. That asshole.

"Shush. You're nice and I'd feel bad."

"Well, no need... He deserves someone in his corner."

"Yeah he does, but..."

"Hm?"
"So do you." The blush just got worse, he decided to blame it on failing life support if anyone asked. Clearly the thermostat was on the fritz.

"You as well." He cocked a pleased smirk at the officer, willfully ignoring the bubbly feeling in his chest at the sincerity laced into those words. There was a soft subvocal undercurrent in there whispering, 'I would stand for you, if you needed me in your corner'. He fought down the bubbles with a mental flame thrower.

"I took care of myself for a long time, Blue. I don't really need anyone in my corner."

"Seems to me that he's still fond of you regardless. Not to mention? 'Needing' and 'deserving' are two different things."

"Pffft, fond? More like 'tolerates'."

"I'd put money there aren't a lot of people on that list either." Well this conversation was becoming uncomfortably honest in record time. Time to hit the exit lane on that skyway.

"Well he was my mentor. I get preferential treatment, of course. Hey, want to play some Relay Defender when you're done... with whatever the hell it is that you're doing to that compression coil?"

"Only if you don't cheat." The Spectre punched him in the arm, laughing with subvocals that said, 'not likely!' .

It was amazing how insignificant a little domestic abuse seemed when your day to day was dealing with the worst the galaxy had to offer. Nihlus was pleased and relieved that Garrus was just as blasé and forgiving about it as he.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: ETERNITY (2326 words) by orphan_account
The strangely organic nature of computer code made by mortal minds

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is given a challenge and Saren cheers him on in that quiet way a door clicks shut in a hospital room: Barely there, but it's effects are noticed by the now closed door.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon: (Including some of the real-world bases for the upcoming techno-babble that I tossed together not knowing shit about hacking myself.)
Patrem – Turian word for 'Father' (Credit: MizDirected)
Pahir – Turian word for 'Son' (Credit: MizDirected)
ICT – acronym for Intensive Combat Training, a generalized term for any and all special forces training. (Credit: Real World)
Diffie-Hellman key exchange – a method for securely exchanging cryptographic keys to a cryptography algorithm over a public channel. In other words, if a system access password = (20 + C) x (current minute of the hour), then you can only actively solve for the password if you know ’C’. ’C’ is the cryptographic key. (Super simplified, author interpretation. I'd advise googling it.) (Credit: Real World)
Montgomery Multiplication – A method for performing fast modular multiplication invented in 1985, necessary to calculate the huge numbers used in cryptosystems such as Diffie-Hellman and RSA. (Credit: Real World)
Superoptimizer – a program that seeks to optimize another program's code into the most optimal form during compiling. Extremely advanced superoptimizers can repeatedly re-optimize, or in essence 'remix', a series of code based on changing priorities in it's instructions. Thus, making backdoors suddenly become unworkable at certain times, and standardized hacks unreliable. Difficult to implement, but offering another level of particularly intense security. (Credit: Real World, plus some theory crafting for theoretical hacking advances in the future.)
Rainbow Table - A pre-made list, usually of potential passwords that could possibly fit the given password length and character restrictions, used to break into computer systems. (A very 'heavy hammer' approach.)
Antigen serum – A compound that provokes an immune response, particularly production of antibodies. (Credit: Real World)
Altakiril – Altakiril is a Turian core world, featuring particularly cold weather and virulent low-temp hardy flora. (Canon)

Chapter Soundtrack: Fight by Icon for Hire (Nihlus' missing perspective.)
“Reread the chapter on recompiling during server maintenance and you will see why rainbow tables would not work in this instance.”

Nihlus scrolled the datapad in front of him back a ways to review said information. Beside him the other Spectre sat patiently, elbows braced on knees. They were sitting at the CIC holo-ring, protégé in the command seat and Saren on a floating anti-grav stool, working on hacking skills. The younger Spectre had proven to be intelligent, but having begun life on a merc base outside Hierarchy space he had no formal education. Truthfully, he had been just a hair above illiterate when entering civil service, and they had not made educating him in more cerebral matters a priority. Saren had been both appalled and silently furious on his behalf.

For as much as his former student loved his deceased patrem, the mercenary hadn’t done well enough for his pahir by half, and the Hierarchy had subsequently proceeded to fail him entirely. Saren cared more about his people than anything else in the galaxy, but his already shaky opinions on their meritocratic policies had not been high to begin with. He had spent an entire childhood hiding biotics so they would not separate him from his last remaining family. He had not wanted to be in the Cabals, and it did not suit that they could take the choice from him if his rare talent was discovered. When the Council’s top agent had taken Private Kyrik as apprentice, seeing his potential for what it was, another failing of the system presented itself: disregard for said potential because of effort required on the time of third parties to see it realized.

He had been... was still... furious about it. An old, quiet anger.

Minutes ticked away as carmine brows furrowed in concentration, trying to grasp the less strategic and more mathematical side of the latest advances in hacking. Nihlus had the intuitive part down, excelled at the more organic aspects of wandering the digital plane in fluid ways to elude security sweeps and digital booby traps. His real world cleverness translated directly into a natural understanding of when to cue the right program for the job, understanding the psychology behind security measures, and most importantly: where people hid their most secret data. Unfortunately, he’d only begun learning mathematics beyond basic addition at age twenty, and his old life truly had not groomed him for conscious critical thinking, only instinctual and subconscious reaction.

“This is ridiculous. Who came up with this new stuff? A cocaine addicted Salarian trippin’ on hallex and Vorcha sweat?” Saren snorted at the colorful language of his frustrated partner.

Nihlus could kill a Krogan with a single knife, if he even needed that much, steal data from the Primarch of a main colony, -literally, he had pulled that off in the Altakril Cluster-, and break into a Shadow Broker vault to re-re-reacquire a much coveted and fought over Prothean artifact. Yet, he
had trouble nabbing the spare credits off the Krogan's Omni-tool, could not tell you what was on the stolen data device, and had to blow the doors on the vault with explosives, albeit beautifully designed and lovingly crafted ones.

Smart as a whip but he was still playing catch up, trying to stuff ideas usually learned at a young age into an adult's mind. A busy-with-matters-of-galactic-importance mind. Saren, though a harsh and unforgiving task master, had proven to a generous teacher with uncommon patience, spending countless hours of their mentorship tutoring him in between the harsh ICT sessions. Nihlus had spent the better part of a year in and out of a medbay, plates cracked and muscles trembling from a brutal training regiment, trying desperately to learn everything from algebra to methods of rationality while partially high on pain medication.

His tenacity and dedication to meeting Saren's standards had a lot to do with said mentor's patience and long standing affection, such as it was.

“Okay... so... the... ummmm... the way the security suite uses superoptimizers... interferes with how it... no wait, I still don't get it.” A silver-grey hand reached over and scrolled to the most pertinent section, tapping it with a razor-edged black talon to have Nihlus reread that particular part. Several minutes passed in quietude as green eyes glared down the squirrely explanation of Montgomery Multiplication and Difae-Hellmate key exchange. Saren took the time to study his student-turned-partner, and appreciate how far he had come.

The younger torin had always been lethally competent at his job, but his continued willingness to learn anything Saren wished to teach him had been unexpected after their formal mentor-mentee relationship had ended. Most would claim to know all that they needed to by now, with a such a prestigious service record and successful mission completion ratio. Further, Nihlus was naturally overconfident, to put it mildly, and he had expected his former protégé to be dismissive of further struggling to learn the finer points of things he was less apt at. Yet it seemed that Nihlus was not adverse to that struggle if it involved his duties as a Spectre. Though if left to his own devices, he might just have easily spent all his down time drinking and playing video games.

Dedicated? Certainly.

Curious and willing to learn what was offered? Yes, obviously.

Ambitious? No.

“Okay, it... these systems, right here? If I used this it would....” Nihlus trailed off again. He was on the right track, at least.
Saren remembered the first time he’d approached the younger Spectre with an offer of further tutelage after their mentorship had ended. A new series of Elcor made poisons had come on the market, virulent and cheap, and their popularity had resulted in a sudden resurgence of wire trapped door ways, spider-robot patrolled vent shafts, and server room proximity alarms. Each armed with a variety of the poison that could deliver a gaseous blast which burned it's way through air filters or needle thin darts that went right through armor at shield-ignoring speeds. Only hard suits and tech armor had proven effective at slowing it down, but a minute dusting on skin was all it took to leave any intruder, dextro or levo, a drooling mess on the floor for days. Not to mention that neither of those precautions were appropriate for crawling through air ducts.

A delicate touch was required to mix the antigen serum, which only lasted a week in the blood stream before becoming too weak to make any difference in case of exposure. Granted, this new poison would only be popular for a few years before becoming obsolete as infiltrators found easier ways around it, but for the time being it was a real danger to those in their line of work.

He had been... concerned for his chemistry and medically inapt protégé. Tentatively calling on vid-chat, he had expected a pseudo-polite refusal of his offer for further aid... because why would anyone want to learn from him again after the hell he had knowingly put the young torin through?

Yet Nihlus had readily agreed, curious to learn how to mix preventative serums at all, and they had arranged to take a cooperative long term mission together to have the time to work on it. The silver ST&R agent felt... he hesitated to call it relief, but it was close to that. He did not want all that training time to have been a waste because the fool had gotten himself killed in a ventilation shaft. It would have been a disappointment, and could have reflected poorly on his own teaching ability and judgement.

Inexplicably, the tutelage had made a master poisoner and half decent field medic out of him, tying into an a developing interest in the chemistry behind explosive ordnance as well. He had taken Saren’s lectures on toxins, venoms, and biological warfare and made a name for himself among the Spectre Offices. Other Council agents soon began approaching the friendly young torin, instead of the vastly more intimidating Spectre Arterius, for questions in that forum. Nihlus could now hand-craft, with nothing but a basic chemistry set and a micro-fabricator, an impressive list of the most deadly, preventative, or restorative chemical compounds in the galaxy. He was, perhaps, better at it then the source of his knowledge by this point.

He still could not calculate atmospheric re-entry vectors in less then ten minutes without computer aid, or calibrate his own weapon mods with any amount of skill, which was unfortunate, but still... Saren was proud of him. He had come so very far.

“Okay, would this work?”
Saren looked up and read through the small program that Nihlus had whipped up to deal with the hacking challenge he had been presented. It would not work, actually, but it was getting there.

“Perhaps.” He reached across the terminal and set a test bed to run, withdrawing and gesturing for him to give it a try.

A silver horned head leaned around the other side of the command chair.

“Hey, I'm making lunch. Any requests?”

“Sum'fin spicy. I feel like I need to be invigorated, this shit muddles my brain.”

“Language, Nihlus.” He added a none-too-gentle talon prod in the arm. “I would enjoy something light on the side, if possible. Less spice on mine if a portion is able to separated out.” Garrus looked thoughtful for a minute before nodding slowly and walking back to the mess hall.

Saren considered leaving his current task of helping one of them learn the latest in hacking, to help the other manage to cook something edible. The state of Vakarian's chilling unit was not forgotten. He sighed in anticipation of a lackluster lunch in favor of staying where he was. The sniper had not managed to under-cook or poison anything thus far, and while not capable of haute cuisine, his cooking was less life threatening then poor hacking skill on a future mission. Sacrifices to be made, and all that.

"Got it! Ahahaha! Fall before me, inferior coding pyjaks!" He turned to look at the screen again, and sure enough Nihlus had managed to find one of the available work-arounds to get his foot in the door, so to speak. The younger Spectre was practically bouncing in place, trilling with triumph, and proceeding to spin up the rest of the programs he would need to crack the test bed security set up. Saren laid a hand on his shoulder, allowing a small smile and a bare hint of pride into his tone.

"Well done."

Nihlus turned to smile at him, leaning over and bumping their foreheads together briefly before returning to his victory lap. Saren pulled back a bit, startled by the forwardness of the gesture, but his protégé had already moved on, humming with overtly vicious glee.
He offered no verbal rebuke. Perhaps it was... alright. His partner had earned a bit of leniency for his exuberant affection, in lieu of his hard work.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex] Hierarchy Colonial Jurisdiction and Infrastructure
Each Turian core world and its nearby colonies, satellites, space stations, and patrol routes are grouped into Colonial Clusters. Each cluster is ruled by a Primarch, whose purveyance involves matters of national importance rather than issues more related to day-to-day infrastructure or military operation. Turians have 27 citizenship tiers, and higher ranked tiers are expected to handle these matters on behalf of the Primarch and the lower tiered citizens under their care. Lower ranked individuals are expected to follow the orders of their superiors unquestioningly to ensure smooth operations. Rank begins at birth, allowing children an automatic tier 1 citizenship, moving to tier 2 during civil service training, and becoming formalized at graduation into civil service ranks at tier 3. (For further information on citizenship tiers refer to the codex entry on 'Hierarchy Rank Climbing') (Canon)

Fanfic Recommendation: Swim (3307 words) by Evidence
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

A/N: Mindior has no official location given in the game, just a general area of space. What are we doing in lieu of canon? Making shit up, of course! That said, after researching known locations in the Skyllian Verge, I've decided that the wiki's description of the Armstrong Nebula best describes the circumstances that led to something like Mindior happening: Human presence, Batarian aggravation at expansion, small and poorly protected colony. Now all of the planets and systems in Mass Effect are themed. Pantheons of gods, types of food, you name it, almost every system is themed. So, theme time. 'Min' is an international short hand for 'minute', and the while the word 'minute' is originally Latin, English picked it up from Old French, which works quite well with 'dior', which you may recognize from the makeup brand. It was originally 'd'or', and means 'gold'. Thus we have 'Minute of Gold' or 'Golden Minute', which mothers might be aware is that precious 60 seconds after a baby is born where they must breathe, for the first time on their own. Otherwise it's straight to a tiny hospital bed with assisted breathing machines and worried doctors; hence the common troupe about listening for the baby's cry right after birth. So here we go, with our theme of French words involving new life, acceptably poetic as Mindior was a farming colony. I am declaring the system address of Mindior to be as follows: Milky Way / Armstrong Nebula / Créer System / Mindior. (The other planets being named Impulsion (pulse), Trace de Pas (footprints), Lamenter (wail), and Liaison (bond). Créer means 'to create'. Thus we have, in a mildly flowery version of word interpretation, 'To create... a heart beat, first breath, foot prints, tears, and a bond."

Oh look, author-chan is talking about that colony that Shepard can be from, that's... that means... uh oh. Oh no. No, author-chan, no! Don't do this to your readers!

Sorry duckies! It's 2167 still, and for plot purposes... Mindior's time has come.

Chapter Soundtrack: From the Depths (Brinstar Depths) by TheophanyRemix

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The battle for Mindoir technically began at 12:09 pm, the moment their mid-line quality satellites detected a non-alliance ship approaching the system in FTL from the direction of the Vamshi Mass Relay, soon to pass the outer most planet of Liaison. The colony's Administrator, Jonas Wimbleton, got the priority alert ping on his Omni-tool during a lunch period, and in a show of true job dedication opted to check it right away rather than put it off till 1:00 pm or so when he'd be back in
His dedication didn't save his life, but there are a few precious people whose lives it did save. One person in particular whose identity would someday become the new dictionary definition for 'a precious life'.

As Jonas read the simple, automated alert ping his thoughts weren't on the future however. In fact, for a few moments, his thoughts were simply confused that the satellites were reporting to him in the first place. He hadn't know they were set up to ping him if an unregistered ship came in range. From the direction of... Vamshi? That wasn't a Systems Alliance controlled Relay... and then it clicked.

It also wasn't a Systems Alliance ship.

Feeling a sinking sense of dread, he returned the lid to his salad container, packed up, and drove his sky car back the quick ten minutes to work. The R&D logo stood proudly in the lobby, floating in holo text over the contained ecosystem center piece that was a miniaturized habitat containing all of the meaningful plants they had customized to grow best in the rich soil of Mindior. A chill slid down his spine as he passed by it, headed for the security center of the colony rather then his office upstairs.

People joked that it was the 'Research and Defense' building, rather than 'Research and Development', by dint of it containing all their defense assets in a small storage space with their government allotted mechs, a tiny security suite that monitored a handful of satellites, and their single planetary defense canon controls. Beside that, they had a platoon of marines that lived in normal housing and trained in the same field the middle school used for baseball. Otherwise... a whole lot of farmers and scientists who had passed their basic firearm classes as part of the colonial pre-departure training, but likely hadn't shot one since.

The Administrator's jitters got worse as he realized he was reviewing their defensive measures while the elevator took him down. He pulled in a slow, purposeful breath as the doors slid open and made for the security room.

Inside, the security guard Adrien Wikkits was fast asleep, head lulled back over his chair, snoring.

“Wake up, Mr. Wikkits. We have a situation.”

“Huh, wha- oh... Oh! Mr. Wimbleton! Sir! Uhhhh what I can do for you, sir?” He looked nervous,
and rightly so, but Mr. Wimbleton didn't have time to deal with his slacking at the moment.

“There is a space craft approaching us with an unknown registry ID, find it and get me information. Now, please.”

“Yessir, right away, sorry sir, I’m on it.” Adrien spun back around to the wall-to-wall security set up, and began a targeted series of scans.

The more purposeful scrutiny showed that the unknown vessel had just pulled into range for proper telemetry data, and a deep space camera was pointed at it, a quick snap shot taken, and all available data about said ship was loaded from available archives.

It was identified as an unmarked vessel of Batarian make, a heavy cruiser meant for large scale troop deployment and minimal air support. It could not enter an atmosphere itself, but could release it’s forces from low orbit via a compliment of shuttles.

Oh. Dear lord. Batarians.

The telemetry data said they had two hours, three minutes till arrival. Adrien's eyes widened like saucers as he looked up at Jonas for answers like a deer in headlights, shocked and unable to act without direction. It took the Administrator a moment to gather himself and offer the best answers he had to give.

“Mr. Wikkits, please arm the planetary defense canon, and call Major Tiras for a muster. I need to send out emergency alerts, and contact the Systems Alliance. Keep your Omni-tool handy, I will be calling you with further instructions.”

While Adrien scrambled to get the automated canon's system online, Jonas stepped into the hallway. He quickly set the colony's emergency broadcast system to begin pinging all the residents with priority alerts. ‘We are likely under attack. Arm yourself and get to the emergency shelters.’ was the jist of it. That done, he attempted to call his usual S.A. liaison and flagged it with the highest priority.

He waited one minute.

Waited three minutes.
Waited seven minutes.

He was not waiting any longer than that, not now. Jonas began rapidly pinging every name in his address book that might possibly be able to help, against policy or not. Every soldier he had a contact for, officer or no, and every friendly merc group or trader in the area. His messages were short and polite, copy-and-pasted words that simply mentioned the basics of the situation and his name. His thoughts, however, grew increasingly desperate as no reply came.

'Anybody. Somebody. Help. There are over four thousand lives here that I am supposed to safeguard. Please. Please someone answer. Please please.... please....'

Nearly twenty minutes passed with no reply. Then, finally, thank-you-god, a vid-call came in.

“This is Executive Officer Hannah Shepard of the SSV Kilimanjaro, how can I be of assistance?”

“Officer Shepard, thank you so much for getting back to me. As I said in my message, I'm Jonas Wimbleton, the Colonial Administrator for Mindior. We have a vessel of what we believe to be Batarian make, approaching from their side of the Nebula, not flying any recognized registry codes. It's a heavy cruiser, m'am. I believe our colony is about to be hit by... Hegemony forces. We are in immediate need of aid, their approach velocity puts them at,” -he glanced over at his old-earth clockwork watch-, “ninety five minutes out. Can you assist?”

“One moment.” The sound on the vid-call went mute, but he could see her moving swiftly through a corridor, waving off people who tried to talk to her, and coming to a stop in a command center of some sort. Her lips moved as she kept herself on screen, but spoke to someone off to the side. Nodding sharply, piercing blue eyes returned to the camera as sound came back.

“We're on our way Mr. Wimbleton. Captain Anderson is calling for back up as we speak, but it's going to be about three hours before we arrive. Hopefully we can find another contingent in closer range to come sooner, but I can't guarantee that.”

“I understand. I need to continue prepping what defenses we have. Godspeed.” He received a crisp nod in return, the woman's hard gaze making him feel just a bit better about their odds. The call disconnected and he headed off to speak with Major Tiras.
While the rest of the colony was still peacefully eating their lunch, Jane Landsley was skipping school and shooting bottles off of tree stumps in the forest zone. Her fellow miscreants, Michael and Tobias, were lounging nearby doing a fuck-load of nothing.

"fwwip" went the sniper rifle, followed by the sound of shattering glass.

“You like shooting that thing way too much, Janey.”

"fwwip". Miss. She glared at it.

“What's it to you, Mike?” She leaned back and lowered the barrel, reaching up to her mouth after an inhale to remove the cigarette. Smoke leaked from her nose as she eyed the remaining bottles. She'd need to set up more soon.

“Nothin'. I'm just sayin', I know it's your dad's gun and all, but the fact that you can do that for hours instead of fucking around on the extranet like a normal girl is sort of...”

“Sort of what?” Tobias laughed at the hole Mike was digging himself.

“Uhhmm. Somewhere between cool and uh....”

“Uhhhh what, asshole?” She glared at him, green eyes backlit with defiance.

“...Sad?”

“Eat shit and die.”

Mike sighed profusely.
“I don't mean to be an ass, I'm just sayin' that... well, I know that you miss him, but the stoic gun-nut gig is more of a Turian thing, yeah? Why don't you take up a new hobby?” Jane rolled her eyes at him.

“I don't want a new hobby, Mikey. My grandparents made guns, my dad collected guns, and now I shoot guns. It's all I've got left, don't you try and take it from me, or we're going to have a problem.” Michael stood up, and wandered over to her, bonking his head into hers before walking down range and setting up a few new bottles as an apology. He really was a good friend, if a bit of a whiner sometimes.

Why he wanted to hang out with her, girl-with-an-attitude-problem Jane Landsley, while she skipped class, played with her antique silenced Striker III, and chain smoked was beyond her... but she was... okay with it. Jane shrugged, offering a small admission instead of forgiveness.

“Well. I suppose I have you guys, at least.”

Tobias chimed in, “Counts for something, yeah? Half credit?”

Mike laughed, walking back.

“Psht, no. We count for double credit. Friends are the family you choose.” Michael would know, being as he was also an orphan.

Before Jane could line up another shot, a shrill voice broke the peace of the forest clearing.

“Tobias Rostre! You are in so much trouble when I tell mom what you're doing!” Aw fuck. His tiny, harpy of a sister.

“Ugh. Tali? Please, shove off.”

“No! Mom told you not to hang around with those... those... troublemakers! Anymore!”

“It's like she thinks you care Tobi.”
“I know, right?”

“Arrrggg!” Talitha let off a shrill, rage filled scream. Her honor student sensibilities could not handle her lazy brother and his horrible friends. She glared at Tobias, trying to will him to get up out of the grass and leave them behind. Jane coughed a laugh into her arm.

“You idiots have no idea what you are doing to your futures! They'll look at this when you try to go to college you know!”

“I don't particularly care, sis.”

“How can you not care?!??! You're already fourteen you loser! You've got to start applying for grants in two years! They aren't going to take one look at you after they see all of these absences! You don't care? You don't CARE?! I can't believe I opted out of afternoon classes to try and talk sense into you! How can you not care!” Tobias let out a beleaguered sigh.

“I'm not going to college Tali. I'm going to join the S.A., and travel. I've said it at least fifty times, does anyone in our family listen to a word I say?” She stared at him like being a military grunt was the worst fate life could offer, short of janitorial minimum wage. After he failed to respond, whatever, she made another shriek of frustration, and stomped her way out of the clearing.

“Weeeelp.” Mike said, popping the 'P'. Jane let out a half-grimace and watched her leave.

“She's going to go tell your mom about you being here.”

“Meh. Mom will yell, dad will yell, and give it ten minutes and they'll be yelling at each other, and I can sneak out.”

“Fair enough.” She went back to shooting.

'fwwip' Crash.
Crash.

Miss. Glare.

Crash.

Their Omni-tools all went off simultaneously.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Administrator Wimbleton, the Kilimanjaro will be in orbit 71 minutes after they arrive, and that is the very best we can do. Our engines are running at absolute maximum speed. The good news is that a three ship patrol of light cruisers under the command of Commander Terrance Connor is also in range, and will be coming in behind us in thirty four hours. They are the next closest Systems Alliance force, and are also going at maximum speed. We're coming, Administrator. You just have to hold on.” Commander Anderson delivered his words with as much encouragement and surety as he could, but the other man wasn't looking any less green around the gills.

The Batarian ship was nearly on top of them, just passing Trace de Pas, and more recent scans showed significant proof that this was indeed a slaver raid. Unfortunately for all involved the dreadnought wasn't as heavily staffed as it could be. The Alliance was spread thin, and though their ship yards could turn out many a ship, their personnel numbers were more limited. People being a semi-finite resource.

Anderson was determined to put boots on the ground himself, if that was what it took. He would save these people.

“Thank you, Commander. We appreciate that you are doing your best. They will be in range to jam communications in just a few minutes, and I need to get into one of the bunkers before they arrive.”

“Understood. Goodbye, and good luck.” The call ended.

David gripped the sides of his chair, steeling himself for the fight to come. Hannah stood beside him silently. Made of ice and stone, his XO was a dependable woman, and a excellent shot. They'd both planned to lead teams on the ground, leaving the third in command, the tactically minded Lt. Aisera, in charge of operations, and in control if anything should happen to them.
It wasn't standard operating procedure, but being heroes of the First Contact War got you a lot of leeway. Everyone knew the two of them, like so many other survivors of the war, were ground soldiers first and command material second. Having a huge recruitment run, a rapid increase in military spending, and no few deaths in the command structure left certain gaps. Gaps that had to be filled by those who might've preferred not to be the one called to that duty. They usually did their best for anything that was asked of them, but weren't going to take 'no' for an answer when slavers were about to attack innocent colonists.

Half the ship had a tender spot for colonists under duress, for one reason or another. They weren't going to argue.

“This isn't going to be pretty.”

“No, sir.” He nodded, and stood, tapping the ship-wide com button

“All hands to battle-stations, prepare to engage.” He closed the connection, and stepped down. “Lt. Aiseria, the deck is yours.”

“Yes, sir.”

The forest zone was quite a ways out of town. After getting the message, the three of them headed out of the trees and made for the main road, hoping for a stray bus to pass by and give them a ride. Unlikely, but possible. They met Talitha half way out, running back toward them full tilt.

“Tobi-oh-god-tobi-batarians-oh-god!” She slammed head first into her brother's chest, arms around him like a vice. He hugged her tight, and rocked left-to-right.

“Sis, it's okay. It's okay. We just have to get back to the colony and get to one of the shelters. The alert said we had an hour and a half, we'll make it back in time as long as we hurry, okay? Please calm down.” She was a mess of tears with a brave face. He pushed her back, took her hand and turned to go. She held back.
“Tobi, Tobi mom is out at the lake.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yes! Yes shit!”

The lake in question was called Lareda Lake. More of a large pond really, it was a nice place to fish, and a source of cheap dinners for their low-income family. Their mother worked night shifts in the aquaponics labs, and then would multitask by lazily napping and fishing during the day.

If she was out at the lake, she could very possibly be asleep.

She could very possibly be unaware that Batarians were about to descend from the sky and kidnap as many people as they could.

The lake was the other direction from town.

“Tali, Tobi, I know what you're thinking. You can't.”

“Can't what, Jane?” She ran her free hand through close-cropped crimson dyed hair, looking back at Talitha with pleading, apologetic anger.

“You can't make that run, not even if you sprint the whole way. If your mom is at the lake, she might be safer then we are. They won't go all the way out there for one person, not when the easy... catch... is in town.”

“.... she's right Tali.”

“What?! No!” Tali pulled back. “How can you say that?! Mom is out there alone! Alone!”

“Sis, Janey makes a good point. She's safe, and way far away. Let's get to the shelters, okay?”
“No! You... you! You selfish asshole! You don't love us at all, do you?! I hate you! I HATE YOU! NO! MOM!!!!” Talitha ran for the hills, full sprint in the direction of the lake. Tobias looked gobsmacked, and hurt. He started to go after her, but Michael grabbed his arm, pale as a ghost and sweating.

“Tobi, man, I know you want to...”

“Let me go Mike.”

“We gotta go.”

“It's Tali!”

“I know, you dumb ass! I've had a crush on her since we were like ten, okay? But listen, okay? Just listen. She is not going to let you drag her back to town, and going with her will make more people show up on scans and stuff, out there, okay?”

Tobias stared at him, swallowing. He knew his stubborn-as-nails sister wasn't going to come willingly. She already had a head start too.

“...I love my sister.”

“I know, man. I know. You can tell her later.”

“Fuck!”

Jane set a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed.

They took off running for the shelters.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
They had not, if fact, made as good a time as they had hoped, arriving with just enough time to see their home start to burn. Trying to be cautious and get to a shelter, they’d circled the town for one that was near the edge of the colony. They’d made it successfully, but a lone slaver had caught them banging on the door to a shelter, begging for it to be opened.

The screamed, they pounded, the fourteen year old trio shaking and weeping, even Jane.

“Please, please, it's us, open the door please!”

The worst part was that the doors were sealed, unable to be opened. Electric locks were fused closed with a chemical compound in the doorway, a measure that Major Tiras had made everyone take after the Batarians had hacked and disabled their canon in under five minutes. The colonists on the other side could hear the children begging to be let in.

They screamed back, of course.

“It's closed! We can't! Go hide! GO HIDE!”

The teenagers couldn't hear them. It was too loud outside.

They kept screaming at the kids to run and hide, until a loud thud sounded out behind the entryway and the screaming stopped.

Michael Calbright had hit the door, already dead.

There was a quiet 'fwwip' that the weeping colonists missed entirely, even in the sudden silence. The rage filled return fire of Jane Landsley.

Now there were two.

Jane and Tobias decided to run for the least likely place they thought to be found, that also couldn't burn. The water tower.
They were careful and slow. Tears were making long charcoal trails down Jane's face from her eye liner, and Tobias’ glasses were full of muck but he didn't seem to care. There was so much smoke from the fires that they could barely see anyway.

A block from the water tower Tobias spotted a shuttle coming in from outside of town. From the direction of the Lake.

“No... no... no.”

His mother and sister were tossed out haphazardly to the ground. Mrs. Rostre tried to run, and they shot her down casually.

Jane knew, without a shadow of a doubt, what was about to happen. She grabbed at his hand and dove for the sheltering bulk of a dumpster.

“No, no you idiot. No!”

Tobias dislodged her almost without trying and ran at them screaming.

She caught a glimpse of Talitha staring in shock at her mother's body, catatonic and unmoving, before the green dumpster blocked her view.

*Cha-thunk... thud.*

Jane covered her mouth, and tried not to vomit. Then she heard boots and armor coming closer.

Fuck, fuck fuck. They had seen her. Two options left, shoot them and hope they aren't fast on the draw, or run for it and hope the dumpster would block their view.

She glanced at the gun in her hands. Hands which were shaking so hard the shoulder strap's rectangular connector was rattling like mad.

She ran for it.
Going along in a low crouch, she came up on a blind turn. Stopping to look could be her death. Not looking could be her death.

She took it without stopping, straight around the corner, down the empty alleyway, and ducked into a subway tunnel.

It was pitch black down there, the entire system was offline and powered down. Jane went anyway, figuring that they couldn't shoot her if they couldn't see her. Going forward mostly from memory she hugged the wall, and hopped down onto the tracks.

The pale reflection of a search light came bouncing around the walls.

'Can't, fuck, can't stop now!'

She jogged down the tracks, squeezed around a stopped tram, then made for the next exit on the far side of the water tower.

She didn't even remember why she was headed for the water tower anymore. Her mind was a mess of shock, the smell of fire, and those... two... thuds. Just 'thud', and that was it? Her boys were dead, and just... thud?

It didn't make any sense. Gravel crunched and teeth ground as she tried desperately to focus and keep going. The other end of the subway suddenly lit up with search lights.

'Shit.'

Her luck was good though, as it was just more reflected light from insta-crete walls for now, enough to reveal a maintenance door in the wall. She scrambled up on the thin border that was meant to be a tiny platform to step out of a subway car onto, reaching up and using the handle to climb.

It turned, unresisting and unlocked, and opened into another corridor of darkness. She didn't stop to wonder why it was open, -really, who would think to check?-, and pushed into the black, pulling the door closed with purposeful slowness behind her. Didn't want it to echo.
Jane took off down the hall as fast as she could while being prepared for steps or dips, her hands outreached to touch both walls. It was why she felt the ladder as she went to pass by.

Stopping, she looked at where it would be if she could see. Forward, into more dark unknown, or up into maybe-hopefully-possibly a way to the water tower. A way that was well lit and possibly occupied with Batarians.

She was sick of darkness anyway.

Rifle over her shoulder, one bar after another, up and up, until there were no more rungs. Just a flat circle with a handle. She swallowed and turned it, slowly.

It turned without too much noise, but she needn't have been so worried. Though the subway had been all shadows and silence, the world above was light and noise. Fires and screaming.

She lifted the lid tentatively and looked out. Another spot of good luck, she was farther from the water tower then she had been before with... before... but it led up into an alleyway, with a fire escape right by it.

Jane scrambled out of the subway tunnel, closed the lid with a little less care, and made for the fire escape. She barely made it onto the building before the slavers emerged from the same hole, looking about wildly for her.

Thankfully, not looking up.

She was now both above the gaze of the slavers on the ground, but in obvious sight of any shuttle that passed by. Hugging the edge of the building, sneaking between crates and a/c units with all the skill of an angry fourteen year old who snuck out of the youth center after dark almost nightly, she made it the two blocks by rooftop without having to climb down or being spotted.

The slavers had established a patrol around the central square three blocks over, it was the city center, visible from her vantage point. She could see them... herding people into the square at gun point. Shooting anyone who ran. At least it looked like they had only caught stragglers, there were nowhere near enough people in the square to account for one of the reinforced bunkers being broken into.
She swallowed heavily. 'Still... how did so many people get trapped outside?' A mystery for later. If she managed to survive this.

Jane eyed the the water tower. It was in fairly easy range of a jump from rooftop to access ladder, but the climb up after jumping would leave her exposed to anyone who looked. Nothing for it.

Crimson hair ruffled in the breeze as she climbed that ladder as fast as possible.

She made it to the top in record speed, not the first time she'd come up here but the only time she'd done so alone... she rolled under the platform that supported an attached communication tower. It trailed up from the water tower another twenty or so meters, but this was where she'd wanted them to get to. Sheltered from air, from ground, easily defended with only one way up, they had, -ha-, water, and direct access to a com tower.

It was the best her mind had come up with, though truthfully she had mostly been thinking, 'Where will they not look? Where will they not think to scan for life signs? Somewhere that can't burn...'

She rolled close to the central support beam, curled around it, and just... breathed. Which was honestly hard enough with all the smoke. There was nothing left to do but wait for the Alliance to show up, and they did. Not an hour later a Dreadnought came into view, hazy through the atmosphere. Her eyes closed in relief, managing a small and tired quirk of lips that died soon after.

The Batarian heavy cruiser began to play 'elude the dreadnought', as shuttle craft streamed from it's sides. She rolled over and lined up her Striker to peer at the square, hoping to see the terror in their damn ugly faces.

There wasn't any terror. They were... ignoring the ship battle in air, and continuing to torment people. Jane's stomach sank at the sight. Why weren't they scared? It was a huge ship, dammit!

Shaking fingers reached into pockets for a cigarette, lighting it with her Omni-tool. Jane Landsley sat there and watched, chain smoked, and waited.

An hour passed.
Then two... three...

She began to realize that, though she still didn't understand why, the Dreadnought wasn't able to keep up with the Heavy Cruiser's speed. Had she a degree in astrophysics she might have known that it's main canon wasn't meant for firing near a planet, and it's fighter craft and smaller weapons were being kept busy with stalling measures and evasion. It's design wasn't meant for planet fall or graceful manuvers. It was big, yes. Too big.

The soldiers that had come down in shuttles were fighting the good fight, she caught sight of them time and again from her perch... but they couldn't break through the slaver's defensive lines, not with the numbers they had.

The Systems Alliance soldiers were fighting with guerilla warfare, and the Batarians were dismissive of their efforts.

Suddenly, a whole mass of people were herded into the squre. They’d broken down one of the shelters.

'Shit. No.' Denying it didn't make it go away. The Batarian shuttles zipped down, picked up a batch, and zipped away to meet the Heavy Cruister as it ran circles around the Dreadnought, the larger ship's bulk making it unweildy and unable to compensate.

An hour later, more people.

Night time fell. The sky was thick purple smoke and and red flickers from the still-burning fires. Jane hadn't known insta-crete and plastic could burn so well. It smelled something awful. She kept smoking to drown out the taste of it in her mouth.

Two more hours, and another group was led in, hands tied off onto benches and poles. It took a while for the slaver shuttles to ferry people to the Cruiser, what with the dance it was doing to avoid the Alliance's secondary weapons. The number of people trapped in the square increased steadily. People weeping and wailing and begging. More people, more time. A pair of soldiers with spiffy armor and their accompanying squads managed to break through for a moment, a few people died, a few more managed to get away, and then the heavy gun fire forced them back.

Jane kept watch through her scope, half hoping to see Talitha still alive and on the ground. She spotted people from school, the clerk from the grocery store, the local minister, and several others she
half recognized. She didn't really know most of their names, and that was.... it felt like she should know them by name, if only to know who'd died as she'd hid there, not doing anything to help.

More colonists were pulled in through the night, no more places to bind them, they were spread around the square, sprawling into the park near and far. A formless mass of the distraught.

Dawn came, but it was hazy and brought no hope with it. Eyes slid open at the light, turned aquamarine in the dull purple hues of it. Sleep had come at some point, though it hadn't been restful. She was still tired, thirsty, hungry... could have slept more, could cut into the tower with her Omni-tool for water... but she didn't. It felt wrong to have even those small things when the world below her was an endless parade of suffering.

The day went on... so long. Those brave, determined soldiers kept fighting all the night and into the day, who knew how. It was around noon that things took a turn for the worse. The Batarian had managed to round up most of the colony, a terrible number already aboard their ship. With less work to do they closed ranks, making the defensive perimeter into an impenetrable wall. The Alliance people weren't able to get close anymore... and the slavers were growing bored as the shuttles continued to take people up in small batches.

Jane forced herself to watch it all, new tears running down cheeks, over the unlit cigarette in her mouth, dripping onto the metal tower as the rising air carried words up to her.

’If they c-come for me I'm r-running. I-I'm running.'

’Nonono, Becky... They killed... no reason, she was just sittin' there... Oh my baby girl...’

’God Almighty, who art in Heaven...’

’No! NO! Take me instead, please don't rape my son, please!’

’May all beings b-be peaceful. May all beings... safe. May all beings awaken to the light of their... their true nature. May all beings be free...’

’Amazing grace... sweet... the sound...’
'Here, take this. No no, hide it! If they come for me... stab... okay? Stab. Me. I'd... dead.'

'Kirinyaga, owner of all things... I pray thee, give me what I need... because I am suffering, and also my children are suffering...'

She saw everything, the lone spectator with the wind in her face and scope to see by. The dreadnought's secondary weapons still lighting up the sky, almost mornfully, trying to hit the speedy little cruiser. There was a doctor who handed out pills to people that asked, they took them and fell asleep, not to wake. Jane couldn't exactly fault him. It was a lot less painful way to go then running for it.

Night fell again. The doctor ran out of pills. The miscellaneous weapons that some people had brought were confiscated. The only way to die now was to run for it. A fair few did, every little bit, others just sat there and begged to die. The runners were shot in the gut, left to perish slowly and painfully. Jane eyed her Striker... looked at the dying. Back at the gun. Down again. She swallowed. The night was loud and dark, the fires burned low, but the smoke still thick.

Over the next few hours, fourteen year old Jane Landsley racked up a higher kill count then most professional assassins.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Captain Anderson was on his feet only by dint of sheer bloody mindedness. 'On his feet' was something of a misnomer, since he was technically laying down on a roof top, sniping at the patrols that passed by. He'd run out the energy needed to 'run 'n gun' sometime... time... today? Probably today. His medics wouldn't give him any more stims, hell, they'd tried to sneak sedatives into his ration bars, but he'd smelled them. They got rather the tongue lashing for that one.

Hannah Shepard was passed out beside him, back pressed into his side. He had another twenty minutes of watch and sniping before he'd wake her and they'd switch, just for an hour, before moving position to do it again. The rest of their squads were injured or dead, only the two N7s still burning for comeuppance and uninjured. Mostly uninjured. Her right ankle was sprained something fierce, and he had two bullet wounds in the right arm. Not enough to stop the N-school's elite, just to slow 'em down a bit.

Hannah had noticed a stray flicker of movement a few hours back and pointed it out to him, just enough to hint at a rifle and a flat laying form on the water tower in the distance. The angle was too poor to make out who it was, but one of their marines must've made it in close and been taking shots when they could get away with it. Good. If he found out who it was, he'd see them promoted,
Posthumously or not.

His Omni-tool buzzed softly. He nudged Hannah awake. “Get up, lazy.”

“Mmmmpmph.”

“No coffee, sorry.”

“Unnnn.”

“No bagels either.”

“Ugh, will all due respect sir, shut up.”

“You will never stop ‘sir’-ing me will you? We graduated from the same class Shepard.”

“Wouldn’t be right sir.” He let out a sigh, waited for her to gather some bearings, and then let sleep take him.

At some point people had figured out that someone was shooting runners in the chest if they were caught fleeing. Less people ran now, the most hopeless weeded out, but a few still did. They ran near her edge of the park. It was a credit to the people of Mindior that no one tried ratting her out for favor.

Eventually, bleary eyed and nearly catatonic, Jane passed out. The last cigarette of the pack still hanging from her lips, unlit.

At first, no one noticed that the Dreadnought had ceased it's Sisyphus-esc chasing and firing, now going on thirty some odd hours of engagement. Then, it became clear why... as three more ships pulled into orbit. The sound woke Jane, and at first she had no idea what was happening, and then it hit her: The Alliance had kept fighting because help was on the way. Three ships. Three smaller,
faster ships. They turned toward the Batarian vessel with menace and began firing for non-critical systems. The Batarian Heavy Cruise ran for it, pushing for atmo and making an FTL jump much too low in the air. It set the sky on fire for a moment in a brilliant flash that set the people below to screaming in terror.

It was there, and then it was gone, all those people...

Knowing the cost of being planet side, the remaining Batarians began wholesale slaughter. Jane's anger, her oldest and last friend, returned.

'Oh, hell no. You are not doing this. We are being rescued. Fuck all of you! FUCK YOU ALL!'

'fwwip'

The crowd fleeing in panic made it hard to aim, a roiling see of forms. She persevered.

'fwwip'

The leaders tried to commandeer any shuttle craft available, including sky cars. She didn't let them.

'fwwip'

It went on and on, Jane trying to kill as many slavers as possible. No thoughts left to morn those stolen away in the cruiser, every inch of her consumed in the fire of hope that they were being rescued, and right now was the time to fight back. To shoot, and keep shooting. For Mike. For Tobias, and his family. For that doctor, and that grocery store clerk, and for all of them.

Her kill count skyrocketed.

Eventually, an impossibly long-short time later, it was done. No more slavers to be seen in scope. She inched out of her shelter into the predawn light, sitting up on the com tower's platform. She lit that last cigarette, and leaned back into the base of it, cradling her dad's rifle.
A dull dunk-dunk-dunk sound warned her that someone was climbing the access ladder. She aimed at it, just in case. Over the side of the tower popped an Alliance soldier in a blue-and-grey armor. He slowly hooked the top rung with an elbow and raised both hands in peace. She looked him over, and pulled up the Striker's barrel back to her shoulder. She gave him the best attempt at a cordial nod, the soldier deserved that much for how hard his people had fought. He reached up and tapped the retractor key on his helm as another soldier started climbing over the side, a woman.

“You're... the sniper that's been up here?”

Jane took a long draw on her cancer stick, and let the smoke trail from her nose, head rested back against the support beam. “Yup.”

“You're... what, sixteen?” She almost-smiled at him, the most she could muster right now. She’d been running on anger for far too long, and was all out of fuel. It must make her look old. A dry chuckle managed to come out at that, though she didn't correct him. Not like it really mattered. The woman retracted her helm, and adopted a stern look that mostly just made her look more tired. Jane could relate.

“You're under aged, miss. You aren't allowed to smoke.” At that she cracked up a little, swinging a wide arm at the smog all around them. The blonde haired soldier glared at the smog, as if it was it's fault for being an excuse. It didn't last long, the woman swayed on her feet, not enough to loose balance, but enough that she moved in closer, sat down, and gave up on the matter. The black guy joined them.

“What's your name, kid?”

“It's Jane... mmLandsley.” She slurred, exhausted. “You?”

“Captain David Anderson.”

“Captain... of the big ship?”

“Dreadnought, yes. The Kilimanjaro.”

“Thanks 'fer coming.” He managed a chuckle of his own at that.
“This is my XO, ahh... that's military speak for 'right hand man', or woman in this case. Hannah Shepard.”

“Hullo.”

“Hello, Miss Landsley.”

“How long have you been up here?”

“Uhhh... since umm... a few hours after they landed.”

“That's a long damn time, kid. You alright?”

“Yeah, mmmight need to eat or something. At... some point.” Hard brown eyes softened and he dug into his belt pouches, coming up with half a canteen of water and an MRE. He handed them over wordlessly.

“Ohhh, nice. Thanks. This liquor?” He coughed.

“No?”

“Oh, alright.” The soot stained teen proceeded to wolf down both without breathing.

For lack of fucks left to give, energy left to care, and all various and sundry forms of non- apathy... they sat there and watched the sunrise.

A shuttle picked them up from the top, they didn't even have to climb down. It was a good thing too, none of them were sure they'd have been able to do so without falling part of the way. A soldier inside the shuttle tried to take the Striker from Jane, rightfully thinking that a kid that young had no place holding a rifle.
She kicked him in the balls for trying.

Chapter End Notes

Mmmmm... it's 6:24 am.. must sleep now... will edit for flow and.. spelly stuff.. tomorrow.... zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Edit: Whoof. Morning after spelling errors! Wait... that makes it sound like I had sex with my story. Awkward. Disregard that. I only had about 5 hours of sleep, 'kay? Forgive the ongoing weirdness. Here is a little snipped from the wiki I would like to point to:

[A human farming colony in the Attican Traverse, Mindoir was raided in 2170 by Batarian slavers, who slaughtered most of the colonists. Those not fortunate enough to die immediately were subjected to horrific cranial implants that the Batarians used to control them. The Alliance dispatched troops to drive the Batarians out, but their defenses were too strong. The Marines were pinned down, forced to watch the suffering colonists but unable to reach them."

I went ahead and wrote out the immediate cranial implants, because there is no way they have a battery of neurosurgeons on hand who are also slavers, who are willing to risk themselves to stuff cranial implants into people in the field. That's just malpractice, yo. We'll pretend that happens in processing when they deliver the 'goods'. As for the rest... We know that there were Marines who had to sit there and watch this shit happen, and that Hannah Shepard came to help. Lastly, we know that Anderson ended up being a mentor for Jane Shepard. Tie all of it together, and this was what I got.

Anyway, don't worry, it's back to our regularly scheduled program next chapter.

Fanfic Recommendation: In the Shadow of Gods (43034 words) by AnneWhynn (Mass Effect/Halo crossover with amazing characterization.)
The bath house chapters pt 1

Chapter Summary

Our Turians go somewhere very Turian together, Nihlus tries to behave.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon: (Prepare for Turian cultural info dump!)

TCD - shorthand for the Turian closed dialect.

Stabata - a long, narrow, nine stringed instrument strummed with both hands. Due to its many resonance chambers, and the movable flanges within, it is capable of intricate sympathetic harmonics similar to Turian subvocals. (Credit: MizDirected)

"Loramici intratar rekescatius" - A traditional greeting for expected guests in the TCD. It is generally followed by the formal reply, "Espectat utamici tibitias agimetran". (Credit: MizDirected)

Ospiti - TCD for 'Guest(s)'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Torin - Male Turian of the age of majority (15). (Credit: MizDirected)

Tenia - A flowering herb used in scents and oil making. It represents resistance, the ability to block outside influences. (Credit: MizDirected)

Disignatus - Minister or official who conducts traditional ceremonies. (Credit: MizDirected)

Tenianatus - The Garden Master of a traditional Turian bathhouse, simultaneously a musician, peacekeeper, gardener, and councilor for the troubled. (Credit: stolen words from MizDirected, remixed to make a new word.)

Solanaceae - Another word for the Nightshade family of flora. (Credit: Real World)

Atropa Belladonna - Also known as 'Deadly Nightshade', it is a highly toxic hallucinogenic. (Credit: Real World)

Mandragora - Also known as 'Mandrake', a plant both medicinal and poisonous. (Credit: Real World)

Cloves and Cardamom - Two of the quintessential spices in Masala Chai, an aromatic tea of Southeast Asia. (Credit: Real World)

Familia Notas – The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow
recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition.)

Chapter Soundtrack: Barcarolle by Kawai Eri (As Athena from Aria the Animation) (Just imagine some nice, subvocal-y string instruments with this when we walk into the bath house's courtyard.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus tugged his anti-grav lockbox behind him as he disembarked the Daedalus. Nihlus trailed along beside him carrying some of his guns. The Spectre was going to escort him through customs with his new, unregistered Lancer, and put a Spectre stamp of approval on his ownership papers when they passed through station security. Technically, he could file the paperwork himself and get away with it, being C-Sec and all, but this would be much faster. No time wasted lounging at the docks waiting for bureaucracy to get it's act together.

“Oh hey, by the way, I sent off the return paperwork to your HR lady.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm. You've got the next three days off, and then they'll expect you back.”

“Why three days?”

“Uhhh ’cuz tomorrow Saren and I are doing resupply, the next day we're going to the bath house, and the day after is for recovering of course.”

“Recovering from bathing?”

“No, Blue. From the night of partying!”

“I recall a mention of 'drinks', but I'm fairly certain there wasn't any 'partying' on the schedule. Does… Saren actually 'party'?” The last was said with clear subvocal disbelief, to which the shorter torin grinned sheepishly.
“Sometimes?”

“Uhuh.”

“So anyway, take it easy tomorrow, I'll come nab you bright and early the next day, and then you'll have the day after to lament your life choices and kick out whoever you take home with you.”

“I don't generally kick people out.”

“You're too nice, Blue.”

“It's not like they won't leave eventually on their own, and letting *tarin* stick around after is how I've gotten most of my girlfriends.” Nihlus laughed his ass off at that one, as they custom's staff stared at the jovial Spectre in something like horror.

Laughing Spectres were apparently just as scary, if not more so, than serious ones. Who knew?

“Seriously? You looking to nest already?”

“What? No! Hell no.”

“Then why are you letting 'em stay? The only kind that will stick around the day after are the kind looking to stay around much longer.”

“I don't know what would give that impression...” Nihlus sighed wistfully at the socially incompetent sniper.

“Of course you don't, Blue. Oh hey, here is where I leave you. I have to help start the resupply or Saren will beat me. Toodles!” Garrus just shook his head and turned to head home.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
Disturbingly enough, Nihlus did show up at his door with a livid mark across his face. The plate was cracked along his left cheek ridge, and the accompanying eye was partially swollen shut. The very tip of the matching mandible was broken off entirely. Garrus turned to Saren with a flat look, who just raised a brow at him blandly.

“No, no, it wasn't him. My own fault.” He blinked an apologetic nod at Saren, who shrugged with disconcern.

“He tripped while carrying a cargo container, dropped the container, landed with his face to the edge.” Garrus winced in sympathy.

“You still want to go to the bath house today? I could call and reschedule our reservation... You'd have to be really careful around that eye.”

“Hell yeah I do. It's only a few hours old, and it'll be good as new by this afternoon anyways. Besides, people find scars attractive.” He wasn't sure where the *torin* had gotten that impression, and just barely held back a quip about Krogan women that would've been awfully unkind to hear right before going out for a night. He had no intention of spoiling Nihlus' mood, he'd been talking about this little adventure all week in excitement.

“Alright then, let's go.”

The walk to the rapid-transit station only took a few minutes, though it was a bit of a drive to the location itself on another ward. The traffic wasn't particularly great either, but they made it. The skycar came to a stop on the transit's landing pad, and rest of the way was made on foot. Garrus noticed that Saren was dedicated about checking his oncoming lines of sight and escape vectors, even among the usually pleasant streets of the Citadel's nicest district short of the presidium. Conversely, Nihlus was the one to stop a passing pickpocket who'd gone for Saren's credit chit. The carmine plated Spectre had pulled the duct rat away before the tiny Asari ever even got in range to 'accidentally run into' the other agent, spinning the kid around and pointing off in another direction with a cheerful, “Good try kid. Remember not to watch their pockets, look at feet ‘kay?”

The C-Sec Officer pretended the whole thing never happened. Hadn't Pallin said something about not working while not on duty? Why yes, yes he had. Well then.

Saren paid the whole thing no mind. Hard eyed black ops agents, sure, but they both had a few soft spots on their plates. Nihlus had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that children were his, but it seemed like Saren might be on the same page, morally if not emotionally.
They took a sky bridge into another tower, and down along a glass and chrome walk way, coming upon the conspicuous Turian-style bath house with no warning. One minute it was modern architecture of metal and plastics, then they rounded a corner and suddenly everything in front of them was marble columns and hanging lamps, incense trays and gently rustling heraldry. Garrus chanced a glance at his companions to see if they were suitably impressed with his suggestion. He was rewarded with the sight of Nihlus’ eyes widening in glee, and the barely perceptible increase in walking pace for the other ST&R agent.

“Ooooh shiiiit. These are some sweet digs, Blue.”

“Language, Nihlus. Try to refrain from embarrassing yourself in the establishment.”

“What he means to say is, 'We are going someplace nice. Do not talk to anyone, touch anything, and in particular do not sign anything.'” Garrus laughed at Nihlus' self-mockery. He really wasn't that bad, but it was an entertaining image, and his 'Saren' voice was entirely on the mark.

An elegantly dressed torin in white and lavender met them at the wide-open entry way, offering the traditional welcome for an expected guest.

“Loramici intratar rekescatius, Ospiti ot Vakarian.” To which Saren offered a cordial nod, and Garrus responded formally.

“Espectat utamici, tibitiás agimetran.” He could hear Nihlus mumble the expected phrase after him uncertainly, and it occurred to him that the traditional phraseology and formal situation probably wasn't something the green eyed torin had a lot of experience with. It bubbled up as a vague hint of inexplicable guilt. Not to mention uncertainty as to why the decorated Spectre hadn't gone out to become acquainted with the finer aspects of life now that he was famous and entitled. He certainly deserved them...

The graceful host led them through a lobby of marble reliefs and jewel toned tapestries embroidered with the clan stories of the family that ran the bath house, down a long hall way brightly lit with actual flaming braziers that shone with white-gold light, and then into a richly appointed private room.

“May I provide anything else for you at this time, Ospiti?”
“No, I am provided all I could seek.”

“Very well. I leave you now, but do not hesitate to ask for your wishes. Be at peace in this safe place.”

“Thank you, we will.”

The host left them to their whims, and Garrus turned to the table that held three neatly laid out bathing robes. He began to disrobe, folding his clothing into a pile as he removed it. His thoughts returned to Nihlus' trepidation. He didn't think it was a matter of money for the Spectre, rather the lack of... insider knowledge to the various courts of the influential and high tiered. -... and didn't he feel like a asshole for thinking like that?- Surely the Spectre was a high tier, he must have begun to get invitations to events, establishments, dinner parties... How could an agent of the Galactic Council not be considered... then again, it wasn't an official Hierarchy position, so possibly Nihlus was still lower in the rankings?

Unnoticed, Saren glanced at the other grey-plated torin in askance as his crest blades caught the light when he shook his head in vain trying to loosen the tangle of thoughts. He was raised to act within the tier system, using it as a guide for behavior, but he personally had never had real respect for those higher up that hadn't proven it, nor felt that those below him deserved anything less than his best efforts on their behalf. The C-Sec Officer was perhaps the farthest from 'class-ist' that one could be. Fringe-world home colony or not, unofficial rank or not, he felt that it was deserved, no... expected for Nihlus' dedicated service in a dangerous position to a higher cause to be rewarded. It bothered him, and he wasn't one to let things go.

Garrus decided he would see to it that Nihlus had the opportunity to travel in higher circles, simple as that. The wise cracking, ever smiling Spectre brought out something protective in him. Maybe it had been the... thing... that had happened toward the end of the fight on Nodacrux. Nihlus had turned into someone else, flipped like a switch at the sight of the Salarian boy falling to the ground lifeless. Garrus would prefer that to never happen again.

"You know Blue, you look really different without the visor. I can see both your eyes, it's weird."

"My face is weird?"

"Yup."

"Thank you, we will.”
"Yours is creepy." Nihlus stopped with his shirt half off and exclaimed at him, hands on hips.

"Wait, what? No it's not!"

"Yep, super creepy." The carmine plated Spectre threw his pants at the offensive officer, who casually tossed them away unbothered.

"No!"

"Okay, fine. Your face isn't creepy if mine isn't weird." His companions joined him in exchanging clothing for bath robes, collecting the complimentary grooming kits, and heading for the door at the far side of the spacious room.

"...that's fair. I guess." Nihlus said 'guess' like they were Volus merchants and Garrus was robbing him of all profit on a trade. The sniper just winked at him, pleased that they were having a good time thus far.

They exited the room into a massive indoor courtyard, filled with flowers in bloom and hanging lanterns. The large green space had been sculpted to have gently rolling hills and a variety of semi-private spots to lounge on low-sitting settee. A Tenianatus, the Master of the Garden, sat peacefully on the side of a fountain strumming a gentle melody on a stabata in counter point to the quiet rush of water from the plant-encircled fountains that dotted the landscape. Carefully laid canals no deeper then a handspan carried trickling water from font to font, the bottom of which were wavering patterns of brightly colored stones pressed together. The light caught the stones and the moving water, projecting a sparkling multi-colored wavering onto the white marble ceiling.

Nihlus let out a low whistle of appreciation, and Garrus smiled at him broadly.

“Okay, that's it, it's official. Blue gets to pick our vacation spots from now on. Hot d-” Saren covered his mouth with a hand.

“Nihlus.”

Nihlus pulled his hand away, and trilled a quiet apology.
"Sorry, sorry. I'll try to... I'll stop. Don't be mad?"

"I am not mad, I simply require you to... rise to the occasion." Saren gave his former protégé a stern look.

“I'll do my best, I've just... I haven't been to anywhere like this before.”

"... perhaps it was remiss of me not to include a training segment on social situations during our mentorship." Saren began to walk out into the sunlight. "Consider this to be remedial work. Step one is to not use any informal language, if you can help it. Stick to the closed dialect whenever possible."

Nihlus rumbled an overdone, serious purr of acknowledgement. The silvery Spectre let out a snort, good mood seemingly restored.

They crossed the lovingly crafted indoor gardens in a slow walk, nodding politely at other Turians they passed by who were sun bathing in the artificially Palaven-bright sunlight, half-clothed and sleepy. It was a place of peace after all, not even clans that had been mortal enemies in ancient times would kick up a fight in a bath house.

It was a place you could bare your throat.

The far wall from the guest rooms was convex, pushing out in a semi-circle into the gardens, and had a huge pair of doors at the entrance. The entryway was lavishly carved stone of whorling spins and flower like geometric explosions. It had been the only closed doorway they’d encountered since their room, the whole structure designed to be open and sprawling. They entered and the air began to grow heavier with humidity. A wide brazier lit corridor stretched out into a series of variously sized semi-private enclosures lined with hundreds of tiny pearl-like pebbles. Each had touch panels to engage a privacy screen or music if desired, and the insides had comfortable looking low-stools, ground level water controls, a drain, and flexible shower heads.

Garrus led them to a larger one, built to accommodate a group of six, figuring that Saren would want more space to himself, and that Nihlus was less likely to accidentally run into anything with the slightly reduced vision on his injured side. He didn't miss the older Spectre glancing longingly at a solo enclosure, or the younger one grinning with a suspicious sparkle in his eyes at the more cramped two person divots. He snorted quietly to himself, not wanting to know. Of course, Saren hit the privacy screen on their area right away.
It was quiet, but not an awkward quiet, as they each set up a spot for themselves, bath robes set aside, low stools acquired, and grooming kits opened. Nihlus immediately started opening each and every bottle to smell them all. Most were scentless, standard products of high quality, but a few of the many bottles and jars provided had smells that were flowery or spicy, fresh or citrusy.

“Mmmmmm, smell this one. I just want to eat it.” Garrus leaned over for a whiff, a pleasant smell of cloves and cardamom rose in the air. It was rather edible smelling. Saren breathed in from over in his personal space bubble, and nodded thoughtfully.

“It does smell appreciable, however I would advice not eating it. I believe there is a bit of Solanaceae in it.”

“Sola-what-now?” Garrus laughed, he knew this one.

“Solanaceae, the Nightshade family of plants. Many of them are highly toxic... my sister was named after them actually. We always joke that she can’t exchange the bite-style bond marks with her someday-mate because she'd poison them.” Nihlus raised a finger to make a point.

“Ahhh Nightshades! I do know them by that name. Actually, there is a super fun mix of *Atropa Belladonna* and *Mandragora* that has juuuuust enough punch to make someone do anything you say for a few hours before falling asleep and remembering nothing.”

“That's your definition of super fun?” That was worrisome.

“I was being sarcastic, come on. Shooting people, dancing, and blowing things up are more my speed. That compound is incredibly helpful in Spectre work though. No muss, no murder, no fuss. Less torture for intel.” Shooting people, dancing, explosives. Well, that was closer to par for the course.

“You aren't allowed to use that on me, I just hope you know. My vengeance would be swift and terrible.” Nihlus smiled a secret, playful grin at him.

“That's the point, Blue. You wouldn't know I'd used it on you. I could have had my way with you on your C-Sec desk, and you'd neverrr knowww.” Garrus' subvocals rolled with mock horror as Nihlus' trilled that out in a sing-song voice.
“You can be outright disturbing sometimes, you know that?” Bright laughter filled their little space as they went about rising off the dust and beginning to rub gritty salt scrubs into the nooks and crannies of plates and hide.

“I'm just teasing. I've used the stuff, maybe, fifteen times. Not exactly something one does to their... uh... friends.” Garrus' subvocals came back with 'Friends only as long as you don't rape me.' in a teasing rumble. The reply of which was a bar of soft soap tossed at his head. It got him right in the fringe, sticking there impaled. He pulled at it, looking up at Nihlus in betrayal. The carmine plated Spectre fell off his low-stool laughing.

After an initial wash they each began their personal grooming rituals, though Nihlus took a few minutes to remember how to breathe.

Saren filed all twelve talons to a razor edge, taking the time to trim cuticles and rub in sealant along the cracks and splits that naturally occurred. He followed with a brief rasping of his crest in a side mirror, sharpening them just a hint, paying careful attention to his Valluvian horns and their long curve. The detective could tell that the younger Spectre was specifically not paying any attention to his former mentor's grooming choices, showing a determined attempt at politeness even though he'd used the same topic to tease and manipulate Saren's mild hint of vanity before.

Well, he really was trying.

As for the clever red torin's bathing habits... he was less careful, mostly just buffing away uneven plate and adding sealant haphazardly to the most cracked or pitted edges. He did even out his mandible tips, as thankfully they'd grow back in their own time. The symmetry made him look a little less beat up. Nihlus ignored his talons entirely, opting to spend far more time messing around with the scented products. Garrus was fairly certain he'd gone through the entire jar of spicy salts that he'd liked, and dug around for his own, sliding it over to the humming figure. It tapped the dark brown hide of his heel, and he looked down, chirping joyfully and offering a wide smile in return. Damn that torin was attractive...

The sniper purposefully refocused on his bathing, telling himself not to eye up his companions, regardless of the fantastic shape they were in. Yet, he couldn't entirely help but catch a glance at Saren out of the corner of his eye; suddenly never being able to un-know that yes, the male was silver and grey everywhere. Unusual for a Turian... he berated himself for his inappropriate thoughts. It was not even socially acceptable to be so much as flirtatious in here until after bathing, even for bonded pairs. Garrus had no intent to be flirtatious at all... he realized that it was an excellent thing they were going out that night. He could really use some stress relief. It was probably why his hormones were being obnoxious.

Nihlus had rinsed the last salt scrub away and was going for another pass on a particularly rough
patch of hide, though he was using a fair bit more then was needed.

"You know you can keep the extras, right?" Nihlus had been just about to take another handful of the goop, hearing this however, he opted to take much less and re-close the lid, stuffing the jar into his collar like a thief might tuck away loot. Garrus turned away from the theatrics with a snort.

Since they were in no hurry, and Nihlus' pace was lackadaisical at best, Garrus took the time to neaten the line of his own fringe, but held back from taking the rasp to his more sensitive crest blades. He didn't particularly care if they were sharp, and they looked even enough. He didn't feel the need to mention that he hated the feel of the rasp on them, it left his nerves lightly buzzing in discomfort for hours. Leaving his talons alone for a cosmetologist to do, mostly out of sheer laziness and a little bit because they'd rub his hands and forearms while the sealing polymers dried.

His bathing rituals came to a sudden halt when his hand picked up the compound to remove his slightly faded and dinged markings. They were getting worn down, and it was a good opportunity to have them redone. He could do his familia notas himself in a pinch, but he was an artist with a sniper rifle not a paint brush, and preferred for them to look cleanly done. On the other hand, he'd never bathed with a barefaced Turian before, and Garrus didn't want to have them redone in front of Saren. It seemed... cruel?

“It is fine, Vakarian.” He looked up to see Saren still at the mirror, watching him. Did the Spectre miss anything?

“I didn't... I don't want to be rude. I... can't say I've ever...” He tried to fall back on the formal societal rules for an explanation, but couldn't find the right words. He did not want to say anything that remotely insinuated, even vaguely, that he didn't normally lower himself to bathe with barefaces, and would you please explain the appropriate procedure for such a thing? He swallowed and tried again, determined not to be... he respected Saren immensely... Suddenly the words came to him.

“I know I've said this before, but to reiterate, I respect you more then anyone else I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Under no circumstances do I want it to seem like I think poorly or less of you because our social circumstances are so different. I want to get my notas touched up, but I won't do it if it offends you in any way. I would rather strip them now and repaint them when I got home, if that's the case.” An offer to walk from bathhouse to home, barefaced beside him. Not entirely inside the realm of acceptable behavior, but the most honest olive branch he could offer while still respecting his own clan to a permissible degree.

Saren went still in the reflection, a nearly invisible drop of his mandible height gave away his surprise at the words. Good, hopefully the Spectre believed his sincerity. A few heart beats passed as their eyes held in the mirror, then the electric gaze returned to dead center as rasping continued.
“It would be a shame to waste the opportunity to have them redone properly.”

“...alright. Thank you.”

It was quiet for a while after that.

Chapter End Notes

Mind canon: The tiny, fragile tips to mandibles regrow easily. There is no way everyone and their mother doesn't break those things off in boot camp at least once.

Fanfic Recommendation: The Care Feeding of Spectres (35,926 words) by Aelia Douglass (FemShep/Turian Janitor OC) (Yes, you read that correctly.)
The bath house chapters pt 2

Chapter Summary

Saren is mildly pleased. No one is rude, stares, runs screaming... it's a nice day.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Faledin regil - Greeting used in formal situations (Credit: MizDirected)
Fragrutis - A dextro cactus native to Palaven. Very spicy, has a tart, savory flavor. (Credit: MizDirected)
Cisera - A non-alcoholic, foamy cider made from the juice of 20+ varieties of edible cactus analogues. (Credit: MizDirected)
Ospiti- closed dialect for 'guest' (Credit: MizDirected)
Umeshu - a type of Japanese liquor where unripe plums and sugar are steeped in alcohol, and overtime the alcohol takes on a sweet and sour taste. (Real World)

Chapter Soundtrack: Sound of the Wind by Yae (Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles OST)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saren was rather pleased with the establishment thus far. The internal thermostat was set to Palaven temperatures instead of the constantly chilly Citadel norm. The staff were polite. Privacy screens kept their activities private, he'd yet to find any spyware or bugs, and the architecture was... well he would hesitate to call himself an expert, but he did have a bit of a 'thing' for good aesthetics and structural design... the location and décor were appreciable.

Having come to an end of his desired grooming, The Spectre rose from his stool, indicating to his companions that he was finished. Nihlus, having re-groomed about four times in order to mess with the bathing products, was definitely done as well. Garrus had been patiently dripping dry until they were ready.

All done, they left the pearl-stone enclave behind and followed along the corridor of grooming rooms, and there were many. At the end, a tarin was waiting behind a desk beside another wide-open entry way that lead into the bathing pools. A unobtrusive scanner ran over them, likely populating her screen with their booking details.

“Faledin regil, Mr. Vakarian, Mr... and guests. How has your experience been with us thus far?”
Saren thought it was rather comical that the bath house assumed it could scan Spectres with any
success using such a device. Then again, the privacy modules in his chest and limbs utterly baffled almost every scanner on the public market. He gave her credit for smoothly moving on.

“It's been wonderful, thank you.” He allowed Vakarian to do the talking since he was able, willing, and apt.

“I'm so glad to hear that. Here is the passkey for your private room, it can be accessed via the stair way on the right hand side after you walk in. Are there any additional services I can arrange for you today?”

“Yes, I'd like to arrange for my talons to be done, and Familia Notas application.”

“Of course. I have a note on your file that you prefer artist Helioteras. He is currently in session, would you like to book his next available appointment, or would another artist be preferable?”

“I'll wait for him to be available, no need to rush. We aren't in a hurry today.”

“Very good, I'll arrange that for you. Do you have a preference for your talon services?”

“Anyone who does a really good hand massage?” The tarin laughed like dual-toned wind chimes. It was likely a request she heard often.

“Estea is my personal favorite, would she work for you?”

“Perfect. Can you add an order for fragruts umeshu for three?”

“Of course.”

She turned to the next farthest from the desk, trying to accommodate normal tier order even though she had no clue who they were, and they were standing in no particular arrangement. It happened to be Nihlus. Saren found himself entertained and pleased that she was trying so hard to be polite. It was to her credit.
“What about you sir?” Nihlus looked like a deer in the head lights. He had been visibly trying to behave, and Saren took pity on him.

“Both he and I need no services, but would care for a pitcher of Cisera.”

“Certainly. I'll have those brought up to you. Is there anything else I can offer you Ospiti?”

Saren shook his head negatively.

“Well then, please enjoy your time here, and do not hesitate to ask for your wishes if there is anything else I can do for you.”

They passed her by and went through to the pools. The main room was a study of marble in various states of cutting. Some areas, such as the entrance to the first and largest bath, were a smoothly cut slab that slowly descended at a tilt into deeper water. Other chunks of marble were left raw, like the edges of a rock quarry, nearly arranged and interspersed with native Palaven plant life. The largest pool took up a major portion of the room, being at ground level and descending down to a meter and a half or so with a shelf cut into the sides at sitting level. The stone cut bench was smattered with adults, lounging against the pool's sides.

To the far left and right were wandering staircases cut into the marble that led to a second tier walk way that circled the room, even above the door way, and led to smaller pools.

Saren glanced causally around as they took the stairs, enjoying the clean aesthetics that were left-right symmetrical, but were intermingled with chunks of more organic design, both raw boulders and plants. A thin reed with feathery leaves that grew up from the base garnished the edges of many pools attractively, wavering in the rising heat. The second tier's pools were clearly the most popular, having a greater variety of depth to accommodate child safe water depths, and subsequent splashing of said children. Though even the younglings playing were relatively quiet and polite, making games of staying underwater the longest, or making the largest bubble stream from their noses. The parents watched and laughed at their antics while drinking and talking among themselves.

The room's cavernous ceiling echoed with the sounds of Turian people relaxing, enjoying themselves in the artificial hot springs.

Saren was inordinately relieved they were all too distracted or polite to stare at his exotic facial structure, battle scars, or implants. Further, Vakarian was temporarily barefaced beside him, but even
then no one seemed to care, or pay attention to it. If this kept up, he did not think he would ever visit a different bath house again. He had never had such a blasé reaction before. His aural augment were not even picking up veiled whispers about him. It was... very nice. A nice change.

Was it this place? Bathing with companions? Particularly unconcerned patrons at the time? Perhaps further research was needed.

A return trip in the future may be necessary.

Their trio turned a corner after finishing the walk up the stairs and around the circle, Garrus leading them down a short hall way toward private rooms. Swiping the keycard, he let them in. The room behind the door was suitably impressive. A miniature version of the décor outside surrounded a massive stone tub with a variety of seating levels cut into the marble sides for different ages and heights. Trailing vines crept up the walls near the corners, and the back wall was a raw stone border to a sizable fish tank with colorful dextro-fish swimming about inside. There was enough room around the pool to pace if one wished to, and enough room inside to fit at least six Elcor. It was perfect.

Saren still ran a scan for bugs, contagions, and various other things out of curiosity. He merely found a VI that listened in for key words that would indicate a need for aid or request for services, it's connected storage device not saving any conversations. 'No spying devices at all?' He was almost disappointed, this was such an excellent spot for gathering intelligence...

No matter. He supposed it was to the establishment's good name that credit went for a lack of such devices. Perhaps they swept the rooms prior to use? Saren found himself caring significantly less as he lowered into the pool's molten heat. Nihlus let out a long low groan of wild abandon at the feeling, of course sounding ridiculously sexual about it. Vakarian at least had merely dissolved into an even hum with only a mild warbling of relief in it as he sunk right down in the deepest part, the water coming over his head. His breath made bubbles that surfaced along the sides of his fringe as it escaped from the gap between mandible and upper jaw.

Saren allowed himself a long, pleased sigh.

For a little while they just melted, the heat making them sleepy and relaxed. Turians really were warm climate creatures.
A/N: I was too excited for bath houses, and forgot about the pirate Asari! Damnit, me. You can assume Saren and Nihlus dealt with her yesterday. The Matriarch was super thankful to them, super pissed at her kid, and happily signed off the ship to Saren along with a nice cash bonus as recompense for still *having* an offspring. I'll try and remember to tie that all back in later. <3

Fanfic Recommendation: [Followed Him Home](#) (2823 words) by [madamebadger](#)
(Mom!FemShep & Grunt)
A few moments into their pleasant soak, the door chimed. Nihlus pushed down the tiny voice in his head that said, 'if they are here to tell you to leave you should just kill them and go back to cooking yourself'. It hadn't been difficult to suppress however, as even his sometimes psychotic subconscious felt like wet tissue paper in the heated mineral water.

Thankfully, it was just a staff member come by with drinks, who didn't enter until Blue called out permission. Everyone was so nice here... he chastised himself for thinking about killing anyone in this place. Not only did he know it was very bad manners to start a fight in bath house, -even in the much lower quality ones he'd been to as a kid-, but also because they were all so nice. He hadn't had to glare down anyone for talking shit about Saren either, and that was the norm when people saw him. Even when the Spectres were just walking down the street, minding their own business.

'This is all just so... nice.'

Nihlus lamented the death of his articulacy as he pulled himself out of a sprawl and slow-walked through the water, closer to these drinks to be had... He needn't have bothered however, as Garrus took the trays from the torin and set them down right on the water after thanking him. The trays
floated, little mass effect generators on the sides to stabilize them in case of waves. They were lit up by a soft blue glow from LEDs on the underside that made flickers against the pool's bottom.

'So neat.'

Yup, it was official. His brain was cooked, and four letter words were as complicated as he could get for the moment. He decided to make it worse by accepting the tiny cup of liquor Blue held out in offer. Might as well make a day of it, that was the point of all this after all, right? Mmmm... the syrupy alcohol was spicy, a little bitter, a little sweet, and strong as shit. Oh, that was goooooood.

The door chimed again, and a this time a drop dead gorgeous *tarin* wrapped in a flowy silken bathrobe the color the sea of entered as well. Her plates were a mellow red behind mint-green markings and yellow eyes. She had a small pile of towels in one arm and a large carrying case in the other.

'Ahah, one of the service staff. Mmmm, those hips... Speaking of four letter words...'

“Mr. Vakarian?” She inquired to the room at large, turning to Garrus when he rose a hand to wave. “Hello, I'm Estea Oraka, I'll be doing your talons today. Do you have any injuries or preferences I should know about before I start?”

“Not really, m'am. Just neaten them up if you would, I haven't been by in a long time and they're sort of a mess. Sorry about that.” Nihlus snorted, of course he would apologize for something like that. Blue was a new and previously undiscovered level of niceness. He supposed it wasn't a surprise that his suggestion of day trip had been a place for nice people, run by nice people. He took another sip of *umeshu*.

“No worries, sir. I'll have them in good shape soon.”

The *tarin* sat down on the pool side with her legs in the water, laid a towel on her lap, and pulled the sniper's hand onto it. She proceeded to unhurriedly clean, trim, reshape, and seal his talons into fairly sharp and well groomed lines using the largest variety of oddments and tools from her carrying case. As the outer coat of sealant settled, she rubbed some sort of oil into the hide of his hand and arm, before removing the oil with a cleaner. She moved to the other side and repeated it on the other hand. Her subject was a boneless pile of happy Vakarian, letting Estea lift and reposition him like a ragdoll as needed.
Without a word, the cosmetologist stood and slipped off her robe before settling into the water, and pulling out her own little set of flotation devices, one for her basic tools, the other Garrus obligingly lifted a foot onto. She dried his leg back to the water line and repeated her talon magic and massage. Nihlus finished off his drink and poured another, looking over at their third number to find Saren leaned back into the pool side with arms crossed. He was watching the proceedings with a strangely liquid gaze that made Nihlus prick his tongue against sharp teeth purposefully. He was absolutely not going to let his plates loosen right now. It was a good thing he was a pro-hand at self denial and control.

Still, the carmine plated Spectre refilled Saren's *Cisera* cider, and brought a cup of liquor along side it. He set them down by the *torin's* shoulder without a word, and moved back to his seat. He watched surreptitiously to see if his fellow Spectre would accept the alcoholic drink, something only indulged in on rare occasion. Nihlus thought for a moment about that, coming up with a scant three times since they'd known each other during which his favorite grumpy asshole had chilled out enough to drink for personal enjoyment, not including meetings with informants and what-not on Spectre business. They didn't count, he determined, because Saren had likely taken preemptive medication to avoid so much as slight tipsiness on a mission.

As the *tarin* was finishing up on the second foot, the door chimed again, and after permission in walked another staff member. He was tiny, shorter then Saren even, charcoal plates painted with banded red markings and pale orange eyes. Small, and if not handsome, then certainly striking. Garrus smiled at him and waved as Estea got out and began to dry off. He smiled back but couldn't wave, both hands full of supplies.

“Hello Garrus. How have you been?” The cosmetologist raised a brow at the informal greeting, but shrugged it off and gathered her things, nodding politely before leaving.

“I'm doing... perfect. Life has been good to me lately. Interesting. You?" The *torin*, likely the artist Helioteras come to redo the sniper's *Familia Notas*, sat down behind him, letting feet dangle in the water and settling a shaped cushion between his legs. Garrus dropped his head back onto it and got comfortable with the angle as a briefcase of artist supplies was opened to the side, and it's internal shelves stretched out to provide easy access to countless bits and bobbles.

“I'm glad to hear that. I've been well myself, though rather busy.”

“So I heard. I hope I'm not adding to the pile?" The darker *torin* laughed.

“Oh you are, but you're a welcome addition to it. Now if only you'd remember to strip the color from around your nose with more care...”
“Did I miss some again?”

“You did.”

“Sorry, Lio.”

“It’s alright.” said the artist with an absent stroke of silvery brow as he cleaned out the deeper topography of Garrus’ face with care. Nihlus narrowed his eyes at that. Touching someone's face was really personal, and granted a lot of it was going to happen as Blue got his marks redone... but that stroke had been not-quite-professional. He eyed the Notas artist suspiciously.

“Let's see... if I remember correctly, you have palaveni style marks, yes? With the secondary flare on the mandible for the Uni wars?”

“Yeah. The extra set on my cheeks too, for the rebellions. I also have the broad strip over the nose from my mom's side, with the dash for hastatim service.”

Nihlus blinked rapidly trying to process that. He knew that markings were originally based strictly on colony, as a historical update to the cities of different tribes, but had moved to a combination of colony and family history as galactic travel made moving about so simple and common. The oldest clans especially kept the markings of their oldest recorded homeworld, with individual and historical choice additions to personalize it, but... hot damn.

Blue's family had fought in the Reunification Wars, obviously on the winning side, the Krogan Rebellions, given some sort of major sacrifice to the Hierarchy as a whole, and he'd personally served in a hastatim squad. Spirits, fuck... he knew the sniper was from a prestigious family, but he hadn't know the torin was quite so... so totally and completely out of his social weight class. The odds of seducing him into bed dropped to a sad, small number. Nihlus estimated maybe three percent?

He bit back a sigh, and watched the striking artist begin to mix paint colors. Helioteras dumped tiny spoonfuls of colored powder from different jars into a central bowl, mixing it into a creamy base and modifying the tone until Garrus agreed it was correct. He hadn't needed many corrections, Nihlus thought grumpily, he must have done Blue's face a few times before.

The artist began to paint in the outline with loving care, and Nihlus looked away to refill his drink. He went to check Saren's as well, who was now eyes-closed and drooping. Clearly the hot springs
had been the best idea ever, as Nihlus cheered up a bit to see that both his drinks were gone. He
topped them off again with an innocent look on his face, and returned to his seat with a tight grin
forced into a vapid smile.

'You may have your hands all over his face right now, you artsy foppish asshole, but he's going out
tonight with meeew~~~'

Nihlus was perhaps not the nicest person.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A rant about markings, social rules, and body language:

So there is my mind canon on markings. I base it off the fact that the official name for
them 'colony markings' indicates a strong tie in to historical homeland/homeworld, but
very clearly we see exceptions that cannot mean they are *only* based on that. A good
example is Nihlus and Sparatus, their markings are nearly identical. Nihlus is from a
non-hierarchy merc base. There is no damn way the Turian Councilor is from outside
hierarchy space. There is meritocracy and then there is 'people are people, and people
are judgmental assholes'. So Nihlus either had to earn those marks himself or be given
them from an authority that could do so. Parents? Colonial government? I'll get into my
interpretation on that later, but allowing for them to be colony influenced but not
*strictly* that fills in the plot hole nicely. Another example: Garrus and his dad. Their
markings are similar, but his dad has no stripe over the nose. So we surmise he got that
from somewhere else, and I chanced a guess at it being from his mom's side of the
family. Why would that be a thing, then? Because the markings have meaning beyond
the plain origin they indicate. My guess is obviously that some modifications are made
based on the history of the clan and individual. What better reason to make personal
modification to your face paint then 'my great x12 grandpa fought in the Uni wars, and
that's why all of you have a stable government. You're welcome.' Saren and his brother
also don't match, as Desolas has markings at all. I could keep going on with the Victus
father and son, -and some other side characters-, but you get the picture.

Now here is my additional take on aliens getting markings. Say an Asari bonds into the
clan. Asari are known to wear facial markings of their own, though it's apparently
cosmetic. This is the kind of oddball cultural blending thing where the Asari may choose
to get markings, or may not. May choose to keep them, and live along side the family's
next 6 generations of Turians as the years pass... or maybe remove them after a period of
mourning on the mate's death. It's going to be a new enough thing in galactic culture that
all kinds of situations will happen. No different then some people getting a civil service
with rings, and other people doing a hand fasting at a renaissance faire. People are
different.

Lastly, I know people write all sorts of esoteric things about the markings, about Turian
body language, about touch. Let's just be straight: Skin, hide, plate... it will all get worn
down over time. Markings will have to get refreshed somehow, especially in a culture of precision and organization. Fastidiously well kept markings would be important. Especially if you're about to be awarded a medal or do something ceremonial. If you don't believe me about the wear down, go read about osteoclasts, then come back and tell me how plate could possibly work much differently. No really, if you have a good theory I'm happy to listen. I like to mind-canon based on facts and logic. So anyway, then if markings have to be redone, someone's gotta do it. I will never be convinced they all do it themselves, duckies! Neverrrr! Not everyone and their mother is an artist, and some of those markings are really intricate. Try drawing Nihlus' markings on paper, and do it evenly. Glwt.

Also-also, touching of soft hide and face-to-face is going to be important and have social rules in a species mostly covered in tough plate. That does not mean they all wear armor 24/7 and never touch each other. Any psychologist would tell you how bad that is for people, and honestly? Turians are the closest to humans in the ME world, psychologically.

If you read my rant, thanks for listening! If you didn't, it's no probs, I understand I'm sort of a nutbar about these things. <3

Fanfic Recommendation: The Soft Rain (2741 words) by damalur
The bath house chapters pt 4

Chapter Summary

In which Saren, Garrus, and Nihlus finish cooking themselves and go out for those aforementioned drinks. The night ends with Saren being unaccountably kind. Must've been something in the water.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Tenianatus - The Garden Master of a traditional Turian bathhouse, simultaneously a musician, peacekeeper, gardener, and councilor for the troubled. (Credit: stolen words from MizDirected, remixed to make a new word.)

Familia Notas - The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition.)

Nais - Pronoun for Asari (Credit: MizDirected)

Torin - Male adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)

Cariose - A lawless world of towering Prothean ruins overpopulated by the worst the galaxy has to offer. Omega on land.

Chapter Soundtrack: MØ - Don't Wanna Dance (With Nobody But You)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His task complete the Notas artist packed up his things, and gently lifted Garrus' head away to retrieve the cushion. That it involved that little shit's hand along the back of a tawny scalp nearly drew a growl out of the pretending-to-be-busily-relaxing Spectre. He managed to catch it in time as he watched for further offences from a deceptively lazy sprawl.

“Stay still for a while as the last coating sets, alright?”

“Sure thing Lio, and I promise not to wait so long to refresh the colors next time. I might even
remember to clean around my nose.” Helioteras sighed with a teasing rumble.

“I somehow doubt that. I would stay and chat, but I have to move on today...”

“More appointments?”

“Yes.”

“Next time then.” The sniper returned with a lazy wave.

“Of course, Garrus. Take care.”

A little snarky version of Nihlus inside his own head pantomimed the effeminate, wispy tone as he said 'Of course, Garrus.', with accompanying coquettish giggling into hand and swooning subvocals in the most mocking tones possible. He didn't trust that torin's manners, they were too... too... something. He was a sneak, and maybe it takes one to know one, but Nihlus was at least sure his own intentions were... okay, not 'pure' exactly, but well meant. He had Blue's best interests at heart.

Surely staying alive, getting laid, killing criminals, and having fun were the very best of best interests?

His internal denigration of the artist's character was interrupted by a polite, mumbled request for more drink from Saren. A much more pleasant thing to focus on, so he did.

At some point, an indeterminate amount of time later, Saren sat up straight for the first time in what must have been hours. The drinks were all long gone, and the three of them were par-boiled to perfection. Nihlus felt as if getting up was the last thing he wanted to do, short of rough sex with an Elcor.

'No wonder we Turians drown instead of swim. With the higher surface temperature on Palaven, our ancestors probably turned into useless piles of plate anytime someone fell into a pool of water.'
He didn't care to try and think out the logistics of that theoretically ridiculous premise, it made enough sense in his head. Speaking of his head, the other Spectre was prodding him in the side of the fringe with his heel. Ohhh yeah. He was supposed to be moving. He looked up at the other torin plaintively, who just stared back with mild eyes. Even their electric glow was more mellow then usual.

“Up Nihlus. Or do you not want to eat?” Wait, wait, what was this about food?

“Food?” Yeah, one word answers were about all he could do.

“Yeess. Did you not hear Vakarian just speak? It is approaching dinner time, and a meal is provided as part of the visit. If you are not coming, I will be glad to take care of your portion.” He didn't doubt it. Biotics could eat like Krogan, and Saren was no exception. He wondered in passing how horrible the calorie requirements were for Krogan biotics.

He shook away the heat-and-napping induced delirium and got out of the pool. Slowly. A towel was draped over his shoulders and another one pressed into his hands. He'd mentioned that Blue was just the nicest torin ever, hadn't he?

'Mmmm fluffy towel.' Nihlus shoved his face into it and tried to gather the fucks needed to move.

He managed to get going before more physical abuse was handed out, wrapping back up into the bath robe and dropping the towels down a laundry chute by the door. Their sniper lead the group back out, all the way to the private room, where they found a meal just being laid out for them at a small square dining table.

'Damn, these people have their timing down...' He thought it might be magic, then realized it was probably some signal from the tarin at the desk... then decided that wasn't as cool, and that it was definitely mystical in nature. He also thought he might be high on steam and mildly drunk.

Garrus opened a window into the courtyard, and they listened to the Tenianatus perform as the food disappeared rapidly. It wasn't long before they were sprawled out in the seating area, falling away into truly epic food comas, though Saren had stuck a handful of devices by the doors and window first. Garrus expressed hope that they were just detection alarms and not... explosive or anything. Nihlus maintained that Blue was adorable before passing out.
Saren came to a few hours later feeling incredibly well. For someone who ran on stress hormone levels in his day-to-day that would give others a cardiac event, being this relaxed was a suffusive feeling of wellness he had not known in many a year. His shock traps had not been tripped by careless interlopers either, so he reclaimed them and nudged Nihlus and Vakarian awake. Nihlus whined like a five year old fledgling.

“Wake. Your other option is what I did after the Cariose mission.”

“I'm up! 'mmup! Shit, how can you have any grouchy left? Do you keep spare fuel for it in your left leg or something...”

“Nihlus, L-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Language. I'm getting up, gimme a minute.” Having reattained various levels of consciousness, they went to get dressed. Saren first scanned their clothing for bugs.

“Well, I supposed it can't hurt...” The officer said with passive amusement.

“He seems crazy, but really our job’s given him pretty justified paranoia. I'd scan mine too if it were just me here. We did leave our clothing unattended.”

“I- suppose that's fair enough. I'll be upset if there is anything in them though.”

“You may rest easy then, Vakarian. They show no sign of tampering.”

“Good.”

Nihlus cleared his throat as they exited the room fully clothed and turned toward the entrance. “So uh, Blue... how do we pay for this?”

“I took care of it, don't worry about it.”
“Wait seriously? This had to be super expensive.”

“Would you like me to tell you about this amazing new gun I got? It's called an M7 Lancer...”

“Oh *spirits*, no, you are not allowed to tell me about that gun anymore. In fact, you aren't allowed to talk about it for the rest of the night either.”

“That seems unnecessary. What if I want to use it as a conversation topic later on?”

“Not if you want to score an Asari, you won't.”

“I generally go for other Turians...”

“Oh hoho! Blue isn't into softskins? Is this speciesism from a police officer?”

“Personal dating preference, you brat. I have no idea how to even complete the act with an Asari.”

“It involves brain sex.”

“Yeah... no thanks.”

“What a shame. Well I think I'll see if I can't round up a Salarian.”

“... okay, that's impossible, even for a Spectre.”

“Not for mee~~”

“Even for you.”
“I’ve done it before.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Psssh. Watch and learn officer, watch and learn.”

The lobby’s host offered them the formal goodbyes and invitations to return, even to Saren. The trio left the building and returned to the rapid-transit terminal, where Nihlus hit the keysequence for Purgatory. The ride was long, taking them quite a while to get from Bachjret Ward to the Presidium, but at least the traffic was lighter then it had been earlier.

“So Saren, how did the turn-over go with the Matriarch yesterday?”

“Rather well. The naïs was pleased to have the offspring returned, and the would-be pirate had no commentary to offer.”

“What he means to say is that the little shit was so damn terrified of him that the brat didn’t manage to so much as look up during the conversation. The Matriarch handed over the paperwork for the ship’s registry, and a generous ’donation’ too. I’m faiiiirly certain Saren is just going to turn around and spend it on the Daedalus.”

“No, actually. I have investment plans.”

“Wait, what, really?”

“I intend to buy into Binary Helix, so that I might control a company share large enough to encourage research in the forums of my preference.”

“What happened to upgrading your shields?”

“The new power draw from the main canon during combat is much lower then before. I am able to overclock the existing shields sufficiently with the extra energy at hand.”
Nihlus turned to Garrus with an accusing look but joking subvocals. “You enabler.”

The C-Sec Officer just laughed, unabashed.

They arrived at Purgatory to the sound of thudding bass and half-yelled background chatter, and took up a table by the third level's dance floor. Saren leaned back into the semi-circle booth with a sigh as Nihlus acquired them drinks. The music was not his preference, but it was tolerable at least. The silvery Spectre had dealt with much worse when gathering intel in the seedier parts of the galaxy. He had agreed to come in exchange for not having to clean the disgusting entrails of Vorcha out of the cargo bay of his new secondary ship though, and he was a torin of his word. Usually.

The larger, more poorly outfitted spacecraft was a bad fit for a Spectre, and currently sat in a long term docking space. He was considering further how to make the most of it as a resource when Nihlus returned.

“And the purple drink with the fruit chunks for the lovely Officer, aaaand a double brandy on ice for the handsome Spectre, and one of each for me.” Vakarian chuckled at Nihlus' charming delivery, and Saren took a pull of his brandy. The implants on his tongue reporting it's quality and lack of poisons to his optical HUD. He let it slide down his throat with another sigh.

“How did you even order this for me if you didn't know the name?”

“I just described it to the bartender. What is it, by the way?”

“It's called a Dextro Heat Sink.”

“Ohh! Is that why the fruit chunks are red?”

“Probably so. I just drink it for the taste.”

“Girlyyy~~~”
“You got one too.”

“Yes, well, I have my metro moments. Do you see these legs?” Suddenly Nihlus spun and lifted a leg into Vakarian's lap. “They're like a license that entitles me to be girly if the mood hits.” The sniper clasped a hand on the red-brown ankle in his lap and snorted with laughter at the younger Spectre's over-the-top self aggrandizement.

His self-esteem sometimes was a thing to behold in it's hubris. Not that Saren thought his protégé was... unattractive. Certainly ridiculous, however.

A few drinks in and said ridiculous Spectre made for the dance floor, a large rectangular swathe of underlit panels that was uncrowded but had plenty of other dancers. He went straight for a blue toned Salarian on the side closest to them, casually coming up along side the man with a gentle brush of bare talon on arm, something between a warning of approach and a greeting. They danced for a while, getting closer as time passed. Vakarian was looking on with an amused smile, his head tilted to the side as he watched. Studying Nihlus' technique? Perhaps.

Saren tried to listen in to what was being said, but it was too far away for him to hear what sweet-nothings were being whispered into the side of a light-blue speckled horn base. Especially not over the music.

Nihlus swept the back of a hand down a long blue neck, leaning in to kiss. The Salarian was amenable to this, and the two of them made out on the dance floor, entirely ignored by the other patrons.

“How... did he even?”

“Mystery of the universe.” Saren deadpanned.

“They're kissing.”

“Indeed.”

“He's Turian!”
“Correct.”

“Where did he even learn to- How is the Salarian not terrified of his teeth? I have to be careful not to show mine at work, even just making the wrong facial expression, or I send witnesses and colleagues running. From talking.”

“That sounds accurate to my experience as well.”

“They're still...”

“Vakarian, might I advise you attempt to seek your own partner if such things interest you so?”

“It isn't my turn yet.”

“...your turn?”

“Mhmmm. He has to get shot down first before I can try.”

“....is that why you are sitting here watching? You are waiting for him to finish. Like a round in a game?” The sniper smiled at him and swirled his drink.

“I take it you... didn't much play this game during your civil service?”

“It is actually a game?”

“Yeah. I don't think it has an official name or anything, but... shore leave is for letting off steam. When a huge group hits the local bars? You can't all try and flirt with the tarin with the nicest waist at once. So.... take turns.”

“I see. No, my experience was somewhat different.” Saren waited for the inevitable question of 'So how was life in the cabals?' so he could explain he'd never gone, and then Vakarian could get over chastising him for hiding his ability. It was a familiar dance...
“Fair enough, I admit it probably wasn't the most healthy cycle of day to day existence. A lot of people caught things living so loosely. Not that I was much better, but I also kept up on my health checks.”

“...no existential dread of needles or medbays?”

“Not after the gene augs I went through, no.”

“I had noticed...” Saren winced at himself. Here was Vakarian not prying too much, and instead his curiosity got the better of him and he was the one prying.

“That I'm tall and built? It's not exactly something easily hidden. This sort of shape takes work to maintain, sure, but I wouldn't be able to achieve it without the in utero genemods and augments that my clan paid for. The process wasn't fun... but it's paid off many times over.”

“In C-Sec?”

“Not... with them so much. Before...”

“With the hastatim?” The officer nodded, and Saren forced himself not to inquire further. Nihlus had disappeared in the crowd as they spoke, but he wove back through now, coming to the table. He held up his Omni-tool, to show them his success. In the contacts list an extra-net address entry was brought up, the picture attached was him and the Salarian, shirtless in a corridor, and attached at the mouth.

Garrus began slow clapping.

Nihlus bowed.

“Thank you, thank you. All proceeds go to the Nihlus Kyrik for Primarch campaign fund, thank you again, I'll be here all night.”
“Consider the next round of drinks to be my donation.” Called the sniper going to get just that. Upon his return he began scoping the crowd for anyone of interest. Nihlus added his two credits while causally lounging against the other torin's shoulder.

“What about that tall one over there?”

“Nah, his fringe is really short. I don't mind that in a female, but it... wow, this sounds shallow... it sort of puts me off in a male.”

“Okay, how about... that one?”

“That's an Asari.”

“Speciesism is wrong, Mr Vakarian.”

“Shush.”

“Ooo, over there, look look.” Nihlus pointed out a tarin with lovely markings that contrasted her plates.”

“That... might be a winner.”

It was not a winner. The sniper was back at the table in under twenty minutes, nothing to show for it. Saren took in a long draw of air, scenting... both a male and a female on him?

“You're back already?”

“Oh yes. I am back. I also need another drink, stat.” Saren stood, nodding to indicate this round was on him. He returned just in time to hear the end of the story.

“So then she says, 'I only sleep with people that are willing to let my mate take them at the same time. I want that deeper connection.' and I mean, not that I'm against group ventures, but then her mate comes up from behind me, and leans in saying something about bondage rope and domination.”
The carmine plated Spectre was laughing so hard he was unable to breathe properly. “Then he puts teeth, his teeth, against the back of my neck like I was an old friend who trusted him, and she starts crowding me, pinning me between them. So I push forward, taking her with me, and spin around to swap places. Then I left.” Vakarian coughed, slightly abashed. Nihlus managed to wheeze out a reply between inhales.

“Just.. walked... away? Oh spirits that's amazing. You're... so bad... at thiiiiis!” The officer just lowered his head to the table top, as Nihlus howled his amusement. Saren set a fresh drink in front of him.

“I take it you are not into that particular subculture, Vakarian?” Said officer just looked up at him in mild horror.

“Uhh... I mean... no offense if you are... I just am not... I mean I haven't ever tried...” Saren snorted, as the still-snickering Spectre leaned in to nab his new drink.

“No Blue, didn't you know? Saren is a-sexual. Every hundred years, on a moonless night, one silver form goes to sleep, and in the morning two emerge from the nest. Identical.” He thumped Nihlus in the side of the head for his idiocy.

“Though I have participated in such things in the course of my duties, I cannot say it is particularly interesting or disinteresting. I am neutral on the matter.”

“Wait, hold on... you two have had... for Spectre business?” Saren raised a brow at him.

“Sometimes one must use more... obscure tools to acquire the trust of certain individuals as needed. If neither force, stealth, nor commodity work... we have gotten creative.” Nihlus had calmed down, but was still smirking as he added to the conversation.

“I know it sounds bad Blue, but I've seen that kind of thing save lives. Lots of lives. In some really messed up and convoluted ways sure, and not every Spectre does it either. It's not a requirement or anything fucked up like that. Saren and I are just... particularly determined to get the job done.” Vakarian blew out a gust of breath, expelling the topic with his final opinion on the matter.

“I can't say I wouldn't do what needed to be done if the reward was justice served. I'm just glad I haven't had to... right well. Yes.” Thus, the awkward sniper tossed back more of his drink, and
stood.

“Now, I'm going to go try again. Hopefully with someone less kinky.”

“Pssssshh, it’s totally my turn!”

“No way, Nihlus. That one was so bad, I'm calling mulligan.”

“Hahaha, fair enough!”

The mulligan also did not help.

Vakarian returned to the table looking traumatized and trailing not one, but two Asari. Saren watched his protégé flirt them into the ground and redirect them off with flawless smooth talking.

“...thank you.” Nihlus just smiled back, tossed the rest of his drink down, and stood.

“You're welcome, but! ...it's my turn again. That would be Kyrik 1, and Vakarian 0 by the way.” The silver-grey officer sighed into his cups and waved him off.

Saren watched Nihlus look for another challenge. The younger Spectre could likely have anyone he wanted, so of course he had to search out the most difficult ones. Their game went on for two more rounds, during which Nihlus teased and tormented both a thin boned torin with an especially long crest, and a pair of Quarian girls who were apparently twins. The C-Sec Officer managed to attract yet another Asari, a Human, and a Drell. Though each were aesthetically sufficient, it seemed they had not caught his interest, and he returned to the table empty handed.

Nihlus stopped by again to declare his points, buy them all drinks again, and whisked himself back off to mingle. Saren watched him scope out the crowd like a thief would case an art gallery.

Another sigh from the other side of the booth brought his attention back to the table, and the mildly forlorn torin who was not even looking out to the dance floor for future prospects. Saren narrowed his eyes, consideringly.
“You have given up?”

“What? Oh... I think it might just not be my night. To be honest... the second round I just went out to dance, I didn't even mean to bring back those Asari.” Vakarian's gaze dropped back to the table. He appeared to be... distraught that he attracted non essential companions. Or perhaps it was the species? Saren remembered something about the sniper mentioning singular attraction to other Turians.

Problematic, apperantly.

He caught sight of Nihlus slipping into a small booth with a privacy screen active, an Asari leading him by the hand, all giggles.

The silver-grey Spectre looked back over at the Officer, somewhat disgruntled with the situation. He'd provided a day of uncommonly good distraction after taking time off from his career to assist them on a mission. The sniper had gone to a fair bit of effort on their behalf. Saren was not pleased that the torin's night was unsatisfactory. He wished to simply dance with one of his own kind?

Very well. He could provide that favor.

The Spectre rose and walked around the table edge. “Vakarian, follow me.” The sniper looked up confused, but followed without question. They came to a halt in an open space on the dance floor, he turned around and stepped in close. Icy blue eyes blinked at him, startled, as he began to dance in a light sway to the music's beat.

“You said you wished to dance, and did not intend to gather a companion. I will ward off newcomers. Dance.” The torin slowly smiled at him, a handsome spread of mandibles, and began to dance. Not ten minutes later a tussled Nihlus came out of the crowd from behind Saren and added himself to the equation.

“Well, well. Now this is unexpected! How did you manage to talk him into letting loose here? He hates dancing to non-classica-OW. Ow ow ow. That was my kidney, damnit.” Nihlus' tall form leaned over and nipped at Saren's shoulder in retribution, only earning himself another elbow jab. The carmine plated Spectre grunted and set his chin on his former mentor's collar, with a roll of exasperated subvocals.

“You see how violent he is?”
“I do, yet he's also dancing with me in close quarters, apparently against his normal MO, so I think I'll play it safe and not antagonize him.”

“Borinng~~.” Vakarian grinned at Nihlus' sing song tone, continuing to roll his hips in time with the bass. Saren began a low growl at Nihlus' disconcern for personal space, and the green eyed menace nuzzled the line of his spine before pulling away and dancing beside them instead.

“Have you had your fill of intercourse yet, Nihlus? The hour is getting late.”

“Pffft. No, Spectre-of-responsibile-bedtimes. I haven’t slept with anyone yet, just played around. Though I suppose it is getting- oh shit, it's three hours into the night cycle. When did that happen?”

“Just now?” Tried Vakarian sarcastically.

Nihlus just gave off the longest sigh, and smoothly moved off the dance floor.

The night of wasting time, over indulging, and non-productivity was over, much to Spectre Arterius’ relief.

Chapter End Notes

I am so proud of me. I got Saren Arterius and Garrus Vakarian together on a dance floor, no cocaine involved. Just think about that for second outside of context. Am I good or what? //fist pump//

Fanfic Recommendation: Beating Like A Hammer (16355 words) by skybound2
Bored of being bored because being bored is boring

Chapter Summary

Target 1 Status: 0
Target 2 Status: 0
Target 3 Status: 1

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Dial-side - The side of the Citadel Space Station toward the top of each Ward, opposite the Presidium Ring

Chapter Soundtrack: EXGF - We Are The Hearts

Imagine we are higher than the sparrows
Casually we're breathing with the pharaohs
Tragically we fall just like the arrows
You will hear our voices echo
We are the hearts
We will never be bought and sold
We are the hearts, Forever singing ooo~ooo
We are the hearts, And the future runs through our bones
We are the hearts, Forever singing ooo~ooo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hanging upside down in a maintenance shaft, Nihlus Kyrik found himself really damn bored. The system mainframe access panel in front of him was downloading into a secondary Omni-tool on his wrist via a tiny cable, built for storage and not function. He'd cracked the security with a cute little back door solution, but the transfer speed was slow as shit. So he was just sort of hanging there, suspended from the ceiling by a razor wire, bored out of his ever loving mind as the mainframe's data was copied at a snail's pace.

He couldn't play Galaxy of Fantasy, since accessing the extranet here would leave a really suspicious gps marker if anyone was looking. No extra-net blocked out a lot of his usual amusements.

Listening to music seemed like a stupid thing to do while performing corporate espionage for the Council, considering that not hearing something coming up on him could be bad. He was still
tempted.

The shaft itself was a hundred meters of cables, air ducts, and access panels lit only by dull red emergency lighting. Occasionally, fist-sized automatons crawled by like robotic spiders, performing maintenance requests for the VI that managed the building's systems. Hence, the whole hanging-from-the-ceiling thing.

The corridor was both dull and creepy at the same time. There was certainly nothing amusing to look at.

Boredom won out, and he turned on music from his 'tool into his aural implants, turned down fairly low. Just enough for a beat and some vocals to break the monotony. He checked the transfer progress, groaning his suffering to the world inside his helmet at the 21% completion.

*Spirits* he was going to die of boredom if this kept up. No really. Why had he even picked this job up off the Spectre terminals? He could've left it for someone else. Hindsight, 20/20 and all that.

'Welp... desperate times, desperate measures.'

The next two hours he would never share with another soul... particularly Saren. They consisted of him hacking the VI and changing everyone's drink preferences for the next company picnic, changing the next restocking shipment for the break room include a crate of beer, and adding a subroutine to the company email system that would insert inappropriate emoticons after select words. He was particularly proud of adding a winky face after every iteration of 'mass', and a shocked face after 'work'.

Their emails would read something like, 'We need to do more work D: on the ratios. The disproportionate amount of mass ;) on the casing will cause stress over time.'.

Harmful? Nah. Entertaining? He thought so. Nihlus even made it so that the easily discovered change appeared to be a virus gotten from a stray malware filled email, and not from an internal security issue. He checked the transfer rate again. Fuuuuuck 67%. Fuuuuuuck. SO BORED.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

In an odd moment of quantum entanglement between lives, Saren Arterius also found himself bored.
If Nihlus handled his boredom poorly with unprofessional antics, then his former mentor handled it like a controlled train wreck.

He was stuck, due to a series of unfortunate events, inside a sewer tunnel and unable to move so much as ten centimeters or he would either be visible or trip security. The non-standard laser grid behind him in the pungently smelling corridor had only been able to be deactivated for a few moments. Long enough for him to make it past and press into a nook, unseen.

Now, the waiting game.

Aphias Telrio was to be killed by order of the Citadel Council for the murder of seven agents of the state, over a hundred civilians, and the theft of classified intelligence.

Telrio was not here... yet.

He would not be here for at least six hours.

Saren stared at the wall across from him, unmoving. He had mastery of his body, ignoring cramps and itches and urges to move with ease of practice and an iron will of self control. It was his mind that was the problem.

For the first hour he focused on designing theoretical shield tech, and that was an interesting and distracting topic. Eventually, he ran out of ideas for shielding and moved to weapon mods, then theoretical physics and dark energy, then what to cook for dinner...

The gnawing chasm that haunted the back of his thoughts sat patiently, waiting for him to run out of ideas and come visit his regrets and losses. He refused, and considered more of his Prothean artifact research, but that just led to memories of the artifact that had started it all...

With a will, he refocused on a troublesome slaver ring that Tevos had been worried over lately.

Finally, the target came into the sewer confluence room, the person he was meeting coming in from another angle. Saren waited a few moments to let them get comfortable. Feel like they were safe.
Then with a flicker of biotics and an explosion of noise, the boredom was dispelled. Like a train wreck, just one that waited to happen.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

At the same moment, Garrus Vakarian was not at all bored. In fact, he would have paid to be unoccupied at that moment. Watching paint dry would be better then this by a large margin.

There was a burning building in front of him, and a weeping Salarian in his arms.

Early in the morning a fire had started in one of Zakera Ward's middle class districts. The building's internal smoke alarms had gone off, but for several minutes the residents simply opened their doors to the hallway and discussed whatever that awful noise was.

Fires weren't common on the Citadel, as most of it was polyplastic and metal, and the keepers kept the electrical systems in tip top shape. Combine that with most fire or heat producing home appliances being idiot-proof... Most residents had never heard a fire alarm in their lives.

Still, a fair few number recognized that any sort of alarm equated to 'get out', and many had tried to do so. Fire meant the elevators were locked down, so they went for the stairs. Garrus didn't know if the stairwells were blocked, too small, already aflame... but scans showed the number of life signs still inside to be staggeringly high.

There were whispers of 'arson' in the mouths of the various emergency services personnel.

The girl in his arms was screaming through her tears, trying to go inside. He'd seen her get off the public tramway across the street and come to a dead halt. Grocery bags hit the pavement, fruit and vegetables tumbling out as she stared in horror at the scene. The young woman ran at the building in a dead sprint, and he'd caught her just as she crossed the police line.

In between her begging to be let go and furiously cursing his family line, he managed to make out that her sister lived in the same building, and she had a whole batch of nephews that were just toddlers. She'd left the eight of them at home to go shopping.

In her distress the customary head scarf and hood that all Salarian females wore over their small horns had come loose. Garrus had no clue why they wore them, just that it was socially unacceptable
for them to be without, so he was trying to pull her hood up for her while she was busy trying to claw his eyes out.

Most of the crowd was too busy to notice her faux pas, instead staring at the spectacle of smoke-collecting drones and fire fighting units trying to evac people off of balconies. There had been no less then twenty keepers who’d come rushing in to begin containment and repair, though over half had self destructed from being touched by someone in the press of bodies.

“-ur father's earliest ancestor and all of their brood!” The woman was still going at it, but he thought it was more of a self defense mechanism then real anger at this point. He felt helpless too. A fellow C-Sec Officer who happened to be Salarian finally noticed his situation and came to help, deftly re-wrapping the woman's scarf and replacing the hood, hissing comforting nonsense syllables at her.

The tears finally won out over anger and she collapsed to the ground between them weeping. Garrus met the eyes of his co-worker, who looked equally at a loss. There was nothing they could do. The firefighters were evacuating people as fast as they could, and the fire was low down, moving upwards at a crawl, many had the time to get to a higher floor and wait for rescue. C-Sec was just there for crowd control.

Garrus knelt down to her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Miss? Can you tell me exactly where in the building your family's apartments were?”

“T-the seventh. D-dial-side... closer t-to us. Why?”

“If I try and get some information on that area, will you stay here and not try and go in?”

“Yes! Okay, yes please, please.”

He returned to his full height and set his visor and Omni-tool to coordinate a deep scan on that section of the building as best they could. It took a lot more time, since his systems were build for finding illegal items and identifying threats, not unarmed civilians... something he made a note to fix at a later date. It took several minutes to complete, during which time the woman calmed down to a shock-induced thousand yard stare.

The results came in.
The information populated as an overlay of the building on his Kuwashii Visor's heads-up-display, a dizzily complex augmented reality of the building's interior in that little corner, most detailed at the epicenter of the scans and fading from there. He looked closely, jogging down the block and back for a different view. The fire looked to be worst around the 11th floor, so they would have been below it. The smoke itself, and the heated air filled with everything except oxygen, was the real risk to them.

His careful search turned up no tiny body shapes outlined in blue, to his immense relief, but it did show... there was something on the next floor up, actually. Garrus returned the scanning focus and reran it. The new information showed the shape of a human male mid-crawl in the hallway. He jogged over to a firefighter on the ground level, and told them about it. They had their own life sign detection devices as well, but they'd been focused on those trapped above the fire, not the people who could escape by leaving from the ground floor. The firefighter reaimed a scan of their equipment, and the higher quality device was able to produce live feed of the man's struggle to escape.

They sent out a ground team to assist him, and Garrus returned to the Salarian woman.

“What-is-it?! I s-saw, you went over to t-talk to that man...”

“Calm down, your apartment was empty, but we found someone else that needed assistance nearby, that's all.”

“...empty?”

“Yes, m'am.”

“T-thank you.”

“No problem, I'm here to help.”

Chapter End Notes
Fanfic Recommendation: Breathe (8644 words) by Progman (Femshep/Garrus)
Kinky is using a feather, perverted is using the whole chicken

Chapter Summary

Nihlus has his good days, days where no one shoots at him and intel is hand delivered by Asari twins. Today was almost that day.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Dolo Station – Location: Milky Way / The Shrike Abyssal / Xe Cha System / Zada Ban / Orbital Station. Population: 22.5k. Ownership: Volus. A small city that feeds the mining efforts of the resource rich planet below, whose frequent radioactive dust storms send workers scurrying off world as needed. (Canon+Inference)

I've got good news duckies! It's a lemon! If you are squicky about alien sex, might I advise waiting a bit to read this chapter? I will be posting a version on fanfiction.net that will be cleaned up to exclude all explicit content, both sexual and violent, and a minor series of edits for the gross science/lighter swearing/graphic depictions/more mild insinuations of sentient rights violations/etc. It should be up soon, so if you want the comedy and friendship but not the smut or gross bits, go there! I'll come back and link when it's done. :)

EDIT: Here is the safe-ish for work version on ff.net - Either Die a Hero by Kurai Ummei

Chapter Soundtrack: Breathe - Miracle Of Sound

Half light in the slip we let the night pass
That fine red lipstick on your wine glass
I was so frightened and bitter when you found me
Little light you shimmer all around me

Don't worry honey I've nothin' to do
Tonight's for making sweet music with you

So lay your body down babe
Forget about your troubles, hit the lights
Lay your body down babe
I'm gonna give the world to you tonight

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Widmanstat put in at the docks on Dolo Station at sixteen hundred hours, Citadel time. Nihlus turned to his coms unit, and tapped the speed dial for his contact here. It answered immediately to the lovely lavender face of a suitless Quarian girl, lounging on a sofa. Her big bright eyes crinkled in a smile for him.
“Well now! If that eesn't the face of my favorreet Turrian, I must be going blind.” Nihlus let out a laughing trill, and touched the screen with two talons.

“You flatterer, now I know you want something. Going to tell me why you called me all the way out here yet?”

“Tsk! No can do, preety boy. You will hafe to come see forr yourself!” She winked at him, her turquoise eye glow flickering out for a moment on one side, before closing the call. The knife loving Spectre just grinned and kitted up before going to see what the lovely Adiah'Si nar Idenna vas Dolo had in store for him.

Hopefully? It involved juicy intel, a handful of antibiotics, and a long, fun night.

He pinged the door upon arrival, and it opened to a decon chamber. A quick round of decontamination fog and targeted UV light lasers, and the next door zipped aside for him as well.

Inside, the far wall was one giant window of plexiglass, with a sitting area on this side of it facing a mirror image in a living room. Another decon chamber, one he knew to be much more advanced, was open and waiting on the right wall. Adiah was lounging in the sitting area, naked as the day she was born. Nihlus casually leaned up against the glass with an arm overhead.

“What a picture you make. Should I be coming through, or are ya just teasing me?” Dark purple lips stretched wide as she tilted her head back, -throat bared in what she knew was teasing to a Turian eye-, and laughed merrily.

“Shall I tees you forr a while firrst? Eet might make things more interesting. I do hafe some... important documents forr you though. Maybe I should make you earrn them?”

“You...”

“mmYees?”

“Are such a brat.” She laughed again and gestured to the next airlock, and he swaggered over to it. Inside was a hypo injector and 3 different units to go in it. He injected them one by one, set the
device to the side, stripped, and hit the initialization panel on the wall. The door closed, and a much more through sterilization suite began to make him as Quarian-immune-system friendly as possible.

It took the chamber about fifteen minutes to run, and then the exit opened up into a short hallway. He walked down it and turned into the main room and joined Adiah on the couch.

“Please tell me you've already had your meds? I know you've got intel, but damn if I don't want to get straight to touching you.” She looked at him through half lidded eyes, dark with kohl.

“What do you think?” His mandibles spread in a slow, dark smile as the carmine plated Spectre stood up, lifted her from the couch, and took them to the bedroom. He knew right where it was. Having laid her out in the large Quarian style bed, shaped like nothing so much as a fruit sundae bowl, he moved over top and began nuzzling into her fringe. Adiah hummed and hooked her knees over his hip spurs, bringing lips to his aural canal, she began to whisper the jist of the intelligence documents waiting for him in the small SSD on her side table, teasingly adding that he had to earn the full package.

Nihlus was pleased to do so.

Without pausing, he reached over and spirited it away with a magician's fingers, flipped them in a twirl, and instead of the SSD he now held a high quality female condom, one of the kind she had in the drawer of the table on the bed's other side. She watched it happen, but couldn't have told you how he'd done it. She said so with a smokey laugh.

Her laughter quickly turned into low hums and breathy pants as Nihlus found the sensitive ridges along her collar bone and hips, trailing a long black tongue up her neck and behind her ear. His clever hands moved between them to the delicate skin of her thighs, teasing her with a long, very controlled glide of talons that ended between her legs. He sought out the dual nerve junctions that Quarians used so frequently to masturbate with, applying pressure with a knuckle to each, using the distraction to arrange the protective barrier. Finished, he dug deeper into her nerves, pressing and circling very slowly.

The long groan she let out had his plates spreading, and he let out a shuddering exhale into her neck. It wasn't long before he sunk into her, and for such a devilish torin, he was beyond gentle about it. He knew she got off on the risk of sleeping with a dangerous person from a species known for it's teeth and talons, but he wasn't one to go for rough sex when it could kill his partner.

She didn't seem to mind that stipulation at all, not at that moment.
They rolled together, his hands dragging her hips into the pace he wanted as she clutched at the pillows and hummed in modulated waves. He increased the pace, adding a light pop to the end of the roll. Her sharp, tiny canines were in full view as her mouth fell open to pant for breath, and he grinned widely at how cute he found them. Pointed oval nails scraped down dark brown hide along his arms, then neck, before coming up to dig behind his fringe. A roil of subvocals escaped him, ramping up into a full throated rumble.

For his next trick, Nihlus pulled on his abdominal muscles to flex himself while inside her, the partially prehensile curl causing her humming to peak into a moan, and then when he found just the right angle, a pleasured shriek escaped. He managed a half-smirk between breaths and picked up the pace of smooth rolls, gentle plunges, and occasional curls.

Adiah came with his name half mixed into the wavering moan, and he let the tough-to-hold curl go to avoid overwhelming her nerves, but kept up the rocking motion for several delicious moments to drag out her high tide. Eventually, she relaxed with a full body shudder into a pile of bliss, pulling him down beside her. He gently swirled himself inside her, enjoying the feel of it. Making her eyes flutter and toes curl was just a bonus. He loved how Quarians enjoyed staying connected afterward unlike females of his own kind during casual sex. He really did need to convince Blue to branch out. Other species were the spice of a sex life.

“Again.” Adiah demanded.

“Again?”

“Yees. Perrhaps twice morre, then I will feed you.”

“Oooh, you spoil me.”

“I know.”

They only managed to work up to more petting, Nihlus' libido demanding his own release at some point, when a priority ping sounded on his 'tool. It was from Saren. He stopped petting Adiah's soft purple skin and nuzzled her cheek apologetically before getting up to take the call. He'd made the mistake of answering Saren while in bed with someone only once, and the subsequent month of the silent treatment from him with no explanation was enough incentive to not do it again.
He brought up his com package to call back... but got no answer. Worried, he tried back several times. Nothing. A cold tendril of fear rising in his gizzard, he was about to start a call to the Spectre Offices for Saren's current mission info when a text message came in.

FROM:1886039//ID.code:liminality
TO:1886039//LOCAL

I require assistance.

END MSSG

Nihlus hoped that the use of punctuation and spelling meant Saren's situation wasn't too terrible, but that felt like lying to himself. Saren would punctuate while bleeding out. He opened up a live chat to ask for more details, pacing across the bedroom floor.

CHAT.live//CONNECT:8466672_to_PROXY.spec.8883_to_1886039

Connecting...

Connected.

NK: 'kay whats up

He waited for a reply... and waited... and w-

SA: I am cornered.

Shit.

NK: on my way, where at?

SA: Omega.

SHIT. Shit shit shit shit shit shit.

NK: hold on

Nihlus spun around and dashed to the door, he needed to get his armor-

Adiah was in the doorway, his armor in her arms, lovely face set in a worried mein. Nihlus wished he had the time to make out with her for the tiny, but welcome consideration. Between them, they managed to get the Spectre back in his armaments in a very short time; the Quarian information broker doing up the buckles and straps on his legs as he attached his upper body pieces.

He thanked her as they finished up, though his voice was a far cry from his earlier suave seduction. “Friend of mine in deep shit. I have to go, fuck I'm so sorry to just... you deserve better, you've always been good to me and-”

“Nihlus! Please, I underrstand. Eet is okay, go safe yourr frriend. You can brring me a prpresent as an apologee next time, okay?”

“Yes, I am bringing you back something awesome. You want a geth head on a pike? I could get you a geth head on a pike. What about a necklace with gemstones the color of your eyes? I can do that too. What about both?” She laughed wetly, taken up by his attempt at charm and trying to hide that her eyes were moist with sympathetic worry. She was far too kind for this business... but then again he supposed she did have more then a few friends in the business that loved that about her, himself included. She was good people in a profession where that wasn't exactly common.

A nuzzle to her cheek, and he was off to the airlocks, sending traffic control the Spectre codes for emergency take off, and priority access on the Mass Relay.

'Hold on you grumpy asshole, you have to stay alive so I can kill you for going anywhere near Omega again.'
Chapter End Notes

I must apologize for breaking the first rule of fanon. If you aren’t familiar, then let me share so you can know my transgressions.

Rule 1) Do not accept canon plot holes.
Rule 2) Do not write new plot holes.
Rule 3) If you find a canon plot hole, or accidentally wrote one of your own, go get your damn shovel and fill it.

I wrote Quarian sex without clarifying how it works involving the spaghetti noodle mess that Bioware made of immunology. I... am so sorry. I tried, so hard, to mind canon some pseudoscience to fix it... and I can't make it work. You have my solemn promise to keep researching till I can force it to make... some sort of sense. I promise. Then we will have more Quarian sex and a codex entry or something. <3

Fanfic Recommendation: A Warm Blanket (3190 words) by HarbingerofWhimsy
Cracked but not broken, he fights on

Chapter Summary

Ex-filtration of Agent Arterius in progress, please stand by for details.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Nais - Pronoun for the monogendered Asari (Credit: MizDirected)
Greater Spirits - The old and well established Spirits of Turian Worlds, generally any astral body that has had Turian life for at least a millenia. (Mindcanon)
Torin - Male Turian Adult (Credit: MizDirected)
Janiris - The ancient companion of the Asari Goddess Athame. (Canon)
Sigil of Janiris - An Asari tradition of branding criminals with a sigil on the back of the neck, and exiling instead of executing them, since the criminal in question may yet have hundreds of years to repent for a crime of a few moments. (Mindcanon)

Chapter Soundtrack: **Globus - Save me (Ext. Version)**

There can be no redemption for a sinner such as I
Won't you wish me to the cornfield now
Won't you help me stop living a lie

So here I am in the corner of a dark room
The same way I began
Alone with these mournful thoughts
And a loaded gun in my hand

But a foolish part of me
Still holds out for a shred of humanity
For a queen in a robe or a knight on a steed
Can't you see that I'm just a child on his knees

So save me from fear and pain
And love will rain on me
Save me today
Before tomorrow finds me at rest

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nihlus thanked every greater spirit he could think of, his father's spirit, Desolas' spirit, along with Palaven herself and both moons that he was only two short jumps from the Omega Nebula. A quick from from zip out to the Xe Cha Relay from the station, Spectre priority on the jump, and he pulled into Osun's relay. The only thing of interest in the Hourglass Nebula being Purgatory Station, there was no traffic in the double-relay system for the jump to Fathar.
Now to enjoy his complimentary in-flight worrying, with a small bag of nuts and a, 'Oh spirits T'loak is going to kill him. Shit shit shit.'

The Queen of Omega had made it quite clear that Spectres and their ilk were not welcome on the station without an invitation. Clarity had been delivered with hand written notes pinned to the corpses of STG, Spectres, Commandos, and N7 alike. So fucking dramatic. The nais was willing to play ball with information, but you went through the contacts provided and stayed away from the death trap that the clever bitch had made of corridors and watching eyes.

He really wanted to know why Saren had taken the risk of landing there. Hell, Nihlus was the disguise expert, why hadn't his former mentor called him to take the job or at least let his green eyed shadow do him up all nice and not looking anything like himself? He was so damn recognizable.

The litany of panicked cursing continued as Nihlus made to do just that for himself. He had a five hour trip to cross the nebula, and might as well make the most of that time. He left the color of his eyes alone, something that Saren had commented on in the past, which he... okay, sometimes the torin said things in passing that might just be the fuel for the torch the younger Spectre was carrying for him. Things about the shade of his eyes, an appreciably clever mind, or that he wasn't 'unattractive'. Other then that though, the wily trickster made his plates lighter, changed the angles of his face, hid his markings entirely, and added a few false scars to roughen up that attractiveness.

He tried messaging Saren several times for his location and more intel, but there was no reply.

Nihlus focused on further prepping with a will. A kit was put together with care taken for tricky escapes and potential bullet wounds. He added some emergency high-calorie rations and a can of energy drink made especially for Cabal units. If anyone asked him why he carried such things on his ship, he'd lie through his teeth. For cooperative missions of course. Not at all because he worried about the stubborn idiot, and what-do-you-know, he'd been through this situation before. Calls for aid weren't outside the realm of normal for Spectres, and they generally had each other's backs. All you had to do was find a fellow ghost.

Though usually, one didn't call for evac off of fucking Omega.

Armored up, low-back satchel of escapey goodies and medical care filled and hooked on, he checked the time... still two hours to go. He took to the CIC controls, a sunken platform one had to hop down into to use. Saren had thought it was ridiculous, like the filming set of a 'space captain with a harem' porno. Nihlus thought it was comfy, being one giant cushioned circle, and also it made great cover when someone attempted to board his ship. More then one pirate had died between the airlock and that sunken CIC.
He brought up the archive file on Omega's schematics, though how accurate they were at this point was anyone's guess. The very bottom levels, closer to the remaining asteroid, were a mess of Vorcha tunnels and dead things. Probably several different forms of illegal bioweapon lurked down there at any given time. Just above that was the mining base that made up the original station and it's various docks, mass effect shields, and power systems. Built above that were tier after tier of levels, with no particular concern for safety. Walk ways ended suddenly, leaving drops into lower levels or black abysses. Water and electricity grids were jury-rigged, often having one district's go down, making them leach off another area, making that one go down as well with the overload. Any given bathroom might or might not work. Any given level might have light, or might be pitch black.

It was a horror story of uncontrolled, unregulated, piece-meal station maintenance.

Nihlus wondered in passing if anyone would be interesting in trying to catch a keeper in a stasis bubble, and planting them here to see if they'd fix the place. If for no other reason then the lives and well being of the station's underprivileged. No one talked about it, but if you were exiled from Hierarchy space, the Migrant Fleet, marked with the Sigil of Janiris, or locked out of whatever your homeworld's controlled space was... well, the Citadel only had so much room. Omega was just as large as the Citadel, but only half as populated.

Yeah, no one talked about that, about why the lawless station's population was always so comparatively low. He supposed it went without saying.

As soon as he came in range, Nihlus slowed to sublight speeds and began scanning com frequencies with the Widmanstat's VI, checking for keywords on the air that might clue him in as to Saren's location. Twenty minutes to arrival he'd finally managed to pin down the right district thanks to some mercs discussing where they were headed to to kill 'the top dollar target'. He was pretty damn sure there wasn't anyone on Omega with a higher price on their head then Saren. Possible, but unlikely.

He set the ship systems to broadcast a random pirate vessel like ID, and precoordinated the navigation to zip by the station without landing, having the auto-pilot take it around to hide behind a nearby asteroid on standby. That done, he stepped into the airlock and readied for zero-g. Helmet up, life support systems online, and mag boots activated. The keyed up Spectre overrode the airlock's external door and braced himself through the whirlwind as a tiny crack rapidly leaked the local air.

Once the area was in vacuum, he opened the door fully and made eyes on the slowly approaching station. The ST&R agent would be making a jump for the tower, correcting the angle with the CO2 jets in his armor, and making landfall through the atmo-net on the upper levels. From there he'd be able to arrive mostly unnoticed, as the section he'd chosen was without local power, and really unlikely to be inhabited. Nihlus would then go downward to the Kenzo district.
Hopefully finding that silver plated asshole still alive.

Nihlus tried to tell himself that if Saren was gone, he would evac himself and go report to the Council. That unhinged little voice in the back of his head was singing songs about painting the walls with rainbows of blood if they'd killed him. Sometimes the green eyed Spectre wondered if he should be on medication of some sort, but... you only needed the meds if you couldn't control yourself, right? He was great at controlling himself, so it seemed to be a moot point. The creepy 'rainbows of blood thing' was mostly just the fear talking, anyway, and the torin felt he had good reason to be fearful. His stubborn, standoffish, excessively independent, former mentor had called for help. The last time he'd done that with any seriousness had involved half a million lives at stake, including his own, and the Primarch of a colony cluster.

The Spectre could tell his psyche was having a bad day when he started making excuses for his excuses. Saren would still probably mock him for worrying so much.

Several minutes passed by in a train of quiet focus as Nihlus waited for his ship to come in close to the station, within just a dozen meters, wait for it... and with a well timed power-off of his mag boots he took the jump. The CO2 jets on his gauntlets and greaves went off with pre-programmed hand gestures to slow down his velocity and provide mild course correction. He passed through the atmos the station's artificial gravity began to tug at him, landing with a thud of black boots audible only through the reverberation in his armor from impact.

It was nearly lightless in the dead zone except for the occasional strip of red emergency lighting. The camera suite in the Spectre's helm automatically adjusted contrast and gamma to give him a half ways decent view to go on. It was quick work moving through the unlit corridors, Nihlus' lanky runner's build giving him the speed and finesse to move through corridors at a ground eating lope. He made it down to Kenzo in short order. Flipping his helmet retractor, he slipped from quiet corridor into light crowds, walking like a grizzled merc with too many kills under his belt for anyone to want to mess with him, adding a slight limp and a paranoid looking tic of the left mandible every few steps.

Green eyes looked around in non specific vigilance, a perfect cover for his search. Word on the street was 'avoid the mess by the hotel on level five', and he made straight for it. A little careless, but he was in a bit of a hurry. Hopefully whoever was hunting his fellow Spectre didn't expect back up. Nihlus made it to the hotel in question, a section of sturdy rooms carved out of a skyscraper's next three levels, surrounded by mercenaries. He considered sauntering up like he belonged there and inquiring what the deal was... but it was Blood Pack mercs, and they were some territorial assholes. They might just as well shoot him for asking.

Instead, he shifted into the shadows and made his way up a few levels, then back down to the upper level of the hotel. He knew Vorcha instincts said come up from underneath, and Krogan habit was to charge straight in. Saren understood that as well, and with a bit of luck, he'd also be on the upper levels. Nihlus came around the outside of the eighth level, popped out a window, and fell to the
seventh level. He landed on a balcony, and broke into the connecting room.

All was quiet. Bad sign.

'Mercs still outside working up for another assault, so good sign. Good sign, Kyrik. Find him.' He replaced his helm began to hunt.

The halls were littered with bullet holes, new and old, though they appeared to be made to withstand heavy fire. He risked a quiet whistle into the corridor, the theme song for tupari, and listened. Half a heart beat later, a reply whistle came back. The last seven notes of the Turian national anthem, backwards. His felt a rush of blood to his scalp from the sudden loss of tension in his shoulders, and followed the echo, moving forward with some caution.

Nihlus had seen some shit in his short life, insane things pulled off by the galaxy's best and worst in times of duress. This moment wasn't the most amazing, nor the most implausible, but it would forever stick in his mind. A glittering shard of stained glass in the window of Saren Arterius. Sitting casually atop a pile of bodies stacked some twenty people high, the silver Spectre had his elbows braced against knees, sidearm held loosely in his right hand. The room was filled with the dead who'd tried and failed to kill the Council's top agent. If he'd had to guess, Nihlus would have estimated eighty or so bodies in various piles around the debris strewn room. The hotel room's seating, cabinets, tables... they were shredded into pieces scattered over a blood soaked carpet. Not rainbow, noted the voice in the back of his head clinically, as if critiquing artwork. The colors had all mixed into a muddy brown.

The pile of dead in the center suddenly made sense. He'd stacked them for use as make shift cover. Nihlus looked back over to meet electric blue eyes, a matching silver hand lowering a half-raised pistol that had been aimed at the intrusion on reflex.

“Nihlus.”

The slouched, silver-grey form looked tired, and it squeezed at his heart. Saren didn't look that damn tired unless he was up for days, and there were... so many bullet holes in him. Little blue trails of dried blood more like a pattern on his armor from their sheer frequency. Saren stood with disturbing grace and climbed down from his perch. His shield generators was sparking with a short, making his form ripple like a mirage.
“You okay?”

“I am sufficient. Do you have a way out of here?”

“... I brought a zip line.”

“That will do.”

The flickering lights inside the destroyed suite glinted off of Saren’s brushed metal helmet and he tilted his head to the hallway, and made to leave the room. Nihlus followed wordlessly, hand-canon ready to blow the *spirits damned* head off of anything that moved. He was led to a corner suite that had a shitty view, most of it blocked by an adjacent building. Perfect for partial cover as they tried to zip line away.

The younger Spectre pulled the satchel from his back, and held out the rations and energy drink with one hand, while going to set up the zip line device. He felt his former mentor take them from his hand, and he withdrew it to finish the set up. Only taking a few moments, he pressed it to the wall opposite the window, and hit the button to have it lock onto the wall. It signaled a successful attachment, and he set it to aim for a walkway in the distance, lower on the horizon, and out of range of standard gunfire if they could make it that far. Hopefully the Blood Pack didn't have any crack shot snipers.

Speaking of snipers, he missed their's. Maybe C-Sec would let them borrow him again? Many Spectres had an on-call entourage, Nihlus didn't see why he couldn't as well.

A thought for another time. The zip line fired, a quiet *cha-pssh-thunk* and then a long revving *vvfooo* of reinforced cable shooting out to tag a support beam through the open sliding doors. He turned to see Saren with his helm retracted, eating mechanically.

“How was he still standing?” The dull eyed Spectre turned to him and blinked slowly, then shrugged and returned to pouring nutrients down his throat. The back and side of his neck were blackened in snaking tendrils... from a biotic amp burnout. *Spirits* how was he still standing?

“Right. Let's go. You first.” Saren was slow to move, tossing his trash aside and reaching for the belt clip line that his protégé held out. The younger *torin* clipped himself in on a second support line, and waited for Saren to work up to taking a running leap. He went, and Nihlus followed. He waited, tense, for sniper fire. None came. They came to the end of the line, and he almost let out a keen at the
sound his partner made as he hit the support beam with a dull thud. Normally the talented Spectre would have slowed himself with biotics or landed feet down and used the counter pressure of muscle to stagger the landing. Jaw clenched, Nihlus yanked at his core muscles to spin in a semi-circle around the line at the last minute, unclipping his own belt and ricocheting feet first off the pillar above the anchor point. The younger Spectre flipped down to a landing as his blood spattered comrade released the belt clip and limply fell the remaining half meter to the ground. Saren staggered and he pushed in to support him for a moment as the *torin*'s weary knees tried to give out.

The stubborn Spectre recovered and he backed off. They managed a decent speed walk away from the scene, but there was just one small problem... Saren's armor was no longer space worthy. Time to get creative to pull off the rest of the exfiltration. A slip of a slow immolation gel into a garbage dumpster had half the local dock running for cover from the stench of burning garbage and smoke. Not all that different from the normal air, but quite a bit more potent. Nihlus set his ship to ignoring docking procedures and usual handshake protocols with the station's VI in favor of just dropping right in on a free stretch of deck.

They stepped into the airlock, and he hopped into the CIC to send them away as soon as the decon cycle finished running. Nihlus looked up at the sound of a hand smacking into a wall, which was shortly followed by the heart stopping vision of Saren collapsing to the deck.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm choosing to capitalize species/race/etc btw, though I know it isn't standard grammar on the wiki, I think it should count the same as modern day races/nationalities. So 'Turian' gets a caps T just like I'd write 'French' with a caps F or a C in 'Caucasian'. Just a personal writing preference I suppose.

I think we always see Omega as upside down in the game. It was in fact built on the asteroid, and grew from there. The concept art was based around a mushroom cloud shape, so they kept it upside down to keep that feeling. You might be able to make a case for it being built from the top floor and them more floors added on bottom, but who does that? People follow their gut instincts when constructing, except for really fancy pants designer architecture. Buildings go up, miners dig down. Makes sense right? A mining outpost isn't going to be fancy, it's going to be functional. I will admit that some of the level design and art in ME3 could go either way, but I'm sticking with my psychology answer. :P

Fun fact: Aria T'loak took over Omega in the 1980s, about the same time Microsoft released the first version of Windows.

Another fun fact: My art program says most of the green in Nihlus' eyes is in fact Red-Green-Blue color code 060.145.060.

Fanfic Recommendation: *The Sound of Light* (72891 words) by nightside (Original Character - Turian / Unbound Reaper. Yes, really. Aren't you curious now? ;D)
Now I walk through to the other side

Chapter Summary

If you thought they were having a bad day before...

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin - Male Adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: **Heavy In Your Arms - Florence And The Machine**

Are you strong enough to stand
Protecting both your heart and mine?

Who is the betrayer?
Who's the killer in the crowd?
The one who creeps in corridors,
and doesn't make a sound?

...

This will be my last confession
"I love you" never felt like any blessing
Whispering like it's a secret
Only to condemn the one who hears it
With a heavy heart

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The port authorities, such as they were, began screaming at his coms in mortal offense, threatening to open fire unless he declared himself and landed to pay docking fees and fines. Having gotten a fair ways away from the station he paid them little mind, even sarcastically wishing them good luck managing to hit him at a distance with his tweaked out cyber warfare suite predicting their firing algorithms. His eyes were only for the crumpled grey form as he checked for vitals.

Heart beat, there, and rapid. Breathing, check, though it was shaky. Good enough for now... but Nihlus had no two million credit robot operated medical suite onboard.
“Saren! Saren, can you hear me? Wake up. Where is the Daedalus? Saren, where is-” A mumbled reply, as said Spectre's eyes fluttered in a failed attempt to open. “is... coords... mmm'tool... passsssssswor... y... eyesss...” Not a ton to go on, but maybe enough. Navigational coordinates... on his Omni-tool... the password is his 'eyes'?

Nihlus tried 'green'. No go.

He tried a few more varieties of green. Still no.

Okay, maybe it wasn't that simple.

On a lark, he instead scanned his eyes with his Omni-tool, and asked it what color his own damn irises were. It reported back several tones, but the top of the list was 'Verdant Green [RGB 060.145.060]'. What the hell was 'RGB'? He had no clue. A number sequence though, and Saren loved his numbers... it worked. Thank fuck. Password accepted, he found the heavily encrypted protocols for remote auto-piloting. Nihlus accessed the navsys data and found it to be hiding in a dust cloud not two hours away. He ran back to the CIC and coordinated a meeting point half way.

He sent them into FTL, and returned to the unmoving form on the deck. Hands only mildly shaking he pulled Saren's armor away, bit by broken bit, and treated dripping wounds with medigel. It didn't help much with the internal bleeding, the impacts leaving tiny mangled holes in organs and viscera, but it stymied the blood loss. The torin was low enough on blood as it was, any little bit surely helped.

The Widmanstat arrived at the half way point, his speedy little ship making better time then his mentor's by a nerve filled twenty minutes.

'Stupid, stupid, stupid! Should have calculated that better. Fuuuck.'

Saren's vitals were relatively stable though, for someone who looked beat to hell. No reason to actively panic, he took some calming breaths and jury-rigged an anti-grav crate into an impromptu stretcher, and settled the torin onto it gently as he could manage. The biotic weighted a shit ton. He was densely packed for a Turian, sure, thick in the waist and covered in armor... but hot damn. Maybe it was all that cooking?

The Daedalus arrived a ways off, the autopilot doing a sub-par job of making navigational choices without a live driver. Nihlus brought the ships together and enacted the ship-to-ship airlock docking
protocols. He pushed the make shift gurney through the airlocks and got Saren into the medbay. Clothing removed, he set off the automated trauma module and sat down to watch the screen for a diagnosis.

[BIOMEDICAL SUITE – ACTIVATED]
[Now scanning...]
[Scan complete.]
[Gathering data from nanite colony....]

*Wait, what?!*

[Data acquired.]
[Multiple hide contusions detected.]
[Multiple hide abrasions detected.]
[Multiple hide lacerations detected.]
[Multiple plate fractures detected.]
[Multiple bone fractures detected.]
[Multiple sites of internal bleeding detected.]
[Nervous tissue damage detected.]
[Calculating efficient order of operation...]
[Initiating repair of Common Hepatic Artery, estimated time of 83 seconds.]

Nihlus was busy staring at the fourth line.

*Nanites? A colony of Nanites? He has a fucking nanite colony *inside* him? Not just... a batch of medical nanites, but a colony?! Shitfuck. Fuck extra fuck. Is he insane? Who in their right mind has a self-replicating nanite colony *inside their spirits-damned body*?*

Dark brown hands gripped at carmine fringe as he tried to come to grips with the fact that not only was *he* on a ship with self-replicating nanites, the ultimate grey-goo horror story waiting to happen, but they were *inside* of his former mentor.
They were also likely the reason his vitals were so stable.

[Repair completed successfully.]
[Initiating repair of Right Brachial Artery, estimated time 46 seconds.]

'Shitfuck.'

He didn't know what to do about this.

Sure, Spectres were above the law... but SR nanites? That was... that was like carrying around Rachni eggs for funsies. Most forms of law enforcement would nuke him from orbit if they knew he had them. No few research stations that had dabbled in the highly illegal branch of science had to be tossed into suns over the years because nothing else would do.

'I was worried that I was the crazy one. Shit. I can't believe... I can't tell on him. Shit. Fuck I'm... I'm now complicit in a Kill-On-Sight offense. You son of a bitch, why do you have fucking SR nanites? Were normal ones not enough for you? Shiit. Shit.'

There really wasn't much else to say besides 'shit', was there?

[Repair completed successfully.]
[Initiating repair of Intestinal Tract at junction 17, estimated time 46 seconds.]

Nihlus sat, head cradled in his hands, eye closed, waiting for the robot to finish it's work. He expected it to take a while.

[Repair completed successfully.]
[Initiating repair of Left Fibular Vein, estimated time 112 seconds.]

This was going to be one of those talks, wasn't it? Saren would wake up, and Nihlus would be all like, 'Explain to me why do you have nanites in your gut?', and he'd reply, 'Technically they are housed in my...'
Nihlus looked up to the medical charts to see if he could locate the colony for his mental conversation. He couldn't actually see anything that screamed 'I'm a weapon of mass destruction waiting to happen! There is where I live, ohai!'

He decided to go with a blanket dismissal instead.

'Technically, they are not housed in my 'gut' per-say. Why do you ask?' and Nihlus would go, 'Illegal! Super dangerous and fucking illegal! Did I mention dangerous as fuck?' to which the only reply could be, 'Language, Nihlus.' as pretty as you please.

[Repair completed.]

[Initiating repair of Left Axillary Vein, estimated time 46 seconds.]

[Error, no damage detected.]

[Initiating repair of Nervous Tissue at Cervical Vertebrae 2, estimated time 867 seconds.]

'Oh an error, is it? Looks like the molecule sized horrors are busy at least.'

Nihlus couldn't focus on this anymore, it was all too insane. Instead, he went back over to his ship, and set the navigation computer to initiate an auto-pilot to... nearby the Citadel. He returned to the Daedalus and ran the numbers to send it on the same path to safer waters. It wasn't a short ride back though, the Eagle Nebula Relays were a good three days apart.

After the jump was calculated, he leaned back from the holo-ring and went limp in the chair. He had to face the idea sometime...

If Saren hadn't had dangerous and K.O.S. tech inside of him, would he have survived whatever he had been doing on Omega? Or would he be a bloody mess in that hotel? Or here, just dying on the operating table?

Nihlus swallowed hard. That thought took away his ability to breathe properly.

The question became whether the greater loyalty should be to the people of the galaxy he was sworn to serve or to... Saren, his former mentor, his... fucking... savior from the soulsucking hell of the
Hierarchy ranks. His best friend. The person he...

Letting him step foot on the Citadel, with the foot traffic from international trade, it could end galactic civilization as he knew it if those nano machines inside him went on the fritz. Grey goo scenario, they called it. Where the tiny robots ate up all the resources around them to produce more of themselves, ad infinitum.

On the other hand... what could he do about it?

Tell the Council? They'd kill him. Any galactic agency would kill him. Hell, Elcor kindergarten teachers might give it a shot.

Threaten to tell on him unless he exiled himself or had the colony removed?

That would go over so fucking well. There were no good answers.

Nihlus took a deep breath, and decided... to wait. Saren had always, always, been dedicated to serving galactic stability. He’d proven that to everyone when he pulled the trigger on his own brother to prevent a bioweapon from breaking out on Palaven. Maybe... maybe he could explain. Maybe he had... a dead switch? A good reason? An unstoppable fall back plan?

He hoped so. He really, really hoped so...

He couldn't let Saren go back to the Citadel without a damn good excuse.... but he wouldn't send him to exile alone either.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Have you ever laid out a chapter outline, and then you went to write it... and the characters are all like, ‘Nope, that's not what happens. Silly author. Here, this is what happens, let me show you.’? That is what happened to me here. I had ideas! Future plot building! All gone. @_@ Damnit boys.
Fanfic Recommendation: Onboarding (1356 words) by Laura Kaye
To run from summer, because the sun is too bright

Chapter Summary

In which Nihlus and his worries come to a head.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torin- Male Adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: L.A.O.S - Healing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The medical robot finished its run, nearly four hours later. The list of damages, repairs, and automated estimates on recovery time for things that just required rest... it was very long. By all means, there was no reason why his mentor should have been able to make it back to the ship still standing. Oh wait, yes there was.

The fucking nanites.

Nihlus swayed in place at the cluster fuck of a situation, bracing himself on the table, then withdrawing in a small spurt of terror when his hand brushed Saren's arm. He immediately rebuked himself for being a jumpy moron. If his little doomy robots were already malfunctioning? They were both dead anyway, trapped on the ship.

The green eyed Spectre locked his jaw stubbornly and laid a hand on a grey shoulder, squeezing lightly.

'See? No spontaneous combustion. Not being an idiot about this.' The shoulder was chilly, however, too chilly for a healing Turian. He cleaned off the make shift gurney, and with one last check of vitals, used it to move Saren to his bedroom. The limp torin was still damn heavy, but he managed well enough.

He sat down on the bedside and just started at the still form for a solid twenty minutes, torn between being scared, pissed off, worried, and really tired in a distant, emotional way. Another round of questioning his sanity, and Nihlus decided... he had none left. He tossed aside his armor and crawled
in as well. If he was going to die from nanites gone crazy, or Saren offing him for discovering his secret, he was going to cuddle with the fucker, at least this once.

Nihlus buried his head into the nook between collar and neck, and breathed in deeply. There was that smell that drove him nuts.

'Purchase price of one ass-saving and not being responsible enough to drive us into a sun? Warm hide and the smell of you, apparently. Asshole.' Nihlus was beginning to move beyond his freak out, and into sarcastic anger. A good sign he supposed. A Spectre should be able to bounce back from anything.

'Even this? Yeah, even this.' He nodded to himself, draped an arm over a silvery keel plate, and let unconsciousness come. He was done with today, just done.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

A low rumble woke Nihlus a few hours later. He managed a half hearted raise of his head to see Saren just waking, his jaw stretching in a yawn. His heart gave a half thump of 'oh shit I'm still in bed with him...' before he quashed it down under a mountain of pettiness, and curled back into the warm neck before him. He felt Saren go still.

“...Nihlus?”

“Mmm?”

“What...” The older Spectre stopped to cough, his throat sounding rusted over. “-are you doing?” His answer was long in coming, not wanting to even get into it when the other option was warmth and sleep.

“Enjoying myself before I die.” He could practically sense the raised brow ridge of regal questioning.

“Elucidate.”

He sighed very quietly, and gathered the tatters of his patience around him. “I have a better idea.”
“Oh?”

“How about you 'elucidate' on why you have a fucking nanite colony inside you?” Well those dregs of patience didn't last long.

“Nihlus, la-”

“No.” Nihlus pushed up onto his arms, throwing one over to the other side of the torin's head, and hovered over Saren, starting at him dead on, verdant green to electric blue. “No, you do not even get to chastise me on my word choice when you are literally filled with kill-on-sight order tech. Explain to me why I shouldn't just maroon us on a dextro planet somewhere, since exile is the best solution I can come up with.”

Saren blinked up at him, as if he were the mad one. “It is not K.O.S. tech... technically speaking.”

“... I'm listening.”

“How much do you know about nanotechnology?”

“Besides how to use a microfabricator? Or that self replicating nanites are considered a weapon of mass destruction? Not a ton.”

Nihlus felt Saren shift beneath him, resting a hand on his ribs plates. It was warm even through his undersuit, and damn if he didn't get melting shivers down his side at the sensation. He forced himself to focus in on what the other Spectre was saying.

“-forms of nano tech, based on replication strategy. The robots you are thinking of are called 'black nanites', and no, my colony is not set up to produce those.”

“You're saying that you have... what, nice and friendly ones?” Saren sighed at him with closed eyes.

“Yes, essentially. The colony in my sacrum is a type called 'red nanites'. When a replacement is
needed soon either the malfunctioning unit or a second identical neighbor will journey back to the colony to have it made. The system has the functionality of self-propagation, but only with access to the origin colony. The physical hardware is set to lock down if my vitals flat line for more than thirty minutes. Thus, there is no risk of the classic issues associated with black or yellow types."

The carmine plated Spectre about died with relief, letting out a large gusting breath and tumultuous subvocals. He relaxed again, and dropped his head... straight onto Saren's. The connection of their foreheads made a quiet 'thunk' in the silent room.

Oh... there went his heart again. Um... shit. He hadn't mean to do that.

He opened his eyes, and braced for rejection. Saren looked up at him in shock, then blinked rapidly. His boxy silver mandibles flicked twice in mild distress. Electric eyes shifted to the side for a moment, then back up at Nihlus.

“I had not intended to... scare you. I should have told you about them sooner... The prototype is only a few months old.”

Saren wasn't pushing back into the connection... but he wasn't escaping it either. Nihlus felt his insides dissolve.

“I was just... You collapsed after I got us off Omega. The medbay screen listed your injuries and it was so damn long. Then I saw it communicate with your nanites, and I thought I was going to have to drive us into exile so the Council didn't kill you. All of it just... you scared the shit out of me.”

“...I gathered that.”

Nihlus let out a slow lungful of air, rocking his head left and right ever so slightly. Saren began to look as if he was fighting back the urge to flee. His protégé took mercy on him, pulling away reluctantly after pushing into his fringe once.

The nanites were some freaky new thing that wasn't a death sentence.

He'd touched fringe with Saren, -and not been subsequently murdered for it-. 
They were both alive.

Today was... good. Fuck yes, today was a good day. He still drew the line at getting up. With a jaw cracking yawn and a lick along his teeth, Nihlus curled back into his spot and closed his eyes.

“Now what are you doing?”

“We're not dead. You're not a walking time bomb. Everything is okay, except that T'loak is probably going to be gunning for your head on a silver platter. What am I doing now? Going back to bed.”

“I see. Very well, I have things I must-”

“No.”

“...Nihlus.”

“No, you almost died. Go back to bed.”

“It is not a large enough space.”

“Pffft. We did just fine till you woke up.”

“...”

“...”

He felt Saren relinquish himself back into the curved mattress, though it took a long time for his limbs to loosen again. When Nihlus woke later, he was alone. He stared up at the ceiling wondering if the stoic torin was going avoid him for a good long while, or just pretend it never happened.
Chapter End Notes

!!!!!!
SOMEONE MADE ME FANART! //faints//

DancesWithTurians, also known as my favorite person right now, does 3D model posing with garysmod, and did some with our Kryterius boys for this chapter. Keep in mind that the models are directly from in game, so it's a much older Saren and Nihlus in the images then in-story. Saren is also in his tube-filled augment armor, and has all that muck in his face plates that he doesn't have in-story yet. And the Geth arm.

BUT STILL!

PICS!

![Image of in-game characters]
Oh, my gosh, I'm in love with the second one. Can't you just see the adoration and worry in Nihlus' eyes? Daaawwww!

Fanfic Recommendation: Orbital Eclipse (6433 words) by Chibihaku
Chapter Summary

We wander away for a moment, to a snap shot in the life of another dear friend to be.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Bosh'tet - Quarian slang, relatively equivalent to 'Bastard', it is sometimes translated as 'Faulty Equipment'. (Fanon)
Keelah - Quarian for 'By the Homeworld' or alternatively 'By the Ancestors of my Homeland' (Sometimes translates into 'God' or 'Spirits' depending on the listener's UniTs quality. (Fanon)
Keelah Se'lai - Quarian for 'By the homeworld I hope to see someday.' (Canon)

Chapter Soundtrack: Veela - Night Vision (Charles Deluxe Remix)

"Well, what do you see?"
"It's like... I have night vision even when I don't want to."

You know she couldn't tell you.
The burden was heavy enough alone.
Even though you tried to help her.
Your love was useless and she carried on.
She lay them side by side, one by one.
You watched her get back up,
Take her pack, and walk away...

Warning, this chapter contains... geekiness. And pseudoscience. You have been warned!!! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nine year old Tali'Zorah nar Rayya stared at the circuit board on her work table, and it stared back with a hateful disposition. Well... she imagined it so. Silvery eyes narrowed at the uncooperative mess of tubes, wires, and circuitry, willing it to work like it was supposed to. It glared back, refusing.

"Tali, sweethearrt!" Her mom yelled from their luxurious, tiny living room. "The night cycle starrts in a few minutes, get ready for bed soon, mmmkay?"

"One morre hour, please! I'm in the middle of something."

"Just one."

"Yes, motherr!"
Tali turned back to the troublemaker, staring it down out of the corner of one eye, then the other. She tried rotating it to a new angle, and peering at it from over the table edge. It still wasn't revealing why it would not work, and she needed it to do so, badly. The science fair at school was in three days, and father had promised to be there.

Her contribution couldn't be anything less then perfect.

Three pale fingers picked it up gently, and Tali rotated it about, taking care for the cables and tubes leading off to the other components. The bright eyed girl mentally re-walked through the construction process and schematics, step by step. She knew there was something to be found, it should work... The recalcitrant board was returned to the table top and the staring contest continued. She was so, so frustrated. Hundreds of hours designing and building this over the last four months... It had to work! There wasn't time to start on anything new...

Tali leaned casually back from the work space, and glanced over at the window into her room.

No one observing her.

She leaned in close to it and whispered, "Work, you bosh'tet. Woooork. Or. Else!" It was then that she noticed a soldering point that wasn't quite connected smoothly.

"Oh!"

With great care she removed the tiny bit of failed work, cleaned off the surfaces in question, and resoldered it. Time to try it again...

Power came online, the cooling system turned on, and with a friendly 'boopboopbeep!' her miniaturized emissions collector, smaller then current available technology by a land slide, began gathering free energy from the environment around her.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Ye- Mother it worrks! Moooooom! Mollllooomom it worrks! The enerrgy unit is charrging!"

Oooooooooooooooood

Lanya'Zorah nar Idenna vas Rayya came up to the window of Tali's room and looked inside. Her fingers came up to her faceplate in surprise. The red hooded woman had listened to Tali go on and on about her little invention for the science fair, yet she'd never expected it to... actually work.

Ancestors, her little girl was just so smart.

She wanted nothing more then to pop through the airlock into Tali's itsy bitsy bedroom/workshop, take her daughter into her arms, and kiss her expressively joyous face a million times. Rather then ruin the sterility of the chamber not three days to the science fair, she settled for placing a hand on the glass.

"Keelah, Tali. That's wonderrful! I am so prourd of you! Oh but... I hate to even say this... maybe you should save it for a pilgrimage gift?" Pale silvery eyes and sharp little nose scrunched up in horror at the idea.
"Mother, I cannot do that! It would be cheating!"

"...of course, sweethearrt, you're right. You are so noble my girrl, just like your father."

"He's still coming right?! I can't wait to show him!" Lanya smiled behind her mask, putting sweetness into her voice.

"Of course!" 'Or I will toss him out the airrlock', she added silently. That man was not missing his daughter presenting an innovation worthy of a pilgrimage gift as a side project for her third grade science faire. Or. Else.

Mrs. Zorah watched Tali run tests on her device, saving the schematics, doing light stress testing, and calculating it's rate of charge. Her heart felt just a little heavy though. This wasn't the first time Tali had blown them away with creativity and intelligence beyond her peers. If she kept this up, nothing short of a dreadnought filled with element zero would do for a pilgrimage gift.

Her baby girl was... so smart.

She was too smart for her own good, but Lanya couldn't find it in her to try and stifle that joyful expression.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Rael'Zorh glanced at the clock for the fifth time, having taken off work to come to the fair. He really needed to get back, but the lock his wife had on his arm said that wasn't an option until Tali presented... whatever it was she'd made. He was sure it was wonderful, Tali was a girl after his own heart, but... surely they could record it and show him later?

He glanced over to the time again, and his loving wife stepped on his toes with her boot heel. He winced and leaned in to see her through their faceplates. She was smiling brightly.

"Love?" He whispered to her while someone's child talked about their... Some green thing in a box. He had no clue what it was supposed to be.

"Yes?"

"I do need those toes."

"Oh! Do you? Well then, maybe you will keep them if you stop looking impatient. The children are nervous enough without an Admiral looking bored in the audience."

"Yes, dear." She continued smiling like the cat that got the canary, and he eyed her suspiciously before turning back to the main presentation stage.

There were two more children that presented before his daughter was up. One had offered a somewhat interesting sociology research study. The other had a mock up of a device idea that would help purify externally sourced food not grown in the fleet. Not bad, for third graders, not at all.

Then Tali took the stage, wheeling a covered cart up the ramp, a beaming smile seen even through the low quality faceplate of her baggy child-sized suit. She was almost ten, and would be getting her
first real one in a month or two. He was looking forward to taking her to father-daughter work day later in the year after her attire could pass decon protocols.

His little girl always had something insightful to say, and was a source of cheer and inspiration whenever he had the time to see her. He wished it wasn't so sporadic, but his work was beyond important to the fleet...

Her cart came to a stop, and she pulled the flexible plastic sheeting away to reveal... What in the world was it?

Tali explained to a silent audience of parents and teachers that it was a stray emissions collector. Miniaturized using a new design she'd come up with, it's compacted form could fit into the nooks and crannies of a ship, and was able to feed power into secondary systems. Theoretically, it could also be overclocked to provide temporary power to life support in case of main engine failure.

" -though that would burn it out very fast, and is best saved for real emergencies. Umm... Any questions?"

The crowd was silent, for a single heavy moment, and then the standing ovation began. Clapping and expressive cheers thundered from the gathering of onlookers. Tali beamed as Rael stood and clapped himself silly.

His daughter was such a brilliant child! He loved her so very much!

“Keelah Se'lai, Tali! Keelah Se'lai!!!”

Rael stayed until the end of the presentations, busily caught up in his head, reviewing ideas for good implementations of his daughter's invention. He didn't notice the dark glares and furious body language a few of the more competitive parents and children were leveling at he and his family.

Her datapad fell to the ground as the shove from behind took her by surprise. Tali hit the ground shortly thereafter, catching herself on her hands.

"Oh~~~, looks like she's not good at everything after all."

"Hahahaha, what a klutz."

Tali looked up, unsure what was happening. Three other kids from her grade passed by on the walk way, not helping her up.

'Well that wasn't nice.'

Bemused, she picked herself up and carried on home.
Tali squealed in joy and made for the cafeteria. She’d earned a token for a high quality lunch paste in class today for solving a tricky bit of mathematics and was so excited to use it. She could already taste the nut and berry paste that you could only get with one of the coveted square coins...

Without warning, she was pulled through a door way and shoved into a wall.

"Well look who it is?! The princess of grade three. Oh! And what is it she has there? Is that a lunch token?"

"Y-yes?"

"Surely an admiral's daughter doesn't need that..." The sparkly token was snatched from her fingers. "Does she?"

"What does that have to do with anything? I earned it, and-" the other students crowded her, their body language derisive. "I want to get the one with nuts and-"

One of the taller ones punched her in the stomach, bringing tears forth. Oh it hurt! She began to cry, the world becoming a blurry mess.

They just laughed.

"Princess doesn't need any treats. Spoiled brat. We'll take this, and you can eat all nice at home. You tell anyone? You won't get to keep any tokens ever, got it?"

They left her on the floor. She didn't have the breath to tell them that she ate the plain tasteless stuff at home too.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

"Ms. Zorah, you should have been more careful on the stairs. This ankle has a stress fracture, and the tendon looks torn as well. You're going to need to wear a brace for a while."

".... okay..."

"I understand that you young things like to run and play, but you'll need to be more careful from now on, understand?"

"... yes m'am."

Alright, wait here while I have the fabricator make up your new brace. Don't stand on it while I'm gone."

"...okay..."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
"What happened to your mask! It's cracked!"

"... I... f-fell... there w-were..."

"It's okay, don't cry, sweetheart. I'm not mad at you. Just leave it in the airlock to your room and I'll fix it, okay?"

"Thank you m-mother... I l-love you..."

"I love you too, sweetheart. There, there, my beautiful girl. Shhhhhhh. How about some of that nutty stuff you like for dinner? That sounds good right? Shhhhhshshsh--. That's it, no more tears my love..."

"Oh Keelah, not again.' Tali felt her stomach tighten in knots at the sight of the small group waiting for her in the quiet corridor on her way to school. Today... today she could not be late! Why couldn't they be bosh'tets tomorrow instead? There was a special guest today coming in to talk about cybernetics during morning classes. She had been waiting to hear this lecture for weeks! In desperation, Tali'Zorah tried to run past, but one of them clotheslined her. She choked and fell backwards, catching herself painfully on elbows and forearms.

"Aww, did princess Zorah get a booboo?" The others laughed at the mocking tone, and Tali's arms started shaking. The jibes and hateful words continued as her tiny fists clenched in anger.

Not... Again.

These ancestor forsaken jerks could steal her lunch tokens, they could push her around, and make fun of her... They were not going to keep her from the guest lecture. No way. She stood slowly.

"Let me go. Or. Else."

"Ooooooo, or what? You going to math at us?" One girl moved in suddenly and shoulder checked her into the wall. Tali couldn't help stumbling back, but she straighten up immediately afterwards.

"I'm going to class! Right now! You all should too."

"Pfffttt, it's not real stuff today, just that dumb guy who's supposed to talk about robot arms and crap."

"Yeah, that dumbass! My dad says he's a Geth sympathizer."

"You want to learn some more math from the Geth lover, princess? That desperate for friends?"

"I'm. Leaving. Now. Bye." Tali turned to go, stomping with righteous determination. The ring leader grabbed the loose shoulder of her suit and pulled. It came loose with a ghastly tearing sound that seemed to echo down the hall.
'No... No! I can't go to the hospital today! The lecture... Keelah no! DAMNIT!' She turned around and decked the kid, who didn't move an inch to dodge. Too busy staring in stark horror at the massive suit breech. Down they went.

'No, I... I refuse to miss this!' Tali'Zorah nar Rayya ripped the decorative cloth hood off the fallen classmate's head. No one tried to stop her, recoiling from the suit breech situation as if it the contamination failure was transferable on contact. In a minute flat she had the suit resealed with Omni-gel, and had a make-shift mantle made of the stolen cloth to hide it. Tali gave herself a heavy dose of antibiotics, and then...

She went to class.

The other kids came, eventually, sitting down just before the bell. They spent the entire morning staring at her with wide eyes, whispering about the crazy girl who is about to die in class...

Tali sat there, focused on taking notes, fever rising.

It was a fascinating lecture, given by a brilliant mind.

She regretted nothing.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex] Ecology of Rannoch and the Quarian Immune System
As many well know, the Quarian homeworld has a unique insect-less ecosystem that relies entirely on larger species of animals to pollinate local flora. Thus, the classic troubles of the Quarian immune system can be traced all the way back to the composition of their home world's soil, which is formed by large amounts of Diatomaceous sediment. Also found on the human homeworld, as Diatomaceous earth, this siliceous sedimentary rock is known to have abrasive and physico-sorptive properties that remove the lipid coating on the exoskeletons of any would-be Rannochian insect life. This results in the loss of exoskeletal integrity, and causes massive internal damage. It can also be harmful to larger lifeforms if inhaled, and will dry out the lipid layers of anything it comes into contact with. Thus, Quarians and other species native to the planet have all developed other solutions to oily coatings and delicate lung tissue. As an aside, Turians are advised to avoid contact as well, as their exoskeletal plates will suffer from extended exposure. That all said, the mega and micro fauna of Rannoch have developed a symbiotic relationship in order to bridge the large gap this creates in the food chain. This is most easily observed in the relationship between the Hidera Virus, Maai/Cocora Birds, and Torza fruit. The Maai Bird will eat Torza berries as a part of it's normal diet, as will the Cocora. The Maai has mild stomach acid, while the smaller Cocora has very potent stomach acid. As a main source of food for the insect-less diet of these birds, the berries must be prevalent and reproduce quickly. As such, the seeds that are eaten with the fruit must have a tough enough shell to survive the intestinal tract of the Cocora, but that leaves the seeds eaten by the Maai in a protective coating too thick to sprout after being spread around by the travelling bird. In this instance, however, the Hidera virus comes into play. The Hidera viral strain
causes mild stomach cramps, which slow the processing speed of the Maai Bird's digestion, giving the weaker acid time to weaken the seed shell, resulting in more planted and growing berries for the birds of both types to eat, and successful rapid-reproduction of the Torza plant itself. Here in, the virus has 'learned' to slow the digestive speed of it's host Maai, which results in more food available for the bird and it's offspring to live on. It does not to do so in excess, or while it's in flight, as that could result in a broken chain to the events in the form of a dead bird, and a virus without a way to communicate itself onto offspring. The Maai bird has also evolved to accommodate the twinges of stomach muscles, seemingy unbothered by the small spasms. Often called 'weak', the Quarian immune system is in fact not so, but rather 'adaptive', as it displays these same traits of synergistic survival compromise in a world that is entirely lacking a major source of protein for it's animal life. The problem on that front lies more in the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of foreign strains in the known galaxy, and an immune system that attempts to adapt to them all would rapidly devolve after too much compromise, too quickly. The tendency of modern Quarians to never expose themselves to foreign strains, and to dose all their current bacterial life in antibiotics, results in an internal environment that is sterile and unchallenged. The recent advancements in restoring the Quarian immune system have all been centered around restoring the territorial and naturally defensive pathogen symbiosis of the individual, without also making them a walking carrier for disease.

A/N: BOOM! Quarian immune system has now begun to make some sense, sort of! WOOOO! Please, kind readers, if you can think of any holes in that theory, additions that need to be made, or alternate theories altogether... comment below with details! ALL THE DETAILS. I love my pseudoscience. <3

A/N/N: I write Tali as a genius. Why? Because the girl could impress career engineers working on top-secret, state-of-the-art military grade drive cores, and crack an AIs encryption while it was dying and trying furiously to delete data... at age 24. Girls got brains, yo. Especially if you consider she also managed combat training before leaving the flotilla. I obviously think she's going to be a bit passive about bullies, just look at how she patiently charmed Pressley, yeah? That wouldn't have happened if she'd been prissy or aggressive in return. She just... took it quietly. Knows her stuff, doesn't get mad.

Admiral Tali'Zorah nar Rayya vas Normady at age 9 ladies and gentlemen.

Fanfic Recommendation: Field Training (106020 words) by Mordinette (FemShep/Garrus)
A deft hand for a subtle craft

Chapter Summary

Garrus is grumpy, and then suddenly he's intrigued.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Aishika's - A dextro only 4 star restaurant in the Citadel wards. Named for a Turian seafood delicacy called Aishika, a rare type of mollusk analogue. (Mindcanon)
Palvi - a shortening for 'Palvipyrum', the Turian word for 'Explosives'. ('Palvipyrum' word credit: MizDirected)
Tarin/Torin - Female/Male Adult Turian (Credit: MizDirected) (Final lexicon posting. If you haven't had these shoved into your brain and credited to Miz by now, I give up.)
MMA - Mixed Martial Arts (Realworld)
CQC - Close Quarters Combat (Realworld)
Click - A measurement of distance in military slang, commonly used for '1 km away', but can also be '1 click' of a rifle's mechanical sight nobs to adjust for things like elevation.

Chapter Soundtrack: Feeling Good by Nina Simone (The Man from U.N.C.L.E trailer arrangement. Because this chapter is all about the secret agent shit. Ohhh yeah.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Garrus sat at his breakfast bar, the infamous kitchen credit chit in hand as he tapped one edge on the counter, spun the card a quarter turn, tapped it again, and repeated. He was in a foul mood. Work had been hellish lately, with a slew of small time crime rings all cropping up under the protection of a few big names that kept C-Sec running in circles trying to maneuver the politics along with the criminal science.

In one case, the C-Sec evidence room had been broken into, the guards on duty drugged, and two days before a court case... key evidence was suddenly gone. Poof.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

On the positive side, it wasn't a singular problem that could be dropped on the 'new guy' to sink or swim. Enough issues and different case files were effected and interlinked that half the department had a hand in the chaos. Only to the perpetrators' benefit.
Thusly, Garrus was in dire, dire need of stress relief. Unfortunately, the news feeds had been all quiet on the leaked escapades of Spectre business as of late. Break room rumors said that ST&R was having issues with one of the Terminus pirate kings, and everything now was hush hush until the situation was resolved.

The rules of the kitchen chit had always been, 'Wait for Saren or one of the Spectres to take someone down, then celebrate.', but right now? He needed to let off some steam, badly. The C-Sec range had attested to that for the past four nights, to no avail.

He was afraid to spar with anyone either, the sniper knew he was too angry at the moment to deal with the... this sounded terrible, but the light weights at work. Most of his fellow officers weren't top of the class CQC fighters. He'd signed up on the roster for the friendly exhibition matches they held every month enough times to know the next best fighter was actually, strangely enough, a human male with a few MMA titles from his youth. If Garrus hadn't been so afraid of carving him up with talons because of his bad mood, he would have pinged the guy and requested a spar. He'd held his own last time they'd been in the ring, but right now.... not a great idea.

It would feel awkward as hell, but maybe he could blunt his talons...

He wondered in passing if Nihlus was on the Citadel. He had the Spectre's extranet address, and an open invitation to call anytime... he hadn't seen either Spectre in months... maybe he could... What? Bother an agent of the Council who was probably dealing with Terminus pirates to come listen to him whine while they fought a rough, graceless stress match? No, his pride wouldn't let him
face the green eyed torin with such a disrespectful lack of focus on the spar, and his conscience refused to let him call a Spectre away from their duty because of his inability to cope with his own anger.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

So, did he break his own rules and use the chit? It was obnoxiously full right now. He could easily afford a new mod for his Lancer... but he didn't think modding it was the sort of thing he could concentrate on at the moment. He refused to muck up the inside of that gun. Refused.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He could still shoot things though. Then again... C-Sec's range made it clear that wasn't going to cut it. He'd laid waste to that room. Whoever maintained the walls to deal with the constant abuse had their work cut out for them. He wasn't the only one who'd been at it either.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Maybe he should go the other route? Go drinking? Garrus didn't think that was wise, he wasn't an angry drunk generally speaking, but lowered inhibitions right now would likely do more harm then help. He wondered if he could get away with a drunken assassination or two... ha ha no... If Pallin didn't kill him for it, his pari would.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The grey plated officer considered starting small. Perhaps he could abuse his stress ball some... but that habit had become a 'mulling something over' method, rather then stress relief. A focus aid. He doubted it could help. A walk? A massage? A cold shower? Sleeping pills? He needed something.... something.

Tap. Tap- diiing dooooong.

Icy blue eyes perked up at the sound of the door. At this point, any distraction was welcome from his downward ever-spiraling thoughts. He slipped the chit in a pocket, and went to answer the door. It opened to reveal a smiling silver tarin who exclaimed joyfully, and pushed them inside. The door
closed behind her as she looped her arms over his collar, leaning in close.

“Garrus, darlin'! I'm so glad to see you. I'm on shore leave! Tell me you can spend it with me?” The sniper blinked rapidly, his hands coming up onto her shoulders to try and hold the unknown tarin at bay. She didn't let him, leaning in close and looking him right in the eyes. Wow... speaking of iris color, she had the most vivid pair of... suspiciously familiar green eyes. He stopped trying to push her away, but left his hands where they were.

What in spirit's name was going on? It couldn't be...

“Ahh, hi. It's... nice to see you too. Ahh... two days you say, how... great. I uh... I'll have to talk to my boss, we've been slammed lately...”

“Oh ya? Well that's okay. Give it a try, hmm?” Peach colored hide, silver plated, higher pitched, and green eyed. She tilted her neck forward to whisper in his ear, “I'll make it worth your while. We should play some card games, just like old times. Maybe I could teach you a few tricks?”

…it was definitely Nihlus, but... where was his crest?! The Officer stared at the empty space where there should have been horns.

Thin air.

“I am... happy to ask. If not, I might be able to switch a shift or two around... Ahh, can I get you something to dri-” He was suddenly pushed back a step, and probably-Nihlus sashayed around him in a rapid walk for the bedroom.

“Mind if I take a shower first? I'll be right out. I'm so gross right now, just got back and all.”

“...Right. Sure.” He stood there staring at his hallway, thinking quick. That was definitely his Spectre, kitted up to look female, and acting suspicious. He...

She? ...S/he? They? No... that sounded plural. She. Right now, he was a she so... whatever.

She had made her identity known immediately, but kept up her cover while in his apartment. So
either she was bugged, or his apartment was under surveillance somehow. Garrus decided to act as if both were true. Time to dust off his undercover acting skills. So... pet name. He needed a pet name, since apparently they were selling a friendship close enough for casual sex and drive-by shore leave.

He took a few steps forward, and called down the hallway casually.

“Hey Palvi, do you want to go out tonight or stay in? I'm up for either.” Ninety-percent-sure-it's-Nihlus' voice called back as the water turned on.

“Ooooh let's go out! I would love that! I'm super broke though, can ya cover for me darlin'?”

“Hahaha! Spent all your creds on...” He needed a word for 'surveillance'... “that new camera upgrade for your 'tool? I saw those shots of you online, very cute.”

“You know it! Worth every bit! I might've saved the purchase for later if I would have known I'd be gettin' shore leave, but you don't mind me crashin' in your apartment for a few days do you? Maybe borrowin' some clothes? I left all mine onboard in my haste to get off that damn ship.”

So yes, there was surveillance, in her clothing and on the apartment? It sounded like she might not have any Spectre gear on hand either. He forced himself not to look around suspiciously, or even so much as twitch a finger toward his Omni-tool scanner suite.

“You know you don't need to ask, besides you steal my shirts every time you're here anyway.”

“Well they're super comfy! Can ya blame me?”

“Only if I don't get to take them back off, Palvi.” He yelled back in a flirtatious tone while opening the chilling unit in the kitchen, and leaning in for a good look as an excuse to tap his visor's buttons.


The water switched off.
“Hey, it's been a while since I went grocery shopping. What do you say to dinner first?”

The doorbell rang again. Nihlus came padding up the hallway, smiling like peaches and silver spoons. She had on nothing but a towel wrapped around mid waist.

“Are you expectin' company? I'm not interruptin' am I?”

“No, I wasn't. It's probably just *maintenance*...”

“Oh well you better *answer it* then darlin'. Might be important.”

Garrus moved to answer to the door while his guest switched with him, walking into the kitchen. He was still trying to figure out how she was different colors, all the way down to the teasing hints of peach toned waist wrapped up in fluffy white towel. No color smears on the white or dark brown spots peaking through...

The door swished open.

“Can I help you?”

There was a cheerful purple-and-orange Drell standing in the door, wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase.

“Hello sir! My name is Conall Gallach, and I'm here to offer you a fantastic investment opportunity that comes with immediate rewards! May I come in to tell you more about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, good sir?”

Garrus forced his mandibles into a bemused smile in case 'Conall' could read Turian facial expressions.

“Ah, sorry. Now isn't a good time...”

“Who's at the door darlin'? Is it a friend? You know your police friends are always welcome to come
out with us.” The sniper tilted his head as if listening, but refused to fake being more distracted then that by taking eyes off the Drell. Those jacket sleeves did a piss poor job of hiding the muscle underneath.

“"No, it's not. Just a sec Palvi. I'll be right there. Ahh sorry, Mr. Gallach, my girlfriend and I are about to head out to dinner. Now isn't a good time...”

“Oh! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to bother you. Would another time be better?”

“... Sure. I have to check my schedule with work though, and she's here on shore leave... can I get your extra-net address and I'll message you tomorrow about it?” He had to give the man credit. His used-skycar-salesman smile didn't even slip at the subtle attempt to gather counter intelligence.

“Of course, good sir! Here is my card? Just let me know when a good time would be, and I would be delighted to stop back by!”

The C-Sec Officer took the card without looking, careful not to smudge any finger prints.

“That's really nice of you. I am interested, just ah...” He ginned devilishly, one guy to another, and tilted his head in Nihlus' direction insinuatingly. 'Conall' chuckled in understanding.

“Well have a wonderful night, I hope to hear from you soon!” The man turned and walked away with a jaunty step. Garrus let the door close and turned around with a purposeful smile. With the electromagnetic mode active, he could see three little pings of light on Nihlus' body. Time to get rid of those.

Stealthily.

He approached Nihlus and settled his hands on her towel covered hips. He could feel the edges of male plate structure beneath the cloth, and let out a mental laugh at finding that the Spectre wasn't crazy enough to get a sex change for his job. This charade was already impressive enough without it. Garrus leaned in close, amorously pantomiming breathing in Nihlus' scent.

“So, about dinner... I suppose you have to put on clothes for that.”
“Mmmm, I might just darlin’.”

“Shame that. Promise you'll take them off later?”

“I might be convinced.” She pressed back into him and nipped at his jaw line. The sniper rumbled playfully, and tapped his forehead to hers.

“Well then, let's begin a night of 'convincing' shall we?”

“I like that sound'a that.” Green eyes twinkled as she pulled away, and made for his room to nab said clothing. Tarin-Nihlus returned, one of his casual sets belted around her waist to show off it's slimness. It was a good thing the Spectre was naturally lanky. Garrus didn't think he could pull off feminine unless it involved major surgery.

“Ready to go?”

“Oh I am. What are you in the mood for?”

“I was thinking Aishika's, it's a nice place about two clicks away. Ever been there?”

“Haven't heard of it.”

“I'm sure you'll like it, Palvi. Let's go.”

“M'kay.”

Aishika's was expensive, but it was his go-to place for really good dextro food. Not to mention? Nihlus was pulling off impeccable drag, and unless he missed the mark, there was a Drell assassin tailing them. Whom he had a business card for. Garrus figured it all counted as kitchen chit worthy 'news'. 
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, Garrus' spur of the moment made up nick name for Nihlus was short hand for 'Explosives', something sort of like 'splode'. In the same vein as a pyromaniac's friend/lover might teasingly call them 'pyro'.

A/N/N: Heh. 'Spur of the moment'. I should find a way to make that into a euphemism...

A/N/N/N: I WONDER WHO THE DRELL IS? WHOEVER COULD IT BE?

Fanfic Recommendation: A Heated Story (1687 words) by ninalanfer (Garrus/Adrien)
Your mission, should you choose to accept it

Chapter Summary

Garrus and Nihlus continue to try and be sneaky with subvocals and insinuation. How about dinner?

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Palvi - a shortening for ‘Palvipyrum’, the Turian word for ‘Explosives’. (Palvipyrum’ word credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Menae's Zenith - Revolution72 (Mass Effect Fansong, ft. Garrus Vakarian and the Shadow Broker Orchestra.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The icy eyed Officer spent the short rapid-transit ride cooking up plans to remove the surveillance devices on Nihlus with inconspicuous timing and movements. Nihlus chatted at him about nonsense topics and recent news, and he chipped in where appropriate while considering tactics. One node had somehow made it onto 'her' mandible, another onto fringe, and a third tucked into the nook on her inner collar. It must have been some sort of aerosolized delivery system of exceedingly small devices, because they weren't at matching angles or even visible without a close look.

Garrus looked the Spectre up and down, consideringly. It was also possible there were more bugs in a pile of dirty clothing back at his apartment. Great. Hopefully a trip through the laundry machine would destroy them.

Since the skycar was on autopilot, he took the opportunity to lean over to Nihlus during a lull in the conversation. She smiled up at him with a curious tilt to her head. The sniper leaned in nearly close enough to share breath, and cupped a hand over her mandible.

“Missed you.” he rumbled in a low tone. The Spectre hummed silkily in reply, eyes fluttering closed as she leaned her head into the hand.
"I missed you too, Blue." Came a breathy, well acted reply.

"I know it's hard to keep up communications on deployment, but would it be too much to ask for more then one call every three months?"

"I'm sorry... I'm just s'bad at it. I promise it isn't that I don't think about you, m'kay?" Nihlus was delivering some honest sounding distress, subvocals and all. Silver and grey plates touched as he brushed temples with her before pulling back, the device from her mandible now scrapped off onto his talon. He'd wipe it off 'accidentally' after a little time had passed.

"Hey, it's alright. Don't stress about it, Palvi. The only thing that matters is that the two of us remain in contact... Listen, I know neither of us are anywhere near ready for bonding, but someday? I at least want to be in the running for you, beautiful."

"O-Of course you are." Nihlus withdrew back into her seat. The skycar slowed down as it came up on the landing pad, and they hopped out on either side. Garrus tilted a nod in the right direction, and led them forward while keeping a casual watch for snipers or suspicious shadows.

Nihlus had long since decided to enjoy this opportunity for all it was worth. Blue was wining and dining him, albeit under a pretense of subterfuge and the baleful gaze of one of the Illuminated Primacy's best, but his shitstorm of a life recently had been so full of struggle and strife that just pretending to be on a date with the Palaven-born mountain of sniper skill and tech wizardry was immeasurably heartening. The C-Sec Officer really was being an incredibly good sport about it all, and having him on Nihlus' side brightened up his outlook considerably. Even the light hearted almost-fun they were having with word play was a breath of fresh air.

A quiet conversation came back to him then, a rumbled subvocal promise that the sniper would stand for him, if he needed it. Nihlus swallowed back the heavy emotions that brought on; a blend of gratitude, a sense of being unworthy, and affection for the person Garrus was, that he would keep that promise so readily. It was not the time to be wrapped up inside his mind however, right now was for pulling off this act like his life depended on it. Which it might.

Truthfully, the sniper's relatively quick uptake on the situation was probably the only reason the
assassin hadn't moved in to attempt the kill, and thank fuck that Blue had played it cool. Granted, the Spectre gave himself pretty good odds, but the rumors about the guy said he had a perfect record.

Best not challenge that.

He'd gone to ground immediately after completing the Council's sealed-record order to kill a high ranking member of the Primacy. The Drell had been on his tail within three days, and only his savant level skill at blending in had kept him a step ahead. The asshole was skilled as fuck, and had a Drell's memory for people.

It was a good thing Nihlus could be someone else at the drop of a hat.

At the moment, he was in his best cover yet. Only possible because of a spot of good luck that had someone who looked like his last guise pass by him on a crowded street, and he'd used it to slip the hunter for long enough to get in a full special effects grade makeover as different as possible from the disguise he'd been in when taking the kill.

Still, the Drell had caught up quickly, but his tracks led him to a very female tarin with matching paperwork and a boyfriend. Said 'boyfriend' was really helping him sell it, as was the crest trimming he'd endured. It would grow back in a few months, but the surrounding nerves he'd long since killed pulling this before had tried to regrow too, and they were fucking itchy.

Well, it was either all of those excellent obfuscations, or the man's reputation for avoiding unneeded deaths. Garrus appeared to be just another civilian Police Officer on paper, and It really didn't get much more reputable then that.

There was no telling exactly what was going on in the assassin's head though, just guesses. He'd been ready with a kitchen knife when 'Conall' had rung the bell.

On that note, he felt kinda shitty about dropping all this on Blue's door step. With Saren off the grid somewhere unknown, his options were sorta limited.

Jondam was on flipping Kahje right now. Not fucking helpful. He would not, under any circumstances, bring this upon tiny, crazy little Tio'fore. Adiah's work was too delicate to have him bringing scrutiny to her airlock. Tela would laugh merrily and slam the door in his face.
His options for friends that could help him deal with this, and wouldn't panic, were very small. He knew lots of people, sure, but a large number of those were self interested mercs who'd sell him out for enough creds, or just plain civilian lovers.

Trim that list down to the number of people who constantly wore an optical piece and had the presence of mind to identify and begin removing bugs... Would be two actually, as Saren had his artificial eyes from that incident with the acid.

Nihlus was beginning to be a little jealous of the silver plated jerks and their optical advantages.

Speaking of advantages, and taking them, their waiter seated them in a cozy booth for two that looked out over the middle of the room, which was occupied by a large fountain that misted a surrounding colorful mess of dextro plants. He snuggled into the sniper's side with a happy sigh covering his malicious glee.

'Suck on humidity and dextro pollen, you tenacious scaly fucker.'

He didn't know if Garrus had planned it like this, or if it was a happy coincidence, but he'd take it. Winging it and making the best of circumstances was his specialty.

He was distracted from further conniving when the sniper started rumbling menu options in his ear. 'Hot damn, that voice...'

" -is also an choice, but my favorite is the next meal down. Any of that sounding good?"

What he thought was, 'Oh, all of it did.', what he said however was a somewhat less lascivious, "Oh, all of it did. What're you gettin'?"

"My favorite, I think."

"I'll have that then, just order two, hm?" Nihlus could see him nod out of the corner of his eye, feeling a swish of thumb back and forth on his far shoulder. That warm arm around his collar was
He was tempted to enact plan A, which was always 'make it worse', but he didn't want to get them kicked out. Nihlus settled for stealing heat and playing footsie with the Officer's spurs while they waited to order. They just needed to keep this cover long enough for the Drell to back off with uncertainty, then he could get his Spectre contacts to work on having the kill order removed via mitigating favors and bribery.

He expected it would take a handful of 'Enkindler' artifacts, credits, and favors owed. Hopefully that process was a matter of days, and not weeks or months.

Though he wouldn't exactly mind posing as Garrus' girlfriend for an extended duration... Vision faded as the temporarily silver and peach colored Spectre closed his eyes and enjoyed it all for a moment, feeling safe enough to just breathe for the first time in two weeks.

The waiting staff came around with complementary wine and took their order, returning with unasked for appetizers of spicy petit fours made of meat slices pinned in with savory cake fluff.

Okay, Nihlus had been mostly kidding on the whole getting 'wined and dined' thing, but Blue was playing a boyfriend that was 'in it to win it' he guessed. It was perfectly normal for a couple to treat each other like this.. but it seemed like he was always mooching on the torin's good will, every time they met. The temporarily-silver Spectre made a mental note to find a way to repay him for all this, with interest.

"You always take me such nice places, Blue." he said, shaking it off. No help for it right now. Nihlus instead refocused on staying alive. He hoped the food wasn't poisoned. Couldn't exactly check it with a scan, and not eating would give up the game. The poisoner in him couldn't smell or taste any though, and that had to be good enough.

"I'm a classy guy, what can I say? Besides, you deserve it for all these long tours you take with your squad. One left this year before you get a longer leave, right?"

'Two bugs gone already? That sly little copper...' Okay, 'little' wasn't really a valid word to describe the seven feet of muscled torin, but whatever. Speaking of small things, Nihlus wished he could tell where the damn tiny devices were. He hadn't even been aware anything but his clothes had gotten tagged.
"I think so, but I'll have ta check the schedule to be sure. Did you, um, want me to visit for part'a the off time?"

Garrus set his eating utensil down, and turned to him fully. Those icy blue eyes meeting his own with sharp edged focus. The hand on his shoulder rose up to rest on the spinal plates at the back of his neck.

"Palvi, don't tease me. You know I'd like you to stay forever."

'Oh... fuck me...' was the faint thought in reply as Nihlus' heart gave out for a moment.

Maybe Blue was selling this cover just a little too well...

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: The Other Beginning (12,610 words) by Misfire Anon (OC/Desolas, OC/ Saren) (This fic is less like literature and more like a painting made of words. It's not to everyone's taste, but I have to recommending giving it a try.)
All done up and ready to fall back down

Chapter Summary

The pretend becomes less of a pantomime for a love starved torin that gives it so freely, but doesn't know how to ask for it in return in any simple way.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Thulium - An element found in Turian hide that adds additional protection from solar radiation. (Canon)

Reverie - The effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva, adaptive to any species or chirality thanks to the biologically creative pheromone receptors/interpreters along the jaw, throat, and nose that use incoming pheromones to produce counter hormones which induce a rigorous onslaught of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce the cocktail will 'remix' the blend constantly for success, continuing until maximum effect is reached. Has an additive component of low grade bioelectric feedback exclusive in Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: A brutal, colorful blending of Recidiva's 'Reverie', MizDirected's 'pheromone receptors', and idea glue from me.)

EM - Stands for 'Electromagnetism', the interaction of electrical currents or fields.

Chapter Soundtrack: Danger by Etro Anime

I don't want to try to fight this love.
How dangerous can it be?
I know the odd are so unfavorable,
and honesty is forsakable.
So many run for safety...
Run from the danger of falling in love like this.
Danger of falling apart in the hands of another.
Danger of falling in love like this.
Cold sweat, craving the dark...

*Warning, duckies. Explicit content ahead.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

That damn third listening bug was still glowing in Nihlus' collar. Garrus had managed to leave the first bug in the skycar, and had transferred the second to his arm, which he'd brush off casually at some point. The third one was in an obnoxious spot that he couldn't figure out how to get to without
seeming suspicious.

He'd keep watching for an opportunity.

The Officer spent the meal surreptitiously glancing around from time to time, using excuses like calling the waiter over or going to the restroom, he checked for their tail. There were no Drell to be seen, but he knew that didn't mean 'Conall' wasn't there.

The sniper found that, strangely enough, he was having a damn good time. Compared to the tension wire stress he'd been fighting in the kitchen earlier, this dangerous game had him feeling engaged and productive. There was a problem, and he was solving it.

Their meal came to an end, and Garrus paid for them. Taking Nihlus by the arm, he pulled them from the restaurant toward the rapid-transit station. That was about the time it occurred to him that if they went straight back to his apartment, not only would he have issues loosing the bugs without having to destroy them, but anyone listening would be expecting amorous activities to begin.

He didn't like the idea of Nihlus having sex as a part of his job in the first place, however, and he had no intention of taking the charade that far. It put a bad taste in his throat. Maybe he was just old fashioned, but Garrus felt that the lanky, cross dressing Spectre deserved better then that.

Time to stall.

"Have you seen the new Blasto movie?"

"I hadn't realized it was out! You wanna go see it?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. Let's go."

The second tiny device ended up on the torso of a random person he purposefully ran into on the way inside. Just one left. As they took seats in the back row of the theater he had to turn off his visor, dropping the shimmered blue veil it had layered over everything to display the local electromagnetics. His matching eye appreciated the break.
Garrus realized about thirty minutes into the showing that the back row seats in the theater had more uses then keeping their backs to a wall... it was also the universal make out spot for horny teenagers everywhere.

Perfect.

The sniper tugged Nihlus into the angle he wanted, and leaned in to nuzzle at warm peach. Time to see if the pin-head sized device could survive saliva... and stomach acid... and a gizzard... and still manage to operate from inside a Thulium lined hide. He hummed a whisper quiet subvocal 'heads up', then began nibbling and laving at hide. Nihlus' neck tilted obligingly to the side in open invitation.

Garrus started out nuzzling and licking lightly, just below the mandible, and worked his way down... a little back... and found the troublesome thing with his tongue. He licked it clean away, fairly certain his insides would kill it, and if not that, then prevent it from operating.

Accidentally eating it seemed like a fairly unsuspicious way to get rid of the third one anyway. He kept up the attention for a while as well, just in case they were being observed still. Pulling back after a bit, he nipped at her fringe playfully and turned back to watching Blasto aim six different guns, one for each tentacle, at the antagonist. All tilted sideways in gangster-esc nonsense.

They stayed till the end, and held hands to the skycar. Garrus turned his visor on after a few moments, opting to 'remember' to reactivate it later rather then sooner in an attempt to not appear paranoid. Once they exited onto the platform, he spent the walk back to his apartment casually looking them down, and when they hit the elevator up to his floor, he risked scanning them both.

Looks like the bug couldn't survive a Turian digestive system after all.

Coming up clean, he briefly showed Nihlus the all clear screen then exiting the program before the doors could reopen. Down the hall, in the door, and they were back in closed quarters at least. No good sight lines in here for any attempts at sniping either. He checked for EM signatures as they went.

“Hey Blue, mind if I set m'clothes to wash?”
“I'll take care of it, yeah? Just make yourself comfortable.” He really didn't want Nihlus touching the wrong bit of clothing and getting rebugged. The Spectre seemed to gather that as Garrus went to grab his laundry from it's haphazard pile on bathroom floor.

Nihlus smiled and flopped on his bed in a lounge. “You're the best.”

The sniper tossed the clothes in the laundry machine, along with some of his own for realism, and panned a look around the bedroom. It looked as though they were finally, finally bug free. He checked other detection fields on his visor as well, just to be safe.

There was someone in the vents of the hallway, showing up on thermal imaging as a Drell shaped heat signature. Damnit.

The sniper turned to the bed, casually tossing off his shirt, and joined the Spectre. Nihlus' silvery arms came around him as they touched fringes, and he slid off to the side to whisper a barely audible 'vents. heat sig.' in her ear before continuing down to nibble softly with mouth plates along the peachy neck. She in turn wrapped her long legs around his waist, shifting them back and forth to pass along his sides. His lower abdominals tensed at how good that felt, and his first reaction was to recoil from the heat he felt spreading, but realized in time that recoiling would give them immediately away.

He swallowed it back and hummed in pleasure instead. Focus. He needed to focus. Either he could stay like this and physically protect Nihlus if the assassin tried to jump them, or he could flip them and put her back to the threat, which he didn't like the idea of at all, but it would allow him to keep watch on the heat signature...

Garrus decided eyes-on was the better bet. He'd roll Nihlus out of the way if the red-shifted blob came forward to engage. He spun them, leaving Nihlus on top, and bared his neck at a good angle to keep his view where it needed to be. The subvocals of the Spectre on him modulated in a wave of desire and she descended on the proffered hide.

Icy blue eyes tried to roll back in his head as the feeling of molten tongue licking long trails up his neck sent his instincts into bliss. *Spirits* that felt amazing. With a will, Garrus forced himself to focus and keep watch through half lidded eyes, kneading at the malleable peach sides in his hands. An insistent nuzzle forced his head farther aside then need be, and a jaw came over his neck as teeth pinched down ever so slightly in a move that asked for trust. Garrus rumbled a long and low confirmation. That tongue went back to work in time to a light roll of hips.

*Spirits*, Nihlus needed to be not so good at this.
The distracted torin focused on keeping the heat signature in sight, but couldn't stop his hips from bucking up against the weight on top of him when Nihlus bit down on his mandible with mouth plates and tugged gently.

He'd been so, so damn keyed up this morning and now... it was all coming back in a very different way, with terrible timing.

His thoughts became a litany of, 'Spirits. Go away Drell. Damn. Oh... damn. Assassins need to leave, spirits please. Goawaygoaway. Can't focus, go away...' He barely noticed Nihlus' stolen shirt go flying, but he did notice the Spectre lean back in and grip his fringe, pulling his face up and diving her tongue into his mouth.

Garrus let out a shudder as a long black tongue laved over the roof of his mouth, kicking off a plunge into Reverie. The hormone cocktail hit his blood stream in seconds and his mild purr roared up into forceful roll of thunder. The gender swapped torin answered in kind and took him apart mercilessly, drawing along the back of his teeth, curling along his own tongue and diving to swipe at the soft underside. Black talons dug into peach hide, any pain flowing away into the state of Reverie induced delirium that swallowed up all sensation and returned it as coiling pleasure.

Heat... he needed... to... the heat signature...

Garrus managed to get a quick peak at the still motionless form, and then the tide rose again sweeping him away. Nihlus was intense, curling her tongue around his and tugging, then licking all around his teeth and mandibles, grinding down on his hips... both of their plates had loosened somewhere along the way. He had a moment of panic realizing that if the Drell was watching them still with any number of tech devices it could easily reveal the Spectre's form enough to show his gender inaccuracy. The fear keeping him afloat just enough, he pulled her from his face, but she went right back to his neck.

It was enough to see that the shape was gone, only a fading trail of transferred heat remained in the vent walls. No other heat signatures around except for the distant fuzzy imprints of neighbors. Garrus let his head fall back with a relieved outrush of breath. It soon became a moan as the temporarily-silver Spectre growled angrily at his distraction and bit him low on the neck.

The Reverie flow turned it into a dizzying amount of pleasure, and his focus sunk back down. He clawed at it though, grasping for the surface, slipping as a long hard length pressed against his own. With a brutal amount of will and a haggard gasp for air, the sniper bent his knees and pulled them in to pin Nihlus' hips, or at least slow them down. He gripped the peachy neck on either side below the mandible and tried to get his attention.
“Ni-” He swallowed through a throat gone dry. “Nihlus!”

No response. He panted with effort and yanked at the face in his hands to look at him.

“Nihlus!”

“Blue... yeeessss... yesss.”

“Nihlus. S-slow down. Stop. He's gone. The Drell is... the Drell is gone. You can stop.”

“....s-stop?”

“Yeah, you can... stop. He left.”

“... I don't wanna stop, Blue.”

“That just... it's just the Reverie, Palvi. It's just the... It's my fault. I was... really stressed today. My pheromones are probably strong as hell right now.”

“No. Blue. I don't. Want. To stop.”

“Nih-”

Nihlus pulled the hands from his face and pinned them down to the bed. He pushed his forehead down into the sniper's, and keened a long low note of want. Almost begging.
“Please, Blue... It's not... I've had... I've been running from that scaly asshole for weeks. No rest. I need this. Please.”

Icy blue eyes looked up into his own, and fuck they were so gorgeous. Garrus was beautiful and amazing and *fuck*, he just wanted him so much right now...

The stared at each other in a panting detente, eyes blurred from excessively powerful hormones that had been jumped up by unrealistic stress levels. He saw the moment Garrus caved into his will, and a fierce smile took over his face.

“Yes, *fuck*, thank you. I don't even need... just keep going, I was almost there.”

Then Garrus pulled him down, *-spirits, hell yes-*, and took over his expression with a venturing tongue and digging talons. Working back up, he tried to roll himself against the abiding warmth of hard length and spread plates below him. He was pressed into the plate gap along side the other *torin*, their natural lubricants working through cloth and mixing, leaving him with no friction, only trapped heat. Nihlus wanted more, but the knees behind his back were holding him in place. He rumbled frustration and went after the tawny throat in vengeance.

It didn't get him released to grind as he wished, but it did involve a wild game of power plays and teasing with teeth and tongue that had him on edge again.

He almost came when Garrus bit down on his neck right below his left mandible in time with a scrape of talons against the sensitive and overexposed underside of his crest. Without Reverie it might have been painful, but this deep in it was a blitzkrieg of pleasure not far from hitting his peak.

Nihlus' trilling must have given away how close he was, because the knees suddenly disappeared and a wet spread of plates and cloth pushed up against him, and he pushed right back.

The sudden hit of pressure and friction was exactly what was needed, and he came with a wild cry. Talons clutched at each other as jaws locked shut to avoid instinctively biting too deep and breaking hide. He felt the pulse of fluid as the other *torin* came soon after, a quick surge and then a slow pouring as they held on until it had wrung them out.

The aftershocks subsided and left them limp and fighting for breath in a shuddering pile. For a while, they just hummed and sucked in air. It was Nihlus who first managed words that were more than merely subvocal.
“...can I stay?” He asked with a wisp of trepidation, eyes still closed. He'd already asked so much...

“Of course.” Honestly silver plates and tawny brown arms came around him and rolled them side ways. “But I vote for shower before we sleep. We're a mess... If I can manage to stand that is.”

Nihlus just fell apart into relieved laughter. His stress levels had taken a dive like you wouldn't believe, and he was about to shower with the... just the nicest, best person he'd ever met.

No voyeuristic Compact minions anymore either.

Life was good.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, that's right, you waded through 85k words to get... some cross dressing heavy frottage and making out. :D

Guess how long it'll be till you get moooooore?! HAhahahaa... //cackles//

Fanfic Recommendation: Something's Gotta Give (2900 words) by NoisyNoiverns
(Desolas / Lt Abrudas)
Sticky fingers in a house of the unsuspecting

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

- cubitura - Turian-style couch, oversized shape that is very deep and wide, cushioned to accommodate crest and spurs.
- kava - dextro equivalent to coffee (Credit: Chromaticism)

This is the kind of thing I think Turian beds look like, also bowl shapes. Ergonomics to accommodate that carapace. :3

Chapter Soundtrack: Namie amuro - Hide and seek (The bouncy tune in this song was in my head as I imagined Nihlus being a ninja all around C-Sec in this chapter. What a sneak!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beeeeeep! Beeeeeep! Beeeeeep!

Nihlus was half awake, knife in hand, before the first beep had ended. Was it the proximity alarms they'd set in the night, in case the assassin came back?

No, it was just... an alarm clock. He turned to look at Blue, who was awake and hiding an amused grin in a pillow.

“What the fuck is that?” He gestured at the noise with the pointy end while the sniper turned it off. Garrus lost the battle with his amusement, and his mandibles spread in a handsome grin.

“It's called an 'alarm clock', and it's making noise to tell me I have to go to work.” Nihlus decided to play along with the brattish teasing.

“Can I stab it? Will that make it stop? I'd rather keep ya here.”

“No, you can't stab it, and I have to check my request for time off before I'll know. Just a sec.”
“What about a bomb? A really small one?”

“No.” Was the laughing reply as the C-Sec Officer began checking his Omni-tool.

“Fire?”

“Uh uh.”

“Acid?”

“No, and I have bad news...”

“Nooooooooooo~~~~~” Was the forlorn, overdramatic reply.

“Yeah. My request was denied. I have to go in today, unless you have a way around that.”

“Ummm. Lemme think.” Nihlus flopped back on the bed, knife held loosely against his stomach. The green eyed torin ran the dull edge along his hide in swirling patterns as he tried to come up with a work around. He couldn't pull Spectre authority right now, as he didn't know if the Drell's intel had enough data to trace him or not, and any access from the knife wielding agent to his real identity could suddenly pin the whole thing on the usually-carmine-plated Spectre.

“Alright, I'll go make breakfast.”

“Out of what?”

“I have bread.”

“And?”

“Jelly.”
“and?”

“...ketchup?”

“Saren would be *appalled.*”

“Ha! Probably.”

He couldn't actually say he was much better, but he did have a freezer full of easily heatable meals on the Widmanstat. Hell, he missed his ship. He'd docked somewhere quiet before this whole thing had started, and it felt like homesickness not to be in it while he traveled. Well, he had no accounts, no ship... really, he had no tools left in reserve to get Garrus the day off without his normal authority. Not even just a good gun. Nothing but the stolen kitchen knife. He didn't think he was nice enough to give it back either. So if he couldn't keep the icy eyed cop here...

“Okay, idea. Can you take me into work with you?”

“Well... yeah. I could take you in, but unless there was a reason...”

“If anyone asks tell them it's business. I'll be all professional even.”

“While wearing my clothes? Or the grubby things you had on yesterday?”

“I could rock it. You don't even know.”

“I believe you, but how about we go early and stop by somewhere that sells clothing?”

“That works too, but I... um... still don't have money. I can't access any of my normal accounts right now, and all my emergency funds were eaten up running from that psychopath. He was a tenacious bastard.”
“The Drell? He was a Compact Assassin, wasn't he?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did the Compact send one of theirs after you?”

“Can't tell ya, Blue. Big time secret.”

“Alright. So... clothing, breakfast, work. You're a... hmm... informant, and we're going to sit in my office all day, while I work on the mess of a case file that has half the department hung up to dry. What are you going to do?”

“Ahhh... play Galaxy of Fantasy?”

“On your normal account?”

“Oh crap, gps data.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Pffft. I'll just make a new trial and farm some creds to mail to myself later.”

“Ohhhh, you're one of those players.”

“Shush.”

In truth, Nihlus was in and out of his office the entire day.
He wasn't exactly sure how, but shortly after they arrived that morning the *torin* had managed to slip out and acquire a standard issue C-Sec sidearm, a shock baton, two grenades from the SWAT team's stock, and a cup of *kava*. He was now drinking with one hand, flipping that kitchen knife with the other, and reading from a data pad on his knees.

Garrus smiled slightly, shook his head, and refocused on work.

A few hours later, the Spectre was gone for a while, and returned with a different pair of shoes and an Earth-style bowler hat. He sat back down in the spare chair to the side and began a series of furious back-and-forth typing messages. The sniper figured he shouldn't ask, as it was probably related to the 'big time secret'.

Lunch time hit, and Nihlus was away, so he just kept working. It was a lot of data aggregation, and searching for loopholes both strictly legal, semi-legal, or at the very least difficult to track.

Mid afternoon he leaned back to pop his back and stretch his wrists. This much typing wasn't easy on the joints of any species. There was a dextro sandwich sitting by his elbow. He stared at it.... looked around the empty room... looked back at the sandwich...

With an apathetic shrug of the bureaucracy entrenched, he opened the wrapper and ate it.

It was an hour till shift end when the cross dressing Spectre returned again. The hat was gone, but the shoes were still different, and he came over to begin tugging at Garrus' shoulder.

“You have got to be off by now, Blue. You've been in here, baring bathroom breaks, for *twelve hours*.”

“I know. I'm off in one more, almost done.”

“Seriously? Your shifts are thirteen hours long?! You have to be kidding me.”

“Normally I only work ten hour shifts eight days a week, but with this mess I needed to get more done. Thirteen is the maximum you can stay clocked in during one twenty hour day, and I'm already here, so I might as well.” Nihlus just stared at him like he was crazy. He stared back. The stalemate broke when Nihlus threw up his hands in pleading to the spirits.
“I don't even Blue. I don't even. Go back to work, I'm going to go get take out, and stop back by, and then we're leaving.”

Garrus half smiled at the still-high pitched and peachy Spectre, and trilled an acknowledgement before turning back to the terminal for one last assault.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

In a show of utter disregard for hygiene, Nihlus was sitting on the edge his breakfast bar while they ate. There wasn't exactly another chair for her, so he didn't think it fair to complain. What was he going to do? Have the Spectre sit in his lap to eat?

Most of the take out containers were empty by now, and he was feeling an oncoming food coma. He normally took a decent lunch break and napped in the mid day to refresh his energy. Having skipped that... he was about done.

Garrus packed up the left overs into the fridge, and went to take a shower.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Green eyes stared after the yawning sniper, watching him disappear into the bedroom and hearing the water come on from down the hall. His hands curled over the edge of the counter top, elbows locked, as he tried to resist jumping up and running in there to join in.

He could just... waltz in, and press up against silver-grey plates streaming with water...

Nihlus jerked back and shook his head. He needed to stop thinking about taking advantage. The knife loving *torin* felt like he'd already mooched enough. Time, money, affection... He had to stop being a damn leech. Garrus' help yesterday had solidified his cover, and his contacts were already greasing the wheels to make this go away. They said it'd be a few days before the family of the Hanar and it's outraged social group calmed down enough to be willing to trade dirty political favors and bitter cold blood money to stop hunting the tracks that led back to Nihlus and the Council.

The Spectre knew he'd have to pretend to have gone rogue if they found him at the end of that trail.
The shower clicked back off, and his gut curled again. He wanted... No no no. But he wanted... No. 'Damnit no, you useless leech.' He berated himself. It didn't matter that he wanted more of the sniper, that he wanted to fall to his knees and lick him off, slow and tortuously, or to lay back on the bed and spread himself open in invitation...

Blue was good people. Too good for him, and he knew it. It was better to take the gift of last night, and tuck it away somewhere safe in the back of his mind. It was more then he'd gotten from the other silver plated torin that he lo-liked. That he liked. And he'd known Saren a lot longer, tried to get him to open up many more times.

Apparently, Blue was just a more generous sort then the emotively private Spectre.

As if summoned, Garrus came padding out of the hall wearing only deliciously low-hung pants. Nihlus told himself not to be spiteful. The sniper wasn't doing it to tease him, it was perfectly normal to walk about in minimal clothing around fellow Turians. Shit, they'd only adapted the heavier clothing styles to deal with the chilly temperatures the other Citadel races favored.

“Hey, the shower is free if you want to use it.”

“Mmm, that sounds great. I'll do that... you uh... want me on the cubitura tonight? I could give you some space... that monstrosity is definitely comfy enough.”

Garrus just shrugged. “I don't mind. It was nice to sleep beside someone, I haven't had that in a while. If you like it out here better, then go for it. Sleep where ever you are comfortable.” Nihlus' cognizance of that statement had died after the words, 'nice to sleep beside someone'.

“Cool. I'll hop in the bed after a shower then?”

“Alright.”

The Spectre couldn't decide if he wanted his contacts to hurry up smooth over the mess with the Illuminated Primacy, or if he wanted them to take a long damn time if it meant he got to sleep next to Blue at night...
'No damnit, you're thinking like a leech again. Stop it Kyrik. Just stop.'

It didn't stop him from curling up to stony-grey plates that night, or nuzzling into light brown hide with a deep breath to pull in the sniper's scent. He slept like a hibernating bear in the warm and easy acceptance.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: 'Blue was good people' is a hat tip to Jim Butcher's 'Dresden Files', in which the main character uses that turn of phrase to describe really upstanding, noble sorts of people. I like it, don't you? That odd grammar is charming.

Fanfic Recommendation: A Happy Place (883 words) by NoisyNoiverns (Nihilus/Saren)
Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Chapter Summary

Wearing shades, sipping a cool drink... it's a good da- oh damnit. Nevermind.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Citadel Time/Date Format - [year/month/day/hour/minute/second]

A/N: Fun fact - While a lot of fans agree that FemShep's voice acting was leagues above ManShep (Literally, the poll about it on the Escapist is a laaaand slide), the voice actor for him was Mark Meer, and though ManShep is kinda dull, this guy actually did the voices for ALL KINDS OF SHIT. He was all of the Vorchas. ALL OF THEM. All the Hanar. Most of the Volus, including the 'Biotic God', and a bucket ton of other things. Have you ever actually listened to the Vorchas snarrr at you? I had to for this chapter, you'll see why. (I was working on literary voice.) They sound... remarkably different! Granted the Hanar all sound like the same person, but there's canon reason for that. No srsly. Crazy variety of vocal tones this man. Whoo.

Chapter Soundtrack: Thrill me now & Ion Ray (That music video is just too cool for school.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[RUNTIME LOG 2168/4/13/07/49/02/21]

[PROCESSES ACTIVE: 1176]

[REPORT STATUS: NO NEW DATA]

[DATA ACQUIRED: CURRENT OPINION OF SPECIES – CREATOR]

[CURRENT OPINION STATUS: HOSTILE]

“Well nobody likes to talk about it, do they? I mean... they came from our world, yeah... but they weren’t our fault, really. No one set out to program death machines, you know? We just made things to clean up the streets, farm crops... all the things that everybody else does. The Salarians have whole worlds full of machine workers that just grow food all day. It's mostly bad luck that ours went crazy and theirs haven't. It wasn't the Quarian people that made them evil, the networking was the real problem. Without that, they would be exactly like Keepers.”
“A shame, really. I visited Rannoch long ago, before all this mess. The Geth of that time seemed peaceful, and rather helpful. Quite a bit less... how should I put this... creepy, perhaps? Mmm. Yes, that word works. Less creepy then the Keepers, very polite when spoken to. It's just such a pity that I can't take my offspring to see it now-a-days. Studying for a degree in Oceanology, you know? The aquatic life on a world without insects would just be a delight to study. Ah well, perhaps the matter will resolve itself before graduation.”

“We do not like places that sing with the cold notes of machines. Their song is repetitive. Their song is not vibrant. It is boring to listen to machines. It is still better then silence. They do not try to end our song as others have done. We are so few now. This mercy is enough. It is not friendship. It is not war. The melody is plain and purple... but it is not brittle. We do not seek an end to their song. They do not seek an end to ours. We each pour dreams only onto a few places. It is well enough.”

“With great sorrow: It would break my heart to never see Dekuuna again. If there was a way to settle the dispute between the Quarians and their Geth, I would like to help. Unfortunately, there is little I can do. With positive attitude: I have hope that they will someday find a way to forgive, though it
may take a long time. With mild chastisement: The Quarian people should learn from this what they can so that they can grow as a species. Maybe if they learn better cooperation the Geth could be convinced to trade with and aid the other races of the galaxy.”

“Uhhhh... you mean the Geth? Yeah, I've heard of 'em. Don't really care. They can't be much sport, you can't eat them, and it's not like you could trust them as krannt. If the suit-rats want their planet back, they should just go take it back. If they can't, then they don't deserve to have it.”

“What I wouldn't give for a chance to meet one! I read all about A.I. in school when I was studying neural augmentation as a part of my masters. Sure, I know it's illegal to research them now, but that's active research, not theory crafting. Who could resist a little of that, eh? Hopefully they figure out what went wrong, and the S.A. gets the rights for us to try a crack at it. I bet we could do it better. As for the state of Rannoch? Well.. I can't say I know enough about the politics to really give you a good answer. I'd like to see the Quarians get home, I mean... it's depressing, isn't it? On the other hand, I don't think kicking the bee hive is going to help matters. I wonder why they don't settle somewhere else?”
“Aboninations, all of them. There is no place in the great wheel for false, undying souls. It's no
wonder the Quarians have lost their homeworld, having such great hubris as to try and make artificial
life. Can you imagine their farms and mines? Their fisheries and factories? Full of metal monsters
instead of having room for the low-caste, all the places the ignoble and poor need to cleanse
themselves... just taken! By machines! It's disgusting. What is a low-caste supposed to do to earn a
better life in their next reincarnation? Spend a lifetime in self-flagellation? Suicide? No, if the
opportunity presents itself, the machines need to be destroyed. For all the low-caste who are trapped
in sin because they have no station of good work in which to live a pure life.”

[DUNNO. GETH? HADN'T HEARD OF THEM. ASARI ARE ALIENS WHO FOUND US. SAW PICTURES, haven't met one.
Very pretty. Saw other aliens too. Was a lizard thing. And a big bug. Also a fish thing. Heard there
were others, don't know how many. Machines? Geth are made of metal? Crazy. Metal is heavy how
could it fly? Oh? Aliens don't fly? None of them, really? I saw an Asari in air... She was using
move into a body that could fly? Body moving! Crazy. Other aliens should ask for help then. Move
to better bodies.”

[AI. AN INTERESTING TOPIC. BETWEEN YOU AND I, CAN'T SAY haven't... dabbled. Was an interesting subject,
but I was careful to destroy the product afterwards, and ensure proper precautions before starting.
Hmph. Was careless of Quarians to network machines with ability to learn, and then update firmware
organically as time passed. Stupid, and careless. Nothing for it now. They Geth have taken over
Rannoch, and if I were in charge... would have whole system defended with every resource possible.
No way to take it back now, best just to let that failed experiment run in containment. If they try to
expand, we'll set the Turians on them. Perhaps best to have a few pieces of malware ready in case.
Always good to take precautions.”
“Ah, and on that topic, had you heard about the most recent attempt to speak with the Geth? I had thought not. The individuals in charge of the project are attempting to secure a cease fire. Yes, it's true. I believe the goal is to eventually earn enough trust to look beyond the Veil for Enkindler relics. No, I'm not certain that there are any. It's hard to say, we know so little of the area. Hopefully some kind of arrangement can be made...”

“This one was unaware such a project had been started. A very good thing. It is this one's humble opinion that even Machines can walk in the Enkindler's Light. There is no need for discord between us if peaceful cooperation can be achieved. If the Geth do not seek enlightenment, it would not be forced on them. At the same time, if they do not believe, then what use have they for the sacred objects left to us? If resources are all that is wished for, as sad as that would be, it would still be possible for mutual cooperation to benefit all involved. This one holds onto hope that violence is not a result of the outreach project.”
“A waste is what it is. The Geth can gather resources with better efficiency then organics can. No need to sleep! Or eat, or breathe, or rest! The Protectorate would never have let the situation get to full out war, or even reacted violently when they began asking for rights and all that. Quarians have always seemed like such overemotional creatures, at least to me. They handled the whole thing poorly. The could have made a deal with their creations, figured out a middle ground between productivity and personal rights. What a mess.”

“NYAAA! Machines not good to eat! Can I sell them? Trade for food? No? Rrrrr! Then what use are they?”

Nihlus walked down the shopping avenue at a lazy saunter. He hadn't spotted any watchers specifically since the Drell had left off the other night, but his instincts said there was still... something... watching. He couldn't put a talon on it, but when his gut told him he was observed, paranoia or not, he knew to follow that feeling. Hence, shopping for clothing and acting like a tarin on shore leave.
Not really the worst time waster he'd ever endured, and it certainly had a few good upsides. For one, Blue had shoved a credit chit in his hands this morning, and wouldn't take no for an answer. It wasn't loaded down, but it was more then enough to buy clothes, lunch, and anything else he wanted in the foreseeable future.

He would pay the sniper back later, there was no doubt about it, but for now... he could really use few more sets of clothing. Things to highlight his most feminine aspects, and smooth over the masculine. He had quite a bit of muscle, not to mention scars as well, though his cover as a soldier smoothed over that little detail well enough. At the very least, if he had to be a girl for an extended amount of time, he was going to own it.

Which was why he had two bags of clothing, a new pair of sunglasses, and a smoothie in hand as he walked.

He heard the scream from a distance and stopped dead in his tracks. It didn't seem like anyone else had heard anything. Nihlus looked around the street, full to brimming with people out shopping, talking, eating... Wait.

There it was again. Distant, and shrill.

He turned toward the noise, and in the fastest causal walk he could manage, made his way closer. He turned down a side street. Once out of view of the crowd, the Spectre tucked his loot away behind a bit of greenery and took off running in the direction he'd heard it come from. Three streets in, he heard another yell. Louder, and unless the temporarily silver torin missed his guess, tear filled. He picked up the pace.

Nihlus turned around the back corner of an internet cafe, and came to a halt in a small garden space to an unfortunately common scene. A dozen gang members were surrounding a fallen suited form, mercilessly kicking even as they were begged to stop. It looked like the poor Quarian had taken a few out first, four more gangster looking sorts were unconscious on the side of the grassy courtyard. The lucky hits were probably doing him no favors now, but he had to admire the spunk of fighting one to sixteen odds when a small cut could kill you.

Green eyes narrowed as a low growl rolled out of him. He did not like bullies.

Twelve to two odds now? How unfortunate...
For them.

'Time to put some holes in these shitheads.'

Light flashed on the kitchen knife, glinting on a slick-sharp edge that was utterly ridiculous for a cooking utensil to have. He came in low and fast, swiping at a scantily clad human female. The gouge wash-boarded over her ribs and she cried out in a shriek of pain. The Spectre got his first good look at the victim. It looked like a smallish male, suit in shades of burnt orange with triangle patterns. What looked a personal assistance mech was sprawled over them. It had probably tried to enact some sort of protection protocols, but now the gangsters were just kicking around it.

The Quarian was in bad shape. Really bad shape. He could see skin.

Building up to a cold rage, the next target fell backwards from severed hamstrings. Nihlus had stopped going for bloody cuts at the sight of the suit breaches, hoping to minimize further contamination. Two more went down, toppling safely backwards with mostly non-lethal moves. He didn't kill any of them instantly, he had that much mercy. For now.

Five of them were falling to the ground within the first few moments, before any of their comrades figured out something was wrong. Flick flick. Two more dropped while the idiots were busy shouting in surprise and anger. He danced backwards, and they came at him. One fool pulled a gun.

Flick flick. It was a piece of shit gun, but hey, now he had two.

Eight down, then ten, then all twelve. The courtyard was scattered with moaning, crying, bleeding gangsters. He made for the brutalized Quarian, lifting the mech gently away even as the pile of smashed tubes and torn cloth cried and continued to beg. Nihlus gathered that it had been nothing but a hate crime from the sound of the man's pleading. They hadn't even tried to blame him for stealing their stuff or their jobs, just outright hate venting. The Spectre swallowed back the anger, quickly checking his Omni-tool for the nearest clinic with a clean room.

They were in luck, there was clinic listed not two hundred meters away. He bodily lifted the small male, and took off for it. It was barely the work of three minutes to get there, push his way past the medical staff claiming that he was a doctor who'd stumbled on the beaten man by accident, and forced his way past bemused and concerned staff into the clean room. Was he really a doctor? Not even. But between being a trickster, a poisoner, and a killer... he could fake it pretty damn well. Two other doctors rushed in with him as the airlock closed and began running decon protocols.
It brought a small smile to his face, that unprovoked hate might've caused this, but the compassion inherent in these medical professionals would help fix it. The smile died as the first scans came in, and his mercy evaporated. He hoped the gangsters all bled to death on the ground. It was bad. Fifty-fifty survival rate even with Citadel quality medical care immediately after the incident. Nihlus smoothly let one of the real doctor's take lead, and instead played nurse, which he could do well enough.

Considering he played bedroom games with a Quarian on a fairly regular basis, he had a fair few ideas on what drugs where what, and what medicines the doctor's themselves needed to take to stay in the room.

It was a long few hours... but the battered man pulled through.

He neglected to mention the idiots in the courtyard. He'd let that situation handle itself. Eventually the other staff filed out, and pretend-female-doctor who was actually a real-male-spectre jovially insisted on keeping watch, citing a sense of responsibility for the patient's well being. Would they mind sending in some rations? Of course not. The nursing staff managed a semi-edible tray of purified detro foods even. Nihlus took note of the clinic's name in his 'tool. He intended to get them a nice 'anonymous' donation next time he ran across a would-be pirate that had a ship to spare. He'd sell it, and make sure this place was well funded. Good people deserved good turns of luck.

Eventually it began to get late in the day. He messaged Blue about the situation, letting him know he was keeping watch over the recovering Quarian. The sniper offered to bring him anything if he needed it, and come wait with him. Damn, he was such a nice person. Nihlus was tempted, but declined, instead asking him to grab his discarded bags if they were still there.

The night cycle hit, and the third-shift nursing staff began pestering him to sleep. He took the mothering with good natured teasing. When next he'd fended them off for a while, he pulled some acrobatics and disappeared into the ceiling ducts with some spare linens. Only one bed in the room, and the Spectre had no intention of stealing it for himself. The fairly wide air duct would do with a little creative cushioning, so he replaced the cover and got comfy. Nursing staff would be confused as to where he'd gone, so he hacked into the system and set the security to think he'd exited and gone to a different floor to rest for the night.

He wiggled into the sheets and lamented his lack of temperature controlled armor. Ah well. He'd slept in much worse places. Green eyes fell shut as he finally drifted off to sleep to the even, if slightly rapid, beeps of the Quarian's heart monitor.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I know they said something about legion's platform being specially made to deal with organics. That doesn't mean that other models hadn't been made before. Like mobile research groups or intelligence cells, right? They had the eye flappies in the historical vids too! 'Specially made' my bum. Also: The Raloi are a canon race. Btdubs.

The line that begins 'Silly Nihlus.' is a hat tip to Vathara, an AMAZING author from ff.net that wrote 'Embers' an Avatar: The Last Airbender fic. It's a monster, and it's AMAZING. NO REALLY GO READ IT. Also, she published a book recently called 'A Net of Dawn and Bones', which is just so cool to see a fanfiction author go on to publish. Eeeee!

One last note:
Here is the newly posted safe-ish for work version of EDaH on ff.net - Either Die a Hero by Kurai Ummei Also, ff.net likes cover images, so I made one. It's up here too on chapter 1 if you wish to see it.

Fanfic Recommendation: Intimidation, Admiration, and (Admittedly) a Little Aroused (2069 words) by broodingmischief
Something woke him.

What was... the beeping had jumped. Nihlus peered down through the duct cover in complete bafflement. The unsuited Quarian was awake, and his monitor tones had evened back off, but... his personal mech was standing at his bedside? How did that thing even get in here?

“Creator Jur'Mallo, what is your status?”

“Oh! Nnnnnnn. My head. Ah, thank you for asking. I'm... I'm okay, I think.

“...We are sorry we were unable to prevent your damage.”

“It isn't your fault, you tried your best. I appreciate it quite a bit my friend. Just... can you talk more quietly? My head is killing me.”

“Clarify, is there further damage in your central processing unit?”
“No, no. It's just a headache. Recovering pain, not umm... active damage. Lower volume on your speakers please, your voice is too loud right now.”

“We apologize.”

“It's okay.”

_Titans and Spirits_, that... was a fucking Geth. With a Quarian... friend? What the hell.

“The Collective is asking for further indications of status. May we scan you?”

“Go ahead. You can tell them... ummm... do you know what happened? I think I blacked out at some point...”

“There was a Turian. She reduced the functionality of the organics who engaged in the assault, and carried you away. We had to make repairs before we could follow. By the time we were mobile, you were already being repaired.”

“I can't say I've ever had a Turian do... anything nice for me. That was a spot of good luck. Do you know if she left or who she was? I'd like to at least thank her...”

“Records indicate that Doctor Asla Lyria is currently three floors above us.”

“A Doctor saved me from those...? Wow. I know what they say about Turian women, but just... wow. Hopefully I get to meet her. I'd like to shake her hand.”

“Handshaking. A common ritual greeting. We do not understand your reference, why do you wish to 'greet' this Doctor?”

Nihlus was pretty certain he couldn't have gotten a better cue if'd been able to script it himself. He swiftly moved the duct cover away, and flipped down behind the Geth platform.
“It's also used in thanks-giving, actually.” The Geth spun around in an oddly graceful pirouette, as the Quarian man's jaw dropped in horror from his reclining position on the medical bed. “You can use it to emphasize sincerity in many situations. It engenders trust, and provokes a stronger memory of the meeting.”

“... Alert. We have been discovered.”

“Oh yeah. Yeah, ya have. You're... a Geth, right?”

“NO! No no no, it's my personal assistance mech! Just a really good VI!” Nihlus snorted in laughter at the man's frantic attempt to cover up this little dive into crazy town.

“Riiiiight. So... you know you aren't supposed to be here, right? AI are super-duper not allowed on the Citadel.” The Geth looked over at the silvery-eyed man for direction, who had managed to raise a shaking hand to his forehead. He was beginning to shiver violently. Nihlus narrowed his eyes, and walked around to the other side of the bed to check his vitals, keeping an eye on the Geth just in case. “Hey now, take it easy there. You're not in the best of shape right now.”

“Ancestors, p-please, don't tell C-Sec! W-we'll leave, I promise. We were just here to see the sights.” There was a long pause as Nihlus considered that phrasing. See the sights? Quarians on pilgrimage didn't have time to 'see the sights'... He looked at the Geth... back at the Quarian... the Geth...

“You two uhhh... or however many there are...”

“We are twelve hundred and one processes.”

“SHHHHHH! You are not helping!”

“Uuhh. You're from Rannoch aren't you?” The shivering got worse as monitor noises grew more rapid in the face of the man's panic. “Woahhh there. Calm. Down.”

“N-no. I-I'm from The Migrant Fleet!” Nihlus leaned in and laid gentle hands on his shoulders, ducking his head down to meet the man's glowing gaze.
“Hey. Listen to me. It's okay. It's going to be okay. You aren't in trouble. Just breathe. Here, do it with me. Iiiiiiiiiin, oooooooout. That's it. One more time. Iiiiiiiin, annnnnd ouuuuuut.” The angry beeping slowed back down as the Spectre talked him through breathing a few times, rolling comforting circles with palms on his thin shoulders.

“Lyria-Doctor. Your non-aggression is unexpected. Clarify: You do not intend harm to us or Creator Jur'Mallo?”

“Not in particular, no. Technically? He hasn't done anything wrong, and you're just... trespassing. It wasn't either of you that decided to brutalize a random stranger for funsies. The gang members are more my concern. Can you tell me what happened to them?”

“...”

“Come on, just be honest.”

“We terminated the potential for future threat to other Creators.”

“Nice.” The Geth's... eye brow? Face flaps? It's... optic panels fluttered.

“You approve of the termination of hostile organics?”

“I approve of the termination of anyone hostile to innocent people.”

“D-doctor Lyria? I want to... umm...”

“Remember what I said about taking it easy? Just breath, and ask whatever it is ya need to once you feel calm.”

“O-okay.” He took a deep breath in, shining eyes sliding shut as he held it in for a moment before exhaling. “Could I... ask you to not tell anyone we were here, please? I'll go straight back to the Migrant Fleet, just-”
“You wanna stop lying to me? I think I've given you enough reason to try and trust me a little, haven't I?”

“...L-lying?”

Nihlus sighed, and shook his head.

“A couple pieces of advice? Quarians from the fleet don't call it 'The Migrant Fleet', they generally just use the more causal, 'flotilla'. Also? Any Quarian worth their salt would be screaming and running from the room in panic if there was a Geth around. Another thing? Flotilla kids on pilgrimage don't have time to sight see, are generally good liars out of necessity, and don't have enough money for PA mechs.”

The poor guy looked more forlorn with every word, his cover very obviously blown wide in the face of someone paying him half a brain cell of attention.

“You're not exactly running screaming yourself, Doctor...”

“Not my first time running into an AI either. I... know some interesting people. Regardless, I do have to insist you leave the Citadel after you recover, but I'm not going to get you arrested either. So long as you promise to leave.”

“Inquiry: You have met other Geth? We do not have record of this.”

“No, not Geth. Just other AI.”

“Further Inquiry: Were you non-aggressive to them as well?”

“Not all. I... my friends that is, had to take out a few of them. Some of them were unstable and malicious. I know of at least one though that was easy going, and is now cruising about the Skyllian Verge mining with drones to earn a living.”

“We do not know this AI.”
“Her name is Via'ce, you can message her under that name on Galaxy of Fantasy actually. She plays a Turian Resto Druid, good healer.”

“...We also play this game. We are an Asari Warrior.”

“Oh yeah? Small world.”

“Oh, ancestors. I have got to be dreaming.” Nihlus laughed at that. Poor guy. The situation was sort of surreal.

“Jur'Mallo, right? Do you have the credits to pay for your medical care here?”

“Oh. Yeah. I've got a credit chit umm... where is my suit?” Nihlus grimaced and grabbed it's remains, a deep tray held the bedraggled shreds. A little riffling through produced the chit, which he twirled in show and set on the bedside table.

“Oh no... my suit...”

“You know how to get a new one?”

“No. I have no clue. I really was just here to see the sights. The Geth sometimes manage to get things shipped to us through third parties, and I had to wait a long time to get a Mi- a flotilla style suit. We umm... we don't wear them on Rannoch.”

“I wouldn’t suspect you'd need to. I can help you get another, but I can't say I have the money to pay for it. They run about twelve thousand credits for a whole rig on short notice, do you have enough?”

“Money isn't a problem really. I've been saving for this trip for a while... It sounds dumb, but can you get me two? Just in case?”

“Shouldn't be an issue. You're going to be here for two or three days at least while those bone breaks heal. Let me scan you real quick for measurements.”
“I'm just... happy to be alive. I thought I was going to die.” Nihlus gave the man's shoulder a squeeze before running the scan. Poor guy.

“Another piece of advice? You'll get better treatment from non-Quarians on planets that don't see your kind often. Places like the Citadel, you're too common and well... a lot of desperate pilgrims steal if they need to. It doesn't exactly set a good standard. Take your pleasure tour towards some places without AI restrictions, outside Citadel space, somewhere you'll be an interesting guest and not a dime-a-dozen security risk. You'll have a lot more fun.”

“You are... a really nice person. Thank you, for all this. Really, just, thank you. So much.”

“Don't mention it. How about you get some sleep, your 'mech' can take my spot in the vents to keep watch, and I'll go see about those suits.”

“Okay. Thank you.” He gave the man a half smile and wandered to the airlock. The sooner he was prepped to go and healed, the less likely he'd end up in jail with his friend being torn apart in an STG lab.

Nihlus yawned as his Omni-tool pinged him with a live chat request. He was expecting a reply message from Blue, but a live chat would work too. Sitting in the lobby of the specialty place that was making the new suits was seriously dull, he'd been here for hours doing nothing, too tired to focus. He hoped a live chat might keep him from falling asleep sitting up.

CHAT.live//REQUEST:From:8892561- Accept? Y/N

CHAT.live//CONNECT:8892561_to_PROXY.public.1916_to_LOCAL

Connecting...

Connected.

GV: I got your message. Thanks for keeping me informed.
AL: just a few more things to handle, gunna be back tonight if everything goes okay

GV: Going to tell me about it later?

AL: sure, been an interesting day

GV: Have you slept?

AL: yep

GV: I get the feeling 'yep' means something like 'for an hour'.

AL: shush

GV: Thought so. I'll bring some take out home for us.

AL: sounds amazing

GV: Later, Palvi.

AL: bai

CHAT.live//CONNECTION_CLOSED

Nihlus stared at the ceiling, the back of his head resting on the plastic seat back. The word 'home' ringing in his ears in Garrus' voice, even though it had been in text, said so casually.

Home.

Shit. He was not okay with this. Suddenly, he wanted his contacts to get done fixing the mess right now, because that word... Home was his piece-meal ship, made of bubblegum and paperclips, that could out perform most top of the line builds just because he tinkered with it like a spaz and had Saren's example to go on. Home was the little batch of rooms he had once shared with his pari on a merc base in the middle of nowhere. Home during his mentorship had been the Daedalus, and his make-shift nest of blankets on his former mentor's boxy settee.

Was home now also... that ridiculously comfy cubitura, a kitchen full of nothing but so-bad-it's-funny captioned kava mugs, and a tiny bedroom with a curvy bed that had a warm and welcoming torin in it? Oh, fucking spirits that sounded so good.

It was also a complete pipe dream.

He knew Garrus had clan expectations to produce children, to bond a high tier female who was well respected within the Hierarchy.
He himself was low ranked, a Spectre, ever travelling, and out of communication for months at a
time.

Maybe, if Garrus hadn't been from an old Palaven clan, things might be different. With a population
ratio of two guys to every chick, lots of war dogs and career soldiers settled down quietly into long
distance relationships with any gender, or even Asari.

But a Vakarian?

Impossible.

His talons dug into the meat of his palms even as his face stayed neutral. He'd gotten so comfortable
with Blue when he'd come on that mission, and it had all fallen back into place when the Spectre had
run to him with death on his heels. Like magic, the threat abated, and he suddenly had good food,
good company, easy laughter...

'Silly Nihlus, the things you love aren't yours to keep.'

Ohh no. no.no.no. No. He'd thought the L word. Nonono.

'Like. Like. Like.' He chanted in his head.

Verdant green eyes stared at the ceiling until the suits were done, then thanked the crafter with as
much zeal as he could manage for the rush order. The ride back to the clinic was quick, and he spent
the decon cycle back through the clean room airlock trying to regather his earlier cheer and
amusement.

“Heyyyy, how ya feeling?”

“Oh! Doctor Lyria, you're back!”

“Ah haha, about that...” The Quarian man looked at him in askance as he set down the boxes of suits
and handed him back his chit. “Fun story. Just a sec…” He scanned the room, finding the obvious signature of the 'PA mech' up on the vent, but no other bugs. “So, I'm... not actually a doctor? Well sometimes in the field I've... ah, never mind. It's a cover ID Jur'Mallo, my name is actually Nihlus Kyrik. I'm an agent with ST&R.”

Wide glowy eyes went round, but thankfully no panic attack started.

“Oh! That's why you've met other AI? You're been outside of Citadel Space a lot I bet…” He dug into a box and pulled out an edge of micro-fiber cloth. “You got it in the same color! Perfect! Can I ask why you're under cover?”

“You don't want to know, I promise, and please, don't mention my name. For right now, I don't exist. You've given me some trust though, and I wanted to repay that with some truth of my own. Now... did the actual doctors say when you can leave?”

“Yes, they said tomorrow morning. I paid the care bill already, I just have to figure out passage off-station.”

“Try Merkosha, at the cargo docks at the end of Zakera Ward. He smuggles people on and off all the time. Remember not to mention me, but don't let him charge you more than double a normal passenger fee.”

“Oh, ummm... alright.”

“Inquiry:” He looked up at the partially lifted vent cover to see a red optic glimmering out from the crack. “Your undercover status prevents you from using Spectre assets to aid us?”

“You're a pretty clever, um, group of... do you have a name?” The platform made a quiet carcophany of sounds. “I... couldn't pronounce that if my life depended on it.”

“Accurate.”

“Riiiiight. Well anyway, yeah, I'm a bit limited right now due to some issues at work. Nothing for you twelve hundred and two to worry about. Actually, I need to get going. Do me a favor? Get off the station before someone finds you. I don't want to get sent to hunt you down. If I get an official order, there's nothing I can do to help anymore, so don't chance it. Go home, or go to some edge
“I will. We'll leave... it was stupid of me to risk coming here in the first place, don't think I don't know... I just really wanted to see the Citadel once. Take some holos to show the nephews, you know?”

“Yeah, I hear you. Tell me one thing though.” He looked between the Quarian and Geth. “I'm guessing your ancestors... never left Rannoch?”

“Affirmative. Some Creators fought to hide, protect, or aid Geth during the Morning War. We did not allow any others to remain.”

“Huh. Makes sense. Alright, well, I'm out. Take care of yourselves.”

“You too Mr. Kyrik.”

“Just Nihlus, Jur'Mallo. Mr. Kyrik was my dad.”

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: out into the black (1987 words) by underdebate
Reciprocity not required

Chapter Summary

Garrus is team dad, he can't even help himself.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Furca - A dual tined spork of Turian origin (Latin, basically means 'fork')

Torini/Tarini - Turian men/women over the age of majority (plural form of torin/tarin) (credit: MizDirected)

Cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur

Familia Notas – The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition.)

Lemon, lemon, lemon, lemonnnnnnn. Just, fair warning. :3
EDIT: A big thank you to CristalDePhoenix for pointing out that I'd mucked up my time stamps last chapter. I put 2188 instead of 2168. Ummmmmmm. WHOOPS! That wouldn't work at allllllllllllllllll!

Chapter Soundtrack: **Major Lazer & DJ Snake - Lean On (feat. MØ)**

What will we do when we get old?
Will we walk down the same road?
Will you be there by my side?
Standing strong as the waves roll over

When the nights are long
Longing for you to come home
All around the wind blows
We would only hold on to let go

Blow a kiss, fire a gun
We need someone to lean on
Blow a kiss, fire a gun
All we need is somebody to lean on
Nihlus’ vision fuzzed a little at the edges as he worked on washing dishes, a small pile had built up and he was determinedly rinsing them clean and loading them into the dishwasher. His mouth opened wide with a jaw popping yawn. It wasn’t that he couldn’t stay away for days if he needed to, but his day hadn’t exactly been engaging or adrenaline filled, and his body was convinced he should just say ‘fuck it’ and go to bed. He shook off the feeling and swiped the back of a sponge filled hand across his nose before getting back to work.

The sound of clacking toe talons entered the kitchen, but the Spectre focused on the task before him, determined to do at least this much in thanks for all the hospitality.

“Hey, you don’t need to do those...”

“Nah. I wanna. They need done anyways.”

Another power-yawn escaped him as he loaded the dish into the washer and picked up a furca to rinse next. The c-click c-click of foot steps came closer, and arms came around him to shut the water off and pull the utensil away. It slid from his grasp, the sponge going next, and tawny brown arms tightened in. He half heartedly tried to turn the water back on, but a hand caught his wrist and trapped it against his keel. The other hand settled firmly over abdominal plates. Garrus' face curled into his collar, not helping the fuzzy sense of sleeplessness.

“The dishes can wait till tomorrow.” The Spectre blinked hard, trying to gather clarity. The attempt was only mildly successful, and the warmth at his back wasn't helping matters any. The hand on his abdominals slid lower, slipping under shirt hem and following the trail of interlocking plates. He told himself not to moan. His body refused to listen to his bullshit, and the low sound rolled from him of it's own accord. The venturing hand moved past the seam with a rough palm, stopping at the bottom to cup his curvature. A gentle roll of hips pushed him forward into it.

Another soft moan stolen away as his one free hand wavered in the air for a moment, unsure what to do with itself. The grip loosened and ever-so-slowly a talon rose along the dividing line to be replaced by a knuckle that smoothed back down. The Spectre's free hand suddenly became busy bracing him against the sink edge. His subvocals warbled with a mix of want and distress, and the hand pulled away to curl around his hip crest.

“Do you... want me to stop?”
'Sort of, kind of, you probably should, stop spoiling me…'

“Nooo.” Was what came out instead. A small voice in the back of his mind threw up it's mental hands in disgust.

Green eyes fluttered shut as the hand went for a new approach, talons scratching in loose circles against the hide at his leg joint as mouth plates nibbled in curious exploration along the exposed scalp where horns should be. The spiraling fingers wandered closer and the knuckle came back to press into loosening plates. It pushed in just far enough to reach fluid and began a slow, inexorable drag.

Mouth plates journeyed lower, down the rough hide of his neck with intermittent flicks of tongue.

Nihlus' head fell forward, black talons scraping on the sink edge and his own keel helplessly at the heady pressure and teasing bites. He hadn't expected the sniper to take advantage of the position, but he did; letting the fading-peach wrist go and using that hand to tug him just enough that a tilt of his head made way for a grip of teeth on either side of the Spectre's spinal plates.

Nihlus' breath caught in his throat at the feel of it.

Teeth to neck was always a request for trust, but this form was specifically asking for surrender of one sort or another. In enemies, a bite here would send dagger-like fangs into spinal tissue, killing in seconds. It was a bite of last warning to surrender or die. In lovers it was a question, not a demand. Asking for complete trust, or more specifically, asking the bitten one to give themselves over into the care of the biter. It said, 'let go, I've got you'.

Blue wanted him to let go of whatever it was that had made his subvocals waver with distress. Which was... Blue himself. Damnit.

The sharp points of teeth along his spine waited patiently for him to decide with a low trill of concern that was felt more then heard, and Nihlus Kyrik realized that his well honed powers of self denial were no spirits damned match for this torin. The replying hum and subtle press back into the grip were rewarded with a resurgence of attention to his seam and enticing bites at the juncture of neck and collar.

'Fuck it.' was about all the reasoning he could come up with.
A deeper bite and rough kneading into his waist convinced his plates to spread another few centimeters, and that knuckle slipped in further to press against nerves near the base.

“Ohhh, fuuuck yesss.... Bluuuue....” He couldn't help but push into it, wanting more pressure. The sniper obliged, coercing the gap wider and digging in a second knuckle, one on either side. The plates above fell in line and spread fully, and his shaft slipped out onto the pale hide of Garrus' waiting palm. The grip slid along him, down then up, a thumb depressing into a spot just below the final ridge before he tapered off.

The sniper's hand on his waist came lower, moving to take over teasing the interal soft spots, while the other hand shifted down to the base in incremental squeezes. The angle left Garrus unable to reach his neck any more, and slightly crouched, so the Spectre pulled his spine convex and dropped his head back onto a warm shoulder, putting his fringe in nibbling range again.

He was going to feel very strange when his crest grew back out and he couldn't have fringe bites on the underside anymore. He held out hope for skillful tongues though. Speaking of skill, the new position let Garrus take more of his weight, and get a better grip on him. The Officer made the most of it, drawing a wanton moan out of the peachy throat by combining a wringing tug with a two-knuckle press. Nihlus had a hard time not drowning in sensation as Blue repeated the move over... and over... and oh shit... and over...

He tried to warn the sniper that he was close, but all that came out were subvocal calls for more. He would have tumbled to the floor if Garrus hadn't been holding him up when the heat spiraled into his core and forced it's way out in a rush. Even as Nihlus tried falteringly to hold himself up on the counter, the generous hands continued to draw out the aftershocks, slowing to one final, heavy stroke. The last dregs of his current stress poured out of him as the high trailed away with a farewell keen of fading elation. It was replaced by low purring subvocals and harsh exhales.

As the Spectre's breathing evened out, he steadied against the sink and distantly noted that the dishes were now even messier than before. The water came on for a moment to clean away slickened fingers. He went to turn and wobbled a step, then found himself being spun into a carried hold before his misbehaving foot could even catch him. He blinked up at Blue, who had lifted him away from his self imposed chores and was walking them back down the hall. Nihlus tried to protest. He wasn't that damn tired...

Garrus just smiled handsomely, and raised an arm to bring their foreheads together.

“I've got you.”
Nihlus gave up then, letting himself be manhandled into bed as the little spoon. As he faded away the Spectre realized that the only solution to his utter lack of self control was to get away from Blue, soon. He sighed, snuggling into the plush mattress and warming sheets. He couldn't seem to tell the torin 'ho' to save his life, and it hadn't escaped notice that the entire damn evening had been wasted taking care of him after the Detective had worked a maximum houred shift.

'Leech... leech... leech...'

Electric blue eyes idly scanned the latest intel about T'Loak's temper tantrum over his escape. He'd just gotten back from a long bout of radio-silence on a recon mission elsewhere, and had much to catch up on. He yawned lightly, it had been a long haul. Regardless, there was work to be done and these files needed reviewed sooner rather than later. He would have taken a datapad to the breakroom, had a tiny form not plowed into him without warning.

He looked down at the four-foot-nothing Drell that Nihlus adored with a sigh.

“Tio'fore.”

“Saaarennnn!! Nih is in troubleee!” Silver crest blades flickered in the blue light of the intelligence room's monitors as he turned his head in an avian manner to stare her down with a gimlet eye.

“Precisely how much trouble? The last time you said that, you made it out to be a dire situation, and it was simply food poisoning.”

“This time she's not exaggerating the situation by a hundred times. Only two or three.” Saren looked up to see the earth toned form of Ankhleas Tithe standing in a pool of shadow by the door, his orange irises and Familia Notas and reflecting the screen light.

“Tithe.”

“Arterius.”
“You two can compare manhoods later! We gotta get the Compact off Nih's trail!” Both torini huffed at Spectre Tio'fore's usual lack of decorum.

“Explain.”

“He pulled off a big one, and they're mad as beeeees! Took out the jellie that was sellin' them Asari, and now he got one 'o my kind on his trail. S'not a good day, this guy named Ghost is on 'em!” He managed to take the descriptive mess and make out that Nihlus had taken out... ah yes, there was a kill order out on Luminous Azynder, wasn't there? A tricky kill to make, but well within his protégé's skill. Apparently the Illuminated Primacy had been upset, and sent a Drell assassin called 'Ghost' out after him. He snorted at the inane nickname. Unimaginative was the kindest description.

“I see. Do you have a plan to remove the assassin that doesn't involve explosives?”

“...that's what you're here for?” She smiled up at him with her massive lilac-on-black eyes.

“Specialist Tithe, do you have any further details?”

“Not many. Spectre Kyrik's exact whereabouts are unknown, but his pursuer has been spotted here, so we assume he's on the station somewhere. The last communication we received from a dead drop said that he'd found a bolt hole and to trade whatever favors were needed, even work for the Primacy directly, to get the return kill order removed.”

“How does that proceed?”

“The Luminous' followers and family are still too upset to hear us out, though Specialist Korvis has been trying once a day since the funeral.”

“It sounds as if everything that can be done, is being done. If Nihlus is in hiding, I doubt the assassin can find him. There is no need for your hysterics Tio'fore.” She groaned at him like the world was ending, running her pitch-black scaled hands down her face in a pantomime of complete exasperation.

She really was the strangest Drell he'd ever encountered. They were normally such an elegant, reserved people. Then again, ST&R attracted misfit Turians more often then not, he supposed misfit Drell were... almost as welcome.
“Liiiiisten, okay, this Ghost guy? He’s got a perfect KO record. All shiny and spotless. If he's on Nih's trail, it's bad news. Com'ere I'll show you his dossier in the archives.” She pulled up the Citadel Archives access screen and went digging for the file, coming up with a very scarce amount of data. The folder had a blurry holo shot of half a face and a shoulder of a Drell male with vivid green scales. There were about five sentences with a handful of estimated data points below it.

“There is nothing else on this Compact agent?”

“Noooope!” She popped the 'p'.

He supposed that was a bad sign. The intelligence teams for the ST&R offices were normally able to get a great deal more then that, especially if they were trying to get ahead of someone hunting one of their own agents.

“Very well. I will find Nihlus. You will find the locations Ghost has been spotted, and plant cameras not connected to any network. A lack of image data indicates some sort of self-propagating selective image deletion virus, which is likely on the Citadels networks. Place them in similar locations to other camera view points, and retrieve data manually. Have the intel office come up with a program to compare the two views, and seek what is missing.”

“See? I knew you'd have an idea to go on! See Ankh? I told you he would. Okay! Cameras, lots of non-transmitting cameras. We got this!” Out the door the indomitably cheerful woman went, her mild mannered shadow trailing behind.

As a first step to finding his erstwhile mentee, Saren sent a ping to his Omni-tool, and another to the Widmanstat. The first went unresponded to, no surprise. The second however returned a line of characters:

[9dcjh3kd8v gh23929fui2wms 929719dcma m38xcjw9ixybvm4 39x7gmakxyd4vu]

It was a cipher, of course, and translated roughly to, “Deceit, Avarice, Decay, Sadness, Remorse.” Ah, the card suit used to win the game they had played with Vakarian. Odd, that seemed like a blatant place to hide. Usually the carmine plated Spectre was much trickier. Not a toilsome place to check to be certain, he just needed to ensure he did not leave any breadcrumb trails to follow. Also not difficult, particularly near the end of the night cycle when the station was nearly devoid of activity to blend into to actively follow anyone.
Still wearing his previous mission’s enshrouding hooded cloak that hid the entirety of his crest, and non-descript armor beneath it, Spectre Arterius trailed out of the ST&R offices, and began to pathfind an arduous trail to follow. It took him through keeper tunnels, cargo storage areas, and quiet corridors where he looped around a few times checking for signs of being followed. There were none to be found, and he came out of the Citadel’s undercroft of maintenance passageways one skyrise over from Vakarian’s building. Saren took the stairs, and crossed via sky bridge, slipping inside the door without knocking.

He listened. Two breathing patterns coming from the back room. There was Vakarian's low rumble, and Nihlus' usual hum. He trailed down the hall like a wraith, avoiding the proximity alarms he could see overlaid on the floor by simply biotically floating over them. Entering the open room, he approached the bed. Ah, it smelled as though Nihlus had finally seduced the sniper. He had suspected they would fall into bed together eventually. Nihlus was something of a sex addict, and Vakarian was too easy going to say no for long. At least the Officer was trustworthy and Turian, unlike many of his protégé’s other lovers.

He idly inspected Nihlus' strange coloring and winced at the crest trimming in evidence, it seemed he had opted for a 'hide in plain sight' strategy at the cost of comfort. The clever torin always had gone the extra kilometer of pain to pull off his covers. The full body dying was not so torturous, but he could not have enjoyed being barefaced and short crested for however long. Saren leaned closer and reached out a hand to shake the disguised Spectre's shoulder, but did not get halfway before his throat was in a tight grasp with talons pushing at his jugular.

He froze, only his eyes turning to look at the owner of the hand.

Icy blue eyes fluttered slowly to wakefulness. Interesting. It had been an automatic response? He took a deep breath while Vakarian took a moment to recognize him. They did not smell bonded. That was not it then... Ah. He remembered now, the Officer's time with a hastatim squad. Likely he'd had to earn those reflexes the hard way from guerrilla fighting saboteurs coming for him or the squad mate next to him in the darker hours.

Recognition dawned and curiously enough, the sniper smiled at him, changing the grip from menacing to a friendly grasp at the back of the neck, with a light and apologetic squeeze before letting go.

“Hey.” The sniper offered simply in a whisper quiet voice. “Good to see you. Things have been kind of a mess.”

“I have just returned. Colleagues ambushed me upon arrival with what news was available. Were
you aware of the assassin?"

"Yeah, he was watching us the other night, had Nihlus' bugged to hell. We had to play at a little
improv to confuse him into backing off."

"... He was here?"

"Yeah, in the vents. Knocked on the door under false pretenses as well. I got a 'business card' from
him that might have prints or some bio-data, it's in the chilling unit in the kitchen."

"I see. You finally make use of the device for something at least. Did you test it for any samples?"

"No. I figured you'd have better equipment then C-Sec does, and I didn't want to have loose
mouthed lab techs give any thing away. Even if I ran it myself, they'd chatter about me being in there
in the break room."

"Prudent. I will take the card with me when I go, and see what information can be found from it. Has
he returned since then?"

"No. I've been checking on thermal and electromagnetic spectrums for tails or bugs frequently, and I
haven't seem him. Then again, I've also been at work the past two days. Nihlus came with me for the
first day, but he was gone all the yesterday, out shopping."

"Shopping?"

The C-Sec Officer pointed to a pile of bags in the corner.

"Yeah, he hasn't been able to access anything of his own, so I sent him out to get some clothes with
my card. We didn't know how long we'd need to keep up the charade of his cover before... whatever
reason it is that the Drell got sent after him for is resolved."

"He did not tell you?"
“No. Said he couldn't.”

“Correct, and I am relieved that he kept silent, as he normally has the terrible habit of oversharing everything that is not top-secret.” The Spectre looked down at his still sleeping protégé with narrowed eyes. “Why is he sleeping so deeply?”

“He's been a ball of stress since he came, and something happened yesterday with some gang members that had him up overnight trying to solve it.”

“... ah. I should let him sleep then. When he wakes tomorrow, you can tell him that Tio'fore is running around the station hunting for the Drell, and I will be back with supplies for him.” Saren pulled back to leave, but a hand caught his wrist.

“Hey, don't go. He hasn't said anything, but part of his stress was not having you around. If you just got back, why don't you stay? You look like you could use the sleep too.”

“While the offer is appreciated, it is more crucial that steps are taken to deal with the active threat.”

“Sounds like there are others on the job already, and you shouldn't be out hunting Compact agents right now anyway. Your reaction times are slow.”

Saren's jaw tightened at the criticism. His reaction times were fine, th-

“Oh, don't give me that look. You know I mean well. You're tired, stay. Just for a couple hours, we'll eat breakfast and share news, and you can disappear back off to do what you need to with a fresh mind.”

He was trying to find a way to convince himself that such a plan did not sound as appealing as it did, and turn the sniper down, when the hand at his wrist slipped down and kneaded into the meat of his palm pleasantly. Apparently the Officer was attempting to bribe him.

“Vakarian.”

“Mmmhmm?”
“My reaction times are within acceptable tolerance.”

“Sure, but doesn't an hour or two of rest sound good? It would put Nihlus at ease...”

The silver-grey Spectre snorted at the blatant attempts at coercion. The hand rubbing his own and the promise of mutual safety that came with sleeping near trustworthy company finally tipped the balance.

“Very well. It cannot hurt, I suppose. I will be out on the *cubitum*—” was as far as he got before a swift yank pulled him down. Nihlus stirred.

“Huh-whaaaa- Sarennn! When'd you get here?”

“He just arrived a few minutes ago. He hasn't slept either, so he's staying.” The stubborn sniper tossed a blanket over him with a determined grin, and he glared in return, half off the bed and still wearing his cloak. Saren was about to reiterate that he would sleep in the living room when Nihlus made, -there was no other word for it-, a disgustingly happy chirp and pulled him further into the mess of limbs.

He let out a growl at the unwelcome molestation, but he was entirely ignored by his protégé in favor of nuzzling into the voluminous cloth at his collar. Vakarian seemed pleased with his cohort, and scootched back on the bed, pulling Nihlus back to him by the stomach, who of course drew the cloak with him like a security blanket in the grip of a tenacious toddler. Oh for spirit's sake.

Saren pulled the cloak from the false-peach grasp, and drew it up over his head and off. He used a small thread of biotics to hang it over the door, and gave in to the their incessant 'invitation'. At least the bed had room enough for him to not be pressed into Nihlus as they had when he had been injured. That was far and away more contact then he wanted to maintain while sleeping. This was... still too close, but better.

Sufficient.
Fanfic Recommendation: The Phenomenology of Shepard (62,771 words) by Elana S
(Thane/FemShep)
Sometimes a stick is just a stick

Chapter Summary

Garrus wakes to a morning that looks like a painting he'd like to own. Nihlus hides his mental quirks behind helpful acts and bright smiles. Saren feels protective, and expresses it in Saren-y ways.

Chapter Notes

Furca - A dual tined spork of Turian origin (Latin, basically means 'fork')
Cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur.
Madlis - Traditional Turian clan compound. (Credit: Recidiva)
Vetiver - A type of Indian bunchgrass commonly made into pungent essential oil. Smells something like a forest after a rainstorm, moss/peat, and undergrowth. (Real)

Chapter Soundtrack: Melanie Martinez - Carousel

And it's all fun and games,
'Til somebody falls in love,
But you've already bought a ticket,
And there's no turning back now
Round and round like a horse on a carousel, we go,
Will I catch up to love? I could never tell, I know,
Chasing after you is like a fairytale, but I,
Feel like I'm glued on tight to this carousel

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus woke first that morning, eyes still closed as he breathed in the scents around him. Nihlus still smelled lightly of dried sweat and pheromones, with an edge of the blade oil he seemed to favor. Saren was farther away, but the lingering scent of his vaguely minty body scrub and a hint of ozone that all biotics had were still present.

This was nice. He'd missed having squad mates to curl up with, sex or no sex, after his civic service had ended. Having grown up in the clan Madlis with a never ending supply of other Vakarian children to play with, he'd never slept alone if he didn't want to until moving here. It remained a less than appealing choice.

The Officer finally managed to open his eyes. The bedroom was still mostly dark as the day cycle lights had just barely started their transition phase. Nihlus was face down with his head turned away,
looking dead to the world, one arm over the sniper's stomach, the other hand wrapped around the silver-grey Spectre's arm below the elbow. Saren himself was propped into a mild sitting up position on his back, head lolled toward the door, paranoid even in sleep. His snores came out as a quiet sibilance on the exhale.

With careful movements, and the sound turned off, he sent in an order for food delivery from a local dextro place that was cheap and had an amazing variety. He might've ordered too many things, actually, but Garrus decided he'd rather have too many things on offer then not enough. The rest could be saved for later in the chilling unit. He'd have to make a point of it actually, as a come back for Saren's teasing that he never used his refrigerator as intended.

So what if he sometimes stored evidence in it? On the rare occasion his house had been broken into, he'd never had anything hidden in the chilling unit get found, even if it sat plainly on the shelf. It was counter intuitive enough as a hiding spot, and the temperature preserved things nicely.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by the disguised Spectre using his stomach as a weight baring point to escape his cushiony indent on the bed. Oof. Nihlus heard his chuff of protest and trilled a quiet apology, coming to sit back on his heels with the tops of his feet to the mattress and his knees rotated slightly to have his spurs stick out by his thighs. He looked conscious, but still comatose, with his lower mouth plates and mandibles open and drooping.

In a fit of whimsy, Garrus took a hold of his collar and leaned forward to dive his tongue in, and lick a trace of the torin's soft pallet. Just a hint of morning reverie. Well it was supposed to be, except when he went to pull back Nihlus followed right behind and returned the favor with a lap of his teeth before they both wobbled back to sitting positions, slightly more dizzy then intended. He laughed as the disguised Spectre hummed happily and face planted back into the mattress with his backside in the air.

The sniper saw Saren's head perk up at the commotion, electric eyes popping open to see what had dared disturbed him. He looked better than he had last night. It might just've been the lighting, but the aloof and regal Spectre hadn't appeared to be in very good health the day before. He seemed alright now though, so whatever mission he'd come from, maybe sleep was all that had been lacking. The resigned sigh at his protégé's antics just made Garrus laugh harder, to which Nihlus joined in, until they were interrupted by the door bell.

Saren was startled and veritably tumbled out of bed in a graceful roll, coming up with a gun and a biotic shield. He bit back another round of laughter, though the reaction and the active danger were no joke, the silliness of the previous moment still colored everything. Best not to laugh at the stoic torin though, he'd be offended.

“It's just the breakfast I promised, ordered it a little while ago.” Saren looked only half convinced and
motioned them to follow him. He pointed them both into cover with military hand signals, which had Nihlus grinning like an idiot armed with nothing but his stolen knife behind the corner that turned into the kitchen, and the sniper along the entry wall in a flanking position armed with fists alone. The electric eyed torin opened the door to a bored looking Asari, who handed him two large plastic bags, thanked them in the voice of the underpaid-and-up-at-dawn, then left.

The paranoid Spectre still scanned the bags and taste tested everything for poison before he let them eat. Garrus couldn't be convinced it wasn't just to get back at them for having the temerity to laugh like children so early in the day. Saren Arterius wasn't a morning person.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Saren left after breakfast, and they didn't see him again until it was over. Just had mysterious packages appear on the low kava table in the living room some mornings. Hidden shield generators in jewelry. A small chemistry set made for mixing antidotes and antivenins, with an attached formula for the especially potent venom of Compact Drell. A kit to touch up Nihlus' disguise. A better sensor suite for the apartment's vents and entries.

A small fortune of Spectre-grade devices showed up over the next few weeks, including an armor set for each of them and a new pistol for the undercover agent. Saren, or those who did his bidding, left presents on the table like a cat leaving dead mice on the porch steps.

It was a long few weeks for Nihlus, or maybe... it was instead too short.

He played the charade of fun loving soldier girl on shore leave with a doting cop of a boyfriend, - who spoiled the shit out of 'her'-, to perfection. A flawless performance when they went out to eat, underplayed combat abilities at Armax Arena when they went out for a night on the town, no small detail went unsupported, no hints that Nihlus was Asla or that Asla was the agent that had killed the Luminous.

He was in his element, wearing the face of an imaginary tarin, but any spook who did deep cover missions could tell you that if you played at being someone else for long enough, one day you'd wake up and it wouldn't be quite so pretend anymore. The trick to a really good infiltrator was that they could put the 'mask' of their old self back on when their job was done, and could stick with it until they stopped having to pretend to be themselves again. Nihlus had switched who he was enough times to be considered one of the best even at such a young age, but he'd never had the transition into a different person sit so well on his shoulders, smooth over so fast.
The false-peach and fake-silver Spectre could smell it as that transition sank into his plates. Or maybe that was just the pervasive scent of Blue on the air, in his clothes, on his plates from curling up together at night. Gun oil from the sniper's obsessive care of his firearms. Vetiver from the salt scrub he showered with. A hint of Kava's savory perfume always on Blue's tongue and floating from the kitchen, from long days taking care of the Citadel's people and late nights spending time with Field Medic Asla Lyria, his Palvi.

Their blended pheromones clung to everything. From hand jobs and making out, though neither pushed for more then that. An unspoken understanding that going farther wasn't needed for the cover... and doing it under false pretenses would color anything they might have after. Still, the smells drove Nihlus nuts, like delicious wafts of baking cookies that would make everyone around hungry.

It made him constantly aroused.

He thought he might be a scent-o-phile or something with how much it got to him, but the Spectre became so sick of the very air poisoning him into keeping Garrus up late at night to pay attention to him that he actually cleaned. Everything.

Twice.

It only helped for a few days before the enticing smells were everywhere again, but it did get the Officer a few better nights of sleep. Two or three days where they went to bed at decent hours of the evening in a variety of sprawls, talking about C-Sec as they faded off.

Apparently Garrus was known as a disrespectful and meddlesome hot-head at work, but the Spectre couldn't see it. Officer Vakarian seemed to have a sniper's patience with a tech-junky's curiosity and problem solving when met with any issue. He was certainly handling suddenly having a live-in deep cover ST&R agent with hospitality and grace. Why was being honest, creative, and unafraid to act so discouraged in C-Sec? He didn't know, but it sounded just as soul-sucking as Hierarchy civil service.

Morons, all of them, for not appreciating what they had. Nihlus sure did, and he was pretty sure that the sniper liked him well in return. Pretty sure.

Truthfully, Nihlus was half afraid that Blue would be so sick of his presence by the end of this that
he wouldn't want to see him for a long damn time after he was free. The knife loving Spectre laughed at his own mental waffling. Did he want to get away or not? Did he want to be welcomed back, or did he want to stay away until he was inside his own head space again? It was hard to say. Just so long as Blue didn't kick him out and ask him not to come back ever. Spirits, Nihlus didn't want that. The sniper's friendship had already been becoming precious before all this. Now? It was... was...

It was all starting to feel like reality, and sometimes Nihlus disappeared into the shower to be alone, to just to shake himself for clarity under scorching water. Breathe in the steam, breathe out the conflicting emotions.

'Remember what's real. Remember what's not real. Your name is Nihlus Kyrik, you're a Spectre, your pari was a merc and your mari was a cold murderous bitch, you liked Blue before you were Asla. Remember. Saren Arterius was your mentor, he saved you from death by boredom after your third squad transfer. You like Saren too. And explosives. And poison. Remember. Re.mem.ber.'

He cleaned the apartment again to reduce the alluring scents, resulting in Blue's assurances that she didn't need to clean so much, and why doesn't she instead spend her pretend shore leave relaxing? Garrus had no clue what he did to Nihlus. No damn clue. When the cleaning wore off again the subtle tug of pheromones and Blue's handsome smile had him leaving lingering touches he didn't notice he was making until the sniper turned and paid attention to him for hours and hours.

He tried to hide his addiction to reverie and orgasm. It didn't work well. Subvocals made it tricky to lie outright.

When he opened the door to Saren, Riaz, Ankh, and Korvis... he was a mess on the inside, but he smiled brightly for them and welcomed them in to plan out how to smooth the mess over so he could get back to work.

The mask of the cheerful protégé fit smoothly over his features, and no one noticed a thing.

Chapter End Notes
So fun fact time! A 'scent-o-phile' has a real term, it's called 'olfactophilia', and is a sub category of 'paraphilia' or 'likes that cause arousal'. Olfactophilia can also be used with Osmolagnia, or 'lust from smells'. Strangely enough, a particularly strong sexual arousal from scent is classified as a mental disorder, apart of the parosmia grouping, specifically euosmia. In other words, it's considered an incorrect neurological response, and deviant.

Ummm... Hi! I think I'm a deviant! Who's with me?!

Fun fact number two: If family members have Sleep Apnea, people can sometimes develop a finely honed sense of their breathing patterns, something that will wake them suddenly in the middle of the night if that pattern changes. It's a known phenomenon, actually. My husband has some mild sleeping disorders, and if he quits breathing suddenly, it's like waking from a nightmare. My adrenaline levels go nuts and I sit right up, immediately conscious. Living with him has schooled my hind-brain into paying attention to breathing noises, and now I do it with everyone. I'm also difficult to sneak up on while sleeping because of it. A new breathing pattern entering my space is registered as different, and if it is distressed, or rapid, or quits, it disturbs me awake.

Weird, right? But neat! And handy!

Thanks hind-brain!

I've given Garrus that ability, but sadly it's because of the rigors of being in a kill squad for rebel forces and not just a mild sleeping disorder. Awww, poor Garr-bear. //hugs// I'm so mean to you.

HEY DUCKIES! I've made a repository for all these neat facts, the lexicon entries, the codex entries, and some other research and fact gathering I've done for EDaH. It's over here:

**Manifesto of Mindcanon and Plothole Fills**

No more trolling through chapters looking for codex entries if they reference each other and stuff. Also, some interesting stuff on canon character ages and heights. I'll add more to it as I go. <3

Fanfic Recommendation (Brought to you today by CristalDePhoenix, who recommended to me a day or so ago. It's huge! And goooooood.): **Crucible** (550,600 words) by **SirArthurNudge**
A ridiculously short Drell woman announced her presence at the door by launching herself at the
disguised silver-and-peach Spectre, recognizing him through the cover with a cry of,
“NIIIIHHHHHHH YOU'RE NOT DEAAAAAD!!!!”, that the neighbors two floors down probably
heard. She had offered her name while wrapped, -literally wrapped-, around his torso: Riaz Tio’fore.

Just about everyone else visibly winced at her volume. If the Drell was anywhere in the building, or
had planted listening devices nearby... well there went the green eyed torin's cover. Garrus closed
the door quickly. They ended up spread across the living room of Garrus’ apartment. It felt somewhat
surreal to have so many ST&R agents stuffed inside the small space. Three Spectre Agents, and two
Specialists.

A Salarian introduced himself with a shy bow and a soft, mellifluous voice. Specialist Korvis Tiin,
the intelligence agent who had been working different angles to get the revenge kill order removed.
He was a pale maroon color interrupted by beige spots, shoulders curled in with a permanent typist's
slouch.

The other Specialist offered his name in a deep, deep rumble with a friendly nod. Ankhleas Tithe.
His entire appearance was average; medium height, earthy brown coloration, common features,
simple orange markings and matching eyes. The torin's steps were exceptionally quiet though, more
of a glide then a walk.

Saren immediately took over the only chair, the one that sat at Garrus' breakfast bar. Considering it
was on the other side of the kitchen counter, it seemed almost like a desk. His regal bearing only did
him favor by adding to that, the final impression being an assortment of courtiers before a ruler.

The effect was somewhat spoiled by Nihlus hopping up on the counter near the door with Riaz in his
lap. Korvis and Ankhleas sat on the couch angling themselves toward the kitchen. The C-Sec officer decided to take a lean against the hallway entrance.

“Korvis, if you would bring everyone up to speed on the current situation?”

“I would be happy to, Spectre Arterius. Might I know Officer Vakarian's clearance level before I begin?”

Saren turned his gaze to meet Garrus', the electric glow flickering as the lenses rotated in focus on him. For a moment the aloof Spectre held him captive with his eyes alone, and he could feel the rapid judgments being made. He returned it coolly, even as the long stare set his guts in stone. If the ST&R group thought they could have a secret meeting about Nihlus in his living room without him, he would have to clarify how much that wasn't happening. He didn't care to challenge Spectre authority at all, or Saren in particular, but... it was his damn house.

The silver and grey Spectre turned away.

“Level eight.”, was all he said. Agent Tiin seemed to blink in surprise, but moved smoothly to carry on the conversation.

“Very good. To begin explaining the compl-”

“Hold on.”, interrupted the orange eyed specialist. “Understand, I mean no offense, but how could a C-Sec Detective have earned an intel clearance level that high?”

Saren's mandibles pulled up ever-so-slightly in displeasure.

“If you should ever have need of an independent agent who can enter the Spectre Offices without a password, acquire data from the intel terminals, and leave again with no aid... Officer Vakarian could do so.”

The entire room baring the speaker turned to stare at him, though Nihlus had a shit-eating grin on his face. The tiny Drell woman's grin wasn't much smaller.
“Ohhhhh well tha' makes it easy! Hard to keep a hacker like that outta data at all, innit?”

“Yes.” The earthy toned specialist nodded, and attention returned to the softly spoken Salarian. Garrus wished he knew what 'level eight' meant, and hoped that no one asked him to hack the Spectre Office door in the middle of the night just to see if he could do it again.

“Oh, Officer Vakarian, you're the one who found that storage based error in the security network?”

“Ahh, yeah. I... had occasion to visit the ST&R office in the middle of the night, and needed to get back out. Saren's emergency code got me in, but I... wanted to go home and sleep afterward.”

“Understandable. Thank you for finding the error, and explaining it so that the loophole could be fixed. Allow me to continue on our main topic, then? To begin explaining the complication, I need to delve into a bit of politics. After the target, The Luminous Azynder, was taken out we acquired aggression from his six daughters, the Slave Baron Orgorosh whom he was selling people to, and his two political allies; The Luminous Derrindray, and the Disciple of the Light Ifrazyl. Orgorosh was refusing to take a more then generous bribe, and was instead eliminated as well. The Luminous Derrindray has been black mailed into dropping the issue using evidence of misuse of public funding. The remaining trouble comes from the six daughters and Ifrazyl. At this time, Ifrazyl is trying to find matches for his two most recently born sons, and the daughters have agreed to wed the youngest two among them in exchange for the assurance of Spectre Kyrik's death.”

“Uhh, so how is it that having babies for a Hanar prince is worth ending me? It doesn't sound like that much trouble.”

“You would normally by correct Spectre Kyrik, but Ifrazyl is old, and his two youngest sons were conceived too late in life. As you might know, Hanar generally have six to eight children at a time. These two are the only surviving of that batch, and are mentally hindered.”

“Ooooh, so a life married to a mentally retarded prince is the deal.”

“In essence, yes. For two of them. Our current options are currently as follows; convince the daughters to revoke the deal, convince the youngest two to renenge on their agreement and hope their older sisters are not so willing, have freely offered brides presented to Ifrazyl for his sons, eliminate the sons which would likely exacerbate the situation, or convince the Disciple of the Light through other means that the daughters aren't worth the expenditure of resources.”
“Well, shit. What have you tried already?”

“We have attempted dealing with the younger two females, and the daughters in general. They are very upset and refuse, though we have perhaps simply not found the correct bribe. Ifrazyl offered to end the deal in exchange for Prothean artifacts that we don't have the ability to give. I did check with the Council about that. On that note, Spectre Kyrik, Councilor Tevos sends you her regret that their above-board options were no help, and wishes you good luck.

“Awwww Mommy loves me! You hear that Riaz? I'm the favorite. I can't wait to tell Tela.” Spectre Tio'fore laughed merrily, as apparently it was some sort of inside joke that she got a kick out of.

Garrus raised his hand as a request to speak. Saren turned to him and rumbled an assent.

“So, Specialist Korvis, these... Hanar princes?”

“Technically they are not royalty, simply popular social media figures.”

“Right, well, I know family is a big deal to Hanar... are they fertile?”

“One moment. Allow me to check their medical records... … Yes, they both appear to be so.”

“Would the mental disorder transfer to offspring?”

“No, it would not. It is unique to the developmental problems caused by late in life reproduction, and is separate from genetically passable causes of mental retardation.”

“Alright. Hmmm. My thought is that if there was something wrong with their ability to reproduce, then the daughters' interest would die a quick death. It might not end their dealing, but it could take the Compact as a resource out of the matter. Is there anyway to induce them with a passable disease, get them sick, have blood work done, and then leak it to the public?”

The room was silent for a moment as they considered how viable a plan like that would be. It was Spectre Tio'fore who first chimed in.
“That’s a tricksey idea there Officer. It might be doable if we can catch them boys away from the bulk of their security, preferably on land. Could hit ’em with a disolvable dart full ’o some pathogens that would make ’em go to the hospital, and an auto-immune disease that would transfer ta any babes. Itsa subtle idea, and might only stall, but the extra-glowy jellie wouldna want sick grand kids to sap the bank accounts either. The girls would hafta come up with a different buy off for a pet assassin.”

“Shame to make the two boys ill though. Sounds like they’ve had a hard life as is. Anyone have other ideas?”

“I might.”, came in Specialist Tithe. “A reversal. The daughters are the trouble makers who will not let the matter sit, let the consequences be theirs. Release compounds in their home to make all of them sterile.”

Saren hummed approval.

“It would make an excellent last warning before we simple kill the lot of them and be done with the matter. Too many council resources are being wasted on their need for revenge. I find myself unwilling to allow it to continue. I have a compound recipe that will do nicely with some small modifications. Sterility, and a hospital worthy illness that will draw attention to it. Tio’fore, will yourself and Specialist Tithe be able to join me aboard the Daedalus for a trip to Kahje? I can alter the formula needed en route, if you are able to develop a delivery method?”

“Sure thing Arterius! I can make a water bomb, limited range dispersion, colorless even. Drop it off at night, yeah? Hide it somewhere sneaky-like, they’ll never know how it happened.”

“Awww you guys are doing explosives underwater without me?” Nihlus appeared honestly distraught that he would miss it. The Drell woman patted him on the cheek with an understanding smile.

A few more details were worked out while Garrus leaned quietly and watched. It was still surreal having a bunch of secret agents in his apartment planning political intrigue, sentient rights medical violations, and potential murder if the angry Hanar women didn’t take their final hint. He was alright with it though, at least life was interesting.
[Author's Codex] The Government of Kahje

A separation of church and state does not exist on Kahje. Population groups range from as small as thirty people, to half a million and up, and are called 'Bloom'. Some of these population centers are more or less religious, and exact opinions of the spirituality of the Enkindlers varies from 'Wise Elders' to 'Demi-gods' in level of divinity. The leaders of each bloom are called 'Luminous Ones', and when they and their entourage are not engaged in religious works, they run each city much as a mayor would. The highest tiers of the Illuminated Primacy are the fourteen Disciples of the Light, the Luminous of the fourteen largest city-groups. These fourteen act as a council for the Hanar people, and are responsible for their military, colonial projects, and law crafting. Though it should be noted that there are only a few thousand words in the Primacy's federal level law book, as each bloom is given a great deal of leave to govern themselves.

[Author's Codex] Hanar Worship of the 'Enkindlers'

The most prevalent religion of the Hanar people is Prothean worship. Credited with giving the Hanar sentience and language. The 18th day of the 8th month each year marks the beginning of the 'First Cresting Bloom', a 13 day festival celebrating this gift of language to the people of Kahje. The veneration of the long-lost species has evolved to include a spiritual aspect. An Enkindled Hanar would expect to join the ascended Protheans in the next plane of existence after mortal death. The 'Ascension' of the Enkindlers circa 48,000 BCE being the commonly accepted reason for their current absence from the galaxy. The Hanar habit of living and working in medium-large population batches called 'Bloom' has carried over to their religion, forming a myriad of church groups that each practice a variance of the religion. In general terms, each group is lead by a 'Luminous One', who has anywhere between two to twenty 'All-Bright Ones', and at least one 'Seeking Ember'. The Embers of a community will spend time searching for and procuring relics of the Enkindlers, transporting these remnants to museums and temples for veneration and protection. The Luminous will interpret the artifacts found, ruminate on the will of the Protheans, and record their findings. The All-Brights of a city will then distribute the interpretations to the general population, and collect donations for future good works. These funds are used to ensure the protection of Enkindler ruins, to acquire new relics, and to further spread the 'Light of the Enkindlers' to other species.

Fanfic Recommendation: Hardware Update (1412 words) by buhnebeest (EDI/Joker)
Resisting wanderlust is like drinking saltwater

Chapter Summary

The hardest part of letting go...

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Palvi - Short for 'Palvipyrum', Turian closed dialect for 'Explosives'.

A/N: Sorry for the slower update this time! New expansion of WoW just came out, and my friends are bullying me into leveling with them. Am I the only one who thinks the quest to reforge Frostmourne is a horrrrible idea?

WARNING! LEMONS! Most of this chapter is citrus. Whoof.

Chapter Soundtrack: Panic! At The Disco: Emperor's New Clothes

Nihlus was very preoccupied when the small team of colleagues finally tried to contact him with the results of the counter-espionage. So busy with what he was doing in fact, though he heard his 'tool go off with a vid com request twice in as many minutes, that he ignored it completely. Blue tried to point it out to him helpfully, but didn't get more then two words out before the Spectre reduced him back to incoherent moans.

He was sitting on Garrus' torso, facing bent knees, with his thighs tightened against the sniper's tapering waist. Most of his weight was kept balanced away, but enough pressure from still-peach-and-silver legs kept the mountain of delirious tech junky pinned down. One of the lanky Spectre's hands was gloved, keeping talons covered safely as he adventured into the topography of plates splayed wide, curling into the tawny brown nooks of slick hide that were flushed purple from the attention. By now he'd found the better part of the Blue's favorite spots, and had no qualms using them to devastating effect. The other hand had the sniper by the base, and was toying with angles to see what got the best sounds from his captive.

Thus far, a tug and twist down then away drew out some of the lowest pitched rumbles, which vibrated into Nihlus' core pleasantly where they touched. Though an even angle to the far left or right with mild tugs seemed to produce these breathy chokes for air and almost begging subvocals that set off something dark and nefarious in the Spectre's demeanor. Blue's hands were dug into the peach hide over his hip crests, holding on for dear life as the knife loving torin drove him maddeningly close to the edge before easing off again. He'd done it half a dozen times with a wicked grin at the frustrated and dizzy sounding huffs at the teasing denials.
Nihlus eventually decided to give some small quarter. He leaned forward, sliding a slick gloved talon along the exposed perineum, to tease the nerve endings around the barely visible entrance with an obscenely light touch. The sniper's dense leg musculature flexed and four black talons dug into the bed as the body beneath him pressed upward seeking more. More pressure, an escape, more sensation, or maybe just in mindless want.

The Spectre had told himself not to push the line anymore while he was here. If he got Blue into bed again after being away for a while, then he'd take it further... at least, that was what he'd told himself. The lustful subvocals and body language were hard to resist though, and the green eyed torin was weak, so weak, for the symphony of need and desire that Blue sang to him in trills and moans and vibrating hums.

He sank a single talon in ever so slowly, and crooked it to press against just the right place. It all locked down around him as the orgasm tore through Garrus with a hoarse cry of his name. Nihlus shuddered with an appreciative and uneven exhale as the sniper came apart for him. Spirits, it was like seeing a sunrise for the first time each instance he heard that combination of name and voice and buzzing subvocals called in release. Addicted. He was so damned addicted to this. Sex in general, obviously, specifically with with this torin though...

The reminder of pending vid-call request chimed again.

Questing hands came up over his collar and pulled him down as Blue shifted them backward into sitting. The Spectre ended up sprawled in the detective's lap, angled to the side and held against a keel with one muscled arm as the other came down to take vengeance for all his teasing. Green eyes disappeared behind fluttering lids as he was taken hold of and worked at with a heavy grip and an unhurried pace. His throat became dry from panting as he drowned in the leisurely take over of his sensations. Blue's legs came over his own, one after another, and trapped his thighs on the other side. Spread as wide as he could bend, -and he was a very flexible Turian-, unable to move much. Still the fist on him moved, pulling the whole area in lazy circles of up and out, around the apex in a curve, releasing the tension near his plates, and rolling back along the the rest of the circle with all grip and no pull. The driving rhythm went around again, and again, the reminder pinged, and remained ignored.

Nihlus began to give pleading trills as the smooth revolutions kept up, and worked the thumb of his still slippery hand into the purple flushed hide below Garrus' grip. The sniper let him work himself up for a few moments, digging into the nerves in double time to the rolling motion, but all of the sudden the icy eyed torin cut him off. One deceptively thin wrist was captured, then the other, pulled away so he couldn't touch himself. Blue's tongue laved at the hide below silvery mandibles. The trills and desirous moans that escaped became louder and more demanding, but the pace never changed. The sniper was getting revenge, and nothing seemed to move him.
Nihlus began to struggle lightly, growling with frustrated subvocals like a distant thunder storm. It went unheeded, and the reverse torment kept on.

The dangerous edge to his growls inched higher.

“Yes, Palvi?”

“Stop. Teasing me.”

Garrus' mouth came up to his ear as he rumbled with amusement, “No.”

He proceeded to push Nihlus' head aside and bite down on rough hide, returning the Spectre to a melting puddle of compliance. It lasted for several minutes, but the merciless and unhurried pace brought the agent no release and he was about ready to turn it into a spar to try and pin the sniper and ride his still-slick groin plates to completion. He called out more frustrated subvocals, threading in a fair warning of his rising intent to force the issue.

“Something bothering you?”

“Wha-yes, asshole. You. You are b-bothering me. Ohhhhh fuck.”

“Is there... anything I can do... to help?”

“AGH! Yes, YES.”

“Yes what, Nihlus? What do you want?”

“Oh, y-you are an evil fuck. Make me come before I...”

“Before... You.. Do. What?” Garrus timed his words to a slowly speeding revolution.
“B-before...shut up and finish me!” Words left him as Blue finally relented, gripping him with both hands and turning the heavy grip and slow rotation into a rapid and breath stopping hand fuck of epic proportions. The slate grey hands worked him over into an orgasm within half a minute, the sudden rush drew a ragged keening roar out of the Spectre as he clawed at the shoulders that powered the hold over him. He was fairly certain he broke skin, but couldn't fathom what to do about that as the *torin* dragged every last moan and shudder out of him, wringing the fluid release until there was none left to give.

He collapsed after the climax, shivering with small whimpers as Garrus trailed talons up and down over sensitized flesh. The gentle but persistent attention convinced his plates that they didn't need to close just yet, and the sniper continued for some time, keeping Nihlus trapped in the aftermath and unable to so much as offer token hummed resistance.

The damn reminder pinged again, and the Officer laughed softly.

“You should probably answer that.”

What he thought was, “How about fuck that?”; however the more responsible reply came as, “Mmmmmyeah. In a second.” It was only a *slightly* more responsible answer.

It pinged again five minutes later. Blue helped him sit up against the curved side of the bed, and put the correct arm in front of him. He left the room with a chuckle, calling out that he'd reheat some left overs for them.

It was Saren who answered, assuring him that the five remaining daughters had revoked their intent, and that he had confirmation the kill order was to be removed within a day. There was a little smear of whiteish Hanar blood along his right cheek horn. Nihlus cheerfully thanked him, and sent his 'hugs and kisses' to Riaz, which was met with an unamused stare. The call closed, and the Spectre sat there trying to gather his will. To get up, get clean, eat... and work on how to get his feet to walk out that door again.

The end of the road came quick. The lanky *torin* painstakingly removed every trace of the hide dyes and plate coating, and gathered his things together, staring at the small pile of girl clothes and cute accessories. He fingered a set of silver and green fringe clips forlornly. Garrus came up and set a hand on his shoulder with a friendly squeeze.
“I've got some spare room in my closet if you'd like to leave that stuff here for future use of Asla as a cover. Saren mentioned before that you don't keep a hold of different sets of disguises because you're bad at taking care of anything not made of metal.” He heard the rustle of cloth as the sniper shrugged dismissively.

It was... really stupid. He should throw it all away, and never be this cover again. He should.

“Yeah, if it's not any trouble? Would be nice to have a ready-made disguise on the Citadel in case I need it.”

“Sure. Just leave whatever you want to keep here, and I'll pack it up later.”

'You are such a moron, Kyrik. A sentimental moron.', he told himself as he pocketed the fringe clips and turned to thank the Officer with a smile. They walked to the door as Nihlus and Garrus for the first time in weeks. Just two friends, not a close knit couple enjoying a soldier's shore leave. He couldn't stand it when the sniper reached out a forearm to clasp his in goodbye, and instead pinned the torin to the wall by the door with a sudden and stupid press of foreheads and a hand clasped to tawny brown neck hide.

He tried really hard to keep smiling, but it was slipping. Nihlus knew he needed to leave, now.

“See you later Blue.”

“Take it easy, Pa-... Hurricane.”

“Nu uh, I never do anything the easy way.”

“Always have to make it worse?”

“Bingo.”

“Then... make it terrible.”
A/N: I found something about the relay network on the wiki that partially confirms my theory that the network is point to point. Looks like 'some' relays can aim themselves, if the distance is short and the angle isn't too different. Holy balls, my attempts to have accurate travels times just got a whole lot more complicated. [“When a relay is activated, it aligns itself with the corresponding relay before propelling the ship across space. ... There are two kinds of mass relay, primary and secondary. Primary relays can propel a ship thousands of light years but only link to one other relay, its "partner". Secondary relays can link to any other relay over shorter distances, only a few hundred light years.”] I'm assuming the relays in geosync with astral bodies make it so that there are 'windows' of opportunity to get to certain places before you have to wait for the angle to be good again. Can't go through planets and all.

Fanfic Recommendation: bursting through your veins (670 words) by buhnebeest
Chapter Summary

We wander off the beaten path, to see the life and times of another. He walks a ways to end up in our time, but his journey there was fraught with that which forms him, and such things are usually a tale worth telling.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Nais - A pronoun for the mono-gendered species of Asari. (Credit: Mizdirected)
Avah - The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. (Credit: Recidiva)
PMC - Para-Military Company (Mercenaries with a shiny coat of paint, and occasionally a sense of morals.)

This chapter is for Kaidan Alenko, my second least-favorite character in the series. I liked the NPC Cerberus tech that intermittently typed stuff in the CIC in ME2 more then I liked this guy, and he lucked out of being last place entirely because Jacob was so bland he'd make the pope cry. That said, fanon has taken him some amazing places, and I firmly hold to the idea that fanfiction is for fixing both the plot holes that drive us nuts, and the characters that were poorly delivered. Hate-fics can be cathartic, (Ron Weasley bashers, I'm waggling my eyebrows at you folks.), but I love to see characters re-imagined with more vivid colors instead.

And also, I have a deep and abiding hatred for the shit-job they did for Kaidan in the Mass Effect comics. There is a long, ridiculous author's note at the end if you care to hear my rant, but for now, I offer you our third interlude: The events of 2168 at Jump Zero.

This chapter may be skipped if you don't care about side characters. Warning for depictions of violence and gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~Interlude: My Heart Sings and I Cannot Help but Burn Brightly~

It all began when he was four years old. Just big enough to understand that mommy was upset about him jumping down the stairs in one go, but not really understanding why. She was crying and holding onto him tightly, a little too tightly actually, but when he tried to wiggle away she cried more so he stopped.
“...mamaa? S’okay, ummm please don’t cry?” Kaidan tried patting her face, but it didn’t seem to help. His dark little eyebrows furrowed together in thought trying to come up with something.

“...Mamaa, you wanna get popsicles?”

“...Would you be happy if I cleaned dishes for you?”

“...We can watch vids and have popcorn?”

It didn’t matter that all of those were his favorite things, the sweetness of his trying-to-help toddler logic just made Cleo Alenko have further trouble trying to breathe. Kaidan began to snivel too, upset that she was upset, and not knowing what to do about it.

Mercifully, his uncle Molorasteph Alenko found them after not too long.

“Cleo? Kai? Cleo, what’s wrong?” The big man’s bushy unibrow rose in worry as he knelt down beside them on the living room carpet. Kaidan heard his mom try to put into words what was wrong, but her thin shoulders just shook harder trying to repress the flow of tears. Uncle ’Mo looked at him for help.

“I-i-i dunoooo. I was going outside so I came d-down stairs and then mamaa was sad and I dunnooo.” He was full out crying now, not able to help it. His uncle leaned back baffled, and yelled across the house for his husband, who came speed walking at a clip around the corner. Uncle Jacob was a doctor-soldier with the Alliance, and worked at the same base outside Vancouver as Uncle ’Mo and his dad. Doctor-solders were the best right? Uncle Jacob would know what to do.

“Cleo, look at me, I need you to nod or shake your head for yes or no. Is something medically wrong with you?”

No.

“Okay, what about Kai?”

Yes.
“I need you to let go of him so I can see, alright?”

Finally, something besides mournful tears, but Kaidan wasn’t sure the wet little laugh that his momaa made was the good kind of laugh.

“I-its n-n-not something you can fix. Ohhhhh my sweet boy. I thought my cancer was just poor genes, I didn’t... I didn’t think. I’m s-so sorry....”

“Cleo?” Uncle Jacob tried again, he sounded worried.

“He j-jumped... from the t-top of the stairs. G-g-glowing blue.” Another loud, mournful wail rose up, and the youngest Alenko in the room wailed right along with it, great big tears going down his cheeks. He didn't know why jumping down the stairs was so bad, but... it was his fault? He made mom cry. He was probably in trouble.

Uncle 'Mo covered his mouth with a big hand and stared up at the top of the stairs with wide eyes. His other uncle just looked serious, and rubbed his back gently.

“Kai, did you jump down the stairs?”


“Heeey, now, hey it's okay. Actually, I was wondering if you could do it again for me?”

“Jake!”

“Love, we need to know for sure.”

Uncle 'Mo hugged his sister-in-law while looking green around the gills. “Do we?”

Uncle Jacob leveled him a steady look, and he looked away. Kaidan wasn't sure he wanted to jump
down anything ever again.

“I.. I don’t want to...”

“Oh yeah? How come?”

Kaidan glanced helplessly at his mother, who still wasn't calm.

“Kai, your mom is just... startled. She didn't expect you to be able to do that. If you can though, we need to know, alright? There's... special things that people who can do that need to have. A lot more food, for one. Give it a try for me? I'll be ready to catch you if it doesn't work.”

“I'm... ummm... not hungry...” His uncle gave him that level look next. It was pretty intimidating. He gulped and climbed the stairs again, turning around at the top to stare down at his family. His mom managed the ghost of an encouraging smile.

Kaidan jumped, like he'd done a dozen times before, and landed with a thump. But not a thump loud enough to account for a 4 meter leap down a set of stairs. Not that he knew that, or that he glowed when he did it. Kaidan had just done what felt natural.

His mom gathered him back into a hug.

“You, can you call my husband p-please? I...I just...”

“It's okay Cloe, go sit down. We'll figure out the details, just take it easy.”

“Thank you.”

When he was seven, the doctors that he visited regularly began to push to have him enrolled into the trials for the new L1 implant. His mom glared them down as his dad threatened to 'sue' for some practice or... something. Kaidan didn't know exactly what that meant, but he knew that it was bad,
and that they were angry.

The doctors backed off, and life was good for a little while. At least it was, until the other kids at Widelakes Elementary discovered that he had biotics. He ended up having to switch schools that year.

Then twice more the following year.

He made it through fourth and fifth grade okay, but the bullying and social pariah status in middle school became a thing of nightmares for Kaidan. No one wanted to even speak to him except other biotics, and there were none at his school. Teachers would lock the door before he could enter the classroom. One of the cafeteria staff outright refused to be anywhere near him, and would leave the lunch room at a run if he entered.

His mom and dad hired a homeschooling tutor. Of course, that was when the nausea episodes started.

It was a really good thing his parents had plenty of money, because the Asari specialist they took him to was incredibly expensive, and he knew it. They tried to hide it from him, but Kaidan was an intelligent boy. Maybe it was hours spent reading quietly when no one would talk to him. It might've been the private tutor too. Regardless, he sneaked peaks at the bills, and was smart enough to know that it took a lot of time to earn that kind of money.

The specialist was nice though, and soothed away the constant desire to vomit and fall over with some sort of special biotic field. The Asari advised his parents to look into a biotic amp for the stabilizing factor. There were a lot of big technical words involved, but the way it was explained to him was that he was building up a charge in a loop, and his options were either to use his abilities constantly in small ways, or to get an amp that would give him passive stimulation.

He was very sick of falling over and running into things because he couldn't balance right anymore, and he couldn't just use biotics around normal people. The last time he'd shown anyone outside of his family what he could do, he'd sent everyone in the room into horrified or awed stares, most of them quickly scattering. As if mild telekinetic powers caused some sort of existential dread that he'd mind control them off a cliff for the fun of it.

In the end, Kaidan just wanted the taste of puke out of his mouth for more then a few hours, and trying to keep up a constant light usage was exhausting.
The Asari had said he needed to get it before puberty to be most effective. His mom hated the idea. His dad told him that the choice was his, and that they would support him either way.

The desperation to just walk straight again without having to fight himself was too great a temptation. Kaidan knew he risked brain damage, and that the operation could go really bad and he'd be stupid for life. He still went ahead with it.

One day dad came home with a pair of Systems Alliance officers who wanted to speak with him about his above average L2 testing scores. They were starting up a boarding school for biotic teens out on Gagarin station, and wanted to see if he was interested. Kaidan was very interested. The idea of a school with kids that were all just like him? No one would be a freak, because they would all be freaks.

His mom put her foot down though. She had no desire to send him off to the middle of nowhere, with no regular communication. Maybe Cloe had been spoiled having him at home all the time growing up, but he was fourteen now and as much as he loved his mom, her constant presence was a little stifling some days. She refused though, utterly and completely, with tears and coughing and pleading with him and dad. They gave in, those Alenko boys. Cloe was too precious to them to make her so miserable intentionally.

Unfortunately for Mrs. Alenko, fate wasn't feeling particularly kind. Four months later a crazy woman tried to run them over with a sky car in a parking lot. The psychopath had seen him get something in the grocery store with a mild biotic lift, bringing it down for his mother to add to their cart. Following them out of the building, she screamed something about demon abominations out the window and he barely had time to frantically shield them both with the strongest barrier he'd ever made before the vehicle hit.

The woman died in the crash. He and Cloe were fine. The media exploded about it.

Kaidan was on a shuttle for pre-departure orientation three weeks later. Much to his mom's great distress. He had to keep her safe though, even if that was from people trying to get to him. He was used to being a target because of his biotics, so that didn't phase him. Granted being a target of outright violence was new, but not of hate. That one was a constant companion. He just... didn't want anything to happen to his mother.

He'd be back once a year for a one month holiday break, for the next four years. It almost felt like an adventure.
The official title for the 'school' of Biotic Acclimation and Temperance Training lasted about a week. When it became obvious that the establishment ran more like a summer camp with morning scholastic classes and a full afternoon of various biotic exercises, followed by pre-military training in the evenings, 'Brain Camp' quickly became the casual moniker of choice.

Some days were good.

Those days were full of hard work, yes, but also a lot of progress with his biotic control. The morning classes were no joke either, and their leisure time was limited. They were being treated more like an elite force in training then children, but the change from being ostracized to being valued was so powerful that Kaidan and his peers mostly took to it with a gusto. A sense of fellowship between the equally struggling kids brought them all together with a sense of communal suffering.

There was still some bullying, but it was so mild comparatively that most people barely noticed. The majority of them had thick skin, and those who didn't had a lot of over protective friends. Rahna, the unofficial mom of theta team, was particularly well known for her stinging lectures at anyone who picked on people. Chris, the team dad of beta group, was a very large boy even at age fifteen, and was not afraid to spend a weekend in grueling punishment chores for deckling anyone who picked on the smaller, weaker, or more unstable biotics among them.

Chris was a good guy, and Kaidan liked him. Covered for him on more then one occasion.

There were also bad days.

Their instructors were a mixed bag. Human teachers for academics and the pre-military classes the instructors insisted on calling 'P.E.', and then aliens for biotics. Commander Vyrnnus had the Biotic Combat Technique, Control & Integration, and Memetics classes, and Osi Rai'ne took care of Meditation, Biotic Theory & Acclimation, and helped the science team that was 'supporting their studies'. If by 'supporting their studies' they meant 'studying their abilities.'

Instructor Rai'ne was a cold and quiet tarin that refused to mother them. Her meditation techniques were only mocked the first few weeks, until some people started 'getting it', and found their various health problems alleviated to varying degrees. Her main class became a great deal more popular after that. BTA class was a study in 'fake it till you make it', as the woman's incomprehensible psycho-babble was so far beyond the gaggle of twelve to sixteen year olds that the class might as well have
been taught with translators off. The grades in that class were very low for a good long while, but at least the teacher was a very patient sort.

Commander Vyrnnus was an entirely different ball game. He was a harsh task master, popular with no one but respected to varying degrees by all. There was no question that the mercenary commander was a powerful and skilled biotic, and that the things he had to teach them were amazing. If only the Turian could have had a few shreds of mercy for the young people in poor average health that he taught. Apparently Turians were considered adults at age fifteen. He didn't seem to understand that Humans were different. Most people didn't consider someone an adult until age twenty, and they couldn't get a skycar license or own a gun until twenty five, the exception being eighteen year olds who joined the S.A.. He drove even the twelve year olds like they were training for war tomorrow. It was brutal.

Every few months someone would snap and have a mental break down. The Human adults tried to mitigate it, but there was only so much they could do. Both Vyrnnus and Rai'ne were nearly impossible to replace. Other teachers came and went, but those two were the core of Brain Camp's forward motion.

Kaidan talked no few number of his peers out of suicide because of that.

Eventually a support pattern formed. Rahna of theta team and her second in command, Kaidan himself, kept watch over their team and alpha team as well. Alpha team's only leader-like individual had hurt themselves badly early on, and was still in a coma in the medical ward. Chris and his twin brother Jasper kept an eye on charlie team and their own delta. Echo team was watched over by Amchee Paztrika, a tiny angry Swedish girl who furiously took care of her mostly male team by herself.

They had unofficial team leader meetings on the weekends and everything, trying to keep everyone up to date on who was cracking and who was going strong. That mismatched group of gangly and awkward teens did a lot of good, and Kaidan had the sense that they'd kept the project from falling through by a landslide. He was proud to be a part of that.

Besides the good and bad days, there were also weird days, as one would expect would happen when a bunch of repressed young people with mental powers were shoved into a space station and told to get along and work hard. More then one biotic lunch fight was paid for in metaphorical blood of hard manual labor and weekends of chores and lock downs. They were almost always worth it.

By the time they all went home for the first year's break period, Kaidan was really starting to feel like a person who had biotic gifts and not tainted by an unwanted curse.
The second year at Brain Camp went more smoothly then the first. A fair few kids never came back, but an even larger amount joined. Fox-trot team was formed, Amchee got a right-and-left-hand set of cousins to back her up, and the unofficial leaders were relieved when a bossy sixteen year old boy named Johnathan joined with the new kids and took over Fox-trot with only a little prodding. The group grew up around Rahna, their kind hearted queen bee, and there were a lot fewer mental breaks and problems over all.

That year was also notable for Kaidan's developing friendship with, -and crush on-, Rahna. He'd stopped by her dorm room one weekend to find no one else around. She was just day dreaming, one of the few relaxing pass times available, and invited him in. At fifteen, he'd definitely noticed girls in general, and Rahna's lovely caramel skin and bright, intelligent eyes in particular. He wasn't brave enough to do anything about it, but she did make him happy just to be around, and that was enough.

Year two came and went, and three started. The atmosphere improved little by little. As results began coming from their data studies further funding was sent. A psychologist had managed to convinced some of the operational staff about a few things that teens needed in their lives, and they'd gotten new entertainments, established holiday parties, and a few other niceties. The unofficial leaders found themselves officially recognized, and they were each called in on a biweekly basis to give a verbal report to the people in charge. Kaidan purposefully kept people's personal details out of it unless they really needed some interference, but the system improved with that new line of communication.

As year three went on, they got comfortable. The struggles of Brain Camp were becoming manageable, and the support staff of scientists and doctors and cooks and so forth all settled into routine and workable patterns. On the flip side, however, Commander Vyrnnus seemed to take their comfort as a personal affront, and his classes picked up in intensity accordingly. Somedays he pushed too far, and Kaidan would push back. He was only willing to put up with so much of the turin's mind games and war-dog posturing before he'd stand up to him in place of whoever the Turian's latest target was.

It hadn't come to violence, but there had been more then one yelling match that had freaked out the newer kids. Kaidan was a passionate individual, and while he was normally quiet like a book worm, when he got worked up he really got worked up. It was a constant battle with Vyrnnus' temper, but it was one the dark haired teen was prepared to fight. As long as the attention was on him, it wasn't on anyone else. That was good enough.

Life was good, or better than before at least, and certainly an improvement over pre-Brain Camp days. It lasted until half way into their forth year, when suddenly Kaidan's whole world focused down into a single crystalline moment that would forever define him, his comfortable little corner of the galaxy shattering into a thousand jagged pieces.
“Hey, Alenko!” Kaidan turned to look at Jasper, who was checking up and down the hall for listeners. Finding no one, he leaned in and whispered, “Shelby’s got his homebrew com suite rigged to send out this week. If you have any messages you want to send back home...”

He nodded at the blonde teen knowingly, “Got it. I'll pass on word to beta team. I've got something to send to my mom... does Shelby want it hand written again?”

Jasper nodded with a half-grin. “Yeah, unless Marco figured out a way around the monitoring on the new datapad OS?”

“Not yet, at least that's what I heard yesterday.” Both boys turned to the familiar voice of Rahna, who offered a smile as she shook her head. Her tiny black braids swished around her head charmingly, or maybe that was just Kaidan's crush talking.

“Right well. I gotta go let people in echo team in on it. Talk to y'all later.”

Kaidan waved farewell, and turned back to the artificial vid-window that looked out into the stars. Rahna pulled up beside him, and they sat for a moment and watched the world turn, or the whole galaxy as the case may be. Eventually, she turned to look up at him with a curious cant to her head.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“What?”

“Haha, sorry, old Earth currency. How about a cred for your thoughts?”

“I'd say my thoughts are worth at least 15 creds. Maybe 20.”

“Oh are they now? Well... since credits are basically useless up here... how about my jello cup during lunch?”

“You strike a hard bargain Rahna, but I suppose sacrifices can be made for jello.”
“Exactly! So...?”

“I was... just thinking, really. I know it's different when we go home for that month they let everyone out for, but for the rest of the year? It feels so separate here. Like we're cut off from reality and... like we'll be here forever. Training and learning, but never experiencing.”

“So says the senior who graduates this year.”

“True. Though I know the Conatix med-sci team wants me to stay, if only because my L2 stability rating is so high. They still can't figure out why I took to it better then the L2-Xs down in the care ward.”

“So you're going to stay? I thought you were just complaining about feeling held back?”

“Haha, I wasn't complaining just... thinking. Besides, if a little extra time here can help improvements to the implants...”

“A lot of good?”

“Yeah, a lot of good.”

She smiled broadly at him, and he felt the well-expected flutter in his stomach at the sight. They looked upward simultaneously as the afternoon class bell went off reminding everyone to begin heading to their next scheduled course. They both had Biotic Control & Integration next, so the two young adepts set off together wordlessly.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Terraze! Stop. Practice that third memetic fifty times, slowly, with no energy behind it. Pay attention to your wrist angles boy, or you'll never be worth a shit.”

Vyrnnus stalked down the line of softskins, annoyed with their lack of focus today. He glanced
down the line and watched for careless memetic motions or the taletell waver of uneven fields. What he saw only aggravated him more. The Jolsey twins were feeding off each other again, more interested in playing with their shared energy then improving their personal control. His best student, Alenko, was mooning over his favorite female and letting his memetics get sloppy. Again.

“Alenko!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Focus.”

“Yes, sir!”

He walked up to one of the twins, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and steered him down the line to a new spot away from his brother. Vyrnnus continued his judgmental pacing, whapping Shelby Monroe upside the head for day dreaming for too long instead of beginning the next set of practice exercises after finishing the previous set.

Idiots. He had no idea how the Human younglings didn't just die from their own stupidity some days. Who spaced off in a room full of other careless biotics in training? Moronic softskins, apparently. A headache was building behind his eyes, and the mercenary felt his own focus fray. He decided to take his own advice for the remainder of the lesson.

“Fields down! Begin movement set C, and work on making it flow into set F and back, no energy. Work on your forms! I want to see improvement today, or else!”

He couldn't say he enjoyed this job, at all, but it paid well. Very well. He was getting too old to take the big pay-out jobs like he used to, had too many injuries to live hard and still live. This bullshit would do until he had the money for his own ship, a heavy cruiser or carrier that he could lead a merc group from. It would be a few more years of beating biotic technique into the empty heads of pyjaks, but he was determined to suffer through.

“Terraze! EYES FORWARD. For the last time you witless moron. Focus or leave!”

“Y-yes sir!”
Ridiculous. This sort of incompetence wouldn't have been tolerated in the Cabals, not for a single day. Regardless of his attempts to put some discipline into his pupils, their spastic pyjak brains couldn't retain half of it. Maybe he was too soft on them, but the tiny damn Humans broke so easily he was reluctant to push much harder.

Mercifully the class came to an end, and he released the lot of them to stuff their worthless faces before P.E class. Vyrnnus was done for today, and had a date with a glass of brandy and a Rachni Wars novella to get to.

The next day was, if anything, worse. Something was going on, Vyrnnus could practically smell it, but the softskins weren't telling him a thing. He broke down around lunch time and asked Rai'ne if she knew what was going on. She claimed not to.

Half his afternoon class was spent keeping the twins from killing themselves or others in their distraction, and one student was sent to medbay with a concussion because of a bad throw.

Midweek just got worse, and Vyrnnus' patience was at an all time low. The pyjaks were up to something. *Something*, and all the other teaching staff, the PMC flunkies that Conatix employed as guards, and every pupil subtly questioned claimed to have no clue. The little shits weren't doing anything in his class besides wasting his time, and no one was absent, so it couldn't be anything that was happening during instruction. The mercenary doubted it was happening during the time frame of any classes, for that matter.

Sick of the bullshit, he decided to do a little recon into the times and places where the undisciplined idiots weren't normally watched. It took him a mere hour spent in a quiet lean against a bulkhead near the dorms to hear snippets of clues. Another hour and a half shed enough light on the situation to clarify. The idiotic, stupid, selfish little shitheads were sending unencrypted messages back to Earth, because they missed their mommies and daddies. Any Turian clan Avah would report such a breach of security right back to their offspring's superior, but of course the Human parents hadn't done so.

Vyrnnus couldn't believe the students were participating in underground message sending in the first place, they'd been lectured about the security concerns before coming, and again at orientation. If the Batarians had any clue that most of Humanity's biotic potential could be found in one place, on a tiny station at the edge of their system... the terrorist attacks would be swift, and frequent. Not to mention that no small number of independent agencies would be vying for 'test subjects'. Everyone knew that biotic children sometimes just disappeared, kidnapped off to who knew where. The going rate for a
biotic child was over six hundred thousand credits.

Idiots. Fucking idiots! Vyrnnus knew that a breach of security of this magnitude was the fault of the staff, including himself. They should have been monitoring the off hour activities more closely. It didn't change the fact that the careless younglings needed to learn a lesson, and clearly had far too much free time on their hands.

He sent off a message to the station administrator, and Cced it to the security office. Now, to find the enabler responsible for the messages.

Oroba Vyrnnus may have been old, coming up on the end of his first century, but while his body was wearing out, his mind was sharp and honed from a lifetime of mercenary work. It took him four hours of casual listening in, clue hunting, perusing security feeds, and general detective work to pin down the name of the clever little shit who had apparently sent out a recent batch of messages just last night, and the names of the group leaders who enabled him.

It was a veritable crime ring of rule violations and message passing. He was furious.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Monroe. Follow me.”

“Uhh... Yessir.”

The biotic instructor led them to the classroom silently. Shelby Monroe following uncertainly in his wake. When they arrived, he gestured to the massive pile of insta-crete blocks in the center of the room.

“It has become clear to me that some of the students have far too much time on their hands. You in particular, Mr. Monroe, seem to have an excess of creativity that would best be put to use in some remedial training. You will be spending all of your foreseeable free time with me, in detention.”

“Y-yes, sir.”
“You see the image on the wallscreen? Build it.”

“Yes sir.”

He was glad the troublemaker at least had enough sense in his tiny brain to show some respect, and get to work without complaint. The tech-loving student was so intimidated that it took the boy a few minutes to notice the temperature in the room was abnormally high. Vyrnnus grinned as Monroe began to sweat in the Palaven standard heat. He'd born the Human's love of cool temperatures with dignity, and a good thermal regulator in his suit, but this mild revenge was quite satisfying.

“Can I access the thermostat program for the room? It's really hot in here, sir.”

“I think my free time should be spent in comfort, don’t you? If I also have to spend it coddling you, between the two of us my comfort should be priority. So no, you can simply deal with it.”

“...yes sir.”

Generously, he let it slide when Monroe removed his shirt, soaked with sweat, and got back to work as a reward for not complaining further. Arguing with your superior officer? Ridiculous, yet some still did.

Vyrnnus watched with mild eyes as the rule-breaker worked, for half an hour, then a full hour, then two total. Decent stamina, he would admit, but terrible control left the boy struggling to place the blocks with enough coordination to not knock others askew. He pulled up the novella he'd been reading and spent some time enjoying the plot line of mercenaries stranded on a Rachni occupied world. After some time passed, he looked up again to make sure Monroe was on task.

The lazy fucking Human was using his hands to bring blocks close to his work, before lifting them a short hop with biotics. He was cheating.

“MONROE.” The block in hand at the time tumbled to the floor as the boy froze in place. The Turian biotic stalked up to him and glared.

“Apparently, I can't look away for two seconds or you will just do as you please. You know you are not allowed to use physical contact in class! How many times have I said this? Agh! Fine. Fine.” Vyrnnus stomped out to a nearby maintenance closet, nabbed some spare cabling, returned to the
room, and pointed one gloved talon at a floor to ceiling support beam near the back of the class room. With trepidation, Shelby approached and stood where he was pointed at. His instructor tied him bodily to the post.

“You may take all the time you wish to accomplish the task I’ve set forth. You will not use your hands.”

“S-sir, I'm too tired to keep going.”

“Then take a break, fool.”

“...I'm tied to a pole.”

“So you are.” The mercenary laughed cruelly, and went back to sit at the lecture desk and continue reading.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Shelby struggled to move more of the blocks into place. He was nearly done with the complex geometric structure, and hoped to god their psycho teacher would let him go back to the dorms after this. He was... so... so close...

He passed out from biotic exhaustion at some point, slouched over and still tied to the pole. He slept restlessly, not waking until he was roused by the sounds of his peers filing into the room before the tardy bell went off for morning class. Sounds of confusion and gasps of shock reached his ears, but before any foot steps could get close their instructor shouted out for everyone to take their practice positions.

Shelby raised tired brown eyes to see his friends torn between shuffling into place on demand, and helping him. Vyrnnus beat them to it, coming to untie him and pointing to a line of water glasses along the far wall.

“Go, get a drink, and sit in the corner. We'll have a talk about your blatant disregard for authority and security after class.”
He didn't even have the energy to argue, a biotic metabolism giving him a raging desire to eat and a bone deep lethargy from the lack of fuel. Shelby sat down in a corner, propped up by the walls, and tried to make himself sip at the cool water instead of chugging it down. He knew that might make him puke, and knowing their asshole teacher, he'd just get lectured on improper disposal of bodily waste or some crap.

Time stretched and shrunk in his daze, the wisps of biotics floating around the room making his teeth buzz. Suddenly there was shouting, and it drew him out of the half-doze he'd been in.

When later asked to recount what happened he will admit that the first moment he knew something was wrong his instructor was already flying across the room.

Kaidan didn't know what to do about the situation, but seeing Shelby's slumped form in the corner had his jaw clenched shut. He didn't have to reach very far to guess that the tech kid's jury-rigged com suite had been discovered, considering it was just last night that he'd managed to get out the most recent com packages. The communications blackout that Conatix imposed on them was alright for some of them, but untenable for others. It depended on the individual's circumstances.

With the kids like him, slipping a simple hello message home kept his mother from a freak out. For Rahna she only sent messages to her brother, but not her parents back in Turkey, because they were involved in politics and would rather she not exist. The twins didn't message anyone, their single mother had died in childbirth.

More then the drive to communicate to loved ones, there was also a sense of control from disregarding the rules that some of his peers needed to keep a mental hand hold on their sense of calm.

The Canadian biotic knew that not all of the students were here of their full free will. Some had come willingly, like him, but others had been pressured into it. Some were just plain orphans, because the accidents that exposed their parents to element zero also caused rampant cancer, and generally involved a crashed starship. The ability to ignore the com black out and message whoever they wanted made Jump Zero feel less like a prison, and more like the boarding school it was supposed to be.

So they'd worked out a system, and supported the back door access, and now... Shelby was paying for that choice. If the particularly spiteful look on Vyrnnus' faceplates was anything to go by, they were all going to pay for it to some extent.
The room's temperature was set to stifling when they came in, and a full class of struggling biotics brought it up even more. People began discarding shirts, tying up pant legs, and tossing hair up into buns or tails. Jasper was down to boxers, not caring who saw, and Tristen was in her bra and panties and looked as if she were considering discarding them as well. It was sweltering, hot enough to kill even a teenager's sense of body shyness.

The afternoon wore on, and people began to drop, -literally drop-, from the brutal demands their instructor set. He made them run through all of their forms first, then set to them to building a complex geometric shape mid air in the middle of the room, demanding that no insta-crete touch the floor at any time until he declared the project finished. Of the seventeen classmates, ten of them did nothing except hold the blocks up, with four more rotating in and out of the ten to give people breathers. The last three worked to slowly pull pieces away from the control of others and put them where they needed to go.

It was exhausting, difficult work.

Finally, they finished it, and their task master told them to sit. Rahna was the only one who didn't. Normally the sweet girl was terrified of Vyrnnus, but she was clearly still miffed about the slumped boy in the corner. Instead of sitting, she ignored him and went to grab one of the glasses of water set in a line on a work table, possibly for poor, dazed looking Shelby.

“Did I say you could get water!?” Vyrnnus bellowed, sounding somewhat unhinged to Kaidan's ears. He turned to look at the Turian in time to see him finishing the memetic for a Warp, and his heart stopped beating in his chest. The gravity-shifting pull of biotics acted faster then he could move, his automatic Barrier not coming up in time to prevent Rahna from screaming in pain from a sudden and intense warping right beside her. He heard the crunch of bone, and roared in anger. He turned to their instructor, and sent off a sloppy, rage fueled Throw. The Turian caught it, and pushed the gravitational forces to the side where they hit the reinforced wall harmlessly, spinning back to Kaidan he sent out his own Throw, tossing the Canadian back onto his ass. The crowd of students scattered to the walls, some running out the door entirely, as he scrambled back up to face the mercenary that was supposed to be teaching them. He couldn't stand that spiteful bastard's smug face, couldn't believe he'd Warped Rahna. He pulled his arms in a much less sloppy memetic form, and tossed half the block pile at the Torin.

As the cruel teacher disappeared under the debris he spared a look to make sure the girl he loved was alright, and the blood drained from his face to see her sobbing in pain as Chris tried to put pressure on her broken arm. There was blood, so much blood, and it was everywhere. His inattention cost him.
Vyrnnus was upon him with a knife before he even understood that he'd been biotically charged, and the Turian style Talon blade cut a long shallow gouge in his side. The mercenary spun, kicking him right on top of that slice with a biotically enhanced strike that sent him tumbling back to the ground. He rolled, coming up with an arm over the wound. His instructor was rushing at him again, and he couldn't stop the hate and rage that boiled up from his gut. Rahna's blood and tears had lit the fire, and the expression of contempt and cruelty before him was the fuel for that flame.

He pulled, from every bit of himself that was; down his spine, out his limbs, into his fingers and toes. The energy came and he didn't even shape it with a memetic, he just bore down upon the focus of his ire like a ship board cannon firing. The impact made a terrible crunching noise as suit and plates over Vyrnnus' torso impacted, creating a concave shape before he even hit the wall. The body slid to the ground, the loose viscera inside his suit sagging against the cloth like an over-full grocery bag.

Kaidan stepped back in recoil, belatedly hearing the dying echo of a normally sweet voice crying out a desperate, ringing 'Noooo!' in his ears. He turned to look at Chris and Rahna. Chris was shaking, staring at him with wide eyes. Rahna wasn't looking at him at all.

He shuffled over to them, staring down at the floor in shock. The station's EMS arrived before he got there, whisking her away. The guards arrived shortly there after, and began to organize the chaos. One of them vomited on his boots right after walking in though.

They took him away to a holding cell he didn't even know the station had. He sat there, alone and silent, for a good long while while the security force figured out what to do with him.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Time to go, kid.”

Kaidan looked up from his listless stare at the table top in the holding cell. They'd told him that, technically speaking, they were outside of traditional government jurisdiction, so his fate was up to the Conatix board of directors. Since Jump Zero had been doing so well, they didn't want this mess to ruin it. They were sweeping the whole thing under the rug.

Kaidan Alenko, however, was to be dismissed from the program effective immediately.

“Did she say...?”
“I’m sorry, Mr. Alenko. Your girl refuses to speak to you still, last I heard.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you for... checking.”

“No problem. Ready to leave?”

“... yeah.”

He walked the familiar corridors one last time, everything he owned packed into a duffel. Arriving at the docks, there was a lone figure waiting for him, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight of Rahna waiting by the airlock. She turned when their foot steps approached. Her normally smiling face was flat and contemplative.

“Kai...”

“Rahna, please, I'm so sorry. You know I didn't mean to... I mean, I wanted to stop him but-”

“Listen! Okay... I-i...”, she gulped, shrinking from him in a way that made his heart feel like ice, “I can't. Here, I wrote you- here. B-bye.”

She shoved a datapad in his hands and left, running away as she began to cry. Kaidan stared after her, trying to call out, to ask her to stop and just... just wait. Please...

He didn't have the air in his lungs needed to speak, and then she was gone.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

He didn't manage to read the letter on the ride back to Earth, too afraid of what it would say. He made it home though, to his mom's unconditional love and his taciturn uncles. It was his dad though, that helped him recover from his first kill more than anyone else. The sat together quietly on the patio that overlooked Boundary Bay, drank beer, and listened to the birds.

His dad's only words had been, “Welcome home son. Talk about it when you're ready.”
Two days of just being, and not thinking, were enough to bolster him into sitting down and reading the single text file on the data pad's storage. It was... perfectly Rahna. She apologized to him, saying that she was sorry for how she treated him, and that she knew he wasn't a vicious person. She talked about some of the good times they had, and what his friendship meant to her. She tried to explain in long, winding words that she couldn't look at him anymore without seeing his face right before he'd killed Vyrnnus, and that it gave her nightmares. Rahna had wanted him to know that she would never forget him, but that she didn't want to face him any time soon. Her councilors thought it best to give it plenty of time before she tried to see him again, and she'd gone against their advice to deliver the datapad in person.

She said she loved him. She said goodbye.

He sat and wept, his dad rubbing his back with a gentle, heavy hand as the sunset hit the water and turned the world a different color.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So confession time.

I didn't even know there were romance options until Liara was forward with me after I was curious about her, and spoke to her two or three times. Now, between the options, looking in retrospect after having done all of them, I'd have to go with Ash or Liara. Ash is a bitch, but the girl has substance as a character. Liara makes me want to feed her hot cocoa and snuggle with her... right up until she starts suddenly flaying people with her mind, and then things get interesting. Kaidan? I can't say I was ever even vaguely attracted to him, I was just a sympathetic ear and a kind smile... Until he starts getting up in my business and making demands and being generally creepy. Sooooo, I reloaded from a previous save, and romanced no one that time.

Fast forward a long ways, and you have me reading the Mass Effect Foundations 4 comic about Jump Zero. Can I just say something really mean really quick here? Dear Tony Parker and Michael Atiyeh, artists that drew that comic, and writer Mac Walters... please spend A SHIT TON more time on future works. MEF4 was FUCKING HORRIBLE. All of you, and Dark Horse Comics, should be ashamed of yourselves. I am normally encouraging to any and all artists, writers, etc, because we need it, don't we? Just a little luv fuels a lot of creativity. That said, it was really, really, really, really BAD. I wouldn't have felt like I got a good deal had the damn thing been free. Free might've been less offensive. The art was sloppy, with lazy coloring and lopsided eyes. The backgrounds were plain. The dialogue was choppy and dull. The biotic effects were just dumb looking and not canon accurate. Also, any sufficiently xenophilic fan could tell the artists that Turians don't have front teeth, their sclera are black, and that their feet are flipping different then ours.
The screen-play (so to speak) was confusing and didn't really make much sense. I had to read it, read the wiki about what happened, and go back and reread to figure out what all occurred. Faces often didn't match the words or events happening. Body language was weird, and conflicting. Kaidan didn't look like himself at all, nor act like himself. Canon facts were ignored. It's was terrible, really terrible. Insulting even to a player who never really liked Kaidan to begin with.

So, that all said... this chapter was for you Kaidan Alenko. I'm telling your story as best as I can, combining canon and the comic, and my goal was to give you at least as many words as the Mindior chapter, because Jump Zero circa 2168 was messed up, and also: fuck. that. lazy. ass. comic.

I hope I did some justice today. I don't know Kaidan as well as a imaginary person like I do, say, Garrus. Minor changes to plot include:

The 'half a year' on Jump Zero doesn't made any sense. There is no way the SA left all this biotic and scientific potential just sitting around for so long. Either they had pre-programs, or Jump Zero had been going on for a while. You also can't make a bunch of spastic kids learn their academics and biotics and survive the social aspects of high school era life at the same, and pull off the stuff they were doing in the pictures in only a few months.

Parents would have flipped shit without any communications or visit, at all, for an undetermined amount of time. Not all the kids would have had push-over parents, and they would have flipped shit to have their kid snatched away like that. SO much shit. The media would have eaten it up too.

Another thing, a lot of parents wouldn't accept, no matter the pressure, getting their kids fitted with an amp while pre-adolescent without a good reason. The need for an amp to be put in while they are still young is canon, and that makes sense somewhat in terms of development, so I had to plot-hole-fill there. Not to even mention that no one would be okay with kids being in flat out military training without some cover story to it. Like 'P.E. Class' instead of 'Endurance Training' or 'Battlefield Strategy Simulation'.

I'm not even going to get into the finer points of why Vyrnnus would've been watched carefully until he could be trusted around their sparse few kids with biotic potential. A penchant for physical abuse, and doing things like breaking arms and stripping a kid half-naked and tying them to a pole in a class as a punishment would've been... ummm... not going into it.

You know what else I'm not going into? The comic for Thane. Now that is a prime example of how to make a fangirl *murderous*.

So! As usual, if you see any plot holes or logic loops I've missed, please let me know. <3

Fanfic Recommendation: **Spare Parts** (19757 words) by **MsWikit** (Really good, and very painful to read. Features FemShep clone.)
The child's neck snapped with a soft, crunchy pop. Saren set the boy down with some small reverence, and moved onto the next cell. A pre-adolescent human girl looked up at him as he entered, standing and shambling haltingly forward on massively oversized legs that wept with bleeding and infected sores.

“Plllleasssse. Ppleeease...”

He did not know if the female child was asking for a merciful death or a last minute rescue, but all he had to offer today was the former. She went less quietly then the last test subject, her spine having mutated into a nearly solid block of calcium spurs, but a small burst of biotics to empower the twisting motion and she too died. He moved to the next cell.

The older man lay on the ground in a sprawl, catatonic. Only a mild jerk was needed to halt the barely-there sound of breathing. Saren turned back out into the hallway, looking down the corridor. He had worked through twenty seven holding cells of captive human test subjects, and another several dozen lay before him.

The next room's occupant was already dead, and the following was empty. His good luck ended after that though, the third room had a mostly healthy looking young adult who tried to jump him as soon as he walked in, screaming something about revenge for shooting his father. The Spectre pivoted, and slammed a fist into the youth’s nose at an angle to impact it up into the brain. The nameless man dropped instantly.
A few doors later he had another child to end, a mostly healthy one. The mission briefing had included a 'Blue Skys' order, which was code for 'no survivors'. This particular terrorist organization had used seemingly healthy Humans released into their main population centers as a Trojan horse once before, to devastating effect. The aftermath of that outbreak had resulted in a standard Blue Skys clause for all missions involving their organization.

Saren kept his armor in full hermetic seal, sufficient for survival in vacuum, just in case any of these diseases were cross-species capable. Unlikely, but possible. The next room had a small body, already dead. Another room, and a crazed woman in her second century bounced from wall to wall spasically, burbling angry noises at him. It was bizarre, giving even the normally impassive torin pause. He had to catch her to kill her, and that took a few moments, so rapid was the manner in which she rebounded from the walls.

Thankfully, the succeeding rooms held more normally ill occupants, who accepted their deaths without fuss. Though there were an inordinate number of children in their number. It was, perhaps, why he had taken the job. Blue Skys missions were never popular, but someone had to do them. The Spectre preferred that person to be him, rather than certain green-eyed agents who did not handle euthanasia well, or paedocide specifically. Another mutilated and diseased Human died to a broken neck, and he moved on to the subsequent area, nearly done.

“W-who... are.. you? You... are not... Batarian...” The middle aged woman held light pink, embroidered rags to her chest, the last remains of her clothing.

“No. I am here to terminate this project and all it’s test subjects, under Council authority. Do not resist.”

“Here to... kill us?”

“Yes.”

“... Thank... you.”

“You are welcome.”

Crunch.
The three succeeding cells all had Humans infected with what appeared to be all the same gene-modifying virus. Their skin was a jaundiced yellow, and their eyes looked like a female Turian’s would, with the mild slitting to the pupil. He ignored the unsettling strangeness, and continued forward.

Once all the holding rooms were clear, Saren set his Omni-tool to deep scan the facility. The results took a few moments, but came up clear. There were no life signs remaining, as expected. He’d killed the scientists and security force first.

Saren stepped out of the facility into the afternoon sunlight from the local Blue Sun, brushed-silver armor glowing softly in the haze of light as he called the Daedalus to him, and boarded the ship. He spent a profuse amount of time in the airlock, running the heavy decontamination protocols three times through with his armor on, then once more while disrobed.

Mission complete, he set the Navigation suite for the Citadel, and began filling out a detailed report for the Council.

The tint of ruby red lights from overhead tainted everything in the room, making the Asari on top of Nihlus appear to be a deep purple color. The twin tarin and torin on either side of him were shaded from light green into a murky yellow that contrasted delightfully against his bright crimson plates. He was high as a kite on Muroda-Lithe, a fun little combination of anti-depressant and hallucinogen that was mild enough to be legal, but lasted a long, long time.

They’d been having sex for hours, drunk and tripping under the ruby glow. He’d first taken each of the twins while the other watched from a shuddering daze under the Asari’s mental spell. Then they’d moved on to combinations of threes picking on the fourth, of which he was currently the victim.

The Spectre was, for the first time since he’d left 'Asla’ behind, not desperate to get back to Garrus. The combination of every distracting, mind altering, bliss inducing thing he could come up with had finally gotten the sniper out of his head.

Right now, he wasn't Asla anymore, or Nihlus even. At this exact moment, he was a delirious foam of ocean water and fish and billowing seaweed. Palaven's cursed Spirits of the Deep were curled around him, in him, drawing his stream of consciousness up into the sky. Ocean-Nihlus was a rainstorm building up, inevitable convection in the heat of the moment.
Destined to fall the moment he cooled.

He was very determined not to loose this heat, though he couldn't remember why at the moment. It wasn't important right now. He didn't even try to chase the thought of 'why', instead trilling out cries of pleasure as the Asari sent his nerves rippling. The twins bit him up and down while their grasping hands worked him over. Mind numb, thoughts scattered.

Saren lead his partner around the room with grace, flawlessly performing the Asari style ballroom dance with the *nais* paired to him. At first glance he appeared stately as they moved with the flow of dancers, and was smiling pleasantly. The truth of his manner was entirely hidden, only a carefully built facade to be seen.

No one could tell he was aggravated. The Spectre's contact, his current dancing partner, was not coming through for him as he had expected.

“I am sorry, Saren. Truly. I hope you believe me. I have no desire to repay your gracious gifts with a half-done effort, but in this I have no recourse. I have tried everything I could think of to acquire the key from Shi'leen's vaults, but no matter the bribe or social counter moves, she refuses me.” He continued smiling, somewhat vacantly, rather then letting out the displeased sigh that wanted to escape him.

“I do not blame you Matriarch T'soni. From everything you have said Matron Shi'leen is a canny socialite, and your inability to charm or coerce the key from her is more a fault of her stubborn idiocy then your short coming. Instead of gaining something for they key, I suppose it shall simply disappear from her keeping instead. A shame.”

Benezia laughed richly, her eyes sparkling with shared mischief. “I suppose it will. Perhaps she will receive some small gift after all.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, certainly. Shi'leen will learn that for all her power, she is not invincible. A valuable lesson to learn as one becomes a Matron.”
“You would know better than I.”

“Oh yes! I certainly hope so. Though that does leave me in the fortunate position of still owing you a favor.”

“Fortunate?”

“Of course. You will have to come visit me again to ask for the next one, and you are by far the best dance partner I’ve had in some time.” He huffed, some vague hint of honesty in his largely false smile.

Matriarch T’soni was a charming individual, to be sure, but he did not doubt for a second that she intended to ensure that the eventual repayment of favors was so large as to leave him in a debt instead. She was very clearly cultivating him as an asset, though he found it to be more of a compliment then anything, regardless of the setback. The nais was seven hundred and thirteen years old, and thought he was a valuable connection?

Well... she was not wrong.

OooooooooooooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Garrus was mid leap over a waist high walking path barrier when the vid call request came, so at first he didn't notice the message at all. Through some bushes, and over a topiary; down a walking trail, and under a bridge. He was catching up on the thief when the reminder ping went off. A quick glance told him who it was from.

Nihlus.

He almost fell over the next waist high divider instead of jumping it. The Quarian was running for all she was worth, and her kind could run fast, but even his stumble didn't put him much farther behind her. Their leg structure might be built for running, but Garrus was a Turian, and his species practically redefined the words 'short distance sprint'.

“Really, you call now? Really?!” He cursed at his Omni-tool in subvocals, or more accurately, at the
He'd been worried, and unwilling to admit to it. The temptation to call the carmine plated Spectre had begun about three hours after they'd parted. That last moment before he had left of being crushed to the wall, fringes pressed together... Nihlus had held onto him like...

The C-Sec Officer actually did stumble around the next turn, loosing a few paces on the purse-snatcher. Growling, he jammed the button to open a call, and pushed to catch up with the troublemaker before she hit the market place.

“Blue! Awww, why am I on voice only?”

“That would... be because I am... currently at work.” Garrus huffed out between pounding breaths as he dodged the shoppers milling about. He was too late to stop the woman from entering the market, but if she thought that would save her, then the blue suited female was about to learn how wrong she was. The mountain of determined *torin* took a leap clear over a gap in the walk way, by-passing the next bridge entirely, and gaining him three meters on her.

“Ummm. Is everything okay?”

“Oh yeah... fine... just have a criminal... to catch. Almost done...”

“Wait, as in right now? You're chasing down a perp right this second?”

“Yeeeeah.”

“Then why did you answer!”

“I would... think that... was obvious.” The Quarian got a few meters ahead by shoving through people, but Garrus used her emptied wake to slip through and took the next corner at a tumble that got him another meter closer. She glanced back at him, glowing eyes widening visibly behind her faceplate in fear.

“Not really, you could have just, I dunno, answered later maybe?”
“I really... didn't want to... miss... your call.”

“A..haha...”

“Hadn’t... heard from you... didn’t want to... miss window of oppur... tunity... Just in case.” Garrus got a lucky break then, the thief tripping on an unexpected mech carrying a crate of wares out of a storage room. He had her pinned, cuffed, and was reading her the standard arrest rights within ten seconds.

The distracted Officer momentarily forgot he had the Spectre on the line, dragging the woman toward the nearest C-Sec post. There happened to be one not too far away, between the market place and it’s nearest cargo docks. When he looked back at his ’tool ten minutes later, the call had been closed, but a message awaited him.

FROM:1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy

TO: 7946130//LOCAL

sorry I didnt call, been sorta busy. call me when you get off? unless I get attacked by pirates or something ill be waitin.

END MSSG

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Summary

Everyone spends a lot of time sorting out their problems.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Cariose - A lawless world of towering Prothean ruins overpopulated by the worst the galaxy has to offer. Omega on land.
Cubitura - Turian-style couch, oversized shape that is very deep and wide, cushioned to accommodate crest and spurs.
Info-net – The galactic equivalent to Google.

Chapter Soundtrack: Afrojack Ft. Eva Simons - Take Over Control (Adam F Remix)

Let us play with fire tonight...
Well, you are the one that I like...
I want you to take over control.
Take over control of me.
Plug it in and turn me on.
We always will be...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren leaned back in his CIC chair, elbows propped on the arm rests and fingers steepled together. He was trying to figure out how best to handle his current mission.

The problem was thus: the council wanted access to the contents of a Prothean vault on Cariose. Both the cache's location and the key to it were well known in intelligence circles. The vault itself was in the southern quarter of what passed for a capitol city on the lawless world. 'Ownership' of different sections was dictated by whosoever had control of each quarter's defense grid. Generally speaking it was a mercenary company, such as Eclipse, as they liked to use the constant battles for supremacy as a 'sink or swim' test for their ranks. As luck would have it, a smaller mercenary group known as the 'Stone Corps' had control of the south, -for the moment-, and their leader had agreed to trade access to the as-yet unopened vault in exchange for a risky favor involving a rival group.

Now he simply needed the key. Which was inside another vault, the private archives of Matron Shi’leen of the Omoi family dynasty.
He'd gotten the schematics for the vault from an information broker, and had run the designs past a contact of his that specialized in artifact retrieval from just such places. Sometimes an owner refused to turn over or admit to having a Prothean relic that should rightly have been in the hands of the Council's carefully trained and put together team of archivists and Prothean experts. In such cases the items were forcibly removed from the care of the selfish individuals.

At least the Council sponsored team operated openly and released their findings for all species to benefit from. Mostly. Saren had seen the closed files that weren't shared with anyone, and he couldn't fault the data kept secret. It was largely bio-weapons such as omni-species adaptive viral strains, or AI research.

His specialist had... whistled at seeing the design. Apparently it was a copy of particularly impossible set up, of which he had three others of the exact same layout that had pending requests for him to find a way into. He had yet to crack it, nor had anyone else he knew.

Unfortunate.

The window of opportunity to get to the vault was limited, only existing so long as that quarter was held by the slightly desperate small time group that needed aid to remain in power. The Spectre needed that key sooner, rather then later.

He reviewed the design, making a list of what he could and couldn't manage to thwart in the vault's security.

A retinal scanner, easily: his optical implants could take the image layout of any eye and project a holo-image over itself to match.

Standard DNA scanner, already taken care of. He had a tissue sample in stasis.

An electrocardiographic sensitive laser suite that lasted the length of an entire hallway. Tricky, to be sure. Any heart that didn't beat in a perfect ECG rhythm to an accepted signature would cause a system lock out for 3 hours. That was the first issue he had no solution for.

Inside the vault, a tiny army of drones patrolled with a VI programmed to watch not for biometrics, but suspicious behavior. They were networked only to each other. Mildly difficult, but he had written three different hacking programs based on the latest in behavioral assessment software to counter them. However, there was no way to know if one of the three would work until it was attempted.
live. At the very least, they were written to fail quietly, and Saren presumed he could modify them on the fly to try and get a foot hold into the VI network to disable them if they weren't sufficient as is.

Next, each item in the vaults was sealed inside a stasis field to prevent wear and tear. The fields were hardwired into a private power grid, and not designed to be turned off easily, if ever. All of the options for taking out power directly involved getting into the floor of the vault. Difficult, as the vault's lining was made of meter thick titanium. He would need to cut the power at the base of the stasis unit instead, but they were each protected from tampering by a biotic field generated by eezo drives inside the mechanism, and the access panel would need to be hacked while the barrier was down to get into the wiring.

While he could suppress the field with his own biotics, he could not manage that and getting into the components simultaneously. Diminishing a repulsive gravitational field of that complexity required his full concentration, and was only possible because of his exceptional skill at the more delicate aspects of the biotic arts. A partner would be needed, or alternatively a device that could repress the field for him, but those were bulky things, not easily carried.

Finally, the room was 'mass locked', anyone who manged to subvert the rest of the security could enter, but their perceived mass was added to the expected total of the room. Attempting to leave the room with more mass then you entered with would result in a lock down as well. This one was laughably easy, and Saren wondered why it had been added as a feature at all. He would take several packages of omni-gel and scan the key once in hand, using his Omni-tool to create a mass-equivalent false key, perhaps even one that resembled the original, to leave behind.

If done properly, the stubborn Matron may never even realize the loss.

The silver-grey Specter needed a partner of sufficient skill with electrical wiring and hacking, and also a way to deal with the laser suite. The rest he could handle alone.

He considered the first matter. Nihlus might do, he was a decent engineer... though speed hacking was not precisely his protégé's forte, much to his own chagrin. He had tried to improve his former student's skill in that arena, and still did work with him on the matter occasionally, but some minds were better at certain things than others. Saren hated to admit to it, it felt like a failing on his part, but it was true. So, other options for an engineer should be run through, but he would take Nihlus if no other options proved acceptable.

There was also a need to find another source to consult with for outmaneuvering the ECG biometrics. A doctor perhaps? Speaking to a security specialist had not illuminated a solution, so perhaps coming at the issue from another angle would be beneficial.
His next steps were then: Alternative engineers, and a cardiac specialist.

Saren didn't know any medics that worked with hearts or biometric data personally, so he would need to consult with the Spectre Offices for a reference. As for engineers... it suddenly occurred to him that he knew someone well suited to the task. Well then.

A third tiny figurine was lined up with it's peers in a row on the edge of the Widmanstat's sunken command seat. Long legs kicked up onto the deck, Nihlus was sprawled in a casual lounge as he folded tiny paper animals. Well, to be fair, the sheets of randomly patterned material he was using to make them was just a paper-like weave of soft metal alloys. It felt a lot like particularly sturdy tin foil, but it was the closest to paper he could get the smallish onboard mass-fabricator to make with the base materials on hand.

So, tiny metal animals.

He pinned the next sheet between graceful fingers, and folded in in half. Using his keel and the back of a talon he smoothed over the crease to make the line crisp and flat.

It was delicate and complex work for a six fingered person to do, but it was exactly what the green eyed Spectre needed right now. Something to keep his hands busy so his mind could slow down and think.

The metal-paper was unfolded, and a new crease was made going perpendicular to the first. Nihlus clicked his tongue at a minutely bad angle, and pulled the misalignment into a straighter fit before smoothing it.

He glanced at his Omni-tool, -no new messages-, and returned his focus to the pale green pattern of waves embossed into the brushed metal 'paper'. He sighed, and stared at it for a moment while he worked on organizing his thoughts and gathering the will to face himself in a mental mirror.

The carmine plated torin had been trying to protect Garrus by running away, but he hadn't thought that the running would do damage too. It hadn't occurred to him until the hurt and angry subvocals bled through the sniper's tone in a barely-there waver when he was too busy focused on whatever asshole he'd been chasing to watch his words, so to speak.
One hand came up to scrub over faceplates in exasperation with his own misdirection. At first, he'd been so sure that Blue would never in a million years be interested in him, it didn't make any sense that a low tier colony kid would catch the eye of a home worlder. Then he'd, -and this was not one of his prouder moments-, basically begged for it, and oh, fuck... Blue had delivered.

Nihlus felt his plates loosen at the memory of it; that first plunge into Reverie with him, the slick heat of the sniper's sheath as he pressed himself into the trench of splayed plates right along side Garrus' length.

He grit his teeth, and flipped a corner of the metal-paper over to touch another edge, and concentrated on lining up the corners just right. Determined to focus on his own complications and not just give in to the resurgent desire to suddenly show up at an apartment door with a case of beer and take out food they'd probably have to reheat later, because it would be cold by the time he'd finished saying 'hello'.

Or just masturbate, that sounded good too. Screwing those twins had brought back old fantasies from last year involving Saren and Garrus at the same time. They weren't even vaguely related looking, but both had that pale stone color to their plates that shone silver in the right lighting, and having them at the same time would...

The green eyed Spectre made three more careful folds before he managed to get his hind-brain under control. His fourth little figure was beginning to resemble more of an animal, and less of an oddly folded metal sheet.

So.

He had been wrong, entirely. The scion of Clan Vakarian had been willing to touch him when he needed it, and had been more then happy to carry on while Nihlus was there.

Was it just the cover?

Or convenience?

He was female looking at the time as well...

Maybe he was just... an easy mark...
The Spectre shook his head angrily at himself. Yes, *obviously* it was part of the cover, but Blue's subvocals had been clear about enjoying it, and wanting it. Convenient? Who was he kidding? That *torin* could walk into a bar, spin his finger in the air, and half the room would follow him home. Any gender or species. No, Blue had instead spent time each day paying attention to him, anything he asked for, and even when he didn't, the sniper would draw up behind him and *nuzzle* into the back of his neck so sweetly...

Figurine number four was finished before he managed to get back on track. He set it up on the ledge with the others, and checked his 'tool again before starting in on five.

He needed to not be such a sucker for attention, he really did. It was part of why he and Saren got along so well, his former mentor would give him plenty of attention if he asked for it in a constructive way like programming lessons, but would only occasionally entertain selfish or hedonistic pursuits. It kept Nihlus in a better balance of work and play then he could manage himself.

Garrus... did not. Garrus just spoiled him, lavished him with attention both sexual and otherwise. So long as the icy eyed Officer wasn't at work, or in the middle of a tech project, he had spent all his free time doing whatever made his 'girlfriend' happy.

Fuck, that *torin* would make some Palaven-born bitch a perfect bondmate someday. He would have to play nice with her too, not kill the twat on sight...

Nihlus turned the current sheet of light orange metal over, folding it back in on itself in a clever way that would make a central horn to a beast that had a triple pointed crown of them in real life.

So now it was clear that while Blue enjoyed being around him, *-who fucking knows why-* the sniper... wasn't good for him. He was *amazing*, in a bad way. On the other end of the equation, the green eyed Spectre thought he was also pretty bad for Blue. The tech junkie had a generous nature and a tendency to throw himself wholly into whatever he was doing. To a normal person that kind of devotion and selflessness would be a gift. To Nihlus, it was an exploitable situation that he couldn't help but to take advantage of.

He couldn't lie to himself and say he hadn't seen the tired droop of mandibles or hazy unfocused look that Garrus had borne after a few days of having him there as a guest to cater to.

That was... probably why he kept feeling like a leech off and on while he had been undercover. When Nihlus was 'Asla', he was an entitled soldier girlfriend enjoying every second of a limited
shore leave. When the quiet hours came, and Nihlus was almost himself toward the back of his mind, he was more aware of what was really happening. That damn seductive cover, how easily it settled on him... the Spectre promised himself he'd never actually go back to it again. Handy pre-made disguise, ready and waiting for him or no. Not unless the situation was really dire.

He checked his Omni-tool again, still no message, though it was still early enough in the day that the C-Sec Officer wouldn't be off for several more hours if he worked the maximum thirteen hour shift that he preferred to. Four hours to go then, so he started on another figurine, determined to actually be waiting for the call like he'd promised.

The next sheet of metal-paper was a vivid purple with a bunch of tiny triangles embossed into it. He began folding it into the base for a bird like shape, and considered further what to do about the situation. Blue obviously was hurt that he'd dropped off the grid without warning him, and he felt sort of bad about insinuating that he'd been busy with Spectre stuff the entire time. He'd really only done two short missions, stopped by Azure for some fun, and ambled around on his ship during the travel time. He could have texted or called... but every time he'd gone to do so, he felt 'Asla' creeping back into him, and his knee jerk reaction had been to run fast and far away from that.

It didn't help that he missed Blue's stupid apartment. The place wasn't even nicely decorated, or well equipped, nevermind spacious. It was small and plain and should have been boring. It had been sort of dull during the day when no one was there. He shouldn't want to go back so much, damnit. But he missed the cubitura, the terribly punny mugs, and the gorgeous sniper with a clothing closet full of gun parts and linen shelves stacked with circuit boards instead of towels.

Spirits damnit! Why was the torin so fucking adorable? He needed to knock that shit off, for both their sakes.

Nihlus made himself breathe calmly, letting the frustration and anxiety wash over him and away as he set the latest itsy bitsy metal-animal on the deck and went for another sheet of material. He had a small horde of wild life, and who knows what he would do with the finished assembly. Probably recycle the lot of them. It wasn't the product that was important, it was the diversion making it provided. Sorting his thoughts had never been a strong point, self reflection didn't suit him, but he needed it right now. Needed to get his head on straight.

So, he'd hurt Garrus with his back and forth, and that hadn't been what he'd intended. What he needed to do was make up for it, and then take a nice long solo mission where he'd be out of communication. That way, he wouldn't have to lie to Blue about why he wasn't going to be able to talk for a while. The carmine plated Spectre preferred not to lie to friends if he didn't have to, and it wasn't really much of a stretch to take on a mission that suited the circumstances.

His Omni-tool pinged and he tossed the half-done creature aside to answer it.
The sniper get off on time that day, clocking out and heading home at a reasonable hour. The front desk staff might have looked at him strangely, but he ignored them and hurried home. As soon as he arrived his armor was shucked off into a pile, and he put himself through a fast shower before flopping onto the cubitura with a beer. Garrus breathed in air, held it for a moment, and exhaled as much of his stress and negativity as he could.

Then he dialed up the absent Spectre and waited for it to connect. As promised, it clicked over almost immediately to show cheerful green eyes and sheepishly grinning mandibles.

“Hey Blue. All done for today?”

“I am, how about you?”

“Yup, just on my way back to Citadel Space. Mission complete.”

“Oh yeah, how did it go?” Garrus felt the bulk of his ire fade away. It was stupid, but... just this little stuff was what he had wanted, what he had missed the most about having... a roommate.

“Pretty damn good! I stole the idiot's data right from his Omni-tool, banged his daughter, and left him a massive bar tab.”

The sniper burst into laughter at the classically Nihlus shenanigans. “The bar tab really was the finishing touch, wasn't it?”

“Yep! It wasn't a small one either. Something like four hundred creds.”

“You drank that much at once?”

“Hell yeah I did.”
“I don't believe it, you're too thin to hold that much liquor and still manage to escape a tab. Or walk for that matter.”

“You severely underestimate my sneakiness, Blue.”

“Ha! Put your money where your mouth is, Hurricane. I wouldn't bet on you out-drinking a Volus”

“Oh it is on. Next time we go out I'm going to drink you under the table, ya mollycoddled home worlder!”

“Or more likely, I'll show you how it's done, parvenu colony kid.”

“Pffft! I can't wait to shoot you down, eventually.”

“Eventually? Not going to have time when you get back?”

“Not, ahh... not this trip, no. Have to get some work done before I can slack off. Tevos would let me get away with murder, but Sparatus gets snippy if I'm lazy.”

“Haha! Fair enough. Hmm.. Thanks for calling by the way. It's nice to hear from you. Normally the only calls I get-”

“Are from your mother!”

The sniper groaned at the come back. “Family in general, thank you! Cute tarin sometimes too, depends on the day.”

“Sounds like someone is stretching the truuuth~~~.”

“Considering you think you're going to drink me under the table? I think we know whose stretching the limits of rationality here.”
The Spectre leaned back in the command booth with a smirk, opposite arm stretched out over the back. “I am going to make you eat your words, Blue.”

Garrus grinned right back, subvocals dropping low with cocky challenge. “When you fail, you'll have to offer me something else to eat.” The emphasizing subvocals on 'eat' practically dripped with sexual innuendo. Nihlus felt his plates slip right the fuck open, imagining that silver crest between his legs as he was held partially closed and eaten out. He worked to keep his reaction cool and sly, instead chuckling with pleased amusement, then redirecting the conversation.

“Pffft. We'll see. So what the hell does parvenu mean?”

“Info-net it, slacker.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Oh well then, here, let me help...”

The central screen array on the Widmanstat popped up with an incoming email message. The main text body read: '[Link: exnet.info-net/let_me_info-net_that_for_you ‘parvenu’].


“I know, right?”

“Arrrrrrg, no.”

“Hahaha! Alright, alright. It means something like 'upstart', and I was just teasing... but ah, I suppose I'll let you go. You probably have a report to write?”

He did actually, and that was as good an excuse as any to wind this up. “I do, yeah. I should get to it, but ah... I'll send you a live chat later?”

“That would be great-, oh the doorbell just rang.”
“I'll let you get that then, talk at 'cha later.”

Garrus nodded goodbye and closed the call.

Nihlus felt... a lot better. They were okay. He could talk to the sniper for a few days over chat, and then disappear off the face of the galaxy for a month or two. Perfect.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The line "That torin could walk into a bar, spin his finger in the air, and half the room would follow him home." is a reference to my favorite OC of all time, Spectre Russ Orbestan from Recidiva's 'Of Kittens and Broken Things'. He... really does that, and it's believable too. It's fucking amazing.

Fanfic Recommendation: Argument (2107 words) by thievinghippo (Not entirely pleasing to read, but so real and interesting I have to share. Garrus/FemShep)
The fastest way to a certain Spectre's heart

Chapter Summary

Saren has problems, he tries solving them, fails, and turns to cooking instead. Thankfully, he's not alone.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: Stephen - Crossfire

(None of our dear carmine plated boy in this chapter, so a little bit of Nihlus-y feels for a soundtrack.)

He'd trade his guns for love,
but he's caught in the cross fire.
And he keeps waking up,
but it's not to the sound of birds.
The tyranny, the violent streets,
deprived of all that we're blessed with.
And we can't get enough, no...
Heaven if you sent us down,
so we could build a playground.
For the sinners who play as saints,
you'd be so proud of what we made.

The doorfwished aside and Saren nodded politely to Vakarian, who looked somewhat startled to see him. Hopefully, he had not come at a bad time.

“Vakarian, I find myself in need of your skill set again. May I come in?”

The tall sniper stepped to the side and waved him in. “Of course. What, ah, what can I do for you?”

The silver-grey Spectre moved inside and allowed the door to close before running a habitual scan for listening devices. Finding none, he continued. “I have located the key to an unopened Prothean vault. Unfortunately the owner refuses to relinquish it. Instead, I will be taking it by force. Preferably with stealth, but regardless, it will be acquired. The plan I have devised requires someone to hack an access panel and disable the internal power supply of a stasis field generator while I suppress an internally generated barrier over top of the panel.”
He trailed off, walking to the cubitura to sit, one leg crossing over the other. “There are several other security matters in place, but I have a solution to all but this issue, and one other. Are you available to assist?”

The sniper took a lean against his breakfast bar, nodding. “You bet, I'm here if you need me. What's the other problem?”

“A hallway of lasers which read Electrocardiograph signatures, and compare to profiles that are allowed access to the private archives the key is within. You are aware that each individual's ECG signature is unique?”

“I wasn't, actually. Anatomy isn't a field of expertise for me, beyond the basic battlefield medical courses everyone has to take in basic training.”

“Those are... largely useless. I advise taking an e-course on trauma surgery. You will gain much more out of it then the layman's tactics for first aid the Hierarchy teaches.”

“I'll... keep that in mind. So how does this type of security work exactly?”

“ECGs signatures are much like a fingerprint, the events in life alter the state of an individual's heart and biorhythms. The system uses lasers to read anyone within range with a great deal of accuracy, and is not on any network, making external hacking is problematic. It is set to observe constantly, and to send out a one-way lock down signal in the event that entry is attempted by any group that lacks an individual in their number that has a registered profile. Since it cannot be easily hacked, it but must be spoofed instead.”

“I can see why that would be a problem. Spoofing a biometric system that involved sounds tricky.”

“It has proven to be so, yes. The security specialists I have spoken with on the matter have no answer to it. Instead, I have an appointment with a cardiologist tomorrow morning to see if they might have any light to shed on the finer points of ECG measurement and variance. I am hoping that further understanding will lead to inspiration on a work around. You may wish to attend with me, even if it is not your realm of experience. I would assume you know enough of the heart to take away an improved understanding regardless. A beginning to further medical studies. If you wish to, that is.”

“Sure. I won't turn down an opportunity to learn more. Can never really know too much, can you?”
Saren could not help the approving smile that tugged at his mandibles. Vakarian was perhaps the least useless resource he had ever acquired, save for Nihlus. Versatile both in and out of combat, and evidently not self absorbed or incurious enough to reject further study in obscure fields. Uncommon traits to find, especially in combination.

The Spectre wondered briefly, not for the first time, why any of his colleagues bothered to maintain a ground team. Sufficiently competent help was nearly impossible to find, and generally speaking an agent of the council rarely stumbled on a resource like Vakarian by accident.

“No, you indeed cannot.” He stood and faced the sniper, favoring him with an assenting nod. “I will be here to pick you up tomorrow at 0825 hours, be ready to depart before then. We will take your things to my ship, and head straight to the appointment.”

“Should I call into work?”

“No. Since you have proven your usefulness repeatedly, I assume the trend will continue. This time I will file the paperwork for permanent Spectre Asset status. In the future, any ST&R agent that requests your aid will merely need to call in a verbal notification instead of repeatedly needing to file the personnel commandeering forms.”

“... Handy. I'm glad I've proven helpful. I'll try and continue to be so.”

“Good. Tomorrow then, Vakarian.”

The mountainous sniper grinned at him then. “It's still just Garrus.”

He chuffed in amusement and walked out.
“No, that wouldn't work either I'm afraid. Spectre Arterius, the signature wouldn't match with sufficient accuracy, and may very well leave you incapacitated. Your own heart simply does not operate in a manner similar enough to an Asari heart to match the... person in question.”

Garrus heard Saren let out the smallest of aggravated sighs, barely audible.

“Incапacitated for how long?”

“Hours, perhaps, and it could cause significant systemic damage that you would need repaired afterward. Even then, if we somehow managed to make your heart match it with sufficient accuracy, the way your very epidermis is made, the signal wouldn't come through the same as it would for a different species. The rate of error and likelihood of tripping the system would be high.”

“I see. Then this angle will not work. What else might?”

The Spectre and the cardiac specialist were going back and forth, and had been for the past hour. They'd been here for nearly three times that, just going over the 'basics' of the cardiovascular system. He was feeling somewhat brain-dead from the information overload, but the newly minted Spectre Asset had given the extremely technical explanation his undivided attention. For a Police Officer, he now knew an inordinate amount about the heart, brain, skin, blood vessels, and bioelectrics of Asari. A fair bit more about how that compared to a Turian.

“I hate to even suggest this, considering my oaths, but have you considered kidnapping the nais in question and either ahhh... forcing them to open the vault, or simply moving the unconscious form through the hall?”

“The device is sensitive enough that I suspect an unconscious person would set off the lock down, and I am attempting to ensure the Matron never knows the switch was made. Considering I did recently try to acquire it fairly, even if I went in disguise the loss would lead too clearly back to me. If it comes down to it, I will do so, but if it can be avoided I would prefer not to have made an enemy.”

“Understandable, and likely a better path to follow. I have no idea how else to fool this system you've described though, and I am the most technically inclined of my peers that I know. You might try speaking with an Asari cardiologist, but...”

“The likelihood of being sold out increases exponentially when involving someone who has
something to gain within the Republic.”

“Precisely.”

Garrus refrained from rolling his eyes. It was a valid point, but the exclusionary words from the pair were straight out of the speciesist back room politics talked about in the board rooms and senate buildings of Palaven. He’d seen enough of it to know how rampant the disregard for Asari was, even though publicly the Hierarchy played a polite and cooperative face. Truthfully, they had more respect for the weak-bodied Volus who were at least industrious and clever. He would admit to a little of it himself, considering that a majority of young nais spent several of his lifetimes partying their lives away and he’d had to deal with the fallout situations that resulted many, many times. The sniper thought he was a fair bit more objective about it though, especially after having worked directly with Asari in C-Sec. He’d gotten some insider perspective on the matter, insight into the psychology behind it. Though he’d learned the hard way not to try and explain to other Turians.

“Very well. If you come up with anything further, send me a message about something inane, and I will come visit again in person to discuss details. Thank you for your time, Dr. Ofuterian.”

“You’re most welcome Spectre, I’m honored that you thought to ask me. I will inquire around discreetly about ECG mimicry and see if any of my colleagues have input.”

“Take care with your words if you do so. A trail leading to me through you will still lead to you, and your life could be in danger if it were discovered.”

“Ah. Is... that why the appointment was booked under a 'Elucidae Stroraes'?"

“Indeed.”

“I will take great care then. I’m sure I can find other reasons for bringing it into conversation. Innocuous reasons.”

“Very well. Good day Doctor.”

“Good luck, Spectres.”
Garrus felt the need to correct the assumption that he was more then just a side dish, but Saren quit the room in a rapid and aggravated stalk. He thought it best to stay quiet on the matter with the door now open into the public hallway. The silver-grey agent led them back to the Daedalus at a fast clip, and he had to work to stay a step ahead. Walking a few paces behind like he was the superior officer would have been awkward. Not that it looked like the Spectre in question would have noticed or cared.

They entered the through the airlock, and the agitated torin made straight for the kitchen. He had to keep an amused hum from escaping as he followed along, taking a seat on the main table's bench.

Icy blue eyes watched the proceedings patiently, and it occurred to him that this was Saren's version of stress relief. Or possibly something like his own 'tossing a stress ball at the ceiling repeatedly, and catching it'. A sort of thinking mode for problem solving.

The Officer supposed that he could be more useful then just watching. He leaned back and pulled out a thermal clip for lack of a ball; flipping it into the air, catching it when it fell back down. The well equipped kitchen was filled with the clangs and chops of food preparation, and a repeating near-silent swish of a spinning clip followed by a light smack as it was caught in a palm.

Garrus' hand eventually got the tossing motion memorized, and he stared at the ceiling for a while. That got dull, and the sniper tilted his gaze to watch the edible proceedings instead. Saren was rolling long, thick slices of poultry in an egg batter, and then breadcrumbs. They were going into a pan to fry, and the first one dropped in with a sizzle.

A thought tickled his mind, unformed.

The slices went into the pan one by one, and though the Spectre turned chef moved on to some sort of citrusy sauce, sharp eyes stayed glued on the pan. Something... about... coating. Covering.

Not quite there, but close, he stopped flipping the thermal clip and stood to move closer. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Saren look up from what he was doing, bemused as the tall torin stepped up to the frying pan and stared at it with an avian tilt to his head.

“Hey... Saren.”

“Yes?”
“The... hmmm... the ECG signature of the Asari matron...”

“What about it?”

“Could it be replicated by an artificial heart?”

“It could, yes... but without a body to invite the sensors to observe it that would do no good.” Saren paused in stirring the sauce, setting it off the heat and turning to face him.

“Yeah, so we need a form. Something... Asari shaped. Like a mech? We'd have to make it seem like a person though. The right shape, heat signature, that sort of thing. The lasers pick up the ECG via the skin right? What about fake skin?”

“Fake... as in 'cloned'? Without a proper circulatory system an entire body's worth of skin would not... Ah! But we only need the bare minimum of exposed tissue. Just a head would do. On a mech? Yes... a loki's optics could be moved, armor applied to produce the correct shape.”

“We could rig up cloned skin to artificial blood vessels and a cybernetic heart, just enough to cover an Asari shaped head piece. Lokis fold down pretty well for transport too.”

“This... is a possibility.”

Garrus smiled widely. “Got the idea from the breading you were doing.”

Saren let out a quiet snort of almost laughter, his mandibles spinning in amusement despite his normal reservation. It was a pretty ridiculous idea... but it might just work.

At the very least, they had a delicious home-cooked meal to eat before they got to work.
A/N: Yes, yes I did manage to have Garrus quote himself from the game. Did you spot it? He's here if you need him. :3

Also, I think I get negative kudos for using the anagram 'Elucidae Strosrae' for Saren's cover name for the appointment. Haha...ha... it's kinda sad.... T_T

Hilarious quote by Theherocomplex on tumblr:

Sometimes I think about how turians are the hall monitors of the galaxy and just...love them so much?
When turians dress up for Halloween, they all come as Aquaman because “that is a useful skill that also fosters understanding and unity”.
When turians have potluck dinners, they all bring entrees and extra silverware. None of them bring desserts.
When the turian councilor gets mad at the human councilor, he breaks out the “I’m not angry, I’m just disappointed” speech.
Like, Garrus Vakarian is one of their greatest rebels and that is saying something.
I love those big spiky dedicated brave war nerds.

---

Pffftft! I love the one about Aquaman. That does sound SO Turian.

Fanfic Recommendation: An Evening Out (4104 words) by thievinghippo
(FemShep/Garrus, Post-war)
Saren circled around the finished product. The appearance of the modified loki mech was rather disturbing, but theoretically it would do the job.

The base was a mech that he had pulled from a box of four kept in a storage section of the Daedalus. Surrounding it was a two centimeter thick covering of memory cloth that Vakarian had painstakingly cured into an Asari shape. The sniper had cleverly coated the inward facing side with a thermal paste run through with a delicate grid of low-current wires. The fabric would fold down with the mech, and pop back out into a person shape when given room to, reproducing the heat signature of a living being when a mild current was run through the wiring.

While his partner had worked on that, the electric eyed Spectre had built an artificial heart as close to the specifications of an Asari as possible, using Spectre access to steal a medical scan of Shi'leen’s original from a fairly recent health check up. While normally he maintained his own cybernetics for peak efficiency, this time he worked for accuracy to the original, flaws included. It took most of the day, constant running of the micro/mass-fabricators, and no small amount of learning on the fly. The cybernetic cardiac replacement was set into a panel on it's back, so as to not be crushed when the robot curled in on itself while in it's hunched over, pre-deployment form.

Next Saren had taken care of the head, which was molded plastic covered with a layer of cloned skin. The rapidly grown tissue produced by his medical suite would only live a short time, perhaps a two to three weeks, before disintegrating. It was a pale blue, dead looking color, but he had made it
with cells off the DNA sample of the Matron from stasis, so that the flash cloned tissue would be a genetic match as well.

Whether it would make a difference or not in reproducing the ECG, they had yet to test.

Vakarian was still rigging up a poor-man's biometric laser-based scanner out of parts on hand, and was not finished yet. The Spectre observed him for a few moments, but the powerfully built sniper appeared to be no slouch at this engineering task either. He left the torin to it, and took a medical scanner to the false Asari head, checking it for arterial and venous integrity. He had overwritten some of the medical suite's protocols to have it automatically fabricate the flesh mask and apply it, but connecting it to the artificial blood pathways had been done with assistance. They did not exactly run from where a heart was supposed to be.

The integrity scan came back all positive; appropriate blood pressure, none of the countless tiny blood vessels were misaligned or broken. Finished, he went to brew some kava in the kitchen. It finished, and he sipped at it and took a breather. A series of cheerful activation alerts suddenly going off in the other room tipped him off to the sniper's progress. The jury-rigged scanner was likely operational. He exited the small mess hall, a second cup in hand, and came up beside his cohort in the brute force mangling of science. He offered the other kava to the weary looking Officer, who took it gratefully, immediately taking a drink and humming appreciatively.

“Is it functional?”

“I think so. Do you happen to know your own ECG so we can test it?”

“I do not.”

“Neither do I. Well then... here goes.”

Vakarian turned the focus laser from a large jumble of cables and circuit boards to point at the mech's head. A data pad's half mangled case was open and connected to the other side. It made several noises, ran for a few minutes, and finished in a comically disapprovingly buzz. The Detective shook his head negatively.

“I calibrated it to give as complex a read out as possible, rather then a binary yes or no. It's producing a 36% failure rate. It might just be my device though, I can't say I've ever tried making a scanner of this kind before.”
He hummed a mild subvocal of neutral curiosity. “What details does it offer on the error?”

“Here, take a look?”

They spent the next several hours messing with it, tweaking minor things to improve the faux Matron's ECG signature. The rating dropped to 34%, then 26%, before jumping back up to 29% when they made a mistake.

“Arg. Okay, I think we've got it back to where it was for the 26% scan. It's half way into the night cycle though, we'd be better off continuing tomorrow.”

Saren nodded absently, considering whether further adjustments to the vascular system would see any improvement, or if a more involved mimicry of the organic form would give them better results.

“You may set up your cot where it was previously, or take the settee.”

“I'll just take the couch, less work.”

He waved a hand permissively in the sniper's direction, and went back to focusing on possible alternatives to the set up. The theory crafting and testing was enjoyable, all things considered.

“Saren?”

“Hmm?”

“Are... you going to sleep?”

“Not now.”

“... You should.”
“Perhaps later.”

Vakarian let out a sigh and wandered off, presumably to sleep. The Spectre worked at the disturbing yet appreciably ingenuitive project continuously, lowering the failure mark down to 17%. He finally went to bed at an hour till dawn, and rose again not two hours later to return to it.

“Well Dr. Ofuterian, here is the prototype. Take your time inspecting it, we are here if you have questions.”

They had stalled yesterday afternoon at a 92% match for the ECG signature, a mere 7 points short of 'perfect'. Close, but not close enough. Most biometric scans required a 97% or greater match to enable a retry, and a 99.7% match to return a positive result. The rest of the day had seen no improvements, so Saren had decided to 'borrow' the cardiologist from his home that evening.

He had hoped the interesting conundrum would allay any displeasure over being medic-napped in the dead of night, and as luck would have it, the Doctor was amenable to taking a look. They had arrived just a moment ago, and the cardiologist's face had lit up in curiosity at their spoofing solution, even though it's appearance looked rather gruesome.

It took the better part of the night to explain the intricacies of the project, but two hours after the start of the day cycle, they'd managed to get a positive reading of 98.6% or higher every time, and hit the 99.7 minimum a majority of the time. It had to be good enough.

Saren sent the asleep-on-his-feet sniper to bed, and escorted the Doctor home. Graciously, he told the cardiologist to contact him if the favor might ever need to be repaid. It was best to clear any debts after all, and taking a page from Benezia's book, he planned to ensure he repaid the Doctor well enough to keep him as a consultable resource, and a pleased one at that.

The Spectre found his bed at nearly four hours into the day cycle after setting course for Niacal, the home of the Omoi family and the location of the vault key that was soon to be his.

Chapter End Notes
Ever wonder where some of the really crazy, die-hard fans get their juicy tidbits that you can't recall from the games? Bioware released a whole bunch of fake news stories leading up to ME2. Here: Cerberus Daily News

And over at this fansite, they continued the tradition of faux news and codex entries for a long damn time, though they aren't official: Cerberus Daily News Forums - Codex

There is, in fact, a whole crap-ton of stuff on the wiki that was figured out or surmised from the official news posts. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: Well. Fuck, (13840 words) by quondam (Just a fun little FemShep/Garrus. I fell for the adorableness. Soooooooo cute. :3)
Chapter Summary

Saren has needs, just like any other person. They aren't always obvious, but then again he rarely expresses himself enough for anyone to know them.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Kralla Prime - Primary refueling station for the Kralla-Thessia Shipping lane.

Aurolis - The capitol city of Niacal. (Canon)

Karipatrem - The Turian equivalent of 'godfather', specifically in cases where an oath of Karifraturus has been sworn. (Credit: MizDirected)

Patrem/Matrem - The Turian equivalent of 'father' and 'mother'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Karifraturus - A Turian oath of brotherhood/sisterhood, not describing blood relations, but verbal promises as close as family that last a lifetime. (Credit: MizDirected)

Karipetri - The Turian equivalent to 'goddaughter', specifically in cases where an oath of Karifraturus has been sworn. (Credit: MizDirected)

Cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur

Petri - Turian closed dialect for 'daughter'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Caman - An open air kitchen and family room, the center of the home. (Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area.) (Credit: MizDirected)

Caris - Turian closed dialect for 'Beloved', 'Precious', or 'Cherished'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Derra - Turian equivalent to a 'wife' in a pair of bondmates. (Credit: MizDirected)

Mari/Pari - Turian for mother/father (Credit: Mizdirected)

Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)

Rites-sister / Rites-brother - Turian familial term for the bonded in-laws of one's siblings, specifically those who have promised to each other in a formal Ceremony of Rites. (I got this fanon from somewhere, and now I can't find it again! If you know where it's from, PLEASE tell me so I can get full permission to use it!)

Chapter Soundtrack: SubVibe & Tide - No Words (TwoThirds, None Like Joshua)
Stolid electric eyes watched the navigational data as the relay approach began. Normally Saren would see to the jump calculations by hand, unless he were predisposed, especially if he were already sitting in the CIC chair. At the moment he felt tired enough to leave the piloting to his not inexpensive navigational VI. It could not manage the trip as smoothly as he could, but it would do the job on autopilot if needed. Considering the Spectre had been at troubleshooting advanced and technical quasi-medical issues near constantly for days, he could not be bothered to care.

The clacking sound of bare feet and talons on metal alerted him to the approaching presence that came up to lean against the right side of the command chair. They sat in companionable silence as the ship's approach vector took them in closer to the Parnitha system's Thessia Relay, which would send them off to the Orisoni system. Arrival at the Kralla Relay would be followed by docking with the Kralla Prime Space Station, a common refueling and resupply point for cargo ships.

Saren had explained the next phase of the plan earlier in the day; they would be docking the Daedalus under a false name on Kralla Prime, and booking passage over to Niacal under the table. Spectre authority would get them and their mech past any security checks, and the pair would make their way around the planet as needed to get to the Omoi estates, just west of the capitol city of Aurolis. The modified loki was coming along in a cargo crate with an anti-grav generator, but had been equipped with a one-time-use cloaking device, and a traditional hooded cloak in case they needed to pass it off as a person.

The final approach began, and the wavering light of a forming near-zero mass corridor started to shine in the view of the vid-windows along the ceiling. The light stretched, forming a visible tunnel shape before them in the camera feed that turned the prow of the vessel into a series of viewing screens instead of storage cabinets. With a final brightening flare, the corridor finished forming, and
the propulsion provided by the ship’s engines to move its usual mass at sub-light speeds instead became sufficient to propel them several hundred light years in a few seconds.

A battery of complex mechanisms pulled power to keep them stable, aided by the near-perfect trajectory the Relay had sent them on. Still, not as good as Saren himself could do, and the ride was a bit more vibrational then it might have been. The Daedalus arrived in-system, and cleared the arrival zone so traffic control could give the all-clear for the next transport to go ahead.

Saren heaved a quiet sigh and sat up enough to send them in the general direction of Kralla Prime. He worked a thumb knuckle into the bridge of his nose, trying to gather clarity, then called the station ahead of them to arrange for private berth and 'donations' as bribes to ensure the local docking authority would be circumspect about their presence. Asari and their tit-for-tat attitude couched in elegant silks was odd and immoral seeming to Turian sensibilities, but at least useful in these situations. As he exited the call after all the various arrangements were made a warm hand came down on his shoulder.

“Saren. I'll get us into dock, why don't you get some sleep?”

He chuffed. 'Vakarian expects me to trust him with my ship, does he?’

“I know you aren't going to suggest that we start this mission of yours without a few hours of down time first. I won't crash us, go on.”

He stilled, wondering if he had begun speaking out loud when tired again. The Spectre had in fact intended to give them time to rest and prep upon arrival, but he did not care for the sniper's mothering in the least.

“Vakarian, you are out of line. I will handle docking procedures into the station, and then arrange transport for late this evening. We will have hours to rest before the next phase begins. If you are tired, then you may lay down ahead of time.”

“I'm exhausted and half brain dead, but your eyes aren't even open. You going to dock us the same way you made those jump calculations, hmm?”

He grumbled in aggravation at the sniper's persistence, but grudgingly acknowledged that his eyes were indeed fighting him to stay closed. “Officer Vakarian, if you continue to be obnoxiously over-concerned for my welfare, I will not request your assistance in the future. It is bothersome.”
“Can’t help it, Spectre. You don’t take great care of yourself, and I know Nihlus usually nags you into sleeping, but he isn’t here at the moment. I’m not trying to be obnoxious, but you push yourself to the edge. I think it would point to something negative about me if I didn’t notice and care enough to say something.”

The Officer’s palm kneaded into the shoulder he was grasping, and the Spectre felt his head droop further at the warm and relaxing sensation. The hand was replaced with it’s other side, and instead came down on his far shoulder to apply pressure to both sides. Saren slumped in his seat, the last dregs of his self control too busy keeping him from purring to work on posture. The sniper began a slow and heavy dig around both shoulders, working just a bit down his biceps before coming up to bypass the collar. Clever fingers took advantage of the forward slump to press into the muscles the ran along spinal plates, rolling in slow circles and inching up every few rotations.

The ghost of a purr escaped him as the pressure worked upward, stopping before becoming an intimate touch, and moving back down.

“Let me dock us, Saren.”

“Mmm... no need. My ship. Do not want... the hull scratched.”

“I grew up on a ship, remember? I know how to fly. Maybe not with the best of them, but well. I’ll land gently, promise.”

“Ob... noxious.”

The meddlesome torin laughed, and bratishly teased him instead of taking offense. “I know. I’m standing in for Nihlus, have to do it justice, right?”

Saren let out a long sigh more aggrieved then aggravated. “Should just... more kava.”

“Oh, hell no. Bed.”

“Never taking you... along again. Like a mother tarin. Annoying.”
“Mmhmmm, your subvocals are telling me a different story my friend...” The hands left off, and came around to pull him up instead. He managed a half-ways decent glare and pushed the help away.

“Fine. Insolent whelp. If you so much as nick the outer coating I will skin you.”

The sniper just laughed good naturedly. “Pretty sure you're younger than me, I don't think you can call me a 'whelp'."

“I was born old. Arrange for transport around 1500 hours. Good night.”

“Isn't that rush hour?”

“Yes. It will be too busy for anyone to notice us.”

“Ahah. Alright, sleep well.”

The Spectre grunted, heaving out a subvocal declaration of his continued annoyance with the Officer, and walked back along the main cabin to his room. With a careful concern for dosage, he popped two sleeping aids and fell into his small cot for a long and uninterrupted stretch of sleep, as was his norm before an active mission period. Even his insomnia was not allowed to get in the way of efficiency.

Brother! Welcome, come in, come in.” Desolas smiled widely at him, a glow of effusive pride in his expression. “I insisted you be the first to meet her, you are the karipatrem after all.”

Saren let off a soft trill of appreciation. He was pleased to be honored so, and was looking forward to meeting his new niece and god-daughter.

“Was that Saren at the door, caris?”
“Yes, derra, just a moment! We'll be right in.”

Saren chuckled at the smitten tone in his sibling’s subvocals. “My rites-sister sounds rather lively for just having given birth.”

Desolas laughed wildly and threw an arm over his collar, pulling him along into the well heated and dimly lit domin at the center of the old Arterius madlis. A pleasant warmth filled his heart to see the once decrepit walls restored with the turn around of their family's fortunes, though it was currently poorly lit to accommodate sensitive newborn eyes.

“Desolas, please, -I hate to be a bother-, but can you make it just a bit warmer in here? I've got the chills.”

“Of course, derra. I'll turn the hearth up.”

Saren moved forward a small step, feeling a hint of nervousness. The former XO of his unit looked exhausted, and the tiny form of his new niece was just... so small. Were they supposed to be that size?

“Oh stop hovering rites-brother, take a seat. She can't see very far just yet, so you'll have to come in close. Come on now, don't be so shy. I've seen you take the head off a Krogan in hand to hand combat, and this has you worked up? Good grief.”

Saren snorted at the brisk manner, it was classic Abrudas to handle even the rigors of childbearing and formal introduction between karipatrem and karipetri with a no-nonsense attitude. She had always been so, even during their civil service years.

He came in close, and kneeled down to greet his niece for the first time. She was curled into her matrem’s collar, hugging the warm neck and making the hums and warbles of a baby talking noises just because they could. Her big grey eyes and mellow lavender coloring were just like her patrem’s. She would be a heart-breaker someday with such classically beautiful looks.

Saren could tell when he came in close enough for her to focus on, because the bright little thing let out a surprised trill. Valencia laughed wearily at the sound. After that initial recoil in shock wore off the tiny form began to reach out to the finger he held nearby, scenting him and gumming at his hide. She trilled again, baby non-sense with a hint of ’mine!’ in it.
“You've got to be kidding me! My petri likes my brother more than me?” Desolas had returned and had come to sit on the stool at the head of the cubitura that his bondmate had taken over. Saren smirked at his brother.

“She has good taste.”

General Arterius threw up his hands in defeat, still humming joyously at the day's events.

“I'm still too cold caris, turn up the heat some more?”

Saren thought it was really rather warm enough, but did not care to argue. He would rather sweat then ruin the mood of good cheer and welcome.

"There we are, I've got it as high as it will go now. Is it warm enough?"

"Oh yes, perfect."

That was when a few stray embers flecked out, ones that should not have existed with a gas powered fire, glowing a menacing red and catching the rug ablaze right in front of him.

“Fire!” He shouted, startled.

No one heard.

“Des, the flame escaped the fireplace. Des? Desolas! Brother!”

The happy family continued to laugh and bother the cranky newborn, replying to bossy and possessive trills with cheerful teasing. He reached out to physically shake his grey eyed sibling, but his hand went through him as if one of them was a ghost.

“Valencia! Lieutenant! The fire! Quickly, leave the room! Leave!!”
Saren tried to put out the fire himself, but it was as if he could affect nothing anymore. The rug would not move to his pull, the water in the sink would not turn on, the emergency fire extinguisher that should have been in the pantry was missing entirely. In desperation, he threw himself on it to try and asphyxiate the flames himself.

The fire did not burn him.

“Ohf! Goodness little one, easy on the neck hide or you'll be in a bassinet faster then you can say 'sorry'.” The scene continued on without him, the cubitura coming under threat next. The flickering menace rose faster then should be possible, crawling insidiously toward everything that he loved with determined malice.

A roar rose from his throat, rage and anguish tearing with sharp clawed denial.

Still, no one heard.

The flames grew in rapid time lapse, gradually shining brighter then the cherry red of a normal burn into the brilliant white-gold of plasma canon fire. It flared in destructive triumph, and suddenly Abrudas' smiling and weary face was gone, replaced by charred plates and ash.

His niece alongside her.

The roar in his throat turned into a desperate yowl as he clawed at the seemingly empty air where his brother sat, now stoically looking off into the distance.

“Desolas, spirits, please. Please! No! NO!”

His brother turned to him then, very slowly, and the fire reflected off his liquid grey eyes.

“You can't take it back now, little brother. Didn't you want me dead? You killed me yourself.”

The fire rose high, and consumed them both.
His own unreleased scream of denial building in his throat, the electric eyed torin woke and suppressed it. All was quiet in the darkness of his cabin as he turned to look at the simple bed-side clock. Four hours, eight minutes. Exactly what he needed to operate efficiently. Paid for in full by inescapable nightmares, hunting his mind until the drugs wore off.

He had not needed an alarm clock since he was nineteen.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: T_T

Fanfic Recommendation: Enough (24231 words) by kesla
If such pitiless indifference might not be a subterfuge

Chapter Summary

In which we get ready to rock.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Piezoelectricity - An electric charge given off by particular materials (such as certain crystals, ceramics, and organic matters) when put under pressure. (Real)

Mnemonic devices - A learning or memorization technique which uses cues such as patterns or imagery to improve the rate of retention. (Like PEMDAS)

///

But that afternoon he asked himself, with his infinite capacity for illusion, if such pitiless indifference might not be a subterfuge for hiding the torments of love.

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez

///

Chapter Soundtrack: Digitalism - Miami Showdown

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last latch on his alternate set of armor slid into place, and Garrus moved into the middle of the room to get a fresh feel for it's range of motion and weight. It was the set that had shown up with Nihlus' replacement armor on his kava table one morning, but he hadn't had a chance to do more then try it on since then. He couldn't wear it to work, and had been too busy recently to visit Armax Arena.

It was a very nice looking set, unreflective gunmetal tones with charcoal underarmor. The sniper was just now noticing the barest hint of icy blue highlights that ran in lines down the seams, aesthetically pleasing to be sure, but they looked peculiar up close. A quick scan with an Omni-tool revealed them to be laced with eezo set in a piezoelectric compound, making him resistant to biotics by creating outward pulses of an unlit, low grade destabilizing field when the armor was subjected to sufficient force.
Garrus had not realized at the time quite what had been dropped on him. This kind of gear was both rare and expensive. He could literally punch someone holding his bullets at bay with a barrier, and the mechanical pressure on the compound that lined the knuckle joints would produce electricity that would react with the element zero, detonating their shield. He'd seen this kind of armor before, on some of the more accomplished bounty hunters that passed by the Citadel. The destabilizing shock-waves could deaden throws or destabilize singularities aimed at him unless the creator was a real powerhouse of biotics.

This wasn't just a nice 'looking' set of armor, it was a treasure. He reminded himself to thank Saren profusely... or perhaps just quietly, and in lots of small, unobtrusive ways. The sniper was pretty sure his stunt earlier had earned him plenty of ire that he would have to disperse with exceptionally good work on the upcoming mission, and effusive thanks-giving probably wouldn't help matters.

Not that he was unwilling to work hard anyway, but it was a worthwhile price to pay for the consideration. The Spectre hadn't even asked for anything in return, except aid that Garrus was technically obligated to give anyway should it be asked of him. C-Sec worked for the Council as well after all.

The well-built Detective ran through a basic calisthenics set and wondered when he'd lost both the hero worship for, and fear of reprisal from, the silver-grey torin. It might've finally died the night they slept in the same bed, but it had been loosing ground since the first moment he'd stepped on board the Daedalus and ran faceplates first into proof of the Spectre's turianity. Powerfully connected, dangerous and skilled, coldly brilliant, ruthless at times, yes... but simultaneously hard-working, fighting depression, passionate behind the stolid mask, and also... also very handsome, patient, and generous.

Of those last three, the first had been the most obvious but the hardest to ignore. He wouldn't admit aloud to a long standing attraction to the Spectre's long crest horns and electric eyes. The last of them, generosity, had been the most surprising but also the most endearing. Saren Arterius may be somewhat sociopathic, -and that was a curse word on any Turian tongue-, but for all the selfishness that 'mental illness' was supposed to instill in a person, Saren Arterius was giving and supportive, with his time and resources, just so long as you were deemed worthy of them.

He considered attempting to pay the torin back for the gear, but figured it would go about as well as his attempts to pay for the Lancer. Maybe another trip to the bath house was in order? The quiet agent had seemed to really enjoy it last time.
The newly minted ST&R Asset was half way into planning another day trip, possibly to a different location, when his Omni-tool pinged with an incoming vid-call request from Nihlus. He popped up from a set of crunches and rolled his neck, flopping down on the settee and hitting the accept key.

Carmine plates and vivid green irises came on screen, a smile forming in his mandibles. Nihlus looked rather tired himself, but was lounging shirtless on a bed, so hopefully that would be resolving itself.

“Bluuue! What's up tall stack? Ma- hey wait a minute, I recognize that couch!”

Garrus offered a lopsided smile at the cheerful greeting. “Nothing much, getting ready for some excitement.”

The Spectre's other hand came up to clutch dramatically at his keel ridge. “Some excitement he says! Without me! I'm heart broken, so much, you have no idea.”

The sniper nodded with mock seriousness. “I know, it's horrible, but I'm sure you're very busy wherever you are.”

Nihlus narrowed his eyes accusingly at the camera. “I'm either being mocked, or patronized, but either way there will be vengeance later when you least expect it. Soooooo anyway, what kind of mission is it?”

“Oh I probably shouldn't say. Too insecure to talk about it on coms. You'll have to hear about it next time you visit.”

“Are you trying to bribe me, Officer Vakarian?” The *torin* was trying to hold his mandibles in a stern look, but the left one kept slipping into a grin at their by-play.
“Yes, is it working?”

At that moment the owner of the ship emerged from his cabin, still mildly damp from a shower, coming down the hallway in a purposeful stride. The sniper looked up and nodded in greeting.

“Good morning. You are... on a call?”

Garrus turned the viewing screen to share the roguish grin of the Spectre's protégé.

“Ah. Hello Nihlus.”

“Hey Saren, good to see ya. I also see you've cop-napped Blue.”

“That is one way to look at it, I suppose. You are not in peril?”

“Nah, I'm fine. Was callin' to say hullo to you next. Saves me the extra button presses I guess. So who ya killin'?”

“No one, if all goes according to plan.”

“Hahaaa, good luck with that.”

Saren raised a brow ridge and drawled, “Thank you. You will have to call another time however, we
are headed out now.”

“No probs. I'll catch you guys later.”

The display screen minimized back into his 'tool, and he tapped the sleep button to send the luminous frame away.

“Come, Vakarian. We will purchase breakfast on the way, and eat during transport.”

“Sounds good.”

A small lunch was procured from a food stall on the station, cooked where Saren could watch it being made. He ordered it without retracting his helmet, and the clerk gave them odd looks but said nothing as they walked away after their take away number was called. The transport his temporary partner had arranged for them was not what he would have chosen, but it would work well enough. Rather then travel in the cabin of a poorly manned cargo craft as was the Spectre's usual choice, the sniper had opted to arrange for a ride in a passenger liner's kitchen area, over a flight too short to have cooks needed to be making meals.

They met a Volus at the cargo entrance of the ship, and were led to a deserted kitchen of dull purple shelves made from a brushed metal. He critiqued the lack of proper securings on the cooking equipment as soon as their contact left them. They spoke as they ate.

“Saren, a ship like this isn't ever going to venture into risky parts of space. The chances of them having turbulence is pretty low.”
The silver-grey Spectre nodded in agreement, but hummed a subvocal stipulation, finishing his mouthful before speaking.

“Perhaps, but the precautions would not be hard to take, and the few times they have engine failure or a navigational error during a relay jump would not result in someone being gutted by carving knives because they were cooking at an inopportune moment.”

Garrus chuckled. “I suppose you have a point there. Those big ones look like they could slice through plate without much trouble. I'm a little afraid to be sitting so near them now.”

“You will notice that I am shielded by the chilling unit between my seat and their location.”

“Ah, yeah, you are aren't you?”

Saren hummed mildly. “Do not worry. If there is a complication, I will raise a biotic barrier in reaction regardless.”

“Appreciate it.”

The quick in-system trip only took three-quarters of an hour, and the Volus returned to accept payment for the smuggling and to guide them back out via the cargo bay. Saren could have easily made his own way, with a nearly photographic memory thanks to habitual use of mnemonic devices, but it was no bother to follow along with the floating cargo crate in his wake.
A/N: Woo! Major plot hole, officially filled! Why did no one say shit when Shepard officer-naps Garrus in ME1? No freaked out coworkers, upset friends, not a word from Pallin? Why, that's because he's been getting snagged by Spectres for years now! No one blinks an eye when Garrus Vakarian goes off grid mysteriously anymore. Why d'ya think his disappearance to Omega was so easy? He had the contacts to make it happen, and everyone who knew him was used to the random AFK-ing. //fist pump//

Pssst, I made a new galaxy map, based off the latest NASA estimates of what the Milky Way looks like, and layered Mass Effect 1, 2, and 3 star clusters over it, with different colored icons for population distribution based on the wiki's listings of species presence in each cluster. It also has the primary relay connections and special relay connections listed from all the games, and color coded too. (I am a super nerd, no really.) It's over here on my deviant art if you are curious: ME123 Galaxy Map

[Author's Codex] Asari Familial Dynasties
As each generation is begun while the prior one retains anywhere from 300 to 700 years of remaining life expectancy, the planning and forethought that goes into the inheritance of each Asari child can sometimes put to shame the fortunes of the oldest and wealthiest families from other species. Most Asari will have one to four children over the course of their Matron stage, but the first born is always considered the 'heir apparent' to the mother's wealth unless specified otherwise in legal documentation. Traditionally, the main estates of an Asari line will have a name to it, always to be kept by the heir apparent and their initial offspring. Genetic descendence is traced back through the first child of each generation, with branch families competing for prestige among the various houses under the estate name. On that note, houses that climb into favor will have land leased to them from the main line, a precious resource on core worlds such as Thessia. Though the population of such planets is low, their home world capping out at an estimated 5.5 billion, the use of land as capital in plans that span centuries, and as a show of trust in the wisdom that the land will be used well, has become such an integral part of the Asari Republics that even low population worlds are highly competed over. Particularly worlds with any amount of naturally occurring element zero.

Fanfic Recommendation: Eavesdrop (6209 words) by JweJang
No plan survives first contact

Chapter Summary

In which Saren just does his thing, and Garrus tries to enable that based on guesswork. Can anyone say 'communications issues'?

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Familia Notas - The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition.)

Stuxnet – A somewhat infamous malware worm of 'unknown' origin that bounced harmlessly from device to device in order to infect the systems that ran Iran's uranium enrichment equipment. The devious and complex coding made the devices seem to have a series of 'accidents', reportedly destroying 1/5th of their nuclear centrifuges. (Real) The virus here in is used as a description of classification, a nod to the makers behind Stuxnet's real world counterpart.

Chapter Soundtrack: "Dreamweaver" by J2 [Feat. Keeley Bumford]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Garrus was relieved to find out that, due to the planet's excess levels of oxygen, everyone on Niacal wore breathing devices such as helmets or re-breathers when out of doors. The two of them in their nondescript grey tones of armor with sealed helmets on didn't stand out much at all.

If working with Nihlus during subterfuge had been surreal because of the sheer depths the torin went to in order to suit his cover, working with Saren during a stealth operation was even more strange. If for no other reason then it gave Garrus a chance to see how well-thought out the Spectre's modus operandi was. 'Well' being a massive understatement.
He walked beside the elegant and armored form. For lack of knowing where they were going he couldn't take point, but 'beside' was at least better than 'behind'. They came first to a random apartment complex where Saren had them sneak past the lobby's security. The pair took the stairs up several flights, and stopped in the stair well. The Spectre told him to amuse himself for a while, but the Detective assumed that meant it was 'hurry up and wait' time. He took a lean against the wall and waited quietly.

An hour and twenty minutes later Saren's Omni-tool flickered with a notification. The Spectre took them out into the hallway, and broke into an apartment by hacking the door. Inside was a newly delivered package, which they took and left. No explanation was given, and though he was curious as all hell, the sniper opted to just run with it. Hopefully answers would present themselves.

Next, the agent took them to a public tramway. Six trams passed by as they waited to the side, until a seventh pulled up with a maintenance sign on the last cabin, declaring it closed for repair. Conveniently, the entrance to the last car was hidden from general view by a fairly wide pillar. Saren slipped the doors open, and off they went.

The inside was pitch black, and the ride went on for some time. Without warning, about twelve stops in, the Spectre led them to disembark. They stopped again at a random data terminal, and the Spectre began uploading a targeted stuxnet style virus to somewhere.

Garrus winced. That was a nasty piece of work to be unleashing on someone, insidious and difficult to write. The sniper was fairly certain he could manage one himself, but hadn't ever tried because they were black enough that it wasn't even illegal, just a death sentence if the wrong people knew you had written one. Not that he'd ever tell another soul that the Spectre could.

After it finished they carried on walking, out past the edge of town and into lightly wooded terrain. There was no pathway, but the topography wasn't too rough. Two hours of mildly paced hiking later Saren halted them just behind a rocky ridge within view of a road, and the waiting resumed. This time for a much longer period, and they each took a turn sleeping with the other on watch. The next day dawned, and they ate plain rations while keeping vigil for something along the deserted flyway. Garrus presumed it involved a skycar.

That 'something' finally came a few hours into the day, a low flying skyvan marked with the company logo of a hydroponics and gardening repair service.

"Vakarian."
“Yeah?”

“I will pull the vehicle from the air, when it has been grounded be prepared to assume control of it.”

“Understood, Spectre.”

As the van came to pass the biotic did just that, wrenching it down with a burst of power that crushed it's velocity but still pulled it down without damage. Garrus burst forward from their cover while attacking the vehicle door's locking mechanism with a pre-made bit of hacking code he had on hand. The locks were poorly secured, and the side door rose up before he was even half way to it. A shout of alarm could be heard coming from the interior.

The skyvan's propulsion jets finally gave up trying to gain altitude just as the icy eyed *torin* came even with it.

“Come out with your hands up.” Was the first thing out of the Officer's mouth, and he winced at how telling that habit was but leveled his pistol at the opening. A terrified and uniformed Salarian exited the doorway, hands raised high. Saren came stalking up and shot him point-blank. Garrus blinked rapidly in tightly controlled recoil, startled as hell, but shook it off and checked the van for other people.

“Clear.” He was somewhat relieved to say. Dead men couldn't tell tales, but he'd prefer to keep the innocent lives lost to a minimum.

Saren leaned down and began accessing the man's Omni-tool. The blue eyed Officer approached, glancing over an armored shoulder to see that the Salarian's credentials and personal information were being plundered. He brought his eyes up and kept watch while the Spectre worked. A few moments of data theft and duplication, and the corpse was tucked away on the road side.

The mysterious package was pulled out and set inside the door, and the cargo crate was tucked away in back.

A distracted hand waved him into the van and closed the door, moving to sit in the driver's seat and set it to take off and continue it's original route. The electric eyed agent turned and retracted his head piece, before moving back to his accomplice and getting into the shipping box. The container came apart to reveal two uniforms similar to the one the Salarian had been wearing, and a few disguise creating items.
Saren pulled the uniforms out, and tossed the larger one to his cohort, putting on his own over his armor. The loose, baggy onesie fit easily, and was padded just so to obscure the armor underneath. They both appeared overweight, but it would keep anyone from noticing the high quality to their gear. A jar and brush came out next, and the Spectre began coating his face plates with it lightly, marring his silver hue with a mellow green tone. A dorky looking cap was also included, in a darker shade of green, and was pulled over crest and fringe to unaccentuate his Valluvian horns. It also disguised how long his crest blades really were.

A handful of moments and the torin who looked up appeared to be a dull looking older male with flat grey eyes and a lame hip. It was an impressive transformation, and if not Nihlus grade, then certainly quality work. Another jar was produced and the Spectre turned to him holding it up. Knowing he couldn't apply it with half as much skill, Garrus stepped forward and tilted his head down, before closing his eyes and holding still.

A surprised chuff of air and no action brought one lid slowly open. He peered at the well disguised Spectre curiously.

“...Saren?”

“...I am no longer 'Saren', until we leave the planet. Call me Giovisi Atril. Your ID reads Amar Renovae.”

“Alright.”

“...”

“...”

“You wish for me to apply the biomasking solution for you?” Garrus was confused at the discomfort hummed in subvocals with that question.

“Yes? I've uh... Heh, I've never used that stuff before, and I'm afraid that, while I am an artist with a sniper rifle, painting... isn't exactly my forte.” He grinned down at the Spectre, relying on humor to carry the day. Saren huffed quietly, what might've been either a laugh or maybe a dismissive chuff.
“It will cover your colony markings.” Ahah, that was the problem. The quiet torin was a very traditional person, and if Garrus were a better Turian he would refuse to let another take away or hide his marks, even temporarily. How to explain that he didn't mind it if Saren was the one doing so? Without also being really damn forward about how far he trusted the faux-green Spectre, or how close he'd like them to be?

“I figured as much. I can't do as good a job of it, so I don't mind having you do it instead, unless that bothers you...?”

The agent's posture straightened, as if having been provided an acceptable reasoning dissolved any and all awkwardness about the situation.

The shorter torin stepped in and uncapped the solution, pulling Garrus' hand up to act as a make shift table. Taking Garrus by the chin, he began to carefully paint the stone and silver over with a greyed out navy blue. The sniper couldn't see it himself, but he'd bet it would make him innocuous and less likely to be recalled.

New faces applied, Saren pulled out a different set of colors and gave them both false Familia Notas, then took their pictures and flash forged fake ID badges to clip to their uniforms. Disguises complete, the Spectre destroyed all evidence of subterfuge and began packing some of the van's various gardening accoutrement into their utility belts.

They were equipped and ready to go by the time the estate's local security force commed the skyvan to request their credentials. Saren modulated his voice to sound polite yet half-witted, and rattled off their ID codes along with their reason for being there in perfectly rote form.

It was the first Garrus had heard of it, but from the conversation he surmised that several of the massive carbon dioxide forming mechanisms in the estate's gardens had run amok, creating vitamin C in misty blasts instead of gaseous CO2 for the plants and garden viewers who needed the altered air to function outdoors in the excessively oxygenated air of Niacal.

The purpose of the stuxnet virus was revealed, at least. He began to wonder how often 'maintainence' was really used as a cover for espionage, or if the frequency he was seeing was just a favorite tactic of Saren personally.

They were welcomed with open arms right into the midst of the topiary and flowers that surrounded the mausoleum-like entrance into the Omoi family exhibition vaults. Closed now, because no soirees or garden parties were on at the moment, but Garrus made himself look useful and deeply involved in troubleshooting the mechanism while his Spectre used the show of diligence as a cover, getting to
the real work as soon as their escort left them to it.

The disguised C-Sec Officer hemmed and hawed and uselessly replaced a few things on each machine. While ‘Giovisi’ made seemingly regular trips to the bathroom and fiddled with the computer components. Mysteriously, a few hours in the malfunctioning machines were all operational again, and they were thanked and escorted back out politely.

The ride back along the road was quiet, only interrupted by a stop off to grab the Salarian worker's body. They made it back into town, and Saren brought them to a shopping center. He left Garrus with the van, and returned shortly thereafter with casual clothing for the corpse. They laid the man out in a pantomime of a mugging in an alley way. The van was left in a nearby parking garage.

Twilight rose around the disguised Turians, one of them walking casually along while keeping a subtle watch for attention or threat, and the other typing away on an Omni-tool as they deleted the traces of their path and presence with every few key strokes. The uniforms were discarded, but the biomasks kept. They acquired dinner, and booked a hotel room in a low class place that didn't require ID, and accepted disposable credit chits in payment.

Now it was time for food, and rest. Tonight, their caper began in earnest.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: **Worst Case Scenario** (37,147 words) by **inthenightside**
(Saren/FemShep/Nihlus)
Only two kinds of people, except for all those other ones

Chapter Summary

Just our boys on the job, doing what they do best.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Pyreisyphomoi – An blend of neurotoxins specifically made to put down any species without killing them by messing with coordination, balance, and temperature regulation. It is particularly effective on the rapidly regenerating nerves of Krogan, as the compound will get trapped inside the damaged area and continue to wreak havoc.

Chapter Soundtrack: Britney Spears - Circus (Linus Loves Remix)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The call bell rang, and the next set of fighters stepped into the ring. On one side a hulking and muscular Krogan came out wearing half shredded pants and nothing else. Armor and weapons were about the only things not allowed in the pit fights, but his heavy build and natural regeneration would make up for that in this contender. Across the dirt floor a lanky Turian sauntered out of the entry door, and it slammed closed behind him. Sharp green eyes glittered with dark laughter, head tilted in smiling curiosity.

The announcer called their stage names to a roar of approval. The Krogan, -aptly called Mountain-, was a local favorite and raised his fists high to the cheers, but the cocky challenger was new and interesting, and drew further roars and whistles from the onlookers. Hurricane had been wrecking people all week, and his devilish demeanor had the ladies and interested gentlemen in the crowd screaming for him.

The two fighters circled, sizing each other up and letting the crowd work themselves into a froth of anticipation. It was a show after all, and it wouldn't do to rush the experience.

Some unseen signal passed by, and they came at each other. The Krogan went the direct route, coming in for a one-hit-one-kill style haymaker punch that Hurricane spun with like a fine weave of silk, flowing around the hit as if he weren't a solid being. The strike connected with nothing, and the Mountain got an elbow in the eye socket for his trouble, popping his left eyeball like a grape.
The blood and viscera dripped down over a clenched jaw, and the crowd lost their minds at the sight. It was a no-rules arena, and they wanted blood. The Krogan growled low, and angry. Not a shout in agony, or even a recoil as the pain of regeneration started growing him a new one.

“You'll pay for that Turian.”

The reply came long and drawling, mockingly sly. “I don't think I will.”

The contenders came together again, and the back and forth was brutal. Every hit that so much as nicked the Turian's plates was bruising, and the smallest opening in the Mountain's guard was exploited in vicious ways. At first it seemed like the Krogan was just going to keep going, steady like his name choice, beating down the upstart by inches.

Out of nowhere the lithe form zigged when his opponent expected him to zag, and before anyone could pin down what had happened the lanky torin was on the Krogan's back, with a death grip on his throat, and toe talons pressing hard into the relatively softer side of the tail that led into the first bundle of nerves that controlled the lower body.

“Surrender, or die.”

The growl returned, vibrating the throat beneath the talons with something between rage and respect. A hint of attraction in the mix.

“I've got redundant nerves weakling, and this won't even be the first time I've had my throat torn out. You want to see me go into blood rage if you pull that shit? I don't think your pretty face would survive it.”

Nihlus chuckled darkly and leaned in to whisper in a wicked voice. “My talons are coated with neurotoxin. Pyreisyphomoi, a sexy little blend that will put you down for days.”

“I should have known a Turian would cheat.”

“My other options all involve killin' you outright. You wanna die instead?”
Their detente held for a few heart beats, before the Krogan decided that he really would risk death and tried smashing the back of his crest into the Hurricane's neck and shoulder. The throw missed entirely, and the return strikes opened his throat and dropped him to his knees when his first spinal nerve set was cut.

Nihlus fell off the Krogan sideways, braced himself, and kicked the figure hard. The Mountain fell, and a fist came over to jam into the open neck wound that was bleeding profusely and trying to knit closed. The fallen fighter gurgled in anger, trying to get the obstruction out of the way but only causing his throat to be torn up more.

Blood rage rose up, and slit pupils dilated. The carmine plated fighter had to pull moves hard and fast redirect the heavy blows coming at him.

“Stop! Please stop! I'll pay you, oh goddess! Let him regenerate!”

The green eyed Spectre turned pit fighter heard the shrill begging, and after a moment's deliberation spun up off the blood soaked figure, outright leaping up nearly four meters to grab the edge of the pit's walls. He swung up and spun around to sit on the edge, throwing an arm over the pleading Asari's shoulders.

“Aren't you a sweetheart. Worried for your boyfriend?”

“He's my father!”

Nihlus gave a lopsided grin and shook his head with a laugh.

“I suppose that works too. Tell him not ta be so stubborn next time. Two chances is more then I give most people.”

“T-thank you. I can... money, um... How much?”

“Don't worry about it, lovely. Good luck dealing with his injured pride that ya saved his ass though.”
The nais let out a short, wet laugh and turned her attention to the now healing but still enraged figure in the pit. The Mountain was trapped down there, unable to jump high enough to get at him, and there was no way the doors were opening until he was calm. The thugs that passed for staff weren't anywhere near that stupid.

He popped up to walk along the edge of the wall, leveling a taunting smirk at the mindless enraged bellow from below. One asshole got in close like he was going to push Hurricane in, and two bare and dirty toe talons came even with a throat accompanied by a disbelievingly raised eyeridge as he balanced languidly on the other foot. The idiot backed away into the mess of people collecting bets.

The wager master had declared him the winner, obviously.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Garrus was trying very hard not to blush.

They'd returned to the estate after dusk, flying in close on a rental car that had been sabotaged to give no outward signals of approach, though they'd only come so far and hiked the rest of the way. On a planet that had thirty-five hour days there had been plenty of time to take it slow. Now it gave them another eleven hours of night time to steal the key.

The Spectre and Detective were almost to the courtyard of gardens, just a short stretch of air vent and a quick run down a hallway before they'd be in sight of the vault's enterance. At the moment, the tall torin's face had the option of facing up at a waist, or forward into hips as they finagled a vent cover open. He was backed up to a wall, crouched down so his knees made a shelf for Saren to stand on to get the well secured vent open. Between the two viewing options, he'd opted for the waist. It was a very nice angle.

Granted Saren was armored right now, but his instincts didn't seem to care. The muscular waist was heavier set through the middle then was generally considered attractive, broad and thick in a species whose aesthetics leaned toward the lithe and long limbed. His hind brain didn't seem to care about that either, and the sniper felt a flush creep up his neck.

His mind helpfully supplied the idea that those thicker proportions might be elsewhere as well.

Garrus swallowed and pressed his palms back into the wall. He was using his hands to help brace himself, and it was a good thing they were busy, because he kept wanting to reach up to see if he
could still circle that middle with his fingers like he could Nihlus'. He didn't think so, it was so thick set, even out of armor it might not work.

There was even the perfect excuse of stabilizing the distracted Spectre, just in case he lost his balance.

He dared to close his eyes instead to keep from staring. His libido was a bit spoiled still from having Nihlus around for so long, and it seemed to think Saren was also an acceptable option. He couldn't say he disagreed, but now was really not the time.

The sniper continued to resist temptation, and held still while the vent cover was unlocked, and it's security disengaged. It came out with a quiet pop and they moved on. Garrus forcefully shoved the thoughts away, he didn't have time to deal with them right now.

The Spectre pulled himself up into the vent, pushing the mech's crate ahead of them. They made it to the doorway of the gardens, and Saren set their abomination droid up. They used it's one-time-use shield generator to avoid being spotted in the brightly lit gardens, and slipped inside. The DNA and retinal scanner both granted access, the mass recognition device scanned them, and suddenly it was the moment of truth.

Calm as you please, they walked down the hallway as the lasers scanned them. The results came up negative for the biometrics of the two fully armored Turians, but zeroed in on the mech. Moments passed... and the lasers turned off as the far door slid open.

It had worked!

Garrus felt his mandibles scrap against the inside of his helm as he smiled in relief. The Spectre had his attention on his 'tool for a few moments, but looked up and nodded. He tilted the view screen to show the sniper the success of his back door hacks having worked on the drones in the vault proper. All that was left was out-maneuvering the stasis fields.

The main room of the Omoi archives was a massive chamber, larger then the senate building on Palaven in a single room, with a winding circular design that had artifacts and rarities floating in groupings like a variety of altars to different cultures, historical moments, or artists. The room was well lit, and lovely, with spiral patterns and elegant metal filigree filling every square meter. He heard Saren growl lowly beside him, and turned to look. The Spectre pointed at one display in particular.
There were nearly twenty pedestals filled with Turian artifacts straight out of a museum, from regiment banners and ancient weaponry to scrolls and musical instruments. Cultural items that should have been on display in a historical preservation center on their home world, not trapped here in the private collection of an Asari.

Garrus let out a quiet 'damn' into the still air, and his cohort nodded stiffly, slowing as they passed by. The sniper reached out a hand to lay on the Spectre's back, who was clearly more pissed off about those artifacts then the trouble of getting the key itself, and gently guided him forward. Surprisingly, Saren rumbled appreciation for the support and leaned into him for a moment before refocusing on their destination.

The vault key was among a variety of Prothean artifacts in vast display of pieces that took up a major portion of wall and floor space.

“'I can see, at a glance, at least six artifacts here that are on the Council's black list for personal ownership.'”

“Oh yeah? What's the penalty for keeping them?”

Saren sounded cold, but a hint of spiteful glee echoed in his subvocals as he replied. “Billions of credits in fines, and seizure of course.”

“Ohhh, ouch.” Garrus smirked.

“Indeed. It would be devastating if the proper authorities were to come here for an inspection. Off world authorities that were not able to be paid off.”

“Yeeeaaah, it would. I wonder what else might be seized in a raid like that.”

“You would be surprised.”

They shared a look, and the sniper was fairly certain the relics of his people were getting home one way or another.
Saren stepped up to the platform base corresponding to the key, and began feeling out the biotic field with his own.

“I am ready to suppress the barrier, are you prepared to hack the panel and disable power temporarily?”

“Yeah, good to go.”

The Spectre was good to his word, flaring in uneven biotic ripples that slowly evened out before turning into a steady blue nimbus. He pushed a hand forward toward the machine, and where the fields touched sparks flew but the machine failed in the face of Saren's will. As soon as the opening was good enough Garrus began to hack his way in, and set about disconnecting the local power.

The soft yellow stasis glow flickered, and Garrus reached out to catch the key before it fell. The still-disguised biotic let his aura go, and pulled up his Omni-tool to make an in depth scan of the key for duplication. It took a quarter hour for the replica to be made, but it slipped right into place as they reversed the extraction process. Everything came back online, and visually no one would be able to tell something was amiss.

They returned back down the hall way, and Saren repacked the mech into it's small floating crate. It was good they had managed this sooner rather than latter, as it's flash cloned skin was already looking paler and moist with degradation. Making for the top of the stairs, the Spectre signaled Garrus to wait a moment. A few taps on his well-used custom ‘tool, and the lights began to flicker. Once, twice, then out altogether. The shorter *torin* took off at a run, the mech's box zipping along behind him.

The sniper kept up, and they headed back the way they came in. A little less then an hour of sneaking had them back on the outside of the estate, and slipping away into the night. The rental skycar was used to return to the city, and transport off world was secured through another passenger liner. Distracted crew never noticed two more random travelers.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Three days later saw the green eyed upstart in the ring again, recovered from the beatings he'd taken, and looking for more punishment. The wager master for the fight had cornered him alone this morning, asking him subtly if he'd be willing to loose in exchange for a pay out. Hurricane had made himself seem curious, but not sold on the idea. He couldn't seem too eager, after all.
Today's match was versus a whipcord-thin Salarian. The man was all wiry muscle and quiet anger. From the first few moments it became obvious that the stoic man wasn't here for the money or the fame. It was all in the emotional release of hand to hand combat, and an outpouring of whatever it was that had caused that molten anger in him. Nihlus psychologically profiled the other fighter while they began a light series of attack and counter moves. He could tell he was being tested, as though the stranger didn't want to accidentally kill him if he was too unskilled.

The Spectre controlled his breath and focused, this match was shaping up to be an actual challenge if he was facing someone with the know how to feel him out like the Salarian was. 'Finale' was his opponent's ring name, and it seemed like a warning more then anything else. Nihlus guessed he was likely known for some sort of combination strikes that finished opponents in sudden and impressive ways. He wondered in passing if the man had even chosen his own name, as it didn't seem to fit his personality.

Several minutes passed as the complexity and savagery of their movements increased in pace, and Nihlus could visibly see the stress leave the Salarian's shoulders as he proved to be a worthy partner. Ever helpful, Nihlus Kyrik tried to give Finale a damn good match, even as he made sure to line himself up for a win. The quiet, angry fellow needed this fight in a way that he could relate to. Some sort of ingrained need for a potent and visceral anchor to reality in the face of life's madness. The carmine plated torin got it from sex and drugs, but he saw that desperate grasp on sanity in the Salarian's movements. He used the fight to keep his heart beating strong.

So he needed a good fight? The Spectre wanted to give him one.

They ended up in a wicked non-stop battle of acrobatics at whiplash speed that the audience struggled to keep up with. It was brutal and fast, and though it might have less blood flow then the match the other day, the crowd was so damn into it. The skill on display was mesmerizing, and had the hundreds of violence-hungry viewers breathless with engagement.

When Salarian recovery times started to get ahead of Turian stamina, Nihlus went in for a finisher move that he thought would do the man justice. The next time a well controlled punch came in to tag him, he grabbed it and dropped both his feet forward, spreading them as he slid. Not understanding what sort of move the bendy and creative Turian was making, Finale tried to disengage, but was rapidly too tangled in limbs to escape. Hurricane's upper body yanked on him as he fell, and instincts made him resist. Not that rolling with it was much better, as the Spectre had this strange combination move down to an art.

As the reverse weight kept the green eyed torin from falling, he engaged his core in an almost sexual roll that pulled the Salarian's feet from under him, leaving the Turian Hurricane with his knees on either side of hips, his feet lodged under knees, and hands pinning Finale's arms above his head as they hit the dirt floor.
The Salarian's head smacked the ground hard, and he blinked up at Nihlus, dazed. Mandibles widened in a smile as he panted in exhaustion on top of the defeated man.

“Sorry friend... you're damn good... but I'm just... a little better.”

“I... ah... I would say so... yes.”

He popped back up onto heels, and took a half step back, helping the still dazed form rise.

“I think... that's a concussion. How about we getcha... to a medic?”

“That would be wise.... thanks.”

Amidst the cheers and fluttering fans, they hobbled out of the pit. The doors closed behind the fighters blocking out the pageantry and exultation at the sport of their match.

It was a concussion, according to the flat eyed doctor the pit kept on staff, but a minor one. Along with a laundry list of contusions, abrasions, and miscellaneous small injuries. She had both of them spend a few minutes in a regen field, and shoved a nutrient loaded drink into each of their hands before shoving them out the door. Nihlus made a crack about severely lacking customer service that startled a laugh out of Finale, who turned out to be named Engress Lorrin.

His former opponent offered to buy him a drink, to which he merrily accepted. Of course, he had the man in bed within hours, and was sparring with him in a whole different manner before the night was out. There was more then one way to blow off stress, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Avatar of Victory (1,880,239 words) by James Golen

(One of the most amazing, mindbogglingly good fanfictions I've ever read. Cross over Mass Effect / Avatar the Last Airbender, set in the ME world but with humans that have decended from the Avatar world. IT'S SO GOOD. If you've never watched AtLA, I
would recommend it, but it isn’t necessary to enjoy the shit out of this story. )
Unable to give up

Chapter Summary

In which Saren's rarely seen true anger is provoked.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Ylasiun - The ancient Turian version of heaven. The realm where all honorable warriors spend eternity. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Praela(s) - The name for ancient warrior spirits who were believed to ride great beasts into war at the head of their tribe’s legions. Spirits of great bravery, tenacity, and a fearsome beauty. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Mari/Pari - Turian closed dialect for mom/dad. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Dextro-Regen Serum – A Turian made pre-cursor to Medi-gel. It lacks the sealant properties, anesthetic, and gel quality, instead being an injectable liquid that has regenerative properties to it, along with clotting agents and a mild stimulant cocktail.

Hypo – Short for 'hypospray', a replacement for the hypodermic needle that uses high-pressure narrow jets of liquid to penetrate skin or hide, powered by compressed air. (Real)

Medigel – A gel based sealant containing anesthetic and clotting agents that seals against liquids. In later years, medi-gel is separated into active and passive types, active being the name for the original, and passive being a name for the non sealant version that includes a regenerative serum and can be injected into the body. Active medi-gel types harden, and must be broken up with ultrasound in order to be removed. (Canon)

Reverie - The effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva, adaptive to any species or chirality thanks to the biologically creative pheromone receptors/interpreters along the jaw, throat, and nose that use incoming pheromones to produce counter hormones which induce a rigorous onslaught of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce the cocktail will 'remix' the blend constantly for success, continuing until maximum effect is reached. Has an additive component of low grade bioelectric feedback exclusive in 'Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: A brutal, colorful blending of Recidiva's 'Reverie', MizDirected's 'pheromone receptors', and idea glue from me.)

Chapter Soundtrack:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The flight to Cariose would take several days, and another trip back to the Citadel would add a week to the journey. Considering the time sensitive nature of the vault access, Saren intended to head straight there. He explained that they were headed to the lawless world now, but Vakarian's dissatisfaction with the situation wasn't over what he had thought it would be.

Rather than being either upset or forgiving of more time kept away from home, the sniper was displeased that the Spectre had planned to leave him on the ship for the next part of the mission.

“You can't just expect me to sit here idly while you run around on spirits-damned Cariose. That place is a mad house. Old war dogs go there to die in the fight of their life, because there is always a battle, and it will generally result in death. What made you think I'd be okay with... what? Sitting here reading? Come on, Saren... let me have your six.”

They had been arguing this back and forth for the better part of the morning, and regardless of the torin's numerous attempts to explain his inexplicable desire to accompany the agent on such a risky venture, he had continued to refuse the Detective as his reasoning was insufficient.

He saw no point in risking his asset when the job only called for one.

“I do not require aid for this part of the endeavor, and as you say, it is a dangerous place. I have explained this. You would take significant risk to your life to travel there. Needless risk.”

“I am completely aware. I understand that risk, but I can't just... let you go out there alone when I am right here.”

“Why would you wish to go? I do not understand your reasoning. Your presence is unnecessary.”

The sniper rumbled exasperation at him and scrubbed a hand over his face plates.

“Fine? You know what? When you inevitably shoot me for this, all I can say is that I didn't know how to make myself more clear with words. Spirits, I tried.”

The shorter torin took a half-step back as the mountainous Turian sniper came into his space, grabbed him firmly by the shoulders, and pressed their foreheads together. Silver-grey mandibles
fluttered in confusion and anxiety, the rest of him frozen in place. He normally reacted to this sort of ridiculous concern and forwardness with anger, but the sniper's subvocals were humming a strange combination of apology and affection, and it felt cruel to simply tell him off. Vakarian pushed into the point of connection, rolling back and forth for a moment before raising hands up to cradle his jaw on either side, the gentle touch inducing a dizzy sort of anticipation that he didn't understand the cause of.

“I care about you, Saren. I would like to think we're something approaching friends, good friends, maybe something else too. I... Ah...” Saren flexed his hands, uncertain what to do with them. Or in general. He did not want to reject what seemed to be an opened ended offer of friendship, but he was not used to anyone getting so close to him physically. Not unless he was seducing a mark, or was about to kill someone. The icy blue eyes looking into his from centimeters away fluttered closed, and a frustrated noise buzzed in the sniper's subvocals.

“I want to go with you just in case anything goes wrong. I can't sit still when someone I care about might be in danger, it drives me nuts not to act. I want to have your six, and yeah, I know you're the superior officer between us, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm here for you. Not the Council, or the archaeologist team, you. When I said I was here when you need me, I was trying to say...”

The Spectre finally managed to draw a full breath when Vakarian pulled back a few dozen centimeters. He had not realized that his breathing had paused. The sniper's mouth worked as if he were struggling to find further words. The taller torin eventually gave up and leaned back in, leaving that pressure against Saren's fringe for several quiet moments. The Spectre's brow furrowed as he struggled to comprehend the situation, but he remained unresisting if not participating, swallowing back the dizziness that their proximity was causing.

“I'm terrible at this. Just... take me with you. Please. I won't hold you back.”

At this point, the Spectre heard himself acquiesce as if from a distance, if only to get the delirium inducing presence to back off a bit. Instead of cooperating though, Garrus let out a soft, pleased sounding trill and tilted Saren's face up to press their noses close as well. A thumb pulled his chin down as they shared breath, sliding sideways in a gentle caress as it returned to holding him close. He felt the light touch of Reverie as a cool tongue slid back along his, licking a languid path along the roof of his mouth, gliding along nerves with a lingering tingle.

Saren began breathing rapidly, short pants that just made the dizziness worse. It occurred to him in passing that something about Vakarian's hormones seemed to mix with his own in a startling and disconcerting manner. Nihlus had also made this delirious feeling rise though... so perhaps it was just him.

Garrus' head tilted as he nibbled along one mandible, tracing his tongue on a long trail to the tip,
before returning his attention to the Spectre's mouth with a curl of tongues. Saren's anxiety ramped up as he was drawn in and responded when he hadn't meant to. He felt cornered, but it conflicted with a wild feeling of being lighter than air and wanting more. It was... it was... just... just the Reverie. Hormones. He pulled back, shoulders hunched in and head down, and tried to find words to resolve the situation. Any words would do. A shield against whatever it was that the sniper did to him.

“Saren? What's wrong?”

“I do not... feel that way.”

“Oh, that's... it's alright. It doesn't bother me if you don't... reciprocate. Sorry for-”

The Spectre growled lightly, not wanting to be misunderstood.

“No, Vakarian, I mean that I... I do not have the full range of Turian emotion. I cannot reciprocate.”

Garrus' distressed eased, and he smiled crookedly, much to the Spectre's confusion.

“I figured you were at least a partial sociopath. It's alright, there's nothing wrong with that. I just hope you'll forgive my... ah... forwardness?”

Saren was... utterly... stalled at the words 'sociopath' and 'alright' being used together. Sociopathy among Turians was nearly as bad as being barefaced. A person who couldn't feel what their people felt was useless as a leader of any sort. You couldn't raise a person like that to a higher tier.

The last person to insist there was not something terribly wrong with who he was... had been Desolas.

The feeling of anxiety quelled, but the airy lightness died too. His sense of being cornered also turned around. He took a step toward the sniper, trying to look into the mind behind his icy blue eyes.

“You are not recoiling from the fact that I am cognitively different.”
“... no? It's not like it's your fault... you can't exactly help a circumstance of birth. I'm ah, just happy with whatever emotions you can feel. As long as they're good ones.”

Saren tilted his head away, blinking furiously and swallowing back bemusement as the dregs of overpowering crossed-wires inside his mind calmed down. Vakarian was... okay with his sociopathy. Wanted to 'have his six', even if it should technically be him taking care of the Detective instead.

This was all very backwards from what he was used to.

A warm hand came down on his shoulder, though thankfully the torin left him the rest of his personal space.

“You alright?”

“Yes... I am.”

Garrus walked beside his Spectre, keeping a gimlet eye on the mercs that were escorting them to the vault. Something in their body language tickled his instincts the wrong way, but nothing about it was overt enough for him to know why.

The corridor the group was traversing was disgusting, filled with no small amount of bones and other remains just left to lie in the endless sprawling passages, so profuse were the left overs of the dead. The place looked like it must have once been a library of some kind, but it felt like nothing so much as catacombs beneath a necropolis.

The surface area they'd landed in, a neutral safeish zone, had been alright. Lively markets and children even, and the sniper had thought that perhaps the dark rumors about this world had been blown out of proportion.

They had not.
Outside the safe zone, which was an island along the coast that mostly lacked any natural resources or ruins, this planet was hell. Or alternatively, heaven if you wanted to fight till you eventually died or got rich off of the looted Prothean relics that emerged from the chaos regularly. The whole thing was like a dark, twisted, mortal version of Ylasiun.

They emerged from the picked-clean library into a series of smaller hallways, then into a large hall where empty plinths still bore the faded outlines of the treasures they once held. There, set into the far wall, was a small and innocuous door with a hollow in the middle shaped just like the key.

“Welp Arterius, this is where we leave you. Everyone who's tried to open this door has died, s'got defenses up the whazoo. See the lines along the ceiling? Some sort of crazy plasma turrets. Yeeeep. Best of luck, and thanks for the favor. We're even now, either way this goes.”

“As agreed, yes.”

The merc leader and his half-a-dozen followers filed out, leaving the way they came. Garrus watched as they left, unspeaking until they were gone.

“Something isn't right here.”

“I was getting a similar feeling. Their disregard for the key we hold is somewhat telling. I was expecting immediate betrayal, yet they appear to be keeping their word. Not even an attempt to renegotiate for a cut of whatever lies inside? Too obvious.”

The Detective nodded, pleased that they'd both noticed something was off. The silver-grey Spectre strode forward, scanning. It seemed he found nothing immediately wrong, as the torin then stepped forward and set the key into the slot with no amount of ceremony.

The center piece flickered with light, and an odd series of buzzes and hums came from the doorway, then it opened. Inside was white, preserved and clean Prothean architecture, lit by glowing blue bars set into the wall half way up. Most of them were ticking off and on, struggling to activate after all this time.

A short corridor opened up into a suite of rooms. It was once someone's home. Saren left proximity alarms at the door, and they carefully walked around. Wall by wall, item by item, the whole place was scanned. They couldn't bring every inch of it safely back into Citadel space, but they could bring
good records of the find and choice pieces of archaeology. It also wasn't as if they needed to hurry anymore.

Over the course of the next four or five hours they cataloged and scanned in over four hundred objects. Saren had shared the program the Council's specialist team had him using, and together they worked over every centimeter. The goods that had organic parts to them, like bedding, drapery, or clothing were all long gone, but some of the bits and bobbles attached had survived and gave hints to the shape the original garment had taken. From the look of it, Protheans must have had a fashion that left the back bared, and draped things dramatically from their heads. A brittle piece of molded metal ornament still had tiny crystals hanging from it, and was shaped either to a very large head, or very small shoulders perhaps. It was hard to tell, exactly. Neither of them were experts, just observant.

The crème de la crème of the find was a working data sphere, of which they didn't have the equipment to download from. It was however small enough to take with. Along with the sphere they also packed up a small datapad device, three memory shards, a logic puzzle, four hand held devices of unknown use, and a beautiful piece of spun glass and metal filigree in a large sealed vacuum tube made from an eezo laced crystal. Likely just art work, but in such good condition they didn't dare leave it behind. Saren had brought two anti-grav cargo containers, each about one cubic meter in space, and after the greater treasures were carefully settled in, the extra space in the second container was jam packed with everything they could fit.

Priceless rewards for a job well done all packed away, the pair left the room. At the doorway they resealed it and took the key. No longer undisturbed, but leaving it to be ransacked behind them was pointless.

Inside the suites Garrus had felt his mood improve. It was less disgusting and creepy in there, and was filled with all sorts of interesting things for him and Saren to discuss. He was inordinately relieved that the incident on the ship hadn't ruined their ability to converse. If the Spectre wasn't into him that was mostly just fine, but if he'd permanently screwed things up between them the sniper would have been fairly upset. Not that he was entirely convinced that Saren was one-hundred-and-ten-percent uninterested. The torin's subvocals had been dizzily humming in a distracted and syrupy sort of desire when they'd shared Reverie.

It was just enough to keep that torch of his lit.

As they exited the 'vault' that was really just an apartment however, that niggleing feeling of something being off had his mandibles tight and his finger tapping anxiously on the trigger guard to the Lancer. They pushed on, heading for the 'surface' of the unending walkways and buildings. Forward through the labyrinth, ever upwards toward the rooftop the Daedalus was parked on.

Reaching the end of the library-like area the Spectre and Detective moved through a door way and
found the exits blocked by barrier generators.

There it was, that 'something'.

A glance around after they’d pulled back behind the doorway showed no one in the cavernous hall. It wasn’t quite up to the rooftops yet, but the room was high enough to have real sunlight streaming in from the right and left sides. It might’ve been a boulevard back in the day, maybe at one point lined with street vendors and park benches.

Scans showed no activity, and Saren called out into the still air with something between a threat and a request for terms. Nothing moved, nothing spoke.

Eventually, lacking other options, they moved out of cover and headed for the exit they were going to have taken before. Still no signs of movement or life. Garrus’ gizzard was a block of ice, and his adrenaline levels were sky high. His hands were still rock steady though.

As they moved toward their targeted exit, he began an exercise his pari had taught him, focusing on it with most of the million-light-years-a-minute thinking his brain was doing anyway.

‘If you can’t figure out what the criminals are doing, stop thinking like you for a minute, and think like them. Start from their angle.’

Pari’s advice had been stuffed into youthful, unwilling ears at the time, but Garrus had built his career thus far of his mari’s cleverness, and the sage advice of his grouchy and pedantic old man.

So, if he were these mercs, or a rival group, or anyone else in general, why would he put up barriers?

To trap them in.

Why would he not be in the room too? If he was targeting Saren Arterius, he would know that a gravity based barrier shield would only keep him busy for so long.

Yes.
Okay, so there-in is the answer. To keep them busy for a little time. But why?

_To strike when and where they aren't expecting it._

Garrus heart skipped a beat as his eyes rose to the openings that were letting in sunlight. He couldn't see a damn thing for all the light that was shining in, but he knew, _he knew_, that was where he would sit to take a kill shot into this room specifically because of that glare.

His feet were moving before he even finished that thought, simultaneously shouting for Saren to get down, and diving to move him bodily into cover.

One thing about being as short as Saren Arterius is that where a long-horned, silver-grey head sits is also about where the shoulders are on someone who is closer to Garrus' height. The high caliber round caught him on the right shoulder, and sent both of them tumbling to the ground. Saren's biotic barrier flared to life, blocking all shots, but the damage was already done. The needle-like bullet, huge for a mass effect propelled round, had been a phasic round made to tear through shields. The high caliber had given it the punch to go right through the shoulder armor as well, and the remains of the now shattered hollow bullet poked out from a 1.3 centimeter thick hole straight through the Detective's torso.

The bleeding was profuse.

Garrus choked in pain, hitting his own medi-gel dispenser and trying desperately to scramble the rest of the way into cover, which was a measly knee high square that had probably once held topiary or flowers of some sort. Barrier flared bright, Saren helped drag him the rest of the way. Out of sight of the enemy sniper, the Spectre retracted his helm then began triage and first aid, pulling pieces of the bullet out and depressing a hypo of a dextro-based regenerative serum into the area. Of course the old fashioned _torin_ would carry the Turian pre-cursor to medi-gel. He hated most everything about human kind, no reason for him to trust one of their inventions.

The bleeding sniper gurgled on a mouthful of blood, and fumbled with his own helm switch, coughing it up violently as soon as he had space to expel the fluid. The shot seemed to have missed the major organs, coming in at an angle that passed by all critical arteries and vital spots. A lucky break on that front at least, but it still went right through his plates and lung tissue, and he could _feel_ every bit of that empty space.

Garrus lost track of time for a few moments, coming back around as Saren painfully worked wound
sealant down into the breach, causing him to keen in agony. He noticed that although they were in
cover, that blue barrier was still burning bright. He hadn't ever worked with a Kabal unit before, and
knew that most people were freaked out by the supposedly non-existent Turian biotics, but at that
moment it was just... lovely. The rippling aura shone a bright sapphire blue, reminding the Detective
of the first time he'd met the Spectre in person, when he'd come flying in a third story window of a
bank like a *Praela* summoned to war.

He caught a semblance of breath as the sealant did it's job.

“Arggg. Shit. I'm alright, we're not going to be able to- aaa, that hurts... see that sniper well enough
from, mmf-from here to take them out. What's the plan?” Saren looked down at him with no mere
electricity in his gaze.

No, that was an entire damn thunderstorm in there.

The Spectre stood and lifted taloned gauntlets as he took a stance. Another shot was aimed at them,
but it shattered on impact with the barrier that was blazing several hand spans out from the snarling
*torin*. Saren's deep bass growls rolled with him as he began to enact the motions for a biotic pull. The
field dampened and flared as Saren moved his body in a graceful memetic, and from nearly sixty
meters away a flailing form came streaking across the sky to land in a sprawl at his feet. The Asari
hadn't regained any bearings in the least before being neck snapped with a wet and overpowered
crunching noise.

Garrus managed to roll over, and push himself to his knees. An arm came down to help him up, and
he leaned the bad side against the supporting strength.

“You will stay within range of me at all times. They are using phasic rounds that your armor was
never intended to deal with. We will acquire a tech shield in the future, for now, do not move outside
of my biotic aura. I... apologize for any discomfort it causes you.”

“I don't- mmmnf... I don't mind your biotics, Saren. Let's just get the hell off this planet.”

“... Agreed.”

The wounded sniper pulled his side arm up, not having the stability for the Lancer or Viper at the
moment, and tried to hobble as straight as possible toward the still shielded doorway. It wasn't
blocked for long though, as Saren's field tore through the machine generated one like wet tissue
paper. On the other side three dozen mercs and their leader were waiting.

“Arterius! It wasn't nothing personal, I hope you know that! Matron Shi’leen knew you was coming. She gave us a better offer to have the spoils sent to her instead. 'Nuff to buy a whole damn moon of our own. If you're interested in the cash, maybe we could work somethin' out!”

He laughed wetly at the idiots and their desperate attempt to deal now that their assassination attempt had failed. Garrus caught Saren eyeing the blood that escaped down his jaw with a black look. More had come drizzling out when he laughed, and the agent looked none too pleased about it. He doubted the Spectre was at all interested in their offer. It warmed his heart a little, actually... The horrifically painful wound was almost worth it to see Saren in a tizzy fit like this. It meant he cared, right? The angry growling was also a little sexy.

He was distracted from further consideration of the silver-grey torin's attractive qualities by the odd hue of the flooring. Why was the ground now lavender colored here? Odd.

The mild recoil from Saren's hand canon drew his attention back to the situation at hand. It was apparently time for bullets. Garrus lifted his side arm and helped out. Even in wretchedly massive amounts of pain, and feeling really off-kilter from the blood loss, his aim was not terrible. He hit the headish region one in three shots, and only missed entirely one in ten. Pretty shit for him, actually, but hey, he hadn't had any vitamins today. It was also a Tuesday.

Ah... hmm.

The mercs were panicking though, so at least something was going right. The over-powered barrier was stopping their attacks dead in the water, and bullet slivers fell from the shield's edge in a sparkle of mass effect propelled dust that had suddenly lost all it's acceleration. The enemy's numbers dropped, and they hobbled forward slowly, clearing them out. After half had died, the rest decided to run for it. Smart cookies. Mmm cookies. Garrus was immediately really hungry for baked goods, and also wanted dextro chocolate. He wanted that chocolate more then he wanted air all of a sudden, and that's saying something for a person that's been lung-shot.

The damn floor was getting more purple by the second.

“Saren... I don't... I'm uh... having trouble focusing. I feel realllly strange too. Did I ever mention that your crest blades are really attractive? I think I have a thing for longer horns, and yours are pretty much the s- oh spirits what am I saying. Ignore me. Um... Why is the floor lavender colored here? I swear it wasn't before.”
The Spectre turned to look at him in bafflement. That was about the time he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, this is last call for italicising of 'torin'. It's become pidgeon English in my head now, hopefully in yours too. :D

So I ran the math on Saren's biotic feat of pissed-as-fuck-because-you-hurt-my-shiny, and I'm not the best mathematician so I used online converters for some of the units, but as far as I can figure it would take a biotic pull (instead of a throw, just reverse mechanics) of about 490 Newtons to nab that sniper out of the nest and drop them at his feet. I went off the traditional Force=Mass*Acceleration, and put in F=73.06*6.7056. Mass was estimated as Mass = Density*Volume, using M=965kg/m3*2560 oz (the density of human body mid-breath, times 160lbs in oz), and acceleration was 30 mph over 2 seconds from a stand still. In game, biotic throws generally max out at 1200N, and that's just an average high, so I'm guessing a power-barrier and a tug of 490 wasn't too much of a drain on a fueled-by-rage Saren. Obviously, I didn't go into calculating the distance and trajectory type data, but I think going flying out of a higher ground sniper perch at 30mph could get you the distance he pulled them at. If not, we could assume that he put up to double or triple that amount of force if needed, or sustained it to keep her coming. As I previously stated back in the metalworks chapters, the Asari merc estimated him as spiking at 1700 N. Umm... damn, that's a scary torin. Whoof.

Fanfic Recommendation: **4th of Eleven** (MShep / Morinth, not a happy fic.)
Well we didn't mean to

Chapter Summary

Saren is as accommodating as he can be, and Garrus still manages to push that boundary.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon: (A litter spoilery, fair warning!)

PNS - Peripheral Nervous System (Real)

Lipophilic - A description for a molecule that 'likes' particles that are lipid based, and are probably lipid based themselves. This means they will play nicely with each other, but not water based molecules. 'Lipids' are fatty acids, like myelin sheaths on nerves, adipose tissue (fat), the various 'glycerides', etc. (Real)

Toxic Encephalopathy - a disorder caused by neurotoxic organic solvents or following exposure to heavy metals. Exposure to these toxins can have a variety symptoms, such as an altered mental status, memory loss, and vision issues. (Real)

Cerbrospinal Fluid - the fluid that cushions the brain and spine, provides both support and basic immunological functions. (Real)

Phasic rounds - an ammunition modification that charges the particles of the round so that they more easily penetrate shields and armor. (Canon)

Cariose - A lawless world of towering Prothean ruins overpopulated by the worst the galaxy has to offer. Omega on land.

Microfabricator - A fabrication device of varying complexity that uses a storage of various elements to create a wide variety of molecules. Intended to create minute amounts of specific chemical compositions, though production facilities sometimes have massive sized 'microfabs' to create great quantities. (Fanon)

Massfabricator - A fabrication device of varying complexity that uses Omni-gel or a storage of various elements to create a wide variety of simple molecules. Intended to create larger objects, anywhere from a few cubic centimeters to meters limited by base material and time available. Most Omni-tools are equipped with a 'Massfab' that can do the job of either a Microfab or Massfab depending on what materials are provided in the gel tanks. Technically, an Omni-tool, given enough base material and time, could flash forge an entire house or ship, if the schematics and elements were on hand. Emergency food even, could be made. (Fanon)

A/N: I am sooo tired. Will reread and check for errors tomorrow, so fair warning if you are reading this as soon as it goes up... might be a bit messy. Long though! :D

Chapter Soundtrack: "Nuclear" by Extreme Music (Nik Ammar)
Vakarian's full weight fell on his shoulder for a few seconds before he compensated with a mass-lightening field. It was unstable and difficult to form without being able to move through the memetic, but he managed it. Thankfully the torin was already immersed in his aura from the barrier shield, so it did not take much more power to form the field. On the other hand it was a challenge to hold the same flux of local energy as both a gravitational wall strong enough that it stopped incoming fire in it's tracks, but also a mild lightening that reduced the sniper's mass enough for him to one-arm carry while shooting.

More of a problem of concentration then power in the end.

While the Stone Corps may have only had a half dozen mercenaries on hand to escort him to the vault, there were no less than five score trying to kill him now, and the hail of bullets was beginning to really put a strain on his biotics. Taking better cover, Saren let himself recover some, but the exchange meant it was taking much longer to get his fallen comrade out of this mess and into a medbay. Unacceptable, but his other options were push himself too far and risk them both, or leave the unconscious form unprotected in a nook somewhere, which did not much suit either.

Suddenly the mercenaries decided to get creative, and someone joined the fray with heavy weapons. As he was currently hiding behind a mere crate, he decided to switch to something more substantial. There was a large shuttle nearby that had previously delivered troops. While he did not think he could hack it while under fire, it might take the oncoming rockets with more aplomb than a crate. Saren moved to the new location with a biotically enhanced leap, and continued to take out hostiles.

The shuttle craft rocked with incoming fire, but resisted the hits well until it took an unfortunately aimed rocket to it's drive core shielding. The fool-proof safeguards kept it from exploding in a fiery mess, but the internal components of metal and eezo rained down on the area. While the Spectre did not usually care to augment his biotics with the trace amounts of eezo found in things like red sand, this situation would work in his favor. Considering that Vakarian's breathing was rapid and shallow, he was willing to take the advantage.

Kicking up the eezo dust with a small whirlwind, he pulled it to him and breathed in deeply, using the extra boost to send out two singularities at the points of heaviest incoming fire, and then detonating them mercilessly. Viscera splattered the walls as thirteen enemies died gruesome deaths. Saren knew he would be paying for this later, but at the moment he was a vortex of refined element zero and displeasure. Another eight hostiles rose into the sky, floating helplessly as he ended them one by one at his leisure.

It took him an unacceptably long time to clear through the mercenaries even thus empowered, but the
eighty or so forms that now decorated the battlefield attested to how useless their double-crossing had been. Saren made a mental note to work on his lift-shield combination of biotics at a later time, as the inefficiency of carrying the sniper and holding a barrier simultaneously had been a major setback. For now, the battlefield of empty targets, he set the senseless torin down in a sheltered spot. A quick scan showed that the Detective's vitals were all over the place, but did not clarify as to why.

He lifted the passed out form in a firefighter's carry after holstering his weapon, then relit his aura into a passable lightening and shielding combination, beginning a pell-mell run for the Daedalus. Considering he could literally bounce off of walls and leap six meters with ease, it did not take nearly so long to get back as it normally would have. The half-forgotten artifacts zipping along behind him on their anti-grav generators, struggling to keep up.

Saren overrode the airlock protocols and headed inside as soon as he arrived, trusting the ship's defense measures to have stopped any attempts to tamper while he was away. He quickly brought the limp form to the med bay. Setting Vakarian down, he stripped the sniper's armor away and set the medical suite to run. It had just began to scan for injuries as he left the room, taking a seat in the CIC and setting his cyber-warfare suite's teeth against the local air traffic control.

His Spectre-grade VI chewed through the local anti-aircraft gun's computer systems, and the ST&R agent proceeded to get the ship off the ground. A priority, in case the mercenary company had more surprises intended for him. The Daedalus rose into geo-sync orbit, cyber-warfare suite, defensive grid, and shields active. Weapons primed.

With nothing approaching on radar, the Spectre returned to see what Vakarian's status was. The medical VI's answers were less than helpful.

[BIOMEDICAL SUITE – ACTIVATED]

[Now scanning...]
[Scan complete.]

[Gathering data from cybernetics...]
[Data acquired.]

[Multiple hide lacerations detected.]
[Multiple plate fractures detected.]

[Multiple bone fractures detected.]

[Multiple sites of internal bleeding detected.]

[Major organ damage detected.]

[Foreign matter detected.]

[Toxic Encephalopathy detected.]

[Calculating efficient order of operation...]

[Initiating blood filtering, estimated time: ongoing.]

[Continuing operations while in progress.]

[Initiating removal of foreign matter, estimated time of 67 seconds.]

[Removal completed successfully.]

[Initiating repair of Right Bracial Artery, estimated time of 83 seconds.]

His eyes trailed over the initial report as the long mechanical arms of the medi-bot worked over the still form, catching on 'Encephalopathy'. Phasic rounds should not have any sort of toxic effect on the brain, and the reading confused the Spectre for a moment until he remembered that the pieces of the strangely large round had been hollow. A new type of ammunition, loaded with a toxic agent in case the initial hit did not finish the target, perhaps.

Electric eyes narrowed. The idiotic double-crossing fools must have hedged their bets, intending for this surprise to take him out if they could not make a head-shot. Now, Vakarian was paying for that hedging, and for his insistence on coming with. Saren growled lowly, filled with a strange sort of annoyance and no small amount of anger. He spun around and headed for the command chair to see further retribution done.

The Spectre pulled the weapon's systems to the main screen. He allowed a black smile of dark amusement to express itself, that the system which Vakarian had helped optimize would see the treachery that had laid him low avenged. He did so enjoy poetry. Moving to fly directly over the mercenary base he let loose three volleys of plasma fire, leaving whoever remained of the Stone Corps vaporized in a scored earth bombardment that would send anyone else to a lifetime sentence in prison or summary execution.

Not a Spectre though, especially not out in the Terminus Systems.
The southern defense grid for Cariose's capitol went off line very permanently, to Saren's satisfaction. This world would forever remember what it meant to cross an agent of the Council. As it should be.

He set the navigational VI's course for the Mass Relay, and returned to check the medical VI's newest readouts.

[Repair completed successfully.]
[Initiating insertion of cloned respiratory tissue, estimated time of 243 seconds.]
[Insertion completed successfully.]
[Initiating repair of pectoral plates, estimated time of 40 seconds.]

A glance at the blood filtering progress showed irregular levels of silver, chemical compounds, and a host of other things that the machine was still running through spectroanalysis. Vakarian whimpered quietly in his sleep, unconscious but still in pain as the repairs were performed with minimal anesthetic so as to not exacerbate his altered blood chemistry. He offered what comfort he could to the comatose form.

“You may rest easy. The people responsible are all dead... except Matron Shi'leen. She will join them shortly.”

Saren nodded to himself and made for the holo ring, intending to set a more specific course for Niacal, when suddenly the machine made a series of displeased dings.

[Attention: vitals not stabilizing. Abnormal blood chemistry levels. Tap here for further details.]

He did so, and a series of paragraphs wrought with medical jargon and definitions presented itself. It took even the highly intelligent Spectre several minutes to go through. In essence, it appeared that Vakarian's natural blood chemistry was not self correcting anymore. The system was artificially keeping him in balance, even though the toxins had been fully removed from his body as far as the VI could tell. Worse, it appeared that the sniper had taken a fair dose of eezo while Saren had been using the remains of the shuttle. The torin's rapid breathing came to mind, and he felt like kicking himself for not thinking of it. Heavy metal poisoning was not what the unconscious form needed right now, not at all.
The Spectre ground his teeth, his mind running a million light years a minute to calculate what to do about it.

First, contact the one medical professional he knew, Dr. Ofuterian.

Second, contact Nihlus, considering his knowledge of poison craft.

Third, seek a nearby location with professional staff.

Fourth, acquire a civilian specialist if need be. The Spectre offices may have a reference to one.

A plan of action to solve the medical crisis bumped up in his mental to-do list over vengeance, though it was delayed and not removed. Perhaps also elevated in severity, if this proved to be permanently damaging. Saren raised his Omni-tool to send out vid-call requests marked priority to both the doctor and his protégé.

Dr. Ofuterian answered immediately, and the Spectre's estimation of his usefulness as a resource rose along side a mental calculation of how high to go in an intended show of favoritism. In thanks for the aid in building the ECG sensor spoofing mech, even he was no help with this matter.

“Spectre Arterius, greetings! Did it work?”

“It did indeed, though that is not why I called. My specialist's vitals have been rendered unstable due to poisoning of a sort. He was shot with a literally hollow round that contained some sort of drug cocktail. My medical VI is currently maintaining his blood chemistry artificially, but cannot detect any further contaminates that would be causing it. Are you able to advise?”

“Goodness, certainly. Can you forward me the VI's report on the matter?”

“I can, just a mo- hold on, I am adding another to our call.”

“Nihlus.”
“Hey you, where am I headed?”

“You need not come to my location as of yet, I have sought you out simply for council for the moment. Spectre Nihlus Kyrik, may I introduce Dr. Ofuterian? A cardiac specialist who has been assisting Vakarian and I with our current mission.”

“Alright... um, hello Doc, thanks for the help. So what's up then?”

“A moment, I am forwarding both of you a medical report. Vakarian has been disabled by an unknown chemical compound.”

“Is he okay?”

“He is unconscious, and his vitals are being artificially maintained.”

“Fuck! Okay, reading it, just a sec.”

“Language, Nihlus.”

His protégé merely grunted, eyes skimming back and forth. The background behind him appeared to be some sort of industrial area with unsteady neon lighting on the walls.

“Spectre, you mentioned that your colleague was... unconventionally injected. Do you have any samples of the agent outside of the compound structure listed in the report?”

“No. I have only what details the medical suite has given. I was unaware that the bullet had caused any abnormal issues until he passed out in the middle of a gun fight.” Nihlus' mandibles flicked twice and his subvocals buzzed in displeasure at the doctor's words, but his main attention stayed focused.

“Ah, a bad time to be hit by anything, never mind a chemical agent spread quickly through rushing blood. A moment while I look this over if you would, though keep in mind it is not my specialty.”
“Take your time. His condition is stable, so long as the VI's microfabricator does not run out of components to craft the stabilizing agents.”

“As you say.”

Several minutes passed by as the two muddled their way through a multi-page report of medical minutiae. The doctor's eyes flickered a great deal faster being both more familiar with the terminology, and well educated. Nihlus was still struggling through when the cardiac specialist had finished, as reading comprehension had never been his strong point.

“Interesting, and odd... Now, I can't say I've worked with neurology much besides how it interacts with the vascular system. If I've got my facts straight though, it looks as if some of these compounds are lipophilic, meaning they could carry things through the blood-brain barrier. The two down at the bottom? Those both appear to lipophilic in structure, and could be bonded to some of these others. They may be intended to 'carry' other molecules into the brain, where normally the barrier would have stopped them. Can you have the medical suite take a lumbar puncture to test a sample of cerebrospinal fluid?”

His protégé hummed agreement while continuing to read, but it was enough to give him confidence in the need to test.

“A moment, I have not had call for that particular task, though this model should be capable of it. I will tell you when I have results.”

It took twenty more minutes to figure out how to instruct the complex machinery to take the sample and run it through an analyzer, and a bit more time for the results to come back. Saren found himself disconcerted at the dead silence that filled the air as he read the new data aloud. He looked to his Omni-tool, only to see Nihlus' video feed bobbing wildly as he ran.

“I'm headed back to my ship, you need to make the med bay a clean room, now, where are you, send me that data.” Came from the other Spectre, a long string of thoughts and words that Saren parsed easily, being used to the torin's stream-of-thought delivery when under stress.

“Spectre Kyrik is correct, his immune system is likely weakening as we speak. His PNS's functionality is also going to degenerate, I would advise having the medical suite prep for mechanical aid to respiratory function to be needed within the next few hours, just in case. Spectre, this is above my ability, allow me to release this call and seek out a few of my colleagues at the hospital?”
“Of course, doctor. I only ask that you be circumspect as to the mission details.”

“I will.”

“Nihlus. Sending you coordinates now, soon to be followed by a mid-way point.”

“Got it. Clean room, asap.”

“Understood.”

Saren had rerouted the Daedalus for the agreed upon mid-way point between himself and Nihlus, and was in the midst of making his entire ship very nearly a clean room. He had already sterilized every centimeter of the med bay, and was now laying waste to every nanometer of air and surface while an audio book read medical texts into his ear on relevant subjects.

The Spectre was no slouch at medicine, but most of his expertise laid in emergency trauma, cybernetics, genetics, and medical nanites. Neurology was one aspect he had not yet gotten around to learning in depth. Evidently, now was the time. He had seventeen hours until the rendezvous, and was still waiting for Dr. Ofuterian to get back to him.

He was thus whiling away the travel time in relative peace when a battery of alarms began to blare from medbay, including the flat-line for the heart monitor. He was there in moments, reducing the clean room’s veracity by a small margin, but thankfully the situation was less dire than originally thought. Vakarian was awake, sitting up on the table, and blearily staring at the noise makers while trying to remove more of the connections. Saren pushed him back down, and reattached the various tubes and leads while explaining the details to the befuddled looking torin.

“Stay down, and be calm. The sniper round you took for me was poisoned. We are en route to meet Nihlus, and Dr. Ofuterian is consulting with other medical personnel on the matter. If you have trouble breathing, there is an oxygen mask to your right. In the mean time, you a- Vakarian... what are you doing?”

Said sniper had begun gracelessly pawing at his arm with a look of dazed confusion, struggling to sit back up. Saren pushed him back down, and bodily held him there, attempting to get the sniper's
attention several times. It was no luck though, nothing he said seemed to be heard. Eventually he tried humming the best pantomime of calming subvocals he could manage. They probably would have made a child cry, but it seemed to do the trick for the sniper.

Vakarian laid back cooperatively, peering at him with hazy and unfocused eyes, humming back in oddly innocent sounding rumbles of concern.

'You okay?'

'Not important.'

'Okayyy?'

'Yes.'

'Hmmnn.'

When it seemed that the reassurance had calmed the torin's distress, the Spectre tried to pull away again. He only made it a half step before the wounded Detective's upset trilling brought him back.

“What is it?” Saren attempted to ask aloud, huffing and repeating himself in the more simple and emotional language of low-bass vibrations when the spoken word only received a blank, fatigued stare.

'Problem?'

'No.'

'I am leaving.'

'No.'
He snorted at the demanding and authoritative tone, one that the Officer would never have taken when cognizant. Saren reiterated his intent, and pulled back, only for Vakarian to growl at him, and latch onto his arm.

"Release me."

"No."

Electric eyes narrowed at the impudent declaration, and he tugged on his arm. The dark grey hands held tight.

"Release."

"No."

"Now."

"No."

Unwilling to put up with the ill torin's bratish disposition, he dug a knuckle into a nerve point and removed the grip from his arm while the hand was weakened. He stepped away from the table with a rumbled order for the sniper to stay put. Garrus did not comply. They tussled for a moment. Vakarian fumbling with clumsy limbs, but the Spectre at a disadvantage while he tried to avoid dislodging any medical feeds. For a recently wounded torin, the mountainous sniper did not seem to heed his still recovering body, nor care about the medical connections at all.

Outplayed, the Spectre ended up in a far worse position for having attempted to remove himself.

First he set out simply to free his arm, next just to retain his feet, then to frustratingly escape the arms that dragged him onto the table and held tight. He choked in surprise when Vakarian pulled him in close and laid teeth on his neck in warning. Apparently this was not a joking matter, and the Spectre froze for fear that any further resistance would expose the torin to his blood. A dangerous prospect for someone with a debilitated immune system.
As soon as he stopped moving the pressure against his neck lessened, and a pleased trill sounded from the encompassing form that was half wrapped around him. Saren's thoughts were filled with unkind things about the oversized gene-modded sniper. It was a ridiculous position to be in, and utterly beneath him to be in it. It seemed the liberties the torin edged around taking when he was fully aware of himself were very heavily pronounced while in a reduced state. The displeased Spectre grumbled a mutinous acceptance, and tried to remind himself that Vakarian was ill because he had taken a bullet in Saren's place.

A little forbearance with the odd mind of a person suffering altered brain chemistry was also reasonable.

It was stretched a bit thin when the Detective nuzzled into his neck, breathing him in and relaxing with a happy sigh. Saren gave into his frustration and rolled his eyes. He supposed that the sniper deserved a small amount of pity for being reduced to child-like communications and wants. It was not precisely Vakarian's fault that it became inconvenient to have a seven foot tall soldier become reduced thusly. Said individual continued to nuzzle into his collar lovingly, and he growled his displeasure at the contact.

'I dislike that.'

'Dislike?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Another eye roll escaped him at the incredulous undertone to the return question. They had literally just discussed his own mental oddities not that long ago. Then again... he was not sure the sniper even knew who he was at the moment, come to think of it. Saren struggled to find a sufficiently simple way to express his reasons for distaste, and not finding any with ease instead defaulted to answering his own question of Vakarian's awareness levels.

'Who am I?'

'Hero.'
Saren choked in surprise again. Not only did the sniper have a ready answer in the subvocal language, but it was a rich and complex sound that had meaning and depth to it.

The first note was a preface, a higher pitch that sounded something like asking for patience blended into the beginning tones of the vibrations for 'someone who I believe in, who I follow', or just 'hero' if simplified into the Turian closed dialect. The middle part of the name widened into a broad wave that was laced with admiration and affection. As the sequence began to fade, it rolled with sexual attraction underscoring the firm hum that spoke of belief. It ended with a fierce loyalty strengthening 'follow'.

The whole subvocal 'word' took about a second to say, but had been laced with such depths of meaning that hearing it stole the breath right out of Saren's chest. He had not felt emotions that potent hardly ever in his life. To hear them poured out so strongly in a subvocal name for him was...

The Spectre did not know what to do or say about such a thing. Vakarian began nuzzling into his neck again, humming softly with affection, albeit with less pressure than he had been before. The sniper just did not know when to quit, but the target of his effusive subvocals was too distracted to rebuke him again, confused and busy trying to understand all that he had heard. Reviewing their history together to figure out where each part came from. It had been so complex...

'Speak again.'

'Speak what?'

'My name.'

'Hero.'

'... Again.'

'Hero. Hero. Hero.'

For a minute, Saren just sat there and parsed. The emotions were clearly spoken and unabashed. He almost felt guilty taking advantage of the situation, but he had not realized the sniper felt so strongly about him. The ready proof of it was somehow evoking. Transfixing. As if he could understand the emotions to learn them, to be able to give them, if he could completely study being the recipient of
them.

Ridiculous and impossible, yet the vibrant by-play of hums and low tones was inordinately fascinating.

He shook himself, and and tilted a bit to glance at the medical VI's monitors. Everything looked similar to what it had been before, if not normal. Good enough for now.

A long, steady exhale was blown out onto his neck hide. Vakarian had fallen asleep.

Saren chuffed in exasperation. Of course the meddlesome sniper had woken only to cause trouble, then proceeded to immediately fall unconscious again for no apparent reason.

The Spectre delicately finagled himself free, pleased when the torin did not stir, and left. He considered running the decon protocols again for the med bay, but he doubted it would last. At the very least, this was not happening on Nihlus' garbage can of a ship.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I love how Tevos uses 'war with the Terminus Systems' as a ready excuse for her decisions in-game. War with a vast collection of unaligned, mismatched, disorganized planets? Versus... the Turian Hierarchy? Ahahahahaha! Sooo much bullshit, Councilor. You are about as see-through as glass, better work on that one lady.

Fanfic Recommendation: Neutron Star Collision (25,455 words) by Mythal Rising
There is a line in the sand and sometimes you cross it

Chapter Summary

Let get into trouble shall we?

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Chelation therapy – a medical treatment that strips metals from the body in order to counter heavy metal poisoning. A risky treatment that can cause kidney stress, allergies, cancer, or death. (Real)

Mari/Pari - Turian closed dialect for mom/dad. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Mystery Skulls - Ghost (Fred Falke Remix)

'T'cause the world might do me in
It's alright 'cause I'm with friends
Had me feeling like a ghost
And that's what I hate the most
...
This time I might just disappear

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heart in his throat, Nihlus called Engress up on his 'tool while he ran like mad, hoping the Salarian would answer. The usually lucky Spectre was relieved to see the request went through not a minute later.

“Hurricane. You're running. What's going on?”

“Hey, sorry to... bother you. I just got... an emergency call... from a friend. Have... to go help. Can you... tell the fight manager... that I won't be there tomorrow? Will... be back soonish, just gotta go... handle this now. Time... sensitive.”

“Do you need help?”
“Nah, shouldn't... Appreciate it though.”

“I'll let them know. When do you expect to be back?”

“I'd guess a week... or two.”

“Alright... Take care of yourself.”

“I will, you too.”

The call closed and Nihlus picked up the pace, running with all his Spectre-standard, genemod enhanced ability at nearly seventy kilometers per hour. He made it to the nearest transit station in record time, and was on the Widmanstat and headed for the Mass Relay in short order.

His breathing was ragged when he finally came to a halt, Turians not being known for their stamina, and he had really pushed it.

The carmine plated torin was glad that the wait to leave the system was short, or he would've been tempted to use Spectre codes to skip the line. Finally en route, and with no further physical exertion to focus on, he let his head drop into mildly shaking hands. Blue was in a bad way. If they could get his brain function back to normal soonish, he would probably live, but... there was no telling if there would be long term side effects and damage, or if it everything would return to normal after treatment.

It was especially tragic, considering that Corporalis was genetic, and if Garrus had it this could exasperate it something fierce.

Nihlus slammed a fist into the deck plating next to his sunken command seat. Amid the worry and dread was a mild anger at Saren for not protecting him, and he held onto that tightly. Anger was fuel and focus, and he wanted that rather than the insurmountable hill of fear for Garrus' mind and life. A long, steadying breath and he found a balance between anger and fear, and brought up the medical scans on his main holo screen.

He didn't know what that doctor or his buddies could figure out, but he needed to make sure no one tried anything that just messed the delicate balance of brain chemistry up more. If he was stable now, then they needed to do it right, not fast.
The next several hours were spent reviewing the more medical-strict terminology and structure of the brain, and pairing that with his expansive knowledge of poisonry. Trying to figure out a way to reverse engineer a cure purely from the effects and the composition of the original contaminate that the medical suite had filtered from his blood and analyzed.

The Spectre had a good base line to start with, considering heavy metals were in a fair few number of assassin's poisons, and he had designed at least three original recipes involving them himself. He understood the mechanisms of causing damage and disability with them well, and of course he had created and tested the counter agents, keeping them on hand in case he nicked himself.

Now to apply that to a recipe he hadn't made.

His first thought was some sort of chelation therapy to remove the traces that remained lodged in tissue regardless of blood filtering, and to combine that with a secondary compound to convince Blue's hormone glands to return to normal production levels. He read down the list of chemicals being artificially maintained, and started to painstakingly write out chemical formulas that would change the glands in question to produce less or more of what was off kilter.

He needed to, essentially, re-poison the torin back to normal. If he couldn't, Blue might be on dialysis and medication for the rest of his life. Nihlus grit his teeth and got to work, determined not to let that be the case.

Nihlus docked his ship airlock-to-airlock with the Daedalus, and sterilized as best he could both inside his armor and out. He had six different formulae for potential cures worked out, and was still shaking off the grogginess of sleeping medication, having taken some to rest before he arrived. He had been too jittery to fall unconscious without it.

The external door VI recognized him and opened. He waited while another decon cycle ran, his cure samples clinking softly against the side of the container under his arm as he shifted impatiently. It opened and he entered the main chamber, just ahead of the CIC holo ring. No one was in the main room, so he headed for the medbay.

He choked, and burst into snickers behind his helmet upon finding the ridiculous situation inside, the mild hilarity breaking over his worried nerves as overly strong laughter. Inside, Saren was trapped in Blue's arms. They came around him like a cage, and he looked incensed about it. The Spectre's
armor was all over the floor, and the Detective was humming like a five year old with his cheek on the shorter torin's shoulder.

“Ahhh, you alright there Saren?”

“No. Fix him.”

“I ah... intend to? Did your doctor ever get back to you?”

“Yes. He and his fellow professionals are going to be calling us in twenty minutes with their findings.”

By this point Garrus had perked up at the new presence in the room, and was making curious and suspicious subvocals at him. Nihlus checked the medical monitor, and seeing that Blue's system didn't appear to be under immunological stress, retracted his helm. The humming immediately changed to a cheerful trill and beckoning tones.

“Do not come closer. He has no personal boundaries at the moment.”

Nihlus tried, he really did, not to snicker at the obvious statement.

“Riiight. Ah, hey Blue, how're you feelin’?”

The tall sniper buzzed at him, confused and reaching for him. He wasn't close enough to touch, but it wasn't much farther. Saren leaned back to keep him from rising off the table to grab the green eyed Spectre. The lack of a verbal reply was slightly worrisome.

“He seems to be unable to talk outside of subvocals and simple sounds. Though within that realm Vakarian appears to retain complex logic function and rationality. Though his brain scans show more activity in the instinctual part of his cortex than elsewhere. It has resulted in -Vakarian stop struggling. For the last time, you are not leaving this bed.- a child-like behavioral pattern. He is also very emotional.”

“So... can I ask why is your armor all over the floor?”
Saren grumbled with agitation. “Yesterday Vakarian would not let me go until he fell asleep. When I tried to struggle he... threatened to bite. Considering the state of his immune system, it was best to not to risk him actually doing so. Today, I thought to circumvent that by wearing full armor. We disagreed physically, and he stripped me of armor over the course of it. I then put him unconscious with pressure points. An hour ago he got a hold of my person once more, and has not given me leeway to disable him again. As such, I would advise not coming closer unless you are carrying a sleeping agent, or prepared to stay.”

His former mentor looked him up and down, consideringly.

“Though... he may allow us to switch places. I believe Vakarian is more fond of you than I.”

“Ohhh no, you aren't tossing me on the pyre. I've got work to do. Besides, a little cuddling is good for the soul.”

Saren just glared at him. Garrus trilled another whiny 'Come here. Want.'

“Sorry Saren, buuuut if it makes you feel any better, you clearly make an excellent comfort blanket. I think I can even see the teeth marks on your gauntlet over there. I bet you'll be a great dad someday!”

Nihlus grinned hugely and gave a Turian thumbs up. Electric eyes attempted to eviscerate him silently.

It turned out that Dr. Ofuterian had brought together a council of medical advisers, five of them total, with two neurologists, a psychologist, and a toxicology expert as well as himself. The silver-grey Spectre had yet to escape his biggest fan, and insisted on the conference being verbal only. The seven of them went back and forth, using Nihlus' compounds and what medical data was available to create as gentle and all-inclusive a treatment plan as possible.

Saren managed to sound dignified and unruffled on the call as they hashed out the details, thanking the team with grace for their consult. It was the best Nihlus could do to keep his amusement soundless, if not expressed in his face, as the traditional torin spoke to the medical staff with an eloquent drawl despite being snuggled and cooed at the entire time. The poison expert was was enjoying the off-the-wall silliness instead of being angry or worried. It was a much better state to be in for theory crafting an experimental medical treatment that he really had no business trying to make.
Not that a hospital staff could do much better, even the toxicologist was impressed with his work. The praises made his thoughts momentarily fall back into childhood days of abusive neglect and dismissive attitudes from his murderous mother.

'Suck it, mari. Never thought I'd amount to anything more then a convenient source of income as a rankbanger, eh? Look at me now, bitch. I've got the Citadel's best impressed with me.'

On a more positive note, the older neurologist reassured them that the non-vocal and child-like behavior was actually very common in cases of disrupted pituitary glands in Turians. She noted that though he appeared cognizant, it was possible that Garrus wasn't even really awake. His active instincts were bringing him conscious enough to search for food and comforts, but his memory and higher functions were likely 'offline' while the disrupted brain chemistry made them dysfunctional and irregular.

The medical suite could handle the chelation therapy, and the panel of doctors remained on the line while it ran. They spent the entire session mostly just discussing the strange and interesting circumstances and medical responses like a bunch of rumor mongers in an office worker's break room.

People were people, even really smart ones, Nihlus supposed.

The initial treatment ran it's course, and some of the numbers on screen improved, though Garrus also vomited near the end. Saren was understandably quick to shove his face in a pan to catch it. Afterward the panel broke up, having appointments of their own to get to, though the Specters got all of their contact information before they closed the call.

It was at this point the abused Detective finally got sick of the cables and tubes stuck into his side, and went to remove them. Nihlus made the mistake of coming close enough to help stop the attempt. He was grabbed and pulled in right along side his former mentor. They were smooshed together in a circle of Blue's arms, his legs coming up on either side. The sniper was now happily distracted from his previous escape attempt. Saren let off a buzzing roll of agitation, patience clearly nearing it's end. The chuckling protégé tried to find a topic of conversation to help take his mind off the closer quarters.

“So Saren, how'd he get exposed to the toxin? You never said.”

“There was a sniper.”
“Uhhh... a sniper? Okay...”

Nihlus nodded haltingly, somewhat distracted. Unlike Saren's displeasure with the constant contact, he relished having Garrus' smell envelope him again, and the warm snuffling into his neck was a heady reminder of his time as Asla. The whole situation was odd, but enjoyable, especially being pressed up against his fellow Spectre. Now if only their third number wasn't out of his mind at the moment, while he had them both on a bed-like surface.

“The round had the chemical agent inside. It was hollow.”

“Wow, really? Fuck, that's bad luck. Did you get hit with any of it?”

“Language, and no, Vakarian took it for me.”

“Wait, what? He took it? The bullet was aimed for you?”

“Yes.”

“... He jumped in front of a mass effect propelled sniper bullet? How?!”

“I do not know how he predicted it. Vakarian shouted and then jumped at me... it would have taken me in the head, had he not.”

That sick feeling similar to fear and worry crept back into his mind at the idea that Saren might be dead now if it wasn't for the clever, apparently precognitive, sniper. He tried to swallow it away, but some of the distress buzzed in his subvocals, and made Blue hum at him in concern.

'Why sad?'

'Not sad.'

'Liar.'
‘... worried.’ Nihlus leaned back into the loving arms that cradled him, distractedly stroking the limb that held onto his middle.

‘Why?’

‘You are sick. Saren almost died.’

‘Saren?’ Garrus buzzed with confusion at his own subvocal word for the grumpy Spectre, and Nihlus reached over to tap the torin's arm to indicate whom he meant. His hand was caught, and he looked up to see his former mentor staring him down with intense focus.

“Repeat it.”

“Uhh, what?”

His fellow Spectre leaned in closer, if that was possible in their already cramped positions, and peered into bemused green eyes.

“Your subvocal word for me. Repeat it.”

With dawning horror, he realized the telling emotions he had laid into the non-verbal naming. He said 'Saren' in subvocals as 'Lunar', the beginning emphasizing a 'light in the darkness' sort of feeling, and an ending that trailed off with love and attraction. 'Oh, fuck me. I did not mean...'

“Repeat. It.” The grip on his wrist tightened.

He gulped and tried to rapidly come up with a clever and diffusing explanation.

Chapter End Notes
While Turians are known to be one of the fastest and strongest races, their lack of fatty tissue means that they have minimal triglyceride storage available. Where as the more voluptuous Asari and Volus have ample lipid deposits around the hips that is easily used for long term storage of fuel, Turians lack this entirely, having only small amounts on the thighs and in the upper torso. The people of Palaven evolved to handle their homeworld's radiation levels, and as such their profile is limited to what can both fit under the minimal amount of plates, which add weight rapidly, and also be carried with a sprinter's build when running from dangerous fauna. Thus, Turians make excellent martial artists and runners, as they can push the movement of their muscle fibers to a faster maximum burst speed then any other species. This 'top of the food chain' spot is challenged by the perfection of form achieved by Drell who use their eidetic memory to learn an unparallelled economy of motion, and the long lasting stamina of Humans, who evolved to literally out-walk their ancient prey, going for days if need be, during their hunter-gatherer period. Modern Turians enjoy a larger body fat, and higher maximum speeds, then evolution originally gave them thanks to Hierarchy-standard genetic mods allotted to each person upon enrollment to their military. Further augmentation is available through more effective in-utero genemods, and basic cybernetic enhancement of tendons and joints.

A/N: 70 kph is about 43 mph, if you were curious. Fastest humans right now are about 27 mph, and scientists are saying it has more to do with the limitations of muscle contractions at the muscle fiber and chemical level then our actual upper range of ability. I would guess gene mods and some mild cybernetics will give ME era humans something like 36 to 39 mph, before the landings and strength needed to push off start to taper that speed off. Nihlus gets 43mph, because I'm estimating him at 6' 8"", with a lanky runner's build for a Turian.

Fanfic Recommendation: Sardines (1,791 words) by Zephyr5 (Femshep having drunken fun.)
Bite your tongue to keep from spilling truth

Chapter Summary

Someone has gotten himself cornered.

Chapter Notes

I've got news duckies! This might be your last update for a week and a half! :o

Unfortunately I am going to be out of internet range for about a week, with intermittent access to a connection, and no computer. I may end up typing more on my tablet, but I have no idea how I could post it. I will be on the ocean.

So... either I will find a way, and updates will be slightly sporadic for a bit, or in about eleven days you'll get one giant update.

Lexicon:

Letum - The fifth season of Palaven, equivalent to a thunderstorm filled winter. Named due to the fact that during ancient times, most deaths within a clan took place during this season, thus 'Season of Letum' translates as 'Death Cycle'. (Credit: Mizdirected, though I added the bit about storms. I'm not sure Palaven gets cold enough to have a traditional winter, but a monsoon season with violent storms seems to fit.)

Nanus - Along with Menae, these are the two moons of Palaven. Their irregular pathing and extremely close orbit made having a standard circadian rhythm difficult for ancient Turians, evolving the ability of sleeping in patches of time, in bright light, or in active situations without trouble.

Reverie - The effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva, adaptive to any species or chirality thanks to the biologically creative pheromone receptors/interpreters along the jaw, throat, and nose that use incoming pheromones to produce counter hormones which induce a rigorous onslaught of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce the cocktail will 'remix' the blend constantly for success, continuing until maximum effect is reached. Has an additive component of low grade bioelectric feedback exclusive in Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: A brutal, colorful blending of Recidiva's 'Reverie', MizDirected's 'pheromone receptors', and idea glue from me.)

Chapter Soundtrack: [We All Become (feat. Ashley Barrett) by Darren Korb](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lY5mbXbQW4)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bile rose in the back of his throat as Saren stared him down with those electric eyes. They were so close he could see the lenses focusing and refocusing on different parts of his face as the torin watched his every expression.
So what did he decide to do?

There was really only one thing to do... make it worse.

'Lunar', he hummed clearly, adding an inciting quirk of eyeridge and suggestive wiggle of mandible at the end where it trailed off, with slightly exaggerated sexual interest. Well if his former mentor hadn't picked up on it by now...

Saren leaned back, with an avian tilt to his head, blinking. Their addle-brained mountain of a sniper leaned in to hum with agreement and nibble on Saren's cheek blades. Said Spectre swatted him away absently, staring into the middle distance with a contemplative look on his face plates.

'\textit{That went well enough...}'

Having his affection refuted, Blue turned his attentions on Nihlus instead, and oh \textit{spirits that felt good}. The sniper took advantage of his tilted head, since he was unable to face straight with an almost fully regrown crest. Stony-silver mouthed the side of his fringe with teeth and tongue in a way that Garrus knew he liked, and the Spectre hummed at the pleasant nibbles, figuring his hide was clean enough from the airlock decon cycle to just go with it.

The carmine plated Spectre distantly concluded that at least some memory was in action, because that tongue knew his spots just like a lover would. He let out a light moan, jaw slipping open to pant lightly as the limb that had been merely holding on was now stroking knuckles over the other side of his neck, probably for lack of free skin with the armor he still had on.

At some point clumsy fingers managed to flip a few of those latches and find his waist. He let slip a long series of low, pleased rumbles with his tormentor's name lost in there somewhere.

The chest behind him vibrated with appreciation for his expressive manner, and... aaaaand he just noticed that Saren was watching them still.

He coughed, and tried to straighten his posture. A weak attempt to push Blue away was made, but the torin didn't buy it, leaning back in to nuzzle at his ear.
"Ahah... Ha... Sorry? He is um... You were very right about that disregard for personal... space."

His former mentor blinked at him, slowly. Studyingly.

"W-what?"

"Your subvocal name for him is paired to mine. It sounds like ‘lunar’ as well, but with different intonation and reversed."

'Spirits fucking damnit.'

"Explain."

"W-what! No! Saren that's sort of fucking personal. You don't just... demand someone to explain their subvocals for other people."

"Then explain your vocalization for me."

"No!"

The electric eyed Spectre stared him down, chin tucked inward in defiant recoil. He knew that damn expression. It meant Saren was problem solving him.

He glared back defiantly.

The dangerous torin continued to eye him, looking up from under a lowered brow in a dammably sexy expression that was probably unintentional. When the silver-grey head rose arrogantly, in a stately and commanding manner that would have suited a queen, Nihlus grumbled, figuring he was fucked with whatever was about to come out of that throat.

Garrus continued to make a wonderful nuisance of himself with his fringe.
"Explain both to me, and I will speak my name for you in trade."

Nihlus blinked rapidly. He hadn't known Saren had a subvocal name for anyone.

That was a tempting offer....

'Yep. Fucked.'

He swallowed, and rolled a request to Blue to back off a little bit. The sniper sighed like the sun would never shine again but complied, setting a chin on Saren's opposite shoulder instead and closing his eyes.

He coughed to clear his throat, staring up at the ceiling in semi-stoic defeat. The green eyed Spectre was fairly certain he couldn't look Saren in the eyes as he explained this. 'So awkward...'

"The base word was yours first. I don't know if you remember, but it was pitch black on that mission where we first met. You showed up that night out of nowhere, the same tones as Nanus when it first rises in Letum. Like you see in all those old, romantic war... vids... uhhh, nevermind. I mean you just... phased out of the darkness and commandeered my squad for your mission like some sort of... mmm... Valluvian priest, demanding the the random warrior tribe come with them and do the Titan's bidding or else... sort of... thing."

Nihlus rolled the his neck to loosen the embarrassed tension he'd picked up, and continued.

"That was the beginning of life not sucking for me. I pretty much told you the gist of my past when you grilled me like a suspected terrorist before deciding to take me as your protégé. So that's... the first part."

Nihlus trailed off, not finding an easy way to explain the next bit, besides stark truth that he suspected would be rejected immediately and painfully.

"Uhhh, and... the rest is pretty self explanatory. So Blue here picked up his own version when-"

"That is insufficient, elaborate further."
Nihlus glanced over at the intent electric stare, and not being able to handle meeting it, instead found the far wall fascinating. His mandibles flat to his face, he backed up and grouchily appeased the torin.

"You're fucking sexy and I care about you a lot. What is there to explain?"

He heard his former mentor scoff and his insides turned chill.

"That is a vastly simplified and incomplete version of what you put into it. Also, language, Nihlus."

"That's all you're getting." He said, mulishly. "I'm not exactly a complicated person when you get down to it, alright?"

"On the contrary, you are one of the more interesting and complex people I have encountered." The green eyed Spectre startled, looking back to Saren in surprise. That had been unusually complimentary. Not the expected... disparaging reply.

He chuffed at himself, thinking that maybe he hadn't left mari's cruelty induced expectations on his worth entirely behind yet. Voice quiet, he replied.

"You're probably the only person to ever tell me that." He hoped the subvocal roil at the end of 'and I love you for it' came through clearly enough.

Saren looked strangely triumphant, nodding slightly as if he'd figured something out.

"Very well, and Vakarian?"

"You're seriously still calling him by his clan name?"

"... He is the heir to a branch of an ancient and powerful clan of Palaven. His ancestors have been
Primarchs, and his father is a senator. It would not be proper to call him anything more familiar."

"Um, but, you are more familiar."

Saren’s brow furrowed, as if that hadn't occurred to him. Nihlus managed a weak grin at his socially-retarded friend.

"You may have a point. I suppose there is a certain line where politeness becomes offensive if insisting on it ignores shared history."

Wow, and wasn't that a really complicated way of saying, 'Yeah, I guess we are friends.'?

"Yeeaaah."

"Fine. Then explain the connection to... Garrus."

'Spirits damn it, why is Saren's awkwardness so fucking adorable?' He made an effort not to let that response into his expression.

"A lot less dramatic I suppose. I stopped using the general pronoun for males and began using the reversed hum for 'lunar' when you two were going at that weapon's system like... just complete and utter perfectionist nerds. You both have a lot in common."

"Why reversed?"

"Well, 'cuz he is like the opposite side of your coin, so to speak. Also really smart, but easy going instead of stressing about things. Favors long range. Good with talking and stuff. No offense."

The other Spectre waved him off in agreement, and he chose not to name some of the other, potentially more inflammatory things. Things like innate compassion, also being from an old clan but a living one, height obviously, and a few others. He didn't want to actually hurt or piss off the prickly torin, even if he was being invasively curious.
"So, your turn."

For a minute, the only reaction was a vague mandible twitch. Nihlus waited while watching Garrus breathe quietly, half-asleep on Saren's shoulder. The four part rumble that eventually came was given in clear and precise tones that suited it's speaker perfectly. It had been a series of notes that didn't translate well to normal speech, no single word suiting any one part.

The first rolling hum was something like 'chosen', only so much as the idea of 'selection' went, but it was backed with a smooth tone that felt preferential and proud. A low vocalization quietly stated something like the feeling you'd have if you went to jump off a bridge, but someone stopped to say 'don't do it!' and that was all it took to not give into depression. Nihlus felt his jaw unhinge, a weightless sense of awe and horror at the very thought. A pale and noble ghost of loyalty followed. The last rumble was 'hope', but a complex kind that looked into the future, and in the case of death, left intentions for the unaccomplished on the shoulders of the one they would watch over as a spirit.

He found himself biting down hard on his tongue, overwhelmed by the strong sentiments from the generally stolid torin. It didn't help that the green eyed Spectre's recent past had been something of an emotional roller-coaster, cumulating in the heart attack inducing news that Blue was on life support.

Of course, that was when Garrus let off a sleepy trill of agreement that was all affection and no guile. Nihlus had to cover his face for a moment to get a hold himself, too worked up from the onslaught of thoughts rumbled with quiet dignity followed by the especially sweet agreement.

He choked the emotions down, and turned to face his former mentor more fully. His next intent would probably get him shot, but the Spectre couldn't bring himself to care. Nihlus surreptitiously sniffed back almost-tears, and pulled his former mentor closer, touching their foreheads together with a soft little thunk.

Saren huffed softly, and pressed back for a beautiful second, before trying to pull away.

The younger Spectre hummed at him, 'wait, just a moment, one more thing', and tilted his head to lick gently at the edge of Saren's upper mouth plate, before dipping in taste him for a dizzy few seconds. He pulled back before the electric eyed torin could, eyes closed and with a half smile in his mandibles, savoring that quick hit of a reverie mix that he never thought he'd get to try. His expression like the face of someone trying chocolate for the first time.

Suddenly a purr of 'Mine too!' popped in from behind them, and without further warning Blue dove into the newly opened space between them to snog the ever loving hell out of Nihlus.
'Oh... that's... the best two way reverie... ever... mmmmm...' was about all he managed to think as the taste of both sunk into his bloodstream through the thin veins in his mouth. He was a puddle of uselessness in moments, Blue's weakened immune system utterly forgotten as a sloppy but exuberant tongue took his higher thinking away.

Too late to stop him, Saren still tried to intervene. Garrus took this as a demand for attention to be laid on him instead.

Nihlus heard a, 'No, you m-', before it was silenced by the sniper's questing tongue and a heavy cocktail of hormones that descended upon Saren's mouth. The silver-grey Spectre's neck flushed a mild purple as his compulsory struggle only encouraged Blue to lean him backwards and try harder. He could tell when the reverie hit because the struggles became half-hearted and the agitated buzz of subvocals turned aroused.

Nihlus tried not to laugh, he really did.

With a weakly frustrated buzz of subvocals, Saren pushed everyone away with a relatively soft biotic shove. Except... his aura stretched out, caught on Blue, and turned him blue.

Garrus was glowing with a biotic field, to their complete and utter shock.

“Oh... please fucking tell me... he was before?”

“No. No I checked. Impossible, he could not be... the shuttle's drive core. Lipophilic molecules.”

The Spectres shared a look of mild panic. The scion of Clan Vakarian had become a biotic. The field flickered and died after a second, but it had been very unmistakable.

*Oh spirits. Fuck.*
A/N: Yes, we are still going to be canon compliant. You shall see. Muahahaha.

A/N/N: Well, I've read all sorts of interesting interpretations about Turian sense of smell, and eye sight, feral or civilized bedroom habits, etcetera.

I've come to the conclusion that they would have good eyesight for hunting in various lighting, but terrible distance on hearing since no ear shell, good range of audible pitch though. A poor sense of smell in general since radiation would cook a lot of the organic molecules that might've made it valuable, though that doesn't preclude your fairly common scent fetishers. Next, a fine pallet for taste since their diet is strangely somewhat omnivorous for people with such teeth, and also because I can, let's see...

Increased sense of touch for soft spots with more nerve types per square centimeter than we have, but nothing except for temperature and pressure on plates. Just basics that can live happily in semi bone. So... All of it adds up to common audio based sexual practices, reinforced with taste, a hint of smell, and touch but only in certain places. I've gone with the slightly troupey 'gentlemen in the streets and beast in the sheets' concept for sexual civility. It degenerates with more and more Reverie.

Is my biology supposition making sense? Thoughts?

Fanfic Recommendation: The Vengeful Ancient (767 words) by season_unending (Javik / FShep)
Chapter Summary

We all know how it will turn out, but the poor Spectres don't.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mari/Pari - Turian closed dialect for mom/dad. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)

Reverie - The multi-species adaptive effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva which induces a rigorous flow of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce it 'remix' the blend continuously for success. Also has some bioelectric feedback exclusive in Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: Recidiva, MizDirected, and myself. Fanon blend.) (See EDaH codex for full entry)

A/N: I'm baaa~~aaack.

Hello friends! I have returned from vacation with many a page for you all, it just needs severe editing. Autocorrect has successfully been trained that 'Nihlus' is a word, after I insisted on it enough times, but it still wants to call Saren 'Serena' instead. Since this isn't a Sailor Moon crossover, I've had to fix that a bunch of times after importing to PC. I think I got them all! Probably. Here in I offer the first few bits of the end of this arch, with more to come as I beat the rest with a spell check bat. Second note, I edited a bunch of small things in the last chapter, so it may be worth a reread before continuing here.

Chapter Soundtrack: Ellie Goulding - Lights

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nihlus sat at Vakarian's bedside, staring at the wall while appearing deep in thought. Saren himself was pacing, a slow back and forth down the bridge and back to the medbay doors as his ship flew toward the next Mass Relay for Citadel Space.

They had put Garrus under, and run him through a second chelation treatment in a last ditch effort to undo what Saren and the poison had inadvertently done.

Nihlus was not pleased, citing that he would be thrilled to have biotics, and they should wait for Blue
to be back in his right mind before doing anything about it.

His former mentor understood that he meant well, but being born outside the Hierarchy and never experiencing Palaveni politics first hand, the silver-grey Spectre knew his protégé had only a faint clue what ruin this could spell.

An old clan like the Vakarians would be more likely to make him barefaced than acknowledge someone 'tainted' as one of their own. A senator's suddenly biotic son would a scandal worthy of epic proportions on news media. The cabals would try to coerce a long term service contract out of him, if the sniper was discovered to be one of the rare and unspoken of Turian biotics.

Worst of all, an artificially created adult biotic would cause a huge stir. Every biotic research group in the galaxy would be gunning to get their hands on him, and not all of them would try do so legally.

Saren grimaced, also remembering the brick wall of social stigma when his own abilities had finally come to light after years of his brother hiding him. Only Spectre recruitment had dispersed that heavy pressure to join a cabal unit, and saved the madlis of clan Arterius from being politically shanghaied by another clan.

Even if it now sat empty and unkempt, he would rather have seen it destroyed then let selfish and unworthy tier climbers take over his childhood home. Thankfully it had not come to that.

A second run of chelation so soon was especially hard on Vakarian's body, but Saren had overridden Nihlus' vote and gone ahead with it even though the process was unlikely to draw out anything further. There was a heavy feeling in his gizzard that he had somehow passed on the curse of biotics to someone who had tried to save his life.

Though... Spectre-grade armor may have handled it better, considering the hyper dense ablative layering he had installed in the interstitial spaces, but there was no guarantee on that.

Regardless of whether Garrus had spared him death or simply a headache, the fact remained that the sniper had willingly thrown himself into the line of fire in the first place. What a way to repay that.

The chelation finished, and was followed by a round of replenishing nutrients, minerals, and regenerative serums to make up for the elements lost that were actually supposed to be there. The metal removing chemicals took everything, good and bad, and some of those needed immediate replacement.
Keeping Vakarian artificially asleep with further anesthetics, Nihlus had set the medical suite to begin the reverse poisoning.

Now they were waiting, and watching, the panel of doctors on speed dial. Not that Saren would be sending them any further data unless absolutely necessary, and in fact had spent several minutes hacking into their files remotely and deleting everything they had received prior.

No need to leave proof of concept or breadcrumb trails as to how this had happened. Knowing the Hierarchy, they would ask a plethora of stupid, young fools to risk themselves trying it.

It was terribly unamusing how quick their highest tiers were to use the power of those they shunned, or how they publicly pandered to the Asari, who all had biotics, as if that was somehow more acceptable.

A mild grumble of well worn disgruntlement echoed in the CIC as he made another pass.

Saren was counting on this heavy handed metal stripping therapy to reduce the element zero just enough to remove the biotic manifestation. If the base levels or node connections could be eroded away sufficiently, exposure without effect could be ignored, but the therapy hadn't been designed to pull elements out of deeper tissues. It was a toss up, really, as to whether the process would work as intended or not.

Hopefully it would, and no one would ever know. Then Vakarian could return to his normally charmed life.

Still a waste, he thought, for such potential to be coddled and left on a police force. Though even he would admit that the hard,-but not extreme-, demands of it suited the sniper's gentle heart better than Spectre-hood would.

A moot point, so long as Garrus was beloved by his clan, as the Spectre doubted they would let one of their own be recruited without a fight. Though it was a distinct possibility if the Detective were to be outcast...

Saren shoved the thought aside, unwilling to burn the sniper's chances for a long life and traditional happiness on the pyre of being a social pariah for the sake of galactic stability when there were others who could serve. Those like Nihlus and he, who already had lost those things.
The last treatment finished shortly after their next jump, bringing them into two days travel range of the Citadel. They left the sniper to wake naturally, the flow of anesthetics tapering off. Saren set the medi-doctor to alert him when rising vitals began to indicate imminent wakefulness, and laid down to pretend at sleep.

The heart rate monitor's beep picked up in pace. It roused Nihlus from a semiconscious fugue state. Green eyes flicked open, checking the read outs with a yawn. All seemed well. Vital stats and blood chemistry were loads better than before.

Long, graceful fingers reached out to wrap around one of the sniper's meaty paws, a thumb was run back and forth over slate grey knuckles.

With an inhalation slightly deeper than the last Garrus woke up, blearily squinting at the ceiling for a few moments before noticing his watcher.

"Nihlus?"

The Spectre managed a pretty decent smile, replying in a low voice. "Heeey, Blue. How're ya feeling?"

"Unn... terrible, actually. What happened? When... nnf... did you get here?"

"Well... you sorta got shot. Pretty solid hit to the torso, and it was laced with toxic crap, so Saren called me... you were also exposed to some eezo from a wrecked shuttle."

"Shit, seriously?"

"Yeah. What's the last thing you remember?"
At this, a trembling hand rose up to cradle a furrowed grey brow.

"Nnn... I was arguing with Saren about going down to the planet with him... then... we went..." He shook his head with a frustrated buzz of subvocals. "That's it. I'm guessing we made it down... is he okay?"

"I am fine.", came from the door. Nihlus glanced back to see his former mentor leaning casually against the entryway, wearing only loose mauve pajama pants and looking as though sleep was a myth. "Though I appreciate the sentiment, we are more concerned for your current state. You were awake previously, but appeared unable to speak and not fully aware." The Detective's mandibles clicked into his jaw, holding there with a tense expression.

"I'm... sorry. Promised I wouldn't hold you back, then turned right around and took a bad hit..."

Nihluss eyes followed the conversation, catching boxy silver-grey mandibles also stiffening by the jaw with tension, but when Saren didn't speak up about the full truth, he coughed and raised a brow ridge meaningfully.

His former mentor caught the expression, and crossed his arms defensively over his thick torso, but turned and held Blue's gaze as he spoke.

"You did not in fact cause a problem, rather you predicted sniper fire, and physically disbarred an assassination attempt."

"...on you?"

"Yes. My thanks."

Garrus' weak limb fell into his lap, the other clenched lightly at rough mahogany fingers. "Of course. Anytime."

Saren lifted a browridge sardonically. "Hopefully not soon."
Nihlus waited for his fellow Spectre to explain the other little complication, but when he remained silent, coughed again in an almost-word that may have sounded something like 'eezo'.

Electric eyes glared dully at him, but only received a rumbled 'you tell him or I will'.

Saren's silver-grey chin rose in a stiff straightening of posture as Blue looked on in muzzy dis-focus.

"Perhaps a demonstration to see if it remains relevant is in order."

Nihlus rolled his eyes at the stalling tactic, but waved his free hand permissively. Saren stepped forward, slowly igniting in a biotic aura. He held out one hand to Garrus and waited for it to be taken.

Blue looked at it in confusion, then up into the face of it's owner. When no answers were forthcoming, icy blue eyes turned to the younger Spectre. Carmine fringe bobbed in the direction of the waiting appendage.

The Detective blinked, shrugged, and took it. He erupted with a magnificent cobalt glow. Pupils contracted in terror as he pulled away, scrambling backwards towards the head of the medical bed.

"What the hell was that?" He suddenly sounded a lot more awake, and no wonder.

"Blue, Blue, don't panic."

"What just- I felt that in my- why did-"

Panic was definitely happening, and though Saren stood there unmoving, Nihlus could practically feel him curling in on himself with anticipation for metaphorical blows of recrimination.


The sniper did, closing his eyes and taking several shaky breaths.
"You said... eezo exposure."

Saren was like an ice sculpture, carved and still, and his protégé felt enough pity to take over the difficult explanation.

"Yeah, it was an accident. A shuttle got hit by rockets near you, Saren used the drive core's wreckage to boost himself, but your helmet was down from choking on blood, 'cuz the sniper round got you in the lung. So you were hit by a big dose of element zero, and also a toxin built around molecules that carry stuff past the blood-brain barrier, and the myelin sheaths on nerves. Or anything lipid based, really. A crazy freakin' coincidence."

"So I'm... ? Damn... damn."

Nihlus snorted empathetically at his disbelief. "We did try to filter it back out of you but... well obviously it didn't work."

Finally, Saren managed words again. "I can teach you to hide it."

The green eyed Spectre watched his friend slowly nod.

"Yeah, that... that would help. I can't... the Avah of clan Vakarian has it out for biotics. I've had two cousins that were essentially exiled from Hierarchy Space because she's a hardcore traditionalist. With mari ill, if I couldn't visit... How do I not use them?"

Saren nodded, thawing down to his regular level of emotive and not frigidly stiff in the welcome absence of accusations. "For now, rest. Recover. The navigational computer is set for the Citadel, but the flight plan can be stopped or altered before arrival. We will let Nihlus return to the mission he was on, and the two of us will spend some time working on it."

"Okay. Thanks for getting me out of there after I got hit."

"I would not have done otherwise unless a very great deal was at stake."
Nihlus blinked in surprise at the relatively effusive confession of caring from the normally cold-blooded and close-mouthed torin. He turned his gaze to find his former mentor blushing vaguely purple in the neck and sides, looking like he'd just gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Saren's mandibles locked to his jaw. He about-faced and left without a word.

Garrus let out a quiet huff of amusement, drawing Nihlus' attention back to him.

"You uh... know somethin', Blue?"

The sniper's slightly hanging head rolled his way as the icy blue gaze looked up into his own.

"I think Saren is, mmm... afraid of disappointing people that care about him, or maybe just afraid of people that care in general. I told him that I did, before we went down. Seems like it made him skittish." Nihlus felt a slightly evil grin make it's way into his mandibles.

"Pffft, confessed your eternal love did you? Wellll, it could also po~~ssibly be from when you held him down and licked his teeth clean until he was dosed to the spurs with *reverie*.

"Wait, what!?"

"Ehe he he... You remember how he said that you were awake before but not aware? You were also very, uhhh... friendly!"

"...what did I do?"

Nihlus smirked at him lasciviously, and pointed to a security camera in the corner of the ceiling. "Wanna see?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I really need to get a list going of the Chapter Soundtracks and Fanfic
Recommendations... I've been gone long enough that I had to go back and make sure I wasn't re-recommending something, lol. It'll probably go up as new chapters in the EdaH codex soonish.

Fanfic Recommendation: Can't Resist on the Mass Effect Kink Meme boards at Livejournal or Can't Resist (16586 words) by 11_Gadget_27 here on Ao3. (Saren/Nihlus. Super sweet, and nsfw.)
Just another pebble in my boot

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is the king of all brats. Garrus turns it around on him a bit. An interesting new hobby is discovered.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Reverie – The effect of hormones in Turian saliva. (Credit: Recidiva) (See codex for full entry.) (Shortened that definition right the fuck down, didn't I?)

Chapter Soundtrack: Morgan Page - Fight For You

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dark grey hands cradled faceplates while he moaned a long, mournful trill. Nihlus was bent over, laughing hysterically.

Retro-actively watching yourself be a self-serving asshole wasn't enjoyable in the slightest, and Garrus had no clue how to go about apologizing.

Becoming aroused at the sight just made him feel even worse.

He groaned abysmally when the figure on-screen nuzzled into a grey neck while making graceless hums of desire, laving a long trail from collar to ear with his tongue. One electric eye twitched with agitation as past-him praised taste and attractiveness with cheerful subvocal abandon.

The sniper winced particularly hard when his evil twin pushed the target of his addle-brained affections down, devouring Saren's mouth with a determined focus for pleasing the mostly unmoved torin.

His Omni-tool pinged, and he opened the message as an excuse to look away for any amount of time. He almost closed it when he saw the sender, his pari, but surely clan business had to be better
then this torture.

It wasn't.

Castis had heard from somewhere that he was on loan to the Spectres at the moment. Garrus barely glanced at the three page rant below it, and immediately clicked the 'x'. He managed to resist the temptation to delete the damn thing, likely the same old paranoid and sensationalist lectures he'd heard about ST&R when the recruitment program letter had originally come years ago. Maybe he would read it. At some point. Later.

That still left him stuck in a medbay with a belly-laughing Spectre and his show-and-tell vid. The miniature Saren on screen was batting away molesting hands while his pursuer trilled coaxingly at him.

He cringed far, far, beyond embarrassed. The carmine plated Spectre next to him was about in tears from laughing so hard.

By the time the replay had finished Garrus was flushed navy and purple from under his chin all the way down to collar line, even slightly colored at wrist and waist. It took his companion several minutes to suppress cackles into giggles, and then get those down to occasional chuckles of mirth.

"How is it that I'm not dead? Spirits, his expression looked like he wanted to murder me."

"He couldn't, ahahahaaaa, do that after dragging you all the way back to the ship! That would've been... how would he put it...inefficient? Pffft, ahahaaa~~."

Nihlus was clearly not yet finished enjoying his distress with the situation. The Detective hung his head in defeat.

"Oh come on Blue, it wasn't all bad! You got some quality 'take me, I'm yours' out of his throat, once or twice. By the way, I don't suppose you'd be willing to risk death and try that again? I'd love to watch." The last sentence was laced with devious sexual undertone.

Garrus' forlorn 'noooooooo' sent the other torin back into a fit of pitiless cackling.
"Nihlus.", came over the intercom.

"Mmmmyes? Heheee."

"If you are done torturing Vakarian, we are at the next Mass Relay. Your trajectory for connection will be coming up in forty three minutes."

"Aw, snap. Time to go. Alright, I'll be up to the airlock in a few." There was no reply, just the com clicking off.

Nihlus stood, and the sniper reached out to capture a wrist. Forward motion halted as the Spectre turned to him, still smiling crookedly.

"Thank you for coming. Really glad I'm not a vegetable right now... and for being... I don't know... chill? About me practically making out with Saren. I know how you feel about him, and I didn't mean-"

The carmine plated torin shoulder bumped him, albeit gently. Garrus still looked half drowned from his ordeal. "First off, there was no 'practically' about it, Blue. Heh. Second? I may sleep with a lot of species but I am still a Turian, yeah? Jealousy is for Asari with goddess complexes and fringe envy." Nihlus winked at him in teasing. "Besides... it doesn't stop me from doing this-"

Suddenly Garrus was pushed back into the not-exactly-fluffy cushioning of the medical bed as a tug tipped back his crest, bringing his head back at an angle. Knees came around either side of tapered and tawny brown waist with a squeeze. Carmine mandibles pushed his aside, and several rapid nips at mouth plates drew his tongue out to mingle.

A breathy, unquiet moan echoed in the medbay while the sniper's subvocals vibrated with desire. The humming reply was domineering and wicked with a sly trill in the middle that promised mind blowing things.

Garrus' hips thrust up, loose plates bumping against the Spectre's backside. The mouth taking him over moved down to layer attention on his neck instead, and the poisoner reduced him back down to incoherent subvocals, no chemical compounds needed.

"Nihlus.", came again on the com system.
No reply.

"Nihlus."

"Whaaaat?"

"Twenty six minutes."

"... Ping me in sixteen, then."

Silence but for the sounds of physical desire for a few dozen heartbeats.

"You cannot make the jump calculations in only ten minutes."

No reply again.

"Nihlus."

Still nothing, as long as a delirious sounding moan can count as 'nothing'.

"If I have to come down there and pull you two apart-"

Finally a reply, just not the one Saren was trying for. "You'll join us?!", Nihlus offered with a cheeky sounding shout and a 'come hither' whistle.

Garrus was half out of his mind with arousal, dragging that delicious mouth back to his before the shrill tease even finished. The com crackled with a disgusted scoff that didn't sound entirely convincing, and grumbling something about airlocks and tossing. Not that either of the two noticed.
About half an hour later, Nihlus' come decorating Garrus' stomach, and his own contribution a mess over red-brown hands, the medbay doors opened to a mutinous looking torin with lighting in his eyes.

"Are you both done *defiling* the cleanliness of my medbay?"

Garrus watched the green eyed deviant gracefully bend backwards, mess and all, naked and still out of his plates. His own erection mildly resurgent at the display of flexibility.

"I suppose we are... unless you're interested in some stress relief? I'd make time for you any day."

Saren's mouth plates parted a scant line, and his pupils were ever so slightly dilated as he replied in a strong verbal negative. The torin in his lap hummed regretfully, but Garrus thought that maybe he had missed those little signs. The Detective surely hadn't.

Memories of the security feed replayed in his head, and his biology let him know he was ready to go again, right now, if it meant tasting that hide one more time.

He was beginning to think he had an oral fixation.

Feeling stupid and brave, regardless of his earlier embarrassment, Garrus echoed the regretfulness, adding his own hopeful and open ended invitation to the rumbling.

Silver-grey shoulders hunched in a bit before their owner practically fled with a weak snarl. He looked down to find Nihlus staring at him with verdant green eyes wide, his mouth popped open in a little triangle of surprise. The sniper grinned at him.

"I think we're wearing him down."

"...w-what?"

"His pupils were dilated. I could tell you how much if I had my visor on, but I don't know where the damn thing is at the moment. Or my armor, for that matter."
Nihlus' face slowly spread in an answering grin, and he pointed toward the wall that faced the single sleeping cabin. "Think he fixed it up for ya."

Garrus flushed at that, consciously reminded of why his armor was on hiatus. Most of that bravery fled.

"Well hopefully that's a sign he doesn't plan to space me in the immediate future."

"I'd give it a solid sixty-forty odds, in your favor."

"Just... great."

A re-armed and languid pair of legs dropped into the Widmanstat's command post, landing with a thump. Nihlus sat and leaned forward, getting straight to jump calculations. He wasn't giving himself any time to consider turning around and going back to Blue and his outright magical progress with enticing Saren into bed.

Dilated pupils.

'Damnnnn.'

That was more then he'd managed to wrangle by himself in years of subtly trying. Granted... maybe it could be chalked up to the fact that he hadn't pushed half so hard as the loopy cop with chems on the brain.

Maybe he should've pushed more.

Thankfully Nihlus managed to get through the Relay before his libido could talk him out of it. He had a mission to complete, with a crime boss to seduce trust from. One way or another. He knew
which way he was hoping it went, if only for someone to take this lust out on.

The carmine plated Spectre set his destination into the navigational computer, and leaned back to enjoy the lingering dregs of satisfaction that Blue had left him with.

He huffed. Wasn't that just a whole 'nother pile of beans. If by 'beans' you meant his growing inability to stay away from the Detective for any length of time.

Granted, this had been something of an emergency, but Nihlus knew he could have left after Garrus had woken, conscious and in control. Instead he stuck around. Joked, laughed, and snogged the shit out of him. Gotten off with him. Again.

It had been *so good.*

The green eyed agent wouldn't have said no to more of that. Would have welcomed it, days of it.

'Spirits, damnit. Why wasn't I born with better self control?', he asked himself, not for the first time.

An easily addicted mind behind a handsome carmine face and glittering, clever eyes.

Never mind the 'other' minds inside his head that he built and dismantled regularly.

Speaking of, he grit his teeth and forced the distant echoes of Asla to submerge and disperse back into the sea which made up the rest of his head space. The lingering whispers of that cover still wanted nothing more then to get back to ice blue eyes and warm hands. It wasn't helping.

Nihlus needed to stay away for longer this time, and barring another emergency, he was determined to do it. They weren't good for each other, he'd accepted that as much as it sucked. Now to act on it. Distance himself, just a little, back to casual friendship. The sexual stuff was fine... Okay that was a lie, it was *great,* he just... needed to not want it so bad that he sucked the life from Blue to get it.

He promised himself a short break after this mission if he could get Garrus off his mind for a bit. Just to visit. Incentive.

The Widmanstat had a three day flight out to the other side of the galaxy, and those last few
glimmers of post-orgasm glow were long gone now. He needed something to keep busy.

A small amount of cleaning got done before that became boring. The less advanced but still adequate medbay got a supply check, followed by the food supplies, then hand held and ship board ammunitions.

He was half way through freshly sharpening and oiling his extensive knife collection when his Omni-tool pinged. It was Blue.

-message header-

"Miss you already. Pretty sure Saren is going to airlock me. Tried to clean up medbay to apologize, but he says I'm not supposed to be up yet. I want Lilies burned with me at the funeral, because I'm classy like that. Take care of yourself, Hurricane.

-Blue"

-end-

Nihlus smiled, chuckling a little at the lilies comment.

Of course, now his head was wrapped up in thoughts of Saren being his usual control freak self and ordering Blue back into bed. Then the other stone-and-silver torin would resist, insisting upon making up for his transgressions. The Spectre would get fed up and bodily force the tall sniper back into bed, but Garrus would hold on, dragging his aggressor with him. They'd land with Saren on top, but strong, tawny brown thighs would come around his waist and...

Nihlus caught his hands making way for his ever-so-slightly-open plate seam, and forced them back to knife and oil rag.

He only had so many knives though, and eventually ran out. Insanely, he cleaned more. Next he showered, then cooked a decent dinner, and ate it. Three different video games and two discarded books later he was getting desperate. Any down time with his own thoughts went right back to grey plates, of one tone or another.
He dug around on the datapad application store for inspiration, coming upon a time wasting plethora of pathetically simple games and boring learning apps, until stumbling on a drawing program. A free one, even.

Nihlus remembered faintly wishing he had the skill to paint *Familia Notas* when that effeminate twat had been all up in Blue's business to redo the cobalt markings. Now *that* would be a good skill to have, and not really too far from the other types of body art he could already do.

The Spectre was caught up in the idea of doing Garrus' *Notas* for him. Suddenly those educational apps weren't so boring a prospect. He searched for one that taught the art of painting colony markings professionally. There were at least a dozen, varying from an introductory of the basics to a fully accredited program that taught all the major clans, and the variants to the designs. Both what things had serious meaning, and what could be modified for a personal touch.

Nihlus bought the best rated full one, considering it to be an excellent cover job, and another layer of realism to his disguises. It was only a side benefit that it would also let him offer to do his... crush's marks next time it came up.

The massfabs could even make him practice paints, easy-peasy.

He got to work with glee, finishing four learning modules before he ever made it to his mission location. A few errands to let people know he was around again, and he went right back to it.

It would make an excellent side project to play with between fights.

Chapter End Notes

*DancesWithTurians* went that extra mile and made us kissing Turians. //fans self//
Fanfic Recommendation: **Yes Sir** (4,075 words) by **RedMare** (Saren/Nihlus. Freaking hysterical, also nsfw. NIHLUS IS THE KING OF ALL BRATS!)
Why don't you cash in now and play it safe

Chapter Summary

Garrus tries to be helpful, but just pisses Saren off. Garrus tries to follow directions. Saren is still grumpy.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Click – Military shorthand for 'kilometer'.

Chapter Soundtrack: Shiki's Theme (Compilation) – Satsujin Kousatsu (From Kara no Kyoukai, aka The Garden of Sinners, anime.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Electric eyes swiveled over to the security feed of the medbay, seeing Vakarian lounging peacefully and reading. After the fool had exhausted himself dallying with Nihlus earlier, Saren had attempted to bring him a nutrient and carbohydrate rich dinner, only to find the sniper on his knees sanitizing the floor with slightly trembling hands.

Of all the moronic, stupid... he had ordered the sniper back into bed, shoved food in his lap, and finished the task himself. When the medbay resembled something like clean again, and the meal was gone, Saren had informed the still recovering torin that he would be sent out the airlock if he tried doing anything more rigorous then going to the bathroom until told otherwise.

Garrus had hummed obligingly with a mysterious half smile in his mandibles.

The Spectre hadn't trusted him to remain horizontal, not with that look, so he had been checking the camera feed regularly. So far, so good. For now.

Turning back to the mission report he was writing for the Council, the loyal agent struggled to find a way to obfuscate the past and future week or so. He intended to spend time training Vakarian to hide what he had become, and did not want to lie, but was unwilling to have the current situation go on file anywhere.
There was just no other way to put it though, he was choosing to keep things from the Citadel Council. Information they would want to know, want to take advantage of... and there-in was the problem. He did not expect them to use it with any more responsibility then the Hierarchy. Nor would they let the C-Sec Officer return to his life, not without so much testing and ogling that everyone on station would know the not-so-secret.

He was faced with either honesty, which was his norm for reports, with perhaps a few mild asides for self protection, or blatant cover up. Talons sat frozen as he considered the screen for long minutes, trying to see another option.

He glanced at the video feed. Vakarian was asleep, a deep rumble that sounded so... peaceful came through the speakers. Saren felt a wisp of desire to join him, to set this down and instead rest for a few hours. He sat back, shaking off the very atypical thoughts. It was always best to handle complications as soon as they occurred, he was not one to be lazy like that. The Spectre went back to problem solving.

The best he came up with was not mentioning the composition of the poison, briefly touching on the mentally reductive effects and moving on. He left out the use of external element zero to boost himself entirely. He went over everything three times, to make sure there were no inconsistencies, and that nothing pointed to missing information, or could be contradicted by the doctors should they be questioned.

He carefully checked the tone, to be certain it sounded the same as his normal writings. No one must know he was lying to the Council, save for the two who already did. They could be... trusted to keep silent, if anyone could.

The screen to his side still showed a passed out form. After a few moments of final deliberation, he set course for the Citadel. He had a mission report to file, and needed to find a second objective listing in the Spectre Offices for two that he could instead accomplish alone. A cover story for keeping the sniper with him just a little longer.

Saren never noticed that earlier his charge had been reading a book about biotics and social issues, written by an Asari who was bonded to one. Not that Garrus had been careless enough to flash the title screen where the camera could see it.
Icy blue eyes opened, still hazy with sleep, to the sound of the alarm he'd set on his Omni-tool. 0900 hours. Enough time to wake fully, shower, and eat before Saren's request to... be ready to... start... to begin biotics training.

Sleepiness fled as nervous tension took its place.

_Spirits._ Cabalist lessons. Never something he'd thought to face as a possible consequence of befriend ing Spectres. Over the last few days of rest he had come to terms with it, but hadn't tried a single thing on his own.

It felt like the formality of Saren's invitation to learn today was the final line, and once he crossed it, this would become real.

A small part of him was excited. For all he would have to hide the ability from discovery, he would also be able to _move things with his mind._ A dream skill for a sniper, to be able to flush a target out of cover with a Lift.

Never a coward, Garrus hopped up and doggedly went to get ready. He'd moved to the settee the other day, and his host didn't appear to be in the main area yet, so he had to ping the door lock on the sleeping cabin to request enterance to use the only bathroom. The Spectre answered after a moment, looking slightly rested, and wordlessly waved him in before walking to the kitchen to begin breakfast.

He felt spoiled to have the illustrious Spectre whipping up homemade meals for him several times a day, but knowing how much Saren enjoyed cooking, opted to hum his appreciation and mention what he liked best about each offering rather than try to discourage it. The ST&R agent continued to prove himself a fantastic cook, and seemed to know an endless number of recipes.

The officer's morning routine passed by quickly, and the appointed time approached. He leaned against a work bench, watching the planet they were orbiting through the vid-windows along the prow.

Several minutes passed in quiet vigil of the sandy garden world, silent but for the distant hum of the engines and the tinkling of cookware as Saren did dishes. Something else he'd tried to help with, but
had been grudgingly waved off without explanation. Strange. He had done shipboard chores regularly before...

With a start, Garrus realized that Saren was treating him like a guest to a home, clansmen to clansmen, and not just a borrowed C-Sec lackey. Because of the bullet? The biotics? It was hard to say.

The undeclared hospitality was endearing, but he wondered where the torin had picked up the habit. Was Arterius a clan name? He thought it might be, but didn't recall anything specific about it from history lessons, aside from the stories of General Desolas Arterius and his infamous squad of barefaced dare devils.

The Spectre in question finished, and booted footsteps began moving up the deck, going past him. Saren took a seat at the CIC, unspeaking as they dropped from orbit and began to make landfall in a sheltered basin.

Garrus watched the cliff tops disappear above them. The ground they landed on decorated with only low, sparse scrub plants and not much else.

"You need not set armor to seal, or raise your helm. The air here is breathable, if stale."

"Alright... thanks for fixing the hole by the way."

Saren gave him a flat look before moving to the airlock.

They left the ship, and walked a ways out while the Spectre lectured on a few safety concerns about over use, common pitfalls of beginners, and a whole slew of useful sounding information. If only Garrus could keep up with it all. A minute in he was flustered enough from the rapid info-dump to set his visor to record. At least he could review it later... several times...

A quarter click out from the Daedalus, his biotic mentor came to a stop, turning to him.

"Let us begin. Try to raise an aura, as minimal as possible."
"How?"

Saren rolled his neck a little, back and forth, while humming uncertainly at him.

"It is difficult to describe. Most discover it on accident in their own time, but we forced confirmation of yours with a second hand ignition. I have heard it phrased several different ways, but most seem to center around a pulling that the user enacts on their own body."

"O... kay."

"Try."

He did so, for five minutes, then ten, before Saren stopped him.

Electric blue eyes looked him up and down with a mild furrow to the browridge above.

"Perhaps if you attempted a traditional memetic..."

"A 'traditional' one? There are non-traditional memetics?"

"Yes. Most nerves run along common paths, but every person is slightly different. Intermediate moves begin to use individually distinct flourishes, and advanced memetics are almost entirely unique to the creator."

"That makes sense now that you've explained it. So, show me one?"

The biotic Spectre did, a lightning fast roll of shoulder with some sort of elbow tilt, and a curl of fingers. A nearby patch of dirt and sand exploded into an aerosolized cloud.

"Ahhh... again please? More slowly?"
With a huff Saren complied, running through it slowly three times.

The sniper gave it his best mimic, to no avail. He tried a few more times, focused on getting it right in form, before brushed-metal gauntlets came in to correct his positioning.

His elbow flick was pushed to become more exaggerated, a subtle wrist turn pulled out. Still nothing.

Saren studied his arm with bemusement, checking his range of motion and reflexes in some baffling and arcane examination.

Suddenly the Spectre flared in a low, even aura. It jumped to Garrus at their points of contact, spreading along limbs until they both glowed with an eerie blue nimbus.

He tried not to let his reflexive fear show as the light rippled along his frame with a strong zing of current. The Detective had never felt the superstitious distaste for biotics that many of the Turian people did, but when you could *feel it run down your spine*, this chaotic and willful power...

It was just a different story.

Thankfully Saren was too wrapped up in problem solving to notice anything amiss.

"Feel that, focus on it. I will let go in a minute, and you must maintain the field yourself."

Garrus tried to intuit the flow, and keep it going when the hands released, but the aura dispersed quickly. When it slipped away, his teacher immediately reignited him, waited a few heartbeats, and released once more.

Again it faded.

They tried this two dozen more times, Saren asking what had gone wrong, and the Detective trying to put the feeling into words. It took an awkward half an hour to discover that Garrus wasn't feeling everything as he should.
Most notably, that feeling of power should flow from his mind all the way to finger tip. Instead, it stopped at the spine, going no further, except for a strong zing that ran down his bones.

When they figured this out, Saren set his Omni-tool to scan a cross section of the sniper's arm for Eezo. The results came back, and Garrus became worried when the Spectre stared mutely at them with frustrated annoyance in his expression.

"I wish to... attempt something."

"Alright."

The stone plated Detective expected a preemptive explanation to happen next, but instead the younger torin reached in to grip his neck by the side with one hand, pulling on his aura in a way that made Garrus feel faint but also like the center of a storm. The Spectre stood perpendicular, his other arm going through the same memetic they'd practiced before.

A small dust cloud puffed up in the distance.

"You are fighting my draw. I will repeat a few times, attempt to concede to my control of your aura."

"I have no clue how. That rush was too intense to focus on any one thing."

"I will reiterate many times then, and provide feedback."

"Right, okay.... I'm going to be exhausted pretty fast though."

"Biotics are always tiring."

The second time Garrus didn't do much better, but by the forth he was beginning to feel the origin of the tug, and push his own energy to follow it. On the tenth try, the dirt actually exploded in a crater with a diameter the size of a skycar.
'That was almost it', he thought as he began to feel woozy, *just less push and more like handing off spun thread.*

The eighteenth attempt made the whole lot of sky car sized pot holes implode, dirt and sand flying into the air, leaving a hole in the ground bigger then the ship. He nearly lost his footing in the concussive wave of air that followed.

Garrus got out half a wavering whistle of appreciation before falling over. He stared up at the clouds, head forced to the side because of long crest blades. Saren's profile entered his vision, looking bored.

"Are you still conscious?"

"Mmmyep, I think so."

"Next time, tell me before you weaken this far."

"Will do, Spectre." He let off with a cheeky salute lazily done.

Saren rolled his eyes and dragged him to his feet. Once standing, a ration bar was shoved into his hands, one of the super high calorie ones, and he was tugged in the general direction of the Daedalus.

They didn't stop until hitting medbay, where the Spectre pushed him unresistingly over into a horizontal flop on the medical bed.

"Stay still, I am going to run a few scans to see if I can work around the strange formation of your Eezo nodes."

"Alright, I can do that. Not moving sounds pretty great right now."

"Shush."
Fanfic Recommendation: Random ficlets by virusq

**Playing Catch** (225 words) Femshep accidentally marries a Krogan.

**Serenade Scrap** (535 Words) Femshep sings to Joker, and the Geth are very confuzzled.

**Plus Five Cunning** (309 words) Verric Tethras and Jeff Moreau meet in a bar... (No, I'm not kidding. I have no idea how it happened either.)

**Giveem Hell** (698 words) How to burst into tears in 700 words or less. Okay, I'm sort of joking... It's Femshep/Wrex, after Shep is gone. Wait, nevermind, no joking. All the tears.
Saren is bemused and disgruntled some more, and Nihlus gets his 'in'.

Lexicon:

**Tripoli Station** – A recovered space station of unknown origin, shaped in a long ovoid, it doesn't match any known species' architecture. Originally dead in the water and long since emptied of all tech, the hollow shell was discovered and rekitted out by humans. The now-famous Tripoli Station is a bastion of colorful markets and mishmashed systems, all well maintained from profitable commerce flow.

**Nais** - the pronoun for Asari. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: **Michelle Branch - Are You Happy Now**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren glowered at the readings on screen while Garrus snored quietly in the slow and deep manner he always did when very unconscious.

The results were both good and bad.

He reached over to shake the sniper awake from his cat nap.

"Huh, wha- oh, hey Saren. Mmmmm. Figured it out yet?"

The Spectre ignored the anxious and intrigued feelings the blatantly affectionate 'Mmmmm' had provoked, instead pushing the monitor to tilt more toward the muzzy torin.

"You are not a biotic."

Icy blue eyes blinked at him with incomprehension, before the sniper sat up and shook his head as if
"Say that again? I'm really really confused. Pretty sure I remember us exploding a giant hole in the ground recently." He tapped the monitor, showing positive results for element zero nodes. "This seems to think I am."

Saren shook his head as well, but in a negative response. "Look carefully at the locations of the nodes."

He watched Vakarian lean in and study the image data.

"They're... in the middle? Along bones? I don't understand."

"Correct, they are in fact mostly in your bones. Not along a major nerve paths, except for a few scattered locations clustered around larger blood vessels. Your liver and lymph system treated the contaminate as it would any other heavy metal that it did not have the strength to deal with, seeing as you were bleeding profusely and wounded, it sent the element zero to storage in your bones. A little in your brain, spine, and plate structures as well."

"So, how did we...? This isn't exactly my field of expertise."

"In short, you have enough element zero stored in various tissues to power a skycar, but insufficient lacing along electric signal producing tissues to use the Mass Effect phenomenon, unless someone ignites your local field for you."

"I'm a... what, a giant biotic battery?"

"More or less."

"But I can't actually use them?"

"No, and on that note, be careful not to consume or interact with substances that contain Element Zero. In this case 'like attracts like', and you do have some base nodes to build on in your nervous tissue."
"Huh. Okay."

"... I would have thought this to be good news? You are no longer in peril with your clan standing.," was followed by a grumbled, "Though you remain wasted at C-Sec because of them."

"Well, yeah, and *damn* that first part is nice, but I was sort of... looking forward to having super powers? Not to mention learning from you."

He tried not to be oddly touched at that last regret. "Language, Vakarian."

"Oh, sorry, and thanks. I'm glad you think so."

"Apology accepted. I suppose you are hungry again?"

"Yeah, aren't you?"

"I could eat."

Blue blood hit the dirt floor in a spatter, a left-side pectoral plate cracked and leaking fluid. Green eyes flashed angrily as a crowd of defeated fighters and their entourage penned him in, murderous at the new comer who was stealing all their wins.

He was just too good, and the matches were becoming less of a sport and more of a mockery as the Hurricane took them down, lifetime pit fighters or more recent contenders, one and all.

They were sick of it, wanting comeuppance and blood. Don't forget the blood.
Before the crowd could get worked up enough to actually try and end him, the security guards pushed through while making heavy handed threats, and the rabble grudgingly shoved off. One asshole spit at the form who had his back in a corner, fists still up just in case someone went off script and got it in their fool head to force the issue. Not that they'd have much of a chance at success.

Other then the final salival jab, the crowd left with nothing more then grumbles. The head bouncer coming up to him, palms raised in peace.

"Yo. Hurricane. Boss wants to talk to you, this stuff isn't good for business yeah? Rozzi will take ya, go see what's up and then maybe get 'cho self looked at by the doc. That's a bad hit, yeah?"

"Yeah, okay. Thanks man."

"No problem. You's a good show, take care'a yo self."

Nihlus kept his triumphant smirk well hidden behind the facade of 'Hurricane', his evolving tough-as-nails pit fighter persona. It looked like the local lordling had finally noticed him. Time to meet and greet the lucky target, and see about getting in their good books.

The undercover Spectre followed Rozzi several hallways over, and took the stairs with an over exaggerated limp and wheeze. Setting foot at the top, he made eyes with one of the door guards.

The bored looking Krogan nodded and opened the door for him.

"Thanks.", he offered for the polite gesture. The man grunted in response, and his escort wandered off.

Nihlus stepped inside the neo-classical office that every head mook from Nos Astra to Tripoli Station seemed to have. You could always tell how well a mob boss was doing by the amount of real wood and organic or prothean material that made up their furniture.

This little oasis amidst the scum of the pits had no less than three wood tables, and a plethora of antique statues amid unwelcoming and cold aesthetics.
The Asari behind the stylish metal desk was petting the head of a collared Turian female who stared off into space as if she had a Batarian brain chip in her head. She probably did. Nihlus forced himself to half smirk at the disgusting, and likely intentional, display. As if he liked the idea of it.

That little aspect of his personality built itself as he moved closer. Hurricane was okay with slavery, and liked a good, dominating fuck with one. Or five. Nihlus shuddered in disgust in the back of his own head, slightly miffed at himself for using Garrus' nickname for a mission. It was a dumb idea, and now the identity had a personality 'mask' to go with it, and that torin was going to become a monster if that's what it took to get the job done.

There was a reason he was considered one of the best. It was the same reason he'd never had a stable relationship in his life till unemotional, understanding Saren had taken him under wing.

Hurricane stepped up to the desk, smirk dropping, waiting in bored silence for the blank faced Asari to address him. For a moment the nais simply eyed him, head tilted in curiosity. At some unseen signal a wide smile split the pretty blue face, chilling like a nightmare.

"That looks... painful." Came the boss' first words, loudly whispered in breathy appreciation.

"Mmm. It is." Ahah, one of those types.

"You will refer to me as Madam, sweet thing."

"A'ight... Madam." He waited just a half beat to add the requested title, a hint of recalcitrance to spice the interaction. People who insisted on being called by a fanciful title always got off on it a little, and denying them the satisfaction was a first step in provoking their need to force you to bend to their will.

The seduction had begun, whether it was sexual, monetary, social, or lethal had yet to be seen.

"Very good, Hurricane. Or should I call you Daelor? Oh! Surprised I know your real name? You shouldn't be. I know sooo~ many things." Coquettish and armed to the teeth. His internal estimate of the crazy levels in the room rose right along side the danger quotient.
Externally he looked surprised and skittish, internally he was trying not to laugh. This bitch was about as subtle as the would-be pirate with all the Vorcha minions, and the fake ID he'd used once at a bar in town seemed to have fooled the nais entirely.

Still, this one was definitely 'uh-oh' crazy, a magical level beyond 'unstable' and into the realms of unpredictability that normally landed in a mental facility. Usually the Asari republics were on the ball about mental illnesses in their own kind.

'Madam' leered at his discomfort act, chortling darkly.

Yeaaah, they missed one.

"I left that name behind a long time ago. Just Hurricane, if you would. Madam. Or 'Cane works too, it's what they call me in the crowd sometimes."

"Hmmm. Interesting. Well let me get to the point then. You've made some enemies with all your wins, perhaps you'd noticed?" The nais twittered amid the shrill, coy words. "I can make that go away for you."

"For a price?"

"Isn't there always?"

"Mmmhmm."

"You fight again in, let's see here... four days? Loose the match, and you will find your peers much more agreeable!"

"That's it?"

"Oh yes."

"Uhuh. Agreeable for how long... Madam?"
"A little while, at least."

"...fine."

"Excellent! Wonderful doing business with you. Have a lo~vely day, Hurricane."

Madam waved a poshy little hand wiggle at him. He nodded politely, visibly wincing from the movement, and hobbled out. Finally some progress.

A dark grin tugged at his mandibles when he finally got to where no one could see him.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If you haven't listened to Garrus talk in a while, and you've forgotten that sexy way he extends his 'r' on words like 'really' and 'right', you could always watch: ME2 Best Garrus Quotes (He does the 'r' thing in the conversation that starts around 1:40. “Rrrright, because I'm in a great place to optimize firing algorithms right now.” Eeeeeeeeee!)

Fanfic Recommendation: Domestic Dynamics (17,875 words) by Dizzydodo (Garrus/Femshep. A little silly at some points, but snickering at the awkward miscommunication is half the fun.)
Ya win some ya lose some

Chapter Summary

Nihlus plays games with people, and misses Garrus even while screwing someone else. Saren is charmed by consideration.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Nais - the pronoun for Asari. (Credit: Mizdirected)
Tarin - Turian closed dialect for a female over the age of majority. (Credit: Mizdirected)
A/N: Warning for smuuuuuuuuuut. (Really kinky smut, beware!) :3

Chapter Soundtrack: Michelle Branch - Everywhere

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He lost the match as scheduled, and was even able made it look realistic. He saw the dangerous looking nais lurking down a hallway as the medics carried him out on a stretcher. The crazy pit boss winked at him with a malicious grin, but the upcoming wall interceded in his view before he could mime a reply.

Nihlus was unimpressed with the person he had 'lost' to, and was over playing his injuries. Even so, that little exchange left him too keyed up to allow unconsciousness in semi-public. He had the doctor fix him up with numbing agent only.

The undercover Spectre made it back to his ship, parked at the local docks under a fake registration ID, and got it locked up tight before finally passing out.

He woke up feeling sore and more tired then before. His medical suite pinged angrily when he ran himself, disparaging the pit doctor's job, and putting him out again to fix a few things.

Nihlus' second waking was to the pings of a message on his 'tool. It was from Engress, inviting him to lunch tomorrow. He was somewhat hopeful it would include a little late afternoon bedplay, but doubted it with a Salarian libido at work.
Didn't mean he wouldn't try for it anyway.

Sending a positive reply, with a request to meet at a plaza near the docks, he reheated three premade meals and stuffed his face without tasting a thing. The rest of the day was devoted to recovering, so he did more *Notas* artistry. Several self-teaching modules flew by while an action vid played in the background.

He stayed up late, honestly enjoying just sitting there and painting. The focus needed was enough to be relaxing but not so much as to be dull, and he ended up painting a fair few more patterns then needed. Imaginary ones, Garrus' at least a dozen times, and a few amateurish landscapes even. Just once he tried the Arterius colony markings. He finished, and spent several long minutes staring at the lines, facinated by the story they told.

Long flat stripes from cheek to fringe ran over the eyes, old tribal markings with some unclear, archiac meaning based around physically seeing manifest spirits. A semi-circle between brow ridges indicated participation in bringing inter-continental peace during the *original* Unification Wars back when Turians had yet to develop space flight. Two dashes over the upper mouth plates, one to either side, were pseudo-fangs. Only given to the honor guard of the Turian Emporer in ancient times. A wide dash, from lower lip-plate to chin was the most recent tale; and although it wasn't apart of the clan standard, pictures of General Desolas Arterius showed the extra dash that indicated exemplary diplomacy that had to of saved countless lives to be added as a personal marking.

What a history. Now he was a hundred times more curious why Saren chose not to take up his family's paint. No answers were to be had though, at least not tonight, and he fell asleep still wondering.

The next day the Spectre woke up with a crick in his neck, and dried paints on his face. Thankfully just acrylics and not the mildly acidic stuff that was actually used on plate. He laughed at himself in the mirror, and took a shower with an indefatigable smile.

Lunch with his fighting buddy was enjoyable too, and though no sex was to be had, Nihlus did
manage to arouse the man, much to the embarrassment of his friend's species-based sensibilities. They ended up going out for a movie, and shopping for newer clothing, before calling it a day.

Nihlus wasted another cycle of the clock playing video games, not on any of his main accounts, but some gold and treasures may have ended up tucked away in obscure locations on the world map for him to grab later.

His next match was that night at 0700 local time, and he was looking forward to creaming someone. He couldn't lose again till the psycho *nais* made a point to ask him anyway. Hurricane needed to become a preferred player on the board, so the queen would want to move him.

He nailed it, by any measure, but his dissenters did nothing more then glower at him. It looked like his 'leash' wasn't the only one for sale.

The trend continued for two more weeks, a match every three to five days, before the doc handed him a white card that just said, 'Madam calls.', during his post-fight patch up.

The Spectre decided he wouldn't see that quack for the slightest paper cut after that. It didn't pay to be under the knife of someone quite so far in the bitch's pocket. He might end up with a chip in his own head that way.

He did go straight up though, thankfully not injured much this time. Speaking of chips, the pet *tarin* was lounging on the floor by the rug. Her eyes were flat and dull looking. Nihlus casually ignored her.

"Oh! The champion returns! Hello again."

"Hello."

The *nais* stared him down disapprovingly, tapping a pointed nail on the desk. He pretended to realize his mistake with a start.

"Er... Madam."
A more neutral expression took over as the pit boss nodded once, slowly.

"Be a dear, and lose your match next Friday?"

"Why should I?"

"Tsk tsk tsk, still not picking up on how this works are you? What a shame! A little slow in the head are we? Wellll then. Shall Madam spell it out for you?"

For fuck's sake, speaking in third person? Really?

"Uh. Huh. Suuuuuure. Why don't you?"

"Watch your tone little torin. This! Is the deal. You lose when I tell you to lose, and I'll let you keep fighting without... in~terr~up~tion."

"Not interested. There's a thousand other digs in the galaxy, and at least ten in-system. I can move to another place easy enough if you're going to screw with me all the damn time."

Purple lips pursed, displeased that bullying hadn't done the trick. Before the pit boss could offer him something mundane, like more cash to go with all the creds he won anyways, the Spectre made his next move.

"Buuuut... I might be convinced to lose, or win, at your pleasure..." He drawled the options slowly, in a beguiling subvocal that even Asari ears could hear. His arms akimbo, and hips cocked to the side.

"To wreck them." He tossed out a hand, purposefully showing off his talons.

“Ruin them.” Nihlus flicked a wrist, fingers fluttering downward to indicate some sort of ruination. A knife flickered in the light between his fingers during a pass or two, disappearing without a trace.

“Make it hurt.” As the last word came out, emphasis was put on the 't', a combination of dark,
beguiling grin and open mouth showing his fangs.

“Fast...” He tilted his head consideringly. “Or slow. If..."

He sauntered closer, laying bare and sharp talons on the metal surface between them. His verdant green eyes bore into dark blue, slowly looking the curvaceous psychopath up and down in clear interest of more personal activities.

"If you had something more... exotic to offer me."

The bitch leaned back, eyeing him like something between a seven course dinner and a pretty vase that would make a nice sound when smashed. Pupils had started to blow up as soon as his list had begun to make clear the lengths he would go to for Madam's enjoyment, if only the favor was returned.

"You like playing with fire, Hurricane? I could eat you alive."

For his reply, Nihlus batter dipped the words with sex and challenge.

"Not if I devour you first."

He could practically see it as the sadomasochist inside rushed up to color decision making to something less cunning and much more selfish and hedonistic. The nais rose up from the chair, resting forward on fingertips to lean over and stop centimeters away from carmine faceplates.

They stared each other down like two tigers considering whether to fight or fuck, then the psycho slid a knife from a thigh holster ever so slowly. A deep blue tongue licked it, and rested the flat of the wet tip against his chin.

"Tell me, how do you feel about knives, Hurricane?"

Nihlus' long black tongue came out to purposefully nick himself on the edge, leaning forward to slide the minutely bleeding appendage between purple lips. He licked along the back of white teeth, flicking a canine as he slid by.
That wasn't his only answer. As they kissed as best a pair of people with only one set of lips could, he flipped a thin, flat dagger out from nowhere in particular and held it to the underside of admittedly attractive tentacles. The *nais'* blade slid seductively down mouth plates and along his neck, ever so gently. His pulse began to race with anticipation.

They mouth fucked at knife point like tomorrow was Armageddon.

As the game moved from desk to chair to floor, dozens of little cuts added up to a room that smelled strongly of rust and sex. Azure and cobalt peppered the floor as he pounded into her in the style Asari preferred.

No mind meld occurred, neither was interested.

At the very least the *nais* wasn't a boring lay, and was giving him something he'd never dare ask Garrus for. The gorgeous Detective was admittedly very vanilla, and Nihlus wasn't sure he ever wanted the torin to see this side of him. Knife play was... maybe just a bit too deviant, *too dark*, to expose his sniper to this kink.

Nihlus knew he wasn't normal, that *this* wasn't considered normal. He could be considered 'not right in the head' by some, so he preferred to hide these shady corners from people he actually knew. Like Riaz, or Garrus. He didn't intend Saren to find out either, though the hyper observant agent might already have a clue.

He angrily stuffed the vague sense of shame into a pit, and railed into Madam all the harder. The Asari came with a scream, and he pushed himself to match it. The pain-pleasure of the cuts did it more than the blue form splayed out beneath him.

Nihlus clicked his tongue at himself for being distracted, and leaned in to continue the charade.

"Your wish, Madam?"

The *nais* curled a hand around his crest and bent his neck back to lick a long line up a thin trail of blood, ending near the tiny scrape it had sourced from by his ear.
"Lose. The match. Next Friday."

"My pleasure, Madam.", he purred.

The Daedalus docked with the Citadel gracefully, but Saren remained seated. The boot falls coming up the deck attested to the approach of his soon-to-disembark asset. Footsteps came to a stop behind his chair, and the Spectre swung around to face them.

"We have docked. You may proceed home at your leisure."

"You want help with resupply?"

Saren blinked, surprised by the offer. He considered. Certainly the sniper had sufficient eye for detail, and was not likely to fail at such a simple task.

He nodded slowly. "If you wish to. I have a list of supplies I require that must be picked up from the source, and a general shipment waiting at docking bay G-14. It would save me time, as I must file the mission report first.

The Detective nodded. "Send it to me?"

Saren did so as a tool-to-tool message, and Garrus confirmed it's arrival.

"Alright. I'll see you when you get done with the Council."

"Very well. Do not forget to refrain from speaking of the element zero exposure to anyone. At all."
Garrus gave a weak smile in reply.

“I won't. Don't particularly care to be dragged into a lab somewhere.”

“Good. There would be... uncomfortable questions asked of myself and Nihlus if conflicting stories were to arise as well. I trust in your discretion.”

“You can. Definitely.”

He nodded, satisfied that they understood each other. The airlock decon cycle was spent in pleasant quiet, leaning on the wall shoulder-to-shoulder. As soon as it was finished they parted ways, the sniper's anti-grav luggage trailing behind him. Saren headed for the Presidium, to turn in his paperwork, and to be available for verbal debrief or dismissal at the Council's whim.

The Spectre was not interviewed over the small matter he had attended to, and BB accepted the e-forms with no complaints. A quick stop past C-Sec's requisitions department for a few bits and bobbles, and he returned to the docks.

His ship was waiting, still locked down, with a tall stone and silver torin leaning beside a pile of crates stacked neatly on a low hovering platform. He briefly wondered why Vakarian was waiting outside before remembering that the VI didn't have the sniper as a registered user for entry. Saren tossed around the idea of adding him in as he approached the patiently waiting form.

"You were able to acquire everything?"

"Sure, no problems as far as I could tell."

"Excellent. Assist me with loading it?"

"Sounds good."

He watched Garrus reactivate the platform, and it followed them back inside the airlock, bobbing up and down as UV light and mist made short work of external contaminates.
"I apologize that you were kept waiting. I should have added you to the VI's recognized user list beforehand. It will not be a problem in the future."

"Uhhh... yeah, okay. I mean... you don't have to."

"I trust you will not abuse the access, and you could have simply tried to hack your way in the door instead."

"I wouldn't."

"I am aware."

A slightly tense silence descended as the cleansing mist and UV light faded, but he ignored it and walked the new supplies inside. Without speaking, they began to unload it all into appropriate places.

Saren took the replacement medical supplies and refills for the micro-fabricator back to the medbay surreptitiously, not wanting the sniper to dither about their expense.

New mission in hand, and resupply complete. The Spectre walked forward, meeting Vakarian mid-CIC. The mountainous torin clacked his mandibles nervously, not meeting his eyes. Odd.

"… Garrus?"

Garrus looked down at him with a faltering smile. Before Saren could inquire as to his preoccupation, a forehead leaned in and met his own with a soft buzz of worry and rumbled affection. His spine stiffened and his mouth felt dry, but he could not seem to move away.

"Take care of yourself out there, okay? I'm here if you need me for anything, don't hesitate to ask. Consequences be damned, I'm glad I was there to catch that bullet for you. Hug Nihlus for me next time you see him, alright?"
As the well wishing ended, the sniper pressed into the quietly flustered Spectre. An amorous brush of cheeks dented his stoicism, but a moment later the airlock was opening and the tall form disappeared through it.

Like a dream, Vakarian was gone. A feeling of faint happiness going with him.

Saren set course and took off shortly there after, but he did not discover the generous slice of dextro chocolate cake in a takeout container tucked away in the chilling unit until much later that day.

He ate it for desert with dinner, a cup of bitter-smooth kava on the side.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: 150k! How did that happen. :o

Fanfic Recommendation: An Engineer's Guide to the Technology of the Mass Effect Universe (27,135 words) by LogicalPremise (A weird and fun combo of mini-ficlet and fannoning of ME science. I can't say all of my mind canon matches LogicalPremise's, but look at all that pseudo-sciency tech lore! Mmmmmmm, nerd cred.)
Tonight is the time and tonight is alright

Chapter Summary

Garrus grits his teeth through a lecture, and Nihlus gets the job done.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Patrem/Pari - Turian word for Father/Dad. (Credit: MizDirected)

Avah - The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. (Credit: Recidiva)

Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)

Tarini - Plural form of 'tarin', a female Turian over the age of majority. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Cubitura - Turian couch built wide and deep, padded and angled to accommodate crest and spur

Chapter Soundtrack: Teminite - Ascent

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The trip back to his apartment went by in the blink of an eye, and he was half way through the door code before Garrus managed to get his head out of his thoughts and into reality.

The place felt empty, but he shrugged it off and set about unpacking. When the lockbox was repacked with fresh emergency trip stock, and his weapons tucked away, he sent off a message to C-Sec PR that he was back on station and would be at work tomorrow.

The Detective rechecked the armor's patch job, but it was expectedly flawless. From the clean and seamless repair he couldn't be sure the chest piece had ever taken a beating, but he did still feel a mild ache where new plate and lung were still getting used to themselves.

Shower and dinner were followed by lazy channel flipping. The alarm set, he fell asleep in the living room, passed out on the cubitura. The vid window VI helpfully turned itself off automatically a few
hours into the night cycle.

The next morning Garrus was woken by the ping of a message alert before his alarm ever had a chance to go off. It was an order to report to Pallin's office first thing today.

'Damn.'

He had no clue what his boss could possibly have to see him about, considering he'd been gone. The Detective ran over potential causes in his head.

All outstanding cases had been left with other officers. Any checked out evidence returned to the records room. Saren said they didn't need to file personnel requisition paperwork anymore, and he didn't think the OCD torin would have forgotten to give verbal notice.

Did he leave food in a drawer and cause an incursion of vent mice to take over the academy? Improperly filed something months ago and someone had finally noticed?

Being honest with himself, Garrus sighed and acknowledged that he was most likely going to get a talking to, good reason or complete bullshit. The Executor would find a reason, and even if he was receiving a raise or some other positive thing, the chances that it was coming without a lecture were slim to none.

He believed in the good work C-Sec did, really, but some days he hated the job. Best to suck it up though, there was no other thinkable career for the son of C-Sec legend Castis Vakarian.

His well worn blue and black armor felt infinitely less comfortable than the custom set when he put it on that morning. It lacked the piezoelectric anti-biotics lines, and was a lower quality material in comparison. Mass produced, rather than a treasure.

He felt cheapened, as if he himself were devalued by the change.

Garrus shook that notion off too, and headed into work.
"Vakarian."

"Good morning, sir."

"Have a seat."

He did, taking the left most empty chair in front of the Executor's desk. Uncertain whether to be relaxed because he wasn't being bombarded by the dulcet tones of Pallin in a tizzy fit right off the bat, or to be concerned that he was being offered, _offered_, a seat.

It felt vaguely surreal.

"So."

"Yes, sir?"

"Explain to me why Spectres are requisitioning you left and right."

Well, hell, what to say to that? Honesty? It usually served him well...

"My assistance was useful in a few on-station situations, and then I was requested on a mission specifically for sniping skill. It went well, and I offered my arm in the future if it was needed. The agents took me up on it."

Garrus congratulated himself on a succinct, well spoken reply that revealed none of his more complicated feelings on the matter.

Pallin set his elbows on the table, and steepled his fingers. A long sigh whistled from his nose, it sounded disapproving.
"I would have thought your patrem's mentality on ST&R agents would have been instilled in you. I'm sure he didn't let you leave the madlis for basic training without warning you about that agency."

"I'm aware of his opinions, sir."

Garrus stared stoically over the Executor's shoulder as his boss examined him. Spirits damnit, more people and their ignorant opinions about dedicated agents they didn't even know. He focused on keeping his expression blank and subvocals quiet. Several minutes passed in silence.

"Vakarian, you are not Spectre material."

He resisted the urge to recite Saren's opinion on that matter.

"As you say, sir."

"Don't be difficult, Detective. You may have the skills, spirits know you're a better combat specialist then most of the force, but you don't have the disposition. Not to mention responsibilities to your clan."

"I'm aware."

"Then tell me what you're thinking. I know we have... conflicts on a number of issues, but you're going down a very wrong path and I want to know why."

"Not changing my career, sir. The Avah of clan Vakarian would never allow it. Pari disbarred me from entering the ST&R selection program previously, as I'm sure you know."

"Yet, you've found a way around that, it seems."

"Not really. Occasional milk runs with Spectres on missions of low security classification isn't 'joining' them."
"It's the first steps to becoming a candidate the unofficial way."

"That wouldn't make a difference in my case, would it?"

"You tell me."

Garrus tried not to show any signs of his internal fuming. What exactly was the Executor trying to get at? He couldn't join ST&R, only help out a bit, they both knew that, and what was the damn problem with Spectres? Why did everyone hate them? Saren and Nihlus worked themselves to the bone for these people.

"No, sir.", he answered for lack of knowing anything else to say that wasn't inflammatory. Pallin stared him down more, as if waiting for something.

"Vakarian."

"Yes, sir?"

"Take some advice for once. Get yourself on a different track."

"I don't know what you're taking about. Sir."

"Do you need help chasing the Spectres off?"

"... Chasing them off? I really don't get what you're trying to say." He put emphasis in his subvocals, trying to convey bafflement with the point of this conversation.

"I'll lay it out then. Next time the Spectres come calling, ask them to get someone else. Avoid them. Their kind are no good for you, or anyone else for that matter. Madmen and psychopaths, the entire lot. The Council has them on leashes of licensure and not loyalty. Permission to kill at whim, legally, keeps them in line and makes them useful when pointed in the right direction. Otherwise half of them would be in prison. Most of them still should be. Get off this path, Vakarian."
The Detective blinked incredulously at the ridiculous, sensationalist description of ST&R. Saren should be in jail? Nihlus was a madman? Pallin was insane. This entire conversation was *insane*.

"... I'll think about your advice, sir." What else could he say?

"Good. Have a productive shift, Vakarian."

"Thank you, sir."

A month after that second purposely lost match and Nihlus was already running side errands for the Madam. His cover had proven to be a sick son-of-a-bitch, and had delightful, mercurial bedrooms tastes that ensured he was around often, ready and waiting for the opportunity to be of further service.

It had continued that way until he was a handy resource for a quick errand. Then an unquestioning lackey for a dead drop. The boss had him tailed that time, he felt them watching, and didn't so much as peak inside the little box. Not anywhere they could make eyes on him at least. He fulfilled anything that was asked of him perfectly, with a dark grin and a mockery of a doting boyfriend.

The worst part was the crazy bitch's enjoyment of slave raping. The *nais* had three, two tarin and another Asari. Nihlus had managed to keep up the act and share in the violations with glee, but he'd puked his guts out when back on the Widmanstat. Each time falling asleep shivering and glassy eyed.

The craving for Garrus, for wholesome and mutual pleasure sharing, for snuggles and back rubs and warm hide, rose exponentially. The opposite intention of taking this long, distant mission.

In between retching and curling up sleepless in bed, Nihlus spent the long nights cursing his rotten luck, poor planning, and for trying to solve this mission with sex and guile. It would've been so much easier to torture her for answers and leave. Never mind that information given under duress was always of dubious quality, playing the long game here was just total shit.
There was a lot of self recrimination on the worse nights. That, and planning a stay with Blue. All the fun things they could do, the list of which included a surprisingly mild amount of bedroom activity and a lot of stupid things like cookie eating contests and playing pranks on other ST&R agents. Garrus always went along with anything he asked to do, ever the good sport.

Maybe he could even steal the sniper away for a mission of their own, just the two of them. They could play video games and share his cot... and why not? He needed it after this. Not a want, a need, and Spectre authority was a beautiful thing...

Nihlus laughed despairingly at himself, miserable, and forced his thoughts toward ways to diminish his addiction to the sniper with... something. A different mission maybe, one with lots of bullets and no mind games. It was much more difficult to keep on task with those thoughts however, and imaginings of kitchen counter sex while cookies baked seduced him back into fantasy.

The inane fantasies helped ease him through the days of playing at being a monster, especially when the lobotomizing tech in the slave's heads didn't work entirely, and their expressions broke through for split seconds in suicidal, broken-willed pain.

The Spectre promised himself he'd get them out at the end of this. One way or another.

Finally, finally, ten weeks after first landing he had access to Madam's secure files. The hidden data was hundreds of years of her own efforts at intelligence gathering, linking her operation to countless other crime rings. Everything from jury-rigged gambling on up to slave trade, illegal arms dealing, and contacts in other information networks.

All of it stashed away on her grey box, unencrypted but immensely safe inside her own head. Until now. The drooling form on the floor had no need of it anymore. Madam was brain dead from the extraction process.

She should never had tried to copy data from it with him in the room. Foolish bitch. He had ruthlessly hard copied every bite, running rough shod over the delicate organic hardware, gleeful to be done with this place.

The Spectre Office's intelligence division would have a field day with this, once he got it to them. It was digital gold.
He was going to need a weekish to put the report together, and get his head on semi-straight. Intel would have to wait that long, at least. Saren had taught him to clip down the accounting to what needed to be told, but not the visceral, self-incriminating details that nobody really wanted to know.

Even then, reliving the past stretch of time was going to be a bitter experience. Nihlus didn't intend to talk about this shit show ever again, once it was done. He also wanted to be sure he was calm minded and affable before he set foot back on the Citadel. No need to drag the mud home with him.

Before that process could begin, he needed to finish up here. Madam was disposed of, disappearing forever more. He kept the nais' Omni-tool, using it to send a message to the contact that had requested information. The same info that Madam had gone to copy, revealingly, from her grey box.

The message simply said they would be unable to deliver tonight. Considering the late hour, how quiet and dark it was, and the fact that the slaves were nearby, he thought it best to get them all out now.

Time for exfiltration.

He pulled the glittering chains from their moors, drawing the three unresistingly out of the corner they were kept in, and into the center of the room like nothing so much as a pack of dogs being walked on leashes.

Nihlus swallowed back the bile rising from his gizzard, and put on an A-game face. There was no room for being squeamish right now.

He walked out of the office and shot both door guards point blank from behind. Moving along the most unoccupied routes, the knife loving torin took his followers toward the docks while taking his time. A good turn for anyone that might hold loyalty to Madam, as it was much less likely to result in a blood bath. His patience had ended now that the mission was complete, and mercy was on ration.

The tarini and nais followed in a fugue state.

Luck was with the Spectre, and they made it to the spaceport without being stopped again. He sneaked them in through the back, hacking through cargo doors, and putting out three guards with sleeper holds.
The smell of home surrounded him as they made it past the airlock into the Widmanstat, and he left the rescued individuals to mill about the causeway. Nihlus sent out the undocking request to traffic control, and a warning message to Engress.

FROM:8466672//LOCAL
TO: 1442357//ID.code:twicereturned

Hey, I just heard that something went down up at Madam's digs. Went over to look, nobody there. Heard people talking about some freaky shit, and it tickled me wrong. My advice? Get out of the area, friend.

-Hurricane

END MSSG

Saren would have berated him for leaving even a vague trail by sending the warning, but he wanted to give the Salarian a heads up just in case they linked the assassination to him. It hadn't been a secret that Hurricane and Finale were on good terms. It also felt disingenuous to just write him off.

Traffic control gave him the go ahead a little under twenty minutes later. The planet disappeared behind them, and the Spectre spent the trip to a rescued slave recovery and de-chipping center spinning inside his thoughts and painting. His passengers continued to stare into space.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Updated C-Sec HR to PR, because 'Human Resources' makes no sense, lol. 'Personnel Resources' it is. Hopefully a 'Public Relations' topic doesn't come up and make things confusing. Alas, 'madtorini' doesn't have the same spice as 'madman'. Oh well.

Love does make us a little blind, doesn't it?

Side note, am I the only one that hates 'sneaked' as the past tense of 'sneak'? I really want to write 'snuck'. Hmph. English!

As for the dechipping center: slavery is rampant, yet it is reviled by the largest military force in the galaxy, illegal in the republics, and just generally disliked. Sooo.... I'm
guessing there is a reverse slave trade too. Underground railroads of the galaxy, you might say. And of course Spectres would deal with it a lot. Every slaver ring they vanquish probably has refugees to evac.

Also! It was really weird and fun trying to write Nihlus having a kink that I don't have. Really not sure I did it justice, but I tried! It'll probably come up again... I will continue to try my best? Huh. Does anyone reading have a knifeplay/blood kink? I could use some advice on writing it convincingly. @_@

Fanfic Recommendation: Unusual Hunt (2,540 words) by V-reingetorix
(Thane/Irikah.)
Forms filled out, Garrus double-checked that the burglar was nice and cozy in a holding cell. An admin would process them for interim jail time tomorrow, to await trial, but his part of the job was done. Flush with success, the tall grey torin headed home.
"That was a damn good catch. I'm completely in the mood for celebrating now. Can't use the kitchen chit, but hell, who cares? I could... go to a dive bar? Dance club? Mmmm. Maybe the arena?"

The Detective was still mulling over options when he got home. His door shifted aside to reveal a shadowed form on the couch, and he nearly drew his side arm on the figure. The automatic lights flickered on a moment later though, revealing a red-brown crest peaking above blankets. A wide smile spread across his mandibles as he stepped inside and locked the door.

Nihlus' quiet snoring wheeze drifted up to him, and Garrus knelt down beside the cubitura. The Spectre was out like a light, suspiciously not waking to the sound of the door or movement.

'He must be really damn tired.', he thought with a hint of concern. A gentle knuckle stroked over cheek bones, still no response.

'Well, if Nihlus wants to sleep, he definitely deserves it.' With a permissive half smile Garrus leaned in, pulling the lanky torin to him, blankets and all. The jostling as he stood back up finally roused a sleepy startle, but the sniper hummed soft reassurances and he settled.

'Just me. Sleep more.'

'Ranul?'

Garrus grinned at the subvocal name for him, it sounded like some off the wall non-word, but the emotive tones to it were heart-meltingly sweet.

'Yes. Just me. Sleep.'

'Kay.'

The Spectre sighed back into a relaxed slump as the sniper took them to the bedroom. Setting the burden down carefully on the bed, C-Sec armor and charcoal grey underarmor ended up tossed carelessly in the corner, albeit quietly so. Garrus tugged the casuals from the unresisting sleeper, leaving him clothes-less as well, and curled up under the blankets with him. Plate to plate and hide to hide.
Wonderfully warm, the Detective thought this was probably a better reward for a job well done than anything he could have figured out.

He drifted away, not even tired, just too peaceful to do otherwise.

Ooooooooooo

Nihlus woke to a familiar deep bass rumble behind him, and for long minutes he just laid there. Unwilling to open his eyes.

This was perfect, he wanted to stay juuu~~st like this.

For a good hour he continued to spurn reality, baking in the toaster oven they’d made of the blankets from both the living room and what normally sat on the bed.

Much too soon the rumble lightened, slowly dispersing entirely, regardless of his wishes. As a consolation prize, a questing nose came nuzzling into the curve of his collar ridge, snuffling sleepily at the juncture of hide and plate.

"Mmmm, Nihlus. Hey."

"Hey yourself. Go back to sleep?"

Ice blue eyes peered muzzily at the alarm clock. It had been almost five lazy hours since they'd moved to the bed.

"Might be hard. Not tired, I am hungry, you?"

Oh. Food did sound good. When had he last eaten? Everything had seemed tasteless lately, or unappealing enough to make skipping meals more attractive of an option. A press of palm passed smoothly over his stomach. Aw fuck, of course a detective would notice he'd thinned out.
"Sure. Whatcha got?"

Garrus laughed, warm and mellow. "A list of take-out numbers?"

"I will love you forever if you get me that curry place again." His eyes finally flickered open at his own joking turn of phrase. It was a little too close to the mark. He mentally kicked himself, blaming it on being half asleep still.

An adoring hum vibrated into him through the chest pressed to his back. A stony temple came to rest against fringe as fingers stroked back and forth over the gap of hide near the bottom of his rib cage. Blue’s low toned voice rumbled in his ear like caramel syrup. "A bargain deal if I've ever heard one. Sold. Just a small catch... I'm going to need my other arm to access my 'tool."

Nihlus felt the arm underneath him pressed into the mattress by his torso.

"We're doomed. I can't move."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. Absolutely too comfy."

"I'm good, but I don't know if I'm 'order food with my mind' good."

"I guess we're just going to starve then."

"Oh hell no.", was all the Officer said before rolling them to free himself. The Spectre laughingly whined about it, but that tapered off into a pleased trill when Garrus pinned his arms above his head and took mouth plates to his jaw line.

Food was ordered eventually, and with a forty minute delivery timer they had, if not ample, then at least sufficient time to touch and taste.
Nihlus was in favor of ignoring the doorbell when it rang, he had no interest in anything but more slowly building *reverie* and lazy petting. His sniper disagreed, and escaped the bed to throw on clothes and catch the door.

The torin brought it to him on a tray, with an array of appetizers and a drink. There was no way, in all of time and space, he deserved this kind of treatment, but fuck if he wasn't going to enjoy it. He wanted to be a leech for a little while... just... just a little while...

Garrus left and came back with another make-shift tray made out of an over-turned box. It seemed he only had the one actual lap tray, and of course he gave it away. The Spectre winced at the micro-display of how their entire relationship seemed to work.

Clothing returned to a pile on the floor before the sniper settled back into the covers.

If only to please his obliging friend, the Spectre dug in to the food with determined relish. It didn't taste like ash...

The curry was hot, savory, and spicy. Delicious actually, and there was more of it on offer then he could possibly consume in one sitting, even a bottomless-pit tall guy like him. They talked in between bites.

"So how did, umm... biotics training go?"

"Ahhh, funny story... turns out I've got eezo in the bones, not the nerves, so I'm not *actually* biotic."

"Uhhh... what? I'm pretty sure your scans showed some embedded in the nerves too."

"Not enough, I guess? Ask Saren for the science. I don't understand it entirely myself, but I can't light up an aura without help. Though he did teach me how to feed his field, and we made some pretty big holes in the ground."

"Oh... well, woohoo! Right?"

"For the most part."
"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I kind of... got used to the idea, was looking forward to having it. Now it's... better, but a little disappointing."

"I hear ya. I'd be depressed as fuck. Biotics are sexy." Garrus chuckled at him.

"I'm not quite that bad, but he did say that if I ate a bunch of Eezo laced stuff they might manifest."

"Oooooh. Are you going to?"

"For now... no. Too much riding on it."

"Laaaame."

Garrus scoffed, and shoved a heaping furka of curry at his face. He nabbed it mid-air in his mouth with a sly eyeridge waggle.

Nihlus ate till he was filled to the gills, then rolled back over to sleep more. He still felt tired, amazingly after six some odd hours of rest, and the good eats inspired nothing so much as going into a food coma. His personal guardian spirit made off with the leftovers, and returned with a book.

The Spectre wiggled himself into Garrus' lap and fell asleep to the slow stroke of fingers over his crest.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Language of Love (884 words) by nugicorn (Hannah Shepard/Council Sparatus)
You might be a terrible influence if

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is just stupid amounts of happy, then freaked out, and then happy again.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ciiitrusssss. Warning for some really rough sex herein. If that isn't your thing you can wait for the ff.net soft-core version to go up, or skip it in favor of future smut. They'll have all different kinds of intercourse by the time I'm done with them, but there is just no rushing these things. :3

Chapter Soundtrack: The White Stripes - Seven Nation Army (Glitch Mob Remix)
(This chapters goes right from the steamy bits to the emo drama and back again, but the sex? Yeah, its all to this beat. Mmmhmmm.)

And the feeling coming from my bones says, "Find a home."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus was pleased with how his night had gone, and was doubly enthused that tomorrow was the start of his three day weekend. A seven day work week with the last three off had it's perks, and Nihlus' timing was perfect for once.

Speaking of the Spectre, he hadn't looked great at first sight. Eyes were sunken, and if he weren't mistaken, blood shot. From tears, sleeplessness, or plain stress it was hard to tell. The second seemed most likely, considering the double loaded power napping that was going on.

Dark grey hands stroked at carmine fringe, splitting apart as some horns ended and others ran long. Smooth talon sides drew along the blades to the tips, and were switched out for finger pads that trailed back to start.

Nihlus slept for a while more before waking on his own around 1100 hours.

"Mmmm. Blue..."

"Yeah?" He replied softly, beginning to pet carmine fringe again, hoping to keep the torin relaxed
and sleepy as long as possible.

"It's... mmm, pretty sure it's tomorrow. Don't you have work?"

"Not today."

A soft smile of happiness fluttered in carmine mandibles, with a pleased hum.

"Oh yeah?"

"Mmhmmm. Next three days off, Hurricane."

Nihlus gave a full body shudder, small but detectable. Garrus paused mid-caress.

"...something wrong?"

The Spectre unfurled from his lap, pushing up into a sitting sprawl languidly. His irises were overbright, reflecting the soft lighting like jewels, but his eyelids drooped lazily in a dangerous looking counter point. Garrus' brow furrowed in concern.

"Nihlus?"

He wasn't given a verbal reply. Instead, long graceful fingers came over his throat, talon tips pressing ever so slightly. Garrus sat still, allowing it. The mesmerizing green eyes watched that hand as it slid into place, then slowly rose to meet his gaze.

"Nihlus?"

"...hmm?"
Somewhat annoyingly the talon pinpricks and mesmerizing gaze had Garrus' plates a little loose. He swallowed, caught in a mild conflict between rising arousal and worry.

"You okay?"

The Spectre's tongue visibly ran along his teeth as he leaned closer, focus dropping to Garrus' mouth plates. The sniper felt a rough thumb stroking the scales below his ear.

Nihlus visibly shook himself after a moment, gaze reluctantly rising back up to eye level. His eventual reply sounded vaguely fearful and uncertain. "I'm... great. Are you?"

"Yeah. Definitely."

The talons at his neck flexed slightly, the tips digging in. It was enticing in a strangely aggressive way. Garrus felt his pulse rise, adrenaline singing in his veins. It conflicted with the niggling sense that something was off. The Spectre's behavior was erratic and intense, but the clever Detective's mind was struggling to discern the cause.

"That's what... I want. That's..." Nihlus pressed in, nose to nose with him. His eyes shuttered, clenching tight. "I like it when you're happy, but I think I'm bad for you."

"Hell no."

"Yeah I am. You should s-send me away. I can't seem to-"

Sick of hearing words so similar to these from people that didn't know shit about ST&R or what they went through to keep the galaxy safe, he wasn't about to listen to them here and now, not when he could finally speak his mind.

"Hell. No."

The grip on tawny brown hide wavered, and he watched as carmine mandibles flailed, helpless and angrily frustrated. A lovely, deep-red lower jaw dropped, baring fangs. His Spectre looked impossibly feral and so damn attractive at that moment.
Icy blue eyes caught on those sharp points, and plates ignored emotional concerns, spreading further with his interest.

"Damnit, Blue. I'm trying to... to warn you. I'm not straight in the head right now. I thought I was. Shouldn't have come back yet-"

Garrus chuffed sternly in further denial.

"No. You can come here anytime you want to, or need to. I like having you here, and you're always welcome. Always."

The Spectre growled softly in disagreement, but it was weak and uncertain. Nihlus' subvocals betrayed him by releasing telling vibrations of appreciation and relief.

That sensual, threatening grip on his neck hide tightened.

Verdant green eyes reopened and focused in, still bright and so very close. He stared right back into them trying to reinforce how much he meant what he said. The denying growl rose in ferocity at the challenging body language.

Garrus' subvocals insisted on his affection, but not wanting to be the cause of more distress, he tilted his neck back a few degrees, baring his throat.

Nihlus' limbs shook with a tremor and his breath shuddered at the submissive gesture. The roar of aggressive rumbling from the Spectre's dark brown throat tumbled into something much less angry and much more lustful. Carmine mouth plates descended on Garrus', and the tall agent moved to straddle him.

The other hand tugged down on his crest, forcing an angle that gave the higher body a better alignment. The Detective groaned, long and quiet. A cool black tongue laved from the back of his throat, along the soft palette, and curled behind mouth plates.

The hand on his horns left, the talon tips dragging down the back of his neck, leaving a tiny trail of beading blood that gathered and fell. Not that _reverie_ let him feel much of anything but pleasure, but
his responding subvocals bore a hint of warning growl in them.

Nihlus apparently didn't care for any more challenge, and pushed him back into the mattress, biting at his throat with mouth plates. The sensation was amazing but slightly painful, even through the hormone cocktail. It was no where near his limit though. Garrus' rumble rose as he flipped them over, taking his own bites at ruddy brown hide.

The Spectre tasted divine, and the delirious moan that echoed around the room from his forceful reply convinced pelvic plates to spread fully. A hand ventured past Nihlus' waist, and finding a cock ready and waiting, gave a few heavy strokes in appreciation.

His partner took the opportunity to nip at fringe, and they ground themselves on one another. The sniper hummed his desire, wobbling unsteadily even on all fours.

A pair of hands took a hold of his waist and kneaded, talons biting into tender hide, making him pant and quietly keen with a unique combination of lust and pain. The tiny scores left after talon rakes stung, but the stimulus was an invigorating counter point to everything else.

This was getting more rough then the Detective usually went for, but he was fine with it if this was what Nihlus wanted. At that exact moment, tongue entwined and dizzy with reverie, Garrus didn't think there was much he would say no to.

The Spectre's grip moved to hit a nerve, and he was slightly caught off guard by the sharp ache. It loosened his stance enough that shaky limbs tumbled aside as Nihlus pushed out from under him, slipping away like a fish. The wild tangle of limbs and repositioning ended with Garrus on his hands and knees, dark brown hips pressed to his back side.

Nihlus' length slid along the groove of his rearward plate structure with amorous abandon, the natural lubrication slicking the seam. Since pelvic plates were already open the rear ones were loose too, and the thumbs that slipped in to spread him did so with ease.

Garrus canted his hips back, grinding up into Nihlus impatiently. He wanted this, right now.

The sniper's demands were obliged. A long, thin length of soft plated phallus dipped inside, seeking the cloaca. Upon finding the near invisible slit with pressure alone, Nihlus slid home with a rough thrust. Raised ridges of soft plates ground inside him, and the engorged hide at the base pressed on nerve clusters.
Garrus moaned long and loud, his subvocals awash with demands for more. Pressure, friction, heat, wetness, or preferably all of the above. Nihlus pushed in deep, curling inside of him in a way that made his back arch up to accommodate it, then holding them still. The Spectre's voice was a rumble of fevered demand.

"How much do you want this, Blue? Tell me how much."

Was given aloud with wild sounding subvocals that offering enticing promises in exchange for submission.

'I'll give you what you want. I'll give you anything. Anything you ask for, and everything you don't. Ask me for it. Tell me you want me. Tell me what you need.'

Garrus was helpless to reply in anything but positives, both keyed up and yet also aroused, just like the apex predator of Palaven that he was. This moment was going to end in sex or blood, maybe a little of both, but sex sounded the best.

He keened back anything his hormone addled mind could come up with to get Nihlus to just move already.

'Yes. I want you. Anything you have to give, give to me. Take me over. I don't care. I don't care. I want you.'

Aloud all he vocalized was his new lover's name, long and drawn out.

It was apparently good enough, because the Spectre stopped pinning his hips and started a quick and fluid combination of curling upward inside of him, rolling at the hips, with a small thrust at the front apex. It all rolled backward and relaxed just to repeat again.

The Detective couldn't breathe properly, the sensation was so intense. It grew even better when the hands that had tugged his rear plates open became unneeded, their loose position settling in. Six fingers moved up to his waist, right below the end of carapace, and raked thin lines of lighter color down his back.
He arched his back like a puma stretching, and demanded more. The claws rose up and dragged
down again for him. Near the hips talons broke hide, but the pain this time was entirely lost in the
pleasure. Garrus' keen was every shade of incomprehensible want that his blanked out mind could recall.

The thrusting tapered off, a viciously deep and slow roll took over that ground ridges along flesh.
Teeth came down to bite small holes into the thinner hide by his jaw, one of those demanding
carmine hands tugging his head aside to reach.

A tongue laved at the wound, tasting it, and then Nihlus drank from the trickling bleed, his words
gone and subvocals devolved into one long string of lustful abandon. Garrus knew he shouldn't let
him do that, but hell if he cared right now. It felt perfect. They felt perfect.

His taste buds suddenly wanted their own due of Nihlus, and he was glad the torin was taking him
from behind. It prevented the stolen bites from being returned, something that definitely wasn't
supposed to happen during casual sex.

Nihlus purred riotously at him as he laved the rapidly closing marks, one hand pressed to Garrus'
stomach to feel himself thrusting in from the outside. The sniper's panting grew ever more ragged.

The softer hide at the Spectre's base was flushed with blood, making him molten hot and satisfyingly
filling. As the thrusts pushed into him the pressure took his breath away, and the reverse pull made a
popping noise as it tugged him backwards.

In again, and the upward curl of the semi-prehensile appendage dug unerringly into a deep point of
building tension. Garrus' length bobbed with the motion, smacking into his own nerve bundles at the
top of every thrust.

He didn't last long, not with the utterly relentless stimulus. His cry of release was a deep bass roar
that went on for endless heartbeats before mellowing out into a low and heavy rumble of
satisfaction.

Nihlus kept going, not there yet. Garrus pushed back into rocking hips while humming lazy, panting
encouragement, clenching with internal muscles to tighten down on Nihlus' length inside of him.

The Spectre's rhythm began to waver, getting more unsteady by the second. The thrusting stopped,
and the ride became all rolling hips and curling that had icy blue eyes shuttering closed in pleasure.
His partner came with a roar as well, quieter but decidedly wanton. Nihlus collapsed, limbs losing control with the force of his release. Garrus tightened and relaxed his pelvic floor muscles repeatedly, milking the orgasm for him. Each release of pressure resulted in a full body tremble that made him smirk a little more.

Eventually he let off, but the exhausted carmine form remained bonelessly draped over his carapace, breathing unsteady. Garrus slowly lowered to the mattress and left him there to recover, humming pleasantly about the results.

They both fell asleep again, still connected.

Garrus licked his teeth as he came awake around mid afternoon. Oversleeping generally left him with a headache, but all he felt at the moment was damn good with a side of well sexed after-glow.

He tilted his head back, using crest horns to poke Nihlus awake. The Spectre woke with a start, pulling out of him and scrambling to his feet by the bedside.

The sniper chuckled a little at spectre reflexes, rolling over onto his back. He was sore, but it was tolerable. Very tolerable, in exchange for this morning.

"I... I'm sorry...", was called in a frail whisper.

He blinked, confused, pushing up onto elbows and forearms.

"Hell, what for?"

"T-that was... I didn't..."
Nihlus was distressed, his voice sounding small, and in such a blissful mood it took the Detective a moment to catch up.

"... was it too soon for you?"


Garrus heard the torin's subvocals buzz with frustration.

"Then, what?"

It came out in a rushed confession.

"Y-you were bleeding. I hurt you, clawed the shit out of- Spirits, I bit you. Fuck I'm so s-sorry..."

The officer stood up, closing in on Nihlus even as the shorter torin backed away. The wall determined a winner, ending the space available to retreat. The lanky Spectre began to shiver alarmingly when he hit the barrier.

"Hey. Shhhh. Hey now." Garrus offered, taking hold of shoulders and nuzzling into neck hide. "A little blood has never scared me. I've got clotting augs too, Hurricane, so it's not like I bleed out easy. Just relax." He stroked soothingly up and down arms, humming affection with gentle insistence.

"I-I didn't mean to..." Spirits, the fear in Nihlus' voice made him want to maul something. He forced that down and away, as there was nothing here for him to take it out on.

"I promise it's okay. I liked it, even. It was new. Interesting. You know I would've stopped you if I wasn't good with it, right?"

"... I... I don't know if I would have stopped if you had asked."

"Asking isn't the only way to stop someone."
"No, but... you shouldn't have to do more than ask. I'm so-"

Garrus cut him off with a questing tongue, licking a long path in Nihlus' mouth, rolling around gently and enjoying the taste of him. He was hoping a little *reverie* would soothe whatever had the agent so wound up.

He had a feeling it wasn't just their bedroom activities. That odd and intense conversation before hand had to of come from somewhere. Why did Nihlus keep coming back from missions so distressed? He didn't like it, not one damn bit.

The sniper repressed his over-protectiveness again, focusing on soothing Nihlus' tense fear of... whatever it was. Reprisal? Rejection? He didn't know.

Eventually their tongues pulled apart with a wet *click*. The Spectre's green eyes shut tight and head tilted as if he'd tried to prolong the contact as much as possible. Garrus pushed his fringe into Nihlus' firmly, talking in a quiet and soothing baritone.

"Something happen on your mission?"

"It uh...", he heard the Spectre swallow hard, "it might've."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Fuck, no, never, and... can you not call me Hurricane anymore?"

"Sure? ... I didn't know it bothered you."

"No! I loved it, just... used it for a cover. It's a long story, but I ruined it."

"Ruined it how?"
Nihlus buried his head into Garrus' inner collar, rolling back and forth in an unclear negative.

"I can't help if you don't tell me what's wrong."

It was quiet for a moment before the Spectre managed a reply.

"Maybe... some other day?"

He sighed. "Alright."

Garrus drew the lanky torin back into bed, showering him with slow, determined attention. He ignored the occasional blood stains entirely. At first the Spectre was simply unresisting in his arms, but patience won out, and determination changed compliance into appreciation. Appreciation became laced with dizziness and slow reciprocity.

He didn't try to initiate anything more then heavy petting and tongue play, but it loosened Nihlus back into something more languid and less shellshocked.

"Want to stay in bed today?" Garrus offered down at the softly humming torin. Green eyes almost glittered like normal as Nihlus managed a crooked smile.

"I'm a terrible influence on you."

"I'm not hearing a 'no'."
A/N/N: Apparently the consensus is that there should be more spoiling and cuddling of Nihlus, until he just accepts the fact that he deserves it. Every comment on the last chapter was like #NihlusSpendsRestOfLifeBeingSnuggled. I laughed, thanks guys. :)

Fanfic Recommendation: Twenty Questions (10,888 words) by dragoonqueen (Femshep/Garrus)
Knock knock knocking on heavens door

Chapter Summary

Nihlus enjoys the time he has to the fullest, and tries to give back a little. He hasn't figured out it isn't about equal trade yet.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Kava - Dextro equivalent to coffee. (Credit: Chromaticism)

Miel - A Turian dipping sauce for meats. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Furka - A two pronged Turian spork.

Chapter Soundtrack: Ariana Grande - Into You

I'm so into you, I can barely breathe
And all I wanna do is to fall in deep
But close ain't close enough 'til we cross the line
So name a game to play, and I'll roll the dice
...

So baby, come light me up, and maybe I'll let you on it
A little bit dangerous, but baby that's how I want it
A little less conversation, and a little more 'touch my body'
Cause I'm so into you, into you, into you
Got everyone watchin' us, so baby let's keep it secret
A little bit scandalous, but baby don't let them see it
...

This could take some time
I made too many mistakes
Better get this right, right baby?
...

Cause I'm so into you, into you, into you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus strolled in the door to Garrus' apartment complex, waving jauntily at the security guard in the lobby. The lackadaisical Batarian's top set of eyes glanced up to see who was passing by, and waved back. The lower set never left the foldable holo-screen that flickered with the latest in galactic news.

The Spectre curled his tongue behind his upper mouth plate and whistled as the elevator took him upward. One long talon tapped the box in his arms, an easily stored anti-grav chair that could fit in a
kitchen cabinet in its compressed form, but would self-expand like the moving parts on an assault rifle.

They had yet to eat breakfast anywhere but in bed, or dinner at the kava table, because Blue only had the one chair for his breakfast bar. This second one could sit on the kitchen side of the counter, and make it a table for two.

He tapped the code into the apartment door, and pressed his thumb to the biometric lock. The passcode and biometric data from his time as Asla still worked just fine, as he had discovered with a secret smile the first time he’d tried to get in by himself. It was also much faster then hacking in each time he visited.

Nihlus had wanted to surprise Garrus with dinner tonight after he got off work, as thanks for the past three days of glorious vacation. They had gone back to the bath house again, though Blue hadn’t needed his colony markings redone-, seen two movies, spent a lazy afternoon lounging in an indoor resort that had false beaches and Palaven-grade sunlight lamps, and had lunch at a really nice sushi place.

There had also been ridiculous amounts of sex. Probably four times a day, often with several orgasms at a time. At first he had been quietly terrified that anything sexual would let more of his last cover leak through, but the mountainous sniper had pinned him every time their activities got rough, nibbling and purring gently until the Spectre had a grip on himself.

It had worked, and well even, but more then anything his hindbrain wanted to see Blue bare his throat again. Fuck that had gotten him going... but Nihlus refused to ask for it. This way was better, so much... safer.

'And boring.' Whispered a devious voice in the back of his mind. He ignored it.

Three days of sex, food, good nights sleep, afternoon naps, and the company of a gorgeous torin who got his jokes and spoiled him silly. He felt light years better then before. Blue seemed in good spirits too, but Nihlus knew if he stayed for long enough the sniper would start to look worn out again.

So tonight was a surprise dinner, and tomorrow he was going in to the Spectre Offices to find his next mission.
The new chair set up with a touch of a button, and Nihlus set to work with his middling cooking skills. It was going to be a pretty simple meal, fried grains with vegetable pieces as a bedding for shish-kabobs. He had a salty *miel* to dip the poultry in, and a tangy citrus wine to wash it all down with.

Nihlus probably could have ordered nicer cuisine from somewhere, had it delivered and plated it here, but the knife loving Spectre had opted for home cooked instead. Hopefully Garrus liked the result. It seemed like the kind of thing that would.

He finished cooking with two hours to spare, and set a weak stasis field over the table to keep his efforts fresh. Green eyes considered the clock.

*’Do I have time to add anything else?’*

Nihlus wondered what else could be done to make it more special. This side of... romance wasn't exactly his forte, so he info-net searched for input while mentally plugging his ears and ignoring the idea that this was more then friendship. It was just nice. Not a romantic dinner for two. Just... nice. The Spectre could practically hear his inner sarcastic asshole laughing at the flimsy denial.

He really should have thought about the impression this could give before he started, but it was too late to back out now. The extra-net consensus seemed to think flowers were a good call. The chat forums were giving the impression that everyone liked nearby fresh flowers to some extent, not just tarin. Flowers sounds like making it worse, and his feet were taking him back out the door with an excited step before his logic brain could point out that he was, yet again, *making it worse.*

Besides, boredom and nervous energy for two hours, or maybe-liked flowers? Easy call.

The Spectre made his way back out to the closest shopping district, and grinned when he stumbled on Palaven Glass Lilies at a flower shop, a semi-clear blue lily with white mottled speckles near the center. It was boxy and sharp looking. He recalled the sniper mentioning lilies at one point, something about burning them at his funeral because he was a classy guy.

Nihlus had no clue what lilies had to do with being classy, but they were really neat looking. The shopkeeper pulled a dozen from the preservation chamber for him, and provided a plain glass vase to put them in with a blue ribbon tied around the middle.

The Spectre walked carefully on the return trip, pleased as punch with the last minute addition. They
were set gently down on the breakfast bar by the wall that ran to the door, the best looking side wiggled around to face the seating. With forty minutes to spare he flopped down on the couch, and channel surfed. Garrus took forereever to get home, but the startled grin on his face when he walked in and noticed dinner waiting for him made the entire rigmarole worth it.

"Did you get really bored today?"

"Maybe. You like?"

"I'm starving, and it looks amazing. Where'd you get this?"

Nihlus tried to force back a flush as he admitted to cooking it himself, but it surfaced uncontrolled when the admission earned him immediate physical rewards against the wall. Dinner had to wait several minutes while Blue expressed his gratitude, but that was what kitchen stasis field generators were for after all.

They were faintly dizzy with reverie by the time Garrus pulled away and sat in his new chair. Nihlus wobbled over to join him with a wide grin, and they dug in. At one point slate grey fingers reached out to rub the petal of a lily, even the light pressure bruising it with purple splotches. Garrus smiled softly as he rubbed fingers back and forth, and Nihlus felt his heart thump in his chest. Any lingering concerns that the sniper would find the gesture too girly were dissolved by that handsome, nostalgic smile.

'Spirits, he's a good looking torin.'

"Mari has these in her gardens." Nihlus froze. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

'Shit, shit, sh-'

A rumbling chuckle interrupted his internal freak out, which must have made it onto his face somehow for Blue to have noticed.

"Relax. It's nice to see them... They do smell good don't they?"
Nihlus hadn't noticed they smelled at all, too wrapped up in other things to notice. He sniffed at them, and surely enough they smelled light and clean, like that fresh wind smell that every fabric softener tried to hit but inevitably missed.

He hummed in agreement, relaxing. "How is she, by the way?"

"Good, actually. The Corporalis is still being stalled by medications, and mari was never one to let anything get her down."

"Glad to hear it. She's so nice, I hope they come up with a cure."

"Mmm yeah. We all do. Way too young to be facing death in a hospital bed."

"Been back to see her yet?"

"Since my last visit when it first hit? No. Nothing I can really do to help."

"But you should visit anyway!"

"Oh yeah? You want to come with?"

Nihlus tried not to react to the generous, nausea inducing prospect. He liked Mrs. Vakarian, and the idea of a loving family, part of an old and well known clan, wealthy and happy, living on the homeworld... it seemed more like a spirit tale then real life. He wanted to see it in person. To experience that Turian dream life second hand.

Though... being invited to the clan madlis, to meet Blue's mom in person? Nervous fear was about equal measure with the interest.

"I thought you didn't want your pari to know about our our uh, friendship?"

"Definitely not, but he doesn't have to know we were ever there. Could visit my cousin's vacation home, invite mari and Sol to come. They'd keep quiet about it. Sol especially owes me a favor or
two for covering for her."

"Oooo, what did she do?"

"You know Primarch Fedorian's daughter? The rebellious one with the piercings?"

"Uhuh."

"Yeah."

"Yeah? ......oh shit!"

Garrus laughed, nodding. "Exactly."

The rest of their dinner conversation centered around the crazy things his little sister got up to, as she apparently worked in Intelligence on Palaven, and it involved finding out, decoding, and delivering information at the highest levels. That had apparently given way to some highly classified 'adventures' that Garrus normally couldn't share with anyone, but Nihlus was conveniently a Spectre.
There is no turning back

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is so damn cute, and he is in much too deep to escape now.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Miel - A Turian dipping sauce for meats. (Credit: AceQueenKing)

A/N: Uhhh... so, how much sex is too much sex? You'll have to tell me, because my hindbrain just wants me to ignore plot and write kink exploration all day long. Hell, I'm not even into half the things I have planned, but I'm determined to make our boys each sexually distinct... I maintain that writing fanfiction does weird things to your head.

Chapter Soundtrack: Ain't No Rest For the Wicked by Cage the Elephant

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus had his chin in hand, elbow braced on the counter top. He was slightly drunk from several glasses of citrus wine, grinning broadly, and listening to Nihlus be a vivid storyteller. Ruddy brown hands were expressively moving about as a comedic prank was recreated, one he'd pulled on a less-than-stellar squad when he was still a teenager. They'd framed him for a mission failure that had been 110% impossible to succeed, by his account. Harmless pranking, if extremely annoying, had been the nicest of Private Kryik's possible responses.

Tableware was arranged to remake the situation, cutlery and cups recounting the topography of the set up. A spice shaker ended up in the miel at one point, a fellow soldier who had slipped and fallen into a pool of mud, uselessly needing help to escape the slippery dip.

The carmine plated torin's reaction to the blame laying had been to let it slide, for the most part, but strangely enough some itching powder had made it into a few sleeping bunks. Nihlus had been cackling internally, flat faced and silent in his glee, while the liars spent the next several days scratching and complaining. Considering the recent mission failure their CO hadn't been empathetic in the least, and brutal training courses had been the agenda for the following week. The gag had been the perfect friendly vengeance until laundry had been run, and then suddenly everyone was itching, including the young spectre-to-be. The crappy, ancient washing units had simply spread the irritant to everyone's sheets.
Nihlus leaned in, eyes glittering with mirth and voice low.

“It turned into everyone's problem, including our CO, and then there was a hunt for the cause. Once the medics figured it out they told the commander, and he was furious. The whole barracks was shaken down looking for clues. They eventually found a container of itching power... under the mattress of asshole number one! He spent three days in lock up!”

The Spectre crowed a triumphant laugh, fist to the sky with posthumous success. Garrus found himself tilting sideways as he laughed. Of course his friend had passed the bill, getting away with it entirely. Classic, sneaky Nihlus.

“You gunna be okay Blue? Don't pass out on me.” The Spectre grinned at him, not in much better shape himself. He pointed a talon accusingly at the green eyed trickster.

“I am fine. Blame that wine.”

“You were the one who drank so much.”

“It was really good, and you picked it, so it's your fault.”

Nihlus denied this with stalwartly negative subvocals while swiping the last bottle and chugging the remainder of the tangy liquid. With a pretend cry of dismay Garrus rounded the breakfast bar on slightly unsteady legs, and tried to steal back the container. It was gone before he got there.

Eyeridges waggled tauntingly at him. It was a very small step of logic that if the wine was gone, and he still wanted a taste, then it could be found on the tongue of his dinner partner.

He made the last few steps and pushed into the Spectre's personal space, grasping neck hide with one hand and tilting jawline up with a thumb. Garrus dipped in closer and nipped at carmine mouth plates. Nihlus' lower jaw dropped for him, allowing their long, tapered tongues to reach out and entwine, sliding along each other slowly. The combination of lingering citrus and torin had him humming a pleased rumble that was met with an echoing reply. He started tugging, pulling them toward the bedroom.

The lanky soldier rose to his pull as if possessed. The Detective walked them backwards slowly, drawing his captive along as he lavished attention on dark brown neck hide. Hands grasped at his
shoulders as breathing turned to panting, and steps became stumbles.

They made it to about two steps into the hallway before clothing started to disappear, and didn't quite get to the bed before the will to have at each other made legs go weak. Garrus didn't care, carpet was fine. Concrete was fine, if it meant having Nihlus inside him.

“Ohhhh, *fuck. Blue.*”

“That's the intention.”

“Shut up, smart mouth. Put that tongue to better use.”

He grinned broadly, more than willing to oblige. The sniper leaned forward and took a hold of carmine hips at their thickest, fingers rubbing circles into the dark patches of hide where the topography dipped. Garrus laved at the loose seem before him, licking the inner edges of the seam as they began to spread. The Spectre moaned long and low, his back arching to press carapace into the floor. Hands reached out to hold the fringe that was working over him.

Nihlus had liked pretty much every deviant thing they'd tried, so the sniper made an executive decision to see what the opinion was on yet another kink. Garrus shifted his grip slightly lower, pushing thumbs inward to hold plates semi-closed. The pressure against his fingers increased quickly as he ravished everything in sight with teeth and tongue. The plating spread as far as he would let it, and he pushed back firmly in a way that made the Spectre squirm, one heel digging into the floor, and the other up on a tawny brown hip, pressing back with curled toes.

A wanton cry rose from the Spectre as he licked the revealed underside of Nihlus' flushed and mahogany toned cock from root to tip. Next he tried teasing the more sensitive spots he could reach with quick flicks of tongue to incited nerves, pumping into the dips and licking up the lines of flesh. It drew choked gasps that dissolved into rumbling appreciation. Nuzzling into the gap, the stony torin pushed his nose into the soft plating below the tip, licking at what he could reach of the base. At a particularly good spot he ground into the point of contact as hard as he could manage. Nihlus keened, one hand clutching at his fringe and the other clawing the carpet.

That sound was music, and he worked to draw it out again and again. There might have been research involved in how to do this particular kind of kink, and it was paying off immensely.

“Spirits, unnnnnnnn fuck, Blue, ohhhh... oh... *Garrus!* Fuck, I want- want... *oh fuck.* Ahhhhhhh!”
Seeing how loud he could make Nihlus scream was proving to be his new favorite thing.

“Let me spread, ahhhhHH! Please, I c-can't...” The Spectre's words were barely comprehensible, but his subvocals were begging for very different things.

'Yes, keep it up, make me come while I'm inside, love you, yes this, take me over, make me, so good.' The truth telling subvocals tore out of him so loud that Garrus could feel them through his hands, still holding plates closed and pinning hips to floor. Nihlus was proving to be something of a moaner, and listening to the Spectre beg for more while eating him out was every fetish the sniper didn't know he had.

Oral fixation and sound junkie heaven.

“Ohhhh, spirits, f-fuck, please!!”

Garrus sought out the places that had been creating particularly exciting noises, and as Nihlus' orgasm approached he rapid-fire depressed into one just below the under-ridge of his head, pistoning his tongue into the hot spot mercilessly. As the intense sensations tipped the Spectre over the edge he screamed, hands clinging to anything stable in the maelstrom, hips trying and failing to thrash without control.

Biology confused, the Spectre's coming lasted ages, and he spent the trip back down shivering with aftershocks. A long, satisfied moan was teased out by another lave from root to head, thumbs easing off to let plates finally spread.

Nihlus' cock sprang free, flushed and ready to go, baffled by the disordered events. The sniper grinned triumphantly, and mouthed his way upwards. He nibbled along stomach and waist as Nihlus finally went limp, panting with exertion.

He cupped the torin's erection, trapping it between the wet hide that backed it, and a warm palm. Nihlus' hips rocked up into his hand with a sexy little growl, and he pushed them back down, a pointed talon set against the soft tissue at the base to warn away more movement.

Except the Spectre pressed up into it, ever so slightly, moaning as it dug into the tough and slick hide. Garrus blinked, then snorted. Of course the knife loving agent liked bedplay with sharp things. He wasn't even surprised.
Experimentally, he bit very gently into dark brown waist. Nihlus' breath caught with a sharp gasp, and when his huffing pants for air resumed they were rapid again. The sniper nibbled his way farther up, skipping over plate to seek tender neck hide. The Spectre's throat was bared when he got there, ready and waiting for attention. Garrus tugged it even further aside with his free hand, and mouthed his way up to the softer and thinner section behind mandibles, biting down with teeth just enough to prick.

The wavering keen that rose from Nihlus was glorious, and with an amused hum at the endlessly kinky torin underneath him, he put a little more pressure into it, enough for a trickle of blood flow, and changed the grip of his hand to tug and pump the phallus it held. The sniper's subvocals rumbled sweet nothings into the air in between slow pumps of fist and even slower licks of cobalt droplets. Nihlus whimpered, clutching at the back of Garrus' neck. One carmine plated leg was tossed aside, toes kneading at very abused carpet, the other was curled around the sniper's waist, pulling him closer.

Garrus laved at the already fading pricks, thinking that the blood tasted... salty and metallic, certainly edible, but no different then he'd expected from having nicked his own gums before. Neither the act nor the taste got him going much, but even the weaker vocalizations coming out of Nihlus had him dizzy with lust.

The Spectre came more slowly this round, with mellow keening and a tight hold. Once the tremble of exhausted limbs had smoothed out to occasional twitches Garrus lifted them up, wanting to actually get onto the bed. It was a bit of a struggle, but he managed it. An indeterminate amount of time passed in slow breaths and languid stroking of hide. The automatic lighting took the lack of overt movement as a sign to dim. Nihlus turned to face him with a rustle of sheets, red shadows and liquid green eyes about all he could make out.

“That was... amazing. I... Is there anything I can do in return?”

Garrus shrugged. “Nothing in particular comes to mind. Anything you have a preference for?”

The Spectre's caramel syrup voice replied with a quiet laugh. “That's not exactly how payback works, Blue.”

Maybe a little drunk still, he reached to stroke a thumb over sharp, handsome cheek bones.

“This? It isn't about being even.”
“I’m pretty sure sex is about sharing pleasure, but okay. I’ll bite. What is it about?” Garrus grinned and touched fringes with the puzzled torin.

“You’ll figure it out eventually. I don’t suppose I could ask you to get me off as well in the mean time?”

The pressure between forehead plating was returned.

“Spirits yes, I’ve been wanting to all night.”

Nihlus was almost asleep when the blaring alert went off on Blue’s Omni-tool.

’Prrrrrt! Prrrrrt! PRRRRT!’, rang out in the quiet room. He sat up, a palm scrubbing his face to dispel the fog of almost-sleep.

"Nnnn. Whatsit, huh?"

Garrus popped up, as if he hadn't just been snoring, making a beeline for his scattered underarmor.

"Emergency signal, like an 'all hands on deck', but for C-Sec.", he explained while gathering his work armor's sections from around the room. Nihlus groaned and went for his own gear.

"Nihlus, you can go back to bed, it isn't-"

"Or not? Ugh. Shush up and explain where we're headed."
The Detective chuckled at his nonsensical statement, shrugging a shoulder as he balanced on one foot to thrust the other into the hole of a legging mesh.

"No clue. Haven't read the alert yet. Generally do that on the way down the elevator."

"Uhhf, 'kay."

Nihlus' kit was gathered from its resting spot in the closet, stacked inside a duffel that ended up right underneath where Asla's clothing hung. He ignored the hanging garments purposefully, and armored up.

Long practice had them both set to go in about two minutes of rushed buckling, lock clicks, and shield generator spooling sounds.

They were walking out the door as guns were still clinking into place on magnetic attachment plates. Surely enough, Blue had his visor running and the alert message text up on his tool as soon as they hit the elevator.

Nihlus pushed in close to his opposite side to read, taking in the details while trying to keep his subvocals from grumbling about having his perfect night interrupted. He was hoping for someone to stab, to make up for the interjection.

His disgruntlement evaporated upon processing the information.


His normally effusive and fluid subvocals dropped flat like a severed guitar string.

Flashes of fear and pain, being held down and hurt, cruel laughter at the keens made by a whip-thin, underfed child. Memories flickered in the back of his mind, the bare dregs of nightmares he hadn't managed to repress entirely. By the time the elevator stopped on the bottom floor a score of death warrants had already been signed.

The bulletin included the names and profiles of the eleven Turian terrorists that were responsible, and
he memorized their data like a camera. Suspected reasoning, criminal bookings, and service records were crossed out with black marker inside his head, unimportant details of the walking dead.

He cut ahead of Blue, commandeering a nearby skycar instead of heading to the rapid transit station. Spectre Authority. Time was of the essence with the most innocent of lives on the line, and the fools had a Council ghost on their trail because of it.

The drive was quiet, but Garrus looked as displeased as he was. Nihlus felt a brief moment of love for him shine through the anger, and his mood lightened a little. Blue didn't tolerate people who messed with kids either? He really was fucking perfect.

They came within sight of the hostage situation, and the Spectre landed them nearby, but not too close. He recognized Executor Pallin, who was on scene behind a police barricade, and avoided the torin like the plague. A dedicated Executor, sure, but he played hardball with ST&R regularly, and Nihlus didn't have the patience required to play nice today.

The squat, eight story shopping mall was surrounded by C-Sec squad cars lighting up the night cycle with search lights. The over-bright beams cut through the gloom in sweeping, criss-cross patterns. Several blockades held back gagglng, obnoxious onlookers, patrolled by officers like a riot line. He was wondering why their gazes passed by without stopping when suddenly it occurred to him that he was walking ahead of a figure wearing their colors. They thought he was there with Garrus.

He managed a half-smirk of amusement. They weren't exactly wrong.

A negotiation team was just unloading from a skyvan, setting up an area to attempt opening discussion to have the hostages released. The Spectre sneered at their endeavors. Did they think the terrorists would just let their get-out-of-jail-free cards go if C-Sec pinky swore a free ride off the Citadel? Ha.

Most likely? That method would leave some kids behind at the mercy of their kidnappers, to reassure the criminals of a clean getaway, and spirits knew the negotiators would be making sure the offspring of the wealthy and important were priority.

He growled lowly, and held out a tense hand.

"Blue. Need to borrow your eye thingy."
"Yeah... alright. Here."

He took the proffered visor, though without a helm mount he had to clip it to his fringe. It clicked on with a decent fit, scanning his biometrics and declaring him an unauthorized user. A hand came in to press a few side buttons and a retinal scan later it bleeped acceptingly, profiling him.

Once Nihlus was added as a user it's functionality went live, and he used it to scope out the scene more fully. It was the perfect tool for the job, matching the image and scan data with public records to bring up blueprints automatically. The software pin-pointed structural weaknesses, and marked life signs detected in real time.

He distantly concluded this must be a very expensive piece of equipment, because the computational speed and combat tooled UI were beyond anything he'd ever heard of. Even Spectre toys.

"I want one of these, Blue. Where do I get one?" The blueprints showed a fair few access points for a creative mind. He started walking.

"Ah, I don't think you can just buy one. I took about four different models and spliced them together to- where are we going?"

"In the back way. Together to what?"

"To, ahhh... make it do all the things I wanted it to do. Had to upgrade from my old model a while back after there was... okay, not that I'm against it, but why are we going in the back?"

Nihlus pointed in the vague direction of the negotiation team.

"The talkers are probably going to wheel and deal with the terrorists to save the kids with rich parents first, and then they'll let a few slip the net, because talking these assholes out of all their meat shields would be impossible."

"It... wouldn't be the first time they've only gotten most of the hostages out alive."

"Exactly. Fuck that. Are you in?"
"I'm right behind you."

The Spectre nodded, stalking into the shadows outside the police line. He headed for a nearby sewer connection, intending to get under the building, and find a way up and in from there.

Those kids were going home, all of them, or at least as many as possible and not based on who had the most important daddy and mommy. Not if he had anything to say about it.

They came up on a keeper tunnel that led into the septic system, and he waved Garrus up to the lock, not willing to waste any time trying to hack it himself. It was open in under a minute, and he pushed ahead into the narrow and low ceilinged entry way. Garrus hummed disapprovingly as they duck-walked along, awkwardly creeping forward in a quick and low waddle.

“Stop grumbling at me. What is it Blue?”

“... I should be on point.”

“Pffft, no. Disregard all the stupid shit the Hierarchy taught you. It doesn't make any damn sense for the person in charge to lead from the rear like a cowardly GPS. Screw tradition if it isn't logical.”

His sniper fell into a contemplative silence, subvocals giving away his tentative consideration. The idea that the Hierarchy could actually just be full of complete bullshit probably wasn't something the Palaven born clan heir wanted to hear, and maybe now wasn't the time for it, but hell... what kind of pansy assholes actually led from the back? Let their squad die so they could be safe? Barking directions from behind living cover, like it made sense to be constantly giving away your position over coms with verbal map data for your group?

Alright, so maybe he wasn't their government's biggest fan to start with, but it wasn't exactly difficult to poke holes in their sterile, rule-humping world views, now was it?

Also there were little kids being held at gun point right now, so Nihlus figured he was allowed to be bitchy.

The passageway dead ended, and they had to backtrack. It gave Garrus point for a bit, but he let it
happen to show how much sense that flexibility of position made instead of stringent order-by-tier movement in a battlefield situation.

“Did it say why there were people in the mall at 3am by the way?”

“No, it didn't, but my best guess is some sort of fundraiser lock-in.”

“A what now?”

“Never did those as a kid? Where your community group has a sleep over in a museum or something? It usually involves donations of vid screenings and food from local businesses, and parents getting begged for the money to go, then profits go towards a charity or afterschool club.”

“Can't, uh, say that I did.”

“Your school didn't do them or you didn't participate?”

Nihlus chuffed with a weak laugh, honestly finding the question funny.

“I didn't go to school, Blue.”

Garrus' head turned sideways to glance at him over his collar. “... Seriously?”

“A'yep.”

“How are you so damn smart then?”

Nihlus took point again at another turn, ignoring the compliment with a miniscule smile.

“Meh. Clever, not book smart. Saren taught me how to write- is that a ladder? It is. Go time.”
“Right. Where do you want me?”

“How good are you with sneaking?”

“Not at all?”

“Kay, let's see what's at the top of this and go from there.”

"Roger that."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Running a spellcheck over a section with sex noises was hilarious! "Ahhhhhh!" Did you mean? "Ah", "Ah!", "Air" or "Ankh"? NOPE! I mean "Ahhhh!", thanks though!

Fanfic Recommendation: All the king's horses, All the king's men (62,672 words) by Lost Gallifrey (FemShep/Garrus. painfulread, be wary.)
Speak in tongues and mock the establishment

Chapter Summary

Our boys do what they do best, and the media does what the media does best.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mari - Turian closed dialect for 'mom'. (Credit: Mizdirected)
Pahir – Turian closed dialect for 'son'. (Credit: Mizdirected)
Nais – Pronoun for non-gendered Asari. (Credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: Duckies! I just found the neatest thing! Dan Koboldt’s Science in Scifi. It's a website about science in fiction, with articles written about common topics with input from specialists, researchers, teachers, and scientists in those fields! There are some really cool reads in the Earth Sciences, Space Travel, and Warfare sections. If you write here too, you might care to check it out, for inspiration if not fact checking. :3

Chapter Soundtrack: Kaster - Rage Quit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus had gotten a sinking feeling the moment the emergency all-call details began describing younglings at risk. What might have been a bored Spectre following around a C-Sec buddy morphed quickly into an ST&R Agent on a war path coincidentally accompanied by a cop. Nihlus' demeanor had shed warmth and affability in moments. Not quite the snap freeze from the metalworks mission, but it still made him feel... uneasy. Cold Nihlus wasn't quite the same person as normal Nihlus.

As they climbed rung after rung of access ladder, Garrus set his mien to that often-used cocky sniper vibe, hoping that jokes and devil-may-care attitude would warm his friend back up.

The accent ended in a sub-level full of utility connections, riddled with the building's hookups to the local power grid, water reclamation, and numerous other systems. Pipes and cables ran throughout the space, neatly bunched together and splitting away in an incomprehensible dance of organization. A flicker of Omni-tool light caught his attention, and he turned to see Nihlus flash forging something.
The Detective leaned a casual elbow on a red-and-black pauldron, lacing his fingers together and making a sturdy wall of himself as he watched the proceedings. Nihlus leaned back into him while he worked, subvocals flat. The Spectre's built-in microfab was producing some sort of chemical compound, feeding it drop by drop into a little plastic tube attached to the output.

“Helms up in a minute here Blue. This little beauty will be going in the air conditioning fans as soon as it's done.”

“What exactly is it?”

“A very mild tranquilizer. Should be barely noticeable, but it'll make the little 'uns calmer, and slow the reaction times of any hostiles that get a lungful.”

“Damn, that sounds useful.”

“Mmmhm, I'm just full of tricks. Speaking of, mind if I keep your eye thingy for now?”

Garrus gave the Spectre his best heartbroken look. Nihlus smirked at him and tapped his helmet button, sealing the visor in with him. With a sigh the Detective stood out of his lean and followed suit. The vial was detached when the compound was complete, and slowly tipped into the air circulation systems.

“So if someone goes to shoot you in the head, try to angle it so my visor survives.”

“Pffft. As if anyone will get the chance. Ye of little faith.”

“All I'm saying is that I spent a ridiculous amount of time on it, and if you could get it back to me not in pieces? That would be super.”

“Aww, how stressful. You could spend some time cooing at your precious Lancer instead. I know how much you love that thing.” The sniper scoffed at his teasing, and Nihlus bobbed his helm toward the only door. “Come on, let's head for the stairs.”

Garrus didn't really mind letting him borrow the custom visor. He was mostly just pleased to see the
Spectre's demeanor lighten a little, though he knew it wouldn't brighten entirely until the hostages were safe. Understandable.

Truthfully he was here for the victims first and foremost, but there was the additional motivation of getting through this successfully for Nihlus' peace of mind, and said 'precious Lancer' might help him do it.

The unsecured basement doors opened into a murky hallway, brightly lit where they stood but fading to black quickly outside their sphere of light. It was creepy, and the Officer set about hacking the lighting system to ignore them, glancing backwards regularly to keep a watch on their six. Night vision through helm cams would work much better if he could get a foot in the local mainframe to disable their signatures. He was working on making them look like keepers, and thus ignored by most of the building's automation, when Nihlus came to a stop.

“Door to the stairwell, it's locked. Want to hack it for me, or are you too busy writing a diary about your abusive boyfriend who steals your stuff?”

Already in the system, he had the alarms disabled in about twenty seconds, but it took another thirty to spoof it into opening without registering on the security grid that the door had been opened at all.

“Dear diary, he takes my very best toys, and makes me do all the work.”

An entertained snort escaped the Spectre, who knocked him in the ankle with a mild kick as they walked through and began to hike up the steps.

“Oh yeah diary, he eats a lot too, and snores.”

“Vakarian, I know what you're up to.” Nihlus grumbled as they rounded the third floor stair turn.

“Do you now? ...is it working?”

“No. Brat.”

“Takes one to know one.”
“Shush, you're abusing coms.”

The Officer scoffed, taking the stairs two at a time in quick-stepped creep to minimize footfalls. “Because preoccupied terrorists are going to break our encryption with ease.”

“Maybe not, but they'll be able to see the chatter is there if they look closely.”

“Fine, fine. I'll be quiet. Just don't go too, ah... chilly on me, alright?”

“... No promises.”

“Alright.”, he accepted with a gusty exhale as they continued onward and upward.

The Spectre hand signed a request to 'halt' and 'wait here' on the landing halfway up to the top floor. Garrus leaned on the banister to listen toward the floors below for activity. Nothing there, he turned back in time to see Nihlus engage the magnetic locks on his boots, meant for hull walking in zero-g, and step up to the wall below an air vent on the ceiling. Footfalls made carefully to minimize noise, the lanky torin accomplished the horizontal wall walk with graceful ease. He may as well have been on the ground for all that gravity interfered with him.

The vent cover opened on a hinge with a small squeak as it was moved aside, and Nihlus slipped up and into the gap. The core muscles needed to support a well armored body moving like that made something twinge near his hips, and Garrus had to clamp down on his reaction to the sight.

He blamed it on not having his visor's data to process, and being mostly unneeded at the moment. The Detective's mind was accustomed to multitasking, having several trains of thought and focus at once, and his lover's physiology was an enticing topic when he had nothing else on the back burner, so to speak.

The Detective shook his head to clear the distractions away. He checked their six again, and pinged his visor for the local scan data to display on his Omni-tool. This was probably why couples that formed on a squad were sometimes encouraged to have one of them transfer if it got serious. Turians could have a squad-wide orgy one night and go back to professionalism the next day, but only so long as the sex was just friendly. If it was more then casual, either you could work with the emotional imperative, or you couldn't. Garrus felt a hint of shame that maybe he couldn't and grappled the thoughts down into the darkest corner of his mind, reminding himself to take a look at
He wasn't about to screw up in a live combat situation because he couldn't stay focused, especially with lives on the line.

Thoughts locked down, he checked out the second hand data, and immediately realized Nihlus' intentions. The life signs were all coming from a central chamber on the next floor. A smattering of shorter forms amassed in the middle of an amphitheater shaped space with the terrorist's signatures scattered around the different levels. The duct work his partner was climbing into looked like it lead right to an exit in a less populous corner. The Spectre was getting eyes on the situation.

Garrus ducked down at the bottom of the last set of stairs to the eighth floor, crouched where anyone coming through the door at the top wouldn't be able to see him right away. There he waited patiently, searching local broadcasting signals to see if there was anything to pick up.

There was.

Contrary to their earlier discussion, it was the C-Sec Officer who hacked into and decrypted the enemy's coms. He hummed a soft warning at Nihlus before piping it into their channel, one-way.

“-an't do that, not just won't, but can't. You've got children up there, Avah Ikois. We have adult volunteers willing to trade places with them, but regardless of your colony's problems, and I do admit they are valid concerns that should have been addressed long ago, I am unable to-”

The Asari negotiator on the line appeared to be trying to save all the kids. Nihlus trilled softly in appreciation. From what Garrus could gather by reading between the lines the hostile group were disgruntled colonists who'd had one too many issues ignored by their government, and were making a stand where everyone could see. From the dark tone in the tarin's subvocals, it was obvious the leader knew what a black thing this was to do, and was pissed enough not to care.

Her come backs and demands were all stalling for time, or things to make the event more widely broadcast. Media manipulation. The choice to kidnap kids was likely intentional, with the intent to make the breaking news as sensational as possible.

“I can see them.” He heard Nihlus speak quietly over the com chatter.
“What's the situation?”

“Number estimate was accurate, they've got eleven total, all inside the room. No one is guarding the door, but the lock is smashed in. I don't think anyone is going in or out that way with how badly mangled it is.”

“Alright. So, what's the plan?”

“How would you feel about learning vent crawling?”

“... Now?”

“Yep. I want you up here, it's a good angle. I can come in from another side. We hit them fast and hard, take them all out before they know what's happening.”

“You want to fire into a room with hostages?”

“Don't think your aim is up to it?”

“Not aim, the gunfire would scare the shit out of those kids. I don't want them panicking when things get hot.”

“How loud is your viper?”

“I can make it pretty quiet in about five minutes of work, but it'll sacrifice stopping power.”

“Do it. We'll get you up here, and I'll go CQC. No loud gun fire to scare the kids is a good idea.”

“Having people die right on top of them won't be do them any favors either.”

“I'll try to toss bodies away then. Not to mention the drops I put in the air system should be hitting
this area any time now, in five or ten minutes they'll be sleepy anyway.”

“Not to... question your orders, but is there a reason we can't wait it out a bit and see what the negotiators can manage?”

“How long do you think it will be before the idea of a dead hostage or two sounds like it will make their point more loudly?”

“No telling. I would say it depends on the negotiator's skill, but I see your point.”

He could hear Nihlus click his tongue, humming in consideration.

“Let's do this then: we'll get ready to enact my plan, and keep an eye on the speed of things. If Ikois goes to do something stupid, we go in. If the Asari can talk them down more, we'll pull out.”

“Copy that.”

Garrus was pleased that his input had been not only listened to, but acted upon. A nice change from C-Sec. Was it any wonder he enjoyed working with the Spectres?

Pulling his viper from it's maglock, the Detective flash forged a few small tools from Omni-gel, and got to work making it much quieter. More of a silenced rifle and less of a ranged sniping weapon. The Spectre came out of the vent system when he was about halfway done, dropping down very quietly considering his weight. Garrus nodded at him and went back to retooling the gun mods to do what he needed.

He stood once finished, shouldering his rifle and walking uncertainly over to the right section of wall. “I think I can magboot up the wall like you did, but... will I fit?”

“Yeah, nicely sized air ways in this building. The entry might be tight, but it's roomier on the inside. An easy crawl, just take your first left, circle around the cabling shaft, and when it splits downward press against the walls as you go over the gap. You'll be fine.”

The Detective eyed the hole in the ceiling distrustfully. “I have a feeling I'm going to end up stuck
“somewhere, or flattened like a pancake at the bottom of a vent shaft.”

“Naaaah, you got this. I, however, have a nice long crawl from a lower level to get where I’m going, but I’ll close the vent grate after you’re in so you don’t have to turn around to finagle it.”

“This is going to fail horribly. I’ve never tried infiltrating via air vents before, ever. I’m too big.”

“Pffft, get climbing minion.”

“Minion! Dear diary, today he started calling me names.”

With a grin in his mandibles that pressed up against the inside of his helm padding, Garrus activated the never-before-used magnetic locks on his C-Sec standard issue boots, duck-walking up the wall in a graceless hunch. He could hear Nihlus snickering over coms.

“Also, he laughs at me when I do my best. Not very supportive, I’m feeling discouraged.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Are you sure? Diary thinks I am.”

“For fuck’s sake, climb faster Vakarian.”

He made it to the gap, and sure enough, with a little work he fit through the gap. Turning around to close the vent cover would have been impossible, but he had enough room to slowly crawl forward.

“I closed it up behind you Blue, only way out now is forward.”

“This was not covered in my training manuals.”

“Shitty training manuals.”
The detective-turned-infiltrator came up on the cabling shaft in short order, gaping at it with disbelief. The cylindrical tunnel was perfectly vertical, bottomless for all eight stories, and had no walkway. Just lots of cables... to hold on to as he climbed? The sniper swore vengeance on his Spectre for vastly underplaying the difficulty levels of this vent tour.

Still, Garrus wriggled himself out of the vent with care and clung to the available handholds, holding on with a vice grip as he found footing in a cable clamp that arranged a bundle of electrical wiring into a neat line against the wall. One hand reached out to the next hand hold, and with another firm grip in place the forward facing leg came out to seek the next bracing point. Rinse and repeat, about thirty times, before he made it to the continuation of the original vent.

He made it inside safely, and began dragging himself forward again on forearms. “Just a fair warning, I'm getting back at you for this. ‘Circle around the cabling shaft’, he says. ‘You’ll be fine.’, he says.”

“Made that gap did you? Congratulations, you're an infiltrator!”

“So much hate right now. You have no idea.”

“But it'll look great on your CV.”

“Hate.”

Nihlus just laughed at him, and thought it was mellow and dangerous sounding, it was something. He camp up shortly on another gap in the vent's flooring where it fell away to connect with other levels. The Spectre’s half assed explanation on how to brace himself against the sides of the shaft and use pressure to cross it were enough to get by. Thankfully this impasse was much smaller, and only about half of him was over air at any one point.

“Engineer. That's my designation. En.gin.eer.”

“Almost-adept infiltrator engineer?”

Garrus' exasperated subvocal reply probably didn't go over coms very clearly, sound devices never
captured them quite right after all, but enough made it through to pull another amused snort from his Spectre. The Detective smirked at how good he was at this.

“Almost to the end point, by the way. How goes your adventure?”

“Pretty good, had to hit the fifth floor and take the elevator shaft up and over. Farther away, but an easier climb then you.”

“Damnit. Why didn't we switch then?”

“Because these elevators aren’t ‘get your master’s degree while waiting’, like in the presidium. Standard speed on these, with inertial dampeners even.”

“So?”

“So if someone takes the elevators at a shitty moment, I’m getting pancaked, not you.”

“Awww, he really does care, diary.”

“Nah, I just use you for your take-out hook ups. That curry is to die for. Hopefully not literally, but sometimes sacrifices must be made.”

“Never mind, my only friend, I’m just a means to an end after all.”

“Pffft. Aren’t you in position yet?”

“Almost. Moving slower to avoid noise.”

“Mm’kay, give me two or three more minutes.”

Garrus made it to the end of the line, and peered down into the amphitheater. Sure enough, he could
make out all of the perpetrators and about two dozen children through the slats in the duct cover.

“I'm in place, under the seating on the far side, to your right a bit. Don't shoot me if I pop up.”

“Not going to, Hurri-. I won't, don't worry.” The Detective winced at his small slip. He really needed a new nick name for Nihlus if he couldn't say the old one anymore. Another thing to consider later, when it was just him, his stress ball, and a ceiling to bounce it off of.

Garrus returned his attention to the ongoing situation in the room below him, pulling out a repelling cable from his sniper kit just in case he needed to get out of the vent in a hurry. One end was clipped to his upper leg armor, the other end left to hang in it's spool. A quarter hour passed while they two soldiers sat quietly listening into coms. The Asari was trying to focus on problem solving the colony's issues, working hard to keep things calm. He had high hopes this could go down cleanly, regardless of the odds.

Not a heartbeat later an enraged roar from the leader brought that half-made wish crashing down.

“Open fire!” Nihlus' voice came over coms, rushed and furious.

Not comprehending what had gone wrong so suddenly, but ready to follow orders, he shoved the vent cover out and did so. With less then a dozen unprepared targets it was over in literal seconds. Garrus had been shooting and re-aiming so fast that he was only now getting the whole picture of the situation. Nihlus had a tiny Asari girl barely big enough to open doors tucked under his arm.

A thick, military issue combat knife had lain into the ringleader and her three closest lackeys. One was still gasping for breath on the floor, choking on blood through a second smile. Garrus had gotten the other seven by dint of ranged attack.

“Okay children, eyes on me! Yep, that's right, ignore the bad guys and their icky guts.” Garrus heard Nihlus open up his external speaker to reassure the younglings, whistling sharply at a Turian boy who was staring at a dying torin. The boy looked up blinking, wide eyes in shock. Nihlus leaned over into view of the vid screen the terrorists had been using to communicate with the negotiation team. "Hey, kids are all fine but the doors are jammed shut. Get us a vibro-blade or something, yeah?"

The blanched, gaping Asari on screen nodded, coughing and resuming a state of poise.
“Yes, of course. Who are you might I ask?”

“Spectre Nihlus Kyrik and Specialist Garrus Vakarian. We were on site in cover, just in case the negotiations went south. I decided holding a gun to a little nais’ head counted as too far south. Hope you don't mind.”

“The hostages are all unharmed?”

“Not seeing any problems, no.”

“I'm very relieved to hear that. Hold a moment, and I'll get a team up there to open the door for you.”

Garrus used their conversation as an opportunity to repel down, rather then take the long way back. He attached the loose end of his cable to the vent's edge, and maneuvered himself out of the air way. The Detective dropped slowly, feet bouncing off the wall a few times. He let the cable run over his wrist in a paced spool, and made the six meter drop to the upper level of the amphitheater without trouble. A button press caused the other end to close in on itself, releasing it's grip and returning the device for him to pack away.

The sniffles and little hiccups of distress started before he was half way down, breaking into full-out wails by the time he touched down. Garrus turned around and had to bite back an unkind snicker at the baffled and semi-panicked state of his Spectre, who was trying to comfort the most freaked out of the batch while still holding a wide eyed and trembling little Asari under one arm. Considering his face was covered by armor, he was slightly bloody, and they'd all just watched him kill people... the kids were having none of it.

Well, at least he'd put the knife away.

Garrus stepped forward into the gaggle of kids, retracting his helm and sitting down among them.

“Hey now, we're really sorry your party got ruined by these guys. Who wants to call their parents?”

The rush forward to him at that idea, coupled with the welcoming body language, ended with more of a pile of pleading then anything else. The shocked little Turian boy, who was maybe eight or so, was the first to make it to his lap, trilling off an extra net address from memory. He assumed it was the parent's contact info, and brought up his Omni-tool. Rather then try to keep control, he held out
the keyboard side to the kid, and smiled encouragingly. Six tiny talons pecked out the address with shaky handed concentration.

“Mariiiii!”

“Spirits! Izaea, sweetheart where are you now? They said-”

“There was bad men and they had guns and they screamed at Obi when he cried and I was scared and then this torin punched him and he died and then-”

As the tale went on the rescue crew got to working on the door, cutting through the thick plating with vibro-blades. Nihlus was off pulling bodies out of sight in a corner, blocking the view with a collapsed table. A short blue form followed him around, regardless of offers to sit down with everyone else.

Garrus let the kid rattle off his fearful recreation, several other little bodies pressing into see. When the wild story began to run down he interjected.

“Hello ma’am, I'm Officer Vakarian. We just wanted to give your pahir a chance to talk to you, to help the kids calm down. The, ah, bad guys are taken care of, and we should be getting everyone out soon, but I need to let you go so the next person can contact their parents.”

“Don't bother! We're all right here!” came a voice off screen from the other end, followed by a, “Dad!” from someone on his left. The vid call dissolved into a chain of parents and children taking turns talking to each other rapid fire, from a conference room somewhere to the dog pile on the amphitheater floor. Sadly, the little nais never tried to join in, and no one on the other side asked for them. Nihlus took a seat at his shoulder, and the little Asari curled up in his arms, wide eyed and silent.

He eventually let the parents go with reassurances, and streamed a cartoon off the extra-net while they waited.

The crew got through the doors in about twenty minutes of careful cutting. The holo image one of them snapped, of the Cop and the Spectre taking gentle care of the traumatized children, would go on to be the highlight of the news stories. The heart warming picture a much more appealing sell then the problems of some crazy back water colony.
Fanfic Recommendation: The Harvest (145 words) by ArcanaMortis
-Interlude: Well we could...-

Chapter Summary

Jane Shepard was never destined for normality, but she does find a bit of it, here and there.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Massfab - short for 'Mass Fabrication' the process of using Omni-gel to quickly make single atom or simple compound objects of small to large size, such as a plate or oxygen bubble.

A/N: Woo! This chapter took a while to post! Sorry about that. It wasn't for lack of working on the story, just made some big edits to the previous two chapters. I didn't like the flow and voice very much, so I added a few more lines of sex, changed the post-coitus dialogue a little, lightened the mood some, revamped the by-play during the mission stuff, etc. After about 10 re-reads with tweaks, I finally declare them acceptable. :D Now! Onto the next arch, an interlude. Pretty long too!

Chapter Soundtrack: "Revolution" by Robin Loxley & Wolfgang Black

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hair in short, spriggy pig tails above her ears, face clean of make up except for a shiney lipgloss, and wearing a cute beige and salmon sundress, Jane walked through the security check point with an air of peppy teenager on their way to somewhere fun. She cleared the system, barely even registering in the distracted glances of the guards. No one stopped her for additional screening, she just walked on by with her backpack and sparkley pink sandels.

Carrying several thousand credits worth of illegal drugs.

They were packed away into mundane things, and sealed in boring shapes to fool the scanners. Makeup cases and lunch boxes. Things made of metal, to make them show up blurry on the security screen. If anyone had been looking carefully they might have noticed she had an awful lot of make up tubes for a girl not wearing much, and had quite the lunch packed away. They didn't though, and she'd done this enough times not to even feel stressed about the subterfuge, which likely only helped her get away with it.
She looked so innocent, and unrecognizable, without her normal racoon eyes and shaggy crimson mane.

It was nice not being recognized as 'that girl from the news'. The Survivor of Mindior, they called her. Funny how the reports never mention how many people she shot for compassion, or how many monsters died through her scope. Just the excessively slanted story of a refugee from an atrocity of Batarian aggression.

Jane didn't want the fame, and every time she heard the rehashed, increasingly stylized story of her own survival she had trouble controlling the urge to punch someone. Worse, there had been something like a bidding war to adopt her, and Jane had seethed with ineffective rage at the various bribes that were offered to secure her preference, to buy her. Politicians, community leaders, religious people, you name it. A lot of nice things had been carted away in boxes, left at donation centers by helpful and worried social workers.

They wanted to use her fame to further their cause, and granted some were better then others, but the assault of material goods tasted like cruelty in the wake of nightmares.

The sound Michael had made as he hit the door, lifeless.

The incomprehensible rage in Tobias' shout when his mother dropped dead.

Tali's face blank with shock as she watched it all, frozen.

The fires. The prayers. The smoke.

Always the smoke.

It was just too much. She'd been almost to the point of running away and living nameless on the streets to escape the cycle of sleepless nights and courting would-be parents.

The desire to just start screaming and never stop was so strong.

Then David and Hannah had come to visit, just to say hello and see how she was doing. For lack of
anyone else to talk to, anyone that understood even one iota of the horror her home had become. Jane's words and emotions spilled out to them like an overturned bucket of fish bait. These people and their sickly smiles, the rage and disgust they brought out as she tried not to deck another person asking her to go on a talk show...

They'd stared in shock as she broke down into black-streaked tears. Hannah had awkwardly held her as she cried, and David had informed the staff that she was leaving with them, and to reject all further contact requests. The two N7s had brought her to a hotel, quiet and classy, and asked her what she needed besides space and quiet.

It was... amazing. They were amazing people.

Space, quiet, and some self indulgent room service had solved the immediate crisis. The long term problem of what to do with her became somewhat more face-able.

The two soldiers had worked hard to find an alternative other than going back to the social workers. She had felt a little like a stray cat they were trying to find a home for, asking friends of friends to see if anyone decent was interested. Jane had met a whole slew of generals and marines and N-somethings. Their serious miens and kind hearted denials only solidified her not-really-mild hero worship for the military.

Were Systems Alliance soldiers the only decent people left? Possibly. It felt like it.

In the end, Hannah Shepard had given up searching. Neurotic about rules and carrying all the emotional retardation and mental baggage of a career killer, the blonde haired woman had knocked on her temporary door one morning with a different idea. She stepped inside, and in a quiet voice started talking about a possible life as a Shepard. She'd be a military brat, and oh did the idea appeal.

The N7 stared at the wall as if giving a debriefing to a superior officer, explaining how commissions could be switched around, that they could live on Earth in a small house she'd inherited from a fallen comrade. It was old, and Hannah would sometimes be gone for long periods, but it was just outside Denver's military base. There would always be someone nearby if Jane needed anything. The area had a good school system even, with a pre-ROTC program.

Hannah's offer, given humbly and not riddled with temptations of status or wealth, stole her heart away more then anything else. She'd said 'yes' before her new prospective mother had even finished speaking, the word slipping off her tongue of it's own volition.
Jane Landsley became Jane Shepard in five to seven business days, the time paperwork took to finalize.

She'd settled into Colorado life nicely, though she still had to pull the hat-and-glasses trick when going anywhere public. Her face had been all over the news for weeks, and the issues surrounding Mindior had made the side stories of those who had survived pop up for months past that. Though at the moment her 'hat' was a cutesy outfit, and 'glasses' was simpler make-up plus a cheerful expression. Changed enough from the black rimmed, thousand-yard stare the tabloids loved using to keep her from being picked out so easily.

The thought of the news media and it's obsession with her made Jane's vacant smile slip a little as she strolled down the boulevard, ever closer to her destination. She brought it back up to snuff and kept walking.

So here she was, enrolled in a nice school, with a very absentee and hands off adoptive mother, carrying a load of drugs for the cash it could net her, rather then living in a gilded cage with all the wealth she could spend. Jane mused that life went strange places sometimes.

At the moment, said pseudo-mom was off on yet another classified mission, trusting her with the house and school work. Which, to be fair, the house was spotless and her 'C-' average was good enough for government work. Though her and Hannah had gone a few rounds about her disregard for school before, a reference to her old records, full of 'F's and absences, proved that she was certainly trying harder then before. Her new mom had been frustrated with her lack of perfectionism, but hadn't had a good come back.

It wasn't like she was going into ROTC to be an engineer anyways, hell no, Jane Shepard was going to be a boots-on-the-ground marine, and then... there was a seat at N-school with her name on it, and this little payload was going to help her get it.

The latest physical augments, cybernetics, and gene mods cost a shit ton of money after all, and her birth mother, whoever she was, hadn't gotten so much as a single longevity mod in utero. The doctors would have to start from scratch to make her top notch. Not to mention, the standard soldier augs given freely after basic training weren't good enough by half. Not for the best of the best, and she planned to be one.

There was a notebook under her mattress filled with extra-net research on what it would cost, and what she'd need to have, and by when she'd need to start the process to be ready to enlist right after high school at eighteen. Drug running had been one of very few options to make that kind of income in the short amount of time she had left. Jane planned to get augmented during the summer break between sophomore and senior year, needing the down time to be out of commission for the invasive procedures.
She didn't like helping the reds make money off addicts, exactly, but if someone wanted that badly to screw up their own body, who was she to stop them? Making it available didn't mean she made the choice for them. Maybe that was equal parts harsh truth and convenient bullshit, but it was what Jane told herself when she decided to go for it.

Contacting a minor player of the 10th Street Reds had been easy, runners had a dangerous job to sneak the illegal compounds past the numerous security stations into Denver, and they were always looking for new people when the old ones got caught. She'd pulled it off where others had failed, and they'd been good to her for it.

Jane walked up to the outdoor cafe table where her drop-off contact of the month was sitting, plopping down in the chair and tapping the button on the menu screen at their table to order herself some food.

“Hey sunshine, how's life?” The thinly smiling twenty-something asked her, and she smiled back brightly even when her stomach flipped. 'Sunshine' was the keyword for 'abort the drop, we're being watched.'

“Pretty great! I got an A on my big test yesterday, so mom will be happy with that when she hears. How about you?” Queue the inane dialogue about school work and other unimportant shit that she never spent time on.

“That's great to hear, how did Jenny do?” There was no Jenny, not that they had any shared friends. Jane barely knew the guy.

“She did okay, B+ I think? Math is more her thing though. Can't be good at everything.”

The automated system brought her order to their table on a floating tray, zipping away after she removed it. The teen focused on ignoring the shitshitshit feeling in her guts and cheerfully eating the vat-grown hamburger. They chatted for a while more, food was finished, and without planning a new place to meet they waved goodbye.

Leaning against a pole on the subway, Jane tried to figure out where she could put the smuggled goods. No where specific came to mind, and she really didn't want to take them back home. Not to mention, she might still be being followed.
Not knowing the first thing about having or losing a tail, she reapplied glossy chapstick and watched the media screen as it advertised things based on the ages and demographics of the people nearby. Her exit point was in six more stops, and Jane wasn't sure if she should act normal and head home or go somewhere else and try to hide the drugs somewhere.

Going somewhere alone, no friends or events involved, as a fifteen year old seemed more suspicious then just going home. Dumping the drugs down the toilet would mean she would have to pay out before she could run again, and that would put a serious dent in her stash thus far. Jane was completely unwilling to get caught though, not wanting this on her record.

She decided to stall, to see if there really was anyone watching, by going somewhere with only one entrance. The arcade two stops past her house would do. Jane got off the subway, and meandered her way to the little entertainment district that housed her destination. Slipping inside she kept an eye on the door, and traded creds for game tokens at a machine. A pocket full of clinking metal, she took up a game of chance that was nothing more then 'insert coin, hope for the best' with an easy view of the door.

A hour went by with no one suspicious entering, popping in to look around, or anything else that would give a watcher away. She took it as a sign, cashed in for a silly little charm bracelet obviously made with a massfab, and went back out the front. There was no one outside either, reading on benches or leaning against poles that would be suspect, so she gave up and headed home.

Jane made it back just right around dinner, but took the time to stash the drugs under her mattress with the notebook before making anything to eat. She would give it a week, and then try to get in touch with the Reds. Exhausted with holding up the rainbows and butterflies act all day, she ate well, worked out in the mini gym in their renovated basement, took a long shower, muddled through homework, and fell asleep to the dulcet tones of heavy metal on low volume.

It was a solid three weeks before a different girl who worked for the street gang made contact with her, actually at school of all things. On close scrutiny the chick was clearly too old to be going there, but was blending in by wearing popular teen clothing and sparkly accessories. They went back and forth on a new meeting location, eventually agreeing on a specific time and place, new code words, and a different disguise. The girl gave her a few pointers about changing her appearance, including a few tips on do-it-yourself wigs, and walking differently.

The walking differently part went right over Jane's head, but she could manage the wig.
The drop was made successfully, no problems this time around, and the blonde curls she'd worn made her feel, while *utterly* ridiculous, also more secure in her disguise. The numbers in the notebook went up, her grades held steady, and Hannah was none the wiser when the N7 finally came home a week later. The mission had been a success, and they went out to eat to celebrate.

Daringer Moroue, or Darry as his fellow teachers liked to call him, rubbed at the ache building behind his eyes. It was one in the morning, and having put off grading papers for two days, he was stuck awake getting it done. The particular e-worksheet in front of him was being problematic, and he was beginning to go cross eyed trying to make heads or tails of Jane Shepad's answers. The girl wasn't horrible at math, but neither was she especially dedicated. The fiery teen was also one of those students that solved the problems without showing their work.

Granted, he'd seen her do the same thing in class, solving the equations on the board in her head using squirrely logic that had more to do with excellent spacial understanding and less to do with using equations. So, at the very least, he'd bet good money the work wasn't just copied.

It still didn't help his current dilemma. Without seeing her process written out the wrong answers could get no partial credit nor helpful advise as to where she'd gone wrong. Darry scratched at his chin stubble, considering how harsh to be. He knew that requests for showing her work would go ignored, and though the whole teaching staff knew what the girl had been through, there was only so much time and understanding he felt acceptable giving before it became more important to demand his student get back on the horse. Otherwise Miss Shepard was going to fall behind.

Not that he thought that would motivate her either. She didn't care seem to care about most classes, so she didn't put effort into them. Simple as that. The girl had straight 'A's in gym and history. 'D's in everything else.

So the question was how to coerce or encourage some motivation out of her. His student had proven to have zero respect for anyone that tried demanding it, though she was polite in her demeanor to those that treated her like a fellow adult. It drove Logan, the uptight social studies teacher, absolutely insane. Darry was more of the opinion that, -all things considered, legally of age or not-, once you'd fought for your life against hostile aliens in defense of your home... well it was the same logic as 'if they are old enough to be a soldier, they're old enough to drink' that had all the downtown bars ignoring legal drinking age requirements for anyone with a military ID.

Life aged some people a little faster than others.
Darry ran fingers through his shoulder-length brown hair, trying to use that knowledge to think of ways to engage the girl in learning. It wasn't exactly the best time of night for thinking, and inspiration refused to strike. He tucked the thought away for mulling over later, graded her kindly, giving credit generously where it could be done so, and finished up the rest of the entries.

Job done, he made it from work desk to couch, and promptly passed out.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Jane stared down at the board, sweating lightly, entirely focused. The military strategy game spread out before them was an antique set made of wood. Hannah preferred the feeling of physical pieces to digital light boards. As neither of them had a social life, board games had become their weekly pass time of choice each Friday night. Saturdays were for errands and shooting range time, Sundays were for sleeping late, and cleaning.

Sometimes one of Hannah's colleagues dropped by to join in, usually David if anyone. Jane made fun of them for still calling each other by their last names. David, or Anderson as everyone called him, would bring pizza and terrible jokes. Hannah would ignore them both in favor of vicious win-streaks.

Though tonight it was just the two ladies. Stakes were high however, as the winner of each round got to ask a question of the other. Exceptions being made for state secrets, and white lies filled in for illicit activities as needed. Winner of the game got a favor.

Jane knew it was her military mother's best idea for trying to talk about all the angsty teenager stuff floating around in her head. It was unspoken, but accepted. Helpful even, as the fiery teen didn't trust the councilors the school tried to shove at her, and even if the N7 sucked at feelings something fierce... she still listened without judgment.

Hannah really did do her best, and Jane was working up to calling her mom out loud, but hadn't yet found the courage.

Okay, so maybe they were both pretty shit at the touchy-feely stuff.

Thankfully, strategy games didn't require that skill, and the teen's next few moves won her the round. She sat back with a wide smirk, proud of herself. It had been a hard fought win, as the N7 didn't really know the meaning of mercy.
Sharp blue eyes glared at the board, accusing it of betrayal.

“So. What's the best way to get flagged for N school early on?”

Alright, so maybe feelings and internal turmoil were only the topics of Hannah's clumsy inquiries. Jane's were always something a little more goal oriented.

“They look for three basic things to consider someone for N1. Critical thinking and problem solving under pressure, patriotism and willingness to follow distasteful orders, and above the curve combat skills.”

While her adoptive mother wasn't exactly grooming her for N-school, Jane had long since made her intentions to get in known. At the very least Hannah was supportive, even though she'd sat Jane down for a solid 5 hour lecture on the down sides to it. When the teen had emerged undeterred, David had been called in for round two. When stubborn mindedness had won that, the hard eyed blonde had nodded at her once, and no further attempts to discourage her had been made.

David hadn't been entirely pleased, but he had jokingly admitted that when he thought it was one of his squad up in that water tower, he'd planned a promotion for whoever it was.

The next round went to Hannah.

“Name the three most interesting boys at school, and why you like them.”

Jane was pretty sure this one had come off of a parental advice forum, or possibly out of a cereal box.

“Uhhh... Jeremiah Witherton, I guess? He does some cool tricks with this butterfly knife his uncle gave him. Oh, and Marcus Akatashi gave me a run for my money last week on the rope climb in gym class. That was fun. Uhhh... errrrr... Caleb what's-his-name has a Turian fetish, talks about their ships and guns all the time, which is more interesting then a lot of kids and their petty high school drama.”

Hannah stared at her like there was something wrong with those answers. She shrugged and began
the next round. Three salvos later her front lines died an early death. Risky moves had cost her, but she'd learn from it and move on.

“Do you use any recreational substances?”

“Pffft, besides coffee? No.” Well, it was technically true. She didn't *use* them.

The next round was hers, only by a small margin and a bucket load of good luck.

“What missions have you taken that you disliked the most?”

“Generally seduction missions.”

“Wait, what? They make you...?”

Hannah raised a dark blonde eyebrow at her.

“Alright, so got your hands dirty for the cause. Willingly?”

The N7 nodded.

“What's so bad about them?”

“The usually involve deep cover, which I am not skilled at. Also, they sometimes involve aliens.”

“... really?”

“Yes. Turians are the worst. They bite.”
Jane whistled. “I'd heard talk at school about that. One girl swears she has a Turian girlfriend, tells everyone about it.”

Sharp blue eyes suddenly nailed her to the couch.

“If you are engaging in intercourse, you are using protection, correct?”

The green eyed girl about choked on air at that demanded question.

“Hell, no, I mean, yes I... dammit! No, I'm not having sex yet, and yes I would if I did. Shit.”

The N7 nodded and set the next round to go. The game was almost over, and they were seventeen to eleven, in Hannah's favor.

Jane fought hard for the next win, and used it to turn the topic back around to something not so freaking embarrassing.

“What's the best way to kill a Batarian in close quarters?”

“The folds of fatty tissue are sensitive. Knife them in the face or along the ribs if you can't get to an artery, it hurts them a lot worse then it would one of us.”

Eventually the back and forth wound down, questions answered mostly honestly, and the game ended in Hannah's triumph. As was usual.

“For my favor I want you to get an A on a test that is not in P.E. or history.”

“Ugh. Alright... any other class?”

“Yes.”
It was, strangely enough, a commercial that gave Darry better insight into Jane Shepard. A random advertisement had been directed at her from a stand alone display, and the sudden switch from mundane goods to specialty sniper equipment had been very noticeable. The 10th grade class had been walking through a public area as a group, in the middle of a field trip through a string of museums, headed for their lunch reservations at a nearby restaurant when the device had gone from offering beauty supplies and trendy clothing to gun mods and shield generators.

The quietly intense teenager had walked on by, as if that was perfectly normal based on her shopping preferences, but no few of her peers had looked at the thing like it was horribly broken. Having been on rear-guard for the trip, also known as straggler-herding duty, he'd seen the whole thing. It opened up his perspective a fair bit, and he munched on french fries while considering what this new information could do to help engage the girl in schoolwork.

So, the adverts thought she was more interested in weaponry. Maybe word problems with a military dint? Topographic map reading games using geometric formula? There had to be a way to make math appeal to her...

Then it hit him.

The girl was literally famous for having snipped Batarians from a water tower during the Mindior raid. The advertisement had been for sniper rifle mods.

Sniping had a shit ton of math to it.

The rest of the trip, while no less boring for the teachers having done it every year in memory with each new student group, was spent in absent minded student tending while thoughts of working this in somehow floated about.

But how to get away with teaching a teenager math through warfare knowledge? The principal would eat him alive.

More consideration was given as he swirled the ketchup in circles. It was a worthwhile cause after
all, and he was a problem solver at heart.

Jane stared at the test results when they came up on screen.

B-. B-. B-.

Her glare would have made lesser visual displays spontaneously combust into flames.

Their mathematics class had twenty nine people in it, all sitting in their own work station with a primary vid window for working. A left-hand monitor played an up-close stream of the teacher and the massive drawing board behind him, and a right side one held general data. At the moment that third window had her aggravating test results, with a stylus written note below the grade to see the teacher after class.

The lecture carried on while she seethed. Jane had actually studied for this test a great deal, wanting to get her favor owed out of the way. She still only managed a B-.

B-.

B-.

'BAAAAARG!'

She was a little frustrated with herself.

The close-but-not-close-enough score sat there and mocked her until the bell rang. With a calming breath, since she didn't want to be a bitch to Mr. Moroue when the failure wasn't his fault, the terminal was shut down. Jane still walked up to the front desk with a grind in her step though.

“Miss Shepard! Good, follow me please? I wanted to talk with you in my office. I'll have a note for you to be late to your next class, come on.”
Late to social studies? Well that was something at least. She hated that class.

Her quirky math teacher led them down the hall, and over into the staff wing. When they stepped into his office a quirk of lips almost broke through the disgruntlement at the mess of datapads and techy gizmos that littered every available surface. The man was notorious for being a little off in the head, tilting side ways from the classical absent minded professor type into the nerdy 'gets excited by algorithms' sort.

At the very least he was a nice person, so she tried to bury her inner caustic bitch that was still mad at the world in general about that B.

“Alright, we made it! Have a seat, would you? I have something to show you.”

To show her? This wasn't about the exam?

“Here, take a look, and if you have any mercy don't tell the other teachers I shared this with you, eh? It's not exactly standard curriculum, and I think our principal would skin me alive for using it to teach. Hahaha...”

Extremely curious by now, Jane's focus riveted on the datapad he'd set before her. She picked it up and tapped the screen twice to bring it out of sleep mode. At first the fiery teen almost dismissed it as more damn math, but then words and phrases starting popping out at her.

Compensating for tailwinds.

To calculate the minutes of angle.

For targets at 500 yards or less.

Adjusting for low light.

It was... it was all about rifle-craft. Sniping in different conditions, the math behind what modern
guns auto-calculated for you, but also situational details. Advise on positioning, accommodating how the eye saw things in different lights, working with or against the wind.

Calculable details riddled the page between arcane gun lore.

She looked up at him slightly slack jawed at the little treasure he'd set in front of her.

“What do you think, is it interesting?”

“This is fucking awesome. Uhh... Sir.”

“Excellent! I'm so glad to hear it. Now keep in mind I can't present this material to the rest of the class, it's not exactly their speed, you understand?”

“Uhhh... yeah.”

“From your background I thought this might catch your eye more then word problems about paper balls or tram acceleration. So if you're interested we'll meet for an hour afterschool once a week and work this into what we're learning in class. Almost three quarters of our curriculum matches something in there.”

“It does?”

“Of course, the material has to be relevant to my class to teach it after all. Now I don't think the 'stick' would work for you at all, so here is the 'carrot', if you finish the book, and get at least a B in my class, at the end of the year I'll introduce you to the author.”

“You just know them?!’

“Well funny story about that, I had to ask around for details on applying math to ah... shooting things? I may be a mathematician but expert advise can never be undersold, by the way. So a little digging turned up one of the world record holders for farthest shooting distance with a sniper rifle, - that's your thing, right?-, Mr. Cargos is retired now, and lives at the VA hall in downtown Omaha. He helped me rework his training manual to suit our needs.”
Keeping up with Mr. Moroue's train of thought was a little difficult. The man wasn't exactly a straight forward orater outside of number problems, and it wasn't exactly helping that she was floored with the distance he'd gone to find her something to make his class applicable.

“... You did all this... for me?”

“Isn't that what teachers are supposed to do Miss Shepard? Engage their audience with learning?”

“I uh... ah, thanks.”

Jane really didn't know what else to say. She'd never had a teacher give more then two fucks about her. Not like this.

“Don't mention it! No really, don't mention it. The superintendent would be very upset with me for teaching battlefield math to a teenager.”

Her teacher smile broadly. Battlefield math. Who knew?

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Over here! Check that door, see if it opens.”

Jane Shepard curled herself into a smaller ball behind the trash can she was using to keep out of line of sight from her pursuers. A drug bust team had made her recent pick up location, and though none of them had gotten a good look at her, she was still screwed if they chased her past a security camera. A few frames of footage with sufficient amount of her running gait, her height, or a thousand other details would be enough for the city's security systems to identify her later.

“Nothing here, and that's locked. Try down that way? They've got the next block over covered, she has to be here.”

'shitshitshit.'
She didn't have any illicit goods on her, but there was no way in hell they would just let her go. A fifteen year old out after curfew, running from a drug bust at 3 am? Hannah would be called immediately, and though she might not get the message till her current mission was over, when she did... oh fuck, mom would be so pissed.

Jane pressed harder into her cover, trying to be small. It wasn't exactly all that successful, she wasn't small girl to start with. Too much working out, daily protein shakes, and range time gave her broad shoulders and dense musculature for a teenager. Not to mention she hadn't stopped growing yet, already five-eight.

“Anything yet? Check for roof access.”

As they moved the other way she peered around the side, and catching them facing away she leapt for a space they'd already checked. The quiet grind of gravel under her landing made her heart pound in fear.

“Damnit, still no. Over there?”

The cops looked for her for an endless ten minutes before gun fire several blocks away drew them off. They took off for it with weapons raised. Jane shoved the panic down and focused on breathing steady. She needed to be ready to run if the back way, the camera-less way, out of the area opened up.

As if granted a miracle, a red sports car pulled up, the passenger side door rising up as it was still slowing. From inside one of the Reds whistled in her general direction.

“Wwwwwwp! Sunshine, let's go!”

Holy shit it was her old contact!

Jane rolled from cover and ran pell mell for the door. As soon as she was half way in the skycar began to move off, going the back way and merging into traffic above them. No pursuit.

She let out a relieved breath and scrubbed shaky fingers through her wig, scoffed at it and dragged
the thing away to scratch nails over real scalp and crimson hair.

“Fuck, thank you so much.”


“Janey works.”

“Not your real name?”

“Real name is Jane, but my old friends used to call my Janey.”

“Oh, hey alright, cool. I'm Len.”

“You're my damn hero of the night, seriously. I thought they would find me eventually for sure. How did you even know I was there?”

“Saw you take off from the bust. I was on the second floor, so I hoped a few buildings over and grabbed my car. Was taking off and saw you duck down an alleyway.”

“You stuck around while they looked for me?”

“Uh...yeah. Reds stick together.”

She grinned at him. “Fuck you're stupid, but hey, I'm not complaining.”

“Wha- screw you!”

Jane laughed, shaking her hair out of it's sweaty mat. It fluffed out like a blood colored mane.
“Maybe some other time, pretty boy. How about I treat you to dinner first?”

The twenty-something actually blushed, coughing a chuckle at her antics.

“Damnit girl, you're too young to be this fly.”

“Did you really just use 'fly' in a sentence? Are you secretly in your eighties or something?”

“Oh my fuck, shut up. Where are you buying me dinner?”

“Anywhere you like for that save.”

“Heh. 'Aight.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, we are in fact back to Shepard again. I do intend to mix up some more of the interludes with other characters, but her story does need to be told. She becomes really important in main character's lives, doesn't she? Someday. Right now she's just a stupid teenager doing dumb things, charming boys, and learning about guns.

Fanfic Recommendation: Shotgun as a Verb (10,828 words) by paynoattention2 (Garrus/FemShep)
There inside lay hints at dreams

Chapter Summary

Nihlus gets back to work, and Saren takes some time for himself.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Towers of Nanus - a series of massive stone towers where in the names, clans, and regiment of the Hierarchy's honored dead are carved in stone. Only those recognized by the Senate as having achieved, sacrificed, or provided beyond the call of duty are allowed to be recorded there. As each tower fills, a new one is built. The grounds on which the Towers of Nanus reside stretch out far into the country side, more empty land stands waiting and maintained for the towers and names of future heroes.

Madlis - A Turian family home, a sort of sprawling clan compound to which any member is welcome (Credit: Recidiva)

Turian Closed Dialect - the elaborate home language of the Turian people, protected from automated translation by cultural treaties. A blending of their unique subvocals, a variety of sounds that aren't entirely verbal, and a semi-formal word base used only when in the company of other Turians. Though the Closed Dialect is a complete language unto itself, it is most often used in a blend with the Turian trade tongue or other languages, pulling words in that have particular emotional sensitivity to them, such as terms of endearment or family. (Credit - Mizdirect, with some author-chan remixing.)

Season of Laetitius (Cycle of Riches) - Named because it is the time of year when crops and prey animals flourished, providing food enough for all. The harvest season. (Credit - Mizdirected)

A/N: This speed update is brought to you by Spicy_Gnome, who asked ever so nicely for me to hurry up when I was being slow. :3

Chapter Soundtrack: Ivan Torrent ~ ICARUS feat. Julie Elven

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mission boards were sparse, much to Nihlus' dismay. A few dead drops for intelligence networking, a two year undercover that called for an Asari, and a hodgepodge smattering of bodyguard requests.
In order; *extremely* boring, way too long in disguise, and *very* boring.

'Welp, *very boring* it is. Let's see here... Sparatus wants watchers for a gala? Uck, no. Volus Ambassador requires minion for looking important during speech? Eh, maybe. Elcor diplomat looking for grumpy Spectre to accompany to super-duper important talks with Clan Omaros. Oooo, it's a shame Saren isn't here, he's the best at being grumpy. Oh well~~, I can manage it too.'

The carmine plated Spectre sent in acceptance of the mission, downloading the full briefing to read on the way.

He watched the secure download bar slide, and told himself that he would do this mission, three more, and if he kept from coming back here between now and then, he would reward himself either by taking that trip to Palaven with Blue or possibly arranging a two person mission with the handsome sniper.

Vague plans to finagle a way to see Saren sometime soon also floated around in Nihlus' head as he wandered back to the docks. He didn't like going more then a few months without meeting up with his former mentor. Everytime they grouped up for missions he felt more stable for a while.

Alright, so he might be a little co-dependent.

'Eh, everyone has their quirks, right?'

When the silence of the Widmanstat's airlock hit him like a physical barrier he forced himself to keep walking. The Spectre turned on a random vid as background noise and started reading mission details. The fairly simple requirements for completion understood, and the ship underway, he turned on Galaxy of Fantasy and went PvPing.

*oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo*

Footsteps echoed where they were not supposed to be, not defiant of rules but *above* them. Still, the keepers of these lands would take offense to his presence, so the black cloaked figure tread lightly.

He knew the way from frequent practice. The paths of the patrols had been long since memorized, and they never did change. There was not anything here to harm or steal after all. These rolling hills of golden grass and towering spires belonged to the dead.
The buzzing of warm weather insects chorused in the twilight of Menae's setting. It was approaching full dark, and with all the astral Titans sleeping there was no illumination to give his silhouette away save for the intermittent northern lights that would waver green and blue on the horizon. Not enough to identify species, never mind identity, of any trespassers.

There were many towers to pass by, countless names carved in stone. The revered heroes of his people going back thousands of years, the history of their fortitude, bravery, and sacrifice. The cost of the hard won peace they enjoyed now. A peace he protected, albeit from a unique angle.

He came before the correct edifice, and began the long climb. The stairs spiraled around the massive tower, stopping on each floor for a time before carrying on, ever upward.

Seven floors up, half way around the circle, Saren Arterius came to a stop before a sacred name often mourned. He lowered the hood of his cloak and set gentle finger tips to the stone.

*General Desolas Arterius of the 119th Regiment. Life given in defense of Palaven.*

A slow kneel was taken to become eye level with the record's placement, a talon tracing the glyphs that spelled the deceased's name like a magic spell to summon his spirit here.

“Hello brother.”

Wind came through the pillars that made up the supportive structure between floor and ceiling, making a hollow rushing sound that drowned out the insect song for a few moments. Silver-grey crest tilted back as he looked up and out at the nearby night sky. He rose and walked to the empty edge. A storm was blowing in, rattling the long grasses that covered the hillside. Massive purple-blue clouds were riding in on a cold front.

For a little while he stood there, silent and unmoving, basking in the shade of his sibling's memory as the far away thunderheads boiled in cauliflower shapes that reached for space. He was in no hurry today.

“I am well. Perhaps better then I have been in a while.” Saren rolled his neck and took a sideways lean against a support pillar as he watched the skyline.
“Pirate activity is down again, almost a full percent. I cannot claim sole responsibility, but I did contribute to it. As did Nihlus.”

He nodded to himself.

“I am proud of him. He has come into his own as a Spectre. I could not have chosen better. For all his eccentricity, he is a good torin. Better then I.”

The wind calmed a bit, and the night time sounds filtered in again. Several hills over one of the groundskeepers for the Towers of Nanus came into view of his cybernetic eyes. The old tarin carried a dull yellow lamp that spilled light over the countryside as they trundled slowly by.

“You remember the C-Sec Officer I mentioned last time? I do not recall if I shared his name. A Vakarian clansman, Garrus.”

The groundskeeper stumbled suddenly, but caught themselves and leaned into the oncoming wind of the Laetitius season storm. It was a little early in the year for the monsoon winds to be blowing in just yet, but this front seemed to be pushing for it. Palaven was known for it's storms though, and unseasonably heavy rainfall happened often enough to not be worrisome.

The lamp's yellow glow wavered as it rocked on a hinge in the tarin's grasp. The old form began to walk more quickly for whatever her destination was. Saren watched from his perch high above, feeling the wind hit his position a moment later, sweeping around his horns and setting the long lines of his cloak spinning behind him. He leaned into the feeling, no fear of the precipice.

“The Detective has become something of a friend, if that is what you would call our amicable acquaintance. He is more tolerable then most.”

He could almost hear Des' teasing laugh in his ear, a low chuckle of disbelieving mirth that he would be so effusively emotional as to call anyone 'friend'. A small smile settled in his mandibles.

“It is true. Between the two of them I actually speak to someone that is not a target or contact at least once a month. Strange, I know.”

The wind built further, and the night life fled for shelter. It grew quiet as the fauna dispersed and the storm neared. Already Saren could make out the growing flicker of lightning in the deeper parts of the cloud bank.
“There is also an Asari I have found tolerable. I expect to see them soon, a part of the reason for my visit this time.”

He shrugged a shoulder, tucking the flapping hood of his cloak into the collar line so it would stay down.

“Matriarch Benezia T’soni. Perhaps the first nais I have ever met that has not tried to sleep with me, or stared at our cheek blades as if they were a genetic prize to be eaten.”

He huffed in exasperation. An affliction they had shared, the obnoxious over-interest in their unusual horn structure.

“There is a social event coming up a few days. The Council has requested I encourage those who are running for senate election next year to either support increased trade, or discourage those who would block the motion from consideration. I have three names to kill outright.”

Saren leaned his head against the pillar.

“None of them are innocent anymore, so I do not mind terribly. The economic reports support the motion as well. More trade would improve many things. Particularly medicine. We have such an abundance of medicinal flora here, and on Sur’kesh. Something Thessia lacks.”

The first peal of real thunder hit the land, rumbling a dirge for the night’s previously clear weather.

“Tevos has come up with a plan to provide temptations for the trade agreements so they look good on screen, but the big picture leans very heavily toward the Republic’s interests. I have no doubt Sparatus has plans for counter proposals to even the scale. The Volus will enjoy it, regardless. Which is good. They have done well by our people, it is only expected for us to ensure their wellbeing in return.”

The raindrops began not moments later, smattering against the roof of the tower in an instantaneous deluge. Some of the falling water was whipped into the landing by the wild winds, and he dared to light a biotic nebula to keep it off him. Saren did not want to move just yet, and there was no one here to see.
He took his time finding things to say. Neither the short sentences he usually used to communicate, nor the honeyed words he lured targets to their demise with. An openness he could not bring himself to offer to any living soul, no matter how he had tried.

“I am looking forward to the soirée. Yes, I recognize the Council is using our family name and my skill at coercion to manipulate the higher tiers. I will have to be in top social form to accomplish these goals, and that will be exhausting, but... it has been a long time since I last danced among our people, ate foods grown on our world, spoken at length in only the closed dialect, or dressed in high fashion and conversed with others from the old clans.”

His silver-grey head lowered in a pantomime of embarrassment.

“These things are so superfluous sounding, and yet I miss them when I am out in the greater galaxy. There is no place quite like our homeworld, not in all the stars I have seen.”

Lighting sparked across the sky, revealing the unending hills covered in towers that rose up in reverence to the beloved dead. The snapshot image of long grasses and spires went on for as far as even his eyes could see.

“I miss Palaven when I am gone.”

The storm reached it’s peak, roaring with thunder, flashing with electricity, and soaking everything but him in torrential rains.

“I miss you always.”

He gave it a little while longer, out of new things to say but unwilling to go. The greatest self indulgence the Spectre ever allowed himself was coming here so often.

An hour to Nanus' rising he made his way back down the stairs, not that anyone would have come out at the moon-dawn and caught him out of bounds in this weather. As the elements raged Saren stalked out of the tower and headed for the rarely visited Arterius madlis, sheathed in blue and moving untouched through the chaos of wind and water.

Entirely separate from his surroundings.
DancesWithTurians, you amazing person, I have no idea how much time you spend making these images, but I adore you for it. <3

General Desolas Arterius of the 119th Regiment. Life given in defense of Palaven.

A/N: It took a while to write this part, the screen kept blurring out when my eyes decided to leak. T_T

Fanfic Recommendation: The Reversal (23,688 words) by Velasa (Saren/Nihlus, indoctrinated Shepard)
Nihlus glared at the ‘game over’ screen, pissed that his role playing choices had led to defeat. Unwilling to waste time trying to replay until he forced the events to happen like he wanted, as he only had forty or so more hours in flight, the Spectre instead info-net searched for the scenario’s
The wiki revealed that his desired ending was impossible, and he just about threw the controller at the wall upon discovering that someone had to die during the dramatic final scene of this arc for the rest of his group to make it out of the time loop. Unwilling to sacrifice any of his party, the knife-loving Torin started looking for game mods that could fix this bullshit. He found one that still required him choose a sacrifice, but the character would mysteriously survive and be around for all future dialogue blubs and story events.

Good enough, Nihlus thought, until he was forced to watch Archmage Telio Morisandre give her life for the cause, almost. He felt so bad for leaving her to die that the carmine plated Spectre spent the rest of the game romancing her, rather then the sexy rogue he'd planned to. The whole thing was just... too sad otherwise.

If ever asked he would swear up and down he hadn't been all that into it. There had been no manly tears or clenching of knives. He did not eat two bags of snack food in distress, nor hunt down the people responsible in game, -who had never technically done anything because of the temporal shift-, and murder them horribly. With fire spells that exploded. Their corpses absolutely did not end up piled within a massive mountain of carefully stacked goat carcasses. Said mountain was not then ravaged by a dragon that was painstakingly driven into it with side-ways use of game mechanics and too much free time.

His playable character and Telio had a lovely bonding ceremony, and three beautiful mage children in the epilogue.

It was, all-in-all, a satisfying use of the four day trip to reach the location of his next mission, though he would still have to come up with something else to do on the return flight.

Oh well.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Pleased greeting. Spectre Kryik, I am glad you have arrived safely.”

“Thank you Ambassador Calyn. Are you ready for the meeting?”
“As ready as can be expected. Anxiously: We should depart right away, if that is acceptable. It would be best to arrive early.”

“Lead the way.” Nihlus sketched a small bow towards the Ambassador, following him out the door.

The quiet walk to the designated meeting room took them down halls of ornate and nature inspired Elcor architecture, across a colonnade, and into their reserved conference space. The large area was built for Elcor-sized people meeting in groups of up to twenty, making the room massively out-size what other species might allocate to a gathering. The wide stools that passed for chairs were barely a third of a meter off the floor, and wider around then a drive core. They reminded Nihlus of a cross between a pet bed and a coffee table.

His eyes traced the lattices of curling metal and plant life. Dekunna natives sure liked their greenery. Even the chairs had intricate lines worked into the metal. An odd quirk of a species considered large and clumsy, to have such fine details in their décor.

Speaking of furniture, the table also seemed ridiculously proportioned to Turian sensibilities, and the water cooler looked big enough to bathe in. He chuffed in quiet amusement, and took a professional stand next to the door. His job today was just to sit there and look pretty. If by 'pretty' you meant 'intimidating'.

A group of three Elcor entered and shared greetings with the Ambassador, glancing momentarily at the Spectre's looming presence before finding a seat and waiting for the rest of the attendees.

Nihlus was covered from head to toe in his usual black-and-red gear, armed to the teeth, and was actively projecting an aura of 'grumpy, and will shoot you if you try anything'. It was his best mimic of Saren-on-a-bad-day actually. Not the easiest demeanor to pull off given his natural personality, but an effective one.

Everyone and their mother knew his former mentor's reputation, and now-a-days they at least knew of his protégé, but if Nihlus took up a gimlet eye on a room, people immediately expected his 'problem solving skills' and kill count to look exactly like Saren's.

Unlikely, but most didn't know that. An effective mien for a bodyguard.

It was a full ten minutes before the other party walked in, nearly late. The head of clan, Avah Minutia Omaros, stalked in with General Ansterial Omaros by her side. The general glanced about
the room, showfully sneering at its extensive scroll-work and flowery accents. Avah Minutia placidly took a seat, treating the massive Elcor-sized seating as if it were a throne. Her heavily armored torin companion buzzed ridiculing subvocals at the accommodations in general, and took up position on the other side of the door from Nihlus.

He didn't acknowledge the Spectre whatsoever.

“With forced pleasantry: Thank you for coming. I am glad we could meet this day.”

From his angle Nihlus couldn't see her expression, but the subvocals behind her bland reply were dismissively rude. Odd, considering most people that high in the tiers had some amount of class.

“I'm sure. To business, then. I've other things to attend to as soon as we finish.” Oh wow. Catty bitch.

“Certainly, Avah Omaros. Patient explanation: the contract between your clan and the business owners clearly states that continued use of resources listed in sub-section A-234 through A-…”

That was about when the Spectre tuned out. He watched the room for trouble, but left the boring detail wrangling to the relevant parties. Regardless of the tarin's wishes to be done with the matter quickly, -and how she thought that was happening when doing business with Elcor was a mystery-, the day wore on and still the two parties went back and forth.

And back.

And forth.

Aaaaand back.

And oh fuck, how long could they actually spend talking about mass fabricated machine parts? Apparently a good long while. His formal stand turned into a mostly-straight lean against the wall beside the door.

He picked up on a few details, regardless of attention paid or personal choice. The whole mess came
down to a few sub clauses in a multi-species business agreement that had different interpretations in the law books of either homeworld, and nothing stated in galactic law. There was a contract for mining rights, something to do with chilling unit manufacturing, and unclear lines of responsibility due to changes in shipping regulations that increased the price on... something or other.

Profit was down, and the leader of clan Omaros had decided that those agreed upon details were no longer to her or her clan’s favor. With some twisty logic she was opting to drop the contract, but the Elcor conglomerate wanted to continue. They disagreed, and now she was just making things difficult for the other party until they shoved off.

Granted 'Turians are excellent, naturally skilled business owners’ said no one ever, but this was a really low level of bullshit. Nihlus huffed, giving them two more hours before he would 'Spectre authority' the whole thing. Possibly with explosives.

He spent those hours experiencing Ambassador Cayln's return fire, which was long Elcor-paced lectures on the finer points of refrigerator manufacture and shipping, and how it pertained to the contract. Somehow.

Nihlus had to give it to the man, he was fighting _stulti_ with _stulti._

At the one hour mark the Spectre glanced over at General Omaros to find him _still_ standing ramrod straight, with an expression in his face plates that said he was clearly above it all. Green eyes rolled at the classically Turian stance. The worst face the Hierarchy had to offer, right there. Prideful assholes screwing people over on orders, and trying to look good for their superiors while doing it.

He was rather proud of himself for waiting the whole two hours to make a move, patiently giving them the time to try and make any sort of progress. None having been made, but learning a great deal of useless trivia about mining ore, the Spectre hit his limit for time wasting.

With a slow roll of his core muscles, Nihlus came out of his wall lean.


The conversation cut off as they turned to look at him, stopping in the middle of yet another rehashing about shipping prices.
“With flagging patience: I apologize that this meeting has run long, Spectre Kryik. Is there something I can do for you?”

“The reverse actually. Allow me to make these issues much simpler?” He smiled confidently, a little coldly in fact. Ambassador Cayln's patience may be flagging, but his was dead in the water. “The contract's finer points seem to be up for discussion, but I doubt anyone here has the authority to change them without input from individuals who are clearly missing. Nevermind that no solutions to these conflicts are being found.” He saw the Avah's offended twitch of expression, and ignored it. “Let's make this easy then, shall we? Find agreement, continue the contract as is, or make a court date. You have one hour.”

With a polite nod, he went back to his lean. The business owners stared at him, as if a Spectre interfering like that was completely unthinkable. He bit back a dark chuckle. Forcing compromise in trade agreements was well within the mandate of protecting galactic stability. He had literally every right to do so, something Ambassador Cayln was likely aware of.

The expression on the Avah's face was furious. He stared right back with a flat look. Her subvocals buzzed at him with offense, but Nihlus' gaze simply hardened. The high tier bitch needed to learn that this wasn't Palaven, she wasn't getting an apology and a foot rub from him.

Nihlus Kryik had no Avah.

Or clan. Or family. He had a gorgeous but sociopathic teacher-turned-friend, a sexy cop that spoiled him rotten, an explosive-loving Drell outcast, and the Council's orders. That was it.

His defiance riled her up something fierce, but the old twit had no recourse and the clock was ticking. He tried not to look smug while the General cast him sideways glances that were baffled and disgusted.

They managed to agree to another five months of keeping the same contract with a new meeting to discuss further points of interest in four. The Elcor diplomat ushered everyone out the door with polite niceties, and the lovely-if-over-decorated meeting room grew silent.

“Spectre Kryik?”

“Yes Ambassador Calyn?”
“With effusive appreciation: You have my sincere thanks for your intervention. I was beginning to lose hope that any sort of compromise could be found.”

“Not a problem. It seemed like that tarin was reneging on her clan’s half of the agreement anyway, which is not okay. Can I ask why you’re even the one negotiating this? I didn’t think private industry disagreements were a part of your job description.”

“Amused: The finer details of the delicacy of this disagreement were in the mission briefing.”

“Well I read them, but they weren't exactly in my area of expertise. I happen to be very good with weaponry and espionage, but politics? Not so much.”

The Ambassador made a chuffling sound, the air rushing past his mouth frills in the closest equivalent to an Elcor laugh. “So you say, but it was your aid that resolved the situation... for now at least. With relief: It will give the various companies involved time to talk to their lawyers and sort out the details. Making it no longer my responsibility.” Cayln shook his great head, the metal bits on his jacket jangling with the motion. Nihlus smiled at him, keeping it close-mouthed to avoid showing fangs.

“Happy to help Ambassador. I apologize if my intercession was too heavy handed.”

“Not at all, Spectre. Not at all. Would you care to join me for dinner? With improving cheer: I would like to bribe you with your preferred cuisine into being available again in four months.”

Nihlus’ serious demeanor dissolved with laughter, and he amiably accepted the edible 'bribe'.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Not One More (793 words) by Lachdannen (Samara's last stand, ME2.)
Radical dreamers

Chapter Summary

Saren returns to the addictive miasma of the past, and chokes on it. Nihlus winks at Councilor Tevos while running through the Presidium carrying a Drell.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Madlis – the classical Turian home, a sprawling compound to which any member of the clan is welcome. (Credit: Recidiva)

Nais – pronoun for non-gendered Asari (Last call for crediting and italics, it's totally a real word by now, right? Credit: Mizdirected)

Amiala - Turian closed dialect for 'grandmother'. (Credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: Did you guys know about Aria's Afterlife lounge? It's a forum on ff.net, pretty damn active, where you can RP, promote your fic, chit chat about Andromeda, etc. Neat things, duckies. All the neat things. Also, has everyone seen the original concept art for Saren? SO SEXY. I definitely stole some bits for this chapter.

Chapter Soundtrack: [Jessie J - Nobody's Perfect (Netsky Remix)]

When I'm nervous I have this thing, yeah I talk too much
Sometimes I just can't shut the hell up
It's like I need to tell someone, anyone who'll listen
And that's where I seem to fuck up, yeah
I forget about the consequences,
For a minute there I lose my senses
And in the heat of the moment
My mouth starts going, the words start flowing

But I never meant to hurt you,
I know it's time that I learned to
Treat the people I love, like I wanna be loved
This is a lesson learned

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The grand doorway shifted aside more like the deepest stone beneath his feet and less like the stylized metal doors that had guarded the front of the Arterius madlis since time immemorial. A small scatter of dust fell as the two sides slid apart on the literally ancient machinery, revealing a portal into
the clan home of his once-great family.

The entry hall was short and sparsely decorated, not to mention massively out of fashion. The entire estate was, but Saren could not particularly bring himself to care. It looked familiar as is, and he preferred that. It was not as if he threw galas every other weekend, as some of the old clans did.

Lavender and silver tapestries mostly hid the lines in the stonework where entry way became wide-open bulwark, but so much of the clan’s riches had been removed to pay debts that any passerby could see the breaks where the walls were made to shift, to seal the entrance. The building could turn into a fortress of it’s own, if the mechanism still worked. He had not checked in some time.

The expansive gardens had long since been taken over by weeds that the automated systems maintained only so much as to keep them contained and watered, so there was also no way to produce food should he actually decide to seal himself in. Saren considered the mess as he passed by the promenade to the wading pools that looked out over the gardens.

A back up plan if he ever decided to retire. The ridiculous thought pulled a small, wry grin out of him. Spectres were not known for reaching retirement age, and generally speaking that was one-hundred-and-twenty or so for a Turian. The oldest Spectre of their race was O’kara, an angry, ninety-three year old spite-fueled tarin.

Though... the grounds were actually willed to Nihlus, so purchasing some automated keepers to tend a simpler field in advance of his death could be wise, and perhaps storing a few seedlings in stasis.

Speaking of his will, that had been a series of obnoxious conversations to have with Cipritine’s records keepers and his lawyers. The willing of an entire madlis to a no-name colony born was unprecedented. He did not care. What else was he to do with the place? Leave it for the social hawks to bedazzle in new furniture and show off in the wake of his untimely demise?

He would rather see it demolished. Which it would be, if he and Nihlus died at the same time.

His footsteps paused for half a beat, the misstep echoing down the dusty, sun-lit corridor as he realized that perhaps he should... well, what was the precedent of leaving the madlis of one clan to the scion of another? He considered the thought further. That would not be such a bad fate for this place, for Garrus to inherent the land if both he and Nihlus died. Considering his protégé's preoccupation with him, he somewhat expected the wild-hearted torin to go down in a blaze of foolish glory while avenging him if the carmine plated Spectre was not already there when it happened.
Not to mention, he had taken the time to spy on the Detective's family a little. They were... surprisingly good people. Their records, even the sealed, top-shelf documents, read more like a fantasy novel of paragons and heroes then real life. The Vakarian clan would be an acceptable recipient of his clan's legacy, in lieu of having any children to pass it on to.

Nihlus first then. Garrus, if his protégé passed as well or refused it. Saren made a note to see about having the paperwork altered, though it would give the record keepers a whole new headache, he was sure.

After a good long walk through the buildings to check up on the status of things, the silver-grey torin finally made it to the last hallway before his destination. His fingers trailed along the white marble of the wall, sliding up and down the deep purple and gold patterns laced throughout the stonework. Something he used to do as a child. The trace minerals that made the glimmer of gold and the rivulets of purple ended just steps to the door of his brother's old room. He paused before it, tapped the center of the door twice in 'hello', and continued on to his own bedroom.

Saren stepped inside, closed the door, passed through the small sitting room, and sat down on his bed. He was already exhausted from being here less than an hour. Every hallway a tall tale, each room a story. The staircases and laundry chutes and balconies. All of them cherished memories, scattered amid the outlines of missing furnishings. Empty cases and wall mounts, once home to pieces of their clan history. Desolas had been forced to sell so much to pay off lingering family debts. Their great-amiala's faults haunting them long past her presence.

Though the balances had all been paid off by the time Saren went to basic training at fifteen, they had not enjoyed that state for long. Desolas had perished four years later. Yet still the light-bleached outlines where ancient war blades and carved shield chests should be instead stood empty. He had not bothered trying to hunt down and return each piece with his growing fortunes. What was the use, when he was the last?

Saren fell backwards onto the mattress, hand clasped to face, and gathered himself for a few minutes.

Then a few minutes more.

He fell asleep into a light doze, understandable considering it was mid afternoon, and right about the time most Turians took a cat-nap for energy. Menae rose, and between it and Trebia this time of day was too bright and hot to get any work done. He slept for something less then half an hour before waking with a startle, shaking himself from an unmemorable dream.
A cold shower washed the melancholy away, and he set his armor on the table in the suite's sitting room, pulling out maintenance and cleaning supplies. He sat and worked while he dried. The extremely customized gear was treated to a thorough tune up, then detailed polishing, and stacked neatly to the side. Saren nodded at it, finished using his gear as a way to stall, and opened the closet doors on his wardrobe.

Inside a few dozen pre-coordinated sets of clothing hung ready, -shoes and accessories to match-, laid out along one side. Perhaps totaling thirty outfits in a space fit to hold three hundred. The Spectre grabbed the first one without paying much attention, and slipped into the formal pieces one by one. First came the underwear, an obnoxious and outdated piece of clothing meant to hide loosened plates from being obvious. The cloth ends wrapped around his hips, bulking them up with a few layers of cloth to make up for his thicker waist.

Most modern fashions did away with the under piece entirely, plates spreading in public becoming more of a chuckle-worthy slip up rather then actually offensive. He would blame the Asari on that count. Their tendency for both cultural infection, and their permissive attitudes on lack of personal control in the young. Regardless, what used to be an embarrassing loss of control was now simply something to set admirers twittering. Saren almost considered forgoing them, considering that lack of control was never a problem for him, but he was already automatically slipping into the pants before he had decided either way. Unconcerned, he clicked the side clasps into place one by one, tightening the loose navy fabric into a more shape hugging arrangement.

A black undershirt when on next, a more formal version of Nihlus' favorite style of muscle shirt. It stretched over his chest plates, tight and mildly elastic. Over-top came a matching navy jacket that cut off above the waist, stopping just below the rib cage to further accentuate the natural angles of carapace to waist. The sleeves draped down to his wrists, trim and classy.

Not that he had been the one to pick all this out. Even with some small amount fashion sense, the Spectre had been wise enough to hand a tailor a large amount of credits, and ask them to make him look good, preferably with outfits that would not go out of fashion quickly.

It took Saren another few minutes of slipping into the heavy boots that gave him some height and disguised that they did so, as well as the head scarf that boldly accentuated his horns rather then trying to hide them. Several additions of pre-selected silver jewelry, adorning chains, and a posh cane that doubled as a hidden fencing blade with a low-power shield generator in the handle.

Looking like the old money that he was not, but the noble torin that he was, Saren Arterius walked back along the halls while making appointments with his Omni-tool. There were a fair number of meetings to make, bribes to give, and intelligence sources to plumb before the soirée of the season in three days.
Three names to arrange death for, as quietly as possible, and a smattering of high tier socialites to point in the direction of improved trade relations. He would have his work cut out for him.

He may have panicked, just a little, when a weight fell on his back from nowhere. The noise Nihlus made in that half moment of teeny, tiny freak out had the crazy little Drell on his back laughing hysterically. Combat instincts dissolved peaceably when he recognized the voice, milliseconds away from falling backwards to squish whatever had jumped him.

“Oh for fuck's sake Riaz, are ya a pyjak or what?”, he said while leaning sideways and forward to compensate for her weight.

“Maaaybe!”

He glanced around, looking for her constant shadow, but it was just them in that area of the Spectre Offices.

“Where's Ankh? You forget him somewhere?”

“Pffft, no. He's shoppin' for us!”

“For us?”

“O-ho-ho, yes. We've gotta mission mah luv!”

“Oooo, a mission. Does it involve fire?”

“Yes!”
“Explosives?”

“Oh yes!”

“Destruction of public property?”

“A bridge!”

“Where do I sign?!”

“Already done, luv! I forged your signature. Ta the ship!”

Nihlus lifted one arm out in a stalwart ‘onward, troops!’ gesture.

“To the ship! Wait, which ship?”

“Anhk's of course! Unless ya cleaned up your flyin' junk heap on a recent birl?”

“Hey now. That flying junk heap is my home.”

“Aye, but it’s a boggin mess of a thing. On we go then, dock 78-D.”

He popped out of the secured area, and took off running for 78-D at a ground eating lope, Riaz squealing with glee as she clung to his back. He raced down the walkways of the Presidium, making a spectacular leap over some topiary bushes as a short cut. He landed like the finest ballerina, and corrected his angle with a spin before taking off again. Across the plaza Councilors Tevos and Valern were having a working lunch at an open-air café, and he could feel the weight on his back shifting as Riaz waved at them cheerfully.

Nihlus smiled winsomely at them as well, and Valern blinked and went right back to work, utterly unaffected by their unprofessional behavior. Tevos hid a smile behind a delicate hand, giving them a little wave back that hid the Turian hand-sign for ‘call me’ in it. He winked at the nais, and kept running.
78-D was a good long way off, but he was having too much fun to stop at a rapid transit station and take the economic way. Instead the Spectre pushed himself, enjoying the free run, tossing in some parkour here and there that pulled shrill yelps and wild giggles from the woman who clung to his carapace like a burr. His psycho little Drell, who was actually an older woman for their species' lifespan, screamed like a twelve year old on a rollercoaster when he leapt over a section of dead-air between walkways.

He laughed joyously as she whapped him upside the head, coming into range of the right docking station after a ten minute blitzkrieg to their destination. Nihlus collapsed to the ground beside the cloaked figure that was placidly loading crates into their ride. Ankhleas lifted an amused browridge at him, but continued working.

“Are the two of you finished making a show of yourselves? I'm somewhat certain you'll be on the news tonight.”

Riaz set her black scaled elbows on his head, curving her torso to avoid his crest, chin in palms from the feel of it. Likely smiling like a lunatic. He gave the mild mannered torin a thumbs up while gasping for breath.

“I dunno, m'dear, think I could go on tha ride a time or two again. So long as we skip the flying leap over nothin’!”

Ankh's weathered brown mandibles tilted in a grin as he shook his head at them.

“As long as you had fun, I suppose.”

“Oh ya, Nih is a right good mount. Maybe need to make 'im a saddle. 'E can carry me inta battle!”

Nihlus stood straight after Riaz hopped down, dead panning the low screech that the raptor-like creatures of ancient Palaven made when ridden to war. Spectre Tio'fore burst into giggles again as she hit the airlock button with a fist.

“See there? He's so tame, it'll work for sure.”

“Tame!? I'll show you tame...”
While the carmine plated torin made to assault his partner, Agent Tithe chuckled and continued loading the incendiary devices they'd need to complete their mission. Which was, in all honesty, a one-person task. He could have done it even, but Riaz had jumped at the opportunity to create massive property damage with her fellow pyrotechnics enthusiast.

The two Spectres looped the ship's exterior while Ankhleas worked, Riaz's doppler-shifted shrieking passing by as she fled from Nihlus' talons. Whether their games would end in a spar, an accident that led to medbay, or a pile of ticklish vengeance on the floor was still undecided.

The airlock sat open, waiting patiently.

With a passing grin and head shake at the two he entered and set about doing the pre-departure checklist. It was very complete, with them having stalled for half a week while they waited to catch Nihlus between missions. He was just about to go out and wrangle them in when the airlock cycle started. They dog piled out jabbering something about cookies, and he took a seat in the cockpit to request departure from traffic control.

It was about an hour later, right when they were coming out of the Mass Relay jump into the Eagle Nebula, that the smell of spice and cookies began to emanate from the kitchen. He looked up from the control center of his ship, the Apien Breeze, at the first hint of the delectable scent.

He breathed it in and smiled distantly at the memories it evoked. The recipe was from Rakhana, modified to entice Turian taste buds. A favorite from his long-lost bondmate's cooking arsenal. Things that had appealed to both of them had made up a mishmash book of kitchen tricks, written in beautiful calligraphy with ink on stiff fabric of all things, that now belonged more to Riaz than him. Which was alright, Emarie had been her sister after all. She made good use of it too, taking care of him with food and company all these long years since his bondmate's murder. Few people knew, or expected, that the vivacious Drell Spectre was his rites-sister.

They weren't similar in personal tastes, didn't have many shared interests, nor even compatible battlefield tactics. He was considered something of a war dog among his own kind, and she was a full-speed-ahead, you-only-live-once dreamer. He also didn't match her... *liveliness* well, not that he didn't try. If for no other reason then he would have long since gone down kicking in a suicidal last hurrah if she hadn't fought so hard to keep him from depression.
Drell had a lot of grace in the wake of loss, and their perfect memory to buoy them. Turians had an inner fire, and it was doused when a mate died. Very often permanently. Riaz had held onto him with a miser's grip after Emarie had passed away, the only family either of them had left. She'd fed his flame with her own till he could stand again, with little things like cookies and terrible jokes.

Agent Tithe sighed wistfully.

He could have gone hunting for some of the latest batch of those cookie himself, but instead he leaned back in the standard issue pilot chair and breathed for a while. Eyes closed and daydreaming of black scales and gold eyes. An alert went off in the diamond shaped cockpit, but a half-open eye told him it was unimportant, and he closed it to return to reminiscing. Until a not-subtle cough drew his attention. There was a plate of cookies, at least ten, sitting on the dash board with a fresh cup of herbal tea to dunk them in. Another sniff revealed the last traces of Spectre Kryik stealing from the room like a thief in the night.

Ankh looked down at the plate with a broad grin. A reverse thief, perhaps.

Nihlus was good people.

He nabbed one of the offerings and double checked on that alert ping, looking forward to the trip. He wasn't one to enjoy explosions quite so much, but the two wildcard Spectres were usually a joy to be around, if a little tiring for a torin like him. Still, the incendiary munitions in the cargo store gave the group as a whole a very high chance of having a particularly good couple of days.

Chapter End Notes

A/N/N: THE SCIENCE IS IN! Duck-checked, fact-prodded, lambasted with hot sauce... opposite chirality contact wouldn't do shit to most people. So! We'll address it in-story at some point later, because I've got some ideas on how to gently plot-fix the presentation of levo-dextro in canon. For the mean time, you can assume that most species eat their own foods out of taste, nutrition, nutrient balance, and for the natural immune response to pathogens in edibles from familiar sources; sort of like avoiding non-bottled water in foreign countries, not necessarily because it's dirty, but because the local bacteria is something you aren't used to. As for bodily fluids, it's not going to be any different. Mostly. There are some other weird things to address like the multi-species effect of reverie and Drell venom, but I'll get to it at more applicable moments. If
you have questions about the chirality stuff, feel free to ask in comments. It's a bit too long for author's notes, and we have several brilliant scientists in the audience who have gone back and forth with me on some of the pseudo-science thus far that might be able to clarify points of confusion if we ask them nicely. //thumbs up, big grin//

A/N/N: New mind-canon: Since Rakhana was a desert planet, and a wasteland by the end, trees and wood were nearly non-existent and stiff woven cloth was used as a substitute for paper. Also, since their entire species has perfect recall, the written word was something special. Data important enough to be written down, to be saved and shared and taught, even when it only needed to be seen once. Thus Drell might keep records and logs in normal electronic storage, but a family cook book would be drawn in a lovely book of bound cloth, hand written. Even the reading of it the one time, a fond experience to recall, full of personal touch. I imagine Riaz pulling out her sister's cookbook and fondly touching the pages as she cooks, even though she knows everything in there by heart.

Fanfic Recommendation: **Flock of Vandals** (68,980 words) by **Progman** (Discharged from the SA, Shepard meets Zaeed Massani, and they murder stuff. Woooo!)
There are few like us

Chapter Summary

Someone has figured something out, finally, and it's time to put up or shut up.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Madlis – the classical Turian home, a sprawling compound to which any member of the clan is welcome. (Credit: Recidiva)

Filian – Turian closed dialect for 'sister'.

Pari/Patrem – Turian closed dialect for 'dad/father'.

Fraten – Turian closed dialect for 'brother'.

Chapter Soundtrack: Frozen - Do You Want to Build a Snowman (I had to. I just had to. Cast Garrus as Anna. Dawwww...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus stared down at the paperwork e-forms in front of him with blurry eyes. He'd saved three people this week, and the post-incident reports were just stupid amounts of non-sense.

One person had almost drowned in the Presidium lake, and being a brave idiot he had jumped in when no one else was willing, and let them stand on his shoulders while he slow walked to shore along the bottom. Thank the spirits for the re-breather in his helmet. Though why not one of the other dozen or so armored individuals in the area had thought to hit their helm switch... the Detective tried not to be critically annoyed.

The second was nearly a murder-suicide, a very disturbing one, and while he didn't manage to save the murder victim, he did stop the murderer from killing themselves. Reluctantly. The less said about that, the better.

His final valiant act for the week, and he was really hoping that nothing major popped up over the
weekend, had been to practice more of his non-existent infiltration skills in a wall climb to save a Hanar child that had fallen over the side of a bridge, and was clinging precariously to a ledge about ten meters above a walkway.

The little guy's five siblings and parents were flashing a thousand colors of the rainbow on the ground below as he finagled his way up, let the kid wrap tiny little tentacles around his fringe, and eased back down again. Only slightly impeded by a pink appendage over the left side of his face. His climbing skills were improving though, which he would be sure to blame Nihlus for.

Engineer. He was an engineer, damnit. He was trained to sit in the back and shoot things, really well.

He chuffed, and ran a palm over his face plates. This paperwork was going to kill him if a long fall didn't. It was just... an insane amount of detail. Why couldn't he just write what happened in a few sentences, sign and date? What good would it do to note the number of pedestrians in the area who watched? Or the number of armaments he was carrying? How about an estimate on local traffic flow?

What did any of that have to do with saving a drowning victim? Or the kid?

Garrus purposefully moved his datapads out of the way, and rapped his forehead against the desk repeatedly.


“Ohhh, so you've been giving yourself brain damage! That explains *everything.*”

The Detective sat up, turning around to find none other then his brilliant wisp of a sister taking a lean in the doorway to his private office. He tentatively smiled at her, but his *filian* was having none of it.

“Hey, Sol. What, ah, does it explain?”

She glared at him, walking inside and shutting the door.
“Nice to see you by the way. I’m at work for the moment though, in case you didn't notice. It's against regs for me to have personal talks during business hou-”

She grabbed him by the front ridge of his collar, leaned into his space, and stared him down with a bucket load of ire. Garrus had long practice in not being intimidated by Vakarian tarin, but his only sibling was a special kind of scary sometimes.

This was one of those times.

By dint of that long practice he still managed not to show it though, and they had a nice long staring contest.

He was inordinately proud that she broke first.

“Explain to me why there are pictures all over the spirits damned place of you and a Spectre in a pile of children.”

He laughed.

“Pr~~etty sure there was a news story to go with that holo... but maybe you didn't read it? So long-story-short, I helped a Spectre save a bunch of kids from terrorists.”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

‘Damn. The 'I know there is more to it' look. How to put this...’

The C-Sec Officer licked the back of his teeth while contemplating how to phrase a few more pieces of the truth in a way least likely to get him eviscerated.

“He’s a really great guy. We’re friends.” That was a pretty good first salvo, in his opinion.
She peered at him still, leaning away and turning her head to look at him side ways. Bird-of-prey style. He smiled at her.

“You're friends with a Spectre.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Pari is not going to like that.”

“Well that isn't fair. He's never met Nihlus.”

“Nihlus.”

“Yes, that's his name.”

“Nihlus Kryik.”

“Yeah.”

Solana let go of his collar, and settled back on a hip.

“Garrus, you idiot.”

“What? Why am I an idiot this time?”

“You made friends with that psychopath Arterius' crazy mini-me. Seriously? Fraten, you have done some stupid shit in your life, -hell, so have I-, but this one has got to take the cake. You know what? I take it back. Pari isn't just going to not like it. He's going to kill you and bury you out behind the garden shed. In pieces.”
His attitude on the whole situation devolved a bit then. He wasn't going to listen to more bad mouthing behind their backs. Period.

“Sol, I'm going to ask you nicely, once, to not talk about either of them like that ever again.”

The tone in his voice had her jerking back, unprepared. Not that they hadn't had screaming matches before, but he was generally more complacent with his sister then any other individual in the galaxy, save perhaps their mari. She buzzed at him suspiciously.

“Why.”

“Because you don't know them, and I get that, because Saren is a hard guy to even get to know, never mind actually learning a thing about him, and Nihlus isn't one to let people see the real him... pretty much ever. But neither of them deserve what you just said.”

“How the hell do you know something like that?”

“If I explain, will you keep quiet about it? I'd rather not end up in pieces.”

“Spirits. I was kidding about that, -mostly. What have you gotten yourself into?

He held up a finger, running a spyware program on his Omni-tool in her view. It came up clean, and he went to lock the door before starting, setting his 'tool to put out a low grade jammer signal for a few feet around him. She chuffed at him uncertainly, still suspicious.

“Alright Sol, what do you want to know exactly?”

“You... called Arterius and Kryik by first name.”

“I did. I'm on a first name basis with both of them.”

Solana's head tilted slightly askew the other direction, watching him silently for a moment. He could practically see her clever mind shifting through a thousand facts and statistics to find more data
correlations. She had always been the smarter of the two of them, probably why she worked for Blackwatch, and he was stuck here with paperwork. Then again, sometimes it seemed like their dad had planned it like that long before they were born.

“Spectre's don't stay anywhere for long, yet you're... friends with two of them? Two of the most infamous ones? You know Arterius is practically pari's mortal enemy, right?”

It was Garrus' turn to blink in startlement. Mortal enemies? What?

“I... didn't know that, no. I don't think Saren does either...” She hummed in agreement to that last part, so something in her impression of their patrem's opinion on the matter must match up. Garrus couldn't recall the Spectre taking much interest in his family at all, that was more Nihlus' fascination. Then again, the electric eyed torin was very subtle when he wanted to be.

“How did you... meet?”, she asked.

The Detective rolled his neck, thinking back.

“I ran into Saren during a bank robbery, it was a big op with a lot of mercenaries in on it. He and I took the building back. I was introduced to Nihlus not long after. We crossed paths a few times last year, and one day they needed a sniper...”

“Tell me you didn't.”

“Oh I did. They seemed to think I did alright. Gone with them a couple times since.”

“On Spectre missions.”

“Mmmmmm.”

She took a deep breath, held it, clicked her tongue, and sighed gustily. Garrus leaned back in his office chair, spinning slightly left and right on the pivot.
“You are varren dinner.”

“Possibly.”

“What else?”

“Be more specific, Sol.”

“What else aren't you telling me that I should know?”

He could think of a few things, most of which he had no intention of sharing with his sister, of all people.

“Just ask me what you want to. I'm not hiding anything from you, there's just too much to really say...”

“Oh, spirits, you're prevaricating.”

“I am?”

“Yes, you are. Bad sign. You do that shifty thing with your right mandible and shuffle your matching foot when you're hiding something that is... Oh hell no. You're sleeping with them, aren't you? Which one? Both? Spirits, it's both. Dead. You're so dead.”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. As if he hadn't been stressed enough before this.

“No, not exactly, and I really don't think my sex life has anything to do with-”

“Garrus. Garrus. Pari hates Spectres, what about that do you not understand?”

His subvocals replied in frustrated agitation. “Listen, I don't... I don't really care. Do you want to
meet Nihlus? Five minutes, and you'd like him too. He's... really great.”

She stared at him, the hide of her neck going a little pale.

“Brother, tell me you didn't...”

“Didn't...?”, he replied leadingly.

“If you've... bonded...”

“Oh, no. I haven't.”

She didn't get any less pale. Solana took a knee in front of his chair, gripping his shoulders with her long, thin fingers.

“You can't.”

He raised a browridge at her.

“I'm aware...”

Solana peered at him closely.

“What does the cra- I mean. What does... Spectre Kryik mean to you, fraten?”

“He's... a good friend.”

She winced.
“Garrus, you don't have friends.”

He bonked their heads together, a little hard, in rebuke.

“Of course I do.”

“No, you don't. I love you, but you're terrible at social stuff. I see it, because I'm possibly even worse. Neither of us make friends easily.”

“That's... not true.”

“Name one person from any school year or squad that you still speak to at least once a month.”

He... didn't have a reply for that.

“We don't idle well, brother. Normal, boring people don't interest us. It's why pari set me up to be Blackwatch, and you to be the next C-Sec Executor. We're... too well programmed. Bred for duty. Raised for it, even.”

He tried pulling back in his chair, wanting to reject the way she was making out their lives to be some... predetermined combination of brain washing and cultivating. Like you'd do with plants. Or livestock.

She didn't let him go, holding on tight and staring him down with a furrowed brow. He blinked rapidly, looking anywhere but back at her.

Damnit.

His sister, his insanely clever filian, had probably figured all this out a long-long time ago.

Shit. He was so freaking slow sometimes...
“You're not stupid.”

“Are you psychic now too?”

“Don't be an ass because you don't want to hear what I'm saying. I know that look. You're feeling like an idiot. Don't, Garrus. You are so smart, it's just in a different way. You're the only one that can keep up with me, alright? Not even the others at work can pick up my train of thought like you can. You’re even the only one in our family that gets me... besides mari, and she's...

They both went silent together, sagging with the emotional weight.

“Anyway, don't push me away with sass alright?”

“Yeah... yeah, okay.”

“We don't have friends, fraten.”

He thought for a moment, brow furrowed. After a moment, he looked up into the pale orange of her eyes.

“I do now.”

She looked at him mournfully.

“That's what I'm afraid of. Pari is going to-”

“To what, Sol? Yell at me more then he already does? Dismiss my best efforts? Threaten me when I'm not doing exactly what he says? Because he's been doing all that since we were kids anyway.”

Her head slipped aside and and landed on his collar. He pulled her into his neck and held on tight. She was so damn thin, always had been, but she seemed more waif like then usual at the moment. Garrus held on quietly while she braced herself to the idea that he wasn't quite the perfect son his
father had always wanted, and that would rock the boat at some point.

A matter of time.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aww, poor Sol. She's such a high-strung spook. Would you believe this was supposed to just be a short scene in Garrus' office, to catch up on him doing some paperwork before we went to see what Nihlus and Riaz were up to? and then it was like.. BAM! Solana showed up. I wasn't really given much choice in the matter. >_>

Fanfic Recommendation: Duende (1,373 words) by fourthage (FemShep/Garrus, post-coitus chit chat. Very sweet.)
The vid call window flickered orange against the walls as the three Council agents sat waiting for their com request to be accepted. Nihlus lounged comfortably sideways in the co-pilot's chair while Ankh reclined in the main one. Riaz was behind the center seat, resting her chin on crossed forearms.

It took a few minutes for the call to go through. Understandable when the recipient was on the Citadel Council. A while more, and the screen refreshed to show Tevos standing in her office.

“Good afternoon everyone.”

“Evening, Councilor.”

“Heya boss!”

“Hullo.”

Tevos smiled at them.

“I have a favor to ask.”
Nihlus glanced over at his crazy Drell, and they looked at each other with mild confusion. The nais could literally ask anything of them, that was their job... so why the preface? Agent Tithe was the first to vocalize the only obvious response.

“Of course, Councilor. What can we do for you?”

“Allow me to give you some details. You may or may not be aware that the Council as a whole has arranged for trade relations between Palaven and Thessia to increase, as a gateway for economic infrastructure that will be available to all the council races with time. That said, Sparatus and I have been going back and forth on making the... arrangements necessary to the success of the motion. Overall? We have made a great deal of progress on matters that will benefit both our respective peoples, but there has been a catch of sorts.”

They nodded, varying levels of knowledge on the topic. Ankhleas wasn't much into paper trails but did chit-chat with other agents about the latest news. Nihlus was an 'in the moment' sort of person, and knew jack-shit about it. Riaz however remembered everything, obviously. The vaguest mentions of the topic were all stored away inside her crazy, black-scaled head. Tevos tilted her chin to acknowledge their individual responses.

“One small aspect of the trade agreements is slanted far-and-away toward Turian interests. The long story, and a copy of the current documents, will be forwarded to you, but in essence I would like the three of you to... pretend to be pirates, and steal away with the cargo of a handful of ships in a specific area of space. When the reports come in, they will support my attempts at renegotiating a few points on the agreements so it results in a better long term balance for everyone involved. Something I'm sure you all know Sparatus tries to... perhaps skew a little.”

Ah, it one of those missions. Councilor-to-Councilor back room politics. It wasn't often these types of requests came up, but when they did... it was most often Tevos or Valern requesting aid countering Sparatus.

Nihlus snorted. “That's probably the nicest way of putting it, Councilor.”

Her purple lips quirked along with a spreading of hands in a 'what can you do?' expression. Sparatus was well known for pushing the bill for his homeworld with ruthless determination. His predecessor hadn't been half so bad.

“I'll forward the details to you in full, Spectres, Agent. It is your prerogatives to decide if my
interference is for the good of the galaxy, or not. Should you decide it is, the equipment and resources needed to accomplish this will be waiting for you.”

Riaz hummed, consideringly. “And how will you keep the other Councilors from noticing where we are?”

Tevos smiled again, brilliantly. “The finer points are in the briefing, but most everything is planned out to accommodate the subterfuge. I understand that you are all citizens of the Hierarchy, and would not want them to confuse principles of fairness with anti-state sentiment.”

That was perhaps the most diplomatic way to phrase double-treason in the history of time and space. Tevos was very good at diplomacy.

“It is part of why I chose your team, besides timing and location, I am counting on you to review the documents carefully, and if I am in the wrong... Well, you are all excellent at what you do. The solution is yours to find.”

Nihlus quirked a grin at her and nodded. Riaz was off in some unspeaking solipsism, probably considering the fact she already had, so he said their goodbyes and let the nais go. The cockpit of the Apien Breeze was quiet for all of a moment before the green eyes Spectre opened his mouth again.

"Either I'm having a very vivid fever dream, or my next mission, -to blow up a bridge without being caught doing it-, is followed by one to be a pirate."

"You're not dreaming, Nihlus. Unless of course we all are." Ankhleas deadpanned with a quirked brow.

"I... love my job."

Riaz shook herself out of Drell-zone, and started giggling.

"No, no, don't laugh. This is serious business. We're about to become pirates and ninjas in the same week. This is new and unprecedented levels of epicness. I think I can die happy afterward. I'm so fulfilled right now."
“Oh ye gods, Nih! We've got ta read the details first.”

"This day, -I mean week, weekish? Whatever.-, This week we become legends. Infamous pirate-ninjas of the Citadel. Pirmins? No... ninrates? No. help me out here Ankh, I need a good combo name."

The placid torin's subvocal were rumbling with amusement as he suggested an acronym instead.

"PNotC? Pinockt? No that blows. NPC? Definitely not."

"Perhaps 'Pirates for the inclusion of Ninjas'? That would shorten to P.I.N."

"But inclusion in what?"

"Galactic affairs, I'd suppose."

"PIN. Pin pin pin. Yes! It will do." Nihlus nodded once, and struck a pose.

"Fellow Pins, today we begin our first steps toward, ahh... the future! So... let's go blow stuff up!"

“Remind meh never to let ya write mah speeches. Dreadful, that was.”

Nihlus sat on the cliff edge, patiently waiting. His role in their preparations complete, there was nothing else to do but sit and contemplate the bridge across the bay from his precarious seat.

The massive structure glittered in the night, physically connecting the city's downtown with it's entertainment district, making them walkable. Buildings in various levels of completion, from skeletal
to complete, lined the causeway. It would turn the whole thing into a giant shopping attraction for tourists, promoting economic growth in the area.

Something the Council didn't want the Batarians to have.

Ankhleas stepped forth from the curling shadows of the rocks and scrub to his left, more somber and wraith-like in the dark than he was during the day. It was easy to forget sometimes that the old war dog was no plain soldier, but an infiltrator whose skill was in never being seen at all. The years had barely made a dent in that skill, maybe even added to it.

The earth-toned torin came to a stop beside his perch, silently turning out to watch the water as well.

The lights of low flying skycars flickered between the lines of the bridge's rails, glittering in it's watery reflection. It was very late at night, just as they'd planned. A few business owners and unlucky passerbys would get caught in the demolition, but the skycars could all fly up and away if they were quick enough. It was the best the Spectres could do, in terms of minimizing collateral damage.

The sky was clear, a deep purple-blue scattered with stars, only the occasional orbital cannon to block the view. A standard defense measure on Hegemony worlds, rather than the more advanced long-distance measures council races usually favored.

A little late, Riaz finally showed, sidling up beside them with a cheerful grin.

“Ey, Ankh. Everythin' go well?”

“It did. The evidence will all point to splinter cells. Correlating details and stories have been arranged to be told on the streets nearby.”

She nodded, and turned to her other colleague.

“How did your stuff go, Nih?”

He gave her a thumbs up, and unfolded from his seat. The breeze off the bay smelled wonderful and
clean as it buffeted him when he rose. Nihlus leaned into it, feeling alive.

“All squared away, lovely lady.”

“Good, good. Care to do tha honors then?” She held out the proverbial red button, nothing more then a program on her 'tool. The carmine plated torin shook his head with a wide smile.

“Next time, yeah? Gimme a count down though.”

“Aye, I can do tha'. Ready boys?”

Agent Tithe hummed his agreement loud enough for her to hear, and Nihlus winked.

“Five.”

Green eyes turned back out over the water as he stood on the very edge.

“Four.”

He could see Ankh finding a steady lean against a boulder out of the corner of his eye.

“Three.”

The seconds slowed to minutes as his adrenaline rose, and he watched some sort of bird analogue skim the water for fish, coming up empty.

“Two.”

'Here it comes... here it comes...' he thought, drawing in a lungful of air, attention riveted.
“One.”

For a single heartbeat nothing happened, but then a distant low-base *whomp* sounded, and a plume of smoke rose into the air as the bay water was pushed down. It held there, for a just a split second, as if an invisible shape were keeping the liquid at bay, before rushing back in.

The pressure wave hit them next, shoving the trio forcefully away as subsequent explosions augmented the first. Nihlus skidded back a step as the air wave expanded, gaze focused on the explosion of shrapnel from the epicenter. The weaker joints and decorative bits had shattered first, and were now flung far into the air.

The support beams that trailed down into the sea floor gave out soon after, sending chunks of instacrete and construction tipping over into the churning drink.

Fire made itself known, heat in the charcoal cloud giving it a malignant glow. The sound by then was intense, battering them with a cacophony of rumbling and thunder. The cloud of ash and smoke billowed outward, like monochrome parallax frames, unreal in their movements as they took over the sky.

The last of the bolstered breeze blew by, and the wind returned to it's previous strength as the titanic pieces of bridge settled into ruins with a sigh.

Nihlus let his breath go in a long exhale, verdant green eyes tracking the last few movements of settling scree and rubble. His ears caught the first rising sirens of the city's EMS and police force, and he shook away the clinging shock-and-awe in favor of turning around and heading for their getaway shuttle.

Fuck, that had been *beautiful*.

The dread pirate Nihlus, or as his victims knew him 'Pinlus', was a jovial sort of thief. Russet brown plates, a plethora of facial scars and piercings, and not the faintest wisp of colony markings. He stole valuable cargo, legal and otherwise, but generously let everyone live so long as they cooperated. Not everyone did, but the black-masked torin by his side and the fully-armored human woman with the rocket launcher really made that option unattractive to most people they encountered.
Pinlus had his shining moment when he stole a Prothean artifact right from under the Shadow Broker's nose, but that turned out to be his very last mission. He and his crew were never seen again. Most suspected the broker had caught up to him, and dismissed the torin from their minds.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It was really hard to write Nihlus this chapter after I watched a compilation on massive explosions. A lot of people died in the things I watched for research, and while he can mind-bend himself to focus on the beauty of physics and fire, I had to swallow back some distress at the lives lost when the videos were filmed. Watching the bombs hit civilian areas and the exploding NASA spaceship's failed launch were the worst. ;_; I'd make a terrible Spectre.

Fanfic Recommendation: **Fruit from Palaven** (3,348 words) by **Smehur**
(FemShep/Garrus. Well, no smut from me, so here's some smexy bits from Smehur.)
Sufficiently menacing

Chapter Summary

Saren smooth talks and Nihlus forces a walk.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Season of Letum (Death cycle) - Named due to the fact that during ancient times, most deaths within a clan took place during this season. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Caravan Palace - Rock It For Me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The luxury transport service brought the skylimo to a stop on the arrival balcony to Cipritine's Paradime Hall, the Senate building’s attached gathering facility. Saren stepped gracefully from the transport onto the polished charcoal tiles lined elegantly with silver geometry.

The Spectre's appearance was immediately greeted by the flashing of holos and the shine of red recording lights. The rarely seen torin, last of his clan and galactically famous, was an immediate hot topic. Thankfully the security staff and guard rails kept the paparazzi from closing in to bother him with questions and close ups. They probably wouldn't have liked the result had they tried.

A short ways away a navy carpet began that led up the massive stair case and into the reception area. Saren headed straight for it, unconcerned with the eyes on him. He paid the hissing dissenters and fluttering sycophants equal disregard.

The open doors at the top were thrown wide, and yet more security staff watched those who approached with subtly inspecting eyes. Sleek, state-of-the-art scanners lined the door, aiding their efforts.

Saren could see no less than eight ways to get by with a restricted item on his person, and was thus unimpressed with the grand, expensive machinery.
The reception hall was lavishly decorated, an area with cocktails to meet and greet fellow attendees. Finger food and enticing tidbits were laid out buffet style along one wall, but he ignored them, too paranoid by half to risk eating food set out like that.

The Spectre did however grab a cocktail, something freshly mixed while he watched, with negligible amounts of alcohol. Drink in hand, Saren began to case the room, walking in a slow saunter as he identified attendees and searched for his targets. He'd only made eyes on one when a group of socialites beckoned him over to chat.

“Spectre Arterius! A pleasure to see you here. How fare things on the Citadel?”

“Well enough, Senator Hostepius, thank you for asking. We’ve seen several positive trends in galactic crime rates lately, so morale is high and the media are in our favor. Yourself, and Palaven?”

“Quite well, quite well! It's ramping up to be a rather heavy monsoon season, but that's always to be expected with *Letum*. As for myself, my youngest is about to have their first youngling, so the *madlis* is in fits to see everything prepared. Need to make sure the radiation shielding is up to snuff and all.”

He nodded politely at the torin, giving his best impression of being actually interested. His considerable acting skill had to carry the day. Before a rejoinder could be produced another guest interjected a new topic.

“Arterius, while we have you, I understand you're something of an expert on the Skyllian Verge?”

His mildly distracted mien focused in on the conversation. Generally speaking no one here would be so rude as to ask for information without having something to give in return, and the Verge had become the scope of over half his missions.

“I would not make such a high claim, but it is an area of interest for me, yes.”

“Well now, don’t be modest, but what can you tell me about the growing presence of Humans there? I've heard rumors they're spreading like locusts.”

The Council knew his tolerance levels for Humans and Batarians alike, which was... not high, and he while no one would go so far as to say they sent him on nearly all Human-interest relevant missions purposefully... They did choose to send him *suspiciously* often.
It was politically convenient that Spectre records were very classified.

“... You would be correct, more or less. Their species has yet to mandate any kind of legal restriction on birthrate, nor implement standardized anti-fertility treatments of any kind. They best they manage are mechanical and hormonal implants, both temporary and voluntary.”

“But then what do they do about over population on their homeworld when they've yet to receive colonization rights for a new world?”

“They do nothing about over population, except incentivise colonial prospects. They also do not wait for approval from the council before settling anywhere they please, including ridiculous places such as deathworlds and pre-populated planets.”

The group looked at him with mild amounts of disturbia and derision at the idea.

“Then... it is no wonder they spread carelessly, and have such issues with slave raids on their colonial worlds. I'm certain you heard of Mindior?”

“Of course. A lesson they will likely learn nothing from.”

Another guest joined the group then, offering the Senator a fresh drink. Perhaps an aide of sorts.

“I must say, as cold hearted as it is, I am glad to see their colonies fall. Particularly the ones that pop up outside the Systems Alliance banner. We already have issues enough with rebel forces and splinter groups wanting to break away from the Hierarchy as is. Seeing another race have successful secessionist groups could do a great deal of harm. To us, and the republics.”

There was a round of affirmative subvocal rumbles. Everyone who worked in the Senate building knew what it was like to see another recapturing order go out from the Primarch to retake a splinter colony. Organizing hastatim squads was a grim business. Hostepius rolled his glass in gloved fingers contemplatively.

“I must agree. If the S.A. had any sense, they would read our history and learn what comes of disunity. If they continue this on this path they will experience the bloodbath of a unification war just as
we did.”

Saren hummed thoughtfully.

“Indeed. Let us hope the elections this year lean toward senate-hopefuls that favor stricter policies on unlawful expansionism, and improved unity among the Citadel races. On that note, -if you would keep this quiet please-, I have caught sight of papers on Sparatus' desk about new trade agreements. I am tentatively hopeful, with the reduced piracy we have seen recently, that they will go through. Perhaps the structure of them will set a better example for the Humans, on the potential benefits to cooperation and organization applied to growth. Careful trimming of the branches, if you would, instead of rampant overgrowth.”

“It would only work if they would look outside themselves for a moment to observe that. A self-centered race, to be sure.”

“Trade agreements, Spectre? I don't suppose you know in what forum they will be in?”

“I do. Medicine, as I understand it, and a few other areas.”

“Medicine, truly? Is there a shortage elsewhere?”

“Thessia's delicate ecosystem lacks the variety of flora that flourishes on Palaven. I'm sure certain concessions will be made in turn, but the agreement does favor the Hierarchy over the Salarian Union. Sur'kesh also has much to offer, but the infrastructure for improved trade will be developed with us first.”

The aide raised a disbelieving browridge.

“And what price did we pay to earn that favor?”

Saren managed a realistic fake-smile that was both handsome and winsome.

“Now that I cannot share, but... it has already been paid.”
Vague, intriguing, and presenting the trade agreement favorably. This conversation had gone smoothly. Promoting the Council's plan on the back of disparaging the Humans? Perfect. He was beyond sick of their selfish, young-minded idiocy, but lacked the resources and time to do much work on the larger picture himself. It was up to the tarin and torin in this room to do so.

The original guest who had asked him for information took back control of the dialogue, offering his own intelligence as unspokenly promised.

“Ah, but perhaps a greater concern then their careless expansion policies would be their careless use of the Prothean's legacy. Just the other day I heard talk in the hall about another Primary Relay being opened.”

Saren zeroed in on that with a predator's focus. The unnamed attendee looked smug at the attention.

“A Primary Relay?”

“That was my impression yes, though I don't know where or how they managed to get away with it... I'm certain there were Humans involved, and it was done recently. I suspect the news of it has been suppressed.”

“A useless endeavor, as it is clearly impossible to hide a choice of that magnitude.”

The guest nodded, raising their glass in agreement before drinking. The conversation meandered from there, but the Spectre let it. He would check up on the rumor later, for now he had more... mingling to do. He bit back a sigh and got to work.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

His knee bounced in a rapid up-down motion while his opposite hand tapped a talon rhythmically on the table. Nihlus was sitting at a café on the Citadel, trying to talk himself out of going to see Blue. The itch for Garrus' presence and touch was almost as bad as recreational drug withdrawals before he took a system cleanser the morning after.

There really needed to be an anti-drug for those fit sniper hips. And that waist. And that
Especially that smell.

Green eyes flitted around the plaza, hoping the C-Sec officer would materialize out of the crowd, notice his Spectre sitting there like magic, and... and take the choice away from him.

**Fuck** he wanted Blue right now.

What he needed was Saren. No one else kept him focused and settled like his former mentor, and a dose of brutal self-control was exactly what would help him stay the course. Unfortunately, said Spectre was on a high priority solo mission somewhere.

The mocking voice in the back of his head was singing pop songs about how little time Nihlus would last when he finally got what he was craving. Ha. As if he had performance issues. He'd come in fifty seconds flat, and then spend the next hour ravaging that well built body like it was-

He cut the thought off right there, licking the back of his teeth and swallowing. The Spectre's knee kept bouncing, and Blue still didn't appear from the mess of people out and about.

"Maybe... maybe I just need to get laid in general?" Nihlus thought to himself, willing to try anything at this point. Two more missions, he'd promised himself, and then he'd take a break and see about visiting that vacation home of Garrus' cousin's with his current fixation in tow.

He wondered distantly if they were closely related, or if the cousin in question would want to come with... maybe see what a Spectre tasted like. Aaaaaand now Nihlus wanted, desperately, to ride one Vakarian while another rode him.

"Damnit, damnit, damnit, not helping, damnit."

This was a loosing battle, and being on station was *not helping*. He needed to go to the Spectre Offices, pick up another mission, and get gone. Steeling his will, he stood and turned his feet firmly in the direction of the Presidium.

He was going to go check the postings if it killed him, and if there was a stop off after completing it at a pleasure house, then maybe he'd have the focus for that homestretch mission.
A/N: Not a human-hater, I promise! Was just trying to match up Saren, who is a logical individual in canon as far as I can tell, feeling and expressing his hatred for Humans, not only for the part they played in the first contact war and his brother's death, but also for reality-based, logical reasoning. Tried to pair that with the Hierarchy's canon disfavor with the Systems Alliance in the years after first contact. And yes, 'deathworlds' was a reference to the HFY reddit stories. :3

Speaking of...

Fanfic Recommendation: Salvage (A shit ton of words) by Rantarian (From the 'Humanity, fuck yeah!' boards on reddit, non ME but set in a similar Space Opera feeling era.)
The party down the hall was in full swing, loud enough that the elegant percussion music came through the walls. When the dancing had started Saren had slipped away, deftly avoiding the socialites that were... hunting him. He'd been dealing with the stares of curious singles at every public function for as long as he could remember, but as his infamy and fortunes grew so did the number of bondmate-seeking eyes that turned his way. Everything from tarin hoping to instantly become an Avah at bond, to gold-diggers hoping for easy capitol and a cushy estate on the homeworld.

Saren slipped behind a floor to ceiling tapestry along the wall, now hidden from sight by it's voluminous folds.

The worst of the mate-hunters were the older male tandin, who would try to use social pressure to secure his consent. Their goals were painfully transparent. If full bonding rites were performed they would be able to select one of their female relatives to become the new Avah of clan Arterius. Making an unknown female their clan leader, and his 'mate' the closest of kin to the Avah. They would try to make him a branch member of his own clan.

The fools had no idea to what lengths he would go in order to prevent that from happening. Not that
the half-wits had a chance in hell of pressing him into a single thing.

The Spectre shifted just enough to watch the shadows at the door, waiting for any sign of movement to duck back into cover and be ready to move. Passively waiting, he grew bored and returned to mulling over possible ways to discourage interest in his person.

Though his expectations for success were low, he tried plotting out methods to improve disinterest. Saren greatly wished the cycling lot of 'admiring' would cease their efforts, but he had very few ideas on actually managing it. Not giving them the time of day had done nothing to deter the swarm, nor had setting a junk mailbox to auto-reject all incoming messages. The names and faces changed over time, but the tactics were always the same, and the goals never a centimeter more creative. Obnoxious.

Minutes ticked by and still the silver-grey from sat waiting in his hidden spot. He was certain his target was coming, the 'when' was the only question. In the stillness of the room, and for lack of other things to focus on, he allowed himself to complain inside his own head. Not something he was prone to do, but tonight the advances had been particularly atrocious, and unfortunately the night was still young.

The Spectre whittled away the time wondering if some sort of disfigurement would help, or hiding his net value in shell accounts. Perhaps having the Spectre Offices blacklist news details about him from the media for a while? Saren did not particularly wish to maim himself to avoid being flirted with, but he was considering it. That was perhaps a hint of desperation talking. He promised himself he would take no drastic measures until at least three weeks after this event. Time enough for the trauma to settle.

The door way slid open with a whir of retraction.

Aloag Tibrie stepped inside, appearing cheerful as can be. The peppy Senator was one of a handful of females on the Senate, and was pushing hard for isolationism. Her clan, fortunes, and public works were all wrapped up in it as well, and previous attempts to dissuade her from this course more peaceably had failed. Senator Tibrie's name was on the kill list.

She hummed, half sashaying to the distant music, making for the desk and computer terminal at the back of the room. It just so happened that this was her office, and a contact of a contact had traded favors to pressure her into coming back here for a verified copy of a certain set of documents. The connections had taken time to arrange, and plenty of prior research, but it was all now coming to fruition.
Saren stepped from behind the tapestry, quiet and unseen. A silenced, stolen sidearm raised at the tarin's head. At the same moment, soundless as a cloud, a green and black Drell dropped from the ceiling.

They made eyes on each other, weapons pointed at the Senator's head, at about the same time. Both assassins froze, startled for a mere heartbeat.

In the next instant it became clear they were not about to attack each other, and were both here for the tarin whose back was still turned as she half-danced to her desk. Saren glanced down at the Drell's weapon, a very nice model. Expensive, silenced, and custom made.

It would not do at all.

He lifted his own choice of firearm into silhouette, showing it off with a gloved hand. It was stolen, obviously baring a clan crest on the grip for the family of the second person on his kill list. The torin he planned to frame would not end up dead, per say, but convicted murder was a fifty year prison sentence in a work camp. Sufficiently 'dead' for his purposes.

The man's dark eyes slid over the Spectre's weapon choice. After a moment he nodded lightly, stepping back and dropping his arm. Even that small motion was utterly silent, the Drell's long charcoal jacket moving with him in a graceful flow.

Saren nodded politely in return. With only a millisecond glance he took aim and fired just as Aloag was rounding the desk's side. She dropped like a stone to a quiet fwip, blue blood flowing out onto the floor from the tiny hole in her fringe.

The unknown assassin stepped forward, checked for pulse, and then clasped his hands in prayer. Somewhat baffled, the Spectre walked forward cautiously, keeping a good distance between them as he inspected the body from a different angle.

“Odd, for a killer to pray for their victims.”

The room was quiet for a moment as the Drell took his time responding.

“Prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken.”
Long silver-grey crest blades tilted with his head as Saren expressed his confusion.

“I was unaware she was a particularly wicked politician. Tibrie's death was more a matter of consequence for her inability to compromise with other factions, on my end at least.”

Large dark eyes blinked once at him, before the assassin shook his head minutely.

“Not for her, for you. Usually I ask the gods for forgiveness for my actions, and give thanks for their blessing in a success hunt. This is... an unusual circumstance. She was, however, a very unwell mind behind closed doors. Hence, the mark I was given for her.”

Saren's chin jerked back ever so slightly in shock, though more at the clarification on the prayer then the elaboration of why the Compact was involved.

The Drell had prayed for him? He was torn between mild offense that the assassin thought he had the right to do so, but also an inexplicable sense of... well, Nihlus would say something about 'appreciating the gesture'.

The Spectre was... oddly, touched.

“Unusual indeed, Drell. I presume you are with the Compact?”

“...You would be correct, Spectre Arterius. Is that going to be a problem?”

“No. Why would it be?”

“... I was merely seeking clarification. I have never shared a kill before, but your plan to frame the Imteperious clan is more elegant then my own intent to simply leave her here, by a significant margin.”

Saren snorted.
“Leave her here? A lesson freely offered then: Never arrange one act to completion when you can arrange multiple. The heir to the Imteperious clan is funneling money into piracy, and using it to push an isolationist, anti-trade political stance. Now? Neither will be a problem, and galactic economy will have a greater chance of flourishing. The most stable peace-keeper of all.”

The black and green man's lips quirked the barest ghost of a smile.

“You are not as I expected from your dossier, Spectre.”

Said Spectre tossed his head in a dismissive gesture.

“No one ever is. For now though, you had best leave the event altogether. I will handle planting the sidearm where it will best do it's job.”

“… I cannot depart just yet. There is more work to be done.”

“Then let us hope that work does not put us at cross purposes this evening.”

The man sketched a half-bow at him.

“I don't believe it will.”

Without a sound, in the literal blink of an eye, the assassin was gone.

The room was empty except for a cooling corpse, and a paranoid Turian with his guard up. Very, very up.

ooooo0000000000000000000000000000

Ice blue eyes lazily watched the vid on screen, not much attention being paid. Garrus was bored as all hell. He was on the second day of his normal three day weekend, and there was just nothing at all
to do. There weren't even any cases he could secretly work on. C-Sec was on top of things for once, and while that was wonderful... it also meant he had no objectives to occupy his time.

The sniper had gone out for a drink the night before, looking for a mild buzz and some company. He'd found the buzz, but not the company. Strangely no one had appealed, even the adorable tarin who'd bought him a drink.

He'd tried to be good company regardless, but had ended up being her wingman on a different prospect instead of scoring her attention for himself. She'd smiled brightly at him as she walked out on the arm of some mechanic from Zakera ward. Garrus had been fine with it, pleased for her success even.

Still, having not really been into the night life scene last night, he had planned to stay in tonight. Hence the vid... and the boredom.

The day had been spent cleaning the apartment, retuning every piece of equipment he owned, and running errands. Most of which had consisted of trips to military surplus stores to blow credits on things he probably didn't need.

His new utility belt would hold an awful lot of tricks in it though, and the miniaturized stasis grenades were the most fun in taking apart he'd had all month. Not that a C-Sec Detective had much use for the growing arsenal in his closet, but if the Spectres came by looking for back up...

Garrus sighed and looked up at the ceiling, admitting to himself that he missed them, missed active combat, and especially missed being what he would consider well-utilized. Working for C-Sec was rewarding, but sometimes the day-to-day was just... miserable. Slow, un-engaging, and miserable.

He wanted to be out in the field.

The closest he got to that on the Citadel, on average, were war vids like this, and trips to Armax Arena.

He perked up a little at the thought. The Arena wasn't real combat, not by a long shot, but it was a hell of a lot better then moping around on his couch waiting for Nihlus to drop in with curry, or Saren to wander by for a quiet cup of tea and a sounding board for his inventions or tech problems.
Besides, the mountainous sniper didn't want to loose his edge. Juuuust in case either of them came by in need of more than simply his company.

Gearing up in his specialty armor, with the entirely non-standard loadout that he could never get away with at work, felt good. It felt really good.

Garrus cracked his neck as the elevator rose, taking him upward and into the arena's brimstone map layout. He was going toe to toe with a simulated merc group, enemy shields and damage boosted for the fun of it. This was going to be a solo run, which was a bit expensive, but he wasn't in the mood to carry anyone else's short comings at the moment.

Detective Vakarian wanted to go full out.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

■(¬isches¬) - Hold up a minute, author-chan. Thane is here, again? Really? … Really?
(＠° ▽ ’＠) ／ - I don't know what happened. I was writing Saren killing the tarin, then suddenly he dropped from the ceiling!
(　;¬___¬) - You can't just add him in where ever he wants. He isn't even a main character.
(*) ( ´ ▽ ` ) - But but but...
■(δژ١٠٠) - No!
(っ´ー`) 一 - But it's already written... and the 'post chapter' button is right there!
(■ ॢ`) - Don't you dare, author-chan. Don't you-
(ॢ`・ω・´) - OOPS! I HIT IT! How did that happen?! Oh, I have a very important meeting. Yep, right now. G2G BAI~~!
(。⊙ω⊙) - Well, dammit.

#ThaneKriosCameos

Fanfic Recommendation: Medicinal Violence (35,590 words) by RedHammer
(FemShep/Garrus, not everything is rainbows. Real people don't always get along.)
Arriving only to find you're late

Chapter Summary

Saren continues to pretend he belongs, and Nihlus experiences true suffering... or maybe it's just his new job. It might not be the best fit.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Quiritus - Applies to both genders equally. Turian closed dialect equivalent to 'people' or 'ladies and gentlemen'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Cylone – One of the most well-defended Asari worlds in the galaxy, a beautiful garden planet home to a notable amount of Turian corporate interests. Antimatter generators litter the surface and orbit, providing fuel for military starships of the Republics. (Canon)

Polos – The capital city of Cylone, and the worlds primary colony. With an estimated population of 260 million, and a large number of Matriarchs, Polos enjoys a great deal of safety, and has negligible issues with inter-spieces cooperation. (Canon)

Madlis - Clan home for Turian families. Usually a massive, sprawling complex full of clan relics and records, but some can be much smaller and simpler. (Credit: Recidiva)

Chapter Soundtrack: Panic! At The Disco: But It's Better If You Do

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tarin entwined with him was flushed with passion, trilling and keening as he worked her over, hands and tongue and hips. He was completely focused, following a careful formula for sexual pleasure that had not failed him in the past.

“Spirits, Arterius, yessss!! OH!”

He managed a half ways decent pantomime of being into it as well, rumbling subvocals in flattering tones at her. Though it was difficult to prevaricate with the half-instinctual communication he managed it by not actually lying. His unspoken words were all true. She was aesthetically lovely, clearly intelligent, important -to his machinations on the council's behalf-, and her rising tones were easy on the ears.

Carefully working around concepts could do a lot for making him believable, and he was getting
better at it with every year. Though perhaps it also had something to do with his mild sociopathy, and why there was a social stigma attached to it. Rarely did people enjoy being lied to, after all.

“Ahh! Ooohh AH! Hnnnnnaah!”

The tarin gasped, clawing at the back of the lounge chair he was taking her over in a side room of the Paradime facilities. At the very least she was enjoying having the stamina and patience of a Spectre focused on pleasing her, and if all went according to plan she would tell everyone who would listen that he had slept with her.

An incurable gossip.

Which was a large part of why he was here, spending time on this to further deter the courtiers. Well, that, and Avah Tenerial had been kind enough to hang on his arm for the better part of two hours and introduce him to a valuable plethora of her intelligence contacts.

Further, her expressed interest in his person had been simple physical attraction, not seeking his fortune or clan name. Technically, she was a higher tier by a small margin, and a more crucial social figure then he, though if from a much younger clan. He would hesitate to say her interest actually meant anything to him, but it had earned her this much.

There was also the small factor that much of the Senate floor seemed quietly fearful of him, yet this Avah would stare him down fearlessly. He could respect that.

The social gathering today would last another three or four hours, with a smattering of after-parties popping up in it's wake. The Spectre's plan was to leave the room smelling obviously of sex, and hope that a short while touring the main rooms would make it seem as if someone had been successful in... wrangling him, thus making the clan heir suddenly disinteresting to hopeful social climbers and rank-bangers alike. The attention on him needed to wane enough to arrange for the last death of the evening.

Saren felt the tarin's insides clamping down on him, and focused on making himself come. Not that he shooting anything but blanks, however the silver-grey torin did not want to insult his partner, and he was fairly certain not finding orgasm would be rather telling.

As she came with a shriek he called out in return, something inarticulate and as faux-passionate as the stolid torin could make. He did manage to come on time, though only lightly.
For effect, the Spectre also pretended to be breathing hard from the laughably minimal exertion as they came back down. The flexible fifty-something slid from him, melting down onto the lounge with satisfied abandon.

“Gracious, that was worth every bit of effort it took seducing you, Arterius.”

He chuffed, taking a seat on the floor by her side. “My only regret is not selecting a more appropriate location. A tarin of your station deserves better then...” Saren breezily gestured to their accommodations.

“Ahhh, such a flatterer. Come Spectre, let us remake our clothing and return to the party. So much more to be done this evening!”

A silver-grey browridge rose curiously.

“Oh?”

Mellow electric eyes were focused on the face of the person speaking amid his group, but his actual attention was on the slightly blurred events in the far ground. An endlessly useful quirk of cybernetic eyes, that he could keep his gaze set to a place he was not actually watching, seeing the image as a whole inside his mind. At the moment, the rising star of the Imteperious clan was being talked to by severe looking security staff. The torin looked rather panicked.

It seemed the planted evidence had finally been tracked down with the bread crumb trail the clever Spectre had left them. He smirked internally, face placid, as the target was lead away.

No one paid the event any mind. It was unrefined to react to such a display. Gaping and staring were for the lower tiers and their less polished sensibilities, after all.

The quiritus around him continued to listen to Senator Refallus' lecture on the tax system, and he returned to giving the words his full attention. It was a rather informative discussion, and the concepts discussed might work to obscure some of his capital value as it grew.
A common pass time of the wealthy.

Looking for all the world like the biggest dweeb, Nihlus scratched at his antiquated jacket and feigned trying not to fiddle with the buttons on his shoulder bag. He was 'applying' for the open position of Assistant Curator at the sprawling mid-town library in Apolos on the garden world of Cyone. The council of Matriarchs that represented the Republic's interests had discovered the faintest traces of a smuggling ring moving Prothean relics off world, but had been unable to find out more, never mind stop it from continuing.

They'd traded favors with the Citadel Council for a specialist, someone who could read people and pull off what their own agents could not. That 'someone' had ended up being Spectre Nihlus Kryik, and he was hot on the trail. Ruthlessly, the carmine plated torin had unearthed details about the ring from resisting mouths and terrified intelligence networks, impressing the seven to eight hundred year old nais of the City Council with his guile. He was actually kinda proud of that.

Today he was here, every aspect of his clothing and demeanor retuned to Sihean Tribalo, a double-masters grad student on Turian Culture and Archaeology, looking hopeful that they were interested in what he could bring to the team. Each wide-eyed blink and nervous shuffle added to his cover story. Several days immersed in extra-net reading would cover his actual lack of degrees upon casual questioning, or so he hoped.

The Spectre suspected the head archivist here of being the smuggling lynch pin, and would use the opportunity to wiggle his way into the system, if he could. Nihlus just had to get hired, and considering he had a diploma in jack and shit, would have to fake it till he could make it.

The other option was kidnapping and interrogation of a possibly-guilty, possibly-innocent torin. Definitely not his go-to solution in situations like this... not that Saren hadn't made sure he knew how. Spirits, his mentor had definitely made sure he knew how to extract reliable information, -with drugs, hypnotism, and Stockholm’s if need be-, but he had no desire to go about it that way. Nihlus didn't like to think about that part of his training. He wasn't squeamish about many things, but a few of those mind games had triggered him, just... a little.

So. Frumpy sweater, dusty brown jacket, and a very dorky head scarf. His colony markings had been replaced with dull orange markings similar to Ankh's.
He was just borrowing them, of course.

Nihlus' pseudonym was called by the secretary, and he stepped into the interview with a youthful, amiable demeanor.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Ah yes! Spectre Arterius and I were just talking about that earlier. He seems rather an expert on the matter.”

“Is he now? Share your thoughts with the rest of us then, Spectre.”

Saren managed to keep his expression looking pleasant while inwardly he was borderline seething. He had involved himself with the small group discussion on cybernetics earlier as a means of controlling the flow of conversation. Perhaps also because he needed to talk about something besides trade agreements, economy, or anti-isolationist policies, else it would become far too obvious that he was here with an agenda.

That did not mean he wanted to speak in front of several dozen people that were mingling en masse on the edge of the crowd. He had been trying to shed public interest for some time now, and this would do the exact opposite. Still, what choice did he have? Either offend the well meaning idiot who had named him by dismissing the claim, and look like a fool in front of Palaven's elite, or steel himself and rise to the occasion.

He cleared his throat, intending to speak in a manner that would seem both intelligent and knowledgeable, yet also boring as possible.

“Certainly. If you're referring to the electrode based integration of cybernetic tissue with the pre-existing nervous structure, then the...”

The Spectre lectured for a minute or ten, elaborating on the previous point in clear and precise tones. Unfortunately, he was a pleasure to listen to, and a skilled orator. The crowd had about a thousand questions for him, and a solid hour was spent in exposition on theoretical augmentation and the latest in synthetic organs. At the very least, discussing the topic did give him several new ideas that were inspired when the uninitiated inquired about a potential use or aspect he had not yet explored in his own research.
Eventually, finally, thankfully, they left off as the conversation flowed into other topics. Drained beyond reckoning, Saren escaped to the lavatory, knowing from experience that the ritzy restrooms would have several private ensuites attached to a sitting lounge before the actual bathroom area. He nabbed a glass of champagne from a server, unusually careless in his social exhaustion, and stole away into one of the ensuites to regroup.

The soirée had another two hours to go, and the silver-grey torin still had a few more targets to nudge toward supporting the soon-to-be proposed bill on the trade of medical goods. Also, one last kill to make.

The quiet room he slipped into had a fainting sofa, shower room, commode, and a vanity with a plethora of complementary toiletries. He gingerly stretched out on the sofa and ignored the rest, sipping the champagne.

With a rough palm over his eyes to block out the light, the dispirited torin took a ten minute breather for himself, insisting that if he attended one of these again Nihlus would be coming as back up if at all possible. Colony born or not, his protégé could charm the entire party while Saren focused on getting the espionage done. Passingly, he also wished it would be at all acceptable to bring Garrus on his arm as a plus one. Though the sniper was slightly awkward around people when it did not involve work, the torin's presence was always very... steadfast. The Detective would make an excellent bulwark against the crowd, if only Saren could bring him on missions like this.

Implausible, unless he wished to taint the torin's social standing with his own however.

The Spectre's self-given ten minute limit hit, and he set the empty glass aside to rise. There was work to be done, and Saren Arterius was nothing if not industrious.

A silver-grey crest tilted, face in a mask of concern, as Saren watched the EMS carry former Senator Deneralo Laxius away on a stretcher. The elderly torin had experienced a sudden cardiac event in the middle of the crowd not twenty minutes ago, and though there were doctors in the room and medical aid had rushed to the scene, the Senator would not make it.

He was rather certain.

The grand hall was quiet as the decorated torin was carried away. Hundreds of heads bowed in
silence, the Turian tradition for honoring the recently deceased, though it was more of a battlefield habit than anything. Then again, almost everyone in the room had been a commander or higher at some point. Their people did not venerate weaklings or the unambitious, and military service was a requirement even for basic citizenship, nevermind promotion to the highest tiers.

The low, mournful trills and softly spoken stories turned to what people knew of the former Senator. Some were distressed enough to be quietly keening, and others were perhaps playing it up for the attention.

Saren paid them all no real mind, his default stoicism a perfectly acceptable front in the wake of one of their own joining the spirits.

He allowed himself a sigh of relief, easily disguised as the chuff of a heavy heart for the circumstances. His work here was done, and though it would be rude to leave immediately, the end was in sight. Given half an hour or so, perhaps even a quarter depending on the mood of the crowd, he could be away and done. His old bed at the Arterius madlis, still undersized from when he was younger and unaugmented, called to him with siren song. Even just the peace and quiet would be a blessing.

Patently Saren waited, and when an appropriate moment came he excused himself. The Generals and Avahs, Senate staff and Socialites all wished him farewell as he passed. Something of a pariah, perhaps, but the torin was still high tier, old blooded, and a growing legend in his own right. It was enough to earn their politeness, if not an end to side ways glances, hidden fear, or treatment that subtly lacked respect.

The Spectre returned that much, and not a drop more, as he quit the room.

'I. Am going. To kill someone.'

Spectre Kyrik was on the verge of murder. Not only had he been rejected, *rejected!*, from his application to become the library's Assistant Curator, but his next best option to get a foot in the door had been a last minute offer to work in the same building in a different position. The job opening was for a librarian.

Foolishly, not knowing what librarians did all day, he had happily accepted. Full of positive energy
and go-get-'em attitude, the Spectre had taken the secondary offer. As it turned out, librarians were
badasses. Very patient, knowledgeable badasses.

Write frequent papers for different journals? Do research for random passerbys? Speak at community
gatherings on an endless variety of topics? Lecture the City Council over new health concerns on
demand? Organize book signings? Teach classes? Clean up after visitors? File more datapads then
there were stars?

Oh, dear spirits, if one more asshole tried to get him to do all the hard work of a college research
paper for them...

There would be blood.

As it stood he was a mere four days into it, and there was a Salarian in the corner talking loudly on a
vid call, bothering the rest of the room's occupants with revolting stories about the more graphic
aspects of his current project. His fellow research-slave, a sweet-hearted and shy tarin by the name of
Esthia, was looking pale around the throat, and he stood up to go tell the man to quiet down.

The Salarian was very, very offended. Nihlus sat there and took his rant about customer service and
freedom of speech and who knows what else with a plastered-on smile, and a stiff grip on a hidden
knife.

Eventually the moron shoved off, huffing his way to the door. The rest of the patrons in his section
looked at the undercover agent with grateful eyes.

The Spectre returned to his work desk near the entrance, and took a cleansing breath. He had just
finished writing a concise paper on the potential health concerns of a new restaurant style, and was
about to move onto reading more about movie ratings while absently filing easy-access datapad files
shelved for perusal.

Thankfully, tomorrow was Friday, and there was a employee only pot-luck that evening where he
could get some real work done.

He finished the filing, and sat down to focus on the standardized vid rating system and how it related
to extra-net streaming.
A/N: Librarians are super heroes. Jus' sayin'.

A/N/N: Hmmm, a little disjoined from trying to skim over the highlights reel of the soirée, but I didn't want to stream-of-thought something not critical to smut or plot. It's just character development... and Saren already has so much character! :D

Fanfic Recommendation: Across the Border (1,451 words) by AngelDormais (Garrus/FemShep)
White lotus pulled from the water and left to dry

Chapter Summary

Saren returns to the Citadel, into welcoming arms.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Madlis - A sprawling Turian clan home. (Credit: Recidiva)

A/N: Speed post, because this was already written and just waiting to happen.

Chapter Soundtrack: Panic! At The Disco: House of Memories

If you're a lover, you should know
The lonely moments just get lonelier
The longer you're in love, than if you were alone
Memories turn into daydreams, become a taboo
I don't want to be afraid
The deeper that I go
It takes my breath away
Soft hearts, electric souls
Heart to heart and eyes to eyes
Is this taboo?
…

And when your fantasies
Become your legacy
Promise me a place
In your house of memories
I think of you from time to time
More than I thought I would
You were just too kind
And I was too young to know
That's all that really matters
I was a fool

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saren sat quietly in the unlit room, eyes half closed, musing on how he had ended up here of all places.
Vakarian's excessively comfortable *cubitura*, to be precise.

The hour was late, and yet the owner was still not home. A thread of discomfort crossed his thoughts, he thought it might have been worry, but past evidence showed that Garrus often worked late into the night. Worrying would be idiotic. Still, it would be nice to know where the missing torin was, and to have an idea of his well being.

The Spectre passingly considered slipping a tracking program that also monitored vitals into the Detective's Omni-tool, or alternatively, placing a sub-cutaneous tracking device in him. Rude perhaps, but not knowing where his asset was, nor if his status was green, was somewhat... annoying. He toyed with the idea of chipping him and Nihlus both, and the benefits to always knowing where they were and how well they were doing.

They would be displeased with him... *if* they ever found out. Still, a possibility to consider. Their ire might be worth the peace of mind.

Tired eyes glanced at the clock, and decided to give the sniper a little while longer before he attempted to make contact. He went back to mulling over why he was here at all. After debriefing in person with the Councilors this afternoon, Saren had planned to run his usual post-mission routine; resupply, check up on the latest Spectre business and technology upgrades, possibly call Nihlus, find another mission, and leave.

Except he had not even managed the first one. The Daedalus sat in dock, locked down and not ready to go whatsoever. He had not been by the workshop for the latest experimental tech or Agent Tiine's monitor strewn sub-basement labs for intel. Nihlus had not been called, no new mission acquired, and here he was.

For some reason half asleep on Garrus' couch.

Saren thought it likely had something to do with his energy levels. That last mission had gone very well, but the plotting, grandstanding, and socializing had left him so very drained in their wake.

He did not want to admit it, even inside his own head, but the visit to Palaven had also made him feel... in-tune. Optimistic, perhaps. Upbeat, if he was being generous. For as exhausted as he was now, the glimpse into the world he used to know so well had restored something inside him. Though defining it was proving difficult.
Electric blue eyes tilted up to absently stare at the ceiling. The last torin standing of clan Arterius knew he would be able to better make sense of it once he had slept. However getting that sleep was the problem. Though he had relaxed upon returning home, spent a fruitless six hours with his eyes closed, and even downed a bottle of wine with dinner the next night, his insomnia presented in full bloom.

He had barely slept nine hours in the past five days, falling quite a bit short from his usual twenty hours in that time frame, and still further the recommended twenty seven for that period. Even his ever growing collection of augments was only able to do so much to mitigate the lack of sleep, but he was wary of developing a dependency on medication to manage it.

Saren admitted to himself that part of the problem were the ghosts of the past. So recently visited in waking life, they were just on the other side of unconsciousness. Ready, and waiting.

There had been instances when he was walking the halls of the Arterius madlis, or just traveling through Cipritine, when the Spectre had turned a corner and expected his brother would be standing there waiting for him. Ridiculous.

Or perhaps the ghost of his mother, whom he not quite remembered from a time when he was barely old enough to walk.

At one point the Spectre actually did pass by Lieutenant Abrudas from a distance, but he had not dared approach her or call out. Not that it would have mattered. She would no longer even speak to him, but once upon a time the tarin used to come over every weekend to 'bother' Desolas for one reason or another.

He chuffed and stood, managing to stay upright long enough to acquire Garrus' cleaning kit, and set about using the kava table as a makeshift work space to clean his weaponry on. It was as good a way as any to avoid thinking about shades and could-have-beens.

Every weapon on the Spectre's person was in top an hour later, and he replaced the borrowed cleaning items. On his way back down the hall he nearly managed to steer his feet to the door and leave, but the siren song of the cubitura proved too strong to resist. The old wood in it's frame and the fibers in it's cushions even smelled like Palaven still. It smelled right.

He fell back into his seat and continued waiting.
A hand settling on his shoulder woke him from a fugue state. Saren had not been truly gone, but he was tired enough that the door opening had not roused him entirely either. The touch did though, and the Spectre blinked up at the tall form, hand moving away from it's automatic reach for his sidearm.

The sniper's face was mostly in shadow, but his cybernetic vision could still pick out much of it. Garrus looked about as tired as he did. Saren glanced over at the wall clock, noting that it was nearly three hours into the night cycle when the C-Sec Officer had finally made it home. That was much too late, and his brow furrowed as he turned back to inquire why.

Saren had not gotten a single word of inquiry out when strong hands pulled him to his feet, and steered him toward the hallway. He rumbled annoyed subvocals at the presumptuous manhandling, but he lacked the gumption to fight it.

He did balk when Garrus tried to pull him into bed though, shaking his head with disagreement. Saren had not come here to sleep, he had come to... to...

The sniper hummed encouragingly, pushing gently at an unsteady stance until the Spectre tipped over onto the curved mattress. An unfair moment for an assault, he thought, and now the battle was lost because this surface was just... disastrously comfortable. Garrus tossed off armor pieces and climbed in beside him. In a show of understanding that made the Spectre look away and swallow, the other torin got comfortable on the far side of the bed, leaving him plenty of space.

Having someone there but not crowding him was... acceptable.

Nihlus would have been right in his space and determined to cling, he was sure. Though at the moment that did not sound nearly as unsatisfactory as usual.

Without the will to rise again the Spectre instead rolled over to face away and began to drift. Time ticked by, first a quarter hour, then half, then half again.

Sleep would not come.

This was normal when Saren felt restless though, so he simply shut his eyes and focused on nothing at all. It was better than thinking too much, or facing nightmares. He listened to Garrus breathe, waiting for the quiet snoring rumble of unconsciousness to take it's place. It did not.
Instead the sniper rolled over to him, that large hand coming down on his shoulder once more as the torin's voice murmured, “Can't sleep?”

He hummed a negative with dismissive undertones. Saren expected the Detective to go away then, hopefully returning to the other side of the bed. Conversely, his arm was stolen. The latches on his gauntlet flipped open one-by-one.

The sleepless torin tried to work up the will to retake his limb, but the release of pressure from the removal of armor plating was appreciable.

Sections on his upper arm and shoulder followed suit, and he half-grunted with annoyance at the meddling Detective. That was best he could manage as the torin tugged him onto his back. He tucked in his chin in and rolled, the cushy pillows pressingly pleasantly up into the underside of his crest. Grumpily, he growled a low insistence for the Officer to go away now.

The effort was valiant but the results were still a failure, and Vakarian began to massage his hand. The slow circles into the base of his thumb were divine, and the paced creep of fingers over his wrist and up his arm had him relaxing in ways he had been unaware he was not previously managing.

Saren caught himself purring softly, the low rumble of his subvocals spilling out of it own accord. He clamped down on his deeper throat muscles trying to silence the sound, but it persisted willfully.

The Spectre felt himself lulled into complacency, unable to deny the soothing attention, though it still did not manage to shift him unconscious as it had in the past. His pauldrons were stolen next, followed by the other gauntlet. Next the chest piece was unlatched and tugged away, though the back half was still mostly tucked underneath him.

Garrus' work on his arm moved to what he could easily reach of the other side, mostly just the opposite hand and forearm. Boots were pulled off, and greaves followed. The sniper was slumped over his legs and kneading into the softer spots with insistent pressure when Saren finally worked up the energy to try dissuading him.

“Your efforts are appreciated, but they are not working. Find sleep yourself, Vakarian.”

“Garrus.”, mumbled the asleep-sitting-up Detective.
“Garrus,” he agreed muzzily. “Go to bed.”

The sniper doggedly shook his head though, removing the rest of gunmetal grey armor with only minimal help. It was an hour till dawn by then, and Saren was still awake. Rest simply would not come.

“Saren.”

“Mmm?”

“Sleeeeeep.”

“I am... attempting to. It is not so simple...” His subvocals buzzed standoffishly. He was not trying to be difficult. Insomnia was considered a medical condition for a reason.

Garrus hummed at him, something odd in the tone of it.

“Relax.”

“I am rel-” He cut off, startled by the feel of hands on his waist, lifting up the lower line to his underamor's top.

“What are you-”

“Shhh. Just... let me help.”

The sniper's face nuzzled into his stomach. Thumbs made smooth circles on the hide by his hips, and though the feeling was beguiling, Saren pushed him away. He rolled onto his side to face the wall once more. Garrus moved up the bed, spooning behind him. Again that wonderfully warm hand came down on his shoulder, and he shivered, glaring at it accusingly.

Saren's subvocals buzzed softly, low and anxious sounding. He considered getting them cut out so they could never give him away again.
“Saren.”

He shook his head, face turning into the pillows. Did Vakarian not understand that these types of things were more stressful than anything else? And unwanted. And invasive. And...

“Trust me.”

“It is... not a matter of trust.”

The Detective chuffed, nosing into his collar. Garrus’ hand came around his waist and settled on stomach hide. It did not move, just rested there pinning him against the mountainous sniper’s form.

“Let me try, please.”

“...why?”

“It might help.”

Saren hummed back disbelief, wincing at both the general weakness of his voice and also desire for relief from sleeplessness that laced into it. Once again he had not meant to reveal any such thing, and was betrayed by his own body. To think he was normally such a good liar, for his species...

The hand skimmed lower, low tones of request and encouragement vibrating into the Spectre through his back where they lay pressed together. He tried to reply in the negative, but it came out more ambivalent than anything else.

Talons drew his underarmor’s waistline down, and trailed along his seam with a light touch as Garrus rumbled at him. The sniper sounded as exhausted as he looked, and nearly equal to what Saren felt. The Spectre suddenly realized that while he could barely work up the energy to fend the torin off, never mind leave the bed, his own sleeplessness was keeping the Detective from rest as well.

He needed to get up and walk to the *cubitura* at the very least, or face acceptance of this alternative
idea as... a consequence. Or that was what he told himself, trying to motivate his body into moving. It had rather the opposite effect, as warm fingers slid up and down with mild pressure. Mouth plates began to nip at the Spectre's neck and the idea of physical release began to sound like the opposite of a consequence. More like a reward, albeit one not normally sought.

He was honestly surprised when his plates shifted. The last dregs of his distress at the closeness evaporated into arousal when Garrus' knee came in to lift his upper leg away. It occurred to him then that most people would not dare be so forward. Half the Hierarchy's senate had revealed varying levels of fear toward him, but for some unknown reason... not this torin. Like Avah Tenerial, the sniper was seemingly fearless.

Garrus caught Saren's phallus as it slipped loose from his sheath, taking up a slow pace of rhythmic squeezing with a gentle tug at the end. The silver-grey Spectre waited for the pace to increase, grudgingly accepting of this course of action and wanting to get on with it. The speed did not change however, and a low roil of building heat caused his pelvic muscles to tighten. A little more, a little more, and it was so gentle...

He was confused. Saren really only slept with people as a course of his job, and they all expected a fast and brutal session from an infamous and ruthless figure. Forcefulness, clawing, aggressive subvocals... these were the norm, and he was always in charge.

This was... just... very different.

At first the Spectre did not think it would be anywhere near enough to get him off, but the unending, patient grip had his insides clenching, his hips following the tug. Tension slowly rising with the mild but inexorable draw, he felt dizzy and warm. The hips behind him rolled as well, moving with him, and he had to keep a miser's grip on his throat to stay silent.

Garrus leaned in and nipped at his jaw line in a clear request for sharing reverie. Saren wanted to refuse, this was already far too much. He also wanted to acquiesce, because this was... wonderful.

His mouth plates slackled in his indecision and the sniper's long tongue slid inside to coil against his own, dipping between mandible and mouth plates from the side to reach while Saren's horns prevented him from turning his head to give better access. An indeterminate amount of time passed as they shared the rising high of reverie, tongues lazily fighting for nothing in particular. Garrus would lick in delicate flicks along his soft pallet before laving with broad stokes in a way that excited the nerves with hints of natural bio-electric feedback then contrasted them enticingly with the imminent heavy swipes.
The Spectre tried to reciprocate with one of the memorized patterns of this activity he knew, but the sniper's pace and manner defied the standardized movements. He growled quietly, and improvised instead.

Pooling heat in his lower abdomen cued Saren into how much he really was enjoying this. The thought came as if from a distance as Garrus led him along in the oddest but most enticing hand job he had ever been given.

The mouth lavishing attention on him moved to his cheek blades, nibbling along the Valluvian horns before licking and biting at the underside of his crest in a move he recognized clearly from having watched Nihlus turn targets into malleable playthings with it.

That thought was very arousing, and his breathing grew ragged. A gift of technique from his protégé, performed for Garrus, and now done for him. Something shared.

The Spectre came as mildly as he had risen to the apex. More like a long and delirious tip over the top of a hill than the sudden coming he normally experienced.

Intense, but in an entirely different way.

It was sublime, really, and he moaned a long, wavering tone of appreciation as he fell. The Detective hummed back to him, affectionate and lazily aroused.

He shivered through the aftermath, breathless and oddly embarrassed. Saren curled into himself, uncharacteristically disregarding the mess. He concentrated on breathing while the rush faded away. The Spectre decided could handle everything in... in a moment, after he could think more clearly.

In actuality, he was asleep in a matter of heartbeats.

Garrus curled up with him, pulling the blankets over them both, sighing with relief and finding unconsciousness himself.

Chapter End Notes
Fanfic Recommendation: For Such Loss, Abundant Recompense (48,082 words) by kalenel (Thane/FemShep)
Dramatization is not as graphic as reality

Chapter Summary

Saren is wary of these feelings. Nihlus tries to fuck away his, and is less than successful.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Cubitura – A Turian style couch, cushioned and sized to accommodate spur and crest. Generally an older style of furniture, built to last and made of natural materials such as real wood or plant fibers.

Reverie - The multi-species adaptive effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva which induces a rigorous flow of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce it 'remix' the blend continuously for success. Also has some bioelectric feedback exclusive in Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: Recidiva, MizDirected, and myself. Fanon blend.) (See EDaH codex for full entry.)

Chapter Soundtrack: **Rameses B - Letting Go (ft. Amelia)**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was no warning to consciousness, Saren was asleep and then he wasn't. Eyes slid open, sight turning on with a reliable flicker of electricity as his cybernetics powered up. The room's lighting rose slowly, meant to gently gradient from darkness to light with the rising vitals of it's occupants. An unnecessary feature for someone with his automatically adjusting augments, but the light did offer visual confirmation of the person with him.

They had shifted in the night. Saren had rolled over at some point, turning toward the sniper. Garrus had ended up farther down, face tucked under the inward curving angle where the Spectre's pectoral plates smoothed into hide. One muscled arm was under the sniper's head and the other tossed over silver-grey hips.

Saren lifted himself up on a forearm, and surveyed the situation further. He had stolen most of the pillows, and tossed away the majority of the blankets. Which made sense, considering he ran hot as a biotic, and his unusual horns always gave him positioning issues.

The Spectre looked down at the torin curled into him, leeching body heat and snoring softly.
He reached out to touch the sniper's face, running a thumb across the handsome angles of his cheek plates and shorter fringe. The Spectre blinked down at his own hand, wondering why he'd done that. Something warm and comfortable curled in his chest.

Saren shook his head, still a little muzzy from sleep, and set about trying to untangle them without waking his host. It went well, except for a close call when Garrus had nuzzled into his mid-section as he tried to pull away, tawny brown arms tightening on escaping hips. Sitting still until the grip faded, the Spectre very carefully removed the arm and slipped away, replacing himself with a pillow.

In order to avoid jostling the mattress, he gripped the sturdy frame and side flipped quietly off the side. Landing in a crouch he eyed the still-sleeping torin with satisfaction and stood.

Saren's head tilted consideringly. He remembered that last night the Detective had not arrived home until extremely late. Curious, he accessed the Citadel's security mainframe with his Spectre credentials as he moved toward the bathroom. Tossing his underarmor into the automated cleaner, he slipped into the shower and began reading while the water rinsed away the dried remains of his release from the night prior.

Electric eyes reviewed the footprints left behind as the torin had gone about his day. Garrus had left his district early on, and then passed a security check into a presidium café at five am, leaving with an extra five hundred and seventy six grams of mass. He checked the café's purchase records. Apparently, the Officer bought morning pastries for himself and his coworkers. Saren snorted. Of course the torin mothered everyone around him as well, too compassionate by half.

Using scanner reports, automated vid snapshots, various and sundry security devices, the Spectre tracked Vakarian as he spent nearly eighteen hours at work, biometric vitals showing increasing stress as the day went on, and greater numbers of people flitting by the camera that faced the hallway into his office. Something must have happened.

Saren pulled up the log-in screen for C-Sec, and pulled the records for yesterday. It took a moment to find the correct reports, but thankfully their department kept detailed paperwork.

Someone had tried to kill Executor Pallin the day before yesterday.

Well... that was unacceptable.

He read further, wondering if the situation needed his assistance, but nodded in approval when the
records arrived at criminal charges and arrest warrants for the perpetrators. The parties responsible had been apprehended.

Hospital records showed the Executor had only been minorly injured in the attempt, and had been released from the hospital late last night.

The documents that had clarified the situation did not deliberately state who had traced the attackers, or run C-Sec for two days in Pallin's absence, but Saren recognized the tone of the writing immediately. The Detective had a fairly distinct and straightforward way of putting things that bled into his written words. He was familiar with it from perusing the sniper's military reports from his time on a hastatim squad. The Spectre wondered exactly how much of C-Sec's operation had been thrust onto Vakarian's shoulders, and why people higher up had not taken care of it.

Running an organization of that size was beyond what he thought was appropriate for Garrus. Too much stress, as was apparent by the still-catatonic turin's distant snore. Detective was a much more appropriate work load, in his opinion. After a moment's consideration, he opened up the sniper's file in the Citadel's databases and made a hidden attachment that would only pop up under certain clearance levels. The attachment would forbid anyone from transferring or promoting him without speaking to Saren first.

The Spectre nodded to himself, satisfied with the results. He wouldn't allow the idiots at C-Sec to deprive him of an asset, or overwork his... friend. It was their own fault if they did not have other options. Poor planning. Besides, if he ever thought Garrus was ready for more responsibility, greater usage as a Spectre Asset like Agent Tiine would be a better use of Vakarian's exemplary skill set then being pigeon holed into a desk job as a convenient Executor.

He went back to reviewing the events of the past two days, borrowing some of the salt scrub sitting on the shower's ledge. It had a sort of spiced smell to it. Cinnamon perhaps. Not particularly caring, he used generous handfuls to remove dry hide and rough plate edges while looking into what the media was saying about the whole thing.

Rinsing off and stepping out pleasantly clean, Saren checked to see that Garrus was still asleep. He also caught sight of the time. Even accounting for the lengthy shower, he must have slept at least five hours straight. The Spectre narrowed his eyes at the clock. Surely that could not be right.

He tuned into his body for a moment, seeking how rested he felt.

The answer was 'very'.
Saren leaned against the bathroom doorway and took a deep breath. He felt fantastic. Well rested, emotionally refreshed, and... hungry. Starving actually. With a last glance at the dead-to-the-world Detective, he turned to redon his newly-clean underarmor and made for the kitchen. There was little hope of anything to cook, but it was worth looking.

The silver-grey torin was utterly unsurprised to find nothing of value in the chilling unit. Left-overs of questionable age, and a handful of dinner mints on the door shelf. Saren stole a mint and tried the cupboards. Some wine, an ancient box of dried levo grains, and a single lonely can of soup.

Permitting himself a disgusted eye roll, the Spectre info-net searched for a place that could deliver breakfast. After reading the menus for no less then four places, and finding their offerings insufficient, he instead sent a purchase request list to a Spectre Asset of Agent Korvis' that would deliver anything, anywhere on station, no questions asked.

Saren figured it was an acceptable use of the service, considering that it was to maintain the viability of another Asset, and the runner would be well paid for it. A confirmation message returned swiftly, with a time estimate of forty three minutes. Considering it was during lunch-rush hour for traffic, that was an acceptable wait time.

The Spectre returned to the bedroom, which had darkened in his absence, and tapped the wall panel to keep it so. He gathered his scattered armor, and returned to the living room to reapply it.

Fully armored, he sat down on the cubitura to catch up on the latest Spectre intel, and order new supplies to be ready for pick up. He finished his post-mission rituals as much possible from the current location, and dove into a recently published journal on robotics until the door chimed. Which it did, right on time. Saren opened the front door of the apartment to an unmarked cargo box waiting alone, as expected. He gathered it up, resealed the door, and sent payment off with a generous tip.

Once in the kitchen he began to pull out all the various ingredients he had ordered for breakfast, including a few edible items that could sit in the chill unit and be eaten anytime in the next few months without expiring. The Spectre half hoped having them around would ease Vakarian into better eating habits, like having food on hand and not eating week old left-overs when desperate. Baby steps.

The dance began, a carefully quiet clutter of pans and plates as he cooked a wholesome breakfast of meats and grains, with fruit on the side. He was only half done with the main dish when a naked sniper meandered out of the hallway, peering blearily at the activity.
“... Saren?” He glanced over his shoulder while slowly stirring a sauce as it reduced.

“‘Yes?’”

The Detective was quiet for half a moment, taking in the scene. To Saren's mild discomfort, the sleepy torin stepped up from behind and wrapped an arm around his torso, the other hand curling around his bicep as a stony chin came to rest against the side of fringe.

“Thanks for this. You sleep alright?”

He ignored both the gratitude and the inquiry with a shrug. Garrus hummed at him, nosing into his collar with a sigh.

“I'm gunna go take a shower. Won't be long.”

Saren nodded once and the tall sniper pulled away, presumably to do just that. He glanced back again as the torin left, catching sight of the dense musculature of Garrus’ lower back and well shaped rear as it faded into the lower light of the hallway and around the corner. The Spectre turned his attention back to the food, trying not to remember what those hips had felt like rolling with his. It was entirely inappropriate to be thinking of while cooking breakfast.

Nihlus threw an angry left hook at the punching bag hooked to the ceiling of his training room. A work out area he was very thankful he had thought to include in the ship's build. While the Widmanstat wasn't the sleek lines and min-maxed capable piece of art that his former mentor made of the Daedalus, it was certainly a lot roomier. The shell he had used for it, bought cheap from a scrapyard, even had three bedrooms to it. Though now, one was his, one was storage, and the third was this wonderful, wonderful training room. Normally it was a good pastime. Right now it was a way to get out his frustrations without tearing up the rest of the ship, or alternatively someones face. Possibly Saren’s. Or Garrus’.

For a species that didn't sweat much, usually expelling excess heat through hide and breath, Nihlus was soaked with it. His rust colored muscle shirt was more of a muddy brown, and though the black leg wraps he’d put on hid moisture well, they were damp to the touch. It wasn't comfortable in the least, and the chill he was catching from the movement of his strikes was making him shiver.
The Spectre was desperate to purge himself of anger though, and kept at it. The ship's thermostat detected his dropping temperature, and raised the heat to compensate. Given a few minutes he felt a lot better, and picked up the pace. He loved this pile of junk so much sometimes. Almost as much as he...

Nope. No.

Not thinking about it.

The Spectre dipped onto a hand and sent a spin kick at the reinforced bag, exulting in the heavy thud made on contact. He continued whipping through blindingly fast combat moves, everything from traditional boxing, to underworld street fighting. The heavy chain anchoring his target to the ceiling creaked and complained with each hit, but Nihlus ignored it in favor of pushing himself further.

Even for a master of close quarters combat, and a heavily augmented soldier, he ran out of steam all too soon. 'Soon' by his standards being longer and harder then the average Turian twice over.

With one last elbow strike, sloppy in his exhaustion, the carmine plated torin dropped to the floor and leaned into his prior target. The bag swayed, and he threw an arm around it to steady himself, leaning fringe against the material as he panted and dripped sweat onto the floor.

There, that was... better.

Of course, now that he had stopped for even a minute, thoughts came creeping in past his focus of not-thinking-about-it. 'It' being the single worst addiction of his life. Garrus Vakarian.

Aaaaand there went the avoidance, right out the window. At least he was too tired now to be quite so upset about it. Earlier he'd been stomping up and down the causeway of the main cabin, trying to find a solution that just wasn't coming to him.

He wanted Blue, wanted to fuck him and live with him and... and... hell, what else did bonded couples do? Have kids? Work nine to five? Plan for retirement?

Nihlus laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh.
He wanted Saren too, as he had practically since the moment he laid eyes on the torin. Wanted to tell him that he would always be there, he would never be alone again, and they could do every mission together, and get hitched, and... also, yeah, have sex. Lots and lots of...

Nihlus wanted both of them, and he didn't know what to do about it.

He couldn't have Blue, not long term, they both knew that. He had clan responsibilities, social expectations, and well... Nihlus and his bathroom mirror had already been over how bad he was for the tall sniper. Too needy, too unstable, lived dangerously, couldn't give him kids. The list went on.

Then there was his first love. As much progress as Garrus' unending patience had made with his erstwhile mentor's aversion to touch, the percent chance that the torin would bond with him? Ha.. Ha ha. Years of affection had barely earned Nihlus the right to sleep in the same room.

That damnably stolid torin's reverie though... *spirits.*

He wanted both and the chance of him having either was so damn low as to be nearly impossible.

Okay, so maybe the future wasn't really as hopeless as all that. Maybe he was just being overdramatic, but in the aftermath of the last few weeks he felt a little unhinged, and really depressed.

He'd finally gotten that Prothean artifact smuggling ring figured out, and that had *really* been an extended shitshow he was dreading trying to write the report for. Then the Spectre had felt the deep and abiding itch for sex creeping up on him, and had made a pit stop at one of the more over-the-top pleasure houses in his area of space.

Nihlus had spent two days, *two days,* having sex with just about every species and gender of the galaxy. Not just any sex either, no, they had been trained professionals of course, and the sheer number of kinks and fetishes the lovely and generous prostitutes had shared with him had been... mind blowing. The whole thing had been amazing, to be honest. They took good care of him for a whole lot of credits, and when he woke up yesterday morning he was sure, absolutely *sure,* that he would have no problem stopping by the Citadel for another mission and zipping off again.

The four-out-of-four he had promised himself he would complete before going back to Blue. To *maybe* visit Palaven with him, even though it was a terrible idea.
Except the glow had worn off fast. Really damn fast, and now he had two days of flight where every other hour he had to tell himself off from just stopping by C-Sec, locking the office door, and...

Every minute that ticked by his resolve weakened further. Hence, the rage-fest on his punching bag. Frustration, epic amounts of it, that he couldn't get his mind off of his Detective. Or his teacher for that matter, but Saren was a lot better at telling him no. Nihlus Kryik was obsessed, and every other thought was about pinning Blue to the bed and ravishing him, preferably with Saren inside him, taking his protégé from behind in that deliberate way he always did everything.

His ongoing fantasies of having them both at the same time played out in his head like clock-work. Unbearable in their impossibility.

The worst part was that he knew if he ever got it once, he wouldn't be able to stop there. He would want it again.

Nihlus thought maybe he should see a therapist for all this... but who could a Spectre trust with the inside of their head? Really... who?

With a massive amount of effort the Spectre stood, patted his punching bag twice in thanks, and wobbled to the shower. The fact remained that he had no answers, just abiding desires that were no good for him, or anyone else for that matter. Sometimes he wondered why he was even born, surely a head as messed up as his wasn't something the spirits intended to make.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Did you enjoy how Garrus is 'too compassionate' and 'mothering', and Saren is 'maintaining his asset's viability'. Omfg Saren, you are so dumb sometimes.

A/N/N: Aaaaand there goes Nihlus, confusing love and sex again. Yeah, I am perfectly aware that his self-deprecation and self-restrictions are illogical and somewhat arbitrary. That's just his head space. He isn't totally okay up there. I did warn about this in the story summary! :3

A/N/N/N: I adore how Saren stole a mint. It makes me grin. For some reason that just gets me. Poor biotic and his super metabolism.

A/N/N/N/N: Ahahahahaaaaa! Saren, the sociopathic killer that he is, totally understands that Executor isn't the best job for Garrus as he is now, isn't something the sniper would
enjoy doing long term, and puts the brakes on all of Castis Vakarian's plans to make his son Executor without ever knowing what he's done! Ahahahahahahaaa!!

//mad cackling//

I wonder when those changes to Saren's inheritance will are going to go through... oh this is going to be the very best fireworks ever. I don't know how it's going to go down yet, but duuuumuuuuuuckies, it's gunna be good.

Fanfic Recommendation: The Spectre's Greatest Enemy Is His Niece (1424 words) by NoisyNoiverns
I've got the summertime, summertime sadness

Chapter Summary

Nihlus goes on the prowl, Garrus gets in trouble to save people, and Saren disregards the wishes of Executor Pallin.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Stulti mendur - Used in the Turian closed dialect as vernacular for 'bullshit'. Short form: Stulti. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Cubitura – A Turian style couch, cushioned and sized to accommodate spur and crest. Generally an older style of furniture, built to last and made of natural materials such as real wood or plant fibers. (Last call for italics.)

Kava - Dextro equivalent of coffee (Credit: Chromaticism) (Last call for italics and crediting.)

Quiritus - Applies to both genders equally. Turian closed dialect equivalent to 'people' or 'ladies and gentlemen'.

Reverie - The multi-species adaptive effect of the hormone cocktail produced in Turian saliva which induces a rigorous flow of Norepinephrine and Oxytocin, or their species equivalent. The glands that produce it 'remix' the blend continuously for success. Also has some bioelectric feedback exclusive in Turian-to-Turian interaction. (Credit: Recidiva, MizDirected, and myself. Fanon blend.) (See EDaH codex for full entry, last call for italics and crediting.)

Bostra – One of the Turian colonies destroyed during the unification wars. System Address is Kepler Verge / Newton / Ontarom. (Canon)

New Bostra - The reformed Turian colony of Ontarom, situated in the planet's cooler north pole, on the ocean. The old colony's terraforming efforts to provide nurturing terraces for Dextro-based planet life to grow on was a tempting target for resettlement, and enterprising Hierarchy colonists took it back from the elements.

A/N: So! Story time.
I was half asleep when I woke up today, and stumbled blearily into my computer room. My PC turns on, and I stare at my desktop for a minute thinking, 'What do I want to start the day off with?' I considered it for a few moments, working on maybe 20% brain power, when I remembered something about Nihlus... and he was sad... and I wanted to know what happens... right? So I bring up my browser, and click through all my closed tabs, looking for that one story... where Nihlus was sad... and Garrus was busy... and Saren was cooking breakfast... and damnit, I couldn't find it at first. Then I finally did!
Found the right tab and hit reload. Then I thought, 'Awwww, the author hasn't updated yet. I want to know what ha-... wait a minute............... I am the godsdammed author. What a fucking moron. Write the next chapter, idiot.'

Soooo... I got some coffee... and I did. Lmao.
I am a special snowflake.

Chapter Soundtrack: **Digital Daggers - Nothing's Broken**

We had a dream I feared we'd wake from
So, I kept my eyes shut tight
...
Can we just pretend, can we just pretend
That nothing's lost or broken?
Can we just pretend this is not the end,
It's only mixed emotions?
...
Did I hold your hand a bit too tightly?
Smother the only light?
Did I push away your love so blindly?
There is no quick reply
...
I can't let go, feel I'm spiraling out of control
I can't let go of the only love I want to know,
The only love I want to know.
But now I see you're just a ghost
And I'm spiraling out of control.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nihlus pressed himself into the wall, palms flat and chin tucked in. Across from him the door to Garrus' apartment loomed, larger then life. He swallowed heavily, and blinked rapidly up at the ceiling.

He'd tried to stay away, really he had, but the siren song of Blue's icy eyes and warm hands had pulled him back here as if led by chains.

The Spectre leaned backwards, carapace shoved into the metal wall, trying with every last dreg of his already miniscule self-restraint to walk away. At this point, he was managing to stall, and no more.

So far, the stalemate between the doorbell and his finger had held for seventeen minutes.
One set of talons rapped a nervous pattern on the steel supporting him, while his eyes played a dance where they would stray to the portal, then he'd jerk them away, then they'd wander again...

It was right about that time of day where Garrus would be at home, eating dinner and relaxing for a short time before going to bed.

To bed. Oh spirits. That bed.

A quiet keen, barely perceptible, wretched from his throat.

Nihlus Kryik could resist torture for days if need be, kill a hundred pirates in one go, steal from the Shadow Broker... but he could not resist that door bell any longer. In a rush he moved forward, his weakness for tall snipers driving his finger into the button to request entry before he could get control on himself again.

The bell sounded, barely heard in the hallway.

Nothing happened.

He gulped, and hit it again.

Nothing.

Fearing a thousand things that could have potentially happened to Blue, no few of them involving being crushed by something heavy the way his pari had been murdered, he typed in his access code with all due haste.

The Spectre burst into the apartment.

A very empty apartment.
He checked the kitchen first, then the bedroom and bathroom. There was no one there.

Nihlus took a few deep breaths, thinking that it was really likely that Garrus was just working still. No need for panic. He could... sit and wait for him. Yeah.

On that bed.

Naked.

'No, no, no. Comin' on too strong, Kryik.'

He sat down on the cubitura, full of energy, and watched the clock. A few minutes wound up like that left him unable to sit any longer. Nihlus popped up and started pacing the tiny living room, using the hallway's length for extra room. He was tall, and his long stride stuck in the small space available just made things worse.

He clutched his forehead with both hands as he walked, realizing too late that denying himself what he wanted so long had just made things worse, and possibly also that there was something seriously wrong with him.

The hours ticked by and the Spectre's distress faded down to a simmering worry and light shivering. He felt cold to his bones.

Something really was wrong... unless this was psychosomatic. He didn't know for sure, but he'd dealt with opiate withdrawals without half so much trouble.

Unable to stand it anymore, he brought up the Spectre access to the Citadel's security systems, and ran a search on the last known location for Garrus' Ident. card usage. The results brought out more of that unhappy laughter.

Blue wasn't on the station at all, his last known location was the docks, days ago.

Nihlus fell back into the nearest wall with a sorrowful trill. His sniper wasn't here, and that would have been easy to find out if the Spectre had just messaged him to say hello. The green eyed torin felt
impossibly drained at the thought.

'Fine. It's fine. It's good, even. I can't jump him if he isn't here.'

Armored boots shuffled down the hallway. He shed pieces of armor life feathers and climbed into Garrus’ bed, inhaling the smell of him. He curled up in the middle, blankets wrapped tight, and laid there pretending that Blue was only a few inches away.

He fell asleep like that, and dreamed restlessly.

When Nihlus woke up the next day, there was nothing in his heart or mind but finding his Blue. Where ever the hell he'd gotten to.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Garrus woke after a two hour nap, still bone tired, and shoved a few ration bars in his face before climbing to his feet and nudging his Hanar partner awake. “B'ob, are you up for more searching?”

The infinitely kind man wiggled in what Garrus thought was the Hanar version of a yawning stretch. He wasn't entirely sure though, multicultural class only prepared you for so much.

“Yes. This one is... is able to continue.”

“Are you sure?”

“Most definitely. A moment to refresh though, if Officer Vakarian does not mind waiting?”

“Of course not. I'm still trying to wake up myself. I'll go find some kava and that grape juice stuff you like.”

“This one would greatly appreciate some coffee.”
“Hah... translator turned whatever it was you just glowed into the Human word for stimulant beans from Earth.”

B'ob flickered with laughter, and waved him off. Translators did their best with luminous speech to Turian trade language, but there was a limit to what could still make sense between two species with such vastly different physiology. Most people learned to let the awkward moments go, but Garrus always got a kick out of them. His new Hanar friend didn't seem to mind.

He made for the food tents and snatched two drinks before setting back to B'ob's sleeping shelf. Granted, the kava for him was to help wake up after minimal sleep. The 'coffee' for his partner was a nutrient solution with no more caffeine then black tea.

He passed the over-sized tube of purple colored 'coffee' off to B'ob upon arrival, and watched curiously as he stuck a tentacle in it. Technically, Hanar could eat with any part of their body, but he supposed sticking a finger in a container was less messy then just pouring it on top of themselves. Also, not ridiculous looking to other species.

They finished, returned the containers to the food tent, and set off across the ruins to look for more survivors. Garrus took the easiest way forward to their last stopping point from yesterday, and B'ob took the highest, floating over debris and looking for life signs with a powerful scanner mounted over top of his front most hump.

Hanar could see visually, though he had no idea how, and a display screen in front of the man read out details as they came in. A live picture of the decimation below their feet.

They crested a decent hill and the sniper got a good look at the progress made since yesterday... which seemed like almost none. Granted, it had been less then three hours ago that they'd given up the search for survivors to rest, but still, with all the relief efforts here he thought for sure more would be getting done.

Then again, a lot of the contributing organizations had plenty of money, so there was a wide variety of equipment and ships, but not nearly enough people to use the expensive equipment. A limited number of warm bodies had answered the call for volunteers.

After getting their fill of the progress efforts they went back down the other side of the hill, just a short hike to where they were going to continue looking for more of the trapped and injured.
The northern coastal waters off of New Bostra's main colony had been struck by a massive, unexpected meteor. The tsunami came first, crashing into land and destroying the beachfronts. Next the earthquakes began, two big ones and five small ones before the tectonics settled again. Hopefully. There hadn't been any more since, and the bigwigs were too busy pointing fingers about how the meteor wasn't noticed in the first place to actually put enough time and focus into what the volunteer geologist was saying.

There was just the one. A quiet Salarian by the name of Keril Solus, who didn't have the backbone needed to interrupt a bunch of Turian generals screaming at each other. The sniper had given the man some encouragement, and gone to do something with his hands. He didn't want anything to do with power struggles.

Garrus had his fill of them, having left the Citadel in a huff after a fight with Pallin.

The call had gone out requesting volunteers to do exactly what he was doing now, and he'd asked for leave to do so. It had been denied within the hour. Frustrated, he'd instead put in for vacation time he was due. It was also denied.

When he went to the Executor to ask why, he was told they had enough problems on station, and that others would take care of it. Besides, New Bostra was reformed from the old colony that had been destroyed back during the Unification Wars for sheltering splinter factions. It wasn't a priority to send aid to a world still proving itself.

Fists clenched, the sniper had a hard time not decking his boss in the face. These people were unimportant because they weren't born on a core world? Didn't deserve help after a freak meteor strike? What.

Almost more then his affront on New Bostra's behalf, Garrus had very much wanted to go for personal reasons. He had shot down enough 'rebel forces' under orders on the streets of breakaway colonies that something deep down inside of him cried out to volunteer. To journey out to this struggling place of questionably aligned edge-worlders and just... just help. Prove to them that the Hierarchy was worth supporting. That they weren't all brainwashed monsters, or... well any of the various things the rebellious colonists of long ago had spat at him with righteous anger.

He'd very patiently tried to convince Pallin of his need to go. When that failed and he was ordered out, the Detective had refused to give up. A shouting match ensued. Garrus told the heartless bastard that he was going, and to hell with him and his stulti.

The main floor of the Office was dead silent when he walked out, everyone trying not to stare and
some failing, as seven feet of enraged Vakarian stomped out the door.

He was... probably fired.

Hopping from boulder to boulder across the ruins of a sky scraper that used to be home to a thousand souls, Garrus couldn't really bring himself to care.

“Officer Vakarian! This one has found a heat signature, north of this location, ten degrees east.”

“Go for it B'ob! I'll catch up!”

The Hanar went speeding away, semi-gliding from rubble pile to rubble pile, slowly launching itself across the horizon with tentacle assisted leaps. Garrus put on a burst of speed and displayed some of the jumping skills of his long-legged species was known for. Not that there was an audience to appreciate it, but if he could save one more life by hurrying, then today was a good day.

He came hopping sideways down a pile of scree, sliding to a stop where B'ob was intently scanning for further information. Garrus leaned in, apologizing for getting in the man's personal space with subvocals out of habit, too distracted to correct himself as the world below them came on screen.

Eight people trapped in an air pocket on what was originally the second floor around here. It was now about seven floors down. He could immediately see why broad range scans hadn't picked up on them. The in flow from the tsunami had left them with an overly high water table, and the bottom third of their floor was ocean.

Those poor people were wet, probably cold, trapped, and had questionable amounts of oxygen to breathe. He sent a prayer to the spirits that they would last long enough for rescue, and pinged the volunteer base for backup.

Now it was time to wait for said backup. B'ob started trying to get in communication with them. It looked like a few of their Omni-tools were just barely strong enough to broadcast through all the debris, but not knowing their local address meant the Hanar was having a hard time reaching them.

Garrus got into it though, and began working on hacking one of the 'tools remotely. B'ob flashed bright greens and oranges encouragingly. The sniper smiled at him, being careful to keep his mouth closed when he did so, and focused on making it happen. He didn't blame the Hanar for not knowing
how to do this, the man was a CEO of a skycar company. This was definitely not in his usual job
description.

Though he sure did appreciate that B'ob was here with him. All the money in the world, and the
polite man was out in the mud and dust with the soon-to-be-ex-cop, digging for survivors. He
distantly cracked a joke about that, his partner having heard the story about C-Sec already during the
long hours of searching, and B'ob laughed in bright colors that were a little more purple than usual.
Hell if the sniper knew what that actually meant.

Eventually the hack went through, and Garrus had access through a back door into the device's OS.
He brought it out of sleep mode remotely, activating a note taking program and typing them a
message.

[Hello, are you alright down there?]

[Spirits, who is this? Are you rescuers?]

[Garrus Vakarian and B'ob, and yes. What's your status?]

Almost before he could finish typing the words, the blinking cursor jumped to the next line with a
reply.

[Get us out! We're running out of air!]

[Understood. We've got rescue equipment on the way. Can you send your local address so we can c-
]

[1346031//ID.code:imurprincess23!]

Garrus brought up his chat program instead, and sent out the vidcall request. It was answered
immediately, and he was bombarded by the fearful trills of eight young almost-tarin, all from ten to
fourteen by the look of it. No one over fifteen, hiding from military service. That was a good sign.
Not that he would have cared much at this point.
“Hey there. Take it easy, quiritus. Do you have any major concerns besides air flow?”

About three of them started to talk, but two shut up as one of the oldest looking pressed forward into the camera's view.

“Yes. It's very cold down here. We're having issues staying warm...”

“How bad is it?”

“There are eight of us now, we're all um... pluckier. Three of our thinner members are... already gone, and two more are in a sleeping coma from the chill.”

“Alright, I'm sure you're doing all you can for them. Now, can any of you pull up your Omni-tool and see about scanning the air to check for oxygen levels.”

The Detective had to walk them through it, unsurprising considering he was talking to the Turian equivalent of sorority girls. It actually turned out that they weren't in dire straights for oxygen at all. It had just been the claustrophobia talking. It was a very lucky break. With oxygen to spare, he told them all to take turns exercising, and then curling up with the comatose to pass on spare heat. Even the ones whose vitals had flat lined. It might be possible to revive them, if the cold had put them into low temp comas and their life signs were just very low and not gone. Unlikely, but possible.

A little finagling, and he had a copy of their heat and air monitoring displaying on B'ob's screen.

Garrus talked to them in soothing tones for a solid forty minutes while they waited. Not that he had a ton in common with them to talk about, but having a sister did give him a few starting points. He was also a cop, and had plenty of experience talking the panic out of people. By the time the rescue equipment finally arrived he had them all tucked away, even the ones with no vitals, into as well a supported structural area as possible. He invited one of the social workers who had come along into the video call, and hummed a positive farewell at them all before dropping out to get to work.

The big machines were used to gently lift chunks of stone away while Asari biotics held things stable. Between the biotics and scanning programs available, there were little to no collapses or shifting as pieces were moved away bit by bit.

Occasionally the smaller chunks would build up at the bottom of their growing hole, and people
would have to hop down and manually pull them out. One Asari nais made an impressive display, pulling out piles of mere pebbles with phenomenal control, shifting the sandy material up and out. Garrus himself did it the old fashioned way, grabbing boulders and carrying them to the walls of the hole for a biotic or a worker with an antigrav generator to lift out.

It became a work line; climb down into the pit and clear the small rubble, then back out to let the machines get the big stuff after careful scanning. Rinse and repeat.

The day wore on, and even with only two hours of sleep, both he and B'ob carried on. Fighting for the people buried below.

Mid-afternoon came, which was a rather long day on a planet with a thirty nine hour cycle, and finally the little bubble of safety was broken into.

The medical team, which had helped move rocks and scree on light duty, took over. They were all pulled out of the cold darkness and into waiting thermal blankets.

Garrus watched from a seat on a nearby I-beam, panting and exhausted, as the rescued were loaded into the EMS vehicles and taken back to the volunteer base. A few of them waved at him shyly. He waved back with a tired smile.

Rising with a groan, he limped over to a vehicle and begged a ride back for he and B'ob. His partner looked particularly droopy, which translated between inter-species body language clearly enough.

The ride was quick, and the driver left to head back to the site. Now that some people had been found in the area obscured by water, other volunteers were hunting up and down that stretch of rubble scanning by hand in case there were more. He would likely go help tomorrow, but there wasn't much more in him to give today.

Ration bars went down tastelessly, and with a friendly good night to B’ob, Garrus flopped onto his cot and passed out.

After several days to cool off, Venari sat down to think about the best way to handle Vakarian's insubordination. It wasn't the first time the hot-headed sniper had stepped outside his boundaries.
Normally the young torin was one of the best on the force, clever and dedicated to his job. He did good work. That didn't mean the Executor could or would let this latest incident slide.

To add to that, Garrus' father was a C-Sec legend, and the sheer amount of dramas that would come of flat out firing him would be... beyond what the Executor wanted to deal with. The Senator-elect had a lot of friends in high places, many more then Venari had gathered in his sixteen years working here. He didn't want to cut the recalcitrant torin from the roster only to be forced to bite his tongue and rehire him. Not that he was dead set on letting the Detective go just yet, but actions had consequences.

A demotion then, back down to assistant Detective. He would see if giving up the private office and relative freedoms of his post would teach Garrus a lesson.

Except, apparently, that wasn't an option.

Vakarian's personnel file was locked on Council orders from alteration in position.

What.

How did that foolish whelp even...

The Spectres.

The rage filled bellow was heard like a distant thunderclap out on the main floor. The assistant Detectives, beat cops, paper pushers, and secretaries all stopped and looked up at the door, waiting to see if their Executor was going to come out and explain. The portal remained closed though. Many of them shared a glance and went dutifully back to work.

Inside the office Venari was staring at his screen in a cold sort of fury. His right eye was twitching, and his talons were making a terrible *screeee* sound as they scraped at his desk's top.

Everything he tried was automatically denied, giving a pop-up screen with an extra-net address instructing him to send for permission to make adjustments.

Permission! Was he the *spirits damned* Executor of C-Sec or not!?

There had to be a way around this. Had to be. Venari glared down the message. If he could figure out who was behind it, which Spectre it was...

Perhaps he could get a Councilor or higher-tiered Spectre to override it? *Did* Spectres have tiers? So much of their organization was aggravatingly obfuscated. There had to be a way to regain control of Vakarian though, short of assigning the torin case files based on level of suffering involved rather than efficiently using his skill set on cases that needed it. Pallin would, if he had to, but... messaging the extra-net address would do for now.

ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Saren was pulling bits of mercenary out of his gauntlets when his Omni-tool lit up with a message. Distantly hoping it was Nihlus, he checked it. He read the short message with a raised browridge.

Executor Pallin was requesting permission to demote Vakarian? Why?

The message did not say.

A little searching showed that Garrus wasn’t even on the Citadel. Curious, he began searching for him. Using vocal commands to his computer while he continued removing viscera, Saren spent a solid forty-five minutes looking. Finally, an intelligence broker sold him the information for a small fee. He scanned the incoming data for malware, as always. Finding none, he opened it to see a short text file, and a video. He set aside the pauldron he was cleaning to sit on his settee and watch it.

It was a news report, airing just recently, about a sudden meteor strike on New Bostra. Wondering what this had to do with anything, Saren continued to watch. At about four minutes in the footage transitioned to a high-tension scene where none other than the missing sniper was wall climbing to help a terrified old torin, trapped in a half-collapsed building tilted precariously over a thin and deep fissure. Garrus worked around the debris that was keeping rescue vehicles from getting into the area. He got the old man situated with an anti-gravity unit, and let him cling to the back panel of his armor while he brought them back up to the surface.
Saren was pleased to see the torin was making use of the armor he'd bestowed. The scene did nothing to convince him that Garrus was well utilized at C-Sec, and he considered the message for permission to demote with mild scorn. He'd put the lock on there to prevent promotion. The idea of demotion was somewhat ridiculous.

The news broadcast went on with a few other details before finishing. The text file included had the coordinates for the location of the footage.

Given the intel he had, the Spectre was easily able to find more recent news. Officer Vakarian and his impromptu partner, B’ob the CEO of Cision Motors, had been hunting the ruinous aftermath on New Bostra for almost a week, and several hundred innocent Turian colonists had them to thank for their lives.

 Entirely distracted from his armor, Saren made a few inquiries with informants that had access to C-Sec. The results completed the picture. A request for unpaid leave to go aid the colonists, once denied, reapplied for as vacation time due, also denied. A shouting match, a vitriolic exit, and now...

The request to demote.

In the main cabin of the Daedalus, quiet except for the hum of the engines, Saren Arterius had a very soft, very dignified chuckle fit. He was thoroughly amused. The Executor wanted to demote his asset because the torin had an excess of compassion? Insisted on helping people? That was obvious to anyone who had ever met the sniper. If Pallin hadn't wanted an officer who wore their heart on their sleeve, he should never have hired Vakarian in the first place.

The request was denied.


 Venari's right eye went back to twitching when his 'request for permission' to make changes to one of his own employee's files was rejected, no explanation.

He carefully set down his kava cup, and took a few deep breaths.

Fine.
If he had to assign Vakarian the worst pickings of cold cases and heartbreaks possible to teach the torin a lesson, then he would play this game.

Garrus smiled winsomely at the young tarin handing him tools as she told him her life story, as young girls were wont to do. She was one of the eight he had rescued several days ago, and had just turned fifteen while buried under the earth. She was a plucky one though, and had waved off offers to be evacuated in favor of staying to help the relief efforts. He was proud of her.

She wasn’t the only one either, two others from her group had stayed to work in the food tents, and a number of other people they’d found had also opted to say, rapidly expanding their search areas. More people found, more people looking. The rate of progress increased encouragingly, even as the number of living they found slowly decreased. With the rate an Omni-tool could convert objects down into Omni-gel, and then reconstitute it into oxygen or nutrient paste, they had a little while yet before all hope was lost for those that remained buried.

The struggle to find anyone yet living continued, but for the moment the sniper was half buried in the guts of a shuttle, altering it just as he had four others to fly sideways. It required a little bit or rewiring to ignore the built in safety mechanisms, and was obviously uncomfortable for the occupants, but if everyone inside was strapped in correctly a sideways flying shuttle could get down into some of the fissures to take better scans and rescue people like that old torin he’d had to climb for.

He’d gotten permission to make the change on one yesterday. The director of the local task forces had come back to him today and asked for six more to be changed too.

Pleased that his contribution was appreciated, Garrus had happily agreed. It made for a wonderful change of pace from wandering the ruins. It was also good for B’ob, who was spending the off day catching up on many, many nights of minimal sleep.

The friendly tarin continued to prattle while he worked, deftfully handing him anything he called out for. She was a sweet thing, really. He was glad she was okay.

Around lunch time her two friends came over with food, and the Detective took a break to eat with them. He hadn't stopped to have real food in days, subsisting off of ration bars, so his thanks for their efforts was effusive. They laughed in happy trills at his ridiculous humming praise.
Laughter.

All the strife of the past few days felt... so worth it. Every bit of it. Job or no job. These younglings were alive and happy because of him, and the sniper wouldn't have it any other way.

“HA! Found ya!”

Garrus’ head perked up at that very recognizable voice.

‘What in the world is Nihlus doing-‘, was all he managed to think before lanky, black-and-red armored limbs came around the surprised torin, and mouth plates came in to snog the ever loving hell out of him. The sniper tucked his chin in as he fell backwards to avoid slamming his crest into the ground. Thankfully the armor over his carapace made his upper body bulky enough that there wasn't too much of a problem.

Rough gloves held gently onto his neck hide and spinal plates as a forceful tongue devoured him. Garrus couldn't help the soft humming moan that escaped him.

Hello there.

Mmm. Missed you.

Ha. I can tell.

Distantly he heard one voice whisper to another, “I told you all the good ones are either gay or taken.” To which her friend replied with a lamenting trill of agreement.

“Looks like both to me,” added the third.

Phoenix, we're in public.
Don’t care.

Teenage females watching.

Hope they like the show.

Garrus’ rumbling turned to chuckles, and he bopped the Spectre’s forehead with his own before forcing the torin away from his mouth and sitting up. Nihlus simply moved with him, going to nibble on neck hide instead.

The Detective trilled apologetically at their audience while trying to peel his lover off. The three of them were blatantly ogling, throats flushed lightly purple. Oh spirits, this was not okay. With a polite subvocal ‘excuse me’, he gracelessly managed to stand with Nihlus’ long legs wrapped around his hips, and took them back to the nook he’d been sleeping in. It was, at the very least, semi-private.

“Ni-”, he got out before the roguishly grinning soldier came back in for seconds. Then thirds. When the Spectre started to go for his armor latches he had to clasp the clever fingers to him to prevent the torin from escalating this right there in the lean-to amid the rubble.

“Nihlus!”

“Mmmmyeah, Blue?” The Spectre sounded half gone with reverie, spacy and delirious.

“It’s great to see you, but could we... move this to your ship?”

The carmine plated torin finally leaned back enough to smirk at him, pupils blown wide.

“Awww, is the big bad Officer Vakarian too shy for public sex?”

“... Yes?”

Nihlus cackled, and leaned back in to nuzzle his forehead into Garrus’.
“Fuck I missed you. Yeah alright, I'm parked about four minutes away from here anyway.”

It was a very long four minutes, but worth every moment of the hours following. Nihlus rode Garrus hard, and wrung him out to dry. Moving afterward was something of an impossibility, due to sheer lack of energy. He was even a little sore, pleasantly so. Once satisfied, the Spectre stayed to help with the rescue efforts.

De-stressed from the amazing sex, the buoyant energy prior to his friend's arrival resurfaced, and they spent the next several days digging people out. Nihlus joined him and B'ob, and several dozen more Turians were uncovered thanks to their efforts. The colony was still in ruins, but the estimated death toll went down from almost half to a final total of nineteen percent after all was said and done.

The rescued females winked at them every time they went up to the food tent to eat. Nihlus would wink back, and Garrus would laugh and duck his head sheepishly. B'ob thought the whole thing was hilarious.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: That part about Hanar eating was made up on the spot, with no science and all guess work. Anybody have a better suggestion? I tried to image how they ate, and 'amoeba' was all that came to mind. Like... Dragon Quest slimes, style. Nom nom glurp.

Also, are you beginning to see my writing process? I feel like an idiot today, so Nihlus feels like an idiot. I've got a caffeine buzz, so Garrus is getting a caffeine buzz. The rest is utterly different, but I take a starting point and just run with it. Professional-smeshional. I'm a fiction DJ, improv on the fly~~~! fweeh fweeeh!! ~Those are supposed to be air horn noises by the way.

Wow... I should never write anything in the morning ever again...

A/N/N: Nooo~~o, I didn't knock softly on the fourth wall at all... Whatever are you talking about? Silly duckies.

A/N/N/N: Pallin's FACE! AHAHAHAAAAA~~~! I am so mean. Well, okay, Venari is both understandable in his choices, that C-Sec is a little swamped not so long after his assassination attempt, but he's also being heartless toward the people caught in the disaster and Garrus' personal needs. He isn't an evil torin, but he is really by the book, and sharp enough to cut. Just like Saren, he wants his 'tools' on hand to use if he needs
them, but unlike the Spectre, he doesn't care if his assets have personal needs. Which makes Pallin a terrible Turian, considering that it's part of their tier structure that higher ups are expected to take care of their people. Well, that's... how I've imagined him, at least. The games and comics give us a lot of his opinions on humans, but not much about his work ethic except for the fact that he is one strict MF, selfish, and will go to great lengths to accomplish his goals. So... this... is the best I got?

So! I have used author discretion on the placement of the Executor's Office. I know in ME1 he's up in the ambassador area, but... what sense does that really make? Why wouldn't Venari be down at C-Sec Academy with the people he leads? Especially with the Turian mentality of protecting and surrounding their highest tiers. The largely Turian police force would be nervous as fuck all the time to have their highest tier up in some random office, unprotected. No guards? Nothing? Oh hellllll no. I may change his office location before the 2180 something events of the books, if I care about being particularly canon-correct, but I have to call this one as a plot hole fill. There is also no real reason the Executor should need to be easily accessible to the Ambassadors. Heck, Venari's work should be very separate from inter-species issues. All of C-Sec needs to be even handed with justice. I think this might have been one of those things where they designed the Presidium, and then wanted to give the Executor an actual office... and all the office space was up stairs. Convenience factor vs reality. … Maybe, if it comes up, I can have his office get bombed or something, and he has to use a spare one upstairs for a while.... I dunno. Dealing with it later. :3

A/N^4: Why yes, I did make a Hanar OC named Bob. I mean, B’ob. :)

A/N^5: So how many A/Ns is too many A/Ns?

A/N^6: Isn't it nice that for once it's the Spectres watching Garrus on the news? Anyway, I think the guilt-volunteering is a real thing that soldiers experience. It's no wonder people come back from overseas posts with PTSD...

A/N^7: Yes, Garrus' subvocal name for Nihlus, previously unspecified, is simplified into 'Phoenix' Which I mindcanon is one of the great beasts that Praela ride into war. I have plans to elaborate later, but for now you can all assume that this is not uh... blatant foreshadowing? //shifty eyes//

Fanfic Recommendation: Misfire Anon Kryterius Masterlist (Multi-fic list, so much the good, yes.)
Popsicles should be illegal

Chapter Summary

Miscommunication and communication.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Ylasiu - The ancient Turian version of heaven. The realm where all honorable warriors spent eternity. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: Do not read this at work. Even if you can get away with it. There is so much smut this chapter, it isn't even funny. Also, the soundtrack matches this chapter particularly well. Nice mellow tones and echoing wavers. Start it up riiight as you get to the smut. It'll be great! /thumbs up/

Chapter Soundtrack: Azam Ali - In Other Worlds

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Garrus tilted over sideways to peer into his office after he'd tried to unlock it, and the keycode had... still worked. He really hadn't expected it to. All his datapads and personalizations were in place, the furniture untouched. Peering around with mild disbelief, he stepped inside and sat down at the terminal. His log in credentials also worked just fine.

Well... this was... odd.

The surprisingly-still-a-detective pulled up the active case files to see what crimes still had his name tagged on them. It looked like the three he had contributed to before leaving had all gone successfully to court, and been closed.

There was a forth on the list. Garrus opened it curiously. It was a cold case file for a triple homicide seven years ago.
The sniper leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin. That was a pretty tall order... and then it occurred to him that it was intentionally a tall order. Pallin hadn't fired him, but he was handing out tough cases in retribution. Slowly, his stony grey mandibles spread in a smile.

The Executor must have finally seen his point, and was giving him a slap on the wrist in a very subtle way. It was both lenient and chastising, without being heavy handed, and Garrus found himself appreciating his boss' deft touch. He would have to remember this sort of thing for future reference, because the message on his end was received but not chaffing. It was a good tactic.

Garrus loaded the relevant files to his Omni-tool, and started off for the Evidence rooms to see what they still had from this case. Before leaving though, he decided a peace offering was due. He ordered lunch from the Executor's widely known favorite place, and had it delivered.

“Delivery!”

The C-Sec Executor looked up from his monitor, and eyed the Asari standing there wearing the uniform from his favorite sub-shop.

“I didn't order anything today... whose name is on the ticket?”

“A Detective Vakarian, sir.”, the delivery person said with a shrug, set the order on his desk before walking out.

Venari Pallin stared down at the packaged sandwich after the delivery nais had gone, baffled. Garrus had sent him lunch? After the hellish case he'd assigned the torin?

'What.'

Was it... poisoned?

Delivered lunch from the Executor's widely known favorite place.
'You alright?' Garrus rumbled in his ear, the low bass flanging pouring into him where they pressed together.

Nihlus nodded, taking slow, deep breaths. The sniper pushed into him another few centimeters, purring quiet affection. His white-striped jaw fell open a little more as he continued to pant through the almost-pain. Blue's body was well proportioned, all of him, and even though the Spectre had a fair bit of height as well, he was also very lanky. Tall and thin in a way that gene mods could only do so much for.

At the moment he was trying to take Garrus, and even for a sex-fiend like him that was a bit of a challenge. He was very determined to rise to the occasion though, and so the two of them were taking it slow. His lover pushed in a bit more, and the dizzy keen that it pulled from him was a solid sixty forty split for pleasure and pain, respectively.

The hips behind that penetration paused at the sound, and before he could demand otherwise, his Detective bit down fairly hard on his neck hide with mouth plates. Almost like he knew Nihlus was about to complain, and had preempted it with a distraction. What a distraction it was. Garrus followed up the bite with long laves of his tongue, from the base of his neck working upwards. The Spectre clawed at the mattress, but the sheets were designed to slip through talons rather then tear. The fabric under his fingers eluded grasp, and the firm hold on his hips kept him from pushing up into the sensation.

He keened in desperation, throat bared, pleading for more. He was not obliged.

On one hand he wanted it now, on the other... the sweating, panting torin also wanted this to go on forever. The dichotomy was intense, and the feeling of ever-so-slowly being filled was a variety of mind numbing bliss that he'd rarely experienced. He'd done designer drugs that didn't undo him as well as Garrus.

Reality faded away in Blue's arms, and he could only hope the brilliant Detective never thought to ask him for Spectre access codes while doing this. Nihlus didn't think he could say no. It was a very dangerous edge to walk, someone having this amount of pull on him, and while it worked with Saren because he was also a Spectre and had his own damn codes...

Maybe he was an idiot for falling for Garrus in the first place. Yeah... he was definitely an idiot.

A very fucking blitzed idiot who wouldn't have it any other way.
Spirits, Garrus was divine.

The cock inside him slipped up just a bit more, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head as the near constant hum he was making wavered wildly. The tongue at his throat pressed into the pulse point beneath his jaw, rhythmically laving in time to the beat of his heart. Nihlus tried wiggling his hips, testing to see if that heavy grip has lessened at all. It held firm though, and he could barely move for the command Garrus had of him.

His own length, long since unsheathed and dripping precome, throbbed at the base with how arousing that was. The sniper waited a good long while before moving again, making Nihlus whine for it. They were very nearly joined as far as could be, and the cocky Officer was drawing it out as much as possible.

A dark brown fist slammed into the cushioning beneath him several times, joined by subvocal demands for more that were mostly unintelligible moans from a taut throat.

Garrus pulled back two steps.

The roiling angry-aroused tone he took at that had his partner chuckling into the lighter hide of his neck, and shoving back in. Two steps back, three forward. The closest to real movement Nihlus had gotten in... however long they'd been at this. The moan it drew from him was loud, and set his heart racing. Blue waited just long enough for it to slow down again to push more, but this time he kept going. A very, very slow slide the last few centimeters.

Garrus slid home, about as deep into Nihlus as their plates would allow, and then just a bit more as he pushed dark brown hips into the mattress. The baritone, static-filled cry that followed reverberated off the walls and made the sniper's subvocals flip lazily with smugness. The Spectre's talons returned to trying to destroy the bed, uselessly. He was trying to keep his hands away from Blue's back, not wanting to claw the shit out of him. He... might have done that once to twice before.

The strong hands left his hips, one arm coming up to rest a forearm by his head, the other coming in to tip his face back down. Garrus wanted reverie, and Nihlus wanted to give it to him, to receive it back. Their tongues coiled together, jaws dropped and mandibles spread low and wide. Blue's hips rolled once, then twice, letting the lanky knife-wielder get used to him before doing anything more exciting.

Not that this wasn't already exciting enough. The Spectre was pretty sure this was a preemptive
glimpse of Ylasiun. Eternal battle, and then great sex, right? The after-sex was of crucial importance, and this... this was some of the most amazing he'd ever had. He didn't know if Garrus was just that good, or if their reverie was just a particularly well-mixed batch or what... but it was the fucking best.

Finally getting used to the sheer size, Nihlus released the torin's tongue and slowly kicked one leg up over the mountain range of Blue's hip crest. He had to breathe for a few moments, readjusting to the new angle while his partner nuzzled into his collar with the occasional nip. Before he could bring the other leg up to match, -because he definitely intended to reek some revenge on Garrus' waist for all this slow torture-, the sniper curled inside of him.

The shuddering moan it tore from him had talons curling into palms, crest pressing back into the pillows.

'Oh, fuck, spirits, fuck. Yes that.'

The damned clever torin had stolen his favorite trick. It took core work and repetitious effort to curl even just a few degrees. He must’ve been practicing. The thought made Nihlus keen with desire and press his fringe as best he could toward Blue's. The sniper rumbled at him, sounding obnoxiously satisfied, and moved to press back at a better angle. The Spectre swallowed at the affection woven under that tone, and haltingly brought his other leg up to match. It was the best angle for this position after all, for both of them.

Nihlus dug into his partner's sides with his shins, rubbing circles into the most tender section causing his hips to roll too, ever so slightly. A unsteady breath chuffed from Garrus' nose and it was the Spectre's turn to hum smugly. Without letting the sniper recover, he also clenched down on the length inside him. It wasn't much, he barely had room as it was, but the resulting purr sounded weak for him. It pleased Nihlus to no end.

He did it again, and was rewarded with a quick jerk of hips and a pulse of blood flow at the base that pressed outward, expanding him just a little more. They groaned in unison and struggled for air. Garrus pressed his forehead into Nihlus' and swallowed hard.

'Can I move?'

'Spirits, yes.'

Garrus laughed at him breathlessly, steadying on his arms and looking into Nihlus' eyes with all the
intensity that those icy blues could offer. The Spectre melted, inside and out, as the rolling of hips became more pronounced and the pleasure ramped up as every bit of what might have edged into pain dissolved with the ever rising high of reverie. Their pace increased without hurry, occasional flicks of tongue across the gap between their mouths to keep the shared chemistry rolling.

“H-higher up, can you-” Nihlus tried to ask, seeking just a small change in position. His Detective knew without clarifying what he wanted, rising up just a tinge and moving forward to change the angle. The sniper tilted into it, centimeter by centimeter, until his partner’s subvocals dissolved into wanton cries when he found the perfect alignment and gave a small, forceful thrust.

Garrus rocked his hips in a way that caused his length to pull out just a bit, before pushing back in. A tactic he’d learned second hand from the Spectre, who’d picked it up from Asari. The friction felt amazing. The sniper took up a pace of thrust-curl-thrust-curl that removed the intent to keep his talons to himself from Nihlus’ mind. Searching hands found hide and scale, clawing his way down. The tawny-brown-and-stone-colored torin purred, liking it to much to stop him right away. As his orgasm began to build though, the Spectre couldn’t help but dig in. Without loosing pace, Blue reached back remove one hand then switched to get the other. He drew Nihlus’ arms up on either side of his crest where it pressed into the pillows, and held them there palm to palm.

They stayed like that, palm to palm and fringe to fringe, connected at the hips as Garrus rode him to oblivion with excruciating slowness that removed every ounce of control and replaced it with unbridled want. The Spectre tried everything in his power to increase the speed. He begged, with stuttering words and wavering subvocals. He tried forcing it, pushing his hips faster, but Garrus only moved with him to disallow it. Uncoordinated with lust, he dug shins, knees, and even heels into waist and ass and thighs.

The Detective refused him, low tones awash in arousal, still insisting on the slow pace. Nihlus had no idea how.

As a last ditch effort, because fuck he was so close, and Blue was just holding him there on the precipice, the Spectre tried clenching down as hard as he could on the torin inside of him. He was rewarded with a slight stutter to their pace. His muscles spasmed deliciously with the effort, and he went again. The half-skip in Garrus’ focus had him gripping their laced fingers tightly and pushing for more.

Finally, finally, the sniper relented and gave him more intensity. The curls became more pronounced, and the thrusts became faster.

Nihlus continued to beg, bribe, and demand more, -and thank you all the fucking spirits in the galaxy-, Garrus began to give in, relinquishing his tightly held will a nanometer at a time.
'Yes, yes... yess!'

Blue was losing control, and the green eyed Spectre stared him down, exulting in the barest hint of feral abandon that stared back. That was what did it, and he came with a roar, limbs fighting their hold in a way that enjoyed the lack of give, head tossed back. He thrashed as the rolling orgasm went on and on, draining Nihlus of fluid all across his stomach hide. The pressure inside of him increased as Garrus came as well, the sniper's release flowing out in a torrent that made the Spectre's vision white out.

His senses overloaded, he wasn't even sure that Blue had made any noise at the end. He assumed so, but every faculty was tuned into the arching bliss that stole his breath, cut his subvocals, and then dropped him mercilessly back down to reality.

Dizzily, he pushed back into the forehead seeking his own, weak and overcome. Garrus was gasping for lungfuls of air in a way that sounded more like the sniper had run a marathon just now, rather than finished having determinedly slow sex.

_Fuck_, Blue was the best lay he'd ever had.

Nihlus' head fell back into the pillows, and he tried to find language again. It took a few minutes.

“Am I dead?”

“Hmmm... no. Don't think so.”

“Okay, just checking.”

“Mmmmm.”

Yeah, 'mmmmm'. That was about all he had left too.

The sniper's right hand came in to support his neck, tilting his head just enough to share one last bit
of reverie. Their tongues curled together lazily, only the very tips since stretching further was way too hard. Garrus' single supporting arm shook from the effort of holding him up to do it, and the Spectre leaned vaguely sideways to tilt them over. He was successful only by dint of gravity's aid.

Blue fell over onto his back, and they laid side-by-side for a while, holding hands and just breathing. Even their subvocals were a mellow purr that he might have been embarrassed to be heard giving in public, not for the sexual satisfaction of course, but because he felt like nothing so much as a marshmallow. Garrus sounded like a ten year old could take him.

Nihlus worked up the titanic effort needed to roll onto his side, and pulled Blue into him. He was big spoon tonight. With his chin tucked into a stony collar ridge, and his torso curved over that broad carapace, he tossed a leg over top and took a hold on the closest hand. The angle was odd, and he would only admit to being so sentimental under duress, but Nihlus held on anyway, and sighed happily as he faded off into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well... I warned you about the smut, didn't I? Whoof. I am so bothered now. By my own damn writing. Ridiculous. XD

Fanfic Recommendation: [AceQueenKing on Desolas Arterius' unit](https://acequeenking.tumblr.com/post/133434201468) (A really interesting tumblr post on some of AceQueenKing's research and theorycrafting on Desolas and Saren's relationship, and also somethings about barefaces in the Hierarchy military. I drew a lot of mindcanon from this!)
Nihlus tempts everyone.

A/N: Short chapter today, I wrote a whole bunch but plot scenes got ahead of me, and the transitions were terrible... so I literally have another 2k+ words... but I have to go back and write what goes between the events for any of it to make sense.

LOOK AT THIS THING I FOUND:

//distant squeeing//

Did you see Saren? In the box! HE GOT SAREN FOR CHRISTMAS.

... Can I have Saren for Christmas?

Chapter Soundtrack: **K-391 - Earth**

Nihlus was lounging on the bed, flopped on his stomach and still naked, with music in his ears and the latest intel reports from Agent Korvis on his 'tool. Garrus had left for work, and though there was temptation to follow... he'd been too damn comfortable to move much, never mind walk.

The Spectre had woken up along with Blue when the morning alarm had gone off, and he'd managed to keep the Detective in bed for another twenty minutes of tongue play and hands running over sleep-warm hide. Eventually his sniper had escaped, laughing and dodging attempts to pull him back, for the bathroom.
Carmine shoulders had shrugged at the messy remains of yesterday and given up being clean for the birds. A sensuous grin tugged at his face as he draped himself invitingly for when Garrus finished his shower. It hadn't taken long, and the expression of want on Blue's face as he practically ran from the room to get to work on time had been so worth it.

He was having a problem with a persistent smirk just thinking about that desirous look. There was nothing so pleasing as knowing your lover wanted you just as badly as you wanted them.

The Spectre nosed into the pillows and breathed in Blue's lingering scent while he read up on recent events and Council business. So relaxed and at peace was he, that when a vid-call request ping came in he jumped half off the bed in surprise. Chuckling at himself he checked the request. It was from Saren.

Smiling broadly, Nihlus opened his end of the connection on voice only, just in case his former mentor wasn't alone.

“Nihlus.”

“Hey you.”

A silver-grey brow rose questioningly.

“Is there a reason your visual is disabled?”

Seeing that his caller was indeed alone, from the looks of it aboard the Daedalus, he activated the camera with a grin. It gave Saren a nice clear view of his sex-mussed form draped over Blue's sheets. He put on his best 'come hither' look to add to the effect, expecting the stolid torin to roll his eyes and chastise him for the antics.

Instead Saren blinked rapidly, a light flush crawling up his neck. The aggravated subvocals cued a moment later, but Nihlus had not missed that first reaction. His pelvic plates loosened to see that slight hint of interest, and electric blue eyes flicked once in their direction before going back to glaring at him.

“Really, Nihlus? Must you display yourself so?”
“I really must. So... what can I do for ya?”

His fellow Spectre buzzed at him in annoyance with the insinuation he had drizzled into the reply. Nihlus just grinned widely and continued to lounge, his body language open and just this side of invitational. Disappointingly, Saren's self control reasserted itself, and every sign the torin had been caught off guard or aroused disappeared.

“I have a mission that requires assistance. Are you available?”

“I could be convinced. What d'ya need?”

“A sniper.”

Nihlus blinked, and raised a browridge of his own.

“Umm. Did you... want Blue...?”

“No. Your skill is more than sufficient.”

“Not that I'm complaining, but why do you want me when we've got a crack-shot pocket sniper?”

Saren's chin raised minutely as he explained everything in a handful of words. Something the stoic torin had always been good at.

“The mission is morally questionable.”

“Oooohhhhh.” Nihlus nodded, understanding.

“Indeed.”
After receiving the mission details via encrypted email the green eyed Spectre stared at the ceiling for a little while, gathering up the will to leave. A long, steadying inhale through his nose and he managed it, rolling off the side gracefully and gathering up his underarmor.

Nihlus tossed the fabrics in the cleaning machine and made use of the shower. The Spectre... really needed it. He laughed, stealing salt scrub in massive dollops to wash with. As a bonus he'd smell like Blue for a little while.

The thought gave him an ingenious idea, which he enacted after drying off by stealing a set of Garrus' casuals. He nodded with satisfaction in the bathroom mirror, glad that he had the height to pull it off. The shirt was noticeably loose on him, but he could care less. Now he would smell like Blue for hours.

Nihlus gathered together his crap, leaving the underarmor with the clothing from his time as Asla, and armoring up over top of the casuals. It worked well enough.

Set to go, he headed for the rally point in the mission briefing. He snorted. By 'rally point' what his former mentor really meant to say was, 'That café I like, because I'm hungry.'

Spirits, Saren was adorable sometimes.

Said adorable sociopath had already ordered for himself by the time Nihlus arrived. In retribution the protégé stole pieces of his side dish while looking through the menu. Much to Saren's aggravation.

"Order your own lunch, Nihlus."

"Breakfast."

"... What?"

"I haven't eaten today, this is breakfast for me." The carmine plated torin flashed a winsome smile at his fellow Spectre's flat look, taking the opportunity to steal another piece. Saren chuffed with
exasperation and pushed the whole bowl over to him.

"It reflects poorly on me when it appears you can not take care of your own simple needs."

"Woah, woah. Woah. Was that... sarcasm? Did you just use sarcasm at me? Who did you kill that put you in such a good mood?"

Saren glared. "I will take the bowl back if you do not want it."

"Ooo. Message received, shutting up," Nihlus quipped with a grin.

The side dish was gone in short order anyway, but thankfully his own food came soon enough. He'd ordered extra for Saren to make up for the thievery. Only a fool would deprive a grumpy biotic of calories.

Neither of them said anything the rest of the visit, about the extra food or the mission. For the latter, it wasn't as if they could really talk about it here. Too public by a long shot.

Speaking of long shots, he was glad Saren had thought to ask him on this mission rather than Blue. They were actually killing some pretty nice people, by the available accounts. The targets really didn't deserve what was about to happen to them. Such was the fate of those who opposed the Council too strongly, even if it was done above board.

This particular mission was from Tevos. A Matriarch and her daughter had taken their campaign against Council interference in the Republics too far. Saren's plan was to have one Spectre run up to them in public and declare their lives were in danger, but before belief or wariness could settle in, the other would snipe them. The Matriarch was to be shot in the head, and the Matron in the shoulder. The 'hero' would then whisk the daughter away and save their life, thus laying the foundation for trust... which would summarily be paved over with lies. Anti-Council Matriarch ended, replaced by someone who owes a life debt to a Council agent as the new head of house.

The only hitch was that Matriarch in question had actually met Spectre Kryik before, and hated him for various... probably fair reasons. So Nihlus would get to be the unknown bad guy, and Saren would be the hero.

While the silver-grey torin wasn't quite a die hard thespian, he had a few decent personas he could
pull off at a moment's notice. Not that his erstwhile mentor usually took missions that required him to act, but they did occur. It had happened maybe twice in the years they'd known each other. Nihlus was looking forward to seeing him try to pull off 'noble Spectre Arterius saves the day'. He wondered how mad the torin would be if he recorded it for posterity.

After lunch, or breakfast, he re-docked the Widmanstat in long term parking, and moved his essentials over to the Daedalus, going about his preparations with tenacious cheer.

He'd finally gotten some Blue, *a whole lot of Blue*, heh, and now a mission with Saren? Life was *so* good.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This popped into my head from left field while writing this chapter, it's so much crack. //peers warily at tea mug// No idea where it came from...

Noble Spectre Arterius™ action figure comes with three exciting movable parts: A raisable browridge (left only), rotatable shoulder joint on his gun arm, and eyes that blink!

Yeahhhh....

No more kava for m-, I mean coffee. No more coffee for me. Yep.

Fanfic Recommendation: *Disasters Like You Are One In A Million* by Anon on MEKJ (Saren & Nihlus)
Interlude: Exactly what was expected

Chapter Summary

Wrex does what Wrex does best, and has a good time doing it. This is what it's like to live the baser passions for untold era, because high mindedness can cost or bestow everything.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

APC - Armored Personnel Carrier (Real world)

Garvug - Former Krogan colony world, it was mostly destroyed due to over population, though packs of Krogan and Vorcha still roam it's surface. (Canon)

A/N: That took so long to write! It was really fun though. Beware, possibly triggery sex scene toward the end. Sorta violent. I'll run through this chapter for spelling and grammar in the morning, but it did pass a preliminary spell check, so it should be readable as is. :)

Chapter Soundtrack: Hide and Seek by Namie Amuro (Sorry, no link. Can't find a good quality version on YouTube for some reason. Might be because it's an obscure Jpop song... nah.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Asari.”

“Krogan.”

Wrex nodded politely over the corpse of the bounty he'd just killed.

“Also hired to kill this idiot?”
“Yes. It was my kill, by the way.”

The crimson Battlemaster turned his head to get a good look at the body with one eye.

“I'm not sure a gut wound beats shotgun to chest for the kill count.”

“It was a tactical shot, on the kidney. My bullet hit first, and would have resulted in death in minutes.”

“Shotgun to the chest is still what actually killed him though.”

“I would argue that it merely hastened his demise.”

Wrex clicked his tongue and eyed the commando. He thought the nais' logic was a bunch of bullshit, but the leanness around the Asari merc's ribs said that maybe times were tough.

“Whatever. I'll split it with you, fifty-fifty.”

“Sixty-forty, my favor.”

“Don't push your luck, Asari.”

“I go by Aleena, and my species doesn't change the fact that the first and most important bullet was still mine.”

“Ha! Fifty-fifty, and you're buying me a drink.”

The purple eyed commando grumbled about it, but did buy him a drink in the end, though he stole one of the nais' eezo laced combat knives after noticing the split had definitely gone sixty-forty. He may not have been a rocket scientist, but Wrex could still do basic math. The nais screeched at him when he snatched it, and they tussled over the blade until he ended up on top with a smirk.
Aleena got the sixty-forty, and Wrex got a blade to channel biotics with. Win-win.

Wrex would have just kept on walking if the rage drenched scream from the overwhelmed Asari hadn't made his heartbeats stop with it's vigor. Now *that* was a battlecry. He hadn't heard a battlefield shout like that since leaving Tuchanka ages ago. The craggy mercenary turned to witness the nais' demise. He thought the source of the enraged scream deserved that much respect at least.

Instead he found his feet shuffling in that direction the moment he saw the figure hadn't quite given up yet. It was that same purple Asari from a few years ago, the one he'd argued over who had the kill shot with. The crazy nais had turned a cable into a garrote wire, and was using it to biotically choke two of the attackers while breaking another's neck with bare hands. A forth fell to a pistol at point blank, and Wrex's feet started to do more then just shuffle closer.

He really couldn't help it. This was a battle, a *real* battle. Life and limb at risk with warriors that weren't just canon fodder. Well, that Asari wasn't at least.

Good enough for him.

Wrex dove into the fray on the loosing side with a joyous bellow. The nais quickly realized he was helping to cut down attackers and the tide immediately turned. As it so happened, one Battlemaster and one ex-commando were more than enough to take out seventy six dime-a-dozen mercs. Now they stood panting in the aftermath, eyes locked on each other, the only ones left standing on the field.

With a wild grin, Urdnot Wrex shook off the last invigorating heat-chills of battle and took a seat on a partially destroyed cargo crate.

“Now that was fun. Are there more coming?”

“You. Hmp. Why would you even care?”

“I don't, but that was entertaining.” He looked over at the nais' slowly loosening body language, watching one side of black lacquered lips rise in a halting but amused smirk.
“So... are there more?”

“Yes. Probably.”

“Great. You want a bodyguard? I'll only charge you half, because that was s'much damn fun.”

“Half of what, precisely?”

The crimson and beige Krogan talked business with the sharp eyed nais for about three minutes before they had more incoming. By the end of day they'd nearly doubled the body count. The Asari paid him for a week in advance.

The headache behind his eyes was a constant throb of glass shards and drum beats. Wrex opened one big red eye to get his bearings, and immediately regretted it.

“Leena?” he rumbled.

“Oh, you're not dead. I was beginning to wonder.”

“Mrrnnggg.”

“Yes well, try not to take a rocket to the chest next time we do a job together. I had to do all the work. Eighty-twenty split, by the way. I'm taking medical care costs out of your portion, for both of us since the extent of my injuries is entirely due to your dirt nap.”

“I'm a Krogan. Dirt naps are generally all the... Nnggg.... all the medical care we need.”
“Not this time, idiot.”

Wrex finally managed to open his eyes the rest of the way, and peered about before glancing down at himself. Oof. That was a bad hit. How the hell did they get him that good?

“Why are you smiling?”

“It was a messy hit, going to have great scars from this one.”

“Oh for fuck's sake.”

Wrex chuckled at the exasperation in the nais' tone, looking up to see what shape his temporary partner was in. Not terrible it looked like. Just a broken arm and a few gashes here and there.

“Going to have some good ones yourself, Aleena.”

“Asari don't exactly find scars attractive.”

“Good thing you mate with other species then.”

“You have a point. Now, go unconscious again. I'd like to enjoy the peace and quiet for another hour or two. Try not to snore.”

The calculating and abrasive merc waved him off, but he could tell the nais had been worried. Warmed the cockles of his hearts, just a bit.

“Got a decent score lined up 'Leena, but I need back up. You busy?” The heavily muscled Battlemaster watched the Asari on the other end of the vid call consider it.
“I could make some time, if the credits are good.”

“Eh, they're not too bad for a two way split on a job this involved. Here, I'll send the details. Take a look.”

The ex-commando swiveled back and forth in a sharply angled chair, reading the data he'd sent. The long silk robe the nais wore fell down over one shoulder, revealing a black lace nightgown underneath. Wrex tried not to stare.

“Extra if the target is alive? I don't normally do living bounties.”

“Me either. Check out the weapon's cache on offer with the credit reward though.”

“... Oh.”

“U-huh.”

“Well then. Dibs on the Stiletto.”

“Ha, knew you'd want that one. Where do you want to meet?”

“Where are you now?”

“On Garvug.”

“That junk heap? Whatever for?”

“Best place to get ryncol short of going all the way to Tuchanka.”
“You could just as easily drink jet fuel.”

“Nah, doesn't taste right.”

Aleena rolled disgusted blue eyes and hung up on him.

“Fuck, fuck fuck, fuck, fuck! Run faster!” Aleena screamed from his back, clinging to his hump with leather clad legs latched around his waist from behind, one ankle swollen from a nasty sprain.

Wrex was running as fast as he damn well could, but he didn't begrudge the nais a little panic. Being slowly eaten by a low grade, persistent acid had to be painful, and his fellow merc didn't have Krogan regeneration. At the moment he was blitzkrieging back to the ship, at the ex-commando's direction. Wrex was guessing that there was medical something or other in the nais' inventory that would help.

As soon as they hit airlock Aleena overrode it, tumbling into the tiny one room craft and pawing at the food cupboards with a clenched jaw. Baffled, Wrex stood there uselessly.

“Uhhh...”

He was even more confused when the Asari grabbed a box of white powder, dumping mass quantities of the stuff and rubbing it in on angrily flushed purple skin while speed walking to the bathroom. Without shutting the door the acid splashed Asari merc jumped in the shower. Wrex picked up the discarded box curiously and took a lean in the doorway.

'Baking soda?'

“To counteract the acid. It's a base.” Crimson slit-pupil eyes looked up from the container to see that his temporary partner had calmed down, and was peeling away ruined light armor along with the thin remains of leather clothes.

“Huh. Interesting trick. Doubt I'll ever need it, but good to know.”
“I didn't see much at the end there, she's dead?”

“Nothing but paste left by now.”

“Good.” The ex-commando was naked, recognizably female-ish, and also clearly incensed. It made for a very attractive picture. Wrex coughed and tried to subtly adjust his codpiece. It was suddenly too tight. Of course, that drew the nais' sharp purple eyes right to it.

Slowly that gaze rose up his form, and they met eye to eye. Aleena stepped from the shower, limping lightly, dripping water.

“Like what you see, Wrex?”

“Yes.”

A devilish smirk crossed the Asari's lips, previous anger simmering just behind wicked blue eyes.

“Good.”

Aleena biotically shoved him out the door and toward the bed. He let it happen.

Wrex watched the dancers swirl and spin, they were half drugged out of their minds and loving every minute. He was working as a bouncer at the moment, and could tell the entertainment staff was as well paid as the security. Or they were just given the good stuff for free when they showed up to work. Could be that too.

The Battlemaster turned away to run an eye over the crowd. He was sort of here to take it easy for a while, but that didn't mean the scarred merc would take the job any less seriously.
Wrex had been on a slew of rough missions lately, and this was him being good to himself. A nice slow bouncer job in a titty bar, with cheap liquor during off-shift as a perk. Only a few heads to bust in each week. He'd been here three so far, and found it to be dull as hell... but it paid well. Who could complain about decent credits? Not to mention, he was definitely a breast man. The scenery certainly made the days a little less dull.

Then again, not a single pair here was paired with much intelligence, ruthlessness, or combat skill to speak of. Made him miss that crazy purple merc he did a few jobs with last century. That nais was the perfect kind of bitch, crazy but not too crazy. Wrex dug around in his memory to match the name with sharp blue eyes, pebbled purple skin, and also a very fine chest.

He actually missed the nais a bit. Wondered what the merc was up to.

The craggy browed Krogan snorted at his own sentimentality, and made a mental note to himself to book a night with one of the sex workers here on his next day off. He'd heard the light purple one with the white facial tattoos was a quiet lay. That'd do.

“Wrex.”

The old Battlemaster looked up, a familiar leather clad form approaching his table. His brows rose up in mild surprise. It'd been a long damn time since he'd last seen Aleena. He didn't think Asari usually lived this long. Wasn't the survival rate to Matriarch something like one in a hundred? He eyed the nais up and down.

Well, the sharp eyed merc might not be that old just yet. Must've been real young when they first met though.

“You're not dead yet?”

“No.”

“Well, color me impressed. What do you want?”
The nais took a graceful seat at his table, grabbing the digital ordering terminal and tilting it to read through the items on offer. No reply came until the ex-commando had made a selection and leaned back.

“I'm looking for a tarin named Agria, heard of her?”

“Can't say I have.”

“Want to help me kill her?”

“Sure,” he nodded.

'Wait for it...

“The split is seventy-thirty, my favor. Your only job is to shot two guards, and drive. Generous on my part, I would say.”

Wrex laughed, as usual appreciating Aleena’s all-business attitude.

“What about when it inevitably goes to hell and I have to rescue your dumb ass?”

“I suppose it will depend on how much saving my ass needs. It might be none.”

The crimson hued Krogan snorted in disbelief and went back to eating. The likelihood that the clever-dark nais wanted him along, -or more accurately wanted to split the cut with anyone else-, on a mission unless there was a good chance of bullshit was close to zero.

He finished his meal shortly there after, but waited patiently for Aleena to do so as well. Then they stood and left, Wrex following his once-again temporary partner out the door.

As it turned out, a hell of a lot of people died by their hands over the next four days. The mission went to utter hell, the original contract was revoked, two more popped up in it's place, both tried to gype them, and Wrex got set on fire at least once.
In the end, it was a fifty-fifty split, both making a little more each than the original contract's worth.

Aleena shoved him back into the hotel bed, dragging the armor from him relentlessly. Wrex groaned as the nais held him threateningly by the throat, useless considering his secondary larynx, but the high the ex-commando got off of power combined with the lingering effects of combat always made for some of the best post-battle sex he'd had.

His blood spattered gear fell to the way side, section by section. He got a hold of those pebbly lavender hips and squeezed, thrusting upward to grind his cod piece up against the nais pointedly. With a sneer Aleena rolled off of him, tore a few layers of leather off, and came back to steal his remaining armor chunks. He'd removed a few in the mean time himself.

Once they were finally naked, every last gun and ceramic plate discarded, Wrex pushed forward to try and top. Aleena decked him across the face in mild chastisement, and grabbed him by the cock. The nais pumped a few times before impaling on him, causing Wrex to toss his head back, roaring at the pleasure. The ex-commando rode him hard, pupils rapidly dilating beyond blue irises. With the initiating effect of the mental link distracting the Asari, he took advantage to rise up from underneath and shove the nais' soft purple backside against the head board.

"Wrex!"

'Ha, that sounded pissed off.'

Wrex grinned wildly, and tried to fuck the Asari merc into compliance. Wild moans and vengeful growls filled the room for only a short time before biotics turned the tables. He fell back onto the bed with a gusty exhalation, his over-sized beige cock was wet, very erect, and bounced with the motion of the bed springs. Aleena jumped him again, coming down on his hips in a reversed sit. The new angle let the ex-commando take him at a brutal pace, and the sheets began to rip with the force of his grip.

Wrex bellowed as he came, his quad tightening almost painfully from the spontaneous demand to ejaculate. Aleena didn't give a shit. The nais continued to ride him after he'd finished, and kept going till he was fully hard again. The ex-commando just didn't quit.
When he had air to breath again the Battlemaster sat up, pushed them both off the bed, and nailed the clever-dark Asari into the wall. Wrex railed into the nais’ channel, ramping up the latent energy in his biotic aura to increase his partner’s mental stimulation from the connection. Flickers of blue lighting crackled through their shared nebulous cloud.

“More. More, I said! Fuck me like you mean it, Urdnot!”

Growling, Wrex pulled his cock out and flipped the nais. He shoved Aleena down on the bed, lifted one leg, dove in, then pistoned in and out as fast as his hips could go. An appreciative wail let him know he was on the right track, and so the crimson and beige Battlemaster leaned into it, palming a purple breast and dragging chipped and craggy nails over the fleshy tip none-too-gently.

It took a solid twenty minutes for Aleena to connect with his mind properly, the Krogan psyche being just as hardy and resistant as the rest of their physiology, but when it happened he knew. The room grew distant, a welcoming black mist edged the corners of his vision, and all the objects around him turned blue and ethereal.

The only thing real in that place was the nais below him, digging sharp little nails into his shoulder as he rode them toward oblivion.

Wrex was once sated sure, but after all that even he was ready to come again. Normally patient, the Krogan bounty hunter was having none of that now, and he roared fiercely, shoulders taut. His quad felt burning hot, and his fingers ice cold. The feeling of physical transcendence that came with Asari mating overtook him at exactly the right time, and the second peak threw him so damn high he would’ve sworn that they’d climbed a mountain and jumped off instead of just having sex.

Thankfully, when reality hit again it was more like a second, smaller peak, and less like actually impacting the ground. Wrex fell forward into Aleena's sweating torso, hips still rutting circles into the nais, and he laved at tight, peaked nipples. One side, then the other, and back to the first to pinch it between his large flat teeth and tug. Aleena grabbed his skullplate and yanked, moaning wantonly. Always a fair man, Wrex took that attention to the other side once the first was a bright, lurid maroon. Never once did their hips stop rolling with a heavy grind.

When both breasts were flushed with blood, and their owner was beginning to shake from over stimulation, Wrex kicked it up a notch and pushed both of Aleena's dark lavender legs forward, practically bending the Asari in half, and fucked into the semen-slathered entrance with glorious abandon. The nais yelled, a violent sounding ramble of his name, demands for more, and harsh criticism. Clearly, the clever-dark merc had never heard of begging during sex.
Without expectation of ever hearing something so mundane as a 'request' from black-painted lips, but with a willingness to try, the Krogan Battlemaster slammed into the nais again and again as deep as he could go, using his hands to keep those long purple legs bent up out of the way. He pushed into it enough that his pumps shuffled them across the mattress, and he took a knee up onto the bed to compensate, forcing Aleena's back to curl up to meet him.

No wishes, begs, pleading, or cries for mercy were to be had, but the next high hit them both like a freight train. Even his Krogan born stamina couldn't hold him up after that one. Wrex tilted over sideways in an attempt not to crush his partner, important considering he weighted about six hundred pounds.

Aleena's body uncurled with gravity, and the loose limbed nais was deep asleep in minutes. Wrex was half gone himself when he tossed a blanket up over the lightly snoring Asari, slipping down and away with an immense amount of satisfaction.

Wrex leaned on the half-destroyed banister of the walkway he was standing on, a elbow rested on it's rusted over top. The leaning arm's Omni-tool was lit up, a simple program running with one large red button. His latest shotgun in a long series of weapons that weren't as long lived as he dangled loosely from the other hand. Below him a trail of people pulled box after box of valuable goods from a hidden cache, stashing the loot into the back of some shitty APC, likely stolen.

With the patience of stone he kept eyes on the leader, a chubby green and blue Salarian, waiting for the right moment.

The cache was only about twenty cargo boxes big, and after loading the lot of them up, the leader and his lackeys all loaded into their ride.

He pressed the button, and a moment later there was a very loud, dull boom. The metal joints of the APC shrieked for a half a second and quit, black smoke leaking from every pore. One of the twenty crates had been dumped in a corner and refilled with explosives.

Doing it this way was boring as hell, to be sure, but it didn't get any cleaner then no survivors, no one seeing him anywhere nearby, and any remaining evidence rendered into molten slag. Wrex chuffed, minimizing his shotgun and turning to go.
One mark down, two left to fulfill the contract.

The second mark turned out to be a proper dust up, filled with broken glass and countless hired thugs. Wrex had a good old time wrecking their shit with his shotgun, and when that got dull, he took to setting off their own grenade belts with his biotics. That trick was hilarious every time, especially the looks on their faces.

The final asshole was a bit trickier. A drug baron with damn good security, and a helluva lot of credits. Between the defensive turrets, an entire squadron of Krogan and Turian professional mercenaries, an unending supply of well paid and mostly useless meat shields, and enough loki to take over a small moon, there was no way for a lone Battlemaster, no matter how good, to take him on directly.

Wrex had to improvise with a stolen shuttle on auto pilot, a sniper rifle he hadn't used in ages, and some low-settling tear gas grenades tossed out in a bulk batch of about three hundred. That pile had taken forever to make with just his personal Omni-tool and a bunch of scrap to make into Omni-gel, but results didn't lie. The smoke drew turned the well defended compound into a jumble of confusion, and when they'd tried to evacuate in a panic after not finding the enemy, it'd only taken a bullet or two to snipe the escaping shuttle down by taking out it's rear engines.

Alright, it might've been more like five or six bullets. Or ten. He was a bit rusty with scoped armaments. At least the getaway went smoothly. Wrex didn't think anyone even noticed his fly by. There hadn't been any noticeable return fire.

The drug lord still went up in flames though, and that made three for three. The satisfied Battlemaster turned his stolen shuttle toward the nearest space port. Halfway there a message notification popped up on his Omni-tool.

FROM:1006041//ID.code:donteventryme
TO: 5821463//ID.code:morethanoneway

Nice touch with the explosives. I was a little slow this time. It won't happen again.

END MSSG

Wrex burst out laughing. He hadn't even known Aleena had been hired on this one too. It happened from time to time, only so many jobs for bounty hunters of their tier, but beating the nais to it was
almost a sweeter reward than the creds. *Almost.*

Crimson eyes watched the clock. Two minutes to go. His target, an Asari who went by the alias 'Veirda' was supposed to be meeting with a blue and green freckled Salarian at the bar across from his position. The Volus who'd contracted him had wanted the Asari dead, saying that they knew too much, and warning that close quarters combat would be suicide even for him. Wrex hadn't taken the slimy asshole too seriously, but he hadn't lived this long by being careless.

The clock hit time, and he watched without being obvious, waiting for either the mark, or the contact.

The contact walk by first, heading into the dive bar with a casual, jaunty step. Around a different corner an uncomfortably familiar silhouette stepped from the night-time gloom.

It was Aleena. His contract was for...

*Well. Shit.*

Honor dictated that he do the job. He had told the Volus he'd see the mark dead, and Wrex was generally a man of his word, but... hell. It was Aleena.

“Well, you have a job you want help on, I presume?”

“You could say that.” Wrex couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him. The statement was *technically* accurate. Across from him the purple skinned Asari narrowed both eyes, letting out a displeased exhale.

“Quit stalling and tell me what it is. I don't appreciate my time being wasted.”
“Let me order you a drink first. You might want one.”

One of Aleena’s purple tattooed brows rose questioningly at him, but a rough palmed hand waved permissively toward the drink menu in their booth. He ordered three shots of a strong plum liquor and a cocktail for the nais, getting himself a generous cup of horosk. The Turian liquor was dextro, strong as hell, and made a terrible burn on the way down. It sounded good right about now.

Drinks arrived, and Wrex took a long pull on his before speaking.

“You remember a Volus named ’Tharn Kevril’?”

“No.”

“Well, he remembers you. Only he calls you ’Veirda’.”

“Ahhh, yes. Him. Go on.”

“Well, heh, you see...”

He couldn't help the grin that was tugging at his wide, dry lips. He really, actually couldn't. The whole mess was somehow just too funny.

“I picked up a contract from ol’ Tharn, to kill some random Asari...”

Aleena blinked at him, once, twice, and then it started to sink in. The grin must have been contagious, because it was beginning to tug at the nais' face as well.

“So I find out some details, track some people down, and when I finally catch up to this target...”

“You see a familiar face?”
“You guessed it.”

Countless weapons at hand, biotics ready to go live at a moments notice, shields spooled down for easy access...

Instead, both of the normally ruthless mercenaries started laughing. Aleena pressed one hand into the table, trying to stop the un-intimidating giggles that were escaping. Wrex dissolved into chortling snorts, snickering into his fist.

Ridiculous. They’d known each other almost longer then anyone else in their lives, and of all the people in the galaxy, the accidental kill-contract was between them? Dark, wry laughter held the table in spell for a good several minutes, followed by a clinking of glasses as Aleena toasted him and threw back the first shot before responding.

“So, mmheheh, now the question becomes what to do about it.”

“About that...”

“You took the contract, Wrex. Don't have the quad to try and see it done?”

He eyed the Asari smiling mysteriously at him, the brightly amused expression sitting oddly on that normally scowling face.

“Of course I do. Do you?”

Aleena slammed back the other two shots, gulped down the cocktail, and walked around the table to set a foot on his thigh. The nais grabbed him by the collar and leaned down to whisper seductively in his ear.

“What do you think?”

Wrex felt himself harden. It was difficult not to when the nais spoke in that liquid-murder tone.
“I think... we can figure it out tomorrow?”

“Good answer.”

Wrex licked his craggy, dry lips. He was bone tired, feeling more than a little fatalistic, and there was a dying Asari on the other side of this door he was trying to kill. That he didn't entirely want to try to kill. They'd agreed though, with dark grins and wild hearts, to a battle to the death. There was no way he’d give this anything less than his best. Aleena deserved that.

He'd let the nais pick their battleground, a hive of scum and villainy that no one would ever miss. It was an old Salarian space station full of smugglers, mercs, and Vorcha. Plenty of Vorcha, that they'd used and abused as meat shields, distractions, and willing shock troops.

Squeezing his eyes shut, the Battlemaster tried the gather some focus. One of them was going to die here today, and the battle was a glorious one that the survivor would tell tales from for the rest of their days. Most of the station was in pieces now, almost eighty percent was uninhabitable from massive hull breaches thanks to Aleena's free handed use of explosives.

He'd made a mess of life support though, so the lack of breathable air in the remaining sections was mostly his fault.

Both multi-centennial mercenaries had worn helms for the past two days. They'd been at it for six.

Suddenly, the alarms began to go off. Checking the local emergency broadcast system, Wrex was terrified and thrilled to discover the station's core was melting down. Everything was on the verge of going up in flames, and the nais remained behind the doors of medbay, trying to patch up days worth of wounds. Even if he sprinted from here to his ship, the Battlemaster would barely make it in time.

Crimson eyes shining brightly from the rush of the best fight of his life, Wrex pounded on the reinforced metal doors twice in goodbye, and started running.

He sprinted at the wind's pace, and like a scene from the vids, the timer was counting down in the double digits as he was undocking. Wrex made it clear of the station and out into open space with sixteen seconds to spare, and watched the remains of their battle ground erupt into a firestorm.
When the dust finally settled there was nothing left bigger than his arm. The debris field was one massive dust cloud, no other ships in the area, no sign of Aleena. With a heavy inhale, Wrex gave a long empowered battle cry, exulting in the triumph of having survived. When it was done he rested a fist and forearm against the vidwindows above his head, and leaned in. Wrex took one last glance at the scanner reports of the remains, and pulled a rictus of a smile onto his face.

“That one was for the ages, ’Leena. I will never forget today, not if I live another ten millenia. Ancestors watch over you till I catch up. I owe you a drink, don't let me forget.”

With a lumbering gait that reflected all of the many, many ways Aleena had almost killed him, Wrex fell into the pilot's chair and set course for the meeting point with Tharn Kevril.

Half way there his Omni-tool pinged.

FROM:1006041//ID.code:donteventryme
TO: 5821463//ID.code:morethanoneway

Better luck next time.

END MSSG

Wrex crowed to the sky, whooping in delight that the clever-dark nais had made it out after all. The client would be pissed, but as for him? He was impressed.

Every now and then, when he was particularly bored, having sex with a dull partner, or even just shooting half-wit hostile mercs that gave him no challenge, Wrex would think of Aleena, and wonder where the nais was. He liked to imagine the ex-commando was still alive somewhere, that the one last message hadn't been on pre-programmed delivery just to fuck with him. It was a toss up really, because while he didn't see how the nais could have survived that explosion, he also had copious evidence that his old friend was slippery as hell. The Battlemaster had seen Aleena dash into that medbay room himself, and he hadn't heard a word since that day. A post-battle message set to pre-delivery was just like that crazy bitch to leave behind to mess with him. A little bit of a trickster's heart had lived in that one.
He didn't dwell on it much though. Wrex never allowed himself to observe the past in too much retrospect. It didn't do him any good, and it always stung a fair bit. Though that didn't change the fact that sometimes he'd regret ever taking Aleena's challenge. He'd almost rather have the nais alive and well, good company and an honorable krantt to have, than possibly dead in glorious battle.

Those last, un-Krogan thoughts would always make him toss the whole thing to the back of his mind, and go seeking a new bounty.

Wrex took a long, steadying pull from his drink. The Turian horosk slid down his throat in a scorching trail, exactly what he'd been after. Across the room his daughter was belly laughing at something one of her friends had said, and he had to try really hard not to be caught staring. So he looked over the tabletop instead, at the lazy and dark smirk on Aleena's face.

The nais had lured him to the station through proxies and unclear job offers under a pseudonym. Curious but wary, Wrex had come to Omega to check things out, and had instead ended up shanghaied into a corner booth of the station's main dive bar. Across the table had sat an old friend he'd never thought to see again, pointing lazily at another booth.

"Third table on the left. The only Asari there? Yours."

That had been the start of a very long conversation.

None of his krantt knew it, few and scattered as they were, but the scarred Battlemaster was the father of four offspring. Well, five now.

Not that any of the others were still living. He'd lost one boy to sickness barely out of the cradle, two more to youthful idiocy, and finally his one Krogan daughter to a raid on the camp where she lived. That was back when his people still had family units, and before his own father had betrayed him. One living idiot of a sibling, and him, was all that remained of the Urdnot line that had led their clan since time immemorial. It was a major part of the reason he'd given up on the future of the Krogan people entirely, and abandoned his homeworld and clan for the stars.

Except now... now there was a knife-sharp Asari maiden, a century and a half old, with his bright crimson eyes and a face just like the mother. Said mother was sitting across from him, smiling like
daggers at the perturbed expression on his face.

They'd already been through the 'why didn't you tell me' stage, which had been fairly obvious considering the last time they'd seen each other it had been from across the battlefield.

Also passed was the amazement and awe stage. That had mostly consisted of listening to Aleena tell him about what Liselle had accomplished so far, what the nais was good at, and a few sparse details about friends and favorite foods.

Wrex's reply had been quiet interest that he'd half tried to hide out of pride, but the clever-dark Asari had seen right through him. The calculating bitch always had.

It was down to mutually quiet observation, and continued truce, if that could be considered a stage in and of itself.

Wrex's ex-lover watched his side of the table out of the corner of amused blue eyes that shone a purple nearly the same tone as the pebbled lavender skin around them in the orange-red light of the club. One leg was tossed over the other, patiently waiting for him to make a move. His eyes strayed past the the far booth again. Alright, so possibly he was still in the second step. He had a living, breathing daughter. For someone that had particularly shit luck with making progeny, that was something the scarred merc had long since given up on. Even being a rare biotic Battlemaster, accepting and giving countless breeding requests over the years, he'd still only ever sired those precious four, who had all gone out like short lived candle lights.

He could handle showing up for the hatching ceremony, and not seeing any of the newborns take a single breath, just barely. Having a chance to get to know them? To give two shits whether they knew what end of a blade goes in the enemy? Having that repeatedly stolen away had killed something inside him. He'd long since stopped caring about having children at all, or so he'd thought.

A daughter. An Asari daughter.

Not a work-around Wrex had ever though to try. By the looks of it though, Aleena's smarts had been enough to balance out his... whatever it was that hadn't been enough for his other kids. Bad luck? Over-strong blood lust? Flat out thick-headedness?

Hell if he knew, but...
A daughter.

The old Krogan finally got his fill of watching the impossible throw back shots and shoot the shit with a variety of colorful friends. Wrex let his forehead come to rest in a palm, wearily rubbing a craggy and scared brow. He covered an unsteady swallow with another sip of horosk, and tried to push past the tired dregs of his hearts that the sharp eyed maiden was calling to. He needed to figure out what his ex-lover's game was, calling him here like this.

"You're telling me now because you want something."

Aleena shrugged, casually throwing both arms up over the seat back.

"Well?" he rumbled, peering at the evasive nais.

"A few easy pieces of work, for someone like you."

"Don't give me that, Alee-"

"Quiet. I haven't been called that in a very long time."

He huffed, crimson split pupils contracting slightly with a mellow surge of anger.

"Was it even your real name, she-devil?"

Purple lips tugged up into an actual grin.

"I'm not female, Wrex. Just 'devil' will do."

The Battlemaster growled lowly at the fine distinction.

"Fine. Is it?"
"No."

The Battlemaster palmed his face and sat up, cracking his neck with a series of loud snaps.

"Alright. Aria. Tell me what you're after."

"I want a few people very dead."

"You want- the hell you need me for? I know how many idiots you can off without trying... Unless, you've gone soft on me?"

The nais' smile slipped into a cold glare at that.

"Say that again and I'll show you exactly how soft I've gone." Emphasis in just the right places made it clear that 'soft' was a swear word, and 'exactly' was a synonym for grievous harm.

Oddly enough, the honest glare warmed his hearts more then any other expression the nais had made.

"Ha! Didn't think so. Are you going to cut the bullshit and explain?"

The leather clad Asari inspected her nails, biting one off at the edge when it didn't pass muster.

"I'm..." The nais clicked her tongue, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling, “building a base of power here, On Omega." A muscular purple arm gestured outward toward the room, and at the station in general. "I can't leave now, the timing is bad, but there are a few third parties interfering from a distance. I want them gone."

"So, what? You're blackmailing me with... Liselle?"

It was Aria's turn to bark a laugh. "Ha! No, you old fool. That was a gift. No one else even knows
"Lis is mine. Except you, now."

"You actually offered the truth as... what, a peace offering?"

The rising star of the Terminus Systems shrugged again, letting arms fall elegantly back into a leather clad lap.

"That fucking Volus that set us against each other is long dead. No bounty, no more reason to kill each other, no hard feelings. What matters is whether you'll do the jobs I have for you, or not. The credits on offer are real, at least."

"Why drag *me* half way across the galaxy, when you've got an endless line of mercenaries here looking for a hit?"

Hard eyes stared him down, a mild sneer twisting features into a haughty and judgmental expression. Wrex just continued to look back, scratching his chin and waiting for an explanation. Either the nais would give up more truths, or maybe just decent lies. Any explanations were better than none.

Eventually his old friend looked away, arms repositioned again in akimbo. He thought that maybe his former sometimes-partner was nervous.

"There were seven total assholes blocking me from control of the assets and merchant lines I've wanted. Four are already dead. The last three aren't above paying anyone I send far more to... 'return to sender'."

The nais' lips flattened as the mercenary-turned-mobster directed a cross look at no one in particular. Further details weren't forthcoming.

Wrex thought about it for a moment, trying to read between the lines. Slowly, a wide and wry grin stretched his craggy crimson and beige features.

"You're saying you need someone you can trust."

Aleena, -sorry, *Aria*- continued to ignore him.

Still...

The Asari had made a good pick on *who* to trust. He'd take the credits and see the jobs done, fair and square. It didn't take giving him a child to secure his honest work. Wrex always played it straight, it was why he had such a damn good rep. His ex-lover was well aware of that.

"Fine."

Blue eyes came back to watching him, a stiff nod ending the petulant silence. With a slow, obvious reach into a pocket accompanied by a challenging brow raise, a data stick was pulled out and tossed to him.

"Then see it done, and come back when they're dead."

Wrex took one final considerate look at his ex-lover before turning to do the same for the daughter he never knew he had.

Liselle. He had a daughter named Liselle T'loak. Wrex wondered if the maiden knew they were an Urdnot too.

The Krogan Battlemaster stood up, pocketed the data stick, and began to trudge away. He stopped a few paces out and looked back.

“Tell me one thing, how did you get out of that medbay and off the station in time?”

The soon-to-be queen of Omega smiled like the edge of a knife.

“I might tell you. If you come back alive.”
Wrex chuckled, walking away with a lighter step then he'd arrived with.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If you're interested to know where I got the idea from about 'Aleena' being Aria, I think it's actually canon. Here is a youtube video where Aria talks about her past a little. You hear that last line? “Better luck next time” It's also the very same words Wrex last heard from Aleena. :o ( Here is that ME1 conversation, if you need to rewatch.) The rest seems to match up pretty well too. Liselle is from the books, so we know Aria has a daughter. The facts seem to point to her having a frenemies 'thing' with Wrex. I just had to run with it! The final scene takes place in our modern times by the way, but Wrex isn't going to be telling people about either his connection to Aria, or his only living child. So when he tells Shepard about Aleena, he doesn't give any extra details... even though the story has a new ending. This might someday come back to bite him in the ass. I dunno yet.

Fanfic Recommendation: fuckyeahshakarian Masterlist (A massive post of Femshep/Garrus, from frenemies to one-true-loves. Some individual ones might get put as recommendations here, or already have, since it's so damn big. Haha.)
Astral decent in ten

Chapter Summary

Nihlus gets kidnapped, Saren is not pleased.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Buratrum - The realm of the spirits of dishonorable association. A approximate equivalent of hell for the souls of dead Turians. (Credit: MizDirected)
Rankbanger – The practice of entering the Hierarchy military with the sole goal of rapidly rising through the ranks for the pay increase, generally to provide for family left at home, debts, etc. Someone who seeks promotion regardless of their worthiness. (Derogatory) (Credit: whoever wrote 'Disasters Like You Are One In A Million' on the kinkmeme forums.)
PMC – Para-Military Company, alternative: Mercenary group. (Real world)

A/N: I just discovered (Yeah, just now, fuck I'm slow sometimes...) that the guy who voices Nihlus also voiced Councilor Sparatus! I just... want someone to... steal all his voice clips... and make a montage. I don't even care if he's trying to be 'asshole Councilor' at the time, just that flang on loop would be a-okay. Mmmhmmm. Also: the VA's name is Alistair Duncan. Uhh... weird... see there is this other Bioware game (Dragon Age. You may have heard of it. Nudge nudge, wink wink.) where there is a guy named Duncan... and a guy named Alistair... //sideways, head tilt, suspicious Turian look at Bioware//
I dunno what that's all about, but if I had more free time I'd go find all the voice acting the people who voiced Garrus, Nihlus, and Saren ever did, modify them for dual-tones, and then make an audio book of pretend conversations from the stolen words.
My name is author-chan, and I have a problem. //sits down in A.A. chair//
Hiiiiii author-chan.

A.A. is Author's Anonymous, btdubs. It works nothing like Alcoholics Anonymous. There are far more glasses of wine and flash fics involved.

Chapter Soundtrack: Puscifer - Horizons

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus was half asleep in the command depression of the Widmanstat when his Omni-tool went off. He snorted awake in surprise at the noise, and peered blearily at the message notification overlaying the text book on mechanical engineering he'd been using to brush up his recently unused skills on. It was from his lovely Quarian informant, just a few short lines and an attached folder of pictures.
FROM: 8838832//ID.code:rainwatcher

TO: 1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy

I found something you might like. If it turns out to be worth your time bring me payment in person. I have a few other things you might be interested in.

-Adiah'Si

END MSSG

[Attachment: 021684535.holo]

[Attachment: 012455995.holo]

[Attachment: 021684536.holo]

Nihlus perked up at the thought of what 'other things' she might have to show him. He'd put money on it involving antibiotics and blindfolds.

Without uncurling from his comfy lounging, he leaned over to tapped out a course correction for Dolo Station. An interesting mission and a good lay might keep him from invading Blue's apartment for a few more days, and the Council didn't really need the Spectre's presence for a briefing on his last mission. It had been a boring, and fruitless, stakeout. A vid report would do.

Hopefully this lead would prove to be more interesting. He had a feeling it might.

Nihlus swirled his drink, watching the way the light hit the angled glass and reflected away. There was a lot on his mind, and no place better than to work through it then a trashy dive bar. The contact Adiah had set him up with wasn't going to be here for a few hours anyway.

“Well look who we've found. Hello Kryik.”
The Spectre turned around in the bar stool he was sitting on, to a voice he'd never expected to hear again.

“Private Matho? Long time no see...” He trailed off, hackles rising at the array of armed thugs behind his old squad mate.

“It's Sergeant, now. Thanks much,” the torin sneered at him, arms crossed and several meters away.

“Sergeant. What can I do for you?” Nihlus began calculating how best to take out each and every one of the grunts staring him down. He had a feeling this wasn't going to end peacefully, fuck if he knew why though. He didn't remember ever pissing Matho off, specifically.

“Oh, it's not me that needs a thing.” With dramatic timing that impressed the Spectre not-at-all, a lightly armored form attempted to get at him from behind, a hypo-syringe in hand.

Not knowing what was going on, or how they'd found him on a mining colony in the middle of nowhere, he decided to avoid murdering anyone just yet.

That didn't mean he'd put up with someone trying to inject him with unknown compounds. The armored form was a lithe nais with bright red eyes. He snapped the reaching forearm in half, and stomped on the hypo after it fell. With a shriek that drew far too many curious eyes for his taste, the Asari scrambled away.

That was the cue for the sea of thugs to come at him. He began a game of ducking and dodging, trying to start an all out bar fight so the feat of taking out so many couldn't be pinned on him. Matho continued to stand there, sneering and angry.

'Spirits of the deep, what did I ever do to that guy? Com' on, think Kryik! Did you bang his boyfriend? Out pace him in drills? Hell, it has to be something.'

Unable to come up with anything off the top of his head, he still managed to get that bar fight going with a lucky chair toss. The resulting free for all was perfect chaos, and he set about downing his attackers with non-lethal take downs. A dust up with hospital stays would be in the news, sure, but one with a double digit death toll always caused a bigger stir. People were just so fussy about murder.
Even if these jackholes had it coming.

Nihlus flipped over a table and slammed two heads together, then spun on the balance point of his carapace and kicked out three times in rapid succession. Five down, a whole freaking lot more to go.

The attackers wore no standardized PMC armor, nor insignia. They weren't even half ways decent fighters. Where did his arch-nemesis of the week get these idiots? The dollar store?

Except... except he was feeling really dizzy. Shit.

Too late to do anything about it, the Spectre suddenly noticed that the whole damn room was stumbling drunk, or that’s what he would have called this behavior any other day.

Airborne. Whatever it was, it was airborne. He tapped his helm key, hitting his 'tool for a generalized panacea for system cleansing as the panels slid closed. At the very least, anything that matched one of the panacea's antigens even slightly should have bonded to the particulates now in his bloodstream and been rendered useless.

Unfortunately for the green eyed torin the cleanser wasn't helping in the least. He felt like vomiting, but also like crying.

'What the hell was in that stuff? No distinct smell, rapid onset, invisible...'

“See? What did I tell you. Tricky as fuck, and willing to see everyone go down with him.”

“You were correct, Mr. Matho. Your assistance was most appreciated.”

Nihlus tried to pin down the second voice, but couldn't recall it at all. It didn't help that he was having trouble standing.

“Sergeant.”

“Of course. My apologies.”
“It’s fine. Just make sure this one goes to *bruratrum* after you're done with him. Casius deserved better that what this rankbanger did to him.”

Even with failing vitals and rising delirium the Spectre managed to be affronted as he tried to escape out the back. He rolled his eyes at the bullshit this whole thing was, even as he fell into a wall, finally realizing what vendetta was being taken.

Casius Familogos and two others had died while under his orders when their commander at the time had gone down, and the rest of them had been too shit-scared to move forward. Those orders had saved the rest of their lives. He'd thought it'd been rather fucking obvious at the time. Evidently not.

Nihlus fell into a door next, his legs no longer responding as tears leaked from his eyes and nose. He sputtered and coughed trying to clear the running mucus from his throat, trying to focus. It was to no avail, and he came to a sprawling stop. All he could see was bathroom tile, a hideous shade of green.

High heels clicked down the hallway, coming to a stop as the interloper opened the door to the unisex bathroom he'd ended up in.

He couldn't feel his feet anymore.

“Ah, that's where he went to. Found him. No worries, Sergeant Matho. His day has come, but fear not, it won't be quick.”

“Glad to hear it ma’am. The payment?”

“Already in your accounts.”

“Good,” was all Gestal Matho said before leaving.

One of his old squad, who he'd fought and bled for, had hung him out to dry. A coughing laugh choked it's way out of the Spectre's throat as the feeling left his arms. His legs were nothing but excruciating pins and needles, and he still had no idea who the second person was, or why they wanted him. Distantly, he wondered if Adiah had sold him out too.
“Ohhh, shush now, Spectre Kryik. We’re going to have a lovely few days, you and I.”

The world faded to black, but not before he managed to set off an emergency protocol beacon on his Omni-tool.

Garrus was sipping kava and wondering what to have for lunch when Saren came stalking through the doors to his office.

“Vakarian, follow me,” was all that came out of the Spectre before he was gone again.

The kava was left on the table, the log out key smashed with a thumb as Garrus stood quickly and did so.

Saren was walking too quickly to get ahead of him as would be proper, so the Detective settled for speed walking beside him. The sniper watched the stalking figure curiously, trying to hypothesize what was going on. He followed along unquestioningly, sensing that words were perhaps not much use at the moment.

The Spectre's demeanor was frigid, utterly flat subvocals and a blank expression. They stepped out of C-Sec Academy and Agent Tithe appeared out of nowhere, falling in line without missing a beat. A very familiar lockbox trailed behind Riaz's partner, though the Drell herself was absent. Ankhleas offered him a matching follow-point beacon for the miniature anti-grav engines on the lockbox. The Detective recognized that as well, it was definitely his.

Apparently they were going somewhere.

He clipped it to his belt as the trio turned a corner, and there, -docked illegally as physically possible-, the Daedalus was nosed in between two sky scrapers, taking over what used to be a plaza. Garrus had never seen someone try that one before. Then again... Spectres.

He was somewhat surprised when Saren overrode the airlock, allowing them to enter without waiting for the decon cycle. The Spectre slid into the holo-ring CIC and started take off procedures.
Air traffic control came over the coms unit, a tarin bellowing about their numerous infractions. The silver-grey torin barked the magical words, 'Spectre Authority', and hung up. Garrus shoved his lockbox where he usually stowed it, and returned to stand behind his side of the CIC chair, wondering where Nihlus and Riaz were.

Before he could loose patience enough to start asking questions though, Ankhleas pressed a datapad into his hands. He looked down, and read the sparse briefing.

At thirteen forty, local time, an emergency beacon had gone off on the mining colony of Heziera. It had pinged the nearest extra-net buoy and reached the Spectre Offices shortly there after. The beacon ID was registered to Spectre Nihlus Kryik.

Oh no.

Garrus swallowed back the beginning hint of panic, clenched his jaw, and when he looked back up at the placid Agent he simply nodded and handed the datapad back.

There were a thousand questions running through his head, but really... that had been all he needed to know.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Nihlus woke in one of the most disconcerting positions possible. Something out of his fantasies, but recolored with horror.

He was spread-eagle, naked, and shackled to a bed draped with plastic tarp. His vision was blurred like wearing the wrong prescription of glasses, but the kidnapped torin could make out that there was a bedside stand laid out like a surgeon's prep table. His gaze slid around the room from behind a lazy eyed squint, remaining still to belay anyone noticing he was awake. The Spectre picked out what might be a clawed bathtub sitting off to one side, also set atop protective tarping. He tried to figure out where he was from the few clues available. There wasn't much to go on, but he did appear to be alone. Strangely, there were no obvious cameras in sight. Not that there couldn't be hidden ones.

Lavishly decorated, the space had crown molding and elaborately carved dark-wood furniture. It almost looked more like a movie set then a real room.
A quarter hour went by, and still he couldn't see for shit.

No windows. Four closed doors. No sizable air vents. There was a massive wardrobe in one corner, a chest of drawers along a wall, and a long, velvet covered klinē style lounging couch. Strewed with cushions, that last item was the only piece of sitting furniture in the room, and it was dead center faced to the bed. He considered the first two as possible ambush or hiding spots... if he could get free to use them.

The high-tech shackles anchoring his limbs far from each other didn't give very much hope of that, but Nihlus was a trickster at heart, and unwilling to give up just yet. Taking the opportunity while he was alone and possibly unwatched, the Spectre began trying to see if he could dislocate his wrist to escape. He discovered, painfully, that he couldn't. The grips had been designed to prevent it.

Next came varied attempts to reach anything of use, be it the manacles or just the head board, using the longer blades of his crest.

It was a 'no go' on both counts.

Nihlus went down the list of his tricks, trying to gain any advantage. The best he managed was to slip one of the scalpels from the side table beneath his pillow, which he'd only been able to do by slowly scooting the metal handle closer centimeter by centimeter with his tongue, until he could coil the make-shift limb around it and pull it closer. Tucking it beneath the pillow that supported his head had been an awkward affair, but he did it.

His head hurt from the vision effects of whatever drug it had been they'd used to knock him out. The Spectre couldn't believe they'd gotten away with gassing an entire building, or even that it'd worked. It hadn't exactly been the most air-tight structure. There was obviously an antidote though. Matho and the unknown third party had been just fine.

The door opened.

In stepped two Asari. The first had to be a Matriarch as the nais actually had wrinkles, which in this day and age meant that someone had survived long enough that regenerative serums and plastic surgery were beginning to fail. Or they were just dirt poor... but this room didn't exactly scream 'lack of credits'.

The second was a younger nais in a crisp doctor's smock, stone faced and hands clasped. The
medic's expression starkly contrasted the mildly exultant look on the older one.

"See now? I told you he'd be awake already. Spectres have the very best augments, didn't you know?"

"Yes, ma'am. You were correct."

The nais in charge sashayed over to his bedside, smiling. The Asari observed him silently for a moment, before spinning to the cohort with an elegant and grand wave of well manicured hands.

"Make him scream."

"Yes, ma'am."

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex] Turian Animism
While citizens of the Hierarchy enjoy absolute freedom of religion, the most broadly practiced is Animism. Attributed as the main religion for seventy six percent of all Turians, it is a practice that even the non-religious will admit some belief in or quote. The 'spirits' of Turian Animism can be separated into three categories. First are the aspects of reality. These are spirits of important or historical places, interest groups such as a sports team, or even intellectual concepts. By far the most prevalent, spirits of reality can be anything from a spirit of music that inhabits an old amphitheater, to a spirit of retribution that possesses a blade. These forms are said to be the manifestation of the perceptions of the living, forming into tangible entities that can be communed with for inspiration or morale support. That said, they are not all positive entities. There are as many spirit tales of beings that embody wrath and betrayal as there are those that tell of bravery and love. The second most common spirits are those of the dead. Originally, during the time of Titan worship, Turian beliefs were based around ancestor veneration. Though few people still pray to their forebearers, many believe that they live on, incorporeal and waiting for their living relatives to pass as well, and that select few may be visited by the shades of the dead. The final type of spiritual entities in Turian Animism are the spirits of the deep. These beings are said to be a wild combination of demons, vengeful ghosts, and evil creatures. Spirits of the deep reside at the bottom of deep water, such as one of Palaven's few lakes or seas, and will venture out to bother the living with curses, quests, and trials. Often, the unexpected deaths of newborns, untraceable disappearances of missing persons, or missing clan relics are attributed to these darker entities. Interestingly, not all spirits of the deep are evil. The patron spirit of
thieves, liars, and murders is both a spirit of justice and a spirit of the deep, said to cast light on the original intent and actual necessity of those darker deeds. For example, a child stealing food because they are hungry might be led to a better place to find a meal by a shadows collecting on the paths that led elsewhere. However, someone who killed their bondmate for life insurance fraud might find themselves feeling hunted until they confess. As an aside, it should be noted that most spirits don't have actual names, just titles. Those that do are considered greater spirits, though their names are only able to be said in subvocal speech.

Fanfic Recommendation: Misfire Anon masterlist (Multi-fic list, so much the good, yes.)
Sticks and stones can only break my bones

Chapter Summary

There is a very unhappy snake lady who wants to know who stole her second favorite Turian, and isn't afraid to do bad, bad things to find him.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

PSV Apien Breeze – The private ship of Specialist Ankhleas Tithe, named for Palaven's main equatorial jetstream.
Pronoia – The third planet of the Tomaros System, regularly mined by the inhabitants of Lusia. Known for it's high quantity of platinum. (Canon)
Lusia – The Asari colony where the Krogan rebellions kicked off. After centuries of unchecked expansion following the Rachni War, the Krogans pushed to take Lusia. Being a core world of the Asari Republics, with an estimated population of 2.2 billion, the invaders were quickly shut down. The defeat incited other Krogan clans across the galaxy. (Canon)

A/N: In case anyone was wondering, Riaz's accent I'm trying for is 'Irish'. I thought, what could possibly be more awesome then a snake lady who is a pyrotechnics expert with all black scales and a brogue? Not many things duckies. Not many things.

WARNING: Graphic depictions of torture.

Chapter Soundtrack: 「unformed」 Hatsune Miku - G-A-M-E

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You're gunna tell me where mah boy is. Go on, litt'l man. Start wit the talkin'.”

“F... fuck... y-y-you...”

Riaz pried open the torin's jaw again, and spat in his mouth. Sharp nailed fingers jabbed into the reflex points on neck hide to make him swallow.

“Ah...agr...”
The torin's pupils were blown wide, and his breathing rapid. The Spectre waited impatiently for her venom to steal away more of his will. The hallucinogenic oils her body systemically produced might not have the same potency of a Compact assassin's carefully cultured blend, but they were usually enough to erode the will of any subject to a noticeable degree. All pleasure became more pleasurable, all pain became more painful. The perfect interrogation tool, and arguably one of the reasons Rakhana's society had collapsed.

It helped that she'd pumped him full of a host of other drugs too, things to augment her venom and overstimulate nerves. Spectre Tio'fore hadn't exactly been gentle with the mix, and the torin would probably die from heart failure sometime later today. There wasn't time to do this properly though, not with Nihlus in the hands of their enemies. Not with that sweet boy suffering who knew what.

“Tell meh. Where is Nihlus. Who took 'im. You wanna tell me, it's burning off ya tongue not to.”

The Turian moaned in pain, as if he could physically feel the echoes of his mouth aflame. Drell venom was no joke, but the staticy images of her fellow Spectre limp and unconscious, being carelessly dragged away from a bar not five clicks from here played through her mind in an aggravating, mercy-stealing loop. Drell memories were also no joke.

“It was... it... arrrgg... nnnnnnn....”


The torin choked on his own saliva, fighting himself not to speak. He was likely experiencing a strong sense of compulsion, delirium, the physical pain of what she'd done to him during capture, and still the ghostly after-image of a burning tongue. The Spectre watched him struggle with himself, large violet eyes unblinking. She was about to add more suggestions to the hallucination when the torin finally caved.

“S-s-something with a P. Like Parean, o-or Pieriin... Preen! It was P'reen! Spirits, l-let me go!”

“What else dya know? Mm? You know more, doncha?”

“N-no... fuck.. no, all I know is the n-n-nais' name, the guy that paid me said it! I-i was just-”
The unnamed Turian died when she snapped his neck. If he didn't know anything else, then he wasn't any more use, and even though the dock worker's part in Nihlus' kidnapping had been small, it still counted as worthy of death in her mind. You did not stab Spectres in the back. They gave everything to keep the galaxy safe. She certainly had.

Eying the body with a frown, she sent a vidcall request to Saren. It picked up almost the second the connection was confirmed.

“Tio'fore.”

“The dockworka Korvis traced from the cameras gave meh anotha lead. I need ta know more about an Asari named P'reen. Sounded like a p, apostrophe, r-e-e-n, if I heard 'im right.”

“I have a secure connection to the archives already open. Hold a moment, and I will see what we have on that name.”

Riaz leaned against the wall of the storage room she'd taken over, watching Saren type furiously into his terminal. Behind him she could see Ankh talking quietly to the Vakarian boy, and it pulled a small smile onto her plush lips. That cop was good people, and Nih did favor him so. It was sweet that he'd come too, but... she did worry about what state they'd be finding their missing torin in when they got to him. Maybe dead. Maybe brutalized. Her smile slipped away thinking about it. Riaz wasn't sure it was going to be good for the Detective to witness. His face was set in a tough mien though, and it looked like he'd be killing everyone involved first and breaking down to mourn second. Good enough. If it was that bad, she'd join him.

Saren was a worry, too. That torin had been a murderous asshole from day one, and truthfully she hadn't cared for the special forces recruit at first, but Nihlus' presence had mellowed him out. It hadn't been until much later, when Nih had quietly told her about Spectre Arterius' brother, that she'd tried to get along with him more. The hateful, unpersonable young torin she remembered from his time as an apprentice made a lot more sense in retrospect.

“We have a personnel file, two short video clips, and several news stories on a Matriarch Apri P'reen. There are also three home addresses, a business address, an estimation of GDP for the household, an out of date assessment on the number of commandos kept on hand, and a ship's registration. Forwarding them all to you now.”

“Thanks much, mah friend. When will ya boys make it out here?”
“We are twenty nine hours and thirty four minutes out from your current position. Inform me immediately if you move.”

“I will do. Ankh's ship is a mite bit slowa than yas though, so ya'll be able ta catch up eitha way. I cannah afford to slow down.”

“Understandable, by all means do not. Call me if you find anything new.”

“Aye. Tio'fore out.”

Riaz closed the call and opened the documents to glance over them. Quickly memorized, she closed her 'tool and left, the cooling corpse being left for whatever unfortunate morning shift worker stumbled by. The area's camera footage would be mysteriously missing when local police went to check it.

The Spectre's mind worked while she walked, beginning to run through the memorized but not yet learned information. Her best bet looked to be the nais' private residence, the second address on the list, which was in the same system but on a different world. Riaz returned to the borrowed Apien Breeze, taking off from Lusia's main space port and turning for the largest moon of Pronoia.

A long sigh escaped the black scaled Drell as she slouched low in the pilot's chair during the short sub-light trip.

'Please be alive me luv, you're jus the brightest, craziest litt'l light. Dun be dead... please...'

The ragged scream that clawed it's way out of his throat was outside the range of noise Nihlus thought he could make. The matching pain was intense, outside his experience of what was possible. Impressive, considering how much physical pain he'd felt in his relatively short life.

The voices in the back of his head appreciated the doctor's technique at least, they'd been critiquing the play-by-play for hours.
When the feeling of ground glass and plasma in his knee joint finally faded, the Spectre started laughing. It was barely more than a horse coughing sound, but it made the lounging Asari Matriarch hum with curiosity, and the younger nais wince just a bit. He had a feeling the doctor didn't actually want to be here, doing this, but denying one's matriarch looked to be about as hard as telling an avah or general 'no'.

The sensation of broken glass and fire filled his other knee cap, and he roared through the pain. When then blind-animal panic and fear took a hold he gave what little focus remained into not keening. For all the medic's skill in torture, they hadn't made him cry yet. Nihlus was pretty proud of that. Doctors could apparently be just as good at taking you apart as putting you back together.

The latest dose of suffering ended, and Nihlus tossed a shaky grin at the lounging nais. He'd tried asking earlier about why they were doing this, to which the Asari had only responded, "It doesn't much matter to you dear boy. You're here to suit my needs."

'Well fuck,' had been his only reply to that. It was kinda difficult to bargain, rationalize, or even just apologize for whatever it was he'd done if they wouldn't share the details. The doctor didn't speak, and the Matriarch lounged on the pillow topped klinê, sipping champagne and smiling beatifically.

Rusty daggers and acid shoved their way under his shin plates as the Matron began de-plating him from the knee down.

“Now that's just fascinating. It's like cleaning shell fish to cook.”

Nihlus' leg burned with the touch of air on exposed muscle. The doctor delicately cleaned the blood away, and sprayed it with an antiseptic. Though it was probably some small kindness, the green eyed torin cackled through breathless coughs at the irony of medical treatment while being tortured to death.

After his left and right shin plates were torn off the nais went for his feet next, and that was a whole new level of fun. At least the shin plates had been single solid plating, removed with acid and scalpel. The many tiny plates and scales around his ankles and down to ruddy brown toes were being pried off bit by bit, and it was so much worse. It still didn't draw out a single cry for mercy, but he did descend into dark, choking laughter and a string of insults in between the peaks of blistering pain.

The edges of Nihlus' vision began to creep in, sight narrowing and hearing fading.
“The nerves in his legs are beginning to stop responding to pain, the stimulus is at a level where his body has begun to stop reporting it, and his heartbeat is fast enough that he may have a cardiac event if we continue.”

The graceful nais set aside the champagne and rose, stepping closer with a mild and inspecting expression.

“Well, we wouldn't want him to die too quickly now. Best patch him up just enough, and start again l-”

A polite knock interrupted the order, as a nais dressed in steward’s livery stepped in with a small bow.

“Matriarch, there is a guest at the door come calling.”

“Is there? Well, we were at a good stopping point anyway.”

The queen bee flounced out of the room with the steward trailing behind, the door clicking quietly shut. Nihlus turned his attention to the doctor, rasping out a question through his abused throat.

“How're ya holding up there doc?”

The nais blinked rapidly at him, the first real expression the medic had made besides stoic determination.

“Why are you... even asking me?”

Nihlus managed a weak little shrug and the ghost of a smile.

“It's p-pretty obvious you don't want to be here any more then I do. I at least signed up for this job. Not s-sure you did.”

The doctor injected him with something, making his heart beat faster in fear for a moment until it
became obvious it was just a mild numbing agent. Oh, *spirits*, that was and cold. Sweet relief.

“No I... it's a long story...” The nais glanced to check that the door remained closed. “For what it's worth I'm so sorry.”

“Don't suppose you could untie me? I promise I'd knock ya out gently and e-everything. They'd never know.”

“I... I can't.”

“Is a money thing? I can get you oodles of credits. Political favors? Spectre comes with a lot of job perks. Whatever it is that bitch has over you, I could probably do it better.”

The doctor gave him a sad little smile, and a head shake.

“No, you really couldn't. Good... good try though.”

“Had to ask.”

The doctor nodded at him and tilted a glass of water to his mouth plates. Nihlus drank, appreciating the liquid like only the direly thirsty can. The voices in the back of his head were torn between trying to play the long game by trying to seduce the medic, or using what leverage he could get right now to bite a blue hand and not let go till the nais let him out of the manacles.

The long game was always a better bet though, especially when the doctor hadn't actually disabled him yet, just maimed. That was either a lucky break, or a kindness on the doctor's part. Nihlus would take what he could get though, and make the best of it. He always did.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: *Stolen Moments* (71278 words) by *MizDirected*
Carpe that fucking diem

Chapter Summary

Garrus gets tossed into a wall and a doorbell is rung.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, you are not allowed to shoot me after you read this chapter. That's rule number one. Rule two is that all of you need to stop being so good at guessing where I'm going with my plot lines. Author-chan thought she was being all sneaky with pronouns and espionage and intel games... instead I have people who chitchat with me in email who are like, ",-and then this could happen, and then this, and oh you're doing this right?", and I'm all like, "Uhhh UHHH no... n-no... none of that was exactly what I had planned... uhhhh... damnit."

Evidently I am not sneaky. u_u;

Chapter Soundtrack: Zone Of The Enders OST1 - Anubis

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Saren, you've got to sleep.”

“Go away.”

Garrus sighed, rubbing the tightness between his brows with the heel of one hand, the other resting on his hip. Specialist Tithe had gone to bed an hour ago, taking Tio'fore's cabin and leaving them to decide who could sleep on the generously sized Turian-style bed in his room, and who got a pull out, military style cot. When the silver-grey Spectre had waved him off to the open room he'd had a feeling that it was less generosity for the nicer space and more a lack of interest in being unconscious.

The Detective had stripped down to underarmor leggings, set his Omni-tool to ping him in an hour, and crashed onto the comfortable surface. When the alarm had gone off he'd fumbled himself out of bed and stepped into the main area under the pretense of getting a glass of water. Saren was still up, pacing circles into the floor.

His instincts had been spot on, and not only was the quietly upset Spectre moving in restless loops, but it was a fast paced, angry march.
The sniper dropped his arms with a huff, moving into the oncoming torin's path. Saren came to a halt not a hand-span away, glaring. Garrus reached out, humming softly, and grasped armored, gun-metal grey shoulders.

“Not sleeping won't make the flight any faster.”

“What about the words 'go away' do you not understand?”

“Staying up late also isn't going to put you at your best for the rescue op-”

Without warning the Spectre shoulder checked him into the wall, going for a restraining grapple hold. Half expecting violence to be the default response, Garrus recovered from the stun quickly and evaded the grasp. Lightning fast silver arms came at him, unfairly augmented with cybernetic joint reinforcements and mechanical servos in the armor. They went back and forth for three or four strike and riposte before the sniper's not insignificant CQC experience couldn't keep up, and the Spectre got a hold of him. Saren slammed his back into the wall, left arm trapped behind him and the right rolled at an odd angle while crossed over his chest. A metal gauntlet held his front arm in place while the other took a hold of his throat, talon guards pressing slightly into hide.

Their pilot's top half leaned out of Riaz's doorway, humming questioningly, looking to still be mostly asleep. Garrus managed to turn his head enough to flash a smile at the torin, albeit a mostly manufactured one. There wasn't a lot of fuel for happiness at the moment, but he made do.

“No worries, everything's fine. Sorry to bother you, Tithe.”

Mellow orange eyes peered blearily back at him, looking slowly from the hand at this throat to the unmoving form on the other end, and back again. With a placid blink the Specialist disappeared back into the cabin, the door swishing shut.

The sniper relaxed into the hold, eyes closed, and waited for the Spectre to let him go.

“If I release you, will you let me be?”

“No, probably not.”
Saren growled lowly, electric blue eyes narrowing.

“What must be done then, to dissuade you? Shall I drug you for the remainder of the journey?”

“I really wish you wouldn’t. Got a better idea though. Why don’t you come join me in-”

The grip on his neck flexed and the tightly wound Spectre exhaled a slow, displeased rumble.

“I have no desire for your variety of... stress relief. Either you will leave me alone, or I will knock you out Vakarian. You are proving to be more trouble than you are worth.”

“That's a lie, and you know it.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.”

“Try none of it.”

Their eyes met for a few moments, quiet determination to tightly reined anger. Garrus tilted his chin up, offering his throat. Saren chuffed with disapproval.

“One of these times you will offer your trust and find I have run out of mercy.”

“Bullshit. If you killed me I'd be pretty damn sure you did it for a good reason, not just because I annoyed you.”

“How can you be certain?”
A breathy almost-chuckle escaped the Detective, and he clicked his tongue as if it should be obvious.


The Spectre growled at the Officer some more, glaring up into his face with displeasure. Garrus wasn’t trying to pick a fight, just get under the torin’s plates some, so he grabbed for the next easiest show of accord he could, leaning his head forward to softly tap it against Saren’s. The ST&R agent jerked back, startled, and chuffed aggravation at him.

“Saren, really, I'm not trying to talk you into bed with me. I just trying to talk you into bed in general. For Nihlus. You've got to sleep to be in good shape.”

“Meddlesome, insubordinate brat. I will rest an appropriate amount before we arrive, on my own time. There is plenty of opportunity before we will be in system.”

“Please?”

“Do you ever give up mothering everyone around you?”

“Do you ever stop being being grumpy as hell?”

“Language, Vakarian,” was the silver-grey torin’s hissed reply, laced with offended subvocals.

“Okay, okay... sorry. That was... a bit much. I apologize.”

Saren give him the evil eye for a moment before humming with a very small amount of tentative forgiveness. The Spectre stepped back to let him up, and Garrus did so, shaking out the arm that had been falling asleep behind him.

“So... how much more can I bother you to take care of yourself before you toss me out the airlock?”

“Very little.”
“I better make my last offensive count then.”

The Detective managed a small grin through the ever-presence worry and fear that hung low in his gizzard, forcing it for Saren's sake. He nabbed the Spectre's gauntleted hand, and tugged him toward the second bedroom's open door. The torin resisted.

“No. Every time I give you an inch of leeway, the next thing I know you have half my armor off.”

“Just the gauntlets?”

“Why?”

Garrus squeezed meaningfully, giving the motion a half knead reminiscent of the hand massages that normally worked so well. It barely made it through the gloves, but Saren looked down and away when he did it.

“I do not wish to relax, Vakarian. I am tense, yes, and it is how I wish to be for the moment. Release me.”

Garrus did, with another long sigh.

“Fine. Alright. Just... don't kill yourself worrying.”

“I am not worried.”

The Detective gave Saren a flat, disbelieving look, to which the Spectre chuffed dismissively. The standoffish Turian rolled his shoulder out as he turned away, back to his pacing.

“Either my protégé is alive enough to recover, and we will very publicly destroy whoever took him as a message to any who would try such a thing again, or he is not, and we will recover whatever remains before proceeding. Worry has no use here.”
The Spectre sounded more like he was trying to convince himself.

“Okay. Just do me one favor.”

“What?”

“It’s just Garrus.”

The silver-grey torin paused in his walking away, crest turning as he spun just enough to look back. The subtle glow of Saren's cybernetic vision implants locked with the sniper's gaze for a few still heartbeats before the Spectre nodded ever so slightly. The Detective got a strong sense of 'still waters run deep' from the expression in those artificial eyes. The sheer number of suppressed, half felt, thousand-cut emotions in that look stole his breath for a moment, and he wanted nothing more then to pull the torin to him and swear it would be alright.

But that... wasn't what Saren wanted.

Garrus stepped back and watched the Spectre resume his endless circling, thinking that maybe... maybe Saren just didn't know what to do with being worried about someone.

The sniper shook his head, slowly returning to the second cabin to catch what sleep he could.

Riaz landed the borrowed skycar right outside the doors to the P'reen estate. She eyed the doorbell for an aggravated half second before hitting it. The Spectre really just wanted to bust in and demand Nih’s location, but one didn't just door crash a Matriarch dynasty. Legally possible, sure, but the memories of Asari were very, very long, and every Spectre from a shorter lived species was warned that their offenses would be paid for by the following generations of ST&R agents, when the Asari they’d offended remembered it seven hundred years later on the day a Spectre came calling for intel or aid.

The bell chimed a merry tune, and a voice came over the speaker.
‘Hello, and welcome Spectre. My name is Ailer, how may I assist you today?’

‘I'm 'ere on official business. I need ta meet with Apri P'reen immediately.’

‘One moment, our steward will be at the door shortly to escort you in, and I will personally go find and inform Matriarch P'reen of your visit.’

‘Ya, a'right. Thanks.’

A sharply dressed nais answered the elegantly engraved double doors shortly there after, waving the Drell in with a smile.

‘This way, Spectre. Allow me to escort you to one of our sitting rooms while you wait?’

‘Thas fine.’ The graceful nais led them down several well-appointed hallways done in light tones and swirling filigree before stepping inside a cozy sitting room with a beautiful hydroponics display all along the walls. Riaz cased the room for exits and camera, taking a seat facing the door.

‘If you'll wait there, Matriarch P'reen will be with you shortly.’

The Spectre nodded, waiting only long enough for the nais to shove off to begin deep scanning the estate for life signs. There were many, over a hundred at least, but none of the them were Turian.

The doors slid open again shortly there after, and a curious but pleasantly smiling Asari came in and took a seat across from her, servants trailing in with refreshments. They waited patiently the twenty seconds or so the help took to lay out their burden and depart.

‘Welcome to my home, Spectre. May I ask what brings you to us?’

Riaz eyed the Matriarch, thinking the nais looked rather young for the post, but shrugging it off as unimportant.

‘I'm lookin' for a fellow agent o' mine who's gone missin'...’
Laelinrae Trein stepped into the sitting room to greet the guest who had come calling.

It was one of the family intelligence contacts, a Volus who was smart enough to keep his mouth shut but dumb enough to just keep taking the hush money.

“Matriarch Trein, I hope I'm not interrupting your day?”

“Of course not, Mr. Hezza. I was just torturing the fool who murdered my fifth daughter. Sweet boy thought he could kill my precious little Madam and get away with it. Stole the slaves too!” The Asari tsked, as if the whole thing were just the worst mess of the week.

“Well, now we're peeling his pretty red plates off. It's very satisfying. So what did you need, m'dear?”

“I have a new prospect for smuggling out in the Kepler Verge, I thought you might like to hear about it?”

“Oh yes, how wonderful! I've been wanting to set up somewhere new for my youngest to try their hand in some business affairs. That would be such a good area to start. Not too uncivilized, you understand?”

“Of course, Matriarch.”

“Well then, do talk business.”
A/N: Sorry Riaz... your princess is in another castle. :/

Fanfic Recommendation: Venri (291,012 words) by Recidiva (FemShep/Garrus. Audio book version also available on YouTube.)
It smelled of almonds, deceptfully

Chapter Summary

So many 'almost's coming to a head.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Familia Notas - The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition.)

Rites-sister/rites-brother - The Turian equivalent to 'sister in law' or 'brother in law', except that the permanent nature of bonding makes these people family for life as well. The term only applies to family members of bonds that also went through one of the official, and legally recognized bonding ceremonies.

A/N: A little bit short, but I had such a hard time writing this. I kept wanting to scrap it all and go straight to something with more fluff, but... the story deserves better then being at the whims of my tenderheartedness. Just hold on, duckies. We'll get there.

Chapter Soundtrack: InFamous 2 OST - Abducted

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four shadows ran through the artificial night, speeding along through the warehouse district at an hour most people spent very asleep. Saren ran at their head, outpacing the rest easily by dint of a mild self-lightening field. There was a very good chance that his protégé was in the building at the end of this route, and he was having a hard time not leaving his back up to make their own time.

They had been hunting for Nihlus for days, hitting dead ends and false leads enough for it to be obvious that the kidnapping had been premeditated. The chances of finding the missing Spectre dropped every hour, and were already abysmal.
He very carefully did not think about it. Instead the silver-grey torin focused on the pace of their run, the feel of the M-4 Carnifex in his hand, and their rapidly approaching destination.

Not three steps behind him Tio'fore ran, breathing ragged and eyes bloodshot. He did not think the Drell had stopped searching since the moment the beacon had gone off, save for a few moments to eat and drink while still on the move, surviving on cat naps during transit and stimulants. Her black scales had paled out to a lackluster dark grey, and her arms trembled constantly. The female Spectre's aim suffered for it, but not enough to force them to leave her behind.

Just beyond Tio'fore was her personal shadow. Specialist Tithe's eyes constantly drifted between the way forward and the weakening form of his rites-sister. Saren refrained from expressing any derision at the torin's preoccupation with the Drell's health. Though he would rather the mellow infiltrator stay focused on the task at hand, he could not blame him for the concern. The woman really did look half-alive.

Their final number was huffing and puffing, trying to stay even with him, eyes set in a deadlock forward. Saren approved. That focus was what he wanted turned on Nihlus' safety, if it could still be secured.

They had chased leads all over the system, and forced local ship traffic to a crawl by requiring the nearby Mass Relay's traffic control to scan and ID all entities onboard any ships leaving the system. It had rattled loose a few stray sentient trafficking violations that they had left to the local authorities, but no word of his protégé.

Their last, best lead appeared as the group rounded a corner.

Agent Tiin had been supporting their efforts from the Citadel's Spectre Offices, contacting countless sources and digging through hacked security footage for the slightest hint of Nihlus' whereabouts. A few half-obscured still frames from private video feeds and security cameras had lead them to several locations, and a few more details had gotten them in touch with a local information broker.

Now here they were, nearly at the entrance to a massive warehouse stretched over a full city block. The doors were just ahead.

“Garrus, get those unlocked. Tithe, scan the facility.”

Saren spun around, putting his back to the wall beside the door. His fellow Spectre did the same on
the other side, her shadow crouching down beside her to minimize his profile as he scanned. Garrus went in between them, face into his Omni-tool as he hacked the doors open. It was done in less than a minute, and the sniper dropped to a knee, Lancer raised as the portal opened.

Inside the lights were flickering on one by one, starting from the entrance and moving deeper into the massive room. The illumination shed light on countless rows of shelving, endless products of one sort or another stretching out farther then the light had yet to reach.

“I've got life signs, three o'clock, second floor offices by the looks of it.”

Saren took off in that direction, leaving the others to keep up or be left behind.

Nihlus stared dully at the ceiling, worrying about Saren.

The brutalized torin was pretty sure he was going to die sometime tomorrow, maybe the day after if he fought for it, but having the strength to hold on much longer was an iffy prospect. As things stood, it was a long shot that he would ever walk again, never mind return to being a Spectre, and without that... there wasn't a ton of things going for him.

The mangled torin wasn't sure he really... wanted to live anymore. Not like this. Nihlus was beginning to get used to the idea that maybe it was just his time.

The green eyed Spectre coughed, trying in vain not to move as the rattling bursts took him. Movement was devastatingly painful. His torso was a ruin of stitches and stab wounds. His arms and legs were worse, entirely de-plated from the elbows and knees down. Nihlus could see entire muscle groups underneath sterile, semi-transparent medi-gel.

’Spirits,’ he thought, inspecting the ugly mess. 'I wouldn't even be a decent fuck anymore. Can't even breathe right.’ The Spectre laughed internally, a dark and hopeless chortle, vaguely curious how many plates they could take away before he wasn't Turian any longer. The thought was morbid, and further depressing, so the slowly dying Spectre turned his mind back to the people he cared about. He wanted his last thoughts to be about them anyway.

Nihlus started working on a theoretical will, one he'd never actually gotten around to sitting down
and writing. Considering the details only gave him more regrets. There wasn't much in his accounts. He owned a bunch of cool armaments, a ship, and that was really it. He didn't have anything else to leave to people, and for some reason he really wished he'd set aside things to be given to his friends after he croaked. Letters with heartfelt words delivered with silly trinkets and nice sized checks.

That was what people were supposed to do, right? Leave behind money and mementos? Maybe that was just in the vids... Nihlus didn't really know. He'd inherited a whole lot of nothing in his life.

Tears started gathering, making the verdant green of his eyes shine bitterly, but he shook them away, grinding his jaw to chase them off. The Spectre had come this far without keening after endless days of torture. He wasn't about to wuss out now, not with the end in sight.

Going out without giving up that one last thing to these sick fucks sounded pretty good. It was the small things, right?

His thoughts meandered for a while, but inevitably cycled back around to Saren and Garrus.

Nihlus was honestly worried about his former mentor. The torin was an asshole on his best days, and an unholy terror on his worst. Unpersonable, ruthless, and short tempered with anyone who couldn't keep up with him. Which was most people, to be fair. The silver-grey agent was a genius, a prodigy, and... and very alone in the world, except for him. Well, him and Blue. That thought made him smile, just a little. He really hoped that Garrus didn't let Saren wander out into the black by himself and not talk to anyone outside of missions for years, because the cold torin would if they let him. The next few lonely hours were spent imagining the Detective joining up with Saren, like Ankh worked with Riaz. Nihlus thought about them drinking kava together on the couch and talking about the good old times when he was still alive, missing him. They would talk to his spirit in the quiet hours, and he would be there listening, -oh hell yes he would-, watching over them... however that worked.

The door creaked open at some point as his jailers returned. The Spectre couldn't tell how long it had been since the nais had last left, nor how long he'd been here overall. Torture had a funny way of dilating time.

“Hmm. I'm wondering if we've gotten all the use out of him that we could. Our Spectre looks rather done.”

“Would you like me to euthanize him?”
The ancient nais eyed him with consideration similar to how people looked over produce at the grocery store.

“Are you cognizant, lovely boy?”

Nihlus shuddered, flinching further from the pain of moving, and the Matriarch laughed with delight. The psychotic Asari had never once told the doctor to cut up on his features that the crazy nais enjoyed, and had quickly discovered that he hated hearing the bitch praise his facial structure or the swooping full body extensions to his *familia notas* he'd given himself. Trien liked to coo at him as the medic cut away pieces, smiling into a delicate blue hand when it would nearly make him vomit.

“Well maybe we haven't quite finished with him yet. What do you think, shall we work on the finger bones today? It would be just the perfect thing, to see how many pieces his hand bones can be in.”

“...Yes, ma'am.”

Weak, dying, and on his last dregs of will to live, Nihlus' spent the day not really screaming in pain, so much as choking on his own saliva from the over stimulation of raw nerves and innumerous wounds. The medic broke his hands into fifty three bone fragments, each side.

Still, he didn't cry.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A big thank you to my active readers who have been bribing me for chapters with idiot-proof cooking recipes. (I'm a pretty iffy at cooking.) I'm gunna try making each and every one. <3

Fanfic Recommendation: Absolute Magnitude (41,634 words) by Evil Is A Relative Term
Queen to H4, checkmate

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is on the edge of the rooftop, looking down at the long drop with readiness. Saren's world is simplified to targets and a pathway. Riaz finds her little light, and wants to set flame to all that threatens it. Garrus cares nothing for retribution, not so long as it's return fire and not vengeance. Ankhleas is relieved not to be evacuating ruins.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Plate - The general term for all Turian epidermic tissue, besides hide. Most often refers to the larger sections of fully solid plating.

Scale - Thin boney plates, from 1 to 30 cm in size, usually overlapping, on the Turian body. Generally clustered around joint sections, such as the waist, or as support between internal bone structure, such as the distance between knuckles.

Scute - Semi-flexible scales made of keratin deposits in the hide. Usually formed around areas where larger plates transition into hide, and on the extremities.

Horn - The hard, dense areas of Turian external anatomy, such as the fringe, hip crest, and spurs.

A/N: I love the suggestions I've been getting on how to best murder the shit out of Matriarch Trien. You guys are really spiteful, creative sorts aren't you? Heh. Meeeee toooo.

Chapter Soundtrack: The Path - Miracle Of Sound

Long roads through the raging days  
Walked the world upon my wary way  
Bestowed with the blade and phrase  
Far too long I've been a lonesome stray  
These lines upon my brow  
They beckon to me now  

...  
I've followed the path so long  
I've weathered this tide  
Through everything carried on  
It's hardened my hide  
I've followed the path so long  
The oldest pain is fading now at last  
Oh, at the end of the path
The medic, whose name he still didn’t know, held his head up with gentle hands to slowly tilt water into his mouth. They were alone again, the Matriarch off somewhere handling business affairs. Nihlus drank, grateful for the water, and especially for the apologetic way the Matron would smooth a hand over his crest. Every nice feeling was a hundred times more potent for all the pain he’d been in lately.

“I want—” he got out in a broken rasp, vocal chords shredded from screaming so much. His attempt to speak descended into wet, hacking wheezes. The doctor blinked away tears, biting at a pink glossed lower lip, and stroked his fringe through the convulsions. Nihlus tried again once the worst had passed.

“Doc, p... please. Just... end it. I c-... I can't take... t-this...”

The Matron stepped back, hands clasped tightly over those glossy lips he kept getting distracted by, eyes shut tight, and slowly nodded. Nihlus laughed weakly at himself, both for being distracted by sexual thoughts even when nearly dead, and also for begging. Begging to be killed... it wasn't how he’d pictured going out. His somewhat romanticized imaginings had always involved more explosions and martyrdom.

That was the moment the door disintegrated in a flare of indigo hued biotic entropy, and Saren Arterius stepped into the room looking like death incarnate.

Nihlus looked up in shock, eyes locking with his former mentor's in a frozen instant of recognition. He saw the torin recoil from the image he must make, and it hurt to see that small rejection, but the split second ended and the biotic's aura flared high. A furious growl rolled out over the room, and electric blue eyes narrowed in on the doctor. Saren began to spin out a memetic he didn't recognize, aimed at the Asari standing wide eyed and stock-still.

“N-no! Nn-!” Nihlus cried out, descending into hacking coughs again. It wasn't enough. The rage in Saren’s expression was feral, and the memetic continued on, sparking into a reave. The Matron screamed in pain as the multitude of tiny mass effect fields tore into flesh.

“S-Saren! SAREN, u-ghk,” He choked on air, weakly reaching for his rage-lost friend. “S-Stop! Sa-” His abused body couldn't give much more, but thank the spirits a heavy pair of gauntlets came around and pulled on the biotic’s arms.
Saren spun to face the interloper, visibly pausing when it was Garrus that came into view rumbling steadying, low-key subvocals. Some of the madness left the torin's demeanor, but his low bass growl didn't quit. The Spectre turned back around and stalked forward to the bedside, carelessly tossing the medic out of the way.

Gunmetal-grey gauntlets reached out for him, but stopped. Probably afraid to touch the ruinous mess he'd been reduced to. Nihlus caught his breath and hummed, quietly pleading for the torin to touch him. Some sort of contact. Anything that wasn't pain.

Saren leaned over him, trembling in anger, and set their foreheads together with a feather-light touch.

“Nihlus.”

“H-hey.”

“You are alive.”

“Sort... of.”

“Enough.”

The biotic torin pulled back, expression relaxed into a more recognizable calm, if not a complete one, as he began undoing the shackles that held his protégé spread eagle over the bed.

In a low murmur Saren asked, “Why do you not wish me to kill that one?”

“Doc's been... u-under... duress.”

“I see.”

Saren turned to the discarded Matron just as a very weary looking Drell came sprinting in the door, trailed by her shadow. Riaz came to a sudden halt, staring at him with wide eyes before screeching his nickname joyously and scuttling in closer.
“NIH!”

“Hey,” he descended into wet coughs again, a small grin breaking though the pain.

“Oh gods, yer alive! Lady Arashu, be praised. Now, who did this to ya? Who do I have ta kill? I'm gunna wreck so many people. I mean, we killed a lot already, but I'd be thrilled to keep goin' from the sight of ya. Was it this one 'ere?”

“No... Matriarch... Trien.”

“Aw hell! Ohhhh, what a mess you are, mah luv. Let's get ya out of this place first, and then we'll be killin' that foolin' Asari, don't ye worry now.”

Saren swooped over to pick the doctor up off the floor by the front of the nais' medical smock.

“Where is Trien?” The silver-grey Spectre's previous calm might have been something of a lie. His face remained less enraged, but the subvocals behind that question veritably dripped with intent to murder.

“I have no idea! The Matriarch was... was... ahhh... going to a meeting! I don't know where, I swear!”

“Hmp, fine. Tithe, secure the... witness.” Saren turned back around, hands gesturing wide to spread a biotic field over him. Nihlus hummed at the feeling. The mild tingle and growing weightlessness was pleasant, and the weak Spectre sighed in relief as his former mentor lifted him straight up off the blood stained tarp with perfect control that didn't so much as jostle him. Careful arms came in to pull him close, his knees draped weightlessly over one forearm, carapace supported by the other, and head lollled over onto a shoulder pauldron. As the biotic pulled them away from the table and toward the doorway he grasped at his former mentor's collar, pulling himself in to warm neck hide. He'd been getting colder constantly since capture, so the bliss of heat and safe contact was almost enough to make him forget how close he'd just been to a mediocre, premature end.

There were sounds in the back ground, of typing and talking, sighs of relief and friendly bickering, but he felt distant from it all. There was nothing real except for the barely-there biotic hold on him, and the smell of Saren's hide. Nihlus put off thinking about how useless he was going to be after this, crippled and weak. He ignored the roaring hunger in his stomach and the pain of breathing.
It was just him, and the arms carrying him away from this place.

He hoped Riaz blew it right the fuck up.

“I wannah blow it up, boys. This place should burn.”

Garrus considered the walls of the building they’d finally come to as they returned down the hallway. Their infiltration of the warehouse had nearly been the end, the occupants had all been innocent workers... except one. A shifty Volus had set both his and Saren’s mental suspicion alarms off. They’d grilled the man, good cop-bad cop style, until the trader had slipped up in his nervousness. The electric eyed Spectre had taken off one heavy metal gauntlet and showed the Volus his very sharp talons, saying simply, “Talk, or I will pop you like the useless bag of flesh you are.”

Graphic, for Saren, but also effective. The Volus had confessed all sorts of things in terror, even unrelated criminal facts, and begged for his life. They’d left him cuffed to his desk for later, and instead taken off for the three story in-city apartments the trader had pointed them too.

Lavishly decorated with more hardwood and gilding then the Detective had seen outside a madlis, their preemptive scans had found a weak vitaled Turian life sign on the elevator ride up. Saren had been an unstoppable force of nature since.

Garrus was pretty sure he was one of the best snipers, CQC fighters, and all-around engineers in the galaxy. In the top thousands, at least. Watching the furious biotic rip through those corridors of commandos and defensive security made him feel like a civilian. The Spectre had been an unholy terror, leaving blood and screams in his wake, only coming to a stand still at the final doorway, covered in viscera and biotic glow.

If the Detective hadn't been so caught up in desperation for that life sign to be Nihlus, he might've been distractedly turned on. It had been incredible.

“I don't think that's a good idea, Tio'fore. There are other people that live here.”
The Drell glared at the walls, like it was their fault.

“Damn it! What about tha warehouse?”

Ankhleas snorted. “Also filled with unrelated, innocent people just doing their jobs.”

Riaz made a cute little growl, sounding comically high pitched to Turian ears.

“I cannah blow up that place? I cannah blow up this place? What can I blow up then?!”

Garrus shrugged, trying to catch a glimpse of Nihlus over Saren's shoulder. *Spirits* did he look bad. They were headed for a hospital, right?

“How about this Trien person, whenever we find them.”

The black scaled woman harrumphed in annoyance. “Aye, fine then... I call dibs on blowin' up tha Matriarch.”

“Granted,” came Saren's dangerous sounding rumble from the front of their group. Riaz smiled beatifically.

They did not, in fact, go straight to a hospital. The group returned to the ship, where Saren unlocked the CIC with voice commands and nodded Garrus into the pilot's seat.

“Rendezvous with the Apien Breeze,” he'd said, before disappearing with Nihlus' broken form into medbay. The stolid torin hadn't emerged since.

Tio'fore tiredly crawled into Garrus' lap, to his mild discomfort, and borrowed a side panel of the holo-ring to look into Matriarch Trien in the Citadel archives. She got a secure download going, and sent off a request to Agent Tiin for a more comprehensive report, before passing out right where she was. He didn't have the heart to wake the exhausted Spectre and ask her to move. It was fine, the
tiny Drell wasn't exactly heavy.

Garrus set them en route, making the jump calculations for the in-cluster Mass Relay hop. He double checked everything twice to ensure it was the smoothest ride possible. Once the Daedalus had arrived across the jump and was running on sub-light engines toward the local space port he leaned back, incredibly tired himself. Thanks to his gene mods and augments, not to mention better self-care habits then most of his fellow rescuers, he wasn't physically at the limit, but emotionally... the Detective was very done.

Tio'fore curled into his waist, hunting warmth, and he chuckled at the somewhat adorable awkwardness. That was definitely not a friendly way to hold onto a Turian, but the woman wasn't even conscious to notice or care. He tried to gently loosen her grip while leaning over the side of the command chair to see where Tithe had gotten to. The quiet torin was passed out on the settee, soundless and mostly indistinguishable from his heavy cloak.

With a little finagling he managed to lift the black scaled Drell and carry her to the lounge chair that Saren favored. Very slowly, he set the Spectre down, and covered her with one of the blankets from Nihlus' stash of them beneath the couch.

Garrus turned to the hallway leading back to medbay, to tired to think. His feet led him onward though, and he tapped the door panel without realizing it. Inside Nihlus was passed out on the table, the medi-bot working over his torso as Saren sat beside the bed, deeply focused on attaching what looked like new scales to one of his protégé's hands.

Startled back to better clarity, the Detective scoped the room trying to understand where Saren had suddenly gotten new scales for Nihlus. The work table revealed the answer though. Saren had been painstakingly recreating plates, scutes, and scales from a combination of delicately made cybernetics and faux-real looking mass-fabricated coating. Uncertain how that would even work, but curious and still worried for the sleeping torin's well being, he stepped inside and took a tired lean against the wall at the foot of the bed.

It was quiet for a while, long enough for Saren to finish the meticulous work he was doing on the latest piece. The Spectre rose from his focused hunch, rolling his neck out while perusing the available pieces of plating laid out on a tray, likely selecting the next one to attach. Garrus wondered if the torin even knew he was here.

“Did you need something?” Well, that answered that question.

“You're... making him new scales?”
“Yes. I would rather not leave the damage done as is for a plastic surgeon to handle, as there are few enough living nerves to attach the cybernetics to as is. Waiting would only worsen the situation, and I would like to restore as much feeling to his limbs as possible. I also do not expect a general medical practitioner to give the reattachment the same amount of... attention to detail.”

Garrus nodded, considering both points to be fair. He stood out of his lean and moved closer to the bedside where Saren was doing something nearly imperceptibly minute to the next piece.

“How can you even see what you're doing? Don't doctors usually require robotic assistance to implant cybernetics?”

Saren looked up at him with calm electric eyes, making the answer suddenly obvious.

“I can see the attachment sites perfectly, Garrus.”

“Ah... yeah, sorry. Obvious, now that I think about it. The ah, the adrenaline is wearing off. I'm just too tired to think straight.”

The stolid Spectre nodded, gesturing with one curious medical implement toward the door.

“You are welcome to use my cabin, as I suspect the settee is taken by this point.”

“It is. Tithe is on the couch, Tio'fore on the chair. She's small enough to fit, strangely enough. I never realized she was so tiny.”

Saren half-nodded, picking up his next addition with delicate prongs and setting it over the attachment site. His hands were rock steady in a way that said augments and intense focus were at work. The Detective waited for him to finish before expecting a reply. It took nearly twenty minutes to connect one small section of new plate to the right nerve clusters.

“Tio'fore's personality often makes her seem larger than she is. A common misconception.”
“I bet. So... how are you holding up?”

“I took a stimulant cocktail to ensure I am able to remain awake and clear minded for some time.”

“Not exactly what I meant, but okay.”

The Spectre tilted his crest in a dismissive manner.

“I am fine. It is Nihlus that you should be concerned about.”


“... My apologies, I worded that poorly. I did not intend to imply that there was an active reason for concern, merely that his general well being is of higher priority at the moment.”

Garrus scrubbed a hand over his fringe, exhaling the tiny spike of fear the words had inspired.

“Okay. Yeah. So he's good?”

“He will be.”

“Anything... long term?”

Saren went silent again, at that inopportune moment, adding an itsy bitsy, ruddy brown pseudo-scute by a knuckle joint. The Detective suddenly realized with no small amount of disbelief that the silver-grey torin was replacing the stripped plate in a nearly exact pattern to Nihlus' original topography.

'How is he even doing that?' the sniper wondered, mystified. 'Why is he doing it?'

Nihlus would be covered in hundreds of thousands of credits in tiny, aesthetically accurate cybernetics by the time his former mentor was done. Garrus could understand wanting to retain
physical feeling on hide and plate, but to be so intensely accurate with the recreation seemed somewhat insane.

“...Yes, he will have several chronic health issues. Nothing that will be impossible to compensate for, however. His bones in particular will need a great deal of reinforcement. It will be a good opportunity to layer a few structural and medical weaves through his extremities though, so it is not of any particular concern.”

“.. and you're restoring his plates to the *exact* same pattern as before?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Have you ever been tortured before?”

“Not by an enemy, no, just standard resistance training.”

“Hmmm. Good. Your trainers may not have explained this in detail, but the Turian psyche does not handle torture well. Physical violence with no recourse to fight back leaves most of our kind debilitated in ways that cause lasting effects to mental fortitude and self confidence. Much of Nihlus' work is built on his self confidence as an infiltrator, thus it is imperative that he not suffer those effects. I am simply attempting to... minimize the lingering damage by removing signs of the trauma's occurrence.”

“So, what... to make it like it never happened?”

“Precisely. Perhaps not the healthiest coping method, but one I am sure Nihlus will attempt regardless. He buries things he does not wish to face. This will enable him to do so more successfully.”

Garrus hummed softly with worry into the quiet of the medbay. Saren nodded in agreement and returned to adding more scutes to Nihlus' fingers, connecting tiny false plating to freshly cloned and mildly inflamed hide. Even the color was perfect. The Detective shook his head, not quite understanding, but happy at least that Nihlus would still look like himself afterward. His sometime-lover was a little vain on occasion, so it definitely couldn't hurt.
He decided to take the Spectre up on his offer, and headed out of medbay, being careful to avoid so much as glancing at the injury report on the medical suite's readouts. Garrus didn't want to know, he really didn't.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Chapter title is the finishing move to the infamous 'checkmate in two moves' chess strategy. As an aside, CrystalDePhoenix found a nice discussion on levo-dextro here if you're interested in reading more about it. Just skip the first few posts though, they're misinformed, jump to about half way down, where the commentor starts clarifying the whole kit-n-kaboodle in a large multi-paragraph essay starting with, “Ok first I will answer the main question...” Now that's some good science right there. Mmmhmm.

A/N/N: Garrus is so confused about Saren's overly precise plastic surgery for Nihlus. Well... physical beauty might be beyond him. The torin spent how long scarred as hell with a 50k platinum restorative device on board the Normandy, literal steps from where he slept? Yeahhh. Vakarian has no idea what use aesthetics are, except for cracking jokes. Either that, or he kept the big ass scar for his squad, as a reminder. Umm... Yeah, also possible. I dunno how that goes, depends on how you mindcanon Garrus. Maybe he's grim-dark Turian batman, maybe he's fly boy sniper, maybe he's both. For now, I decided he doesn't much care about looks though. I mean... he does romance someone from a different species, right? Meh. It's mindcanon canon now. And yes, for the record, Saren is free-handing neurosurgery. Freaking crazy-competent asshole. How even?

Fanfic Recommendation: Ill Moon (3,290 words) by orangeflavor (“He silences the quake of her lips with his own needful mouth. They kiss, and they kiss, and they drown.” That really sums it up, right there. Whoof. FemShep/Thane. )
The afterimage of fall is inevitably winter

Chapter Summary

No torin is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every Turian is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Palaven is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any torin's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in our kind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.
(Original by John Donne)

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Auto-cannibalism - point at which the body begins to break down existing healthy tissue in order to provide critical nutrients to core systems. A concern for Biotics, particularly those from a rapid-metabolism species, as their abilities consume ever increasing amounts of energy as they develop and become stronger.

A/N: Oh, mah goodness, you all are going to love this chapter. I love this chapter. I didn't write it, they did. I just typed, and sat there overwhelmed at the end.

Chapter Soundtrack: Jo Blankenburg - Hymn Of The Apocalypse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus was awoken suddenly by a heavy thud from somewhere nearby. Startled from deep unconsciousness, he was halfway into a defensive crouch before realizing where he was and who had made the noise.

It was Saren, but the stoic Turian was pale throated and sweating, brows furrowed as he struggled to move away from the wall holding him up. Without missing a beat Garrus rolled from the mattress
and moved to help, pulling the silver-grey torin's arm over his bare collar. The depleted agent came willingly as the sniper steadied them, tilting Saren into him and making for the bed in a slow stagger.

“You look terrible... are you going to be alright?’’

The Detective expected a reply somewhere between scathing redirection and bland indifference, but what he received instead was a hesitant nod. Worried, he glanced at the clock to check the time. It had been nearly six hours since he’d left the biotic alone to work on Nihlus.

“Please tell me you haven't been in medbay this whole time,’’ he inquired while slowly lowering them to the mattress. Saren didn't reply, but fell back into the sheets with a relieved sigh. Garrus rumbled out displeasure.

“You are just... shit at taking care of yourself. Really, really terrible at it. You may be good at everything else, but you... I can't believe you're just now stopping. Have you even eaten anything?’’

The Spectre's eyes remained closed, clenched as if he had a terrible headache. A dispirited sounding growl buzzed from the silver-grey Turian, too soft and wavering to be convincing.

“Stay here, and don't fall asleep yet. You're going to auto-cannibalize if we don't put food in you. Probably why you have a headache.”

The silent treatment continued, emphasized by the Spectre rolling away toward the far side of the bed and curling in on himself, armor and all. Garrus shook his head and headed for the kitchen, walking softly on bare feet to avoid disturbing the other individuals passed out in the main area.

He peeked into medbay on the way through, stalling on a long stare at the sleeping torin. Nihlus still looked like hell. Though he now had a full hide, and no small amount of restored plating, everywhere the Detective looked his friend was either emaciated or inflamed. The heart beat on the monitor was a little too rapid, and his core temperature was running low even though the ship’s thermostat seemed to be turned up at the moment.

Garrus checked the ambient temperature on his visor out of curiosity. It was just over 39° C. That was nearly Turian body temperature, but the reasoning was self evident. Saren had done it to ensure his protégé's form had an easier time staying warm. Less stress, more recovery.
Unable to help the motionless torin on the medical suite's bed, and reluctant to mess anything up by touching him, the Detective returned to his quest for edibles.

Digging around netted him a large handful of nutrient bars, a couple of cans of a calorie-rich drink for biotics, and a bottle of vitamin laced water. Probably not the meal the diminished Spectre needed, but the best he could do on short notice. It wasn't as if Garrus could cook to save his own life, nevermind someone else's.

The sniper returned to the main cabin, and set the items beside him on the bed.

“Saren? Still conscious?”

“Mnnn... no,” was said softly, in a scratchy and annoyed drawl.

Garrus chuckled, cracking the tab on one of the cans.

“I guess I'll just pour this over your head then, and hope some sinks in.”

With a displeased rumble the exhausted torin rolled over, eyes open only a thin slit as he glared at the world in general. The Spectre swiped at the drink, impatiently downing it in one go, which reduced him to an out of breath pant as he shoved the can back at the Detective and turned away once more.

Garrus tore open a wrapper on a nutrient bar and held it out next. When the silver-grey biotic didn't immediately take it, the sniper wafted it back and forth, humming encouraging subvocals.

“Unng... Vakarian, for one stop trying to feed me. Two, cease being excessively obnoxious about it. Or I will lock you in the bathroom.” Saren's threat generation apparently evaporated when he was tired. That was probably the least intimidating statement he had ever heard the grouchy torin make. The Spectre's weak voice and lethargic movements didn't do him any favors either.

“I'm sorry, who are you talking to? There are an awful lot of people with the last name Vakarian...”

The exhausted, temperamental growl that provoked made the sniper grin tiredly, and he took a small bite of the nutty rations, overtly humming about how good it was. Saren snagged the food from his
hand and shoved the Detective off the bed in one go, finally rolling over again, only to curl around the pile of much needed calories possessively.

In the mean time, Garrus fell off the bed entirely, landing on his ass with the grace of a long time martial artist. The cold floor wasn't exactly comfortable on his thinly clothed back side, but he gave the exhausted torin his much vaunted personal space for the moment. Garrus chuffed, tossing an arm up on the bed to lean against. The height was slightly too short, so he made do by tilting his head into a palm, and watching Saren devour the food pile.

The fastidious biotic crumpled up each item's remains and flicked them across the room into the trash. Five ration bars, two cans, and one bottle later, the Spectre sighed upon finding nothing left to consume. His color looked a little better, and he wasn't out of breath anymore, though the headache-squint was still in evidence.

“Want me to go get anything else?”

Saren peered at him, blinking wearily, and hummed a negative. The Spectre gathered blankets to himself and curled his arm around the bunch, setting his head back down as if he couldn't hold it up any longer. The Detective shook his head at the agent once more, and began stealing away pieces of armor. The Spectre grumbled at him, as expected, but cooperated as the sniper removed everything but his undersuit. Fed, watered, and better prepared for rest, Saren curled up into a miserable looking ball. Garrus pulled himself up and onto the bed as well, encircling the wrung out form.

Surprisingly, there was no token rumble to go away, or recoiling body language. Smiling tiredly at that small victory, the sniper nuzzled into the back of Saren's neck, palming his shoulder and humming contentedly as he drifted off.

Saren stared down at his protégé's still form, sharp teeth digging into his gums as he tried to control the battery of emotions that were assaulting his focus. He was trying to consider how best to continue the restorative and augmenting surgeries he had planned for Nihlus, but the cold feeling in his gizzard and tightness in his throat was too distracting.

He sat down heavily, glaring at his unmoving patient for making him... worry.

This was not a problem he had predicted when taking a student, after no small amount of
'encouragement' from the Council to do so. He had expected the carmine plated torin to get himself killed during trial missions, or to fail to complete his rigorous survival training. Saren had high standards, very high, but Nihlus had met them all with time.

The silver-grey Spectre had also predicted the youthful spirited torin would have moments of carelessness, just such as this, but had not realized that he would care quite so much. The distracting symptom was only getting worse with time. He almost regretted letting anyone get near him, for the aggravating loss of mental self-control it provoked.

*Careless.*

His former apprentice had been *much* too careless in the field, to have gotten caught by some small time criminal ring.

Was there some level of paranoia or preparedness that his protégé should have been, and was not?

Did he fail Nihlus somehow, by not teaching him properly?

Worse, would this situation happen again?

Of course... of course it would, and if Saren perished in the line of duty, who would save the knife-loving, green-eyed torin the next time the careless fool was under duress?

Tio'fore was old, as was her shadow. There was no telling how much longer they would be around.

Every other Spectre had their own agenda. Saren would not trust his own mentor with anything more precious than a potted plant, the secretive ex-commando was a nais of far too many mysteries.

If Nihlus died, he was alone. If he died, Nihlus was alone.

The very thought made premature biotic sparks flicker around him, accompanied by a willful desire to growl lowly and kill things.
Saren spun up from his chair, and stalked out of the room, taking up a pacing circle in the main room, grateful that the other Council agents were in the ship following them, and no long aboard. The disturbed Spectre needed the space. Distantly, he could hear Garrus still in the bathroom. The supportive Detective had done anything he had asked all morning, including going elsewhere so he could get some work done. Elsewhere had turned into an excessively long shower, which was perfectly fine.

What was not fine was that the only person they had stumbled upon that was half way reliable and could aim a firearm with any level of competence, and also get along with both he and his protégé, was a Palaven born scion to an ancient clan. What he needed was a disenfranchised and moldable youth, with no other moorings or responsibilities, to train into another Spectre.

Someone to take care of Nihlus, should he himself become unable to.

The thought sparked an idea. A very strange, fascinating idea.

“Is everything okay?”

Saren turned quickly at the voice, dragged back to reality from his somewhat far-fetched planning.

“Karifratrus.”

“Ahh... wait, what?” Garrus asked, eyeing him as if he were of questionable sanity.

“The oath of Karifratrus. I wish to take it with you.”

The Detective blinked at him, subvocals rolling out in tentative confusion. Saren chuffed and crossed his arms defensively.

“It has occurred to me that Nihlus will likely always find ways to get himself into trouble. This was not the first time I have had to... intercede on his behalf. Granted, in our line of work, he has done the same for myself. Regardless...”

He trailed off, trying to find the right words to convince the sniper.
“Regardless, should anything happen to me, there is no one else that would prioritize his safety, save for Tio’fore, and the Drell are a short lived species. Thus, my offer. As is proper, the binding would come with a certain amount of my hol-”

“Okay. Yeah.”

Saren paused at the interjection. He had begun to gesticulate and move with his words to add to their convincingness, but stopped mid-motion at the sudden acceptance. All things considered, he had not thought Garrus would be so easily coerced. Asking for a blood oath was no small matter, it would be legally binding even, should a single recording of the making exist to present in court in the case of a dispute. Not that he expected such a thing from the self-sacrificing torin.

“You are agreeable?”

“I... yeah. I'm... honored.” Garrus rubbed at his neck, appearing nervous. “Definitely.”

“You do not seem so certain. I understand it is not commonly practiced anymore...” The mountainous sniper stepped closer and shook his head rapidly in disagreement.

“I just wasn't expecting it, that's all. I was coming to ask you about lunch and you sort of caught me off guard. But, yes, I know what you're asking, and...” Garrus quarter turned toward the wall, looking into the far distance. “Honestly, my pari has never paid enough attention to anything but his goals, and mari is ill, you know about that, and... if something happened to me Sol would be-”

“Your filian?”

“Yeah, Solana. If someone took me out... I know most families have four or five kids, but it's always been just us. Mari had a hard enough time with her first two pregnancies, and the doctors told her not to try again. I have a ton of cousins, but... Anyway, there is also the fact that we might be in the main branch of the Vakarian clan, but I wouldn’t bet on our Avah taking care of Sol if something, uh... 'impolitic’ were to happen surrounding her work with Blackwatch.”

The icy eyed torin turned back to meet his gaze, expression asking him to understand.
Saren did. He really did. It had always been just Desolas and himself, two against the world.

“Should the worst happen, I would watch over her.”

“That’s all I could ask.”

“You will intercede on my behalf if Nihlus is ever so careless again?”

“Honestly? I would help regardless.”

“Of course you would...”

He gestured a military hand sign for ‘follow’, and moved to the medbay. Nihlus remained asleep, kept in a healing coma by the constantly monitoring medical suite. They both came to a stop at his bed side, and Saren took a deep breath to steady himself. His eyes closed slowly, head tilted down, giving this path forward one final consideration. It was, as far as his immensely clever mind could see, an excellent plan. Garrus was noble, generous, and dutiful. The sniper was more than willing to break rules and throw aside convention for his allies. Nihlus would be in good hands.

He only hoped that Desolas would understand him swearing brotherhood with any other. Would not hold it against him when they finally met again.

He turned sharply, posture straightening formally, and bared a rough skinned palm between them. Meticulously, he slid the opposite thumb talon along a short line. Enough to bleed.

Garrus repeated the motion, his vibrant blue blood welling up very quickly. Saren could hear the Detective’s heart pounding.

Light grey clasped tawny brown, palm to palm, vital fluid mixing in a tradition that was as old as the Turian written word.

“Until and beyond death.” Saren intoned quietly.
“Until and beyond death.” Garrus repeated, reaching out his free hand to draw them together in a masculine hug. The tall sniper's temple pressed to his reassuringly, and finally that distracting and aggravating sense of worry faded to something more manageable.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Lexicon addition (Added here to avoid spoilers)

Karifratrus - a blood oath made between Turians, bonding them as siblings in honor rather than blood. It has its origins in ancient times where clan members swore oaths before going into battle. If one of them died, the family and all dependents of the other would be adopted into the survivor’s family. While the oath-swearers are alive, they are bonded as close or closer than blood. If bond-mates are involved, the bond can be a three (or four) way romantic or platonic relationship. Children of one are considered the children of both. Although no longer extremely common, karifratrus is accepted and honored both socially and legally. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Fanfic Recommendation: The Shepard (43,359 words) by Galexz (Garrus/FemShep)
sugar, spice, and everything nice

Chapter Summary

A council debriefing and mild alarm.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Cepa – A yellow-orange root vegetable that grows commonly on the grassy plains of Palaven, known for its strong scent and savory taste when fried. (Latin for onion.)
Capsicum – A spicy fruit of the Solanoideae family of plants, generally purple in color, they are a popular and cheap spice in rations and frozen meals. (Latin for peppers.)

A/N: Fun Fact: The third race to discover the Citadel was actually the Volus. The Turians are one of the more recent newcomers to the galactic stage, only having been discovered a hundred years into the Krogan Rebellions. Much like Humans in the 'Geth War', they were credited with saving everyone and given a seat on the council. Weirdly enough, the Volus soon petitioned the Hierarchy for 'client race' status. Probably saw a nice, trustworthy bunch of kitty-birds and thought, “Oh yes. They can stand at the front of my bank and look mean. Perfect!”

Chapter Soundtrack: E.S. Posthumus - Ebla

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well done, Spectres. The recovery of one of our own is welcome news, indeed.”

Saren nodded regally at the vidcam. “Thank you, Councilor Valern. We are pleased to have succeeded in the endeavor, and to have uncovered a previously unknown criminal enterprise in the doing. As you will see in the written report, there will be some time needed for recovery, and for clean up of the remaining elements.”

The Salarian Councilor offered them an understanding nod, by far the most 'strike them first' minded of the three.

“What is your estimate on the extent of the crime ring and threat level remaining?”
Saren tilted his head in consideration, unspeaking for a few moments as he formed words around already existing contemplations.

“The Matriarch had no small number of daughters, and the documents we recovered indicate the ring is a family enterprise. An investigation into the entire Trien line may be in order. I would advise it.”

The Councilor's eyes each flickered on the display, meeting glances with each other as they came to a consensus. Tevos was, as usual, the spokesperson for their decision.

“Your advise is well received, Saren. Confer with the intelligence department, and arrange for this matter to be looked into in depth. I would prefer not to have blatant enemies of the Council races running around kidnapping our agents and interrupting in-progress missions. It isn't acceptable.”

"I agree."

“Another matter then, what of Nihlus' original mission?”

The other Spectre on the line spoke up finally, readjusting her sitting position as she added, “I'm off ta handle it, while Nih recovahs. Once we've got a betta bead on the Asari involved with this, I'll be back around ta see it finished.”

The Asari Councilor gave a small, graceful nod at the exposition, raising a delicate hand in a rolling motion for a new topic. “That will do... and Saren, will Nihlus be making a full recovery?”

“I believe so, though he will require extensive reconstructive surgery. The kidnappers broke his bones in hundreds of places, and de-plated large sections of hide.”

On screen, the Turian Councilor visibly winced. “It sounds as if he's had a rough time of it, Spectre. Does your report include an estimate of the medical expenses?”

“It does, though I have made the judgment call that the time needed for reconstruction is also a prime opportunity for augmentation. The full expected cost of Nihlus' new bone matrix and medical weaves is included in the documentation, though it will exceed his accrued allotment of medical funding by a significant margin.”
Sparatus’ crest tilted skeptically.

“If his Spectre discretionary account cannot cover the amount, the remainder must come from personal funding. Our budget this quarter is tight as is, I’m sure you understand.”

Saren did not, in fact. The Citadel Council's yearly budget was massive, and even these extremely expensive procedures would have only been a drop in the bucket if they were managing the books efficiently. He presumed money was being wasted on non-critical things like cultural exchange and diplomatic parties. The stolid torin's expression remained neutral, however.

“Understood. If the difference becomes a problem, I will bring the matter up. For now, it will be managed... out of pocket, as the saying goes.”

Tevos smiled at the assembled audience placatingly. The display panel with Tio'fore's lavender eyes looked less than amused.

“By all means Saren, do so. Nihlus is one of ST&R's up and coming star agents. It would be tragic for his career to be cut short. While I must agree with Councilor Sparatus' words on our fiscal situation, it doesn't mean that some small wiggle room couldn't be found if it becomes very necessary. I can't promise anything, and it likely wouldn't be much, but it can't hurt to have the Personnel Resources department take a look. If needed, you understand?”

“Of course, Councilor.”

Yes, he understood perfectly. Tevos was willing to 'find' extra funding to cover the medical expenses, in exchange for personal favors between them. Valern often did the same thing, allocating credits funded straight from STG to have agents take care of Salarian interests quietly. Sparatus was the only one of the trio who didn't, or if he did, he didn't trust a barefaced Spectre with his dealings.

Saren was glad the numbers in the medical report were mostly nonsense. They were accurate only as estimations on the cost of augmentation and recovery had Nihlus been staying in a public hospital for the procedures. As the silver-grey biotic was gathering the resources from asteroids with home-built mining drones, then painstakingly creating the cybernetics and bone matrix layers himself with high-grade mass fabricators and a copious amount of Turian-hours, the actual costs could only be in the wear and tear on his equipment, and personal time invested.
He would still be draining Nihlus' discretionary funding and putting the credits in a private account for his protégé's free handed usage instead. Partially out of spite.

On screen, Valern was already distractedly moving onto the next issue of the Salarian's day, preemptively reading something on his Omni-tool. Sparatus looked placated, waiting in distinguished poise for the call to be ended, and Tevos was still smiling as if everything was just fine.

Sometimes, Saren thought diplomats were the dullest, least self-aware creatures to ever be born.

Seeing that their business was definitely done, the Turian Councilor gestured a curt, military farewell. “Well then Spectres, take what time is required to finish the original mission, develop a plan of action for this new threat, and recuperate as needed. Report back to the offices when you are ready for new assignments. Dismissed.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Aye.”

The Councilors dropped off screen, disconnecting from the vidcom debriefing.

Tio'fore looked mutinous. “-the remainder must come from personal fundin'. I'm suuure ya understand,” the Drell copy-catted in a mocking mimic of Councilor Sparatus' low tones. “Arterius, yur Councilor is an asshole, jus' so ya know.”

Saren sighed, “Language, please. Though... I understand the sentiment.”

“Ah well, if you be needin' any creds to see mah luv well again, let meh know? I won't see 'is fixin' up short changed because the Council is feelin' cheap this week.”

The ruthless torin's mandibles flicked in the ghost of a smile.

“Appreciated. I will let you know, if other options fall through.”
“Aye, you do tha’. Well then, Tio’fore out.”

The video conference panel closed entirely, and Saren leaned back into the CIC chair with a quiet exhale. Behind him the quiet clicking of talons on metal floor panels approached without trying to conceal themselves.

“Garrus. I thought you were keeping Nihlus company.”

“I was, came to tell you his vitals are doing... something.”

“Ah. I will look in on him. In the future, try not to eavesdrop on Council debriefings. Technically, you are not cleared to attend.”

The tall sniper held onto the chair back and leaned forward into view. “Really? I'm not cleared to listen to you bicker with the Council about medical bills, but I can walk right into the Spectre Offices any time I please?”

“I did say 'technically'.”

The Detective snorted, likely not appreciating the nonsensical rule. “So... umm... do you need help paying for all this?”

“No.”

“Oh... alright. Just making sure.”

Saren tilted his head in acknowledgment, moving to stand.

“I will go check on the situation in medbay, it is likely nothing serious. In the mean time, can I convince you to chop some of the cepa and capsicum from the chilling unit into slices?”

“Slices? Ah... how long?”
Saren held up a gauntlet, fingers pinched about eleven centimeters apart. Garrus nodded and went off to do as asked. The Spectre watched him go, pleased that he had discovered an easy way to get the sniper out of his fringe whenever he wanted space. Simply give the torin a task to complete, and off he went. Both appreciably industrious, and very convenient.

The agent spent the short walk to medbay considering what meats to stir-fry with the results for dinner. There were several options available, and selecting one over another was less appealing than a little bit of each, though it would be a more work to prepare that way. The cook times on each type of protein were different, and he refused to lazily toss them all in together.

Saren moved to the medical suite's display panels, taking a seat on the mobile stool as he reviewed Nihlus' current vitals, and recent scan history.

His eyes widened. It was not 'nothing serious'.

Nihlus was dying.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Does anyone actually know who the Councilors would have been at this time? I'm presuming it's a life-long election for the sake of stability, where one can be added or removed if it becomes relevant. Granted, Salarians have short life spans, so this Valern may be much more youthful, but it's still theoretically possible. I know Ambassador Udina was proceeded by Anita Goyle, but I can't find any other canon facts to help me figure this out. Also... does anyone have first names? Doesn't Valern have like ten? @_@

A/N/N: Holy cow! I just found out (wiki walking, it's an amazing thing) that there is a Galactic Standard Time in canon! AND hilariously enough, it's not all that different from what I made up so many chapters ago! In the Wiki: 'A galactic standard day comprises 20 hours. Each hour is 100 minutes. Each minute is 100 seconds. Each second is half as long as a human second.' So my guess of 50 second minutes, 50 minute hours, and 20 hour days was pretty freaking peachy! How cool is that?! SUPER COOL OBVIOUSLY. The wiki also says that a galactic standard year is 1.09 times longer than an Earth year, which isn't quite the same, considering I added 3 days to the week for 10 day weeks, but still.. pretty fly. Workable, right? If anyone notices a conflict between my calander and canon, let me know, but otherwise I'll just leave it as is, for simplicity's sake. Close enough, right?
Fanfic Recommendation: *Apropos of Nothing* (16,898 words) by *flamedwing* (Some of Saren's perspective of ME 1, very different from how I write him, but fascinating to see!)
Grace in recomposition

Chapter Summary

Nihlus does not have leave to die. Saren will not allow it.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: New mind canon: Turians don’t particularly have a taste for fatty foods, because their bodies don't really store things in lipid-based tissue like ours do. Of course, some minerals are not water soluble, so they have some fat, but not much. So! Dairy products, like the cheese you'd put on a sandwich, that supply a decent chunk of our normal fat intake in a day, is not something they would cook with. So Turians might have sandwiches, but they would be meat and sauce and maybe vegetables, no cheese. They might have deserts, but icecream wouldn't be one of them. Maybe something like potato chips though would be popular though.

Chapter Soundtrack: Kasabian - Days Are Forgotten

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus peered down at the vegetables on the cutting board. They were... mostly the right length, and a... similar thickness.

That was a lie. They were a pile of longish chunks. It looked like a five year old had done it. The expert sniper groaned, and attempted to organize the mangled vegetables into piles according to size versus color.

It helped, -a little-, making the chaos appear slightly intentional. Embarrassed, he made a mental note to practice cutting things. Engineers machine-shopped straight lines, they didn't cut them by hand generally speaking. He wondered if Nihlus could teach him a few things, once he felt better. The way the carmine plated Spectre absently flipped blades in his long, elegant fingers while not paying an iota attention had Garrus hoping there were some tricks to be shared.

Not to mention he wouldn't exactly mind paying more attention to those fingers, and looked forward to asking about it once the torin was up and about again. His heart still felt a little frosted over from
the fear that they could have been too late, so future planning was... comforting. Garrus almost got caught up in day dreaming about it, but shook himself and turned away. He had other things to get to for now. Such as telling Saren he had finished.

With a final forlorn glance at his lackluster results, Garrus left the kitchen and tapped the door panel to medbay. Inside Saren was thoroughly wrapped up in something on a datapad. A new orange-hued containment barrier had been erected over their comatose friend.

The sniper really didn't like the look of that.

"Saren?"

The Spectre looked up from his focus for only a moment, glancing at his approach before going back to the datapad.

"There has been a complication."

"Alright... what is it?"

"An immunological degenerative disease. Genetic, and likely something that would not have presented until he was very old. The stress of torture has caused it to develop unnaturally early."

"I mean... he didn't have hide for a while there, I would expect a few complications from that... So, he's... getting sicker?"

The blank faced Spectre shrugged lightly. “For now? No. Medication is suppressing it, but his white blood cell activity will become increasingly erratic. Give it a few months and he would perish from incorrect immune responses attacking healthy tissue, beyond what could be easily corrected with gene-mods. Not that the correct ones for this exist."

The silver-grey torin tapped a particular read out on the monitor. Most of it was incomprehensible to Garrus, except for the very basics like heart beat and blood-oxygen level. The section Saren pointed to looked like some sort of numeric gauge of inflammation levels and hormone balance. It was all so much gibberish.
He could pull apart an anti-material rifle and repair tiny faults in the mechanism, could build a bomb from kitchen cleaning supplies, and jury-rig a mining laser into an orbital canon, but give him something organic and you might as well have asked a veterinarian to build a skycar.

Garrus palmed his neck, baffled and distressed.

A set of secondary vid windows had been activated above the monitor, showing a live stream of cellular activity, though the slow movements on screen might as well have been Human mating rituals for all the Detective understood the activity.

He looked pleadingly at the Spectre, hoping for clarification or direction, but the torin was placidly watching the cells with a mild glare.

"So... what do we do about it?"

"I am researching potential solutions."

"Right. Okay. Well... the vegetables are finished."

Saren straightened, and flicked the datapad off before setting it aside. Wordlessly the agent pushed past him and into the kitchen. Garrus leaned aside to let the torin pass, but moved further into the room to stand vigil at Nihlus' bedside for a few minutes. The orange barrier was permeable, but if germs were the problem he didn't dare lay a hand the sleeping Spectre. He regretted not reaching out to touch his friend the day before, when he had the chance.

Another medical problem he could do nothing about. The sniper deeply wished his clan had set him on the pathway of being a doctor instead of a soldier. He felt just as helpless now as when mari had been diagnosed with Corporalis.

Useless. He felt useless.

Saren stared at the ceiling above his bed, a long time companion for the Turian insomniac. Beside
him Garrus breathed, slow and deep.

He had been distracted by his thoughts on Nihlus' complications, not realizing the sniper had followed him from the main area until he had come to a slow stop before the bathroom mirror, deep inside his thoughts on potential solutions, and been very startled when muscled arms had come around him from nowhere.

The biotic had been about to elbow-strike the person, but glanced up in time to see the reflection of Vakarian clan markings on the face that was tilting over to rest lightly on his shoulder. Garrus had... hugged him, and then pulled them both out into the cabin. The clock read numbers that meant Saren had been standing motionless in front of the sink for a half an hour, at least.

The Detective had pulled him into his own bed, and proceeded to pass out. Saren had been too mentally engaged to pay much attention or protest at the time, and it was perhaps too late now. The sniper was fast asleep, but not crowding him overmuch, so it would do.

A barely-there glow from his eyes reflected off the ceiling, giving him sufficient light to see anything he focused on, even as he sat in the darkness not looking at anything in particular. Or anything real, to be precise. The ceiling was merely a backdrop for the formulae and diagrams running through his head. Sleep beckoned, and tiredness crawled through his veins like frost on window panes, but he refused it. Even still somewhat under the weather from his previous overexertion. The Spectre was too close to finalizing a solution for Nihlus to give into it.

His protégé had an autoimmune disease. It was systemic, genetic, not common enough to have a name, and appeared degenerative. His immune system was going to fail, in fact it was going to become worse, quickly. Suppressants could destroy his natural immune function, but they could not replace it. The hematopoietic stem cells in his bones that were producing new leukocytes were corrupt, only making more flawed replacements.

If he removed Nihlus' bone structure entirely, replacing it with a metal skeleton, the torin would lose too many other critical functions. Like creating new blood cells in the marrow. Mildly important for soldiers who bled frequently. The option of separating other bone tissue from the particular stem cells would be excessively difficult, time consuming, and still leave Nihlus with no immune system.

His solution to this, perhaps the only solution to it, was to both replace and destroy the body's immune system on the cellular level with something that would maintain the complete suppression of the existing system should it try to regenerate, and also exercise it's functionality.

That something was going to be nanomachines.
Saren was decided on the matter. He would create a new colony much like his own, a copy of the self-designed system that he had been testing and tweaking for over a year now. It would be fool-proof against replication failure, but also able to completely manage his protégé’s immune response. His allergic responses as well. The colony could interface with the medical weave he already had planned, making it more efficient, and automatically repairing the other augmentations if any pieces should experience mechanical failure.

Nihlus could have a self-repairing, built-in medical suite, making it so any future trauma would have to be truly massive to kill the torin, to take Nihlus away from him.

Perfect.

Garrus leaned into medbay while standing outside the threshold. The interior of the room looked like a medical disaster zone, albeit an organized one. A variety of medical accoutrement, metal bobbles, and humming micro-fabricators covered the work table, as well as two hovering make-shift platforms. A new holo-monitor had been set up on one wall, apparently stolen from the CIC area’s vid-windows. Various cables hooked from it, into the medical suite, a few more going into a series of data pads that had been magnetically pinned to an adjacent wall. There were no less than four mass effect containment shells going, not including the orange shield over Nihlus, and five of the eleven pieces of lab equipment set up along an upper shelf above the work table were actively running tests of some kind.

Saren sat in the middle of it all, enshrined in the chaos on the rolling stool, wearing loose, lavender draw-string pants and a white cardigan pushed up to his elbows.

“Hey, we're coming up on the Citadel. Do you want me to dock us?”

“Hm? Oh. Yes, please do so. Take care, if you would.”

“I will.”

With a quick glance at Nihlus' still comatose form, the sniper left them. He did take extra care, not wanting to jostle... whatever was going on in the other room.
He’d woken up this morning to an empty bed, and upon exploring the ship discovered the missing Spectre almost exactly how he was now. Inquiries about breakfast, if he'd slept well, and other pleasantries hadn't provoked much reaction. The silver-grey torin was endearingly submerged into his work. Considering who was on the table, Garrus planned to enable him as best he could.

The Detective had managed breakfast, very carefully toasting bread and spreading fruit preserves on top. He’d made about half a loaf, for lack of other options, figuring the biotic could use the calories. Garrus had set the plate down next to the absorbed Spectre and wandered off to run some generalized system's checks that every ship needed. The toast had been gone when he'd stopped by at lunch, which had been plain sandwiches of meat and sauce.

He was determined not to be useless.

Docking procedures successful, his C-Sec credentials enough to get them into the docking area of the presidium ring where Spectres normally parked, Garrus shut down the flight-critical systems and stood from the holo-ring to see how things proceeded in medbay.

Saren was at the desk now, typing away in code. Interested in something he might actually be able to have an opinion on, he took a lean beside the engrossed torin. One section of programming wasn’t enough to determine the purpose, not by a long shot, but he silently watched over the Spectre's shoulder with curiosity.

Eventually, almost two hours later, the silver-grey biotic leaned back from his progress, stretching his neck out in a way that caught the Detective's eye. He ignored his body's interest though, unwilling to disturb the work flow. Or bother the hands-off torin with physical advances. Not now.

“Garrus.”

“What's up?”

“I am about to bring you up to speed on this... project, but it involves classified intelligence. Specifically, unpatented work of mine that is not for public consumption. I will be using it to save Nihlus' life, and career, but the details must not go beyond the ship.”

Saren turned to look at him, finally. Electric eyes staring into his, unflinching, the circular lenses spinning to focus in on Garrus.
“Alright.”

The Spectre nodded, accepting his reply at face value. He could, after all. They were *fratrin* now. Blood brothers. There came a certain amount of trust inherent in that. Saren was, technically if not officially, clan now. Nihlus was, technically if not precisely, *his* protégé as well.

“I have redesigned the basic concept of the nanomachine to account for concerns of uninhibited replication. They have been tested extensively, and will work as intended. My goal is to replace Nihlus’ immune system with nanites, and lace the bone matrix I will use to repair his skeleton with a synergistic medical mesh that will augment their ability to travel quickly and repair any future damage done.”

“Wow that’s... it sounds incredibly... futuristic.”

“It is cutting edge, so to speak. I have them myself, though not in such an advanced form. Since so much of Nihlus must be replaced, and his rehabilitation will take much time regardless, this is both the most efficient use of that time, and also... it will prevent the disease from ever becoming a problem. He will likely never be ill from anything, ever.”

“Lucky. He... deserves it. After what he's been through.”

“Agreed. You will not speak of it outside this ship, and only in my presence, understood?”

Garrus smiled, and nodded once. “Understood, sir.”

One of Saren’s mandibles flicked in the echo of a smile in return, and the Spectre turned on his stool and stood.

“Then I want you to take a look at this. Do not change a single line, but if you see something in evidence that looks incorrect, call me. I am going to refresh myself, and cook dinner.”

“A nap might be a good idea.”
Saren chuffed dismissively.

“Perhaps later. For now, recheck my work for syntax errors and logic faults. I have created extensive documentation at the top of each section to reference the effect each piece of code will have on the nanite’s behavior. A delicate thing, to be sure. Hence, my restriction on making any changes without me.”

“I don’t mind. I can't say I will understand half of the reasoning, but code is code. I can follow that.”

Saren nodded to the computer, and left. The Detective sat down, cracked his knuckles and neck, and got to work from the top.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh no. Saren. Saren. Saren, no. No. Nanites? Built in medical suites? Oh spirits. You see where this is going? Do you see? I'm so worried. @_@ But also... also, yes... Nanites. I've got this duckies. Probably. //wary thumbs up//

A/N/N: Is it just me, or does the story have a lot less vitality when Nihlus is comatose? It's like he's the life of the party, but he passed out early and now everyone is bored and considering going home. Damnit Nih, wake up soon! <3

A/N/N: Does anyone else do what Garrus does? Where you get stressed and so day dreams distract you from reality, and when you get near someone close to you, you just puddle onto their shoulder forlornly? I do that. I don't cry, or scream, or get upset... I just puddle. Poor Garr-bear. He's so stressed.

Fanfic Recommendation: Delicate Subject (363, 789 words) by Recidiva
(FemShep/Garrus/Thane)
Standing defiant in the face of tradition

Chapter Summary

There is no such thing as a lack of drive in Garrus or Saren. They each have their own reasons, but neither likes to sit still for any length of time. To be doing is to be alive, and in this case, to ensure another continues living.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

House-mice – police slang for officers who rarely leave the station (Real World)
Mari/Pari - Turian words for Mom/Dad (Credit: MizDirected)
Matrula/Patrem - Turian words for Mother/Father (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: So, weird crazy fact, according to the books there are 2.5 million Humans living on the Citadel as of 2183, out of 13.2 mil people total. So in the 26 years since the 314 incident and first contact, Humanity pushed so hard into the galactic world that they represented about 19% of the Citadel's population. Out of the 12 sentient races of various welcome on the station, we account for nearly 1/5 of the population. Wha-what?! No freaking wonder there is so much anti-Human sentiment in the wards! Holy cow, that's a huge shift in a very short amount of time. I'm surprised the Asari even let it happen. I would think population shifts that fast would throw them off their groove. Then again, I guess they have been dealing with the Salarians for a long time. Still...
Hmmmm.

A/N: Evidently Decian is Officer Chellick's first name. It was in the original script, but got cut out for some reason. Canon enough for me!

Chapter Soundtrack: Wake The Phantom ft Veela - Honora

They say the tree never bothers the bees
Growing slowly, cradles them carefully
It never asks for any kind of sympathy
For holding ten thousand lives at its mercy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus almost fell off the medbay stool when his Omni-tool pinged a vidcall request into empty air that had been quiet for hours. The sniper had reviewed massive sections of code, off and on, going back and forth with Saren for the better part of a week as the brilliant Spectre constructed countless miles of intricate bone weave and pieces of microscopic nanomachine. He caught himself though, and checked the notification. It was from an unknown caller, but was marked as coming from a C-Sec IP proxy. Cautiously leaving the room full of classified going-ons, the Detective stepped into the hallway and set his back to a blank wall before answering. On screen the familiar face of Sergeant Cardin O'Riley flickered into view, one of C-Sec's rare human officers.
“O'Riley? What can I do for you?”

“Vakarian! Good to see you're alive, buddy.”

“Ah, haha, was there any doubt?”

“Of course not, but I'm glad to see you're just fine. Listen here though...”

“Yeah?”

“Are you coming back soon? We've got something of a situation at the academy.”

“What sort of situation?”

“Well it's not exactly for public consumption...”

Garrus gave the stressed looking man a closed-mouthed smile, and pantomimed looking around himself to check for listeners. He wasn't even slightly surprised to find the ship's other conscious occupant standing not two meters away, staring curiously back at him. The sniper hadn't heard so much as footsteps approach. It occurred to him that Saren would have made an excellent spook for Blackwatch had he not been stolen by ST&R. Then again, if rumor were to be believed, the biotic had also worked for the Hierarchy's black ops at one time.

The Detective turned back to the screen with a small nod.

“My location is secure, Sergeant.”

“Right, well then, we had a couple of murders pop up, eh? Scattered, domestic affairs type stuff, with easy evidence at each scene that pointed right at an obvious perp. Family or the like, but then there were a few more, and a few more... you get the picture. See, everyone one of them is a Turian too. It's all as straight forward as can be, every case, only the numbers are giving away that something is up. About three times as many murders as usual this month. Way too many to be coincidence, but the
house-mice in the labs have been going through the evidence over and over, and nobody's finding a
hair out of place. ”

The Detective wasn't sure what finding protein filament out of place had to do with anything, -
probably an idiom he hadn't learned yet-, but he got the gist of what his fellow officer was saying.
Garrus rubbed at his chin, not liking the sound of a string of dead Turians with picture perfect
evidence that resolved each case. Real facts never aligned quite so well, there were always outliers.

“That's not good. Not one real lead?”

“Not-a-one, Vakarian, not-a-one. Ahhh, and well, we were in a meeting yesterday, and someone
brought up those cold cases you've been on a roll with lately. You've got an eye for them, yeah? So
then people from other departments were asking where you were...”

“Oh, sorry. I've been... on loan to ST&R.”

“Yeah, we figured as much, but ah... are you about done, buddy? We could use the help. They put
Chellick on the case, now that we've got a pattern if not anywhere to take it, and the man looks about
done in with the way the big wigs are breathing down his neck. Nice guy, Decian Chellick, but not
the best under fire, you feeling me?”

“Yeah, I-uh, I see what you're saying. Should be back soon. Could you forward the associated files
to me? I can take a look at what the CSI techs have come up with, at the very least.”

“You betcha, Vakarian. Just keep it quiet, eh? Media hasn't gotten wind of the mess yet. Be nice to
keep it that way. Let me know if you see anything, yeah?”

“Will do, O'Riley.”

“Alright then, take care.”

“You too.”

Garrus let the vidcall terminate, dropping his arm. The listening Spectre still stood where he'd been
before, arms crossed, looking into the middle distance. They both began to speak at the same time, and stopped. Garrus smiled at him.

“"You first.”

“It appears you need to return to your duties.”

“Yeah, soon, but for now I can go through the evidence just as well here as anywhere... as long as you don't mind me hanging around, that is.”

The electric eyed Spectre looked at him with consideration, making the Detective feel a bit more like a cell culture under a microscope rather than anything else. Saren tossed his head in a small, dismissive tilt.

“For now the ship is not going anywhere, regardless.”

That wasn't exactly the welcome Garrus was hoping for, but it wasn't a 'go away' either.

“Oh, okay. Well... if you can get me a list I can help with resupply? Skycars trips around the station are as good an opportunity to read up on the case files as any.”

“...efficient. Very well, I will prepare the restock list now, while I am not in the middle of anything with Nihlus.”

“Want me to pick up some take out so you don't have to stop to cook later?”

Saren went to move away but paused in mid-motion, mandibles flicking in a strangely sheepish expression. “There is a café I prefer...”

“Sure. Send me the address and what you want with the list.”

The Spectre nodded to him, continuing past for the CIC. Garrus' Omni-tool pinged once more, and he accepted the unusually large data transfer with a half-smile.
Garrus winced at his building headache, looking up from the extended datapad he was typing on as he sat cross-legged on the floor of medbay. A few shakes of his head with some tension-relieving shoulder rolls and the pain abated enough for him to refocus and continue.

The Detective had been pulling double duty for the past six days, giving nearly ten hours a day to reviewing an ever-growing set of case files for C-Sec, and a further five to what he could help with for Nihlus’ recovery. It was the best balance his internalized guilt for not reporting to the academy immediately after docking would allow. Garrus could do remotely almost exactly what he would have been up to at his desk, minus a few hours a day considering he was a work-aholic who regularly clocked-in for thirteen hour shifts.

It let him contribute to the care of his sleeping friend, and assuaged the quiet, illogical fear that the torin wouldn’t wake again, something he didn’t think would fade until Nihlus was up and about once more. Not to mention it also allowed him to take care of the other, surprisingly easy to live with, Spectre.

As long as he made sure the biotic ate well, didn't bother him about resting too much, and followed every order, Saren was... really not difficult to get along with. Though the sniper did miss having the down time to pursue more leisurely hobbies with the stoic torin, and the constant hard work was beginning to take it's toll.

Well, the hard parts weren't entirely constant. There had been a few quiet meals shared in peace, and half-understood demi-medical conversations. He also managed to be relatively efficient by spending all travel time fringe deep in his Omni-tool while riding in skycars between errands. The Spectre would ask for a wide variety of specialty parts or miscellaneous supplies, and Garrus was more than happy to makes those runs so the brilliant torin could stay focused.

Even so, the mountainous sniper had been going non-stop for long enough that the days were blurring together, having just enough time to sleep a very minimal 4 hours, eating to make sure Saren ate too, and rounding it all off with the occasional skycar nap en route from place to place.

Exhausting, yes, but worthwhile. He was fulfilling every obligation, and each time he made it back to medbay Nihlus' appearance was slightly better. He enjoyed that the most, which was probably why the Detective was sitting up at an hour into the night cycle, on nothing but hard floor panel, reviewing case files while Saren worked tiny, near invisible cybernetics into the carmine plated Spectre’s right forearm.
Another hour of work and the sniper looked up again, rolling his neck to ease the regrowing headache, but mostly taking the time to see how things were going on the other side of medbay. It looked like Saren was nearly done, having spent the entire day off and on laying augmentations into the comatose Spectre, which was good. They both needed to rest at some point.

About an hour and a half later the silver-grey Spectre leaned back from his work with an audible sigh. Garrus took that as his cue, and saved the progress on his latest report for O'Riley before closing it and staggering to a weary stand. He waited a moment to see if the other torin would need to be cajoled into putting down the scalpel for the night. It didn't seem like it though, as the omni-talented agent began putting things away at a measured pace.

Saren slowed to a stop by the bedside as the Detective looked on, a three fingered hand coming to gently rest on Nihlus' brow. The stolid torin didn't say or do anything else for a moment, just stared silently down at his sleeping protégé.

Eventually Garrus stepped up from behind, setting his own hand against the Spectre's lower back.

“He looks a lot better.”

“It is only temporary. He won't be well until the nanites are fully operational.”

“Better is better, and you're nearly done with the augmentations, aren't you?”

“Yes. Tomorrow afternoon I will need to seal the medbay against pathogens. The final stages will require a clean room for the somewhat invasive surgery.”

“This part wasn't invasive?”

“Not really. Most of it was done through small holes in his hide. Short bursts of regenerative fields ensured that each section was fully healed moments after completion. Laying the colonies into his hips will expose a fair bit of soft tissue to the air.”

“Oh... colonies?”
“Yes, two smaller ones, rather then one large one. Redundancy, and less displacement of existing tissue in one area.”

“Ah, okay. Makes sense... I'm still amazed that you can even do all this... without a surgery team? Or a whole bunch of specialists? It's impressive.”

Saren tapped the vent-like slats on one long cheek blade with a single talon. “I have a fair number of augmentations myself, and after the first surgeon I went to for maintenance betrayed my confidence for credits, I was reluctant to trust another. It was learn the systems myself, or remove the additions.”

“...guessing that doctor isn't alive anymore?”

“No.”

The sniper hummed non-commentally. It was an obvious answer, but he'd thought to check out of curiosity. Garrus turned to look at the Council's most infamous agent, taking a moment to admire both the ruthless torin's aesthetics and also his seamless augmentations. Saren was beautiful, without a doubt. Classically structured, with a square, heavy jaw and narrow eyes, but pale as Menae rather then the more popular pale-brown shades. He was both exotic, and surreal looking.

The torin's mandibles were smooth in between the scars of battles past, coming to long masculine points by his chin. The cybernetics were subtle as well, besides the obvious slats in deceptively delicate looking Valluvian horns, and the murky glow of electric eyes. The Detective could see the vague edges of scarring for Saren's biotic amp at the base of his skull, and a few disguised ports that looked like they belonged to a grey box, but other then those the rest of the deadly agent's upgrades were hidden away.

Unable to help himself, Garrus leaned in to press his face against biotic-warm neck hide, inordinately pleased when he wasn't pushed away.

“So... time for a break?” he murmured into Saren's collar, causing the torin to chuff at him.

“You accuse me of being 'not sneaky', but are rather less than subtle yourself. By a significant margin.”
“Ha, you mean when you were very obviously listening to Nihlus fall in love with my *mari* over vidcall? He had her utterly charmed with himself inside of five minutes, and you just sat there tinkering at your work bench, not doing a thing about it.”

“...I am rather certain it is not your *matrula* that my protégé is enamored with.”

“*Not that* kind of love, obviously. You know what I mean.”

“I suppose.”

“You really weren’t sneaky.”

“Perhaps I did not try to be.”

Garrus chuckled and backed away, wandering for the door.

“I'll be in bed whenever you want to join me.”

“A reprieve from your nagging?”

“Only temporarily.”

“Hnn.”

Garrus retreated, starting to get a feel for how much space the Spectre needed to be comfortable, and how much he could push with success instead of backlash. Once in the main cabin he undressed, and put his clothing in the cleaning unit for washing. One jaw cracking yawn later the Detective was ensconced in the minimalist blankets on Saren’s smallish cot. He glared mildly at the furniture in general. Really, the torin could modify the bed for more space pretty easily. The cabin even had room for it. For a Turian used to a bedroom that was nearly one half bed, it felt ridiculously small, though it did fit two with only a little trouble.

The biotic joined him eventually, looking drained. Saren gracefully fell onto the mattress, clothes and
all, and set the back of his hand over his eyes. The Detective reached out, half asleep and muzzy brained, to curl a palm around the Spectre's bicep.

“Everything alright?”

“Well enough.”

“Okay... g'night.”

Saren wordlessly rolled over, throwing the sniper for a loop when the stoic torin came to rest with his head on Garrus' shoulder and an arm tossed over broad pectoral plates. He didn't dare say anything about it, a sure fire way to make the Spectre pull away with discomfort, so instead the Detective silently drew him closer. Didn't ask what was actually wrong, or even so much as hum with appreciation, just pulled Saren in with a loose grip and kept breathing calmly even though the uncharacteristic affection had set his heart slightly racing.

Garrus focused on breathing until he felt calm again, slowly but surely relaxing. The quiet exhales beside him lengthened into breathy, rumbling snores, and he let unconsciousness come. Tomorrow... tomorrow Nihlus would better. Maybe he could even wake up.

Chapter End Notes

DancesWithTurians, strikes again. Daaaaaaaaw!
A/N: So today I went about trying to figure out how many co-workers Garrus would have, for completely relevant plot reasons obviously.

To compare some real world data to in-game statistics, New York City has 8.4 million people, that's about 63% of the Citadel's 13.2 mil population. NYC has, give or take, 49,500 people employed in the police department, 5,000 of those being specifically in the Detective Bureau. Using that as a base line, an original estimate of C-Sec employees if the conditions were similar to NYC would be 77,800, but the situation on a space station would be very different, as would technological support. So! As a comparison, Tokyo is very definitely a more technologically advanced city in terms of public monitoring, has a population comparable to the Citadel with 13.6 mil, and has 43,000 police. I can't find their Detective numbers, but the percentage should be somewhat similar, so let's guesstimate 4350. My thought is that a small technology jump seems to reduce the needed size of a police force by quite a bit. 8.4 mil people with 50k police versus 13.6 mil people with 43k police. Big difference, right? I could do a bunch of research and make a graph of this, likely with diminishing returns on technology improvements versus police employment after a certain point. Buuuuut.... I'm just going to give it a guesstimate.

So approximating the numbers, and then adjusting for the improvements to security that technology could provide to minimize state-employed workforce needed to maintain order in a closed system like a space station. My estimate is that C-Sec has a mere 8,000 employees, with the bulk of them being guards and helpful order-keepers, and a very small total force of detectives, about 150. After all, if there are cameras everywhere, a lot of the guess work is minimized, right? Not as much 'detective' work to be had.

Thus, I'm mindcanoning that Garrus works on a lower floor of C-Sec Academy, with about 2,500 square meters of office space split between 150 people in the Detective Bureau. (26,909 sq ft) There would be 15 people on a Major Case Squad who specifically take care of high profile cases, 15 people on the Crime Scene Unit who run lab work and investigate material evidence, 30 people on the Robbery Division who do a lot of computer work tracking down creative theft and following leads/trail on stolen items, 55 general Detectives of varied rank who dabble in a bit of everything as needed,
10 support staff to deal with paperwork like warrants and processing charges, and lastly 15 people split up between Chief Inspector, training staff, Commissioner (Or in this case, Executor), Captains, and various people of rank. I also think they split up the main police force based on wards, but not this division, since their numbers are limited and applicable crime rates will vary.

Garrus would be a Senior Detective by the time of ME1, but is just a middle-rank something as of now, I think. Private office, ends up doing a variety of things based on what they need at the time, lots of skills and plenty of leeway. Sound about right?

TL;DR – Garrus has to work with at least 150 people, which the game grossly misrepresents with the very, very few C-Sec personnel we see.

**UPDATE: One of the reviewers, Charientist, has heard a dialogue blip from Palin where he mentions that there are 200,000 C-Sec officers on station. That is... well, probably Turian-normal amounts of security staff! I wonder what Turians think of Earth standard security staffing? If estimates based on our system are around 1/4th of what they actually put in place... Well hot damn.

... Wait, how did they Geth disable a standing army of 200,000? I know Shepard is coolio and super spiffy, but if they can take down a few hundred Geth in the short period of the attempted take over, surely a police force of 200,000, plus a large population of Turian civilians...

Canon, you are... a spaz. A complete spaz. That would have to be SO many Geth units.

Fanfic Recommendation: Beginnings and Ends (7,886 words) by RedMare
(Nihlus/Saren)
A unique vantage point can be a curse or a blessing

Chapter Summary

Lexicon:

Familia notas - Turian closed dialect, more commonly referred to as 'colony markings'. The facial, and sometimes full body, set of markings that display the clan and colony loyalties of a member of the Hierarchy for all to see. Reading familia notas is something of an art, as small alterations and additions tell the story of the individual and their clan's history.

A/N: We've all been waiting for it, finally, finally it's time...

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: Feint - Sky Dance

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Verdant green eyes flickered open slowly, heat-waves of pain and foggy vision making his heart pound in fear.

“Nihlus.”

'Oh... it's... him... I'm... safe. Spirits. I'm safe.'

Thinking was about as difficult as swimming, but he knew that voice. Wincing through the worst full body pain of his life, a deep and abiding ache in his very bones, the Spectre tried to sit up. His limbs shook like a leaf for the half second he managed before pressing hands came in to hold him down.

“Hey there, take it easy. Don't try and move just yet.” That sounded like the soothing baritone of Garrus coming from somewhere to his right. He ignored the words and reached for the voice, one trembling hand blindly seeking touch. Rough palmed hands came around his, out-sizing his typist’s fingers by a significant amount. He squeezed, and the strong fingers squeezed back.

'Oh yeah, that's definitely Blue,' he thought with a relieved sigh.
Memories started to fill back in. He remembered being carried out in a mass-lightening field, Riaz was there, and Blue, and Ankh... he'd stopped Saren from killing the doctor, and.. oh yeah, he was... probably not in good shape.

Then again, for some odd reason, he could feel scales on his hands. Plates on the back of his knuckles.

Vision still finding it difficult to focus, the carmine plated torin peered at the slowly sharpening mass of colors and shades in his field of view, trying to see what he looked like. It took a few moments for things to become clear, and the angle wasn't good, but what he could see above the sheets had plating.

It didn't make any sense. Confused, he asked the first thing that came into his mind.

“What, ah, happen to the doc?”

Saren huffed, giving a small shake of his head.

“The Asari medic is in Tio'fore's care, last we had heard.”

“Which is, uuuh, where?”

“I am not certain. The Drell and her partner went off to complete your last mission, and then to track down Matriarch Trien.”

“Oh... 'kay.”

Nihlus lifted the hand that wasn't still in Blue's grip, palming his face. Everything felt really strange. Besides the bone-deep ache, his hide felt hot and cold at the same time, and a bunch of his somehow replaced scales tingled like a foot fallen asleep. He looked up at Garrus in innocent confusion.

“I have... how do I have plates?”
The sniper smiled at him, one thumb making gentle circles on the back of his hand.

“Saren had to do a lot of work on you, but he made you new cybernetic scales and plates. You look exactly like you did before, it's kind of amazing.”

“...at the risk of sounding really vain, can I get a mirror?”

A few button presses on Garrus' Omni-tool, and the Detective had the next best thing: a vid feed straight from his camera to the screen, showing a live stream of everything it was pointed at. The mountainous sniper leaned a hip onto the bed to sort of sit, and Nihlus wiggled himself carefully over to make room. Then the Detective angled the screen to show him what he looked like.

Which was... pretty much exactly his normal self.

There were a few new lines of poorly healed scaring, his *familia notas* were a mess, and everything looked puffy as hell... but he was recognizably Nihlus Kryik.

“I'm... sort of baffled as to how I have working hands at the moment, never mind plates, but... how did you even do this, Saren?”

The stolid torin made the smallest shrug, casually grabbing a datapad from the work table and setting it on his lap before turning around to leave.

“The full report is in there. I suggest you read it when you are able to, but there is no rush. You are on official leave. I will be by later to answer any questions.”

Then the agent was gone, slipping away from accolades or emotional moments with the ease of long time practice at their avoidance. The two remaining Turians in medbay watched him go, turning back to each other when they were alone once more.

Even feeling like death warmed over, Nihlus quickly discovered he could flutter his fingers, wiggle his toes, and generally move a full range of motion, even if every bit of it hurt. Of course, having just discovered that he could move, the first thing he did was to pull Blue to him and dive for his mouth plates. The tall sniper came willingly, one hand moving to cradle the back of the Spectre's neck.
That touch hurt just as much as anything right now, even breathing, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

He was alive. Fuck, yes, he was *alive*. Blue was here. Saren was here. Riaz was off fixing his mistakes, but she’d be back. He still had plates! And fingers!

Every glass-shard breath was a small victory, one that Nihlus celebrated with the taste of Blue’s mouth and the smell of his hide. The shaky Spectre was glad his lover was only in casuals, because they were so easy to pull aside and reach into. He did so, seeking supple waist hide, and upon finding it was rewarded with Garrus’ breathy groans. Unfortunately the Detective stopped him before he could get much further. Blue held his questing hands captive, and they spent a few moments panting in the quiet room, eyes locked.

“How’s it going?”

“Pssht. No. Just taking advantage of I-nearly-died pity, duh.”

“Hahahaa, spirits, you *aren’t* funny. Way too soon.”

Nihlus grinned at the twitching not-quite-smile on Blue’s face. It looked ninety percent relieved and only ten percent amused, but he’d seize on that ten percent and improve on it.

“How sure I’m fuckin’ hilarious, even half dead.”

“You aren’t half dead anymore.”

“So does that mean I have to play the wounded-soldier card instead of the nearly-died one if I want to get laid?”

Garrus groaned, but not in the way he wanted him to.

“Terrible. You’re terrible.”
“I know, but you love it.”

“Yeah, maybe I do.”

The warm look in Blues eyes made him swallow even as he grinned, and he tugged the Detective down for another taste of reverie. It would compound whatever half-assed pain meds Saren had him on anyway, and he could use the relief. Also, maybe, he just wanted more of Blue, and this was as good as Nihlus thought he could do at the moment. Even holding onto to things ached.

A few seconds in had them both breathing hard, and the sniper pulled back to slow things down. Nihlus hummed at him, seductive and cajoling. He watched the desire to taste him win out over Blue's better judgment, and lanky carmine arms welcomed him back by curling around carapace as the icy eyed torin leaned in once more.

He was alive, and Blue's tongue was curled around his. Both had seemed impossible daydreams, not so long ago.

Too soon the sniper retreated again, fingers trailing over the tender hide at Nihlus' throat. He tried not to flinch, but something must have made it to his expression because the tall torin pulled entirely away. The carmine plated Spectre tried to reach for the now missing hand, not caring if it lit him on fire so long as it also lingered on his hide.

The Detective wasn't cooperating though, pushing the Spectre's uncoordinated limbs gently away, and stepping back to sit on the medbay's rolling stool.

Nihlus whined about it, subvocals complaining about the missing touch.

“Just give it some time, yeah? You're still healing. Saren said you'd been unconscious too long though, so we woke you up sooner rather than later.”

“Unnnn... fine. How long?”

“Weeks.”
The green eyed Spectre's expression flashed surprise. He hadn't been aware of the missing time, but still... weeks?

“Well shit.”

“Yeah, so, don't rush it... and you should really read that as soon as possible. You've got a ton of augs now.”

“Wait, what, really? Did he give me the eyes?”

“Haha, no. No eyes. Your bones got a lot of work though. More reinforced titanium matrix than actual bone it seems like, and uh, you've got some helpers.”

“...helpers?”

Garrus just nodded to the weight of the datapad still sitting on his lap. The Spectre looked down at the blank off-screen with a suspicious feeling that he knew exactly what kind of 'helpers' they were talking about. With a purposefully stoic expression, he clicked the device to life and started reading.

Oh yeah, he had nanites now. Freaking.... oodles of them.

Great. Just... great.

Nihlus trembled uncontrollably, setting the small hand-weight down after a meager twelve repetitions of bicep curl. He was sitting on the floor in the main cabin, slowly but surely progressing through the rehab workout Saren had assigned him.

He was pretty sure the torin would never stop treating him like a lower tier that needed to be ordered around and watched over, but it was difficult to complain about it as things stood. He'd be dead right
now if Saren hadn't come for him.

“Do not stop yet.”

Nihlus sighed and picked up the weight in his other hand to do the next twelve reps. He wished Blue were here. The Detective had a sniper's patience, and would offer bribes of reverie in between encouraging stories to get him through the day's workout. Hours and hours of slow paced rehab without Garrus was so much more hellish, but the stupidly tall Officer had gone back to work this morning. Nihlus had tried to talk him out of it, with some small desperation not to be apart right now, but Garrus had pushed him into the cushions of the settee and made out with him until he was half drunk from the hormones on top of his regular pain medication. Then Blue had pulled away with a promise that he'd be back tonight, and left. It was the only reason Nihlus hadn't chased him down in a determined hobble.

He set the hand weight down and lowered himself to the floor to do the next item on the list: leg lifts. Then crunches, one at a time, then push ups. He cheated on the push-ups by balancing from his knees instead of his toes, and even then barely made the ten. Once finished, the carmine plated Spectre curled up into a ball on his side, trying not to shake so much.

A biotic field startled the exhausted agent, lifting him slowly onto the nearby settee. His former mentor followed behind, a glass of water held out when he was settled. Nihlus found himself too thirsty to complain about being torin-handled by biotics without being asked first.

“Your progress is good. Better than expected. Take a break, we will continue later.”

The trembling slowly calmed down as Nihlus laid on his back, head propped up over the edge of one arm rest. He felt very drained, wanting nothing more then to sit still for a nice long while. He grabbed a stray cushion and set it over his eyes, hoping to catch a nap before the torture resumed.

It felt like a very short stint of time, maybe half an hour at most, before Saren was back and prodding him awake.

“Nihlus, awaken. It is time to continue.”

“Noooooo.”
“Yes. Do not make me repeat myself.”

Grumbling something fierce, Nihlus wobbled to a sitting position, scrubbing a hand over his face as he tried to wake up. He felt groggy and so out of it.

“Good. Now stand.”

With a bracing inhale, the green eyed torin pulled himself to his feet, using the couch back for aid to make it. Once upright, his fellow Spectre stepped back, beckoning him forward. He followed haltingly.

“Walk from here, around the holo-ring, and back. Then you may sit again.”

Nihlus wasn't entirely sure he could manage that much at once, but the stern look on Saren's face said he had best try. He shuffled forward one step, then two. The pressure on his legs from standing began to go from uncomfortable to burning pain within five pathetic steps, and he sunk to the ground with a quiet whimper.

“Get up, Nihlus.”

“It... it hurts.”

“It will not hurt any less later. If you wish to walk again, you must push through it.”

The lanky Spectre pushed himself to another stand, shaking like a leaf in a storm. He grit his teeth and made it another six or seven steps before he tilted over into the wall for support.

“S-Saren, I don't think I can do this.”

Nihlus turned, using the wall to pivot carefully, facing his friend-slash-torturer. The stoic torin stood where they'd began, arms crossed. That penetrating, electric stare meeting his eyes without judgment, but also without pride. He loved it when that flat expression broke and Saren looked at him with pride or fondness, and the absence was hard on his already raw emotions.
“You can.”

Rugged carmine eyeridges turned up in distress as he mashed his eyes shut, mandibles flickering weakly.

“My legs are about to give out. It’s... not just that it hurts, or that it’s hard to manage. I think I’m going to fall with every step, no matter how hard I fight for it.”

“Perhaps a reward at the end of the path will inspire you to try, even if you will fail.”

The struggling Council agent opened his eyes again, confused. He hummed questioningly back at the torin watching him without visible emotion. Those electric eyes were boring into his with some nameless intensity.

“I am aware of what motivates you. I do not believe you need it, but in lieu of your recent trials I can be... generous.”

“...what?” Nihlus gulped, his mind going right into the gutter.

'Maybe...? Is he offering...?'

“Walk. Stand, and walk. You will round the holo-ring, and then return to me. If you can make it, I will bring you the rest of the way to my bed. Once there, you will bare your throat, and I will lavish the attention upon it that you seem to crave. I will share reverie until you are too delirious to move. I will even allow you to stay the night.”

The lanky, exhausted torin stared at his long time crush with incredulous desire. Saren would... he would...

Dizzy, and feeling more like sleeping forever than taking the next thirty or so steps, he forced himself from the wall with a wavering push off.
Spirits, it hurt.

Spirits, he wanted to make it.

One desperate step turned into two, then four, then ten. Nihlus made it to the holo-ring as if in a dream, he was sweating, shaking, and using every available surface for help to make it. Only the vision of silver-grey plates at the end of the causeway kept him from giving in to the urge to just let go and fall.

The determined Spectre leaned into his next step too far, staggering forward almost two meters before catching himself on the edge of Saren's work bench.

So close. He was so... damn... close.

His left ankle gave out as he tried to take the next step. There was nothing he could have done about it, the joint was just done with him and his bullshit rehab. Nihlus stumbled down onto one knee with a quiet keen, breathing ragged as he looked up in crestfallen sorrow. He couldn't make it.

Saren stood there watching him, not helping, but also not calling the challenge to an end. Nihlus' emotions buoyed a little at the silence. No declaration of failure meant there was still a way to succeed, he'd learned that much about how his former mentor operated back when he'd been in training to become a Spectre. If their mission was a bust, Saren always let him know with precise explanation as to why he had failed, and how he could have done better. Granted, the stolid torin had taken the disappointed tones and mocking lectures to a whole new level of verbal hazing, so the less said about that part of their partnership the better.

There hadn't been an order to stop, so maybe... he could still do this.

'What was it he said, exactly? It was, 'Stand, and walk. You will round the holo-ring, and then return to me. If you can make it, I will bring you the rest of the way...'"

He'd stood... and walked... but he hadn't gotten to the 'return' part. Then again, maybe... he didn't have to walk the whole way.

Nihlus let his other knee fall and waddled painfully forward on his knees. He didn't want to literally crawl on his hands to the finish line, so he kept his arms up and shuffled the last few meters. At
Saren's feet he came to a stop, happily faceplanting into the agent's stomach, arms wrapping around rugged hips covered in charcoal fabric. Nihlus rubbed his face into the matching cardigan over the pushy asshole's torso with a weary hum.

Done, he was so done. That had to be good enough.

The silver-grey Spectre snorted at his subvocal declarations of success, humming back amused acceptance. A biotic field came around him again, blissfully lifting him into a zero gravity float that took the pressure off his bones in sweet relief.

“You are ridiculous, Nihlus. Hedonistic bribery should not work half so well on you.”

“But it doessss.”

“Yes. I learned from watching Vakarian lead you around by your fringe as if he was your beloved Avah.”

“I wouldn't mind that. Except then he'd be a girl, and I like him as a guy.”

“...Ridiculous. Do you wish for something to drink? You lost a fair bit of fluid in sweat accomplishing the task I set before you.”

“No, no I just want... what you promised.”

“Very well.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aaaaaand that's a wrap, story's over. Thanks for reading!
Oh gods, I can feel the death glares from here! Ahahahaaa... okay, I'm kidding, really. Please don't- //snort, giggle// - don't kill me.

So that whole final scene was supposed to be a dream sequence... but then I liked it too much. Oh well!

Fanfic Recommendation: Prank (1725 words) by nugicorn (When Joker and Kasumi start pranking everyone on the crew, Garrus wants to join in. He does not pick up the concept right away. )
Investment returns are unpredictable

Chapter Summary

Saren is rather conflicted, with too many thoughts and restrictions and temptations in his head. This is the end result.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Familia notas - Turian closed dialect, more commonly referred to as 'colony markings'. The facial, and sometimes full body, set of markings that display the clan and colony loyalties of a member of the Hierarchy for all to see. Reading familia notas is something of an art, as small alterations and additions tell the story of the individual and their clan's history.

A/N: Saren Arterius' headspace is a difficult place to write from. Grrr. He isn't very cooperative. I re-wrote this chapter so many times, but finally... I like it. Ish. Also: Not safe for work. Whoof.

Chapter Soundtrack: Afrojack Ft. Eva Simons - Take Over Control (Adam F Remix)
(The remix sounds so good for sex, but the original lyrics are perfect, so I'm adding them...)

I think it's time to let you know
The way I feel when you take hold
One single touch from you, I'm gone
Still got the rush when I'm alone
...
It feels the best when you're involved
...
I'll make an excuse to play
But, it's up to you now
Just wanna fulfill your needs
While you're taking over me
...
I want you to take over control
Take over control
Take take take take over control
Whoah-oh-oh I want you to take over control
Plug it in and turn me on

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Saren could feel the hefty weight of the torin suspended in his biotic aura as they moved down the hall, the new augmentations making for a significantly increased drag on the carrying field. He could hear Nihlus' heart beating rapidly, along with a slight tremble in his breath taken on the inhale. A tentative, quiet purr filled the air. It was clear how excited the other Spectre was for the long sought attention, even through the after effects of exertion.

It was attention the silver-grey Spectre had very specifically avoided giving in the past. Counter to what the younger torin likely thought, Saren had contemplated his protégé's... aesthetics, on rare occasion.

Nihlus was roguishly handsome, with a rich coloration that was unusual for a male of their kind, dark toned in reds and browns. Combined with the other Spectre's full body, all-white família notas it made for a striking vision that Nihlus offered to him with obnoxious regularity. He had ignored the displays since they day they began, focusing on more important tasks, but as of recently thoughts of his protégé had... caught him off guard.

This venture would simply be the conclusion to a chain of building curiosity, exacerbated by the displeasure that some fool nais had nearly killed the torin prematurely, thus ending any chances of ever... experiencing what Nihlus was offering.

Saren did not like ignoring his natural inquisitiveness, he did not like having things taken from him, and he especially did not like having new regrets added to the pile of existing ones.

Still, he blamed their sniper almost entirely for this situation. Garrus' beguiling affections had opened his eyes to the idea that sex could be both a tool acceptably used on allies if it was done in their best interest, and also that it need not be a violent battle for superiority between people who held some amount of trust for one another. He idly wondered when exactly it was that either of the two had earned his provisional trust. It was not something he had really intended to offer.

The biotic set the recovering torin down with precise control, but the slight wince from the restored forces of gravity gave away how sensitive healing tissues were to even normal pressures. He contemplated re-tuning the Daedalus' gravity generators to compensate for the Citadel's artificial gravity, having it create a zero-g area inside the cabin where Nihlus could have a reprieve from sensation. He dismissed the idea though. While possible, it would not help the other Spectre's body get used to it's adjustments any faster. As the council would only give them both so much time off without question, it was best to expedite the process, not hinder it.

That was another significant factor of his reconsideration, and thus the current predicament.
He knew what would drive Nihlus into pushing himself, having watched Garrus do it two days in a row. Where the 'stick' would get ridiculous amounts of whining before accomplishing anything, the 'carrot' worked extremely well. Granted, he would normally just use more 'stick', but considering what the carmine re-plated torin had been through recently, he could not bring himself to do so.

A needing hum distracted Saren from his thoughts, and he realized he had been standing at the bedside absently. Verdant green eyes peered back at him innocently, subvocals a low, sheepish welcome. He was suddenly reminded what a terrible idea this was. On one hand he wanted to have greater control over Nihlus' focus on recovery, and had reconciled himself to the short stint of increased proximity that would include. The opportunities it would involve. On the other hand... giving in felt reminiscent of weakness, something he did not tolerate in himself.

The stolid torin set one knee on the bed, throwing the other over carmine hips whose color peaked out between charcoal toned underarmor top and bottom. He let his hands settle on either side of Nihlus' shoulders, bringing them face to face without putting any extra weight on healing limbs. Electric blue eyes looked into verdant green, watching the light glint off of vivid irises.

His protégé. His oldest friend. Sexual activity between them would only, could only, complicate matters, and he had not any... particularly strong desire for it, but the other Spectre did. The knife-loving torin had made it very clear, many times, that he desired his former mentor just as much, or more, than any other. Before Garrus had wormed his way into their lives, Nihlus had been the only living person he even spoke to regularly. Now he was on the verge of allowing more, and strangely enough, with both of them.

Casual sex was common among Turians. It should not be a problem...

Yet Saren had the sinking feeling that it would be.

His protégé's hands reached up to trail fingers from his shoulders, down his fabric covered chest plates, and past the topography of waist hide. The light touch gave him an involuntary shiver, and he chuffed to drive the feeling away. He had offered Nihlus his domination, not his submission, and the gentle touch reminded him far too much of Garrus' cajoling hands and voice. That... was not how he wanted this to go. He shook those memories away.

This was going to be him sating curiosity, and Nihlus being encouraged into faster recovery with physical affection. Perhaps using sexuality to influence Nihlus for his own good was not a particularly honest way to go about it, but it was time to own his choice, too late to back out now.

In a deep-baritone subvocal rumble he ordered the carmine plated Spectre to bare his throat. The
torin's eyes fluttered closed as he began panting unevenly, the enticing expanse of his neck hide offered in perfect trust. As Saren's fangs came around the light red-brown throat, he distantly lamented that Nihlus was fool enough to offer this so easily, to open his bleeding heart to a torin who had killed the few other people who had ever attempted getting close.

The silver-grey torin would try to do better this time. He did not want to loose another.

When the points settled in to prick at hide, a low and wavering moan rose the from the Spectre beneath him. It was a wordless, senseless hum, but the immense amount of long held desire in the tone was... satisfying to hear. He felt foolish himself at the thought, of course his protégé had wanted him for years, he knew that. It had been obvious.

But hearing it so effusively...

He enjoyed the feeling of Nihlus' throat between his teeth, limp and surrendered, for a few moments before releasing the hold and laving a long trail from collar line to fringe. The carmine plated torin's subvocals were humming so heavily he was literally vibrating with want, hands grasping at pale shoulders. Saren mouthed at the sensitive hide beneath mandibles, one of the few areas undamaged by torture, and was rewarded with black talons digging into arm hide. The electric eyed Spectre hummed in return at the pain-pleasure sensation. Pushing into the sharp points, smelling blood on the air.

He froze suddenly, tempted to curse. No blood, no pain. He specifically wanted this to be different...

“Saren?”

The silver-grey agent cut off the aggravated buzz of annoyance at himself, not wanting his partner to misconstrue the sound.

“My apologies. Your immune system is still fragile, we should avoid blood sport. It slipped my mind.” Well, that was also technically true.

“Oh, okay... maybe later?”

He narrowed his eyes at the weak grin on Nihlus' face, the cheeky knife-wielder was already pushing for more, pupils blown wide. He should have expected that. Give the torin a centimeter and
he would try for the kilometer. Saren made a mental note to watch that closely, to not allow his insouciant protégé to push for more than was on offer. He preferred having all the control to move forward, or not, being entirely his.

“Perhaps.”

Nihlus smiled crookedly and pushed up to press their fringe together, humming at him with far... _far_ too much affection. He felt distinctly uncomfortable at the adoration in that tone. _Spirits_ preserve, he did not want that amount of emotion from anyone or anything. It was unnerving.

This was not going as he had planned or promised, much to his compound aggravation.

Their late afternoon was supposed to be casual physical attention, and then when Garrus returned from work he would leave the bed to them, generously, and go work on a third nanite colony... Saren had plans to ensure neither of his assets were removed prematurely, and had ordered sufficient materials when making Nihlus'. He merely needed time to make a third set, and then wait for an opportunity to implant it.

For now his plans were going awry. Nihlus had long, elegant fingers curled under the jutting edge of his mandibles, thumbs stroking the signature facial feature of their species with inordinate amounts of affection in his lovely green eyes. Saren might have pulled away if not for that captivating shade of green catching him like a snare.

Nihlus' eyes were... mesmerizing. It was his favorite shade of green, perhaps his favorite color of all.

“He... we don't have to. Ya know? I understand you aren't big on this stuff. It means a lot that you're just... here. Trying. We c-could wait for another time.” Saren blinked, caught off guard by the offer. He considered and discarded it. Reneging on an offered reward for hard work completed would be needlessly dishonest, and beneath him.

“No,” he murmured simply, leaning in to slide his tongue between dark, carmine mouth plates. Nihlus' jaw lowered, his mandibles spreading, giving the silver-grey Spectre easy access to the rough and wet texture of his pallet. Saren nipped at the left lip-point, licking behind it from the teeth to the front. He repeated it on the other side before diving deeper, nearly to the purple-black flesh at the back of his throat. A long, back and forth slide along the roof of Nihlus' mouth had them both dosed on enough reverie to tranquilize most other species.
His former apprentice was panting, questing limbs seeking out places to brush against him, hormone-drunk enough to feel all the pain as pleasure. Another benefit to this task.

“Shit, oh fuck, spirits, sorry... sorry, it's so intense. My hide, it's... oh spirits...”

“Nihlus?"

“Y-yeah?"

“Language, please.”

The carmine plated Spectre beneath him shivered at the deep rumble of his polite request, subvocals giving away arousal at the words.

Of course. Of course his strange, fascinating, merc-born fool of a protégé was enticed by that. Such an odd creature.

He felt equally odd for feeling possessive about him for it.

Discarding the sideways thoughts, Saren re-focused on paying attention to Nihlus' throat. He had promised reverie, in excess, and that was a process of repeated bursts over time, so it was most efficient to work elsewhere for a moment. One silver-grey hand slid up the back of red-brown spine plates, all the way up to the underside of crest horns. With care he worked sharp talons into the diminishing space between skull hide and horn, scratching gently over the original flesh.

Nihlus purred long and low, legs coming around his waist to squeeze it between dark red thighs. The sensation hit him harder than expected, dragging out a low, appreciative rumble.


“Please what?”

“More? Anything.”
The electric eyed Spectre was not entirely sure what was meant by 'anything'. It was too unspecific a word, but he was pleased to see he had reduced the torin to near incoherence. With a vague subvocal rumble of acceptance, he tried biting a little harder with mouth plates and laving a trail as far around the inner ring of collar ridge as reachable. Nihlus was pushing his head back into the mattress, crest blades tucking under carapace, as he moaned for more. The younger Spectre's hips pressed upward, rolling against his as plates splayed open beneath undersuit.

Saren could smell his protégé's arousal in the air, the savory and musky scent of his natural lubrication rising though the insufficient cloth. The silver-grey agent pressed back against the aggressive hips, dragging Nihlus' face back to his for even more reverie. He licked deliberate patterns over teeth and along inner ridges, coiling their tongues together with a mild squeeze.

The stoic torin realized his breathing was growing ragged as well, and suddenly the temptation to rend the underarmor from Nihlus and take him was viscerally, inordinately strong.

'No. No. That is not how this will go,' the normally callous Spectre reminded himself sternly. Always the worst part of sexual activity, this sense of lowered self control. He fought it though, mellowing his actions and slowing their pace with a will. Nihlus' hands tried to drive him onward by gripping his ass and grinding them together, but he pinned the other Spectre's wrists beside his head, pressing their hips into the mattress to restrict movement.

Nihlus let out a loud, frustrated moan. He tensed for a moment, fighting Saren's control of him, before relaxing with a shuddering collapse into the mattress.

“Sorry... s-sorry.. know what I said, just... f-.. sh-... spirits, that was good. I want more of that. Do you want more of that? Please tell me you do. I... will do... anything you want, for more.”

Saren let go of his protégé's wrists, rising up on his knees.

“For now, no.”

“For now?”

“Yes.”
“So later?”

The electric eyed torin tilted his head consideringly. The sweating, panting body below him was a very attractive image.

“Perhaps. I will consider it.”

“Yesssss.”

“I may decide against it.”

“You won't.”

The silver-grey Spectre raised a disbelieving eyebrow at that comment, making Nihlus grin broadly as he slowly got his breathing under control.

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because... because I can be anything you want me to be. Will do anything you want me to. You're a control freak, and I'm so damn willing to give it to you it isn't even funny, and 'cuz you like me.”

“... You are tolerable, I suppose.”

“I knew you'd fall for my charms eventually.”

“Hmph. Overconfident.”

“Yes, yes I am... and just throwing this out there, but can we have a three way with Blue?”

Saren scoffed at his former apprentice, reluctantly amused at the torin's quick recovery from gun-shy to pushy swagger.
“No.”

“Damn.”

“Nihlus...”

“I know, I know. *Language.* I'm bad about it, sorry... did I mention I grew up on a merc base? Ha. Well... anyway... cuddle with me?”

The stolid agent blinked flatly at the immature word choice, half wishing he had not promised the last part. Allowing Nihlus to stay would give the younger torin far too many opportunities to take advantage.

“Very well, but you will restrict your activities to what is appropriate for the rest of the night cycle.”

Nihlus looked at him incredulously for a moment, and dissolved into laughter. It continued, devolving into stomach-holding hysterics.

“Ap-appro-appropriate? Appropri-priate. Oh *spirits.* You're adorable, ahah, please don't kill me. Hahah...”

“Adora- *what?* … Perhaps we should reduce your medication. You must be overdosing.”

“The f-fact that, ahah, you can say that with straight face, hahaaa, just *kills* me.”

“... refrain from dying, then. It would be a great waste of effort on my part.”

Nihlus gazed up at him with a breathtaking smile, still fighting bubbling chuckles.

“Yes, haha, sir.”
Permitting himself an eye roll, Saren lowered back down beside his bothersome former apprentice.

“Good. Now go to sleep.”

“After that? You- Saren, I am *high as a kite* on reverie. All I want right now is sex, and barring that, private time in the shower to handle it myself.”

“Strange that you would offer full intercourse, but be too shy to masturbate in my presence.”

Nihlus blinked at him repeatedly, a confused grin teasing at his mandibles. “It's not... shyness. I could do it here...” Ruddy brown fingers clenched repeatedly on the mattress' give. “Why... do you want to watch?”

Saren considered it. It would be more efficient and notably safer than letting Nihlus shower alone, and it would disperse the torin's libido.

“I am ambivalent. You may do so if you wish.”

“Okay... yeah... just, do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Mmm... roll on your side for me.”

He peered suspiciously at the encouraging nod and simple request. He was not certain if this was a ploy, or something reasonable. Deciding to give the carmine plated torin the benefit of the doubt, he turned over onto his side. Nihlus rolled to him, wiggled into his space with the top of his carapace pressed to Saren's pectoral plates, and tossed an arm back to grab his hand and set it on a carmine hipcrest. Once his hand had settled, the younger Spectre reached for the lower piece of his underarmor and tugged it down.

A thin, generous length of dark red ridges revealed itself, long since free from plating. Nihlus took a
hold of it with a sigh of relief, and began working himself over. Saren sat perfectly still, mouth a little dry, watching his fellow Spectre stroke, squeeze, and tug. Every few repetitions he would run a thumb over the ridges near his peak, moaning softly.

*This* was definitely a ploy.

Still, his fingers *itched* to take over.

Nihlus upped the pace, albeit not by much with his prior exhaustion, hips rocking with the motion.

“Nnn... S-Saren. I am... so... pretending this is you... right now. Just... so you know.”

Black talons dug into carmine hips, a low growl of displeasure rolling out into the room. The younger torin was making a temptation out of himself. He refused to give into it.

“What... what should I do? What would you do, if you were in control?”

“*Nihlus.*”

His former apprentice laughed breathily.

“Don't... kill me.. okay? I'll stop. Just... let me finish this.”

Saren held himself stock still, watching captivated as Nihlus reached orgasm. His protégé’s back arched into him, toe talons scrabbling weakly at sheets, and fluid spilling out messily onto the bed.

Half of him was bothered by the mess. The other half was just *bothered.*

Nihlus moaned his name as he came, -his complex, emotion filled subvocal name-, stretched to fill the long duration.
For a few moments his focus was entirely on mastering himself. Nihlus' phallus was right there, still half hard...

With a bolstering exhale, the silver-grey Spectre disentangled himself, acquired a wet towel and a dry one, and returned to stoically clean the mess from abdominal plates and sheets. He almost wanted to cast the irrepressible torin from his room for that stunt, but the mellow purr rising from the now half-asleep knife-wielder was... sufficiently endearing enough to prevent his deportation.

“Nihlus.”

“Mmm?”

“That stunt will cost you. Two laps around the CIC tomorrow.”

“Mmhmm.”

Saren snorted. He was rather certain that 'mmhmm' was not what Nihlus would be saying the next day during his forfeiture.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Saren is bothered. I am so pleased by this. I am tentatively okay with the expressed mind space, but the being bothered is key to my nefarious plans. Obviously.

[Author's Codex Entry] Familia Notas

The practice of inscribing semi-permanent tattoos on plate can be traced back to ancient times. Originally used as markings of loyalty in war to ensure clarity between friend and foe, the modern usage has evolved into a complex system of historical accounting, personal accomplishment, and origin marking. Generally unpoliced by any overseeing body save for the clan that lays claim to a particular pattern, 'colony markings' are an incredibly personal aspect of a Turian's appearance. An individual may choose to add to, alter, or remove their markings entirely in conjunction with life events. However,
there is a powerful cultural stigma to lacking the traditional marks of loyalty. 'Barefaced' Turians are seen as having no home and no clan, making them seem untrustworthy, selfish, and likely to abandon allies in rough situations. Generally speaking, people will expect one of these individuals to be 'fair weather friends', and nothing more. Most Turians will receive their first markings upon reaching maturity at age fifteen, just after their plates have stopped changing, and right before leaving for basic training with the Hierarchy military. For Turians born outside the recognized colonies, familia notas may be earned by personal action, or given freely by an adopting clan. Very rarely are entirely new sets of clan markings recognized as legitimate. On occasion splinter groups of Turians will attempt to form new, independent colonies with their own unique laws and markings. This is seen as an act of war, and has historically resulted in immediate counter aggression from Hierarchy forces.

Fanfic Recommendation: Void (172,495 words) by Sereneffect (Garrus/FemShep)
Unidentified

Chapter Summary

Just little things.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Palvi - a shortening for 'Palvipyrum', the Turian word for 'Explosives'. ('Palvipyrum' word credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Stephen Swartz - Bullet Train (feat. Joni Fatora)

Like a bullet train
Moving like the speed of sound
Feet can’t keep on the ground
Can’t stay in one place
...
'Cause I can’t stop time
You keep blurring in my mind
And spaces undefined
These tracks left behind
We can’t stay the same
Can’t stop this train

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus slumped against the airlock wall as the decontamination cycle blasted the tiny room with aerosolized cleaner and UV. He was, -to put it mildly-, tired.

The murders were still going, and after so much time unresolved the free elements were beginning to catch wind that something was up. He'd only stopped working long enough to order lunch, and just coming up to the front desk to grab it had revealed no less than three stalking reporters, waiting patiently for the slightest whisper of activity.

There was blood in the water and the sharks could smell it, even if they didn't have a bead on the source.
Though for now he could set that all aside, at least for tonight. The Detective needed food and sleep, and then more sleep.

Possibly followed by sleep.

Going from round the clock dual shifting between Nihlus' care and work, straight to long running hours in the office had not been his best idea. The lack of mid afternoon two to four hour naps, like a normal Turian would take every day, were wearing him thin. He had been sleeping for four hours a night, and dozing a quick fifteen when he needed it badly enough.

If he could just solve this case Chellick would stop panicking, Pallin could stop wasting time in meetings with concerned in-the-know individuals, the snarky nais in PR would stop nagging him to cut his hours, and then... he could sleep.

Garrus was struggling not to do so against the wall, passing out in the airlock right where he stood. He had learned to do it in hostile territory during his years with a hastatim unit, and on rare occasion found himself waking up at his desk the next morning after crashing where he sat. He shook it away though when the decon cycle ended, stepping into the Daedalus' light grey and white CIC.

All was quiet, save for the barely perceivable whirr of life support. He shuffled down the causeway, peeking into the kitchen. No one there either. The door lock to Saren's room was green, and so the Detective tried that instead.

Inside, Nihlus was passed out, sprawled across the cot, every blanket thoroughly stolen. Nudged up against the far side, Saren had his arms pillowed beneath him as he slept on his stomach. The quiet swoosh of the doors opening hadn't seemed to bother him, but when Garrus stepped inside his eyes flickered open in the gathered shadows, glowing lethargically like dual lightning storms.

That gaze turned to pierce the unknown intruder, but mellowed again upon recognition.

"Garrus," the silver-grey torin rumbled quietly in greeting. The Detective stepped forward, drawn to the dark, peaceful image before him. He slid to the ground at the bedside, crossing him arms over the edge of the mattress and setting his chin upon them tiredly.

"Hey," he whispered back, "how'd things go?"
"Well. He walked today, for a few minutes."

Garrus smiled sleepily, pulling his legs into a curl as he settled into the side of the bed frame.

"Glad to hear it."

"Yourself?"

"Little bit of progress collating data. Still no solid leads though."

"A shame. You will inform me if you require assistance."

"Mmm, will do."

"... it is not wise to sleep there, you would regret it tomorrow."

"Too tired to move."

Without another word the biotic pushed himself up, gracefully moving over Nihlus by spinning on a palm stabilized against the frame. He landed silently on the cold metal floor, and tugged Garrus to his feet. The Detective came without complaint, but sluggishly.

Before he knew what had happened, he was half curled around Nihlus' bundle and blessedly horizontal. Saren began walking away, drawing a half hearted sound of complaint from him. The Spectre merely waved him off and left.

He felt bad for taking the torin's spot. Three Turians could easily share a rotating hot bunk, and often did while on space-limited warships, but still...

Garrus was working up the will to chase the silver-grey Spectre down when the other Council agent nearby rolled into him, nosing into neck hide while still unconscious. The carmine colored torin drew
in a deep breath against his neck, and then sighed back into sleep, seemingly satisfied. The warmth of being half draped with Nihlus and his endless blanket mound was too much, and the Detective disappeared into strange dreams of shooting fruit off the tops of passing skycars.

Nihlus woke up feeling like death warmed over, but contrary to his physical state, he was happy as a clam. Saren had held him as he came, claws digging into hips as he drowned in the torin's aggressive subvocal rumbles. Never mind the bliss of making out with him. Then the other torin had taken the time to clean his plates afterward...

He'd crawl laps around the CIC using only his fingers if that was the end reward everyday.

Stretching with a yawn, he dug a hole out of his blanket fortress to check the time. That was when Nihlus noticed he had company, but it wasn't who he'd expected. Blue was back, passed out beside him outside the blankets. The Detective was still armored and very unconscious.

Nihlus weakly rose up on one arm, shoving blankets away to stroke a hand over long, stone grey horns. Garrus clicked his tongue wetly against the roof of his mouth in his sleep, mandibles fluttering as he pushed ever so slightly into the contact.

The carmine plated Spectre grinned at his dead-to-the-world friend, going to gently remove armor plates with mostly steady fingers. His coordination was fine, but using the press of tender fingers into flipping clasps was less than pleasant.

He managed to pull away gauntlets, upper arms, and pauldrons in one go before taking a break. A short rest for his puffy, aggravated digits and he stole away everything else but the back of Garrus' chest piece and hamstring covering armor.

Giving it up as good enough, he got the other torin under the blankets with him. The press of another body was also mildly unpleasant, but it was mitigated by dint of it being Blue. Warm and cuddle-worthy Blue.

Nihlus dug himself into the sniper's side, ignoring the pain, and breathed in Garrus' scent with a deep inhale that made his ribcage complain.
Icy blue eyes slid open a forth of the way, mellow slits that turned to see him. Nihlus purred back soothingly, meeting the look with his own sleepy green eyes. Blue's lids slid closed again, one muscled arm coming up to pull him close. The sniper's rough palm found his back, and stroked slowly up and down.

The hide on his back was another one of the few places that had escaped much damage, probably because he had been tied down, immobile, with his back pressed into the plastic tarp. Limited access saving that one section of his waist.

His purr rose accordingly at the feeling, quieting only when the touch became halting, slowing till it stopped. Blue had fallen away again, and Nihlus gave in to the desire to follow him down.

They slept for hours, waking only when the Detective's alarm went off.

The knife-wielder woke as well, glaring at the mellow but insistent Omni-tool pinging. Blue let out a gusty sigh and reached to turn it off, struggling to escape the blankets. Nihlus clung onto him like a limpet, humming subvocal wishes.

'Ranul, stay.'

"Ugh. I would love to, but I've got to get back to work."

'Noooooo. Stay. Work later.'

Garrus chuckled at his childish whine, sitting up on the edge of the bed and rubbing at his eyes with the heels of both palms. Nihlus was wrapped around his middle determinedly.

"I'm still on that big case, can't take time off right now."

'But I like you.'

"I like you too, but I have to go, Palvi."
He buzzed determined denial and held on.

The Detective sighed, sounding reluctantly amused, and twisted around to pry him off. He was less than successful. Switching tactics, the C-Sec Officer instead came in close to share reverie as a distraction. Unfortunately for Nihlus that worked pretty well, turning him into plated mush as it took the edge off of his pain.

Using the blankets as a barrier the Detective bundled him away and escaped with a handsome laugh. His tall and built form standing to replace armor segments, and waving goodbye in silhouette from the doorway before disappearing to parts unknown. Nihlus curled into a somewhat miserable ball, hiding from life under the micro-fiber cloth pile. He dozed again, still weak and easily tired. It was not half an hour before Saren came in to rouse him, dragging the reluctant torin to the kitchen for a large breakfast that was insisted upon, followed by the first set of rehab exercises for the day.

In between fiddling with some unknown machine parts, and unerringly reminding him to keep going, the silver-grey Spectre arranged for a small on-station mission for himself tomorrow, created a report on Hallex trafficking though the Eagle Nebula based on some previously unsorted statistics and intel that had recently been dumped into the Spectre Office's data files from another agent, and on top of it all, he also made a three course lunch.

Nihlus tried not to whine too much about having to lift a small hand weight hundreds of times over the course of the day. It felt pathetic, in the face of how hard everyone else was working. He glared down at the bar in his grip, dissatisfied with the slow progress, and maybe a little with his own deep set desire to hide in Saren's cabin for a few months instead of getting back to work as soon as possible.

He was no stranger to hard work. As a misfit and a rankbanger, he'd had to fight twice as hard to get anywhere in life... so why was he feeling so entitled and stressed about getting back into it?

The carmine plated torin couldn't put a talon on the source of the reluctance, but he wasn't about to let feelings get in the way. Not when life was filled with so many rewards for the dedicated and determined. He had Saren laying hands on him willingly, there was Blue for when he needed... anything really, and an endless supply of mercs and hostiles to kill.

Life was grand, and he was sure it was because of his hard work thus far. The spirits didn't watch over someone who didn't contribute, and Nihlus wasn't about to let any bit of this slip away.

So when Saren informed him of his two lap forfeit for pushing the line last night, rather than needed to be goaded into it, he rose to the challenge. The first lap was better, he made it most of the way
before crawling the last few feet and resting for a few minutes. Then the knife-loving Spectre made another half lap, before pausing again, panting through the ache. A few stumbles accompanied by increasingly ragged breathing and ever-intensifying pain reduced him to forearm crawling the last few feet.

But he made it.

The look of approval on Saren’s face as he was lifted onto the settee and offered water was entirely worth it.

Maybe he was naturally lazy, but Nihlus Kryik wasn’t weak and he wasn’t a quitter. He gave his own nature a big ‘fuck you’, and finished the day with another halting lap after he’d napped for an hour.

“I can take the couch... or just go home. Probably should have... sorry, didn't mean to mooch off you.”

Saren chuffed. “What do you have to eat at your residence?”

“...crackers?”

“Also known as ‘take out’?

“Maybe. There might also be some soup...”

“I have seen that soup. It expired years ago.”

“Ahah...”

“If you were not welcome, I would tell you to leave.”
Saren half-nodded, arms crossed as both he and Garrus surveyed their most recently complication. The Spectre's bed was not large enough for three, barely big enough for two fully grown Turians, never mind a third. There was also accounting for two who were unusually tall. Where as the single bed might work for hot bunking, if they all wanted to share, and not crowd him, this... was going to be a problem. The Spectre turned slightly to eye the torin beside him, considering options.

The Detective had returned just an hour ago, eating the plate of reheated food Saren had shoved at him with effusively grateful sub-vocals, and slamming back several glasses of water along with a large mug of tea.

The fool sniper had forgotten to hydrate over the day, and had subsisted off of ration bars from his desk drawer and food stolen from the break-room. *Levo food*, stolen from the break room. Saren had been slightly disgusted. Garrus claimed the human food called 'doughnuts' tasted decent with a little bit of salt on them. He did not believe it for a second.

Saren eyed the bed frame, the surrounding space available, and mentally compared it all to their sizes. He sighed.

“...thanks.”

“...There is nothing for it. It will need to be remodeled to suit. I will take care of it tomorrow, however. For now, you may either sleep on the settee, or lay out a cot in here.”

Garrus chuckled, nodding and rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah, I'll just crash out there, but I mean... you don't have to modify your own room. I can set up a cot in the future, it would work okay.”

Saren waved him off dismissively, already plotting out how to best machine shop a new custom bed frame, and calculating whether it would be worth the effort to custom order a new mattress, or to simply make that himself as well.

There was a lot a creative mind could do with a mass-fabricator and a storage room of Omni-gels and metal blocks.

Returning to the main cabin he sought out Nihlus, who was exactly where he had been before, dozing on the floor in a sprawl. Right mandible twitching in reluctant amusement, he tugged the torin
airborne, and drew them into the bedroom. Like a hibernating mammal, Nihlus burrowed into the blankets and purred quietly.

Leaving the sniper to handle his sleeping arrangements as he saw fit, Saren set his armor pieces aside and lay down.

His protégé nosed into his arm, face pressed into the bulky deltoid muscle on the outside of his shoulder. He waited a moment to see if the insolent torin would push for more, but thankfully he did not. The silver-grey Spectre let his eyes fall closed, letting the backs of his eyelids become a canvas for his thoughts for the few more hours it would take for him to find unconsciousness.

He did some of his best planning in the fugue state of almost-sleep. It was... similar to rest. Close enough to ensure functionality, at least.

The brilliant sociopath faded away with his mind full of angles and measurements.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Who wants really, really badly, to be able to flash forge things?

I'd never leave my house. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: Casualties of Choice (57,594 words) by JaliceAZ (Garrus and Shepard are tentatively introducing a more physical dynamic to their friendship. Of course things become more complicated when a certain enigmatic drell captures the commander's attention. Shameless Shepard/Garrus/Thane triangle. )
“I want one of these, can I have one of these? I thought I wanted a big bed like Blue's, but no, no... I want this bed to be my bed. Maybe two of them.”

Saren rolled his eyes at his erstwhile apprentice, perhaps feigning more exasperation than he truly felt. The goofy torin was rolling around on the newly remodeled furniture, nosing into corners and swimming under cushions like a Turian land shark.

Ridiculous.

A hand clasped his shoulder, the matching arm laying across his carapace in a loose half-hug.

“Spirits know how you managed to even think this thing up, never mind make it from scratch. It looks better than my bed at home. I mean... uhh... not that I’m trying to get you to make me two of them... or assuming that... you know what? Never mind. Just... this is nice. You’re amazing.”

Saren felt warmth in his gizzard at the awkward praise, giving a half nod in return while stoically watching Nihlus’ continued antics.

The new bed was a work of art and creative engineering as much as it was a functional piece of furniture. In the limited space available between closet and bathroom there had not been much room
to work with. A close review of the ship’s blueprints had revealed a little gainable area behind the back wall, but only above waist height. Working with that Saren had used spare metal to create a depression in the wall, and extended a shelf out from it that gently angled downward to a secondary platform that took up the rest of the original bed space. The entire thing was white framing around soft mounds of pale brown suede.

He had gotten... sentimental when nearly finished, and inlaid flash forged gem chips of pale green, blue, and grey into the base along thin, straight lines that ran parallel to the top.

The geometry was aesthetically pleasing, so he had painted on a sealing resin and ignored it from there. He felt no need to explain himself.

Saren was slightly proud of the fact that the design encouraged anyone sharing the bed to sleep on the lower platform, while he had the personal space of the upper one. The elevation differential was just over a third of a meter. Enough to lounge against comfortably with the gentle, rounded slopes, but a small semi-barrier to intrusion by determined carmine limbs.

Perhaps now he could go the night and retain at least one blanket. Or sheet. Or pillow.

The silver-grey Spectre snorted, doubting his chances on that front.

Nihlus hummed to get their attention, reaching out a lazy hand and purring invitation. Out of the corner of his vision he could see Garrus turn to look at him, ready to follow his lead. He hesitated. It was not yet time to sleep, but the decadent padding and hand crafted angles did look inviting... it deserved to be tested, did it not? Better to do so now, when there was time to make adjustments before usage.

Saren climbed into the new bed on his knees, turning around to sit cross legged in the middle of the upper platform. He looked around, giving it a final inspection. Nihlus wormed in behind him, curling around his back with a sigh. Garrus, however, started doing something with his Omni-tool rather than join them. The knife-wielder wiggled around far enough to set a carmine chin on a conveniently placed thigh, making a trill of lazy curiosity at the Detective.

“Just a sec, have an idea...”

Of all the strange things to do, the sniper removed his visor and moved the anti-grav desk chair from its normal resting spot, placing it in front of the door. The visor was clipped to the chair back, and
Garrus tapped something. The mountainous torin scrambled up onto the bed and sat to the right, opposite of Nihlus, with his legs stacked across the middle. Just as Saren was putting the clues together the visor pinged an obvious 'holo-image taken' sound.

The Detective got up to nab his missing eye piece, and returned the device to it's usual position.

“Oh, that's a good one.”

“I wanna see.”

“Ah, just a sec, I'll send it to you.”

Both Saren's and Nihlus' Omni-tools sounded a message notification in their aural implants. The silver-grey Spectre was uncertain how he felt about the holo being taken at all. Then again, he supposed if it ever leaked to the extra-net, the Spectre anti-tracing viruses would find and scrub it. He opened the file to take a look regardless.

The Vakarian clansman was correct. It was a decent, if somewhat inappropriately informal, holo of them.

Nihlus had leaned up, propping his head on a palm. His protégé had been prepared for the image, perhaps expecting it more, and had leveled a devilish smirk at the camera. Garrus as well had smiled after a fashion, mandibles cocked in a handsome half-smile. Saren was, of course, flat faced and stolid. The accidental composition of the image capture was symmetrical and pleasing... but still he though to add, “This had best never be posted to any website, or sent to others.”

The Detective shook his head. “Of course not.”

Saren nodded once. “... very well.”

Nihlus hummed vainly at himself in the holo, making the sniper chuckle and lean over to nip at a ruddy brown ankle. The victim trilled in alarm and tucked his endangered feet behind him.

“Oi! If you want to bite something, come 'ere. I'll give ya something to sink your fangs into...”
As Garrus obliged, reversing himself on the lower platform to be nearer to Nihlus' head, Saren quickly realized what this was going to devolve into. He promptly disentangled himself, and stood to leave. The only thing that stopped him from immediately walking out was Nihlus' despondent keen. He turned to look, making sure he had not physically harmed the torin with his movement. He had not. The green eyed torin was uninjured but forlorn, one taloned hand reaching out for him.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean... please don't go...”

Saren blinked at his protégé’s murmured request. Really, that level of sudden depression over him leaving the room was ludicrous.

“There is no need to apologize. You wish to take advantage of the new accommodations with Garrus. I will leave you to it. Clean whatever mess you make, if you please. I will have dinner ready in an hour and twenty.”

“W-wait!”

The silver-grey agent had been only partially reoriented forward again when another request came. He huffed, “What now?”

“I uh... umm...”

“I think what Nihlus is trying to say is that he'd rather have you stay than get laid. You should get to enjoy the fruit of your labors, and all that. This thing really is comfy.”

“... the evening meal needs to be made at some point, regardless.”

Garrus hummed in agreement, but clicked his tongue and offered a compromise. “Ten minutes won't hurt, will it?”

Saren turned back to them fully, arms crossed. He stared at the sniper with suspicion for a moment before eyeing his former apprentice as well.
“Nihlus.”

“...yeah?”

“Twenty laps, at a jog.”

“Ten and a quick hit of reverie?”

“Twenty five laps, for ten minutes and reverie.”

The long, moaning sound of begrudging complaint given at his counter offer was at complete odds with the small smile in the carmine plated Spectre's mandibles.

“Fiiiiine, deal.”

The stolid torin moved back to the bed, lifting himself over Garrus to bear down on the whiny torin. Nihlus' pupils blew wide, mouth falling open in anticipation. Saren captured his protégé's jaw with both hands, and dove his tongue in for a lap around each set of teeth. The younger Spectre veritably melted, going limp in his grasp, talons scratching absently through the cloth at his waist. The soft dig of talons there felt... appreciable.

Generously, his tongue wove the path once more before he withdrew to a free corner of the bed.

Nihlus continued to purr riotously, a languid, hormone-drunk tangle of limbs.

They lounged for a while, idly discussing dinner choices, as well as Garrus' ongoing case. The details of which Saren found himself increasingly interested in. Missing pieces to a puzzle always did fascinate his mind.

After a remarkably long ten minutes the silver-grey Spectre noticed the time and made to leave.

He was caught midway off the bed by Garrus, who tugged on his collar and stole a lick of reverie from a side angle before Saren could chase him off. He growled at the thief, taking a half hearted
swipe at his jugular for being so audacious. The Detective caught it and nuzzled into his palm humping a request for forgiveness.

The stoic agent pulled his hand away and buzzed aggravated subvocals in return, stalking out of his own room. He supposed it was no more than what he deserved for giving either of them a centimeter. Both of them would always try for the kilometer and then some.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: **No One on Earth** (23120 words) by **AngelicSentinel**
(Humanity never made first contact with the rest of the galaxy, but Prothean beacons were made to be a galaxy-wide communication system. When one malfunctions, it connects Garrus and Shepard over trillions of miles, leading to a strange friendship, and maybe more. It's all in their heads, right?)
**Fluidity in temperament**

Chapter Summary

Saren faces himself.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Klick - A 'klick' is military shorthand for 'kilometer'. (Real World)

A/N: Get ready for this Chapter soundtrack. It might make some happy tears.

Chapter Soundtrack: [Martin Garrix & Bebe Rexha - In The Name Of Love](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InWz54b5DDc)

If I told you this was only gonna hurt
If I warned you that the fire's gonna burn
Would you walk in? Would you let me do it first?
Do it all in the name of love.

Would you let me lead you even when you're blind?
In the darkness, in the middle of the night
In the silence, when there's no one by your side
Would you call in the name of love?

...  
When there's madness, when there's poison in your head
When the sadness leaves you broken in your bed
I will hold you in the depths of your despair
And it's all in the name of love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren walked up the docks, back straight and eyes forward in an especially regal gait. He was trying not to limp.

The electric eyed Spectre was famous enough to be staked by fan and foe alike, and either might be idiotic enough to record him, or gossip about his current state, the truth of which could not be allowed to become public knowledge. He had far too many enemies, and even the illusion of imperviousness was it's own defense.

Especially on the Citadel, where fortunes changed by the moment and watching eyes were everywhere.
With a soft pneumatic hiss the door to the Daedalus slid aside, allowing him access to the airlock. It closed behind him again and he collapsed into the frame, finally letting go of a rigid hold over his posture. Limbs began to tremble slightly, his left knee wanting to give out from under him.

The silver-grey agent had been taking on-station missions for the past two weeks, unwilling to leave Nihlus unsupervised in keeping up his rehabilitation schedule, but equally unwilling to laze about the entire time.

The relative safety of the civilized world had made him complacent, and he had been day dreaming treatment options for some of Nihlus' minor complications when a sniper had gotten off a full three shots before he could make it into cover. The first had shredded the back of his helmet, which caused him to instinctually power a strong barrier over his head and torso. The second shot had been deflected successfully, but as he was rolling into cover still dazed from the first hit the shooter had gotten his mostly unprotected leg right at the knee.

As soon as the damage was done, nearby servo motors in his armor had activated to provide continued function of the joint. Between the trauma module of his armor, an internalized medical weave, and nanite colony the damage had been sufficiently mitigated enough to take off after the sniper, but the pain had been intense. He had ignored it, -embraced it almost-, and pushed himself until his quarry had been caught nearly two klicks later.

He had asphyxiated the sniper, talon guards sinking into throat muscle with satisfaction, before stripping the attacker's Omni-tool and tossing the mostly dead hostile into a massive ventilation fan. The keepers were probably still cleaning it all up.

Now Saren was safe, or as safe as he ever was, but the only thing keeping the injured Spectre upright was his waning strength of will. The shake of adrenaline was still leaving his limbs, and he was unwilling to move further into the ship in such a state.

It was... embarrassing.

Saren slid to the ground, sighing as the weight finally left his wounded limb. With a few button taps on his Omni-tool he let his augmentations and armor know he was in friendly territory now. They could move from in-combat holding patterns to repairs.

He ground his teeth to repress making any noise of discomfort. The pain was real, but he was unwilling to allow such a sound to come from him. The Spectre did not keep a stock of more potent
pain killers, so there was nothing stronger in his trauma modules than mild sensation deadening
drugs. He did not trust anything stronger in the field, more concerned with functionality than feeling,
and the initial repairs burned like molten metal was being poured over top.

For a while Saren simply sat still and breathed, silver-grey chin tucked into his collar.

Eventually his Omni-tool pinged a notification from his armor. The advanced, cutting edge suit he
had designed and built himself was at the limit of what it could do, and while the nanites could repair
his knee to full functionality given enough time, it would take a very long while for the tiny machines
to move everything back to order, cell by cell.

It was advising he seek further medical treatment, which meant going inside to medbay.

The biotic torin felt better after resting for so long, at least. He used the wall for support to rise again,
his armor having locked at the knee entirely. The Spectre limped to the next portal and tapped the
entry panel, vaguely holding out hope that Nihlus was asleep and Garrus was still at work.

That was not the case.

As soon as the door slid open the wanton hum of sexually charged subvocals hit him. Saren had
already been in mid-stagger forward, and stepped into the CIC before he could reverse. The airlock
slid closed behind him, but the Spectre barely noticed.

He was riveted in place by the vision of debauchery taking place in the main cabin.

Nihlus was clothesless, torso supported by the kava table, hips stretched up and backward to where
he was connected with Garrus. Rich brown hide was shiny with sweat, long fingers curled over the
table edge and forehead pressed to the surface while the torin behind him held onto carmine hips as
they rolled together.

The mountainous sniper was behind his darker toned partner, spread legged as he stood straight,
head tossed back and eyes closed. The position almost looked like a surrender of it's own kind, so
blissful and gone was the Detective's facial expression. Garrus too was utterly naked, tawny brown
hide stretched over dense, flexing musculature.

The two made a striking contrast of color and physical form, rumbling heavy subvocals of
encouragement and desire at each other.

A very small, choked noise escaped Saren's mouth as he caught himself with a tense grip on the doorway of the airlock. Garrus did not notice, still lost in the feeling of the torin he was buried in, but the other did. His protégé looked up sharply, lust filled green eyes meeting his from under heavy carmine browplates.

Nihlus had never looked so dark and dangerous as he did at that moment, mandibles spread wide in pleasure that showed off his fangs, talons scraping against metal, and pupils blown wide as sharp eyes zeroed in on the unexpected sound.

The normally unflappable Spectre found he could not draw a breath, frozen in place by that vivid stare.

Garrus kept going, unawares. The carmine plated torin under him hummed a low base request for more, asking for greater intensity as he held Saren captive with only his gaze. The Detective agreed with low, rumbling subvocals, changing the languid roll into a more punishing thrust.

The sound of plate on plate was a quiet grind, like the smooth pass of one whet stone over another. It was accompanied by the slick noise of lubrication as the thrusting pulled the sniper out a short way before he slammed back in.

Distantly, Saren's fingers pawed without coordination for the airlock panel, missing it entirely as he folded into the wall trying to escape those piercing green eyes.

“Nihlusss, yess, spirits...” came the sniper's deep baritone flang, hips snapping forward faster and faster, stomach muscles rippling in an obvious pattern that would curl his semi-prehensile cock upward while buried inside the other torin.

“Yes, Blue. Fuck yes. More. Please, *fuck*, more,” Nihlus raised himself up slightly onto forearms, chin tilting forward as if to point at the faintly shivering Spectre at the entrance, “I... want... you,” he moaned in time to the rhythm.

That choked noise escaped him again, tearing from Saren's throat against every bit of fading will he had left.
This... this was not what he needed right now. Temptation after such a rough day. Nihlus needed to... to just...

Saren was not entirely sure what he wanted his erstwhile apprentice to do. Part of him was rising anger, a quiet snarling beast ready to drive the torin away for tempting him so. The other side was demanding he find a way to fit into the equation. There were so many ways to add a third to sex that even an unusually unsexual Turian like him knew how.

He could come up behind Garrus, spread rear plates with thumbs and use his shorter height to angle himself up into the sniper. He could shove them both back into the settee, so conveniently placed, and ever-so-slowly work himself into Nihlus along side the length already there.

Saren knew he was welcome, knew he was wanted. It was growing more difficult by the second to hold back. The quiet, intense Spectre had no idea why he was so inordinately fascinated. He had never wanted sex this much in his life.

Nihlus hummed, sounding drunk on reverie and dangerously seductive. His low bass tones invited anything the listener wanted. Anything.

It was Garrus' voice that started to undo him. The sniper was growing louder, building to a roar that crashed just as the stone-grey torin hit his peak. Nihlus' eyes fluttered closed, his hips pushing back into the increasingly uncoordinated penetration. The carmine plated Spectre melted onto the table, keening and shuddering as he came as well, head falling down to rest on the surface again as he lost himself to the rush.

After several long, ragged breaths the Detective pulled out with a slick pop, sinking to his knees. Stone-grey faceplates nuzzled into Nihlus' lower back as he purred affection and satisfaction at the lanky knife-wielder.

Nihlus hummed back, sounding exhausted, still face down into the table.

Saren's clinical mind distantly noted that this... event... had not exactly been on Saren's rehab schedule, but it likely did not hurt either.

His protégé's head rose up, wavering wearily, and the younger torin smiled at him with some unnameable emotion somewhere between love and regret. He hummed a soft apology into the air.
“Heya, Saren. Welcome home. Um. Sorry for the mess. I'll clean it up, promise.”

Garrus rose up from his slump, blinking rapidly as he tried to find reality again.

“Oh, you're back. Ahh shi-, I mean... darn? Uhh...”

Nihlus started chuckling, baring up and leaning his chin on a palm insouciantly.

“Nice recovery, Blue.”

“Aha... hah... I tried?”

The two joked back and forth while ignoring his awkward silence, the lounging torin picking on the sniper for his inarticulacy as Saren tried to move from the wall.

Unfortunately, he had forgotten about his leg. The pain reminded him, profusely, and the stolid Spectre staggered away from his point of stability. The lovers looked back over to him in alarm at the off-kilter scrape of his boots as they scuffed the floor several times while he caught himself.

“Saren!”

“What the-”

Nihlus, in a show of his returning dexterity, rolled forward from the table and sprinted the few steps to him with small grimace at the ache it must have caused. Their sniper made it over soon after, hovering worriedly while the younger torin pushed in on his weak side to help him stay upright.

The smell of sex and hormones assaulted the stoic agent, his eyes catching on the gleam of come still shining wetly on his protégé's stomach hide.

Saren jerked away weakly, but it only made him over balance. Thankfully Garrus was in time to brace him, gently pushing the other worried, but still injury-weak, Spectre aside. The Detective eyed his rigidly stiff leg, picking up on the source of the problem, if not the exact reason, and pulled an
arm over his own carapace.

“Medbay, I'm guessing?”

Saren’s jaw was stiff like concrete, finding himself in some sort of nightmare come true. He was desperately aroused, wounded, appearing weak and incompetent, and was in forced close-quarters with the source of most of those problems. The silver-grey Spectre managed a sharp nod, holding back a temperamental growl as they began walking slowly to the rear of the ship.

They arrived shortly after, Nihlus hobbling ahead to open the door for them. As soon as the silver-grey torin was settled on the medical bed, he waved them both off.

“Leave me.”

Garrus and his protégé looked at each other, then back at him, hesitating.

“I said leave. Do not make me repeat myself.”

“Saren, why do y-”

“No, Blue... come on.”

Nihlus hummed reassuringly, and tugged the taller torin from the room. Garrus left reluctantly, nearly being pushed the final few steps by determined carmine arms. His fellow Spectre turned to look at him, nodding with understanding that only made Saren's throat close up, before shutting the door behind him.

The exhausted agent set his head in his hands, elbows on knees, once more just breathing through the rough spot. The biotic sought calm, and once he found some, slowly removed each piece of armor. The medical suite's simple start-up procedures were entered, and he laid back with a particularly gusty sigh.

This whole situation was untenable. They were tempting him, supportive and... loving, he supposed was the word.
Saren feared it was making him soft.

Soft was not something a Spectre could afford to be.

The medi-bot worked him over while he struggled with how to move forward.

He felt foolish for letting a small sense of loneliness behoove him into idiotic choices, such as making a bed for three. He was frustrated, blaming them for making him less careful, feeling as though the carelessness that had gotten him shot was from their affection, but was then swarmed by guilt for even considering them in such a light. Shifting the blame for failure? No, never.

If he was a fool for what they offered, and it made him weak, it was his fault. His alone.

But... he wanted it.

Spirits, brother, ancestors and titans, he wanted it.

He wanted his protégé in ways that were completely outside an acceptable role for a mentor, and the sniper in ways the Vakarian scion could never offer.

Where had all this come from? How had it built up so strong, without him realizing?

The medical suite pinged with mild displeasure at his rising blood pressure. Unshed tears stung in his eyes. He had not even been sure his lacrimal ducts even functioned after the incident with acid had destroyed his original eyes. The glassy surface of his optics never seemed to be wet, and yet the blurry ceiling above him proved that some small amount of them still functioned.

Still, he refused to allow such a thing. Saren Arterius had not wept since the first anniversary of his brother's death, the day that loss had suddenly become real after denial was worn thin. There was no excuse to give in to them now, over matters much less dire.

He continued to focus on other things, forcing his mind to a different place as the advanced multi-
million credit machinery repaired his leg to full functionality in a fraction of the time it would have taken nature to do the same. An hour and seventeen minutes, to be precise.

Saren was still meditating when it finished, and he continued until he felt able to face everything.

He did so, not one to leave any problem unresolved.

Sometime late into the night cycle the Spectre emerged from medbay, mind settled on the matter. All was quiet in the halls, and so the biotic turned for the main cabin. Inside the other two looked to be asleep on the lower platform, as he had planned for. Garrus was curled up in a mildly comedic ball, the mountainous torin still taking up a lion's share of the bed space. Nihlus was half sitting up against the wall, arms crossed over his stomach, with his face angled to the door.

As the silver-grey Spectre moved closer, his protégé's eyes slid open, watching him silently.

"Nihlus," he called quietly.

"You're about to do that thing again."

"...what 'thing' do you speak of?"

"Where you run off and don't talk to me for months."

"I am not."

Nihlus turned away, his expression hurt.

"Not sure I believe ya."

"When have I ever lied to you?"
“You hide shit from me all the time.”

“A lie of omission is not the same as a blatant fallacy.”

The carmine plated Spectre huffed, his subvocals sounding suppressed but forlorn.

“Nihlus.”

“What?”

Saren leaned in, taking hold of the torin's dark red chin in two fingers, and tugging gently till Nihlus faced him. The stolid agent brought their foreheads together with a quiet thud.

“You are important to me. At times, my consideration for you distracts me. My focus was on your wellness while it should have been on the mission, and for that, I was injured. A sniper caught me off guard. It is... not your fault. It is mine. I need to find a balance, but my nature lends itself to... extreme focus on that which I am interested in. I will not... avoid you for months again, but give me time to find the middle ground I seek. Be prepared that it may involve some... distancing.”

Nihlus pressed back into his fringe, hands coming up to cling on his collar.

“I don't want 'distancing'."

“I am aware.”

“Will you... umm... try and figure something else out?”

“I will. I... want to.”

The carmine plated Spectre swallowed heavily, mouth plates moving as he if were searching for words, but it took him a moment to find them.
Simply, “Thank the spirits,” was all he managed, with a half-second smile that cut more than it reassured.

Saren chuffed, letting go of the dark red chin to run a hand over the long elegant lines of white *familia notas* that decorated his protégé’s crest.

“Go back to sleep.”

“...’kay.”

The biotic Spectre climbed over the other two, making note of Garrus’ closed eyes that did not hide the soft smile in his mandibles. Saren shook his head and settled in on the top bunk, hoping his choices were taking him down the right path.

Chapter End Notes

Part of this chapter has been rendered into a mini-comic! Check it out [HERE](#)!

A/N: My internet is being a jerk! I was trying to do a speed run of the Karazhan instance in World of Warcraft, for the secret boss, and it died! IT DIED! For hours! My team mates were so super sad. I'm the healer and they didn't have a replacement for me, not someone with good enough gear to handle it. On the plus side... while it was down I wrote more stuff to post when it went back up, sooo... silver lining? :D

Fanfic Recomendation: Blueshift (4324 words) by bloodbright, Fistful of Gamma Rays
Disconnected from server

Chapter Summary

It wasn't really Garrus' fault, or C-Sec in general, that no one could solve those murders...

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
EMS - Emergency Medical Services (Real World)

A/N: Complete left field from last chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter Soundtrack: Paul Oakenfold- Dread Rock

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Vakarian! Behind you!!!”

Garrus dove forward in a clean tumble, uncertain of what he was dodging exactly, but trusting Chellick that it needed to be avoided. He spun around at his new location looking through his ever present visor for a telltale waver in the air. It was only a half second before he caught what should have been empty space ever so slightly rippling toward him again. It was close.

The Detective dove once more, trying to get a moment to grab for his side arm, but his attacker was literally too quick for him to manage it. A choking noise came from his fellow Officer's direction, worryingly. Chellick was dealing with the other half of their mystery case, an extremely psychotic Asari who had fallen in love with a monstrous science project turned, -uck-, lover. The unknown thing that was chasing him.

At the next dodge Garrus angled himself to be able to see where he’d been, and also where the other detective was supposed to be. The nais had Chellick in a heavy warp field, and was slowly choking him to death mid-air as well. The sniper only had a single heartbeat to take in the situation before he had to move again, the cloaked creature bearing down on the torin without pause.

He feinted going left, but pulled out at the last moment, and instead swerved around to slam into the mental nais. Garrus hadn't had time to angle it very well, or get his own limbs in position for a clean snag, but he wasn't a top rated hand to hand combatant for nothing. A little creative use of spur,
which hurt like hell, and elbow, which drew a satisfying noise of pain from the Asari, and suddenly the tables had turned.

The blue eyed detective had the nais by the throat, his other arm wrapped unforgivingly around a tattooed blue torso, and he flipped to face the previously invisible monster using his captive as a living barrier.

The thing bellowed, slowing it's forward charge when faced with it's... ally in danger. Unfortunately that made it near impossible to see, even with the on-the-fly visual tracking program that Garrus had cobbled together.

"Aaaaah-shit! Where... fuck."

The barely perceivable wavering stopped when the creature did, and his software lost it entirely.

All four were frozen in place until the Asari's sudden and insane scream of rage broke it. As the nais began to struggle in the Detective's grasp, the monster, -there was no other word for it-, roared again and charged.

Garrus barely had time to feel panic as freakish, eight fingered hands began to scrabble at the hold he had on the Asari.

Chellick, that brave bastard, came back in swinging. The bright-eyed and pale grey torin tackled the beast around where it's torso should have been. He appeared to hit solid air and slow as the much heavier torin bore the figure to the ground.

A muddling in the air like a heat wave revealed green-grey scales where he touched, some of the creature's natural camouflage failing in the face of direct contact.

If Garrus had thought the Asari's previous desperation was wild, it was nothing compared to the feral shriek that assaulted his ears when the nais saw her murder-pet-lover-thing go down. The maiden exploded with biotic energy, sending him flying into a wall. The stone-grey torin tried but failed to regain his feet, dazed and fearful for his fellow officer's safety.

Sound and cognition were slow and distant.
A Turian battle roar.

Constant screeching.

An otherworldly bellow cut short but a crunching sound.

A heavy grunt and the sound of bone breaking.

Garrus struggled upward again, but stumbled back into the wall, disoriented. He tried desperately to shake it off, forcing himself to focus through the worlds-away feeling. The Officer was fairly certain he had some level of concussion.

Before the sniper could fully make his bearings a wild blue form came flying at him. Still screaming like a banshee, the nais tackled Garrus back into the wall and shanked him, shoving a knife between his armor plates and digging deep.

The air left his lungs, the slicing pain preventing him from easily drawing another. All the world was a dizzy, screaming mess.

The blue-slicked knife withdrew and came in for another strike.

It was aimed to sink into the soft flesh between collar and neck, and might have made it had the Asari not tried to further propel the strike with biotics. In a burst of panic Garrus pulled at the nais' aura, his underdeveloped biotics powered by terror and adrenaline, yanking it away from the murderer while trying to block the knife's path with his arms as they fell to the ground.

He did something wrong.

For a split second the sniper's body was nothing but jagged pain, like electrical wires crossed wrong. The blade's edge went unnoticed as it skidded by his head with a high pitched scraping noise.

Focus came back in bits and pieces, but the C-Sec Officer managed to sit up and again seek his
bearings after a few steadying breaths.

The world inside the small room was suddenly, jarringly quiet.

Over his legs laid a corpse, soft tissues partially shredded, bleeding heliotrope purple over his armor and the floor. The body was a mess of lacerations and tears, looking like a victim of a shrapnel grenade. Spatters of blood flecked nearby surfaces like macabre artwork.

Garrus swallowed back the urge to vomit, not sure what had happened but afraid that it was because of him. Forcing the thoughts away to focus on the active situation at hand, he shoved the remains away and stumbled upright, trying to find his partner.

Officer Chellick was half buried under their monster. The bright-eyed torin had managed to kill it, though it was still somehow invisible where it didn't touch anything. Garrus pulled the damn thing off and away, heaving with his back to move the massive creature. The other Detective was unconscious, shoulder dislocated, and one leg broken badly.

Running a quick scan told him that his co-worker's vitals were stable, -thank the spirits-, and a little medi-gel would hold the light plated torin over until medical services got their hands on him.

The Vakarian clan sniper breathed a sigh of relief before looking around him at something of a loss. He wanted to call dispatch and have them send an ambulance for his fellow officer and a CSI team, but this mess... this was not in the C-Sec training manuals. Invisible monsters and their psychotic Asari mistresses? This was... whose department would this even be?

Giving up, he called Saren.

“Garr- what happened?”

“Ahh... long day? I need ssome quick advice.”

“... You are bleeding.”

“Yeah, got ssstabbed. Have you ever heard of... a eight fingered, sscaled creature? About three
“Your pupils are dilated and your words are slurring. Where are you?”

“Yeah, have a concussion I think. Uhh... solved that murder case. Was some sort of... that thing I described.”


“Um. Zakera Ward, Maloi disstrict... that big blue building on Halarai street? Ninthhh floor. But listen. Who... would I call to deal with this thing? Um. Also... I might have... bioticed? Bio... bioticed? ... it's Asari masster to death. Ssomehow.”

“... Stay where you are, I am on my way. Are you alone?”

“Technically? Mnno. The lead detective for this casse is unconciouss in front of me. He killed the damn... monsster thing. He's okay, but I need to call for EMS or ssomething. Leg's broken.”

“Is his life in danger?”

“... probably not?”

“Then call no one else. I request that you do not take offense, but I am taking your case. Spectre Authority.”

“Aww... that'ss not fair. I ssolved it already.”

“We will discuss the particulars later. Get medi-gel on that stab wound.”

“Okay, yeah, I ssshould do that...”
Nihlus was trying to hide how tired he was just making it from the Daedalus to a rapid-transit station while fully armored. It was a lot of weight to carry, and his bones and hide were complaining about the pressure something fierce.

Still, he refused to stay behind. When Blue had called he had tried to pop into the call to say hi, but Saren had denied him, suddenly tense, and gone for his armor and weapons. The carmine plated Spectre had immediately done the same, listening in to the local half of the conversation. The short, very disconcerting conversation.

He'd tried getting his erstwhile mentor to elaborate on what Garrus had said, but all the silver-grey torin would say, in an aggravated grumble, was that it sounded like one of STG's special projects had gotten loose without anyone noticing. 'Incompetents' had been muttered at least three times since they'd left.

Saren's face was set in an utter non-expression, which was probably a bad sign for whoever had fucked up. They were now in a skycar, the other torin driving it on manual to their destination with an override on the vehicle's autopilot controls.

“So the person who stabbed Blue is dead already, right?”

“I am not certain it was a 'person', per se.”

“Well that's less than reassuring.”

The Spectre's shoulder pauldron's groaned in a quiet metal noise as he shrugged slightly.
“Well is the non-person dead?”

“I believe so, but I am not certain.”

“... One of those days, is it?”

Saren hummed in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Insurance (3324 words) by probablylostrightnow (Javik has retreated into solitude in response to the ultimate betrayal - Shepard's choice to take control of the Reapers instead of destroying them. An unexpected visitor makes a very surprising offer.)
A rising mist of lavender

Chapter Summary

Just another day on the Citadel. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honour, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: Weirdly enough, STG is usually deployed by the Citadel Council. They're like... supposed to be espionage buddies with ST&R. I guess? And all of them have code names, unlike the Spectres. Weird, right? I always thought they were an arm of the Salarian Union. That begs the question of what the SU has then. Humans have Ns, Turians have Blackwatch, Hanar have the Compact servitors, the Asari have Justicars and enough intelligence brokers to win the lotto everytime. Wtf do the Salarians have since the League of One went down? Or the Quarians, Batarians, and Elcor? Anyone know any canon on this?

Chapter Soundtrack: Panic! At The Disco : Lying Is The Most Fun...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scene that greeted the Spectres upon arrival was both worse and better than either had imagined. Various shades of blood decorated the previously white tile flooring, not all of it identifiable. Garrus was on a foot stool, elbows on knees and appearing alive but also fairly concussed. The Detective looked drowsy, faceplates stuck in a permanent wince. Beside the foot stool was another torin, one that Saren did not recognize save for the Officer's obvious C-Sec colored armor.

On the ground a short distance away were the hostiles, long since dead. The biotic let his optics zoom in for a closer look as he passed the corpses en route to his main concern, pausing for a half step at the strangeness of seeing a slightly visible body, and the violent shredding on the Asari's pebbly skin.

Both nais and the unknown species were very dead according to his heads up display, thus he turned away from them and carried on.
Catching their approach, the woosy officer hummed a greeting while eyeing the remains of the situation and rubbing at his brow as if bothered by a headache.

“Hey, thanks for coming. This is... such a mess.”

Saren looked him up and down, before shaking his head with a huff and kneeling to check the Detective's vitals with his Omni-tool's scanner.

“You are covered in an obscene variety of fluids, Garrus.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Nihlus stepped up beside them to very gently press his mouthplates into Garrus' fringe at the temple, a convenient clean spot. The silver-grey Spectre looked away, refusing to allow the emotions that rose up within him at witnessing the image. Now was not the time.

“You okay, Blue?”

“Mmmhm. I'll be fine. Need to get Chellick to the hospital though, he was nearly choked to death, and something happened that I didn't see, but I think the... thing decked him one in it's death throes.”

“Saren will take care of ya both, I need to go check out our 'thing' here. Any idea where it came from?”

“Ahh, no idea. All we had to go on are some weird outlines of movement in a few frames of video surveillance, took us forever to trace here. The nais kept it, uh... in the bedroom. It's got... never mind. Go look for yourself, I can't describe it.”

With a single raised browplate Nihlus wandered off for the bedroom first, if only out of curiosity. He returned a few moments later, his throat pale.

“That shit is some fuuucked up, grade-A crazy.”
“Nihlus. Language.”

“No way, no how. Go look at the back rooms. It's... mmmmph no. Not just no, but hell no. I thought I was pretty freaky in bed, but never mind. The bar has been raised.”

The carmine plated torin made a faux gagging expression and turned to inspect the bodies instead. Garrus half nodded with a wince before thinking better of head movement.

“Told you.”

Certain that they were both exaggerating, Saren finished his medical scan of the Detective, noting that the knife wound was well clotted, if improperly healed, and that the concussion was fairly mild.

Unworried, he checked the other C-Sec Officer as well, finding a notably worse concussion and a host of other small issues from the struggle that must have taken place to produce the mess around them. Satisfied, he sent in a call to the Spectre Offices for a medical response team with appropriate clearance levels, and a bio-hazard containment team for the corpse of the unidentified species.

Seeking to fill that particular gap in his knowledge, Saren searched for the specimen in the Citadel Archives using Spectre clearance.

No results.

Bothered by the mystery of that, he took deep scans on the body and a few tissue samples. Suspicious of the circumstances, he forwarded the data back to the Daedalus, and to a private, unregistered server, then wiped every trace of having done so. The samples he stashed in a utility pocket. Then, just to be very certain, he switched his Omni-tool out for a spare model. Something about this had his paranoia levels on high alert.

Secure in the knowledge that it would be extremely difficult now to cover this up from ST&R, the silver-grey agent returned to where Garrus sat, leaving his fellow Spectre to case the scene with holo taking. He trusted Nihlus to ensure none of them were in any of the images.

“Garrus.”
“Don't suppose you know who to call about all this? C-Sec is... definitely not equipped to handle this sort of thing.”

“I have already sent out a request for the appropriate personnel.”

“Oh. Good.”

“We must wait here while they are on route, but the teams coming will ensure the other Officer, - Chelik you said?-, is taken to a hospital for medical care. The creature's remains will be disposed of properly after investigation of course. Speaking of, I need your case files.”

“Thought you might. They're on my work computer at C-Sec. It's biometrically locked though, you'll have to take me with you, or hack it.”

“The first option is preferable, I do not wish to waste my time trying to hack past your personal security.”

“I wouldn't exactly want to try and get past yours either, Saren.”

“Hmm. You are not slurring as much as before.”

“Yeah, my first aid and trauma module. It's giving me, ahhh... these.” The sniper pulled up a screen on his Omni-tool showing the UI of a very basic trauma module and a short list of drugs it was dripping into the Detective's blood stream. The medical assistant was unintelligent, simply noting his symptoms and alleviating them with tiny amounts of flash forged medical compounds.

It was a simplistic, inadequate, and stupidly minimal for a torin that ended up on a battlefield so often. Saren was almost offended, and nearly said as much.

“That is... a very inadequate device. We will have to apply a better one if you intend to continue running into such inordinate amounts of trouble. On the Citadel of all places. Also, were you aware the 'ninth floor' is two stories down, and the building has five hundred square meters per floor? Perhaps a tracking device would be a good idea as well if you find yourself poor at giving directions when you have head trauma.”
“Hahaha, oh ow. Sorry. Nnnn... Don't make me laugh. My head is killing me.”

Saren chuffed dismissively and leaned back, somewhat amused that the Vakarian clansman thought he was joking. From across the room, Nihlus' voice broke the quiet.

“Interesting. I'm not seeing STG's signature markings or tracking devices on this one. Maybe it's not one of theirs?”

“STG? What does the Salarian Special Tasks Group have to do with this?”

The silver-grey Spectre sighed, having long since expected Nihlus to give up on all pretense of keeping the sniper out of classified intelligence.

“Forget you heard that, Garrus.”

“... I can not talk about it, but forgetting that two Spectres show up to a scene like this and already have expectations as to who was responsible is sort of a give away for a lot of... I'm not helping, am I?”

Saren huffed again. His fratri was far too intelligent for his own good.

“No. Now pretend you forgot it.”

“Riiight. Pretending.”

The cheeky Detective gave a lazy salute that made Saren resist rolling his eyes. Why were his two... friends, such sarcastic people?

Thankfully the medical and bio-hazard teams showed up shortly there after, toting Officer Chellick away to the hospital, and removing the mysterious, still semi-visible specimen. Garrus gave a show of being more confused and dazed than he was, and the Spectres had to wave off the EMS staff who wanted to take him as well.
Saren had every intention of putting the sniper into his medbay at soonest opportunity, but first a stop by the Detective's C-Sec office was in order. He was well aware of how quickly incriminating documents disappeared from secure servers.

Nihlus vaguely wondered if concussions made one more susceptible to reverie than usual. He'd made the wonderful mistake of pressing in on Garrus as soon as the medi-bot gave the Detective a clear bill of health. Really, he'd just had a whimsical desire to love on the sniper, but it had quickly devolved into something decidedly less platonic when Blue had pulled him up onto the medical bed for more. Now he was straddling the mountainous torin, shedding armor like water.

“Mmmmm, I have... a theory.”

“Oh yeah?” Garrus asked between long, wet laves of tongue on his warm and flushed throat hide, “…what's that?”

“Concussions... oh yes, more of that... concussions make you more susceptible to... unnnnnnn... to reverie...”

The sniper chuckled against his neck. The deep bass rumble was sexy as fuck, making his plates start to loosen.

“Where did this... theory come from?”

Nihlus grinned, smiling close-eyed at the ceiling as the Detective nibbled a path along the underside of his chin while drawing light, scritchy circles with bare talons in the hide of his lower back.

“Just came up with... ahhhhhhh... with it. I don't have a large sample size yet, but so far...”

Blue ran a long, black tongue along the inner side of carmine mandibles, curling around it at the base possessively and tugging just a bit. It sent shivers down Nihlus’ spine, making his toes curl and uncurl repeatedly.
“I don't think I'm alright... with you getting a bigger 'sample size'. Repeated head trauma sounds like a bad idea.”

“That's, mmn, fair. I could be... convinced to forgo the testing phase... entirely... and, ohhhh fuuuuck yes please....”

“And what, now?”

“Shush. Mmmm... and, ahhhh...”

“Thought so.”

“Cheeky... asshole...”

“You like it.”

“L-lies and... falsehoods.”

“What was that?”

“I said, li- Oohhhhhnnnnnn... spirits... yesss... ye-ah! Ahh~!”

Nihlus melted as Garrus threaded fingers through his crest blades, tugging his head aside to clamp mouthplates down on neck muscle while biting heavily in a way the sniper had learned his frequent lover really enjoyed. It edged into deviance, and made the Spectre's mouth grow wet with saliva in anticipation of returning it.

So far Blue had taken everything he'd worked up the bravery to dish out, promising that nothing had turned him off. The Palaven born torin had to have a line somewhere though, and the green eyed Spectre was determined to find it.

Find it, and maybe push it just a little.
Garrus’ tongue pumped against his neck, licking upward in rapid and forceful bursts as his jaw gently
worried the hide. It filled the room with the slick sounds of a serious make out session, music to his
aural canals.

The carmine plated torin could feel his plates spreading fully, and he tilted his hips to grind down
against his lover, drawing a breathy moan from the Detective.

“Blue...”

“Yeah...?”

“Please tell me... this is going... somewhere. I'm gunna die if it... doesnnnnn't... oh shit...”

“Spirits, yes. Want you right now.”

Unfortunately for them both, just as Nihlus went to drag Blue’s pants down the door to medbay
fwished open.

“Out! Not in my clean room. Out.”

“Bu-”

“No.”

“I co-”

“No. There are a dozen other surfaces you could use, and meters of floors space. Not in medbay,
Nihlus. Out.”

The knife-wielding Spectre went limp in Garrus’ arms, groaning in dissatisfaction. Moving was just...
too much work. Lucky for him their sniper was a beast of a torin, and scooted them both off the bed,
lifting the carmine plated whiner as he went.

Double lucky, the sniper took them right up to Saren,leaning into his space and rumbling invitation.

Nihlus really hoped his fellow Spectre would take Garrus up on it, even if the move was very obviously revenge for booting them out. The mild glare that followed said Saren was perfectly aware of that, but it didn't hide the slight dilation of his optics that the younger torin now knew to look for.

Why arousal made cybernetic eyes dilate was beyond him, -brain chemistry was a weird, weiiiiird thing-., but he delighted in seeing that reaction every single time.

“Hey Saren.”

“...what?” was the suspicious reply. Smiling innocently, Nihlus leaned in and licked his former mentor's cheek affectionately.

“Luv ya!”

The silver-grey torin looked just the slightest bit terrified at that statement. Vengeance complete, the green eyed Spectre turned to lick long, sweet trails up Blue's neck, nibbling his way back down as best he could with their collars in the way. The sniper hummed with pleasure and carried them on by to the bedroom. Nihlus watched his fellow Spectre stand in the doorway, frozen in place.

He hid a devious grin against Blue's shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Grapholagnia (1089 words) by fourthage (Shepard buys a Fornax after Garrus's remark about krogan testicles.)
As the air hisses by we hear the last spoken words

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

PT – short hand for Physical Therapy (Real World)

Chapter Soundtrack: Evanescence - Weight of the World (The Enigma TNG Remix)
(Less the lyrics, or the edgelord remixer who -granted- did a good job, and more the long sorrowful feel to it.)

A/N: I've got some research planned for the next chapter, but in the meantime, here is some shameless sexy time, with some emo-ness mixed in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus' entire body had long since begun to shake from exhaustion, but he refused to stop until he really, actually couldn't walk anymore. Or, more precisely, until Blue couldn't. Below him the sniper was panting, sheets loosely held in his fists, eyes closed in an expression of bliss. The carmine plated Spectre had made Garrus come no less than six times, dosing the torin on increasingly strong reverie every few minutes. Drawing out every roar and sigh as much as possible.

Tomorrow afternoon he was shipping out for a mission.

It was his first since he'd been injured, and while a large part of the knife-wielder felt deep relief he was returning to work, other mental factions were less than pleased. He wanted back in the action, and was damn thankful to not be a cripple, or hell just plain dead...

But fuck he did not want to leave Blue.

It wasn't all bad. At least Saren was coming along, and that was a shit ton better than going it alone, but still...

Every night for the past several weeks, -every spirits blessed night-, he had spent coiled around his sniper, a loose limb or two reaching up to brush his other love. On occasion, the more stoic torin had even reached back, running knuckles over his crest or scratching soothingly at hide. Nihlus had gotten sex anytime, -no really anytime-, he wanted it, because the Detective couldn't tell him no.
Not that he hadn't been told no, -or told off, or ordered around, or refused things-, enough recently. His electric eyed rehab trainer had done plenty of that.

Even still, Saren had been good to him. His former mentor generally lacked the care giving skills of a first grader, but during his recovery the stolid torin had fed him well on home cooked meals and almost-sort-of doted on him after particularly tough PT sessions.

It had been a strange kind of paradise, and everything that made up the colony-born Turian had absorbed it like a sponge would water, taking it in to recover from the dark days of physical and mental torture. He wasn't whole, but he was better. Much better.

Still... spirits damn it he didn't want to see this time end.

Nihlus curled inside of his lover, a centimeter at a time, with a desperate desire to draw out their every interaction as long as absolutely possible. The Detective rumbled encouragement, also shaking from being worlds too over-sensitized to go hard and fast anymore.

“Palvi...” Garrus panted out, subvocals all over the place.

“Yeah, Blue?”

“I want...”

“Mmmm?”

“I want this always...”

Verdant green eyes slid shut. He pushed his fringe into the sniper's as he replied, “Yeah. Me too.”

“Wanted you to know.”

“I do.”
Garrus shuddered through a seventh orgasm a few moments later with a heavy, dual toned moan that went on for long heartbeats. The Spectre felt his own peak fall away in his exhaustion, but Nihlus couldn't really bring himself to care. He'd come so many times already.

Grey and tawny brown arms came around him, holding their foreheads together as they breathed through the latest aftermath, seeking oxygen amid the delirium.

“Nihlus, I...”

“It's okay. I mean... I'm not goin' anywhere. Uh... metaphorically, that is. Heh.”

Garrus' subvocals buzzed with dissatisfaction at the situation. The green eyed torin grinned, small and crooked, nodding into the press of fringe. Icy blue eyes looked up into his, pupils still blown wide but brow ridges tilted low in a serious expression.

“I don't think...”

“Hmm?”

“My clan... I don't want... bonding outside of an honest connection is... it's more than...”

Nihlus put a finger to stony mouth plates, shushing the sniper's despondent words.

“Shush. It's okay. Tonight, let's just... it's for us, right? Saren won't be home for hours, and till then? It's just you and me. Fuck the outside world. Just you and me right now.”

The Detective huffed quietly. “Not sure we can keep this up though. Think I'm getting dehydrated, and well...” Garrus held up a level hand, displaying a mild and persistent shake.

“Ha. Yeah, I'm about the same. Be right back, I'll grab us some water.”
Pulling out of Blue was harder than he'd thought, but the Spectre managed it. It was only the work of a minute to bring back fluids, but the trip was chilly for lack of clothing and his preferred seven-foot space heater. Nihlus returned with two large glasses, drinking most of his on the way back, and the rest as he was crawling back into the bed.

Setting the cup aside revealed a delicious view of Garrus, legs spread and plates laying loose, half sitting up to chug his own glass. The torin's throat muscles worked as he drank, drawing Nihlus' gaze like a targeting reticle. As soon as the other torin was done the Spectre was pressing in close, sinking himself back inside the sniper's slick cloaca with a pleasured hum.

Blue made a feeble sounding moan that broke and wavered, falling back into the mattress as his arms gave out. Carmine cock rolled in and out of the slit amidst wet brown hide sopping with proof of all the hours past. Garrus tensed, probably from over-sensitivity, and began panting immediately; throat bared as he turned to bite down on nearby fabric.

Oh... fuck, did this torin make him hot. The noises. The smells. The trust.

Nihlus braced himself on his arms and thrust in several times, pushing in faster and dragging slowly back out against the smooth, clenching walls of muscle. The Spectre watched the body underneath him writhe at the persistent sensation, talons scratching with futility at the thick sheets. The tear-resistant cloth may have prevented the catch of black claws, but it stretched tight and ground between mouthplates as the sniper used it to bolster himself against the relentless sensation.

Fuck, fuck fuck, that was disgustingly sexy.

As silent punishment for being too damn fuckable for his own good, the Spectre curled inside his partner on the next thrust, catching Blue's mouth for more reverie when the torin pulled away from the bite-hold to gasp. He dove deep, and they were still locked at the mouth, jaws open and tongues coiled as they came.

Nihlus was first, nearly loosing his balance as the riptide of orgasm washed him away. Garrus took a few more moments, barely coming as his fluids gushed slightly then merely leaked, his mind willing but his body running low on supplies.

It took them several minutes to work up to anything besides boneless lazing and remembering to breathe.
“Think... think I'm done. You'll have to call an 'escort service' if you want more. If you do, warn them that you need two, maybe three.”

The carmine plated Spectre snorted into the mattress under his face. He was folded over Blue's chest with his nose smooshed into the bed by the other torin's shoulder. It was vaguely uncomfortable, but moving sounded really hard.

“You're underestimating me.”

“Four?”

“Pffft, double that.”

“Damn. I'll never keep up.”

Nihlus laughed through a yawn, managing to withdraw enough to roll away in a loose-limbed flop. He landed beside the sniper, and weakly kicked the other torin's nearest leg.

“Roll over.”

“Mmm... which way?”

The Spectre half heartedly kicked his lover's calf again to demonstrate, prodding a spur with his toe when the Detective was slow to move. He wiggled closer, slipping a knee between Garrus' thighs to push muscular legs apart just a bit to slip inside again with a sigh. The sniper winced and hummed simultaneously in a dichotomy that made Nihlus' expression fall just a little, reminding him that Blue would just give, and give, and give...

He was so bad for this torin. So bad.

As the Spectre inhaled the scent of his partner and settled in for a nap, he realized that he was in too deep, mentally. Nihlus wasn't sure he could stay away from this for long, or really... face the idea of the other torin eventually having a bond mate that was someone else.
Maybe... maybe if it was a bonding of convenience... she would let him...

Nihlus pushed the fucked up thoughts away, forcing the hopefully distant future to stay that way for now.

Chapter End Notes

Adorableness, brought to you by DancesWithTurians:

A/N: OH LOOK. There is a short Omake over here of Saren reviewing the holos from the crime scene. I went weird places with it. :D

Fanfic Recommendation: Hot Chocolate (561 words) by Evil Saphyre (FemShep/Joker)
~Interlude: The Wolf That You Feed~

Chapter Summary

There are countless scars.
Inside, outside, unseen.
She has gone by many names.
Jack, Subject Zero, Jacqueline.
Countless lives were ended.
Thieves, rapists, jailers.
Though not all were guilty.
But still, even now,
With a tormented, fragile heart,
She writes. It's poetry.
Darkness, entropy, and hate,
These do no beget anything.
They cannot create.
So somewhere deep inside,
Under the ruins and behind the walls,
Must remain a spark of hope.
Just one will do.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I apologize for the long wait. This chapter probably isn't going to be worth it. It's doesn't have a good story arc to it, and it's really just sad. @_@ As always, the Interludes are skip-able if you only care about the main story.

Chapter Soundtrack: Skillet - Monster

The secret side of me, I never let you see.
I keep it caged but I can't control it.
So stay away from me, the beast is ugly.
I feel the rage and I just can't hold it.
It's scratching on the walls, in the closet, in the halls.
It comes awake and I can't control it.
Hiding under the bed, in my body, in my head.
Why won't somebody come and save me from this, make it end?
I feel it deep within, it's just beneath the skin.
I must confess that I feel like a monster.
I hate what I've become, the nightmare's just begun.
I must confess that I feel like a monster.
It's hiding in the dark, it's teeth are razor sharp.
There's no escape for me, it wants my soul, it wants my heart.
No one can hear me scream, maybe it's just a dream.
Maybe it's inside of me, stop this monster.
I... I feel like a monster.
See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jack's Timeline (Best I can guess, based on all the data I can find from the comics/wiki/games)

<p>| | | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2161</td>
<td>2165</td>
<td>2166</td>
<td>2167</td>
<td>2168</td>
<td>2169</td>
<td>2175</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>2178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2180</td>
<td>2182</td>
<td>2183</td>
<td>2185</td>
<td>2186</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Abduction</td>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>Xfer to ME1</td>
<td>ME2</td>
<td>First implants/</td>
<td>Combat</td>
<td>Escape/</td>
<td>Slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cult</td>
<td>Purgatory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reapers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Piracy/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pragia</td>
<td>surgeries testing</td>
<td>Used by</td>
<td>Hanar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>~Mar</td>
<td>~Jan</td>
<td>~Oct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>rescuers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>spacestn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~Interlude: The Wolf that you Feed~

The floor was blissfully cold. Weakly, she tried to curl into a tighter ball, hands clutched over her ears. Fingers and toes clenched as she panted into the flooring, passing an indeterminable amount of time on the cool tiles, trying to be away from the pain.

“Subject Zero, present yourself.”

Terrified that they'd use the electric stick again if she wasn't quick, the small girl scrambled out form under the bed and jumped to her feet. She tried to make her back stiff and straight, but a moment away from the chill floor the room began to get too warm again, nausea sinking into her guts like a sludgy poison. The girl barfed down her front, hurking up everything in her stomach and splattering the lead guard's boots with orange-grey muck.

“Oh damnit, fucking gross. Central, send a clean up.”
Two orderlies came in moments later, removing the fetid smelling clothing and replacing it. They wiped her face without care or affection.

The lead guard leaned over and yanked her forward, setting the fever-sick seven year old amid the four person escort. They marched her to one of the bad rooms, but she knew better than trying to resist going in. Subject Zero focused on trying not to be sick again, stumbling down the hallway panting and nauseous.

“Dr. Cassey.”

“There you are, took you lo- what's the matter with her?”

“The kid puked.”

“When? What was she doing? Give me details.”

The guard did so, boredly listing off general facts that the doctor scribbled down on a datapad. Subject Zero stood there, or more accurately, waivered vaguely in place while they talked, trying not to barf again. When the adults had finished telling each other things half of the guards left, and the other two took up posts by the door.

“Subject Zero, in the chair.”

Oh no. It was a chair day.

“I-I... I don't feel good today, c-can I go back to my r-”

The girl wasn't able to say anything else before the Doctor waved at one of the guards, who grabbed a hold of her flat grey in-patient dress and physically put her in the chair. She nearly vomited again, the room spinning as colors bled together.

As always the complex surgical chair came to life, needles coming in to drug her into compliance.
Sometimes she was lucky and they put her to sleep, or made everything seem fuzzy and far away. Not this time though, the needles just took away her ability to move. Subject Zero was unable to so much as blink. Thankfully her eyes were already closed. She had long since learned to close her eyes before the chair started injecting things.


The medical arms pushed and pulled her into it's preferred position, and the needles came in again, along her scalp, and the roiling in her guts grew worse. Blessedly, her scalp went numb before the scalpels came in, but she could still sort-of feel it. No pain, but there were knives in her brain, and it felt really gross.

It took forever for the Doctor to stop pressing buttons, directing the chair to do things to her for what felt like hours. When he finally finished, the guards were called over, this time with more orderlies and a stretcher. She was returned to her room, still conscious and immobile, and left there on the bed to wait out the hours till the drugs wore off.

This was new.

She was terrified of new.

There was very good reason to be afraid.

The guards had come this morning, and taken her to one of the doctors. A lady with flat blue eyes who never made any expression. The woman had put something into the metal works on the back of her patchwork-shaved head, clicking a heavy bracelet thing onto her wrist that pinched into pale-white skin and attached itself.

Now they'd dumped her into a big room with seating and closed door ways, adults in white coats watching from above. A door across the room slid open, and out came another child, also a little girl. An adult shoved the other kid out the door and closed it.

For a moment they just looked at each other wide eyed. Subject Zero stared at the girl, who had only had clumps of hair remaining, with sores all over her face and arms. It was icky, but she couldn't bring herself to care. This other girl was the first kid she'd ever remember meeting, and even though the unknown girl's face looked messed up and her expression was twitchy, Subject Zero moved closer with fascination.
“H-Hello. I'm... um... Zero. Who ar-”

“Subject Zero. Subject Twelve. Test your biotic capacity against each other. The winner will be
given better food. Begin.”

The unknown girl looked slowly over at the man who'd given them the demand, then turned back to
her. The girl's face looked about as confused as Zero felt.

'...winner?'

The two confused little girls stood still, uncertain what to do.

“Dr. Evalin, they appear hesitant.”

“What? Why? Subject Twelve, attack Subject Zero.”

The room was dead silent until the tiny, gravelly voice of Twelve broke it, “I don't know... how to.. I
don't want to...”

“How. Try the electric shock tokens?”

The shrill screams of both children would have broken the heart of anyone not a monster. It was
unfortunate that none such were present.

“Hmm too high, turn it down a bit. Subject Zero, attack or we will repeat until you do.”

Needless to say it did not work, and when it did not work the proctors attempted shocking them
several more times. When orders and shocks finally proved to be insufficient incentive the
disgruntled scientists sent the guards to take them both away. Shivering from involuntary muscle
spasms and drooling slightly, Zero watched through a daze of pain and confusion as the only other
child was taken away elsewhere in a similar state.
Once in her room again, the little girl crawled under the tiny bed with her one blanket, starchy and scratchy though it was, and cried.

Why had they hurt her more?

Why did they hurt Twelve?

She didn't understand any of it. Not what they wanted her to do, and not why they did it.

Maybe... she was bad? Is that why they hurt her?

Zero didn't want to be bad.

The first man took his scalpel and stabbed the other man with it, in the eye. Zero wanted to wince in empathy, but she was afraid to move, or speak, or do anything really. The big screen in front of her had been playing videos of people fighting for a while now. Every ten or fifteen minutes the fighting would stop, and Dr. Cassey would explain what had happened and ask her questions. She'd gotten a lot of questions wrong, it seemed. Dr. Cassey had made lots of frowns. The current set ended and the Doctor turned to ask her more questions.

“Subject Zero, tell me what happened in the video.”

“The... man with the brown hair stabbed the tall man with a scalpel?”

“It is called a knife.”

“N-eye-ff?”

“Yes. Did you see where the tall man was stabbed?”
“In the eye?”

“Yes. Do you know why?”

“… to... to hurt him?”

“To blind him. It is a weak point on most sentient beings, the exception being Hanar. Now, watch the next segment.”

On it went, Dr. Cassey showing her video clips of violent acts, then asking her questions. At first Zero was just confused. She didn't like the videos, and she was afraid of getting in trouble, but the more she thought about why they were making her watch them...

Zero was afraid they wanted her to attack people.

That's what they had asked her to do to Twelve. What if they asked again? Did she not do it, and get shocked over and over? Did she stab Twelve in the eye with one of those knife things?

She didn't want to stab anybody. It didn't seem very nice.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Do you remember the attack the green armor woman did to the red armor man, Subject Zero?”

“...yes?”

“Attack Eight.”

The other child in question was a boy, and he looked like a strong poke might knock him over. Knowing that they probably hurt Eight like they seemed to do to everyone else, Zero very gently tapped her palm into the boy's chin.
“Harder.”

She did so, just a little harder.

“Knock him down, Subject Zero.”

Swallowing miserably, she gave the unresisting and vacant eyed Eight a solid whack. As soon as he hit the floor a pinch pricked her wrist, but before she could cry out at the minor pain her whole body flooded with warmth. Suddenly everything felt really great. Really, really great. Zero smiled, confused, at the silly boy that was weakly trying to sit up. When he managed to get to his feet, the proctors asked her to hit him again.

She did, and giggled as he toppled over. It was... kinda funny to watch. He wasn't very graceful.

They asked her to light up her biotics, and punch him with in her hand. She did, and the second pinch at her wrist was followed by a wide, wide smile. The world just seemed so great. Pushing the other kid over was so silly, and sort-of fun.

A few more good hits and Eight didn't stand up again.

Dr. Cassey clapped, smiling as well, and the guards led her away.

Zero didn't remember until the next day, when she very first woke up, that Eight had stopped moving after that last biotic punch. She started shaking, scared about what that meant. Her arms wouldn't stop trembling that day, or the next.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Hello?! Twelve? Have you seen Eight? ...Hello?! ...Answer me! Twelve?? Eight! Have you seen Eight? He's a boy, shorter then you, he has blue eyes... Twelve! Hello? HELLO!!”

Zero hadn't seen Eight again after they had fought. The food lady this morning had watched her eat breakfast, and then led her to a new room without answering any questions. The new place was bigger, and had more then just a bed in it. She liked it at first, feeling a little special, but then her day
had taken a turn for the worse. The other kids had appeared outside the window just after lunch, and she'd tried to talk to them, but no one would answer her.

The little brown eyed girl had only recognized Twelve out of the thirty some odd kids outside, but not one of the other children had answered her greetings or questions about Eight. She'd gotten louder and more demanding, eventually screaming at them while pounding on the glass. They wouldn't answer no matter what she did or said, and now her voice was nothing but a hoarse, froggy whisper.

“Please answer me! I just want to know if you've seen him? Is he okay? I didn't mean to... to... Hello?!? Girl! Girl with the dark skin! Have you seen a boy with blue eyes!? His skin is my color and he didn't talk and... and... HELLO?? Please talk to me! Just tell me... just... tell me... hello...?”

When the lady came back to bring her dinner the young girl was so thirsty that she drank her entire cup of water in one gulp. Zero also tried asking the food bringer why no one would talk to her, but as always the woman left quickly and wouldn't respond to her questions.

The little girl sat down on her new bed and glared angrily at the wall, trying to avoid looking back out the window toward any of the other children. If they were going to ignore her, she would ignore them right back.

She still wanted to know what had happened to Eight though.

Oooooooooooooooooo

“Harder, use more of your biotics.”

Zero did as she was told, hating it, but unable to stop herself. The warm feeling the bracelet gave her when she did what the doctors asked was just so good. She spent most days feeling really sad and unhappy, lonesome and disliked. No one would talk to her except the doctors, and it felt really good to punch the mean kids who spent hours ignoring her everyday even if none of them talked back when she smacked them around.

A particularly bright-glowing elbow jab sent Twenty Three flying, and Zero smiled dizzily. Twenty Three... didn't deserve two words to his name. It wasn't fair. He was a jerk. He was ugly. He ignored her, just like all the others.
She told herself a lot of things to make it okay to hurt people, and sometimes she really believed them. It was so much better when she did, because when she didn't Zero was sure that they were all here because they were bad, and she wasn't any different.

They were all bad, all belonged here.. in this place where the doctors hurt them and made them fight all the time.

“Twenty Three, stand up. Zero, begin again, use more biotics. Actually, use only biotics. Don't physically touch him.”

It took quite a bit of focus but she managed it, and the sweet-warm rush hit her insides like nothing else did. The little girl smiled big, making a face at the limp, glaring form on the floor. She flounced off when the guards called for her, and laid in her bed grinning while the happy feelings lasted. Zero fell asleep convinced that it was okay, because they all deserved it.

She was just not hurt, because she did what the doctors said, and did it really well. If they did what they were told, if they weren't so bad, maybe the doctors wouldn't tell her to punch them.

It wasn't her fault they were bad, it was theirs.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Amazing. We can't waste potential like this, we might not find it again. Subject Zero tests higher in almost every category then any other specimen, and her overall average is nearly sixteen percent higher then the next best. The girl is a jack of all trades in the combat applications as well. Look here, at this data set? You see? Amazing.”

Zero sat patiently on the surgical table, knowing that moving without being told to would get her punished. Two weeks ago the doctors had removed the bracelet and put something in her head instead, and the pain when she messed up was about ten times worse now.

She was very careful not to mess up.

The two scientists went back and forth for a while before remembering she was there and calling a guard to take her back to the window room. She refused to call it 'her' room, because she didn't like that place. She got really sick of the other kids playing the stupid 'ignore Zero' game every day.
The guard that came was a nice one name Mozogi, a tall woman with dark brown skin and pretty grey eyes. Zero liked a few of the people here better then others, mostly the ones who would actually talk to her. Being ignored was the worst thing in all of time and space, and this guard was one of the few that would say stuff to her sometimes. She liked them.

“Hey, Mozogi... what is a jack of all trades?”

“It's someone who can do anything pretty well, but nothing perfect.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, kid.”

The guard dropped her off at the door to the window room, patting the short tufts of hair on Zero's head before locking the door as she left. The little girl smiled a small, honest little grin. She really liked having her head patted. It was nice.

Zero turned to flop on the bed, and thought about what Mozogi had said. She liked it, the idea of being pretty good at everything. That's what the doctors had said she was, wasn't it? Pretty good at everything... but not perfect.

The little girl help up one hand, five pale fingers spread in contrast in front of the dark hued ceiling. She eyed the long surgical scars that ran the length of her arm, thinking that she could never be perfect anyway, not with all the broken lines on her skin.

She really was a jack of all trades, and that was... okay. She was good with that.

The practice exercises went on and on, but Zero knew better then to complain or stop. Stopping would mean being shocked, and that always hurt a bunch. A bunch- a bunch.

“The whole series, again. Again. Once more. Good. Stop, and take a break. You have ten minutes.”

She dropped where she stood, panting with exertion. None of the exercises were easy, and repeating them over and over was hard to do. The little girl curled up on the floor and passed right out for however long ten minutes was.

“Your break is over, stand up and get ready to start again.”

Zero wobbled to a stand, trying to be good enough for more of the warm feeling. They hadn't given her any all day, and she was starting to feel a little sick without it. It took nearly two more hours of work with short breaks before they gave her a dose of the good feeling, and she giggled her way to the window room after practice time, lounging on her bed and dreaming about punching the stupid window out and tossing all the kids at the wall. It wouldn't happen, she'd certainly tried breaking the window once before and gotten in big trouble for it, but it was nice to dream about.

Eventually Zero drifted off to sleep peacefully.

ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Twelve stood across the fighting room, and the grin on Zero's face grew huge.

“You! Can't ignore me today, can you?”

Twelve just glared at her, not talking, and she started to get a little mad.

“Well you can't! We get to fight today, and I'm going to get all the warm feeling stuff! You don't deserve any, because you're mean!”

Still the other girl said nothing, looking frustrated and angry. Zero really started to get mad, and glared back at her, waiting for the proctor to call the start of the match. It took forever but when the word 'begin' was called out she ran forward with a fist full of pay back for Twelve.
The other girl didn’t make it easy to catch her, dodging all around the room almost faster then Zero could go. Almost.

A few quick turns, a couple of jumps assisted by clumsy biotic pushes, and she caught up, slamming a biotic powered fist into the back of Twelve's head. The other girl stumbled and got body-checked into the wall.

“Ha! How do you like that? You deserve it! I’m a jack of all trades and you're just a bad person. That’s right! I’m the Jack, and you're not!”

Twelve rolled away, pushing to her feet and trying to kick at her attacker. Zero dodged it, easily, and laughed as she returned a much more biotically powerful strike to the other girl's midsection. Her opponent went down, rolling to a stop, and the guards came in to take the limp form away.

The warm-feeling flooded Zero's veins, and she laughed buoyantly, tossing her head back and her hands into the air.

“I'm the Jack! I AM! Hahaha!”

She spun in an exuberant circle, giggling as her own guard walked her away to the window room.

Today was a good day. Twelve had gotten payback for all the days she'd ignored Zero through the window. One ignoring mean kid down, on top of a pile or others, with about ten more to go that she hadn't gotten to punch yet.

She planned to defeat all of the other kids, so that the doctors definitely knew she was the jack of all trades. All the warm feelings should be hers because she was trying to be good for them, where as all the others were just mean and bad and stuff.

The little girl wolfed down dinner when the food lady brought it, eating four sandwiches before curling up for bed with the one scratchy blanket.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
Most days were either instruction or practicing, only occasionally did the proctors and guards set up a fight. Instruction days only got her the warm feeling if she was paying really good attention and answered all the questions they asked correctly. On practice days she could earn a lot more of the feeling, but it was also much more exhausting to do it. Fighting days were the best of the three, because Zero could earn the happy feelings after every fight, so she was blissful by the time the end of day hit, and could fall asleep no matter how sore or hurt she was.

Sometimes though, sometimes the doctors took her to the bad room and put her to sleep. She often woke up sick after those days, and was left alone and bored in the window room with nothing to do and no one to talk to, feeling ick and weak.

Zero made up an imaginary friend at one point, but when the proctors asked her about who she was talking to they frowned when she tried to explain. Having imaginary friends was a bad thing it seemed, and all the tests they did after that told the little girl that she needed to not have pretend friends.

She hoped that someday she could have a real life friend. Definitely not one of the bad kids here though. Someone else.

Someone good.

“What do you think? Jack’s progress with the RTA-5 modification was great last week, but the sacrifice of power for longer up-time was pretty harsh.”

“Too harsh in my opinion. Let’s stick with the RTA-4, and see how things look next month. Cassey said that the devs have a new prototype in the works, but it definitely needs tested before we put it in Subject Zero.”

“Of course.”

Zero sat quietly, listening to the doctors talk about her. She had learned most of what she knew from listening to the adults talk. Dark, soulful brown eyes watched the two scientists go back and forth verbally, comparing test results on the screen that she could only see some of.
Not having a good view of the monitors was annoying, but the little girl was willing to deal with it. The only stuff she had to think about in the window room between tests and practice was the stuff the doctors talked about.

She could tell anyone who asked what kind of neurotransmitters were in the latest batch of biotic augmentation serums, though she still didn't know what color of blue the sky was supposed to be. Zero had heard one day that it was blue, but no one had been able or willing to explain where the sky was, or why it was blue.

The little girl absorbed any knowledge she could get her hands on, and made the most of it.

With a sudden, heavy strike the older boy slammed her into a wall with the most powerful biotics Jack had ever felt from anyone besides herself. She pushed back immediately, snarling at the upstart Fifty Nine. He looked about as angry as she felt. His eyes were red and... and filled with... tears?

She stopped, skipping backward and away, staring the older boy down while feeling confused and upset and weird. Why was he crying? She decided to ask.

“Fifty Nine, why are you crying?”

He opened his mouth wide as he ran at her, almost as if he was screaming, but no sound came out.

She back tracked, not sure about about this. Something wasn't right.

“Subject Zero, what are you doing? Proceed with combat.”

“I don't.”

The mild shock from the back of her head made her flinch more then the right hook that came for her face. Jack blasted the boy back many meters, and turned to look at the the proctors. Dr. Cassey was
holding a datapad and whispering at the other doctor. Several of the guards beyond them, Mozogi included, were watching the ongoing fight with interest.

“Subject Zero, proceed.”

Foot falls alerted her to the returning attacks of Fifty Nine, and she spun around to take them properly. They went back and forth several times, but her heart wasn't in it. The tormented expression on the boy's face was disturbing and the tears made her guts churn. When she got a good, solid hit on the other child the warm feeling rose up, but it didn't feel strong enough for her to care or lose focus.

Something was just not right. Why was he still crying? She didn't understand.

It didn't change the fact that the boy seemed determined to fight her and win. Jack didn't want to fight, but no other options were forth coming and she wasn't about to lose. She hadn't ever lost, ever, and the very idea of failing that much was... scary.

Zero and Fifty Nine fought hard. Many cuts and bruises later she came out triumphant, knocking the boy out with a solid spin kick that blasted him toward the wall and into unconsciousness.

At the end of the day, face buried in her pillow, Jack felt more mad at the other child than anything else. Everything was okay when there were fights and she won. Why did Fifty Nine have to make it weird and cry? Crying wasn't supposed to happen. She didn't like it. The doctor's didn't like it.

Jack decided that anyone who shed tears when she fought them was getting an extra hard punch to the face. It was bad to cry, she determined. Anyone who cried deserved to hurt.

Uncertainty and anger roiled in her guts with a shaky and dissatisfied lack of the warm-feelings.

She sleep really poorly.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Jack stared out the window to where the other kids were, watching them interact. They were talking
to each other, just not to her. The little dark eyed girl couldn't hear a thing through the heavy glass, but the fact that they ignored her even when she banged on the partition never ceased to make her mad.

The door opened, the food lady bringing lunch, and closed again.

Still Jack stood there, watching the other kids. She didn't like them, any of them, because they hated her for no reason. That didn't mean she wasn't desperate for a little interaction.

She imagined all sorts of things. Hitting them. Being friends. Playing games. Having another person like her that was good at things, another jack to fight with. The little girl, growing less little every day, thought about eating lunch with people like the other kids did.

She wondered what they talked about, where they came from, why they had different skin colors. She pondered what would happen when she became an adult. Would she be given a white coat and have to do test on other kids? If she was a doctor, who would be the new Jack?

Subject Zero didn't like the idea of there being a different jack. She was Jack. The best Jack.

The day came and went, and no one came to retrieve her. She spent the entire duration alone in her room, day dreaming and thinking.

Someday, she decided, someday she was going to prove that she was the very best Jack, a really good Jack, and they would let her leave. She would go find the sky, and make real friends, and have lunch with people.

Someday.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.
“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy,
sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

--My inspiration for the chapter title, and the sad truth about the mess inside of Jack's head. She did not get to choose which wolf to feed, Cerberus starved her light wolf, and fed her dark wolf on prime rib and opium. I love the ManShep/Jack romance, the fluffy one where she gets a ManShep that cares, a giver and not a taker. She doesn't have anything left to give that isn't tainted, she needs to receive until her light wolf has the strength to fight again.

Fanfic Recommendation: How to Get a Turian to Go Down (2644 words) by ThreeWhiskeyLunch (FemShep/Garrus)
Tumbling down to find a new place

Chapter Summary

Saren takes care of the details.

Chapter Soundtrack: Trentemøller - Moan

A/N: I know that wiki sources and popular fanon seem to think that Saren blamed human kind for his brother's death, but the way it went down in the comics... it's pretty clear that Jack Harper's interference and involvement somewhat helped throw a wrench in ground zero for the initial Reaper infection from Temple Palaven, where as Desolas was actually helping to spread it. Actively. The events were chaotic but these details were self evident, and I don't think that a clear minded Saren would make that kind of illogical jump in thought process. Does anyone else have a theory? As it stands, I have to ignore the wiki on this one...

Anyway, for anyone who hasn't read the comics or books, let me summarize the really important canon events that have already occurred in our timeline. (If you have already read them, just jump down to the chapter beginning.)

Chapter Notes

Evolution 1: General Desolas Arterius, whose eyes glow blue, has a ton of squads scouring the surface of a contested Shanxi. Jack Harper, aka the future Illusive Man, and he come into direct conflict. The General is captured, some subterfuge is utilized, and the newly discovered location of a relic Desolas was hunting for is found. The tables are turned by Reaper infected Turians inside the cave where the relic was literally chained up. Jack comes into very brief contact with the relic, and passes out into a coma for weeks. One of his squad appears to have died from direct contact.

2: Jack and his crew are taken on board Desolas' battleship, but the 'war' is called to an end, and the Turians are good enough to release Jack and his one surviving squad mate back to the Alliance unharmed. He begins to have visions of a terrible future, and can suddenly speak the language of the infected, as well as other alien languages. His eyes begin to glow, and he has a constant sense of where the relic is, even from other star clusters. When they track it down again they run right into Saren and Desolas, and are taken prisoner once more.

3: A 'triumphant' return of General Arterius to Palaven, followed by infected dressed as Valluvian Priests of legend. The crowds go wild as Temple Palaven is reopened and the relic is borne inside. It is in fact a sort of trap. Desolas has made the Temple into an observatory for the relic, with scanners and researchers. The infected allow it to be settled into the apparently harmless place of honor. Desolas intends to research the artifact and use it to make all Turians into meta-Turians, evolved with the relic's power, and to use that strength to make Turians the dominate force in the galaxy. While imprisoned, Jack Harper figures out just how dangerous the 'Arca Monolith' really is and tries desperately to tell them.
4: Harper tries to convince the obsessed General that the relic is bad juju, but he won’t listen. Saren starts to look at the situation and realize something is very wrong. Jack escapes and goes looking for what the infected are up to in the bowels of the temple, running into Saren looking into the same. They discover a 2nd monolith. Saren starts to listen to Jack’s predictions. Saren sees the truth and goes over his brother’s head to contact central, declaring a bioweapon containment emergency. The infected hear the call and go nuts. Saren returns to the temple center with back up, sees his brother being attacked. The new force lays into the infected. Jack’s squad mate wants to leave with their recovered squad mate who was discovered still ‘alive’ but infected. Jack insists on staying and helping Saren fight the infected, while Saren himself is fighting and trying to convince his brother the whole thing is a failure. Ignoring him, Desolas goes to shoot Jack and the squadmate jumps him, shoving them both back into the relic. Contact infects the General, and he passes out. Jack tells Saren the rest of the information he's figured out, telling him to warn his people about the threat, and then leaves. Saren pulls out and leaves a com device for his brother to find when he wakes up from the initial shock of transformation. Desolas awakens and they talk. His mind is already going, and Saren explains what is happening, apologizing for what he is about to do. He tells his brother he will mourn for him, and avenge him, then orders an orbital strike over the temple to destroy the infected and the monoliths. Jack Harper survives, escapes Palaven, goes on to take his first few steps to becoming the Illusive Man.

Revelations: Saren is a Spectre now, tracking down an illegal weapons deal, but it was cancelled last minute because they didn't want Spectre attention. Ever curious and feeling something is amiss, he follows the rabbit hole and basically just stumbles over Kahlee Sanders and David Anderson, who withhold information on illegal AI research they are trying to get to Alliance brass, and definitely don't want the Council to have. He figures out, of course. The human Ambassador eventually tells the Council some things as a show of 'good faith', and Saren and David are sent on their infamous mission together to handle the fallout. During the mission Saren gets his hands on the AI research, which is actually on the Reaper named Nazara who was discovered floating in the Perseus Veil in 2182, and then studied extensively by a Batarian and the Alliance Defector Dr. Qian. It lead to a bunch of data that Saren would go on to spend the next several years working through before he eventually tracks down and meets Nazara himself.

(The plot doesn't really make much more sense then that. Drew Karpyshyn has some really neat ideas, but his brain space is also kinda disorganized sometimes. XD)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The blue frames of the CIC holo-panels were brightly lit, a plethora of information scattered across the screens. Saren leaned sideways in the command chair, chin resting in a palm as he read. A taloned hand gestured absently to the VI, causing the page to scroll as he slowly but surely worked through the latest bit of information he had managed to decrypt and organize.

Scripted in mid-air by the holographic monitors was all of the research on an artifact of unknown origin by one, -now deceased-, Dr. Qian.
Four years ago he had stumbled on humans performing illegal AI research, not to mention several other weapons trading violations along the way. That series of missions had lead to a very precious data disc containing years of research into a ancient alien ship of unknown origin, a source of endless wonders in technology and engineering that Dr. Qian's team had been using to make leaps and bounds in their own inventions and studies.

In the end the Doctor had offered the data and his services to Saren in exchange for his life. The Spectre had taken the former, rejected the later, killed the man, and left. The scientist's assumption that his life was safe because the data was complicated and involved, -because he was the only living specialist-, had proven very false. The silver-grey Spectre had chosen to muddle through the terabytes of data himself, rather than work with a human.

The upstart race had risked them all with blind exploration, practically invaded the Citadel with their numbers, and were constantly demanding respect and difference in a galactic community they had only joined a handful of decades ago. No respect, no patience, and all the selfishness of children.

Saren would rather cut off his own arm.

The section came to an end and he let out a sigh, crossing his arms. Though the dedicated Spectre had worked through several hundred gigabytes of data, there were thousands more to go. Nevermind that some of the information required testing and laboratory facilities to verify or expound upon. Facilities and equipment that he simply did not have aboard the Daedalus.

The Spectre needed a proper research facility, as well as personnel that were closed mouthed and loyal, if he intended to begin working with the information he had. He knew the unknown vessel had mind altering capabilities, and that encountering it before he was properly defended from them could be disastrous.

There was also the vague suspicion that the ship was from the same origin as the Arca Monolith had been. Did he want the power and resources the meta-Turians had been able to offer? Yes, of course. The Turian people could do so very much with upgrades like that. The loss of intelligence, independent thought, and free will however... not for all the credits in the world, -not even if offered his brother's life-, would he risk the minds of his people, or his own.

Saren rubbed his lower jaw, scratching a talon over his mouth-plates in contemplation. He needed to spring the trap, steal the bait, and take the spoils back to Palaven without the taint of the creators. To do that however, he really would need proper research facilities to begin working through what he had already decrypted.
Perhaps a closed location that could be eradicated if containment failed or the research became a liability. Facilities like that meant credits, personnel meant potential security leaks, and where in space could he locate such a place that was low risk for pirate attacks, but also unlikely to invite inquiry by other species or governments?

Numerous problems, no easy solutions, and the data he had mined thus far was beginning to pile up with places it could be taken. Saren sighed, letting his hands dangle loosely from the arm rests. Giving it up for the night, he closed the project down and resealed the documents under the tightest security he had. Instead, he checked his messages. Three were from Nihlus, whom he suspected of having, -what was the word...-, 'separation anxiety' perhaps? Two were from the Spectre Offices, and one from Garrus.

FROM: 1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

hey I found a thing. -nk
ATTACHEMENT: asd0f0a6s.stf
END MSSG

FROM: 1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

how do you make those wrap things with the fish inside? i bought the stuff but i cant figure out how to mix it right. mine tastes funny. -nk
END MSSG

FROM: 1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

just wanted to say hi today. youre terrible about checkin your nonpriority messages btw. i almost marked this one but i knew youd get mad. ;) also, its blues name day next month. we should get him something. any ideas? -nk
END MSSG
FROM:5225225//ID.code:spectreofficesoffical
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

Spectre Arterius,

A package has arrived for you on the Citadel.

END MSSG

FROM:5225225//ID.code:spectreofficesoffical
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

Spectre Arterius,

A dead drop for information was expected at the coordinates in the attached document, but none came. The details are also inside, investigate at your discretion.

ATTACHEMENT: 138as12ca8aadf33.stf

END MSSG

FROM:7946130//ID.code:trueshot
TO: 8466672//ID.code:liminality

Hey, sorry to bother you. A coworker came to me with some data, and it looks more like Spectre intel then C-Sec jurisdiction. Going to be on the Citadel anytime soon? I can email it to you if you want it, but the relevant situation is also here, so if you aren't around I can stop by the Spectre Offices and talk to someone else about it instead.

-G

END MSSG

With a huff, Saren sent Nihlus the recipe for the seafood wraps, certain the message was an excuse to talk more than anything. He also checked the 'thing' that had been found, which turned out to be an interesting article on color-combination logic puzzles. Reading through it ate up an enjoyable twenty minutes before he set the numerous remaining sample puzzles aside in order to continue handling the small queue of messages.

The third email gave him some pause. Saren had not the slightest idea what to give someone for their naming day. He had not ever had occasion to give anyone such a gift, -at least not since he was
young-, where in he and his brother would exchange small acts of service rather then spend money they did not have.

The silver-grey Spectre sat a few moments and debated between taking the opportunity to spend money on such a thing, now that he had it, or giving the Detective a gift of service as well. He decided on the later, finding it had the greater appeal. It seemed... more honest. It did not take much of a jump in logic to conclude that a set of home cooked meals preserved in stasis would go over well.

Perhaps he would be kind and make a few spares for Nihlus, as such a treat might alleviate his erstwhile apprentice's attention seeking antics.

That course of action determined, he looked into the message about missing intel from the Spectre Offices next. The data was sparse, but it did give him enough to work with. He read through it, and then sent out two preemptive inquiries to information brokers and one to a fellow Spectre about the matter.

He came to the final message from Garrus last, working through his mental calendar and current mission information, but deducing that he would not be back to the Citadel for weeks. Silvery fingers hovered over the keys as he went to type a reply.

Saren wanted to... visit, and regretted that it would not be feasible. His return message said as much, but asked for a copy of the data as well, telling the Detective that he would send a Spectre to visit him during work hours about the matter after seeing the issue at hand.

The youngest Spectre ever appointed tapped a few more keys, compressing and sending off all the replies in a batch of data transfer. He finally stood from his chair and stretched. It was time for a shower, some weapon maintenance, and then perhaps he could see about fabricating small stasis chambers meant to hold meal-sized portions.

He was a little tired, but there would always be time to sleep later.

There was simply too much to accomplish for now.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Short, but hopefully good! I am going to be going to the dentist tomorrow and the next day for some major work in my mouth and stuff, so I will be high as a kite and don't know if that will result in no writing or tons of writing. XD Heads up!

Fanfic Recommendation: Sense and Flexibility (220,428 words) by Roarkshop (Garrus/Femshep, classic retelling. I love this one!)
This remains a viable option

Chapter Summary

Nihlus wings it, yet again, somehow.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Ishiri minra - Thessian dish, a type of stir-fried fish and peppers neatly cut and reorganized after cooking for aesthetics.

Cozun - A naturally spicy root vegetable from Thessia that tastes like potatoes with the consistency of rice.

Priami - Tiny levo fruit tarts, origin unknown, that are popular throughout the galaxy.

Forurin'ai - Thessian sweet banana-purée-like fondue with other fruits for dipping. A desert.

Mimmit - Soft pita-pocket filled with edible leaf vegetables and creamy sauce.

Maître d’ - the person who oversees and organizes buspeople and workers, generally in fancy places like hotels and classy restaurants. (Real world)

Entrucia - A Turian core world, one of the most stable, populous, and wealthy dextro planets in the galaxy.

Amarceru - A type of very strong herbal tea from Palaven. Also popular in diluted forms with Quarians. (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Change - Deftones

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"An ishiri minra with cozun and priami for the sides, a forurin'ai to share, and kid's sized mimmit."

Nihlus smiled at the Asari waitress delivering the most recent order, turning away to look busy preparing it. The nais wandered off to continue waiting tables, leaving he and the other cooks to get the job done.

It might have been an impossible request, considering that the carmine plated Spectre knew jack-all about cooking Thessian dishes, levo or dextro versions. He could just barely manage basic Palaveni recipes, really.

Truthfully this mission would have been a disaster from the start, his fellow cooks getting him fired for not actually knowing how to cook... had they not also been Council agents.
With a baffling amount of domestic skill for a Salarian that worked, -on average-, some 16 hours a day solving galactic crime, Jondam Bau absentely flipped some sort of flat cake in a pan while adding ingredients to a bowl with the other hand.

Korvis Tiine, normally not a field agent, was filling in as the only other available ST&R employee with any amount of cooking skill on hand.

Nihlus was seriously lamenting that Saren was in deep cover elsewhere for the next few months or so. Not that these two weren't doing a *phenomenal* job covering for his lack of culinary skills, but... well... he missed...

The green eyed Spectre was distracted, lost in his own thoughts until a cough caught his attention.

Jon twiddled two fingers for 'swim', and then hooked a finger for 'cut', holding the action for several moments while whistling a short ditty from a pop song about red dresses.

The knife-wielder mentally punched himself for being self absorbed on a mission and grabbed his utensil of choice at the subtle direction. He removed two bright red and pink fish from the chilling unit, laying them out to carefully cut length wise.

The sheer amount of military hand signs they'd stolen to communicate inaudibly about cooking was getting kind of ridiculous, but they were manageing to pretend that two Spectres and an intelligence officer were chefs at a four star restaurant.

Somehow.

Nihlus still couldn't pronounce half the things he'd made today.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

A Salarian voice hissed at him from behind, "Kryik!"

"Whaat?"

Agent Tiine, going under the alias Lislon Risi, leaned in close to him as he minced poultry into a fine paste. It seemed like a waste to the colony born Turian, but rich people liked weird foods.

"The target just walked in. Table seven!" the quiet man whispered to him.

At that moment an Asari busperson wandered by with a hover-tub full of dishes, so Spectre Kryik covered for their intimate vicinity with default Nihlus-tactics. Korvis blushed burnt orange at the passing lick, making the nais grin cheekily and wink at them.

The peach colored agent coughed awkwardly once they were alone again, and continued his information sharing.

"He is with two consorts, a business partner, and three bodyguards. I'm not sure how much luck you'll have..."

The carmine plated Spectre grinned broadly.

"Watch the master in action, my friend."
The look Korvis returned him was less than confident, bordering on worried, but Nihlus didn't let it deter him. Agent Tiine hadn't ever seen him in action.

Like the smoothest of operators he passed the poultry mincing off to Chef 'Risi', snagged the order ticket for their mark when it came in, and tagged Jondam to help him make it well.

Jondam, going as Jorfinni Siir, whipped up the food with little help in short order, and passed the lot of it off to his fellow Spectre with a solemn nod. Nihlus grabbed a bottle of house wine and put on quietly charming airs before stepping out of the kitchens to deliver.

Special attention from one of their top chefs, for a very special patron.

Aegis Victus was as over weight as a Turian could be, with pale red plates and the classicly large Victus clan mandibles that hung heavy on a particularly masculine jaw. He was also musculely husky, with clear grey eyes and a patient manner.

With effortless sexuality, -in a plain white chef's uniform of all things-, Nihlus sidled up to the table with their order. Not one, but both courtesans narrowed their lovely, slit pupil eyes at him. He hummed politely at the table, delivering each plate with elegant motions that brought attention to his long neck and slender wrists, graceful fingers and narrow waist.

Seduction was an art, and while his cooking skills might sometimes leave something to be desired, he always did.

The undercover Spectre flashed a beguiling flicker of mandibles at the passingly charmed target, stepping away from the table without a word. Aegis Victus returned it with an amused half-smile, talons gliding over one of the courtesan's bare arms as he watched Nihlus dip a bow and leave.

Bright green eyes narrowed smugly as he returned to the kitchens and went back to cooking. Korvis glanced with confusion at the doors to main dining hall, once over at him, then shook his head and went back to stirring some sort of sauce. Nihlus grinned. You just couldn't rush these things. His fellow Council agent would see.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooo

"'The one with the green eyes, if you please,' is what he said. Sorry Amalos, I know you're a chef and not a waiter, but..."

"Don't worry about it Esi. I actually enjoy seeing reactions to the plating layout, the smells, the first tastes... I really don't mind waiting on Mr. Victus' table so long as the kitchens are slow."

The restaurant's Maître D', a female Batarian by the name of Esi Anaz, sighed gustily with relief. Rich clientele were sometimes difficult to please, and accommodating staff were clearly a gods' send. Nihlus tapped his finger tips to her shoulder in a Batarian gesture of support, and Esi smiled brightly at him, her cute and pointy teeth catching the light in a glint.

With no more fuss than that he sauntered off to the table in question.

The Victus clansman looked up from the menu with a cool glance. He was alone this time, save for the usual three bodyguards. It was the business torin's third visit to their establishment this month, the first having been their initial meeting. Nihlus had been careful to be seen only in passing on the
previous visit, meeting the mark's gaze juuuust once. He had made it seem like being caught
admiring, forcing a blush by holding his breath after averting his eyes.

Third time being the charm, their target was asking for him now.

"Have you made a selection, sir?" asked Nihlus in smooth-sounding closed dialect, grateful for
Saren's class-enfused example to emulate.

His mark leaned back from the table, subconsciously readjusting his posture in a subtle shift that
made the most of his heavier set form. Nihlus purposefully let his eyes stray from the other torin's,
blinking after a moment and moving his gaze back to where it belonged. It gave the impression the
Spectre been distracted by the view.

Victus' pale red mandibles flicked with amusement. Nihlus' target watched him for a moment before
lacing his hands atop the table.

"I'm having trouble choosing. What do you suggest?"

Nihlus tapped his chin thoughtfully.

"May I ask... where you're from?"

"Entrucia."

An honest answer, if the torin's dossier was accurate. Nihlus smiled pleasantly, sketching a half bow
and humming a low request for patience before turning for the kitchens.

Inside, Korvis was a one Salarian whirlwind of cooking, taking care of three orders at once while
Jondam pulled away to meet him.

"Any luck?" The Salarian Spectre asked when they were close.

"I need Entrucian cuisine. Tell me you can make something fancy from there?"

"Likely. Am not especially familiar with the local particulars, but know enough to start. Extra-net
search further information while I begin?"

"On it."

Between the two of them they had a variety of Entrucian-ish cuisine made and plated in less than
twenty minutes. Nihlus wisked the tray of small taste-testing plates out to Aegis' table, moving
through the same graceful, eye catching motions to offer the many choice bits of food.

The business torin watched, paying almost as much attention to the presentation as he did the
proffered demi-meal. When everything was set out, including a pot of amarceru, the green eyed
pretend-chef stepped back with a flourishing hand gesture.

"May I offer you a selection of potentially interesting dishes? Perhaps something here could suit your
tastes."

Aegis surveyed the off-menu food without pause, obviously a torin used to special treatment. Nihlus
waited patiently while the other Turian sampled whichever caught the target's eye, the flat-faced
bodyguards staring off into the middle distance like good Turian mooks were supposed to.

Several minutes passed while the torin nibbled and hummed his way through the offerings, polite
subvocals giving his opinion on each. 'Amalos' pretended sophisticated fascination with his mark's
expressed thoughts, offering low and vaguely intimate hummed inquiries when he thought up a question to ask.

On they went, Nihlus wrapping the other torin in a subtle web of seduction built to suit a rich male with refined tastes who, -if his instincts for people were on the ball today-, suffered from being surrounded by 'yes men' who didn't have a thought of their own to share. Who also loved good food. He could work with that.

Aegis' expression and body language relaxed more as the tidbits disappeared, a meal's worth and then some eaten. The torin was clearly a 'foodie', and having a spread like that, -elegance, variety, and home-like cooking combined-, turned the hungry target into a pleasantly full one. Always a good start.

Nihlus left once to refill the amarceru, but spent the rest of the time attentively waiting on that one table. Much to confusion of the other wait staff. Thankfully they all acted like everything was normal and let the undercover Spectre work his magic.

When he was done the well dressed torin stood and stepped in close to Nihlus, just short of inappropriately near for strangers.

"My name is Aegis Victus. Come work for me. I will double what you earn here."

"Oh!" Well then. "I... I mean, I'm flattered, but I couldn't just leave my two co-chefs. Alone, I'm afraid I am only a third of a real culinary specialist, but... thank you. The offer is tempting."

"... why do you need them?"

'Chef Amalos Arterio' shrugged helplessly, humming apologetic refusal.

"Honestly? We fill gaps in each other's skill set and experience. The three of us have too good a thing going for me to simply leave them behind..."

Aegis' sharp grey eyes narrowed at him, pale red chin tilting in displeasure that his interest was telling him no. As rich people are wont to do the torin weighed his options, and seemed to decide that money was no object.

"Then all three of you can come. I want this," thick, rust-colored fingers gestured over the table, "daily. Every meal. You are wasted here."

Hand to his heart as if he were overwhelmed by the generous offer and flattery, Nihlus looked wide eyed at the door to the kitchens and then back.

"I... I would need to ask them?"

The business torin returned to sitting, taking a smooth sip from his tea.

"Then do so."

The devious Spectre's disgustedly smug expression didn't touch his mandibles until he was safely behind walls, and spilling the good news to a baffled Agent Tiine.

"Wh-what? How... "
A/N: I got sick of not posting when I had literally five chapters waiting to be uploaded, so I sat down in my hotel room and cleaned up this chapter entirely on my iPad. It was rough! Also, new mind canon, Turians find pointy Batarian teeth to be adorable. They would look like little kid teeth, right? Cute!

Fanfic Recommendation: Cross-Cultural Exchange (1896 words) by rivendellrose
In the last few days I've changed so much

Chapter Summary

Korvis has a panic attack and Nihlus charms his target a little more.

Chapter Notes

A/N: So much editing, so little time. XD You may want to review the codex entry on Salarian nationalities before reading this chapter, heads up.

Chapter Soundtrack: **Globus - The Promise**

One sails the seas of life and believes  
The storms will lead you home

...  
I live in a dream  
With open eyes I breathe again  
I see all your fears  
Together we can feel, we can heal  
And take the road less traveled on

...  
This dream is a universe  
And every soul shines  
Where the darkness turns into light  
I take you to fly with me  
And follow the way  
There will always be a new day

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Much to Korvis' dismay his lack of social maneuvering skills combined with Spectre Kryik's sexually oriented mind had resulted in the most awkward living conditions he'd ever been in. The quiet voiced intelligence agent was taking slow, deep breaths while locked in an en suite bathroom. It connected to the generous bedroom he was going to be sharing with Spectre Bau.

The lead Turian Spectre had insisted that it was important that he be classified as single, and the two of them taken. While Korvis understood the basic idea that the torin frequently used seduction as a manipulation tactic, the 'he and Jon needed to be clearly taken' part had resulted in them being presented as a couple.
A room sharing, bed sharing, life-partner couple.

‘Oh goddesses,’ he thought anxiously, accompanied by a heavy swallow and more forced slow-breathing.

Though no observers would find it odd for Salarians to be particularly non-amorous, affection and strong shows of friendship would be... normal. ‘Jorfinni’ was clearly Sevinite-descendant, meaning nobody would expect him to be the needy or demonstrative one in the partnership. It was up to Korvis to play on his Amrotepi descendence and be the social, affectionate one.

He was not a social person.

Korvis bit his lower lip, far and away more stressed about the pretend relationship then being in a deep cover as a live-in chef for a filthy rich Turian clan.

A soft knock came at the door, and his spine snapped straight like a live wire.

"Lislon?” Came Spectre Bau's voice while using his cover name.

"... Yes?"

The door opened, slow enough for him to have stopped it or said something if he were inclined. His new roommate for the foreseeable future stepped inside, closed the door quietly, and activated his back-up sub-cutaneous Omni-tool with it's Spectre grade widgets and tools.

The low hum of a local jammer and anti-listening device whir filled the bathroom.

"Agent Tiine... are you alright?"

Suddenly he felt so much worse. His nerves were so obvious they were affecting the mission...

"I apologize, Spectre. I'm... not normally a field agent..."
He shuffled his feet as Jondam looked on, confused.

"You were fine before?"

"Well... yes... before we weren't needing to pretend..."

"... Pretend?"

"To be so... close?"

The awkwardness felt like it was a vice around his throat. Korvis winced at himself, making a mental note to add 'Inability to pretend to be in a relationship' *very clearly* to his personnel file.

Jondam simply nodded though, as if his deficiency was understandable. "Ah. Yes, of course. Your psyche profile has you listed as highly introverted, correct?"

'Liason' nodded sadly. "I have some training in acting to make up for it, but this is..."

Ever the upstanding person that he was, Spectre Bau settled a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I will carry the act then. Focus on not being upset by it."

Agent Tiine perked up slightly. He didn't want to be rude and question the idea by pointing out the racial stereotype of Sevinites being the lone-wolf type, but...

Well...

If the other man said he could do it, who was he to doubt? Spectres *were* the best of the best, after all.

"Really? That would be... so helpful."
Jondam nodded again, his solid-black eyes blinking slowly closed with the motion to emphasize his agreement.

"Of course. Spectre Kryik will be under the highest level of scrutiny, but this sort of mission is his specialty. It is unlikely either of us will need to do more then act friendly, cook, and provide back up of a more martial nature should that become necessary.

Just like *that* the peachy colored Salarian felt worlds better. He could make food, he was *naturally* friendly, and the sheer number of martial arts he knew would intimidate anyone sane. This... was okay.

"Thank you," he said with profuse gratitude.

Jondam smiled reassuringly, a handsome quirk of blue-grey lips, and Korvis returned the gesture as best his settling nerves allowed.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

It wasn't a full two weeks before Nihlus' stylish delivery of lunch was met with a request to stay.

"Please, sit, you look... tired." Victus tilted his head curiously at his chef's under-the-weather appearance, opining with a tentative grin, "Was the meal that much effort to make?"

'Amalos' smiled tiredly back, unmarked carmine mandibles flicking wearily as he responded with a light chuff and took the offered chair.

"No, no. Not at all. This is... probably the lightest set of daily duties I've ever had, combined with the most generous amount of time for researching for new dishes. Please don't mistake my state as your fault whatsoever."

"Then... why?"
Nihlus debated for a moment on what to say, and decided on a simplified variation of the truth. The best lies *always* grew from a seed of reality, so he laced his undercover persona's every motion and word with a bit of 'Nihlus' for believability.

"It's... I don't want to bother you with personal matters, Mr. Victus. I would rather you enjoy your lunch. It... ah... this is a bit embarrassing to admit, but seeing you appreciate our culinary works every day is probably the best part of this position."

The charming smile Nihlus whipped up for his patron was another thing simply crafted on the fly with just a bit of truth behind it. He *had* always liked being helpful.

It was also bait.

"I am glad you find it fulfilling. Though... I still find myself curious about your personal matter. Is there anything I can do for... whatever it is?"

Nihlus ducked his head sheepishly. "Ah, no, but... thanks. Today's... the anniversary of my *pari*'s death. We were close. It's always a hard day for me, that's all."

Victus' eyes turned surprisingly gentle, reminding him of the soft look Garrus would give him sometimes. It made him miss the Detective something *fierce* that moment.

"Why didn't you just request the day off Arterio?" inquired his mild mannered boss delicately.

Not having an immediate and favorable answer, the disguised Agent shrugged casually, fiddling with the sleeve of his chef's jacket while he came up with something. "I love what I do... no reason to sit idle and be unhappy when I could be cooking instead."

Aegis leaned sideways in his chair, paying less mind to the meal he was absently eating, and more attention to the despondent seeming torin that sat quietly beside him, gazing out the window. The Spectre could feel the other torin's contemplative stare on him as they sat unspeaking for a time.

Nihlus managed to be both a thousand miles away, *actually* thinking about his long dead father, but was also present enough to be aware of Aegis' every move. Today wasn't the best day for him to be pushing further into the torin's life, but being invited to stay and chat was too good a chance to pass up.
He sat in peaceable silence while the other torin ate, waiting to see if the classy clansman would engage him further, or if he would need to weave more conversation.

"May I call you Amalos? That is how you say your first name, isn't it?"

Jackpot. Sometimes his job was just too easy. The green eyed operative made himself brighten visibly.

"Sure thing, Mr. Victus. Most people do."

"Then simply Aegis is fine for myself."

Nihlus blinked rapidly as if startled. "Are you sure, Mr. V- er... A-Aegis?"

Said torin looked utterly charmed by his stutter, reaching over to squeeze a hand lightly over his. Black talons lightly scratched the hide on the back of his hand as the other torin withdrew, lingering for a long moment. It produced a vague feeling of fluttering wings in his gizzard. The Spectre could feel his cover solidifying, the exciting but quick-to-fade feeling of falling in lust-love bringing the act to life more clearly then the pretend-chef routine ever could.

Nihlus was no real cook, he lacked the passion for it, but falling for someone? Sex? Flirting? Oh yes. There was his passion.

He knew what it felt like to easily fall in lust-love, -spirits did he, particularly with people that were stupidly higher than his tier, out of his league, or just plain unavailable-, and the mannerisms it provoked settled like a mantle over his shoulders.

"I'm positive... and do whatever you please for dinner, but be sure to take some time for yourself today?"

"You're such a kind person, Aegis. I... thanks. I will."
The grey eyed torin shook his head and stood to leave the side room off his offices where he frequently took working meals. "Not really. Mostly decent, perhaps."

Nihlus knew the truth of that, having read about Aegis' literally cutthroat business practices in the torin's dossier in the Citadel Archives, but 'Amalos' didn't have a clue. He smiled widely and guilelessly for the Victus clansman as the other Turian waved in passing before he left.

Mission on schedule, the Spectre took his usual sly scan of the room and then returned to the kitchens, holding onto to his cover identity's growing interest in his boss.

Strangely, those mild flutters made him feel a little sick as well.

Weird.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm going back and adding some of danceswithturians' amazing model manips to some chapters. I'll get a full list for you all in one of the updates, but gimme a bit. I want the pics to match the chapter scenes as much as possible.

Why yes, Nihlus did ninja Saren's last name for his cover without telling anyone. I wonder if that will come back to bite him in the ass?
Korvis was having decidedly more fun than he had expected to.

The local branch of the Victus clan had a massive inner-city estate where the going's on tied deeply into the life of the colony, and the clan business expanded out into the city's arcologies in all directions.

As such, the estate itself had nearly two hundred staff.

Tonight was actually a staff party, organized by the clan Avah's secretary. The social and upbeat torin knew his stuff, having arranged for the event to be held in a variety of rooms in the less frequented part of the madlis. It allowed the dancers to gather in one room, the talkers in another, and the more chill individuals in yet another. There were at least eight rooms all stocked with food, drink, and various activities. Everything from arcade machines to group crafts.

Korvis was basically at a company party, but rather than feeling awkward and anxious he was calmly playing a table top strategy game against a soft spoken Asari while curled into Spectre Bau's side, sipping a mild and fruity cocktail.

He hadn't thought social events could be this way.
This was awesome.

'Lislon' made his next move and sat back from the table to give the nais however long they liked to choose a counter move. The warm arm around his shoulders squeezed a quick pattern that was finished off with innocuous finger taps.

Slightly drunk, Spectre Bau was telling him in STG style morse code that his last move was clever. Korvis tried not to beam at the praise.

Maybe this field work stuff wasn't quite so bad.

Across from Korvis his opponent hummed thoughtfully and made a move, softly intoning, "I'll be right back. I want another drink..." but Spectre Bau waved the nais back down.

"I'll get us all a fresh round, stay."

"Oh. Thank you, Jorfinni."

"Not a problem. What would you like?"

"The... pink and orange one?"

"Ah. What can I get for you, Lis?"

Korvis fought a smile at the nick name, trying to suppress the incessant feeling of kinship the undercover Spectre's faux familiarity evoked. It was fake. He needed to remember that.

"Whatever is easy?"

'Jorfinni' walked off with one of his solemn nods, and their strategy game continued on.
He began setting up for a convoluted play that was fairly conservative, but would help him creep closer to victory without major risk, unless of course his opponent predicted the entire setup while it was being built. There was some risk of that, and it would cost him if it happened.

The nais made several moves as well, bringing pieces in alignment for a recovery and resource building phase. It didn't leave him any good opportunities to spring the trap, but he could be patient to make the most of his work.

It took the other blue-grey Salarian quite a while to make it past the queue for drinks, but he returned with three in hand, setting the requested pink and orange one down on the Asari's side of the table. A vivid green tube was handed to him, and he took a cautious sip. It was another fruity, tasty cocktail.

Korvis tried not to be so pleased that his pretend-partner had picked up on his tastes. He tried to put it in perspective. Of course a hyper-observant Spectre noticed his drink preferences. Obviously the man got him low-alcohol content drinks. They were on a mission.

The blood vessels across his cheeks, up his horns, and down his neck ignored his self-denial, making him feel warm with a blush. It brightened further when Jondam put an arm back around his shoulders, finger tips circling on his arm.

Bother. Bother. Bother.

He drank the green cocktail verrrry slowly, afraid for his inhibitions.

Mercifully, the Asari tried to shift out of a defensive layout soon after, and Korvis became engaged in springing his trap. It was super effective, rapidly degenerating the board into the end game. The nais was fairly smart, making several close passes to turn things around, but unfortunately the Asari gardener was no match for a quick-minded Salarian intelligence agent.

'Lislon' tried to make the loss slightly more gentle toward the end without giving away that he was doing so. He wanted to be kind, but not patronizing.

Still, the strategy game ended in a landslide. The nais sat back with a friendly smile.

"Thank you for the match. That was fun."
"Yes, it was very enjoyable. Thank you as well."

With a thoughtful nod the other staff worker stood and left. Korvis reset the board and dropped his head back onto Spectre Bau's shoulder.

"You have a brilliant mind, Lis."

The Agent's previously faded blush came back in force, turning the peach colored skin of his face a darker, burnt orange.

"Um. Thank yo-" he got out before the breath left his lungs in a sudden gust. Jondam had leaned in to link their horns together, a very familiar Salarian gesture of affection.

'Oh goddess. Ohhhhh goddess.'

Korvis was fairly certain his fingers were turning orange, never mind his cheeks.

Thank goodness the Spectre was just as observant as advertised, disentangling himself with a murmured excuse about using the restroom. It was clearly intended to give him some space to recover from... this.

The quiet man tossed back the rest of his drink in one go, forcing himself to at least sit casually and breathe normally. He was calm and mostly collected by the time 'Jorfinni' made it back.

The Spectre rested a light palm on his shoulder before making a low voiced inquiry in soothing tones as the mildly lively party continued on around them.

"Would you like to stay longer, head back, or... possibly go for a walk?"

The idea of a walk, -fresh air and less people-, sounded wonderful.
"The walk, if you don't mind?"

Spectre Bau nodded solemnly, tugging gently on his arm. Korvis stood, accepting the other Council agent's hand as they left. The pair meandered past the noisier rooms, catching sight of Nihlus on a dancing themed arcade machine, limbs moving at mach two before a cheering crowd.

The taller, blue-grey Salarian led them onward, toward the madlis' public gardens. As the bustle faded away he took a deep, refreshing breath.

The party had been, honestly, a lot of fun. He was still glad to be leaving it. Korvis had a distant sense of missing his quiet basement work room in the Spectre Offices. It would be nice to get back to the data streams after this mission.

"Better?"

He smiled, glancing sheepishly up at 'Jorfinni'.

"Yes. Much, thank you."

Their walk went on for a little while, the sky long since having fallen dark, but the path remained lit by multi-colored hanging lanterns that dotted the angular and manicured Turian-style landscaping.

Spectre Bau began whistling at some point, a wandering melody that switched between modern pop and long-forgotten jazzy tones at whim. He listened as it evolved and lived, enjoying the way the sounds echoed around the walls of greenery and space.

As the night turned cold, Specialist Tiine tucked himself into the Spectre's side again, unwilling to end the peaceful walk but feeling pretty chilly. The other man's warmth stalled the need to leave for 'home' for another twenty minutes or so, but eventually he shivered despite himself.

Without a word Jondam steered them toward the nearest entry way back inside the compound. The fifteen minute walk from there to their room next to Nihlus' in the staff quarters was still spent pleasantly cozed up with Spectre Bau. He blamed the green drink, their need to keep up the act, and the fuzzy-soft fabric of the other Salarian's long sleeve shirt.
Korvis spent that night notably more entangled with his sleeping partner than usual, pajamas askew and possibly drooling as he dreamed about the data streams he missed and terrible break room coffee being delivered by a certain Spectre when he passed by between missions.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hysterical, random conversation I found on Tumblr:

Desolas: Could you pretend you can take a joke for like five minutes.
Desolas: This is why you have like one-point-two friends.
Saren: I have more friends than that.
Desolas: Hanging out with MY friends and not getting told to fuck off does not count as having friends.
Ahahahahh, even alternate reality Desolas-lived Saren is an asshole! XD

A/N/N: A Pokémon reference AND Nihlus playing DDR.
I have no shame.

A/N/N: This entire chapter is brought you by my brain, which has decided to ship Jon and Korvis regardless of my original intent.

Fanfic Recommendation: Learning Experiences (23,181 words) by inthefadeforever
(A little zippy, but the plot is so much fun! Saren/Femshep)
Uncommon Methodology

Chapter Summary

Nihlus continues to sink into his act, and finds his unequivocal success to be less than desirable. He wasn't born cold or cruel enough for this game.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Did you know Grumpy Christmas Drell is a thing? Like... Thane, with frumpy xmas sweaters, displeased to be wearing a santa hat? Shell shocked Garrus unable to say no to his favorite human? Fem or Man Shepard going crazy with holiday-madness?

It's a thing.

“Siha, I cannot drink anymore hot cocoa, please stop. Tea would be fine. “
“Thank you for the sweater, Siha. It's very... warm.”
“Vakarian, what are you doing under the table?” - “Hiding from Shepard.” - “... May I ask why?” - “Turians aren't meant to wear mittens.” - “Ah.”
“Siha, are you sure this is a human tradition? It is somewhat unsettling.”
“Mr. Moreau, what happened to your usual head covering?”
“Thank you, Siha, but no. I am not much one for singing...”

I love life. So many wonderful pintrest pins of grumpy Drell.

Chapter Soundtrack: Daughter - Medicine (Sound Remedy Remix)

You've got a warm heart,
You've got a beautiful brain.
But it's disintegrating,
From all the medicine.
You could still be
What you want to be
What you said you were,
When you met me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I have a favor to ask."

"Okay... what is it?"
Nihlus stood casually, a dark brown hand on his cocked hip and head tilted in question, in front of Aegis' desk. He'd been asked to come up here mid-afternoon with no explanation, and was curious what this was all about. Hopefully it wasn't attempted murder due to discovery. He didn't think so though.

"I need an escort for an event."

'Amalos' jerked slightly in startlement, not putting much more shock into his expression than he actually felt at the unexpected inquiry. He knew he'd charmed the hell out of his mark, but hadn't realized it had gone quite so... far.

"I-I... umm... an escort?" he asked, weakly. Seduction was one thing, but this? The torin wanted him as a... spirits. What did he even do with that?

"Yes. I'm required for a visit to the main clan madlis on Palaven for a meeting, a soirée, and a formal dinner in two weeks. I want you to come with."

"I'm... sort of confused. Why would...? I mean, that sounds like fun, but I'm... just your cook..."

"Do you want to be more?"

Nihlus was pretty certain he hadn't heard a more straightforward, business-like proposal for a relationship ever. This had to win some sort of award for 'Most awkwardly formal come on of all time'. Possibly also a book deal, titled: 'How to tell someone you're into them in one easy step'.

"I... wow, ah... maybe? Y-yes? I didn't think you'd want... I mean, I don't have..."

The Spectre touched his face, the disguise of thicker bone structure hiding his identity somewhat.

Not as much as the absence of colony markings though.

"I'm curious Amalos, do you not have a clan or...?"
Nihlus whispered his reply into the room of elegant, old-world decorations. "I'm merc-born."

"Ah. Well, it doesn't particularly concern me. I want you to come regardless, and if you are my escort you can..." The pale red torin chuckled, shaking his head at himself.

"This is going to sound terrible, but I want you there to entertain me through the tedium. I want your company. As a courtesan, we can sit together at the dinner, dance afterward if you're inclined."

"There are... other things I would like to do with you as well."

Aegis looked out the reinforced glass of the window, his heavy-set profile turning away in the vaguest show of insecurity after the expression of interest.

If he only knew how much Nihlus liked the awkward ones.

"Yes."

The business torin's crest flicked to the side as his head spun forward again.

"Yes?"

Amalos grinned infectiously, drawing his shoulders inward and upward in a growing expression of giddy 'well why the hell not?'

"Yes!"

The carmine plated Spectre floated back to his room, stopping by his co-chefs' door to tell them the good news. His cover persona was so excited and jittery about the whole thing that the observant Spectre behind his eyes nearly missed the way Korvis gravitated to Jon's side no matter where the
other Spectre went. It was kind of adorable.

Generously, he decided not to point it out to tease the quieter Specialist.

Details shared with relevant parties, he returned to his own room and flopped on the bed. Apparently he was going clothing shopping tomorrow with Aegis' fashion consultant. He tried not to be ridiculously happy about the opportunity to clothing shop on someone else's credits.

There was also the fact that he was taking one huge, unprecedented step closer to infiltrating the Victus clan's social networks. His initial mission was simply to get names and basic facts from listening into Aegis' dinner conversations. Any data would do, as cyber warfare had failed entirely.

Jon and Korvis had been sent as back up because the last Council agent that had tried to get a foot in the door had been discovered within days and unceremonious murdered.

The Spectre Offices had backed off for a while after that, not opting to send another agent for almost two full years. They hadn't predicted Nihlus would stumble his way into a position as a private chef, never mind... a consort.

One would think they'd have learned to expect his fantastically lucky breaks by now.

At the very least the intelligence officers at ST&R had taken the good turn of fortune in stride and updated the mission parameters with his promotion to personal chef. He was to get all data possible, and remain in cover until it was broken, or he was recalled. Priority was on getting solid information about bank account balances, and trading partners.

Nihlus was sure he could do it, especially now, but estimated it would take another three or four months to get his talons on the good stuff. He just needed time and opportunity... and holy shit was opportunity knocking.

The green eyed torin clicked his teeth in excitement. This mission was really going places, and he was definitely taking Blue up on that vacation offer after this. As long as he didn't get caught and murdered like the last guy.

Life was pretty damn good.
The next day he and the tarin fashionista had an absolute ball shopping for high society clothing for him. Nihlus walked away from the trip having spent every credit the consultant had been given, and no few of his own. From the elaborate to the simplistic, traditional to edgey, 'Amalos' was going to be well dressed every moment of every day.

Aegis was going to be *floored* with how well his cook cleaned up.

He had vague plans of staying a part of the business torin's social entourage, and leaving the meal making to his coworkers. It would be hard to make a track-switch like that, after having repeatedly expressed a 'love' for cooking, but not impossible. Then again, he was actually learning to cook with some proficiency, and that was a skill he could potentially use to impress Saren...

The undercover Spectre tapped out an absent minded rhythm on the mattress beneath his talons, considering the future from many angles.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The slack-jawed expression on Aegis' faceplates was worth every bit of effort he'd put into looking good this morning.

They left for Palaven today, and he'd traded the plain white chef's jacket and pants for exotic black clothing that hugged his belly and neck but hung loose everywhere else. It was velveteen and unembellished, with long panels from the shirt in the front and back, like a messy tunic, with matching pants that disappeared into the ankle wrappings of his soft leather shoes.

The outfit was set off with the two-blade crest clips over his left ear, and a small ring in his right mandible flare. The silver metal over his aural canal laid flat against his horns for several centimeters and flashed in the sunlight.

He was also freshly scrubbed from fringe to toe talon, his eyes accentuated with tiny sprinkles of silvery dust at the inner corners. The whole effect was deceptively simple, elegant, and just as exotic as he imaged a consort should be.
Aegis was staring, stock still on the steps leading down to the skycar that would take them to the spaceport.

Nihlus let a little bit of dangerous and fluid grace into his walk, gliding forward to stand before his patron, giving a demonstrative sweep of hands and looking down at him with a little grin.

"Do you like it?"

The tongue that dove into his mouth and the hands that curled around his neck and waist were the only answer. Amalos' eyes fluttered shut as he caved to the thorough reverie sharing, settling talon tips on either side of Aegis' jaw.

Liquid grey eyes opened as the sudden and passionate act gentled between them, looking into his vivid green ones with lingering disbelief.

"I... hadn't realized you were this... gorgeous. Spirits, Ama. Warn a torin next time?"

Nihlus laughed brightly along with the business torin's smooth, self-effacing chuckle.

"No way. Not if this is the reaction," he teased. The other Turian huffed with feigned exasperation, offering a small admission while a thumb rubbed circles into the softer hide just underneath his mandibles.

"I've... wanted to do that for weeks."

"I might have too."

Aegis took his hand, walking backwards to pull him down the stairs and into the waiting vehicle. The heavy-set clansman tugged him down, hands lingering as if he dearly wanted a repeat but wasn't sure how forward to be. The slightly spoiled Turian eventually seemed to decide that Nihlus' agreement to be his consort for the event gave him the leeway to go for it.

As soon as the destination coordinates were in the computer, and the copy-paste trio of guards were settled in the front seats, Aegis pulled him close for more. They spent most of the trip locked at the
mouth, the wealthy torin pulling away reluctantly.

"I... am... going to make us both sick, going this fast. I'm... slightly sorry?"

Amalos-Nihlus chuckled softly, knowing his many adventures with various Turians would mitigate that, and playing up his own reverie delirium to compensate.

"Don't be. It's... a long flight to Palaven, isn't it?"

Aegis' mandibles fluttered the weak-willed movement of the addicted, and he swallowed, eyes tracing Nihlus' throat with desire. The torin pulled himself away with obvious reluctance.

"That's true, but at this rate I won't even make it to the ship on my own two feet. You are..." the pale-red plated Turian trailed off, turning away and covering his eyes with one hand. He groaned, humming a complaint about temptation that had the undercover Spectre laughing again.

"Isn't that literally my job for the next week or so?" he teased.

Aegis shook his head, reaching over to steal Amalos' hand and dragging it back to his lap.

"No, it isn't. Just... be you."

The smile the Council agent flashed him in return was very fake.

'Just be you'? That wasn't...

Courtesan was one thing, but that phrasing didn't sound like a torin talking to his consort. It sounded like something Blue would tell him. Or maybe Riaz.

Nihlus was suddenly a bit nervous about where this was going. Wherever it was, it was moving fast. He swallowed back the ill feelings and bolstered his resolve with a strict reminder from the half-dormant Spectre in the back of his head.
For the mission. Anything for the mission.

That's what Saren had taught him, and Nihlus wasn't in the business of disappointing his former mentor.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Apodyopsis (3,083 words) by tarysande (Apodyopsis: The act of mentally undressing someone. Shepard is distracted. So is Garrus. Awkwardness ensues.)
Lexicon:

Avah - The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. An 'Avah' is the head of the whole clan or it's main branch if the clan is particularly big. A clan may be split up into different branches under the same name if it is legally/socially desirable to do so, and each will have an 'avah' (lowercase 'a') responsible for their branch clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with a little author-chan remix in there to make it more complicated.)

Amitila – Turian closed dialect for 'aunt', formal. (Credit: MizDirected.)

Filioris – Turain closed dialect for 'sister's son', or 'nephew'. (Distinct from the daughter of one's sister, or the children of one's brother.) (Credit: MizDirected.)

Season of Letum (Death cycle) - Named due to the fact that during ancient times, most deaths within a clan took place during this season. (Credit: MizDirected.)

A/N: Heads up if you are reading this as it goes up! Part of chapter 109 has been rendered into a mini-comic by DancesWithTurians! Check it out HERE!

Chapter Soundtrack: "Forever" by Tracey Chattaway

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus watched the world from under his browplates, eyes narrow and gaze coy. Everything from his walk, which was a fluid sashay, to his wandering gaze was constructed around the building idea of Amalos as a mysterious, intriguing consort, -and a sexy one at that.

Of course, surrounding a devil-minded torin with straight forward generals and high minded avah resulted in a great deal of suspicion and uncertainty. Still, the undercover Spectre was fairly certain that the flat-toned subvocals aimed at him with every other introduction were as much a cover for jealousy and sexual interest as they were for that uncertainty. It was expected, regardless. He was an outsider, barefaced, and an unknown player on the semi-political field of Victus clan politics.

He'd have them eating out of his hands, given time.

“Aegis, dear. Introduce me to your... friend?” came a voice from their left. Wrapped around his patron's arm, Nihlus followed the other torin's lead as they slowed and turned. The approaching tarin was ancient, over-decorated, and also fairly plump for their species. It didn't make Nihlus miss the cold-edged intellect in her eyes.
“Amitila, it's wonderful to see you. May I introduce Amalos Arterio? Amalos, this is my aunt Tiraes, the avah of the Victus clan's second largest branch.”

The old tarin's head flicked sideways in a politely acknowledging nod, her subvocals humming neutrally.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, avah Victus,” he offered in soft-toned reply. Nihlus was slightly torn between thinking he should do or say something to get the high tier tarin's attention, and feeling like he'd much rather she forgot his name the moment she heard it. He ended up remaining silent, and the elderly clanswoman's attention went back to Aegis.

“Indeed. Are you looking forward to tomorrow's dinner, filioris?”

“Oh, of course, amatila. It's been too long since I was home to enjoy one of our family's feasts.”

“Ahh,” the tarin's voice turned coy, “and what about the dancing afterward?”

Aegis' mandibles flicked uncomfortably, and he gave a dismissive wave. “I look forward to them as well, as I have a more than sufficient partner and need not entertain... well, you know.”

Tiraes laughed merrily, wobbling her weathered crest right and left in amusement. “I look forward to seeing you dodge your admirers.”

The pale red torin sighed, giving a semi-smile that looked more like a grimace. Now Nihlus was curious about the 'competition', so to speak. Traditionally a potential partner had to show some interest in flirting for it to be socially acceptable to engage them further. Granted, prissy core-world niceties like that were generally discarded in places like the merc base he had grown up, but he was still socially adept enough to know the rule existed.

So who was tossing courtesy out the window among the social elite of Palaven and pursuing a, -by the sound of it-, entirely disinterested torin?

Nihlus supposed he would find out, sooner or later. He almost felt bad for them in advance. Who could compare to him on a good day? Well... compare to the torin he was pretending to be, at least?
As they walked away, 'Amalos' loosened the hold he had on his patron's arm very slowly, wanting to see how nearby he was being kept. The answer was discovered not a moment later when Aegis pulled the undercover Spectre right back to him, straight out of 'friendly companion' and immediately into 'very cozy' range. Entertainingly, the heavier set torin didn't appear to notice he was using the green-eyed pretend chef as a security blanket. Nihlus kept his mandibles pinned in a neutral expression, trying not to laugh at the shifty eyes that Aegis flickered around the room while the torin drew them along.

“Aegis, you look well!”

Another Victus clansman caught them as they moved through the entry hall of the madlis, which was packed with other arrivals. At this rate it would take the better part of an hour to reach the still-distant staircase. His patron seemed to have anticipated it though, and continued on in a casual stroll when the latest passer-by had said their hellos.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Every piece of Nihlus Kryik that was unrefined, inelegant, or crass was stuffed away in the back of his mind. Right now Amalos Arterio had full play of their reactions while the cunning Spectre watched from behind his persona's eyes. The act was so smooth that not even video footage, a Drell, and a team of psychologists would have been able to notice something was off.

The Council agent behind his eyes carefully cataloged every face, name, and interaction he saw. Nihlus then coded the social data into simple forms and stuffed it into his memory using memetic tricks that Saren had taught him during his mentorship. He thought it was probably a lot like cramming for college finals, but this little soirée wasn't half so hard as the tests the OCD torin had put him through back then. This was all baby-Spectre difficulty level, with less than a hundred attendees and no life-or-death decision making immediately afterward...

Unlike Saren's final 'exam'. The less said about that shit-show, the better.

In between selling the mysterious-consort act to the other guests and the just-a-cook-trying-his-best act to Aegis, the carmine plated torin tried to analyze some of the data he was picking up on through observation. The Loloria clan had no less than three tarin at the 'meet and greet', all available bachelorettes of the right age to be looking to nest. Their clothing and demeanors matched that of females looking for a bond mate as well, so 'lovely lady lollies looking for love' was made up on the spot. Intel would be interested in that one. The Avah of clan Fexos waltzed in at one point, looking like she owned the place, and A-Fex-swag was repeated ten times fast. Avah Fexos had her swagger on. Easy enough to remember, another point the ST&R Offices would want to know.
Bit by bit the closed door data of the Victus clan connections were being memorized by the undercover Spectre, and while 'Amalos' was busy being mysterious yet charming, 'Nihlus' was hard at work squirreling facts away like the monsoons of *Letum* season were coming and data was edible.

The senate building on Palaven was, to put it simply, fuckin' huge. Nihlus tried to be both elegantly aloof for the onlookers, and charmingly backwater for Aegis depending on what new marvel of engineering or art they passed, and who was watching.

"Spirits, how long did that take to build? Did you see the sign? It's eleven thousand years old! It has to be hand carved. That's just... wow."

Aegis had a permanent small smile stuck in his mandibles from the low toned whispers of awe that sneaked out between Amalos' attempts at an appropriate demeanor. As usual, the heavy set torin was charmed by his antics, and was never more than a step away.

"Ah! The whole wall is an aquarium! Oh have you seen these fish? It's almost scary, like we're actually underwater... but the colors! Sooo pretty."

Aegis chuckled, nodding, stars in his eyes as he watched Nihlus ooo and awe over the grandeur of their people's seat of government like he'd never been there before. To be be fair, it was a similar recreation of the first time the Spectre had come here, which had been when he was several years younger and still Saren's apprentice. They had been all over the senate buildings to arrange an under the table deal to close a particularly isolationist senator out of the next running race, and Nihlus had been too fascinated by the local culture and sights to be much help.

Young and distracted, what he was mimicking now, must be a good look on him. The business torin on his arm was certainly enjoyably entertained.

“Ama, over here. Look in the nook here, I've always liked this one...” On they went, taking far longer to reach their goal then necessary.

Eventually they came to the correct office, some sort of registry where Aegis needed to drop off some unspecified documents. Nihlus hadn't figured out a way to ask what they were that wasn't suspicious as fuck, but he was hoping to get a look at the top page when they were passed over at least.
The long hallway was polished dark-grey stone threaded with jewel green tones and carved to mimic an orchard, with no less than twelve service windows built into the wall, each fronted by a decently long line of people. They took their own place in line along one side, his patron pulling him in for a loose, one-arm hold around the shoulders while they waited. The knife loving operative hummed pleasantly and snuggled into the other torin's side, eyeing the lines and settling in for a goodly wait.

Even in the modern era bureaucracy demanded time wasting and paperwork, wait lines and triplicate forms. He felt a sudden surge of empathy for Blue, understanding anew why it was the bane of the Detective's existence.

Briefly, Nihlus imaged the hilarious situation of him using Spectre authority to skip the lines. It would utterly destroy his cover, -mission totally failed-, but the look on people's faces would have been hysterical. He was also excited for the big dinner party in three days, and wanted to get all the errand running over so he could own a bunch of core worlders on the dance floor now.

He grinned evilly on the inside, mentally acknowledging that he wasn't the nicest Turian in the galaxy. Really though, the undercover Spectre had dealt with far too much bullshit for being born to mercenaries living outside the Hierarchy to not deeply anticipate showing up the soft-hided Palaven high tiers when handed the chance to do so on a silver platter.

'Amalos' was distracted from his thoughts when warm breath ghosted over his neck. He hummed again, smiling. Aegis was being pretty damn forward for standing around in public, but what did he care? The nose that pressed into his neck and nuzzled sweetly felt good, and the quiet rumble of the other torin's subvocals was enticing. They hadn't gotten to anything more intimate than heavy petting really, but the sex-addicted agent was looking forward to the possibilities.

The heavier set torin nipped lightly, but pulled away afterward with a self-rebuking hum and a chuff of air. Nihlus laughed lightly, the warm air tickling his throat, and bopped his forehead into Aegis' temple a little hard in teasing support of trying to behave. The business torin pulled farther away to smile widely at him.

Nearby, a middle aged tarin cooed about them to her friend, who hummingly agreed they were adorable. Amalos turned purple in the throat and ducked his head sheepishly.

The various public gossiping hums and trills that drew out of the bored crowd made Amalos blush even harder, but Aegis ignored it save for snorting quietly and winking at the pair of tarin. Turning back to his consort, the heavier set torin shook his head with another quiet laugh, one hand smoothing up and down the undercover agent's arm.
“Don't mind them.”

“Ha... ha... a little difficult to do with half the room... talking about us.”

Aegis leaned in to brush his cheek plates past Amalos' reassuringly, but went on to tease him verbally instead.

“It will be more than half of the room when we dance, Ama. You and I? We look... very good together.”

Distantly, almost unheard, a low growl reached the ears of the Spectre. No one else seemed to notice. Granted, his aural structure had ST&R grade implants for noise filtering, clarity, and general improvement, but...

Nihlus' stomach flipped a little as his ears caught the low, barely-there sound of displeasure in the air. He could swear he recognized it. Surreptitiously, the green eyed torin hummed a flirty reply to Aegis while subtly changing his viewing angle.

To the right? No... it wasn't from there. Ahead? Not quite...

Nihlus finally got a decent look over his left shoulder after a few moments time to arrange for the motion to look natural.

Four lines over, hidden under one of his big black cloaks, Saren Arterius glowered back at him with glowing blue eyes. Their gazes met for half a second before habit made them both move on. Nihlus was obviously undercover. The silver-grey torin looked to be in the registrar's office for... well, probably some sort of personal business with his clan. The quiet growl cut off suddenly.

Aegis nuzzled into his throat again, addicted. Nihlus scrambled to reaffirm 'Amalos' as a persona, having been thrown off his game by the sudden and unexpected visit from a... really pissed off sounding former mentor.

A moment later the undercover agent risked another glance in that direction, but Saren was gone. Just gone.
'What the hell was that about?'

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: Marauder Shields by Koobismo (A 62-some odd page comic with amazing visuals that rewrites the ending of Mass Effect 3 with a little help from a reaperized fragment-personality of Nihlus. Yeah, no joke. It's freaking sweet as shit. Fair warning: It's incomplete!)
Chapter Summary

Nihlus has such a fluid mood and a mercurial mind when he isn't himself. More questions than answers are raised.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Avah - The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. An 'Avah' is the head of the whole clan or its main branch if the clan is particularly big. A clan may be split up into different branches under the same name if it is legally/socially desirable to do so, and each will have an 'avah' (lowercase 'a') responsible for their branch clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with a little author-chan remix in there to make it more complicated.)

A/N: Whoof! This holiday busy-ness is killin' me. I haven't read a thing all month! ALL MONTH! Dear real world, please go away. I have Turians to hang out with. Kthnxbai.

Chapter Soundtrack: RJD2 - Weatherpeople

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus spent the rest of the day accompanying Aegis around the city on various errands. The business torin seemed have a hundred things to do before the week was over, and was stuffing them in between the clan related events. The undercover operative continued to memorize every detail he could, but the information dump was beginning to give him a headache. He regretted not having a grey box and optical implants like Saren.

Hell, then he could just record all the critical bits. Something to consider. Then again, he already had two little colonies of wonderful little nano-helpers. Giving them something delicate and attached to his brain to possibly fuck up sounded like a phenomenally stupid idea.

The rightfully suspicious Spectre still wasn't sold on the tiny buggers, even though he noticed that he no longer needed as much sleep or recovery time between orgasms.

That last one was the best thing the creepy little robots had going for them, in Nihlus' opinion.
Thus resigned to the drudgery of data cramming, he kept up the act, the smile, and the charm all day. It wasn't all that difficult. The acting came naturally to him, though the naivete of his cover was beginning to grate. Never a good thing, when your current alternate personality and yourself didn't get along, but Nihlus managed. He'd had practice.

Currently the Spectre was lounging on the couch in the waiting room of a bank, fingerling the fine Volus-style carvings in the metal of the side table. He'd been left behind while Aegis did something or other. The clansman had been unclear, but he found himself unconcerned. A break from the constant memorization was nice, actually. Instead he took the opportunity to review the data tucked in his head, finding himself catching on the memory of Saren's low bass rumble under the sounds of the registrar's office.

Regardless of the... weird run-in with his former mentor, the day was going well over all. The mission itself was sitting pretty too. Being stuck undercover in the middle of a critical mission, the carmine plated agent stuffed the bothered-ness about the silver-grey agent's odd behavior into the back of his own head for now.

Later though... his curmudgeony friend was getting his own dose of the charm, and if that failed, possibly some blackmail. Answers would be had. Oddly, Nihlus thought that the blackmail not only had the greater chance of working, but Saren would probably appreciate it more.

'Spirits, that torin is infuriating sometimes... and sexy... and infuriatingly sexy. Ugh. I need to get laid.'

“Ama? Are you ready to go? I'm finished here.” Nihlus tossed his head to the side cutely while grinning, popping up from the couch and moving forward.

“Oh definitely. Did I mention I don't idle well? It was so boring without you.”

Aegis smiled, catching Nihlus' hand as they reunited and turned for the entrance. The Spectre leaned in close, breathing in the other torin's scent and humming appreciably at it. The low sound made the heavy set Turian blush lightly, but it didn't stop a stray hand from sweeping almost inappropriately low on his back, grazing the waist just barely. 'Amalos' hummed again, welcoming and sly.

While the Spectre could do nothing about his erstwhile mentor, he could at least work on the other problem of getting laid. If the roil in Aegis' subvocals was any indication, things were looking good for some stress relief soon enough. That it would help the mission continue successfully was even better.
"I may strangle that tarin."

Spectre Bau looked up from the shellfish he was cleaning with a single raised eyebrow. Though the undercover agent didn't say anything else, Korvis knew it for the inquiry it was. Jon wasn't the most verbal individual.

"She insisted I cut the meat into smaller chunks, because the tiny cubes are apparently too much for her delicate digestion. So I did. Then? She decides the color of the sauce is wrong, and tells me to remake it."

Jondam paused in his prep work, coming over to look at the plate of perfectly good food in Korvis' hands. They'd been passed off to work in the general kitchens while Aegis and 'Amalos' were away, but it had turned into a mess of trouble. As new and temporary staff, they were left with the worst tasks... and the hardest to please clan members.

Which was how 'Chef Lislon' had come to be assigned to several middle ranking clan members, including one Dici Victus; the snottiness, most prissy Turian the intelligence agent had ever known. Or heard of. Or conceived of.

He could, -and had on more than one occasion-, decide the fates of thousands with less drama then the tarin produced by breakfast. Cooking for her created new and unprecedented levels of stress in the normally calm Specialist.

"I have an idea..."

Agent Tiine looked up at the taller Salarian hopefully, slightly distracted by the nice scent of earthy cologne the tall Spectre was wearing. Instead of elaborating however, the blue-grey operative took the plate and set it on the counter. Nabbing a container of mildly flavored and creamy vegetable oil from the chilling unit, and some salt, the Spectre stirred some of each in. The result was... not the original dish. At all.

...but it was a different color, and enticingly salty. Something Turians loved.
"This is a terrible plan."

"It might work."

"It isn't even the same dish anymore."

Jondam smiled crookedly, offering the modified plate back to him. Korvis took it tentatively, fairly certain he was going to get screamed at. Again.

Unwilling to remake the same meal from scratch, and not wanting to offend 'Jorfinni', the quiet Salarian gathered his patience and took the slightly different food right back out to the lovely Miss Dici.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Nihlus sprawled out on his bed naked and fresh from a shower. He'd been quite the mess after several hours of bedplay with Aegis earlier. There had been edible syrups and fruit involved. The sex had been decent too. Not the mind-blowing, wonder fuck that Blue gave, but still pretty good.

The night's fun wasn't over yet though.

Was he a crack programmer like Blue? Maybe not. Or a damn master-of-all-trades like Saren? Also no, but Nihlus was pret-ty damn proud of himself for this little beauty.

The tiny widget he'd put together on his subcutaneous Spectre-grade Omni-tool over would route confirmation deliveries for random household goods to Saren's work email, the first letter in each subject line would be the letter of a message. The confirmation emails would be real, duplicated and sent to their original destination as well. It piggy backed off a popular home shopping net-store, and was close to untraceable.

The run-around would let him contact Saren, or anyone else clever enough to figure out the code with no prompting, without sending suspiciously encrypted messages. He was sure the Victus clan had their own private security that monitored staff extra-net usage, but he also figured the chances of anyone noticing him accessing a home shopping site and thinking it suspicious was low.

If anything, a courtesan browse-shopping for household items would be affirmative of intent.
Completely normal.

The carmine plated Spectre grinned devilishly down at his little creation. Granted, it was only one-way and had taken him hours of coding to get it working... but it would also spam his erstwhile mentor's inbox with confirmation emails for towel sets and tea pots.

So worth.

He carefully created his first message, and sent it with a gleeful chuckle.

MESSAGE: [THAT CLOAK MADE YOU LOOK LIKE A SUPER VILLAN FROM A VID. TRY BLUE INSTEAD. WOULD MATCH YOUR EYES.]

Sending snarky messages over the extra-net via secret code spread over seventy eight messages about fancy cups and matching tableware? Priceless. He was imagining the disgruntled look on Saren's face already.

Nihlus went to bed that night grinning like an idiot.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

"Titans and spirits, Ama. You look..."

Once again Nihlus' fashion sense, acting skill, and lean body type did him all the favors, making the merc born Spectre who was messy and déclassé by habit into an exotic and elegant torin consort that left his victim speechless.

He was dressed more masculine for the soirée tonight, with dark red trousers that cut off sharply at an angle which started over his spurs and dropped toward the front. It was complimented by a black tunic with geometric patterns in the same shade as Aegis' plates. The expensive fabric looked soft to the touch, and the tasteful, glossy black accessories brought the whole thing together marvelously.

He posed, with just a hint of sheepishness, in a way that made his throat look long and feminine. Aegis was on him in a split second, boldly licking his way up to the softer hide below mandible.
Minutes passed with them in a standstill in the middle of the clansman's living room.

"Ahhhhhh~," Amalos moaned, long and low as the heavier-set torin tilted the faux-chef-turned-courtesan back over his arm. The mild dip turned deeper as the business torin devoured tawny brown hide, seemingly forgetting they had places to be.

"Ahh-Aeg-ohhhhh... nnnnn... Aegisssss, oh, spirits..."

"Mmmmmm?"

"T-the.... ah!" Nihlus didn't have to pretend to be breathing hard, but damn if he could afford for them to miss the social event tonight promised to be. "We're going to be l-late! Nnnn... nnnnnnnnn... won't you get in... -oh...yessss, I m-mean, no!- trouble?"

"I'm not certain... mmmm... that I care...

Well shit. Nihlus really needed to go to that fancy party, -sorry, soirée-, unfortunately more than he needed to have sex. As much as that sucked. Or didn't suck enough, as the case may be.

The undercover operative was having some small difficulty remaining coherent with his patron's tongue laving passionately at his pulse point. It felt realllllllly good. His mind in the gutter, the carmine plated torin wondered if Aegis was brave enough to try oral sex. Most Turians had the strangest aversion to it, but maybe...

'Damnit, gotta focus. Too distracted.'

"Aegissss!" he whined, "You brought me all the way to Palaven to not go to the party? But I'm all dressed u-ahhhhh, f-fuck, never mind, oh that is so good...."

The damn torin was using his greatest weakness, neck biting, and it was just too enticing to say no. Well, he figured there was still the dinner thing to snoop at. Probably... maybe... good enough...

Aegis sighed heavily and set the undercover Spectre back on his feet.
"I suppose... we should at least make an appearance."

'Oh thank fuck.'

"If you want to, Aegis... I mean, we could do this instead... or later," Amalos winked, "either way."

The heavier set torin straightened his slightly-less-crisp business suit, and stole one of Nihlus' hands.

"... later. Thoroughly and... later."

The disguised Spectre smiled warmly and nodded sideways at the waiting door.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Without warning the low hum of the crowd's subvocals took a sudden turn for the hostile before dropping in volume as politeness dictated silence over expression of dislike at a party like this one.

Every Turian in the room pretended ignorance of the change, but no one could have missed it. 'Amalos' listened carefully without looking, hoping for more juicy details. Tonight had already been so very fruitful, -Korvis and his fellow intelligence agents would be drooling if they knew half of it-, but more data was always good. Every detailed helped.

"Spectre Arterius, welcome."

'Hold up, what?!'

Nihlus kept himself from spinning around toward the cold sounding-greeting in disbelief, juuust barely.

"Your presence here is an honor, of course..." came the voice again, immediately identifiable as the head of the main clan, Avah Loralai Victus herself, "but we are rather busy today, as you can see.
Might your business with our family be conducted another day?"

Oh, those flat, perfectly even subvocals were welcoming alright... welcoming Saren to die in a motel fire on Omega, maybe. What was he doing here?!

"A thousand apologies for interrupting, Avah Victus. Unfortunately, it cannot wait. Give me a few moments to speak with whom I seek, and I shall leave your clan and it's guests to their revelry."

Nihlus kept his expression and poise in place by force of will as the sound of footsteps approached his position, audible over the hush of the crowd.

Was Saren here for him? No... no, he couldn't be. The Council had waited far too long to get an inside source to recall him now. The carmine plated torin desperately wanted to spin around and ask his former mentor just what the hell was going on.

"Aegis Victus?"

As Aegis turned to acknowledge Saren with pin-sharp eyes and even toned subvocals, Nihlus held on to the arm he was curled around, moving with the spin. The undercover agent's own faceplates settled in a neutral expression, subvocals flattened like every one else.

"Yes, Spectre?"

"A moment of your time, if you would?"

"Certainly. Here or...?"

"A quieter location would be best."

"I see. This way then," intoned the heavy set torin with a hand gesture off toward one hallway, feet unmoving. It was subtly insulting, saying that not only did he not trust the other Turian at his back, but that he was of higher tier than the Spectre... which was technically true.
Lower rank was always expected to move ahead first, but a Spectre... should have been shown greater respect.

With a gracious nod and bored expression, the last Arterius moved past them, not giving Nihlus so much as a sideways look. Which was good. He preferred his cover intact, -thank you very much-, hopefully unbroken even after mission completion.

When Aegis went to follow, 'Amalos' glided forward beside him unresistant, still attached at the arm. A quick glance at his patron revealed that the normally placid torin's steely gaze was locked on the interloper unerringly.

'Well. Okay. What the fuck?'

It looked like he was coming along for the ride, so hopefully that question would get answered. Probably all according to his fellow Spectre's plan. He could always count on his erstwhile mentor to have at least three main strategies, two back ups, and a framework for winging impromptu alterations.

'Come to think of it, 'OCD' doesn't really **begin** to describe Saren's habits.'

The trio of Turians, followed by the ever-present brainless goon squad, -sorry, 'professional guards'-, turned into a side room halfway down the corridor. Saren managed to make his turn-about look pre-coordinated when he clued into the course adjustment. When the door closed behind them the Victus clansman got straight to the point.

"This should do. Now, what is it you interrupted our evening for Spectre?"

Saren's eyes flickered to Nihlus, making his former apprentice tense enough for Aegis to notice. Thankfully the heavy set torin entirely misconstrued the context, and brought up his hand to soothingly stroke Amalos' grip on his bicep.

"I can understand your desire for guards, but the information I have for you is perhaps too sensitive for the ears of a mere... consort."

The tone of voice, subvocals, and body language were flawless, painting a picture of Saren's utter disregard for the barefaced consort on Aegis' arm. It caused his patron to growl quietly.
The silver-grey Spectre turned away to admire the side room's decor with an absent air, fingering the expensive looking drapes with the Victus clan colony markings pointedly.

Aegis' low rumble continued, unabated, as he drew Nihlus closer to him possessively.

The undercover operative almost slipped up and laughed aloud at how skillfully his mark was being manipulated. He curbed it, settling for internalized smirking instead. Saren was actually subtly reinforcing the trustability of his cover, the clever bastard.

He tried not to be turned on by how well the sociopath could play people, but it was a lost cause in a heartbeat. The stoic torin was competent as fuck, and ohhh it was always so damn attractive.

"Leave him out of this. State your business or leave, Spectre."

'Ooooo. Aegis is maaaad.' Nihlus giggled to himself, doing good not to let his entertainment show.

"... very well. There may be an assassin here for you."

"Excuse me?"

Saren merely shrugged at the Victus clansman's disbelief. Aegis chuffed, humming to emphasize his inquiry.

"Elucidate, Spectre."

"There is not much to say. Several known assassins are on world right now, and one in particular is a Drell I have been hunting since he attempted to murder... well, regardless, we suspect he is here for you. The Council wished you to be forewarned."

Oh. Shit. Ghost was here? Less than good. Was the asshole here for him? Actually here for Aegis? Was it a ploy entirely?
"You must be joking."

Saren blinked, unconcerned. "No."

The two torin stared each other down for a moment, electric blue coolly meeting grey, before Aegis broke first and looked away.

"I... see. Thank you for the information."

"You are welcome." With nothing more than that, Saren headed for the door, disappearing without so much as a polite nod. Still wondering exactly what the hell that had been about, 'Amalos' took the sound of the door swishing shut as the perfect opportunity to flutter and panic over his patron's well being.

"Oh spirits, Aegis! A Drell? One of the Hanar's pet killers? Spirits!"

"It's alright, Ama. The likelihood of a compact assassin being here for me is extremely low, and Spectres always have an agenda. I just have to find out... please, sweetheart, don't cry..."

As the beginning of a very convincing keen was choked back in the exact manner of someone trying not to cry would do, Amalos continued to freak out while Nihlus carefully tucked away that neat little fact. No expected Hanar aggression? Very interesting.

The sweet nuzzling and comforting humming coming from the heavier set Turian was rather endearing though.

"Is three bodyguards enough? Have they s-stopped assassins before? I should be carrying a knife, damnit, why am I not carrying a weapon? I used to live in... not-so-nice places, and I would never go anywhere without a blade.. Ohhh, but I thought Palaven was safe! What if-"

Aegis cut off his anxious string of words mid-sentence by pushing in to share reverie. The tongue that curled around his was gentle and thorough, licking slow loops around his mouth till he let the faux-panic fade away in favor of an over-played reverie buzz.
"S-sorry. This is just... assassins? *Assassins*? Please tell me this isn't normal..."

Aegis chuckled, fondly running a hand over his crest, eyes soft as he flicked the ring in the undercover Spectre's mandible flare teasingly.

"No, it's irregular, I promise."

The carmine plated operative sighed gustily and clung to the business torin's collar, pushing in to press his nose into the warm hide of Aegis' neck. The other male tilted his head, resting his cheek ridge on the top of Amalos' head. They sat together for a few quiet moments before the undercover agent pulled away, took a 'steadying' breath, and glanced with obvious worry at every ventilation cover and entry point in sight.

Aegis chuffed with quiet amusement, and turned to send a few messages on his Omni-tool. Nihlus turned back to watch him silently with wide, guileless eyes.

That watched his every key stroke.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: *Palaven's Finest* (5762 words) by *ApocalypseThen*
Please tell me you remember

Chapter Summary

Nihlus stalks the quiet night.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Madlis - A traditional Turian clan compound, estate, or house. Generally speaking, it refers to one of Palaven's massive family homes, but may be used in smaller context to refer to the metaphorical home or heart of a clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with some bonus mind canon from author-chan.)

Name day - The Turian equivalent of a 'birthday', a date selected for the official naming and introduction of a youngling to the clan, generally after the child has survived their first season of Letum, Palaven's harsh monsoon season. Re-celebrated yearly among family or friends. (Turian Calander credit to MizDirected. Full Calander available in the Manifesto of Mindcanon and Plothole Fills.

A/N: Hello Duckies! I was wondering if anyone here is good with fanfiction.net's posting and updating system? Is anyone interested in helping me keep EdaH updated over there? I would be happy to get you my log in info and give full credit for helping. I just... I only have like 60 chapters up over there because I hate their complex update system, and posting feels like a chore. That site is a counter intuitive mess. So I thought... maybe someone else is good at their crazy system? Maybe I could get help? XD I don't know if anyone is interested, but let me know if you are. I know I should keep the cross posting up to date, but ugh... I love Ao3’s site so much more. It's author friendly, to be sure.

Anyhoo, on with the show!

Chapter Soundtrack: Mystery Skulls - Ghost (Fred Falke Remix)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Pale red arms slid aside without resistance, their owner fast asleep. Deep, uninterruptible sleep assisted by sexual exhaustion and perhaps a little something-something slipped into his drinks by the carmine hands that delivered them.

As the weak grasp fell away from the very poisoner that had made them so, a soft moan of complaint was called out. It was gently shushed and soothed away with murmured reassurances and a brush of
knuckles over crest.

Nihlus tucked his patron in, drawing the edges of the blankets up and slipping away into the predawn darkness. He went, not out the door, but up into the ventilation ducts, using the comfortable crawl space that normal minds always ignored to move from the bedroom, past the guards in the living room, and down the hall.

It took time to move quietly in the metal frame that echoed and amplified any noise made in it, but the Council infiltrator might as well have been made of mist for all the sound he made. Long practice from his time as a Spectre, years as a creative-minded specialist in the Hierarchy, and even more time spent hiding and playing in the airways of the mercenary base he grew up on had made the torin into a master of taking the hidden and less travels paths between places.

The path he took now was long and convoluted, leading him across the Victus clan madlis as it sprawled over countless acres of private land. In some places the building was too old for proper movement in the closed spaces, or made during a time of paranoia where vents were made small to halt just such a wanderer as he, and so the Spectre had to leave the comfort of the vents for open air every now and then. Thankfully it was the quiet time just before Trebia rose with Nanus during this season, and so the cold air and dark sky had all good Turians asleep in bed.

Luckily he was no such thing.

Nihlus crept through the silent halls of the clan compound using the ventilation shafts his scanner could find, and tip-toeing through the regular hallways and rooms of various floors as needed to avoid surveillance or activity. He traveled a little less than one tenth of a kilometer over the course of half an hour, such a long time for so short a distance.

The important part, however, -the critical part-, was that not a soul or machine saw him. Silent and unseen went the clever-dark Spectre to his destination: the room Aegis had led Saren to for their discussion yesterday. The carmine plated torin slipped from the final section of duct and into the space, dropping like sand. Quick, fluid, and whisper quiet.

Orange light from an electric wall display glimmered in the shine of his eyes as he moved forward intently, seeking the one and only thing his former mentor had touched in the room.

The tapestry of the Victus clan familia notas.
Black talons pulled the heavy fabric into his grasp, feeling and looking around the area for any sort of...

There it was.

On the back of the tapestry was a tiny physical storage device, -a few centimeters wide at best-, discreetly placed and left behind in a moment of social manipulation that also reinforced his protégé's cover. Nihlus smirked to himself, once again appreciating the silver-grey torin's brilliant manner.

Trusting Saren above all others, particularly when he was on a mission, the device was connected without hesitation to the tiny port of the Omni-tool in his arm, and the data download on it begun. The undercover operative settled the cloth back in place while the transfer carried on, dissappearing back up into the vents and making his way back to where he was supposed to be.

Another half an hour of controlled breathing, slow motion acrobatics, and silent stalking brought the Spectre back to the vents above Aegis' bedroom. The coast was clear, his patron still peacefully asleep, and so he dropped down onto plush carpet. Now unsuspiciously inhabiting a normal space to be in, the Spectre padded quietly into the bathroom and checked the data exchange.

The files must not have been very big, because it was complete already. Nihlus detached the data device, crushed it, and dropped it in the toilet. He tugged the tiny false plate edge back into place on his wrist, and activated the file browser for the download location. It contained three files. One video file, one text file, and one image. It took only a split second to select the vid and play it, the sound going straight to his aural implants, with the display popping up onto a small holo-screen that fuzzed into place over his arm.

“Nihlus.”

The Spectre grinned, the fine edge of exasperation in Saren's voice the perfect reward for the prank message format he'd painstakingly programmed from scratch to bother his former mentor with.

“Hey you,” he whispered back at the screen with a quiet, cheeky hum, not caring that it was a recording. It continued on of course, delivering it's message without replying.

“I took the liberty of requesting your current mission parameters from the Spectre Offices. A difficult task, it seems. Though you've made better progress than predicted, as I would expect of you. Well done. However... it seems you have an excess of free time at your current stage of progression. I
thought perhaps, if properly provisioned, you might find your current task completed more... efficiently. The files included may prove useful. Also...”

Saren paused in his monologue to fidget awkwardly, making Nihlus very curious as to what was about to be said.

“Garrus asked me to pass on a thank you for the gift you had delivered. It arrived as scheduled on the afternoon of his name day. He informed me that he is anticipating your next visit, and has a surprise waiting for you.”

The green eyed knife wielder choked back a snort at Saren's deadpan delivery, not wanting to make any noise. The stoic torin looked vaguely aggrieved to be talking about something as childish as name day presents. It was kinda adorable.

“That is all. Good luck on your mission. Arterius out.”

So it seemed as if the 'assassin' was a ploy after all. Nihlus was completely okay with this. He hadn't wanted to tangle with Ghost when it was his own life on the line. Considering how good Aegis was being to him, he would have fought to protect the heavy set torin from any mundane threat, but against one of the Compact's finest?

He wasn't suicidal.

Not that the odds were impossible, but he wasn't willing to die to find out if his top tier CQC was a match for the galaxy's natural born perfectionists. Particularly against a Drell quietly famous for being unusually deadly among his peers.

The mildly relieved Spectre pulled up the image file next, and the content was so valuable it stunned the grin right out of his mandibles.

A layout of the clan compound, only partially complete, but with nearly twenty different markers for hidden caches, vaults, and secure data servers. The text file was full of notes written in Saren's distinct short hand, clarifying that the locations were only suspected and not verified, and giving tidbits of info here and there for different sites. Password hints, warnings of laser grids, and other helpful chunks of information made a long list to match the map.
There was even a storage vault not a hundred meters from his current location.

'Well fuck. That's... useful. I guess he wants me to hurry up. Ha. Time to see what treasures are stashed behind door number one...'

Chapter End Notes

A/N: One last note for the chapter! There is a very neat book bundle for aspiring writers being sold as a big batch for whatever you want to pay for it! Like a humble bundle, sort of? If you're interested, it's only up for two more days, but can be found over here! (Spicy_Gnome was the one who found it for us. So cool!)
Maybe I just need a hole to toss you into

Chapter Summary

On the far side of the galaxy, Garrus is getting into trouble.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Amarceru - the bitter, mud-like tea popular with turians. Popular with quarians but much more dilute. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Kava - The dextro liquid stimulant equivalent to coffee. (Credit: Chromaticism)

A/N: Fun fact time! If you visit a man in Fallout 4 named Sully Mathis, he's a mechanic and a quest giver who asks for help fixing some pipes. The character is voiced by the same guy who does Garrus. He is quite literally recalibrating and fixing a huge water flow system. How fucking hilarious is that? That turin is going to calibrate no matter the universe. Also interestingly enough, the female wanderer is voiced by the same lady who does Jack. (Video evidence!)

...Viva la Mass Effect!

and also:

Merry Christmas! Happy [various holidays here]! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The snarl that ripped from Garrus' throat made the murderer smugly grin, and his fellow Officers crowd him just in case he went for it. A Salarian politician by the name of Disgor Welmp was going free, completely and utterly free, after his lawyers had found a tiny loophole in the evidence gathered against the bastard. Now Detective Anise Hovistus, an honorable and hard working turin that had been on the force for nearly seventy years, was on forced leave pending investigation. The criminal she'd tracked down after the third mysterious disappearance of a young Asari had given C-Sec the clues they'd needed to pin down the culprit, but bureaucracy and legalities had been used to full effect, turning the case around onto C-Sec's people.

“Vakarian, control yourself.”

Executor Pallin's militaristic order tugged on his inner sense of duty just enough for Garrus to keep himself from screwing over his career in favor of clawing the lime green Salarian into shreds on principle. The man was guilty, -without a doubt guilty- and now he was stepping into an excessively expensive skycar, in the company of three more young Asari, and flying away.
His spine rigid like stone, the blue eyed detective dug talons into the palms of his gauntlets, and held perfectly still, not trusting himself until temptation was well and gone. Flat voiced but calm, the Executor turned to the waiting police force and dismissed them.

“O'Riley, Parjeesh, Vakarian, back to the division office. Mu'kuron, Tipet, check up on Hovistus. Tifor and M'nomi with me.”

Garrus let out a breath, still tense enough to kill, but relieved that Mu'kuron and Tipet were being sent to 'check up on' Anise. The quiet susurrus of their leader's subvocals had been clear that it was a visit to offer support and make sure the tarin was taken care of emotionally and financially during an illegitimate forced leave.


A tug on his arm from the ever-friendly O'Riley, one of the few humans on the C-Sec roster, encouraged him to follow along behind the man as they turned to leave and return to this ward's C-Sec division office.

'And do what? ' he thought snippily, 'make kava and file more reports? While that asshole goes off to murder another nais the next time it suits his fancy?'

He went... begrudgingly. Orders were orders.

The stress ball bounced off the ceiling above Garrus' bed with a solid thud, thrown heavily and rebounding more quickly than the eye could track. Still, he caught it easily from long practice, and tossed it up again.

Up the ball went.

'This can't be the end of it.'
Down it came.

'There has to be new evidence. A loop hole to avoid the loop hole? Something.'

Again the stress ball ascended to the metal ceiling.

'I won't sit by waiting for that asshole to kill again, hoping we can pin it to him next time.'

*Thud* went the ball, with a particularly loud smack, as if adding punctuation to his determined statement.

'I know his type. It's not over, he'll just play it safe till the heat is gone.'

Back down yet again.

'I can't do nothing. I just can't.'

Up it flew, quick and hard, distending as it impacted the surface.

'Pallin is going to be furious if he finds me investigating a closed case this high profile.'

One last time the stress ball dropped with gravity and rebounding force, Garrus snatching it out of the air like a bird of prey catching it's next meal.

'I'm not sure I care.'

As the tall, determined torin donned his C-Sec armor and made for the door to his apartment, he realized that something might be wrong with him. Orders were orders. They were law, scripture, and duty for every single tier of the Hierarchy, done in support of the higher tiers and the complex plans made for the betterment of the people.
Orders were the bread and butter of the meritocracy, and he was about to disregard them for personal morality. For doing the right thing.

That was the first moment Garrus realized he was probably not a very good Turian.

Wandering the streets this late at night wasn't smart, even on the Citadel, but the lower lights made it even easier to avoid notice and erase his tracks. The Vakarian clansman checked the walkway behind him as he continued on, manually looping the security cameras he passed with quiet determination. He hadn't been successful in finding any new details yet, but he had no intention of giving up anytime soon.

Technically he wasn't scheduled to be into work for forty-six hours. Garrus planned to spend the majority of those seeking any material detail that had been missed, and using office time to go over that new data along with all the case files still stashed on his Omni-tool. The mountainous sniper had already been by Detective Hostivius' home to offer support and subtly question the tarin, but his fellow Officer had proven to be, -far and away-, more stuck up on soaking up the social support of the division rather than solving the case. It was obvious that in her mind the case was said and done. Officially closed.

Garrus tried not to be passive-aggressively annoyed with her.

The stone-grey Detective had also been by the first crime scene, and had scanned every inch of the place in painstaking detail, saving the data to review later. Since the second murder had no known or suspected location, he was moving by foot, -slow but much more difficult to track-, to the third crime scene.

He slipped inside and left the lights off, taking his time to slowly dismantle the CSI's anti-tampering safeguards and the suite's standard security system. Leaving the lot of them offline, Garrus moved into the expansive suite of rooms and began gathering fresh data.

The sniper only got through one small corner of the studio-style suite's décor before the door swished open without warning. He ducked behind a cubitura as soon as the pneumatic hiss began.

The barely perceivable sound of whisper-quiet foot steps across the carpet gave away the creeping, sneaking movement of the interloper.
Suspicious.

They hadn't turned on the lights either.

Very suspicious.

The Detective considered his options, which were rapidly diminishing as the footsteps moved into the room and closer to his position. Calling up his best 'I'm in charge here' voice, Garrus spun out of his hiding spot, pistol aimed at the unknown figure.

“Hands where I can see them. This is a closed crime scene. State your name, and your business here.”

Standing across from him, seemingly unarmed but with exceptional poise, a lithe tarin with soft features stood watching him. She appeared extremely unconcerned with having a gun pointed at her head.

“My name is unimportant, my business is my own, and yes... this is a closed scene. Which I have every right to be accessing... but do you, I wonder? Officer...?”

“Didn't your mari ever tell you it's rude to ask for someone's name without offering your own?”

“She did, but in this case I think it's appropriate.”

“I don't think so. I've got a bead on your head. Name.”

The unknown tarin sighed quietly, looking every inch the dissatisfied professional. “I suppose it doesn't much matter. Aiesha Makasian. Blackwatch, 27th division. Now, unless you have something with more firepower then that peashooter, I suggest you return the favor before I see how well your C-Sec armor stands up to my combat drone. It isn't as if a pistol of that caliber could penetrate my shields anyway.”
Listening intently to her subvocals, and giving the stranger one last look over, Garrus decided to take her word for it and lower his sights.

“Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec Detective, and my pistol would destroy your shields. It's custom.”

Her eyes narrowed, displeased. “They are over-clocked Moser IIIs, over three times as strong as what your armor should be equipped with. I could lap the room four or five times before your sidearm could so much as begin to break my shields.”

The sniper grinned a small, cocky grin. “Or I could shoot the side panel on your Mosers, a classic weak spot on the older models. With the stopping power I have, it would take two shots to fry them.”

“You couldn't make both shots before my drone ate your armor to pieces, Detective.” she insisted, politely.

“Yes, I could, and your drone would be on the ground from an overload in between the two.”

“... Combat engineer?”

“Yes, but I'm not much one for drones. More the hack and snipe sort.”

“I see... and why is a C-Sec Detective trespassing on the site of a closed case in the middle of the night cycle?”

Garrus winced. “Would you believe I was here to... clean up?”

The Blackwatch agent blinked slowly, eyeing the holo-outline of the corpse's resting place and the completely intact slew of offline security devices with mild incredulity.

“No.”

“Damn.”
“Well?” she asked, sounding more curious than upset.

“... The case shouldn't have been closed.”

“... True.”

Garrus let out a sigh, scrubbing a palm over the back of his neck. “So... why are you here?”

“That information is classified.”

“U-huh. Riiiiight.”

“Well then. Regar-

At that very moment, the door began to hiss again as it opened and both Turians quickly ducked behind nearby furniture. The glow of the hallway lit up the room for a half moment before the lights flipped on.

“Oh gracious me. Best get to work cleaning this up,” said a new voice. Garrus and Aiesha shared a look of ’...shit.' across the distance of their respective hiding spots.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aiesha is an OC, property of CrystalDePhoenix. She's being borrowed with permission.  :3

A/N/N: On another note, I've been going through the ME 1 dialogue for chapter ideas to make sure Garrus here lines up with Garrus in game, if a great deal more complex and well explored. In doing so I came across a line in the game where Shepard specifically asks Garrus 'Have you worked with a Spectre before?', and Garrus straight up replies, “Well, no. But I know what they're like.” Huh. Interesting. How does he know what they are like if he's never worked with one? How exactly did a ranking detective on the citadel get away with years at C-Sec without crossing paths with the Council's watchdogs? Why would Pallin put him on a big case to investigate a Spectre if he had no experience with them? Why Garrus on that case? Oddities, duckies! I would have to
call bullshit even disregarding this fic's fanon. So... I think he lied. I wonder... when did he figure out that humans can't hear a falsehood in Turian subvocals? How much did he lie about? Did he ever come clean with Shep about this? Hmmm...

Fanfic Recommendation: Almost Doesn't Count (46123 words) by 11_Gadget_27
In hope for clear skies tomorrow

Chapter Summary

Garrus gets an unexpected visitor and Nihlus smiles the smile of the man who can kill you with his pinky.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Quihiri – Turian closed dialect for 'children'. (Composed of Mizdirected's words for 'people' which is 'quiritus', and the words for 'son' and 'daughter', 'pahir' and 'mahir' respectively.)

Genortis - (Season) Named due to life springing from the decay of the old. In ancient times births were planned to take place during this three month season to give infants the best chance to survive the long tacedems of letum. (Credit – Mizdirected. Basically, Palaven's springtime following the stormy and chill monsoon season.)

Avunem -Turian closed dialect for 'uncle'. (Familiar form Avu. Credit: Mizdirected)
Filian – Turian closed dialect for 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)
Amarceru – A thick tea, muddy and strong, popular with Turians. (Credit: Mizdirected)
Hastatim – Hierarchy rebel suppression forces. (Canon)

A/N: Whew! Nice big update, almost 3k! :D

Chapter Soundtrack: zircon - The End

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ama, don't think I am missing the looks you're shooting at Lemura.”

Nihlus hid a playful grin in Aegis' shoulder, leaning into the heavy-set torin's side, playing at being three or four glasses of wine drunker than he actually was. “I can't help myself. Her fringe is devastatingly cute. Are you closely related?”

The Victus clansman snorted, one set of talons absently stroking his consort's far arm, fingers playing along the grooves of undisguisable and dense musculature appreciatively. “Yes, before you get your hopes up for a threesome. Much too closely for intercourse, seeing as we're second cousins.”
“Blast. All my plans ruined.”

Aegis laughed, kicking one of Nihlus' spurs playfully. “Am I not enough to sate you?” he inquired with a joking hum, which the carmine plated torin replied to by rumbling delightfully inappropriate things for a dinner party into his ear. It was a good thing they were sitting alone for the moment, as it meant there was no one else at the corner table to overhear the various kinky suggestions.

“Aegis.” called out a voice, self-confident and subtly underscored with judgmental subvocals. The two torin looked up to see a tarin standing, - or perhaps posing was a better description-, in front of their seating.

“Ah. Elexis. A pleasure to see you this evening,” managed Nihlus' patron after a half-second-too-long hesitation.

“You must be getting bored here with no one interesting to talk to. Why don't we refresh our drinks and catch up? I'm certain you've missed me.”

“... Anyone could miss you, of course. Unfortunately I will have to pass on your offer. I have the pleasure of escorting Amalos Arterio this evening, a chef of the highest quality, and a riveting conversationalist.” 'riveting' being said with a multi-layered hum that sounded preferential, vaguely sexual, and affectionate in one smooth rumble.

The tarin did not take the hint.

“A cook? Fascinating, if a little... how should I put this? Well, I am rather certain everyone here is grateful for the hard work of the lower tiers that created tonight's lovely meal and decorated this old place up for us. In other news, I'm sure you've heard that Trisae is pregnant again?”

Nihlus smiled at the tarin pleasantly as she went about disparaging him with every other word. Knowing that you could kill someone with their dinnerware made it very easy to keep smiling. Not to mention that technically speaking, Nihlus could walk away anytime, so immense were his late night findings. The tarin's threat level to mission success was somewhere near zero even before his pale-red patron replied with ever-flattening subvocals.

“Ah yes. This will be her fifth?”
“Sixth, dear torin. Six quihiri. Like a backwater colony worlder, breeding for offspring to throw away in illegitimate, dead-end jobs outside of Hierarchy space so that they need not work themselves. It's just so distasteful.”

The undercover agent was mildly amused by how quickly Elexis Victus was revealing herself. She had laced 'backwater colony worlder' with enough pointful disdain to drown a small animal, which she only could have thought to do if she were aware of his own supposed background. Considering he hadn't mentioned this cover's back story to anyone in person save for Aegis, her knowledge must have involved either research, connections, or paying off an intelligence broker. Possibly all three.

“I'm rather certain her children are all very successful actually, two are full grown and in politics. Isn't one of them a doctor?”

“Entirely beside the point, Aegis. It's always unbecoming to procreate that frequently. Ah well. Shall we get that drink?”

It was almost amazing how selective the tarin's hearing was.

“As... I said before... I must pass, but thank you for the offer.”

“Oh before I forget, Telladagia, the Asari designer you like? New line of semi-formal wear coming out in Genoritis, but I have tickets to the pre-showing on Tuesday of the week before. Have your secretary schedule you off for the day so we can go.”

“I will be certain to see if it is available.”

“Of course you will dear. Have you sampled any of the deserts yet? The berry-mousse is divine, you must try some.”

Aegis finally broke down the pleasant act and looked over at him apologetically, humming with mild aggravation. Just as Nihlus was deciding whether or not to scandalize the tarin by finding an excuse to share reverie with his dinner date, a fourth party goer popped into their previously quiet corner.

“Elexia, darling! Please, tell me you saw!”
“Saw what?”

“The avah of the Invictus branch is here, and you would not believe what she's wearing!” the newcomer exclaimed, winking conspiratorially at Aegis when the pest spun around to see for herself. The toxic female gasped dramatically and clutched at her pectoral plates.

“Spirits of the deep. She did not. She did not!”

“Oh! But she did!”

Blue in the throat and looking incensed, Elexia excused herself in a self-righteous flurry and zipped off to parts unknown. Nihlus remained clueless as to what the avah had been wearing to cause the reaction, but didn't actually care that much and more so appreciated the smooth intervention. Yet another Victus clansman stepped up beside their party, a red eyed torin who watched after the furious tarin huffing away as if she put a bad taste in his mouth.

“I'm surprised no one has pushed her off a bridge yet. Her shoes certainly look unstable enough that a strong wind could do it.”

Aegis chuckled, raising his wine glass a few centimeters in welcome toward the two guests to most recently visit their table. “Are you volunteering avu Vomorus?”

The torin, apparently his patron’s uncle, shook his head with a weary soldier's mien. “My bondmate would disown me for familicide.”

The other tarin, a young and butchy female, laughed brightly. “But would it be worth it? If only to remove her from the gene pool?”

Grumpily, Vomorus rumbled out a quiet, “Possibly,” that made the rest of the group laugh. Nihlus chuckled right along with them. Spirit obviously lifted, Aegis gestured to the newcomers and made introductions.

“Avu, Ro, may I introduce Amalos Arterio? Ama, this is General Vomorus of the eighty-eighth air squadron of Palaven, and his right hand tarin, Lieutenant Ro Vakarian.
“A pleasure to meet you both. The honor is mine.”

The General nodded politely in return and stole an abandoned water glass from their table, while Lt. Ro leaned a casual arm on the much older torin. “Ignore us, we're mostly joking Arterio. Promise.”

Nihlus shook his head with a smile. “Far be it from me to judge.”

“Ha! Thanks. Well we won't take up your time, will we sir?”

“No. We came by mostly to... ah...”

The Spectre popped in with a chagrin filled, “...rescue us?”

Aegis laughed as Vomorus nodded in simple agreement. It really had been a rescue of sorts.

“Well then, if you two are off already,” Aegis said as he began to rise, “then I'll use that as a good excuse to leave off myself. Elexia can't bother me to dance if I am no longer here.”

Of course as they rose together the live orchestral band chose that very moment to begin playing. The undercover agent felt the heavier set torin turn slightly and stiffen. Following his line of sight revealed the tarin they were socially routing from, on a warpath back for their table as the chimes and drums of the traditional percussion music rang out in an opening sequence.

‘Ahah’, thought Nihlus, ’the music was timed, but she missed her own cue. Fail with a capital f, sweetheart.’

He turned, and with a graceful sweep of limbs born from excessive amounts of close quarters combat and a strength in his arms that had been growing steadily since his rescue, the undercover agent swept Aegis out onto the dance floor and into the beginning moves of the song. It was a boring, -and in Nihlus' not even slightly humble opinion-, lifeless form of physical expression when compared to the energy behind raves and rock concerts, but it would do. At least the ease of the mass-groups and dance patterns popular at these kinds of social events meant that Saren had been able to teach him all of the basic sets without much time invested. He sure hadn't learned them growing up.
Memories of awkwardly dancing with Saren, -at the time his half-despised asshole of a mentor-, rose fondly for a moment, making him dearly miss the stolid torin.

Elexia swept on by as if she hadn't been moving their way at all, unable to inject herself into the situation without causing a scene by mucking with the organization of the entire dance floor.

'Nihlus Kryik 1, Elexia Victus 0.'

Garrus didn't expect to hear from Makasian again. If anything, he'd half expected to get a call to come to Pallin's office without warning the next day.

Yesterday night they'd awkwardly coordinated hacking the door to open in tandem with the lights going off, and doing it with the timing needed for them to slip past the cleaner that had come to clear out the suite. A few heart pounding moments of speed planning with nothing but silent military handsigns had ended with them rushing out of the door, and her splitting off in a different direction spontaneously.

She'd disappeared in a moment's inattention, so the Detective shrugged it off and made his way home using more hacking tricks to circumvent the station's surveillance cameras and security devices to go about unseen again.

The next day he'd woken up and gone out for breakfast, returning to the hunt for more physical data to review in hopes of finding alternative clues.

All had been as planned, except Garrus had walked back into his tiny apartment that night to find Agent Makasian sitting on his cubitura, reading a digital article on her 'tool.

“Vakarian.”

“You again.”
“Mmmhm.”

“How are you in my apartment? Better yet, why are you in my apartment?”

“I used the door. It was a fascinating experience by the way. I wonder where a C-Sec detective gets military grade anti-infiltration devices. You do know that three of them are illegal for home defense, don’t you?”

Anti-infiltration devices? Did she mean the proximity alerts that Saren had left for them when Nihlus was pretending to be his girlfriend?

While that event hadn't been particularly recent, the sniper was pretty sure he remembered them being harmless prox alarms.

He was no longer quite so certain.

The Blackwatch agent closed the file she'd been reading and crossed one leg over the other, turning to watch him with sky-blue eyes that were mild and curious. For a supposed operative of the Hierarchy's most morally questionable branch of military, she was awfully sweet looking.

“Oh, those are... it's a long story. You still didn't answer my question.”

“Fair enough.”

“Well?”

“Hmm. Did you find out anything new?”

“... Seriously? You broke into my home to ask me... spirits. I might have. Why do you care?”

“As you said, the case should not have been closed.”
“Annnd?”

“Further information is classified.”

“Uhuh. You've got to do better than that.”

She huffed, rolling her eyes at him. “I intend to see it... reopened.”

“Alright. Okay. Let's say I take that intent at face value, as well as your identity and clearance, why should I share my intel with you unless you're doing the same?”

Agent Makasian looked the sniper up and down like he was the galaxy's greatest moron. She stood up slowly while pulling up a new file on her Omni-tool and slipping an ident card from a small slot on her light armor's utility belt. The petite tarin held out the card first, one peach-colored brow raised as if to say, 'well?'

The ident card read out Aiesha Makasian, giving her basic Hierarchy stats and tier, as well as her insanely high clearance level that all but screamed 'Blackwatch'. His Omni-tool beeped after a moment, requesting a file transfer. He checked it over for spyware with extra paranoia before allowing it to download. It was...

The case files, amended with what looked to be her personal notes.

Garrus looked up at the placid tarin, and laughed awkwardly. She was being... perfectly helpful, and was most likely exactly who she said she was, or was at least frequently known by this alias. He felt slightly bad for his previous hostility. She hadn't even turned him into the Executor, it seemed.

“Ah. Right,” he coughed, “let me just look this over and see what I can add...”

“You do that.”

She turned away to stand in front of the window and watch traffic zip by in the distance. With one last glance at the mysterious tarin, and a small shred of curiosity as to why he kept running into problem cases and individuals with security clearance he never wanted to see on his own ID, the Detective sat down on his own couch and went through her additions. He'd long since gotten most of the original case files memorized.
She'd added detail, a lot of detail, but only small amounts of it had been used with conjecture to make some new guesses on the case's finer points. He had to sit there for a while and just review everything new.

His uninvited guest waited quietly, unconcerned.

Somewhere on the fifth page of notes he spotted an inconsistency. A few fact checks later and Garrus thought he had their next big break.

“I think... I know where the second murder took place.”

Agent Makasian turned back to him, an intrigued expression in her mandibles.

“Oh really?”

The site of the second murder spread out before them, yet another hotel suite, albeit one with multiple rooms and fancier furniture. It’s locks and tamper proofing technology had been no match for Garrus’ crack coding and the mysterious agent’s various gadgets.

Not risking a repeat, they sealed the door behind them, and got to work tearing the place apart for the smallest scrap of missed information. As the silence grew, Garrus found himself unable to keep it.

“So... why are you investigating this case? Seems a bit outside of Blackwatch's usual purview.”

“That information is classified.”

“After the asshole who did it? Or one of his cronies?”

“Also classified.”
“Huh. Okay. We can pretend it's not odd as hell for you to be here. I'm still not convinced you are from Blackwatch.”

Aiesha's eyes narrowed without leaving her current focus. “That's nice.”

Garrus glanced over once, but continued to scan the edges of furniture for biological material. “Nevermind. That attitude must be a pre-qualifier to your screening process. You all default to 'classified', and when that fails it's right to the small talk phrases.”

He could see her mandibles flick out of the corner of his eyes, ever so slightly, as the tarin resisted smiling at his snark.

“Oh?”

“Mmmhmm. My filian is a Hierarchy spook. I swear, some days what she had for lunch is classified.”

Makasian huffed in amusement and continued in her slow perusal of the suite's kitchenette, deadpanning her reply. “... Nice weather we're having today.”

“Really? That's the best you've got? It's a space station. We have nice weather everyday.”

“It... remains true.”

The Detective tilted his head in mild acknowledgment, amusement in his subvocals as he conceded the point. “Fair enough. Anything else besides the pre-determined weather that isn't classified?”

“... About what, precisely?”

“How about twenty questions?”
“Hmmm...” she hummed while stalling, distracted by the scans of a seemingly innocent counter-top, “Sure, why not?”

“Great. Let's start with, 'Is Makasian your real name?'”

“Possibly. Is Vakarian yours?”

“I'm sure you've checked by now.”

“Yes. Garrus Vakarian, thirty two years of age, tier twenty one, three service medals awarded during civil service... favorite tea is northern-style amarceru.”

The sniper avoided reacting to the purposely detailed list that semi-verified the tarin's clearance level. One of those medals was from his time in the ranks of the hastatim, and wasn't publicly listed. If the close-mouthed engineer wasn't a Hierarchy spook, she was at least a very well informed pretender.

“That last one was oddly specific. You have something against tea?”

“No.”

“Amarceru?”

“Also no.”

“Ah... is it the northern style that did it?”

“Possibly.”

“Should I assume 'possibly' is code word for yes?”

“... Possibly.” she replied dryly.
Garrus chuffed a quiet laugh. The tarin wasn't the most expressive, but her dry humor reminded him of Saren.

“Well then. I suppose it's your turn.”

“Technically? It's my turn for the next four questions.”

“Touché.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, Nihlus has run into another Vakarian. Don't forget that I mind canon the Vakarian clan as a massive one that is based on Palaven and purports thousands of members. Nihlus and Saren are both the last of their lines, and of the two, only Saren ever had a larger family to begin with. The mega-clan isn't the norm, by any means.

Fanfic Recommendation: Illustrated Revelations (3173 words) by House of Wax (FemShep/Garrus)
A mockery of intention

Chapter Summary

Everyone is in air ducts.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Pari - Turian closed dialect for 'Dad'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: 【東方 Violin / Piano】Lunar Clock Quartet

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It was nice knowing you Vakarian.”

He scoffed, “We're not dead yet.”

Makasian gestured casually around the room they were sealed in, still unflappable in the face of near-certain doom. “Considering they could walk in and overpower us at any time? I am fairly certain we are.”

“Don't be a pessimist. My pari once said, 'The only way to change reality is to believe it can be changed.'”

“Believing that the door will open won't make it so,” the peach-and-tan Agent muttered, typing away on her Omni-tool. There was a jammer up and they'd had no luck breaking through it. At least she was still attempting to.

Garrus shook his head back and forth while backing up, checking different angles of the room for options. “No, but believing something is possible inspires us to try.”

They'd run afoul of a trap while investigating a lead and were summarily captured. Now they'd been left to wait for the person in charge to get out of a meeting of some sort and decide what to do with
them. He had no intention of sitting around and hoping, if that person was who he suspected, that they would be merciful. It wasn't a large step from civilian murderer to cop-killer.

“I concede the point, however you must admit the odds aren't good. I can't get around this signal jammer to save my life. Literally.”

The Detective looked around their cage, seeking any way out. Something a regular person might miss. “There has to be something...”

If the stoic tarin had another defeatist reply Garrus didn't hear it, he was suddenly too busy stacking crates to reach the ceiling. Six meters up and tucked in the corner was a ventilation duct cover.

“That's unlikely to work. Surely you see the blue sealant device around the edges?”

The Detective grunted a positive, dragging himself up several lengths of precariously stacked crate. He could hear the other Turian move closer to his position before elaborating.

“It's a locking mechanism. The cover is tamper proofed. You won't be able to remove it.”

Icy blue eyes narrowed as he reached the top of the make-shift ladder and inspected the entry to the airway. It wasn't very sizable to start with, and the blue affixes were indeed some sort of locking clamp. He eyed the metal the cover was made out of. It didn't look particularly hefty.

Stabilizing himself the best he could, Garrus pulled back a fist and nailed the center of the panel a good one.

Three things happened at once.

Makasian took several steps back and away from his brilliant plan.

The tall sniper's uppercut slammed into the metal with all the arm strength of a torin who stabilized high caliber sniper rifles for hundreds of rounds at the range every week, rending a sizable hole into the relatively weak material.
Then... the pile of crates began to topple over.

With a high pitched shout of surprise, the Vakarian clansman made a grab for the edge of the newly made hole and caught himself, his gauntlets sparing him shredded palms on the jagged edges. He got another hand hold on the rim after a moment, and hung there grinning. Makasian came around the side, her head tilted curiously at his success.

“Well. I suppose that's one way of doing it.”

“See? Not dead yet.”

“I shall have to thank your patrem for it later. In the mean time, reach up to your left and see if there is a-” she got out, before the mountainous sniper managed to find and hit the inner release on the locks. It made the panel fall open, which he clung on to mostly by dint of an adrenaline powered grip and instinct not to fall.

Garrus swung back and forth as the panel came to a slow halt with gravity. The Blackwatch Agent observed him with a flat look, arms akimbo. Her subvocals gave her away though, trilling quietly with amusement. She huffed and peered around him, up into the duct.

“Your master plan has a flaw, Officer Vakarian,” the tarin offered, one long talon pointing upward. The stone-grey sniper tilted his crest back to look up, brow ridges furrowing slightly in dismay. The airway it had opened into was... way, way too small for him. Even without the blue and black C-Sec armor, his collar wouldn't fit.

“Damn.”

“Mmmhm.”

“Well, there are two other ducts. Another one might be bigger...”

“...Hold still.”
“Wait, what?”

Without further warning, Agent Makasian hopped up on a solo crate from the pile, and used it to leap at him. She caught hold of his ankles, sending them swaying wildly.

“A little warning would be nice!”

“I did tell you to hold still,” she offered while climbing him like a ladder. Garrus hung on without too much trouble, his genemods and workout routine making it possible to keep them both aloft. For a few minutes anyway. It also helped that the petite Blackwatch Agent was wearing light armor.

“A little more elaborate warning would have been better, is all I’m saying.”

Scrambling up from ankles to knees, and from knees to hips, she politely avoided his waist, but had no recourse but to use his collar and crest to finish the climb. He bared it stoically. Handholds were handholds.

“I thought my intent was fairly obvious. I am much more aptly sized than you.”

“Not certain what being short has to do with it...”

She stopped to glare at him lightly, one foot coming off his shoulder as she began to get her own tentative hold on the rim. “I mean that I am much thinner, and more lightly armored, Vakarian.”

The blue eyed Detective grinned cheekily, having obviously been teasing her. She didn't look particularly amused, turning away with a huff to lurch up into the opening. With a grunt, a twist, and an uncomfortable sounding exhalation, the tarin made herself fit. Just barely.

“You alright in there?”

“Well...nnf... enough...”

“Less than encouraging, but I'll take it. Where does it go?”
Her voice getting quiet from distance, the Agent replied “The wrong way, but... nnnf... I see light. Give me a few minutes.”

With a half formed prayer to the spirits, Garrus dropped down, landing smoothly on his feet with a heavy thud from his weight. The sounds of struggle from the ventilation duct diminished, then disappeared altogether.

It was a quiet, worry filled seventeen minutes before the door slid open. Makasian appeared in the doorway, four guards dead on the ground behind her.

“Ready to go?”

Garrus stalked forward, snagging a pistol off of one of the bodies. Finding it lacking, he tried the other. Palming the heaviest hitting model, and pocketing the second best plus a few clips, he snarked at her after looting.

“ Took you long enough. Did you pick up lunch by any chance? I'm starving.”

She snorted, and turned to walk away, peering carefully around the next corner before moving forward.

“No. We can get lunch later. I simply took my time. 'Caution is the mark of a professional.'”

“Oh?”

“Mmm. My Avah, something she said to me a long time ago.”

“Fair enough. Coast is clear?”

“It is, let's go.”
Green eyes glittered with anger behind the ventilation slats on the wall over a room of horrors.

Tonight was their last night on Palaven, and Nihlus had slipped Aegis a mild tranquilizer once again in order to have a final evening to slip through the quiet halls of the Victus clan *madlis* in search of secrets.

He'd found more than he bargained for.

A few clues and files had led him to visit the quarters of a certain guest.

The Spectre found himself oddly relieved that the torin in the room below wasn't actually a Victus clansman. Maybe because they were about to die for what he was seeing, maybe because he didn't want to think about Aegis being related to such a person.

Then again, *he* was related to his mother. Best not to judge a torin by his family.

Still, the space beneath the vent played host to a Turian being waited on hand and foot by two absent eyed slaves, sporting chipping scars on their necks and fresh bruises. Score marks from talons, old and new, littered their wrists and waists. It was disgusting.

Spectre Kryik waited patiently for the torin to decide to go to bed, watching as the male casually treated the two people like particularly dumb varren. Or furniture.

Eventually the bastard did, curling up on the guest bed comfortably while the two slaves, a torin and a nais, were stuffed carelessly into a storage container. Their chips were set so high that they were little more than vegetables, so stupefied they were nearly drooling. He watched them, rage growing like a well watered jungle plant. This fucking torin had brought them to Palaven in a shipping crate.

A. Shipping. Crate.

How the asshole had managed to do it without getting caught, whether it was money or connections or both, he didn't care. He just cared that it ended immediately.
The minutes Nihlus spent silently stewing gave the slave keeper a chance to fall asleep one last time.

Like a fine mist, the carmine plated operative slipped from the vents and onto the plush carpeting. He stopped by the en-suite bathroom first to grab a towel. Next, he nabbed a spare bottle of wine from the room's liquor cabinet. Swathing the glass bottle in the towel, Nihlus crunched the bottom of the container off with one foot, and lifted the jagged remains from the towel by the intact spout.

The quiet crunch had disturbed the sleeper, but not enough to awaken him. Tugging the Asari out of the box, he steadied the makeshift weapon in the nais' grasp, and walked them both forward. A quick jab guided by his hand was all it took to slide ragged glass into throat hide.

The chipped Asari stood there watching, catatonic without direction, while the bastard of a torin bled out, having woken in terror only to choke on his own blood. Nihlus watched dispassionately as the blue spread across sheets like ink. The lifesblood bubbled from the uneven tears in the bastard's neck as he gasped for air and died suffering.

Justice served, the clever agent shuttled his unassuming assistant to a nearby couch and laid the nais out comfortably, dropping the fingerprinted bottle onto the carpet midway between.

Without a word, the Spectre slipped back up into the air ducts and away, leaving the mess behind to be discovered in the morning. Hopefully the cleaning staff came in and caught on, then made a big deal about the guest's disreputable actions.

He was sure the Victus family could take the story and turn it into profit. They weren't exactly innocent people themselves, but at least he hadn't seen any hints of criminal activity half so dark as slave keeping.

A long night of searching and hiding, code cracking and data theft, and Nihlus finally slipped back into bed with Aegis half an hour till dawn. It was cutting it close, but he was getting so very done with this cover.

The mission had been beyond successful, he had hard data he needed to get back to the Spectre Offices, and he was getting pretty damn sick of acting like a delicate, shy courtesan instead of himself. It was nice not to shoot things to save the galaxy for once, but this personality was really beginning to grate.
Curling up with his heavy-set patron, 'Amalos' caught what sleep he could find in what remained of the night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Do you like my chapter summary? It's pretty much the entire chapter in five words. What in the world is my preoccupation with Nihlus, -and others-, in air ducts? I mean.... Sexy Turian Spectre slipping out of the dark night to murder the bad people? Uh, yes please! Mmmm. ... Okay, I think I just answered my own question.

Fanfic Recommendation: Capture the Flag, But With Snow (2612 words) by NoisyNoiverns (The Arterius brothers, Nihlus, Abrudas, and a bunch of enlisted. AU, involving a snowball fight at a Hierarchy base in the middle of nowhere. Desolas/Abrudas.)
There is no use trying to change your mind

Chapter Summary

Catching up with everyone. Garrus is relieved. Saren is annoyed. Nihlus is bothered. Then again, when isn't Nihlus 'bothered'? 

Chapter Notes

A/N: Warning for some NSFW-ness. Just a tiny bit!

Chapter Soundtrack: S.E. Lain OST - Majixx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is it, exactly what we needed,” Agent Makasian offered with a distracted smile, fingers flying over her Omni-tool's keyboard as she reviewed the files they'd tracked down. Video surveillance that showed the Salarian politician being in places where other witness testimony swore he couldn't have been.

Strangely enough, the locations were also very close to the scenes of the second and third crimes.

It wasn't enough to pin the murders on the man, but it should be more than needed to get the case reopened.

Garrus leaned into the wall, suddenly exhausted. He'd been running himself hard trying to see this through, and the loss of the weight on his shoulders from allowing the Salarian murderer to slip through his talons was enough to make him weak limbed.

Justice might yet be served. Thank the spirits.

A small hand came to rest of his shoulder, and Garrus turned to look down at the owner. The peach-toned Blackwatch operative fidgeted awkwardly, looking like she wanted to say something but didn't know how. Eventually she patted the metal of his pauldron in a reassuring manner before clearing her throat and stepping back.
“So. A job well done, I would say. Shall we see this delivered anonymously and then find somewhere to eat? I do believe lunch was promised.”

Garrus grinned, half-laughing breathily in relief.

“Yeah. Alright. Food sounds amazing.”

“A agreed.”

The human man screamed for bloody murder as the pinky finger on his left hand was shot off.

“Hmm. Did you think I was joking?”

“Aaahhhhh! AAAAAHHH! SHIT! My hand!”

“It was just one finger. If you talk now, you can keep the rest. I give you my word.”

“Fuck-fuck-fuuuuuck you!” the man slurred out through the pain. Saren shrugged lightly, and shot off the next largest digit.

“AH GOD, JESUS FUCK, YOU SON OF A-” The Spectre shot the next just to cut him off.

“You have never met my mother, nor will you. Refrain from disparaging her. Her spirit deserves better than thoughtless curses from the likes of you.”

“S-shhh-shiiit... my fucking hand. You asshole.”

“Are you going to tell me what I wish to know?”
“Ab-so-fucking-lutely not!”

“Very well,” replied the silver-grey torin, utterly unconcerned. The human's first finger exploded in a pulpy, crimson mess just like the others.

“AHHH! AHHHHH!”

Sick of the man's useless screaming, Saren grabbed him by the throat and squeezed enough to cut off the noisy airflow. “AAAH-grhk!”

“Another digit, another chance. I would advice you consider your options before we reach the other hand.”

“God damn skull faced asshole! Fuckfuckfuck. I ain't tellin' you shit!”

With a bored click of his tongue, the stoic Spectre tossed the man down, stepped on his wrist to hold it still, and decimated the human's thumb, leaving that hand a ruined mess.

“Now?”

“N-ARRGG!”

“Perhaps... now?”

“FU-OH GOD!”

Crying, face red and snot dripping, the man refused to give up the location Saren wanted, and each and every finger and toe he had were removed for it. After the loss of all the toes on his second foot the male passed out. With a huff of displeasure for wasted time, the Council Agent took a lean against a wall and refreshed his thermal clip. He gave the man a generous five minutes before kicking him awake none too gently.
Having passed out from pain, the human awoke groggy and glassy eyed. Saren pulled him up by his shirt, pinning him to the wall. The man's head lolled weakly, and he paused before offering any new threats. Perhaps this treatment was too much for the soft skinned species? The male appeared to be dying already...

With an exasperated chuff of air for the delicate-ness of other species, the Spectre tossed the man down with some small care for head trauma, and applied basic first aid. Enough to keep the human from bleeding out immediately.

'It seems I must proceed more slowly, or loose this lead entirely. Annoying, but the alternatives could prove costly, and I would prefer not to spend the credits unless I must. Hmm. How long do humans take to recover from simple trauma, I wonder...'

Saren spent the next eight hours peaceably reading about the strengths and weaknesses of the human body. On one hand, it meant the man received the average recommended number of hours of sleep before their interrogation continued. On the other, it meant Saren knew much more precisely how to take him apart without killing him when he did wake.

Given a choice, the human male likely would have chosen to simply bleed out by the time the Spectre was done with him.

Nihlus had to admit, even if the other torin wasn't particularly amazing at sex, he was generous with affection, unselfish in bed, and had a decent libido.

Then again, not much could match eight-some-odd rounds of Blue flavored with desperation and...
other things that the Spectre was still trying to pretend he didn't feel. Even that one stimulant filled night with silver-grey twins wasn't quite so good.

Spirits of the deep, he fucking adored that torin, and adored fucking him too.

With only a brief and light knock, the undercover agent slipped into Spectre Bau and Agent Tiine's shared room.

'Huh. Speaking of sex...'

Passed out, naked, and curled together the two Salarian operatives made Nihlus' cock twitch inside his sheath. Lithe like all Salarians, Jon was more muscular and toned, sporting shades of grey and blue from head to toe. The intruding agent eyed the man's powerful looking leg muscles that were on display appreciatively.

The smaller Salarian was snuggled into the other's chest, snoring lightly. Korvis was thin and delicate looking. Still muscled, but made entirely of long lines and wiry strength. The contrast had Nihlus wondering why he hadn't flirted with either of them more.

Possibly because so few Salarians had a sex drive, and neither had shown an interest.

Rather than taking any offense, Nihlus took the opportunity to get a good eyeful of them both, then graciously tugged the top sheet into a more modest draping. Not three seconds later he noticed Spectre Bau's eyes were opening, and taking his presence in. Slipping to the side of the bed, the carmine plated Spectre knelt down and whispered a greeting.

“Hey Jon. Looks like you guys had fun. I got a bunch of data for us, got somewhere to put it?”

Jondam blinked slowly and exhaled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he leaned slightly to see the clock. “Nn. Ah, yes. Ahh. My clothing, in the left shirt pocket...”

With an understanding grin at the cuddle-shackled Spectre, Nihlus padded quietly away and dug out the shirt in question, rifling through the pockets to find the small data device. He sat down on the floor next to the bed, and copied the files over, slipping the tiny drive back into the correct pocket.
“All set. Well... unless I'm invited to join in I had best leave you two to enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Spectre Bau ducked his head. “You are welcome. Korvis is fond of you. It wouldn't be wise though, I doubt either of us have libido left to spare, and Mr. Victus would smell us on you...”

Nihlus almost smacked himself for being an idiot. Too distracted by tight blue-grey thighs to consider his current cover. He'd fallen out of 'Amalos' very quickly after stepping into the room, and the mission felt almost over as it stood.

“Right. Shit. Have I ever mentioned how attractive you are? Yeah. Anyway, that's probably best. Tell Korvy he rocks the lithe and wiry look for me. I'll see ya later.”

“You have, Spectre Kryik. On at least twenty three occasions. Ah... Korvy? I... will. Have a good night.”

With a mildly self-depreciating laugh, quiet enough not to disturb, Nihlus removed himself from the room and made his way to Aegis' suite. The door slid aside for him without preamble surprisingly, and he smirked about it while stripping.

'How much trust is that? Damn I am good at what I do.'

Clothing gone, 'Amalos' arranged himself on the bed in a tantalizing spread and got comfortable. It was all of five minutes before he began playing with himself. Keyed up from the previous glimpses of flesh, and anticipation for a decent lay driving him, the sex-addicted Spectre's fingers fluttered over his own seam.

He stroked the meeting of plates, long and slow, till his phallus emerged glistening wet and flushed purple with blood. Choosing to let the need build rather than soothe it, the green eyed Spectre played with the edges of his sheath, spread his own rear-plates into looseness, and grazed talons over the sensitive hide of his stomach for an endless stalling period.

By the time Aegis made it to bed he was a hot mess, ready and wanting. The heavy-set torin stepped into his bedroom and practically skidded to a halt.

“Ama. Sweet spirits. The things you do to me...”
Chapter End Notes

A/N: I love Christmas. I have no decent excuses to pause my fic for an x-mas special, but thank the spirits other wonderful authors have. See below? XD vvv

Fanfic Recommendation: A Christmas Surprise (1630 words) by soldiermom1973
Passionfruit tea at four

Chapter Summary

Time to wrap things up.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

APB – a broadcast issued by a law enforcement agency to its personnel or allied agencies typically containing information about wanted suspects, arrest warrants, persons of interest, or other critical data. (Real world)

Click – Military short-hand for 1 'kilometer'. (Real world)

A/N: New Years is about to hit, so expect a slow up on updates. Much love to you all ducky, I hope your 2017 is amazing.

Chapter Soundtrack: World 1-2 | Agent Whiskers - Resurgence of Hope

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I'm thinking a 'fake my own death' sort of deal. You got a better idea?”

Korvis resisted the urge to palm his face, and instead attempted to convince Spectre Kryik that there had to be a more... elegant way to exfiltrate. Something less likely to result in tragedy as they burned him on a funeral pyre while he was simply highly sedated, or some other horrific accident. Visions of historically failed attempts to fake one's death swam before his eyes, and picturing the lively Spectre dead so young made him feel rather ill.

Jon held two fingers aloft to gain their attention.

“A method which would allow for re-infiltration in the future would be inherently superior.”

The carmine plated Turian nodded slowly, scratching at his chin in contemplation.

“Alright. So... Aegis already thinks I have no clan, so a family emergency wouldn't work.
Convincingly 'falling out of love' would take a buncha time to pull off, but it is a good fall back. It does make that 'coming back later' idea a lot more difficult though.”

The peach colored intelligence agent nodded encouragingly, hoping the Spectre would continue focusing on their problem solving session. They’d had two already this week, but Nihlus had gotten distracted by chit-chatting both instances, and they’d had to cut things short. This particular Spectre could be a little spacey at times, he’d found.

Brilliant, but spacey.

When the Turian operative didn't seem inclined to continue, Korvis tried moving the conversation forward himself. It was sort of like herding cats. “Very true. Soooo... what would be convincing?”

Vivid green eyes rolled to the ceiling, one side narrowing speculatively. “Well. It's gotta be realistic. Leaving suddenly or suspiciously would set their security forces digging around, and while I don’t think I left them any tracks to find...”

“Better safe than sorry?”

“You got it Korvy.”

Agent Tiine's felt his left eye twitch in mild annoyance at the new nick name. Of all the ridiculous things his fellow Council Agent could come up with... 'Korvy'? It sounded like the name of a token side-kick creature from a children's show.

He refrained from distracting the vivacious Turian by side tracking their conversation with complaint.

The room fell quiet for a few moments while the brain storming continued, -hopefully.

Jondam eventually brought up another idea. “What about a shameful secret? Do you resemble any of the leaders of recent secessionist forces? Or know much about any of the current batch? We could arrange some sort of imaginary connection to be revealed. It would explain you suddenly leaving 'in shame'.”
The quiet intelligence agent huffed, not much liking this idea much either.

“Jondam, while that method would be possible, if the reaction to such a revelation was particularly unfavorable Spectre Kryik could be killed on the spot. Sometimes Turian clans are... overly sensitive about 'traitors'.

Nihlus' head shook in mild disagreement. “Nah, they wouldn't just shoot me straight up. That would be too low-brow for the Victus clan. They might detain me and/or turn me over to Hierarchy special forces for interrogation though, and those lovely people wouldn't be pleased to find out a Spectre was digging around in clan business...”

The carmine plated agent hummed in a dual flang that sounded angry to Korvis' ears, but he couldn't be sure what it really was. His hearing couldn't pick up even half of the Turian vocal range. Thankfully Nihlus returned to spoken word for their sakes.

“Technically speaking? Even doing this sort of thing on Council orders is enough to get me stripped of my colony markings, and I'd rather not loose those. I worked damn hard to earn them in the first place. So ex-nay insurrectionists, but the shameful secret idea has some merit.”

Seeing an opportunity to point out a plan less likely to see Spectre Kryik's head removed from his shoulders in some fashion, Korvis popped in with a slightly more reasonable proposition.

“We could make it out to be a self-sacrificing choice for 'Amalos' to leave. Something that would have Aegis remembering him fondly, but instantly removing him. Act sad and wistful for a few days, leave a remorseful letter explaining everything, and disappear in the night?"

The small, peach-toned agent was particularly supportive of the 'leave suddenly in the middle of the night' part of that plan. Thankfully, Spectre Kryik seemed to like it too, one fist smacking into his other palm decisively.

“Oh damn, that's so dramatic! My species secretly loves that kind of thing, and a run-away lover would be super romantic. That's the kind of stuff epic-length poems are written about.”

The quiet Specialist smiled weakly, somewhat confused as to why abandonment would be considered romantic... Turians were very odd sometimes.
“So... that's... good then. It also wouldn't be much of a stretch for the two of us to 'resign' shortly there after. What would be your cover's reasoning in the letter?”

“The self-sacrificing part is important. Gimme a minute here to think...”

By the end of the hour they had the whole thing plotted out, ready to begin the following day. Korvis spent most of the following week trying very hard to act natural, with only mild success. Thankfully Spectre Bau covered for him repeatedly.

Korvis really, really missed the intel labs back at the Spectre Offices, but at this point he wouldn't have traded this anxiety-inducing field mission for the world. He'd never had a companion quite like Jon... he only hoped their developing friendship could be sustained after the mission was over.

'What was that human saying? Fingers crossed?'

At first he had intended to be merciful.

The human male who charged at him in the open air courtyard of their base was openly crying, recognizable even across the species barrier by the flushed color of the thinner skin regions, the uneven vocal tones, and overactive lacrimal glands.

Barely coherent screams of rage and pain accusing Saren -correctly- of having killed his brother brought out the smallest sliver of compassion in the stolid torin. He knew first hand what it was like to loose a brother.

The Spectre had knocked the crying human out, and proceeded to decimate the illegal weapons manufacturing enclave.

The items produced here seemed neither to meet galactic safety standards, nor arms limitations. No permit was had, no taxes paid, and the buyers...

Well, destruction of the facility and immediate arrest was being very generous, considering the sheer
amount of havoc the weapons produced here were conceivably making. Of course, any attempts at resisting that arrest, which he graciously announced, were met with immediate termination.

He was not here to play around.

This mission had dragged him across four systems, two rock planets that were unpleasantly chilly, and had taken weeks of back tracking sales to find the origin of the illegal arms. His patience was gone even if his mercy was somewhat hanging in there.

Thankfully, a few bloody skirmishes in and the 'staff' seemed to realize this.

Patiently affixing the remaining dozen or so criminals with handcuffs, Saren left them in the windy courtyard and made a full sweep of the property.

That was when he found the abused female in a cage, leaving him feeling cold and dark minded in seconds.

She was colored with bruises, half starved, and sporting the tale-tell sockets of a removable biotic amp in the back of her skull. Her prison was tucked into the corner of a firing range, and it was no long jump of logic that she was quartered near where she was considered useful.

The weapons manufacturers had been testing their designs on the woman, using her biotics to see what their creations could do against a barrier field.

Barbaric.

Disgusting.

There were days where Saren felt ashamed of his own species' superstitious dislike of biotic potential, citing it as folk lore nonsense and bigotry. Modern era racism, even.

This, though?
He had never heard of his own kind treating a biotic barely old enough for basic training like a test dummy. Shunned them? Perhaps. Repeatedly assaulting them for research, caged like an animal?

No.

It was something a Batarian might do, but never a Turian.

With a sour taste in his mouth the Spectre broke into the cage and opened it. Wide eyed with fear, the female made no move to escape her confines.

Saren suddenly noticed that his mandibles were low, putting his teeth on display, and his talons were flexing absently with displeasure. Realizing he probably looked terrifying to the softskin, he made an attempt at composure and cleared his throat to speak.

“Human. You appear to be being held without consent. That is illegal in Council Space. I am releasing you, feel free to leave.”

Saren waited patiently for the brown eyed female to acknowledge his rescue and exit the cage. For some unknowable reason, she did not.

Huffing with annoyance, something that made the woman flinch, he turned away to stalk off. He had no desire to deal with the pitiful creature. She would figure out how to escape an open door on her own eventually. Probably.

What he did have a desire to do, however, was ensure that the fools who had used the biotic so callously would never have the chance to propagate such behavior again.

He stomped back to the courtyard and shot them all in the head, twice each.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Data files sent to the right places as anonymous tips, a quiet lunch on the presidium devoured after a nearly twenty six hour day, and Garrus still had the energy to see the Blackwatch agent off at the docks.
He chalked it up to good genemods and his mari's never ending insistence on politeness. Probably a little bit of the tail end of the high from making so many rapid fire breaks in the triple-homicide case.

Makasian seemed to carry nothing with her, no case or satchel had been retrieved from the hotel they’d stopped by for her to check out from. She stepped up to the entry line for the passenger ship back to Palaven, and showed the attendant the ticket on her Omni-tool. The bored looking Salarian scanned it, and waved her in.

The peach-and-tan Engineer turned his way and gave a small, awkward wave and head-bob in farewell. Garrus waved back with a smile, and turned for home. He was so damn tired, and if he made it farther than his cubitura it would be a small miracle.

Of course, he hadn't made it all of the ten meters back to the rapid-transit station before his 'tool pinged an APB emergency tone. With a groan he stepped out of the flow of foot traffic and checked it. A murder, another murder. On his spirit's damned station.

Growling, vaguely wishing the criminal could have had the decency to wait till tomorrow, the Detective got his ass to the rapid-transit station and put in his C-Sec override codes. Taking off for the perpetrator's last seen location, a residential building several clicks away but thankfully in the same ward, a dark thought began to rise in the back of his mind.

The ABP had been clear on the crime, stating that the homicide had been in public of all things. Considering the definitive description of the criminal's guilt, he had no intention of holding back. Either the perp would surrender to arrest... or the courts would have one less monster to process. He didn't have the patience left, and a quiet echo of his frustration with the Salarian politician who almost escaped justice still simmered somewhere inside him.

The stone-grey torin made way for the scene of the crime, Omni-tool linked to this precinct's active security scans for the person in question.

Upon arrival he was greeting by the news that the nais had already been caught, and was in custody awaiting transfer to a holding facility. Garrus let out a sigh of air like a gust of a heavy, burdensome wind. He hadn't been needed, but that was... okay.

Adrenaline fading quick, he checked in with the local lieutenant organizing everything, and then returned to the skycar he’d commandeered. It took off under auto-pilot, bearing him home at normal speeds and in regular traffic lanes.
He didn't actually make it past the cubitura. It was a good thing the massive couch was extremely comfortable. Garrus passed out for a solid seven hours, face down and asleep moments after impact.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For everyone interested in Agent Makasian, fear not! She's going to come back again later, but for now she has to return to Blackwatch HQ and report in. Mission success and all that! :3

Also: Don’t forget that everything the characters think isn’t necessarily what *I* think. It’s all down to perspective. So if different thought-trains and mindscapes seem to contradict each other? It's the character's stream of thought, not a meta-belief inherent to all of them.

Also, also: Garrus is kind of possessive, I think. :o

Fanfic Recommendation: Narcotize (6563 words) by squiggly_squid, hoxadrine (Human female OC / Turian male OC, gritty, criminal, and dark. Definitely not for everyone, but I have to give props to the author for painting a very fascinating picture.)
Minutes till midnight

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is sleepy, and Saren is sleepless. Business as usual.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Have you SEEN all of the holiday specials written for Mass Effect? I LOVE YOU ALL. I DO.

Chapter Soundtrack: Sawano Hiroyuki - KRONE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus fell into the command depression of the Widmanstat with a gusty sigh, curling up in the circular space and ignoring his inbox full of contact requests entirely. Burned out mentally more than physically, he'd just finished the planned and elaborate exfiltration in the early hours of this morning. It had required disguise hopping several times to ensure there would be no lingering connection between Amalos Arterio and Nihlus Kryik.

A long, convoluted trail of people appearing and disappearing, doubles walking out of stores, and sudden blips of ‘Amalos’ heading for an entirely different space port would leave any pursuers far behind.

He felt confident in his craft. If anyone watching, -or looking for him later-, was genius enough with surveillance footage to match the people he'd shifted into from one to the next to track him, then they deserved the information. It hadn't happened yet though.

The merc born Spectre was good at what he did, disturbingly so according to Saren.

The clocked ticked over to a minute past noon, but Nihlus continued to stare passively at the ceiling, trying to find the gumption to at least make something to eat. Thankfully the ship was still fairly well provisioned from his last resupply, but unfortunately... the kitchens were all the way over therrrre.

‘Over there’ was an endless distance away, and the titanic effort to get back up sounded like work.
Giving it up as a lost cause, the Spectre curled further into the pilot's seat and gave in to the feeling of oncoming sleep. He was docked in a relatively safe location, the Widmanstat was in lock down, and he had to wait around for his cohorts to exfiltrate themselves naturally as well. With plenty of free time, Nihlus planned to catch up on all the down time he'd missed while exploring at night, plus interest.

Sleep, food, video games, and possibly some studying. Maybe. He might even check his emails.

Strangely, sex wasn't on that list. Nihlus gave it about two days though. He never went long without.

Saren silenced the automatic alert on his Omni-tool that pinged the HUD on his retinal implants whenever his vitals dipped into problem states. A few distracted talon taps and the flickering text dispersed. He returned to cleaning and fine tuning the latest firearm to cross his bench.

The Spectre did not need the alert to be aware that he had not slept in days, nor that the resultant adenosine levels in his brain were getting high. He also did not care.

The latest weapon on his bench was a Scimitar II shotgun, which he slowly and painstakingly maintained until it matched his own exacting standards. It involved pulling the mechanism's larger sections apart, detailing each piece, reassembling it, and scanning the finished product with a software specifically made to find flaws in the workings.

The Volus made Scimitar came back with full marks, so the silver grey torin stood and made way for the armory. He replaced it on the rack, and took the next gun in line. A Thunder I assault rifle, an old but reliable AR model that he had owned since basic training.

The Hierarchy had since upgraded their standard weapons assignment at civil service initiation, but Saren had not been particularly impressed with the cred-a-dozen Elanus units now in use upon trying them himself. There was actually a Thunder III on the rack as well, a modern upgrade for the first edition that would have been his choice for new recruits, however his Thunder I was... a little special.

Like any career soldier, he respected the tools that kept him alive above all else, and this particular rifle had seen him through Temple Palaven and for some years beyond. It deserved the attention it was about to receive.
Saren took a seat at the work bench again, reaching into his tool kit for a screw driver. He found one, pausing to shake away his body's growing miasma and it's unimportant insistence for sleep, then got to work.

After an indeterminate number of hours spent singularly focused on weapon's maintenance the ship sounded a pre-arrival alert. Leaving the pieces of the grenade launcher he was working on where they lay, the Spectre walked himself to the command chair for the Daedalus and checked the navigation systems. He would be arriving on the Citadel in just under a quarter hour.

Sending ahead a docking request, Saren returned to the heavy weapon at his bench and rapidly reassembled it. The launcher would need a fuller cleaning later, but it was never a good idea to leave a critical tool unusable for any length of time, and he would likely be busy the rest of the day reporting to the Council and selecting a new mission.

Sitting in the holo ring he went through a quick mental check list of tasks to accomplish while on the station. Turning in his report came first, of course. Followed by immediate resupply, just in case he needed to leave in a hurry. To the best of his knowledge Nihlus was still...

Saren cut off the low growl in his throat, citing poor mood for the slip up. His protégé was still deployed on the mission undercover with the Victus clan, a necessary and important task. He would not be able to catch up with the younger torin at this time.

Visiting a few of his intelligence contacts would also be in order, to see if any of them had news for him. Lunch at his favorite café off of Palaven, Anari's Hearth, would be accomplished as well unless time prohibited it.

He could also visit Garrus...

Saren paused, considering it, but decided not to. The mountainous sniper would insist that he rest, and the torin was far too good at convincing him to do so. The introverted Spectre had no desire to visit his subconcious right now. The nightmares had been riled up since he had rescued the human biotic, -for some ridiculous and unknowable reason-, and he preferred to let some time pass before trying sleep again.

Besides, a few days of sleep deprivation was nothing. Give it a few more, and he would enjoy the mood lifting effects of excess adenosine build up. Day five or six into restlessness was always his most creative as well, and he had every intention of arranging his next mission so travel time could
be spent working on a new grenade mod idea, if possible. Sometimes critical missions were waiting for him, and the choice of destination and resultant activity levels were predetermined, but that did not occur often.

Still, the Spectre hoped for that time to create while in the strange mental place that sleep deprivation caused. He looked forward to it, even.

Docking with the Citadel went by quickly, and Saren made straight for the Spectre Offices to turn in his report. A short jaunt through the low population hallways of ST&R’s intelligence center brought him to the right place, and he entered to see the room’s usual occupant eyeing him blandly.

“Spectre Arterius.”

“BB. I have a mission report to file.”

“Of course you do. Give it here then.”

He did so silently, and the ancient nais left him to his wait. The secretly-spying-for-the-Salarian-Union Agent plugged the data stick in, typing away at the terminal at a measured pace.

Lips pursed like the nais had just eaten something sour, BB pulled up the files and briefly glanced over each one. He was sure the Intel Agent would review them in more detail later, hoping to find errors that did not exist. The spy had an unholy love of making Spectres correct and resubmit reports that had, -admittedly-, ensured that most of their operatives turned in near perfect, high-detail reports each and every time. Well, except for Nihlus.

Nihlus and BB were more like mortal enemies, and the less said about their strange back and forth, the better.

“Alright, It looks like everything is in order. The Council wants to hear the short version in person on this one. System says they have an open time slot at ten till three, and another at eight. Your preference?”

“The two forty appointment will do.”
"Done. Have a pleasant day, Spectre."

"Yourself as well."

His heads up display gave the time as a few minutes till one, which was enough time for one or two things, but not all on his list. Resisting the urge to get lunch first, the unflappable torin instead drifted to the markets to resupply first.

Unfortunately the presidium shopping district was packed wall to wall with people, and still managed to be slightly too cold for Turian sensibilities. Only his mild fame as a Spectre, and a ruthless one at that, cleared his path enough to get anything done.

The journey was slow, the available paths were inefficient, and by the time Saren finished the last item he was almost displeased enough to shoot the next person who did not watch were they were walking. Knowing himself, and wishing to avoid the paperwork associated with committing murder in public, he left quickly and stopped just outside the district for a cup of piping hot kava.

Between the caffeine and the heat his patience was restored enough to carry on. Checking the time again, the silver-grey Spectre realized he had enough time to drop off his purchases, but not sufficient allowance to stow them all properly before his appointment with the Council.

He grabbed a second cup to go and made haste for his goals. Traffic delayed him, as predicted, but he arrived with twenty minutes to spare. Choosing to wait inside the peace and quiet of the Council chamber, the Spectre informed the secretary at the base of the stairs that he had arrived, and took a seat beneath one of the ever-flowering trees.

Not ten minutes passed before his wait was interrupted.

“Arterius,” offered a form approaching out of the peaceful gloom. Saren looked up to see Ankhleas Tithe moving toward him and taking a seat down the bench, close enough to talk quietly but far enough not to crowd.

“Tithe.”

“I have a favor to ask.”
“Interesting... and unlike you.”

The specialist shrugged lightly, his voluminous mantle shifting with the motion.

“Very well, what it is?”

“Not something to be discussed here, truthfully.”

“I have an appointment with the Council. Afterward?”

“Mmmm, you're docked on station?”

“The Daedalus is at C-13, presidium docks.”

Ankhleas stood, humming acknowledgment, and disappeared back down the causeway.

Saren watched him go, curious as to what the orange eyed Specialist wanted. A polite cough from the other direction took back his attention.

“Spectre Arterius? The Council is ready to see you a bit early if that would be alright?”

“Of course. I know the way.”

Lea K’siri, the Council’s sweet tempered Asari secretary held out a welcoming hand toward the supplicant’s stage, wandering back to the base of the stairs after he passed by. Saren took the steps quickly, and walked out onto the dais in a regal stalk. He waited patiently for the Councilors to finish a private discussion they were having. Thankfully it was only a few seconds before the Salarian councilor seemed to give in to whatever Sparatus was asking for, and the trio turned to him, reactivating their microphones.

“Saren, welcome home. I heard your mission was successful.”
“Yes, Councilor Tevos. Allow me to summarize?”

“Please do.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: That little stick out platform where you stand in ME1 while wishing you had a good sized rock to throw? It's called the supplicant's stage, canon. Neat right? The game devs had some cool ideas sometimes. Asari, aka the token blue space babes, are not one of them, but I'll give them some dramatization points for this one. :3

A/N/N: More research for this fic lead me to some fun finds on sleeplessness. That whole 'sleep deprivation can lift your mood' thing I mentioned? That's real. About twelve hours in your brain chemistry starts to hit a magical place where the neurochemicals act like anti-depressants. How neat is that?

'Can't sleep, gotta work? Don't be sad! Keep going!'

Thanks brain. You're pretty fucking magical sometimes.

Fanfic Recommendation: Galactic New Year (5777 words) by NoisyNoiverns (Focuses on a very unique multi-shepard from NN's other works, but we get to see Saren/Nihlus in an AU where they survived ME 1... and at a New Years party!)
Various expressions of gratitude

Chapter Summary

Ankhleas has fought all his life, usually alone, but this time he seems to have a friend to help him.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Quirte - The Turian equivalent of 'mister' or 'miss', applies to both genders equally. (Quirte-an specifically refers to one who is bonded, like 'missus'.) (Credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: I.... I'm pretty sure I said I was going to slow down updating...

//author-chan looks up toward her forehead, suspiciously//

Braaaaaain. What are you dooooinng? Hmmm. No response. Ah well, here's another one, uh, on the house?

Chapter Soundtrack: Transistor Original Soundtrack - Forecast

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Only because of his optics, which some might considering to be cheating, did Saren catch the movement at the corner of his eye. Placid and fluid like a midnight ocean, Specialist Tithe emerged from the barest of shadows and into synchronous step with the stolid Spectre. Wordlessly they carried on through the late afternoon docks, heading for C-13. More importantly, for the secure location that only the inside of Saren's ship could provide.

The silver-grey torin had left the Council chambers just minutes ago, leaving off any other errands in favor of being punctual to meet the ex-Blackwatch agent. He listened around for other foot steps, wondering where Spectre Tio'fore was. From the sound of footsteps it was only the two of them as they progressed slowly, parting the sea of people to move forward. More easily than usual, he noticed.

Saren himself was enough to create a path through most crowds, between the dangerous stalk that was his usual gait and his notoriety people moved away while consciously trying not to stare, looking nervous to be near him. Ankhleas had a similar effect, but also an opposite one. The torin's liquid walk and unassuming, non-threatening body language should have made him easy to forget and difficult to notice. Instead, the crowd parted for him as well, almost as if in a daze. Distracted, unable to see him, but also unable to remain in his way.
It was a strange quirk the Spectre chalked up to the light-brown torin's infiltration history. Why or
how it worked, he did not know, but people avoided Tithe like the plague.

Odd, considering how kind-hearted and quietly jovial the torin was under the surface appearance of
black mantle and flowing cloak.

The doors of the Daedalus slid aside with a quiet pneumatic hiss as the two Turians entered the
airlock. Saren patiently waited for the decon cycle to run, and then led the way into the main cabin.
He motioned vaguely for the other torin to follow, and carried on through to the kitchens.

Once in the tiny mess hall he set water to heating and pulled out two geometrical mugs, reaching out
for the cabinet where he kept boxes of tea. Considering the Specialist was coming to him for a favor
that appeared to be of some heavy import, he opened a box of Palaveni Reserve as a gesture of
kindness. The earthy scent of the limited-quantity, high-quality blend rose into the air as he opened it
and set to making them both a cup.

Saren nodded, pleased, when Ankhleas slowly sunk down onto the nearby bench with an
appreciative hum. Now in the relatively safe area of the Spectre's kitchen, and not in the ever-
dangerous realm of public space, the old war dog allowed himself to look tired.

As would be expected of two quiet people sitting in a peaceful kitchen, the room remained near silent
as he prepared them drinks, save for the tiny clink of metal tapping ceramic and containers being
closed.

The ruthless Spectre set a mug before the Specialist, and sat down across the table from him.
Patiently, he waited for the other torin to speak.

“I made a mistake, and Riaz is going to pay for it if I can't fix it.”

“Go on.”

“We went on a mission, and I was recognized. It was against Hierarchy forces on the Gemina
project.”
“Against? I thought the Council did not wish involvement on the matter?”

“Not on the conflict there, no, but a server with certain clearances to the Hierarchy Intel Network was recently set up on site.”

“The Council wanted another back door?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

The conversation stalled for a moment before Ankhleas cleared his throat and took a drink, continuing on somewhat reluctantly.

“She set up a distraction and I went in, but someone saw me. Not a camera, but an actual person. They recognized me from my Blackwatch days. A tarin by the name of Telial Buronmaea.”

“A colleague?”

“... you could say that.”

Saren lifted a brow at the other torin, subvocals wavering lowly to ask for more details to the story, for clarity. Ankhleas palmed his face, thumbing at his jaw line with discomfort as he seemed to consider what to say.

“Ah, well... less colleague, more ex-girlfriend. She and I were on-and-off before I met Riaz's sister... E-Emarie.”

There were no mistaking those subvocals, the love and pain it caused the torin to say that name could only be from a mating bond now lost. The silver-grey torin nodded a small, encouraging nod and sat back to display his patience with the telling. He had warm tea, and theoretically all the time in the world. Specialist Tithe lifted his own drink, visibly breathing in the earthy smell before taking a sizable sip and setting it back down.
“I couldn’t believe the odds. Not just spotted, but spotted by an old flame, caught blue-handed in the middle of uploading the backdoor program. She didn’t even call out an alarm, just walked up to me looking pissed and said we’d be in touch. Two days later I got a message from her, still in-flight back to Council Space.”

“What is it that she wants for her silence?”

“Credits. More than I have. More than either of us have.”

“Ridiculous. Blackmail for currency? Not only is it excessively crude and cliché, but it risks galactic peace. For honor? I could understand. For personal gain? Disgusting.”

The light-brown Specialist ducked his head in agreement, and took a long drink of the Palaveni Reserve.

“Correct, on all fronts, and if the information leaks...”

“The Council will be forced to pretend Tio’fore is a rogue agent, and you as well as her accomplice.”

The room fell into quietude again. They both knew that rogue Spectres were hunted down without exception, and forced to face their charges, fair or not. Most did not make it back to the Citadel in one piece.

Ankhleas’ low thrumming subvocals gave away his vague hope that Saren could help avoid the end of Riaz's career, not to mention spending the rest of their lives being hunted. The stolid Palaven-born torin huffed, displeased that the weary Specialist sounded less than confident of his aid. Then again, the other torin was something of a pessimist.

Saren took a measured sip of his tea and leaned forward to begin problem solving.

“Very well. A good place to start would be the exact number of credits, and the date by which the tarin wants them.”
Ankhleas blinked at him.

“I... wasn't asking you to donate your life savings, Arterius. Telial asked for more than money than any of us make in a decade, twenty billion credits. The tarin doesn't want the money, she wants to see me sweat before she ruins us.”

“Likely, but if we can put that much on the table it may make her stupid.”

“I'm... not following you.”

“If you give her the credits, and promise more every year the secret remains thus, it will keep her quiet long enough for us to find and kill her. Then it is a simple matter to take back the funds, and all is well.”

“Convoluted... and... clever. How did you come up with that Saren? It... I don't mean to be rude, but it isn't a very Turian train of thought.”

Saren hummed, finishing the last of his tea with one hand and gesturing dismissively with the other. He eyed the bottom of the mug with regret. It really was an excellent blend.

“I spent years doing a poor job of hiding my biotics. They aren't easily controlled, and once spotted are often immediately reported to the Cabals or used as extortion. My brother and I had a Volus we used to see about these things, blackmail and the like. A friend of the family who was particularly good at rearranging circumstances to his, or our, favor.”

“You learned blackmailing tactics from a Volus?” the tan-colored Council Agent asked with the ghost of a disbelieving grin.

The silver-grey torin unevenly flicked his brow ridges up and shrugged, standing to clear away the cups. A quick rinse and both mugs were settled in the cleaning unit before he returned to the table.

“So, the question now is how many credits can you and Tio'fore come up with between the two of you?”
“Ahhh... about three billion, four and half or so if I sell my ship.”

“Three it is then. What was *Quirte* Buronmaea's due date for the transfer of funds? Drop off location or account number?”

“Thirty six days from now, on her birth date. She sent me an account number to put it into.”

“More than enough time to gather a fair few credits from allies, perhaps mining of resources as well? I can contribute up to ten point two billion myself, but hopefully less than that need be placed at risk if our other options prove fruitful. Nihlus may have a small amount to add as well, if we can get a hold of him mid-mission.”

Ankhleas stared at him, slack jawed. “Ten... point two? Where in the world did you ge- never mind, never mind. Sorry. Forgive me. I honestly don't care if it's family fortune or you've saved every single paycheck earned and sold merc-looted weapons by the crate-full. I don't care if you've been blackmailing Sparatus for years with embarrassing photos or some other crazy Volus tactic. I really, really don't. *Thank you.* Spirits. I thought we were about to spend the rest of our days running. Thank you.”

Saren snorted at the normally quiet torin's effusive, thankful babble. Technically speaking he had nearly fifteen billion in liquid assets, with another eight or nine locked within property and clan relics. The stoic torin had been saving and scavenging regularly since he'd begun to make vague plans of a research facility to carry on Dr. Qian's work without the operating limitations his ship existed under as a necessity of his job. A stable location, ongoing focus, and dedicated scientists would be able to take the research much farther than he could alone, but they'd need credits to do it. Many, many credits.

In the mean time, it was only of minimal risk to loan them out for a good cause. He would ensure they made it back to him, one way or another.

“You are welcome. Your dedication to ST&R does not deserve to be rewarded with abandonment because of political convenience. I shall do what I can to avoid such an event,” Saren grinned wryly at the much less miserable looking torin, “Besides, Nihlus would be very upset if someone attempted to kill Tio'fore. He can be very... passionate about his friendships. None of it would go well for any party involved.”

Ankhleas smiled back, humming lightly in relief. “You have a good point, Arterius. Not well at all.”
“Well then, for the sake of my erstwhile apprentice, let us check in with the Spectre Offices and see what discretionary funds can be acquired.”

Potentially never to be returned. He did have a very good use for them once this was done after all.

“I'm in. Riaz is on a solo mission that was waiting for her when we got back, so for now it's just me.”

“All the more proof that our organization would be lessened by the loss of your team, should it come to pass. First however, I would prefer to eat. Have you had lunch Tithe?”

“I... haven't eaten in two days.”

“Then that takes priority. Come, there is a café you should try. The waiters can be obnoxiously curious, but the food is very edible.”

“Ha... ha. I think cardboard would be edible at this point. I hadn't realized I'd forgot to eat. Too stressed. I'm suddenly starving though.”

Saren reached into a cupboard and grabbed a small, nutrient packed ration bar, handing it to the other torin before turning for the airlock. He would need to return his own mission to the general queue back at the Spectre Offices and finishing checking in with his on-station contacts before they really got to work, but the venture could be considered vacation at this point. He fully intended to walk away with more credits than he was risking.

There was also the matter of a certain green eyed torin. He really did believe that Nihlus was more likely to go rogue and kill anyone who went after his favorite Drell rather than allow a friend to suffer criminal accusations and death row on false charges.

He himself would... have a difficult time managing such a situation. The Council, what it stood for as well as what it did for the galaxy as a whole each and every day, meant something. He could not allow his protégé to risk tearing that down whatsoever.

Yet, Nihlus was also... Nihlus.
The last Arterius shook off the theoretical conflict of interest to examine again later, at a better time. It was not going to occur here and now, and the sandwiches at Anari's Hearth were calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeahhh, Ankhles does what I like to call 'Thane-o-mancy', where the sneaky person in question is able to hide in plain sight, disappear in crowds, and be as noticable or unnoticable as they please. Ser Krios pulls that shit on his loyalty mission, and it's just... dumb... but it's also kinda cool?

Also, if you aren't familiar what a 'mantle' is, you know the cloak-coat-thing that Vincent wears in FFVII? Mantle. It's technically any kind of overcoat/cloak, but most mantles have extra cloth near the neck, either giving it a high upper ridge, puff around the shoulders, or extra layers going over the shoulders. In Ankh's case, it's extra some extra neck-scarf action, plus the over-coat-esc layers. And a cloak. Because that's how cool he is.

Deal with it? 8D

Fanfic Recommendation: Making Spirits Bright (416 words) by YourLocalPriestess
(Another holiday fic. I have a problem... but we already knew that. FemShep/Garrus)
(Also, if you've written any holiday ficlets for Mass Effect this year, you should add them to the 2016 collection!)
I laid hand on the viscous meaning of real

Chapter Summary

Nihlus makes it back to the Citadel, and heads exactly where you'd think first. His reunion isn't cut too short, thankfully.

Chapter Notes

A/N: NSFW at work. Heh. You'll see.

Chapter Soundtrack: Zircon Feat. Jillian Goldin - Breathing You In

Weightless, the feelings all inside here, beside here
I know that if we try, you and I,
We'll find a way to fight it
Breathing you in I feel our chemicals combine
Breathing you out I feel our memories entwine
Finally, finally
Set me free

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus just about fell out of a chair when a pair of hands came down on his shoulders in his office at C-Sec, with no sight or sound of entry having occurred before hand.

“Gah!”

The recognizable laughter of Nihlus was the only reason the intruder wasn't tossed over his shoulder and thrown into a restraint hold across his desk. Then again, the carmine plated trickster probably would have enjoyed that.

“Aha-hahahaha-haaaaa!”

“Spirits, you're a brat,” the sniper grumbled while spinning around and dragging his long-absent lover into a hug. He'd dated a bit and slept around with a few people while Nihlus had been gone, but the attractions had felt empty and the connections somewhat forced. Garrus had missed the slightly-crazy merc born more than he cared to admit.
Said slightly-crazy merc born hummed happily and melted into Garrus' hold, arms looping over the shoulders pressed against his midsection.

“Meh. You like it,” the Spectre accused dismissively.

“Mmmph.”

“I'll take that as agreement. So what cha doin’?”

“Mmmph,” Garrus replied again, face still smooshed into the fabric covering Nihlus' keel.

“Ohhhhh. Hmm. Doesn't sound very important. Take an early day?”

Garrus leaned back to turn and eye the computer screen. The relatively boring data correlation he'd been doing on drug trafficking was no where near done, but not extremely critical, and... Nihlus was warm and smelled good. He tried thinking up a better excuse for taking a half day than, 'wanting to spend time with his boyfriend', but nothing even vaguely honest came to mind.

Still, the report was due by tomorrow, end-of-day...

Apparently his thoughtful troubleshooting was taking too long, because ruddy brown hands came in to tug his face straight, his jaws open, and his head back. Another tongue came in to entwine with his, curling possessively. The Detective's subvocals buzzed with attraction outside his control. Nihlus hummed back, sounding smugly pleased, and pushed in to straddle the office chair. One long, graceful leg went over the side, the other tucked into the gap between Garrus and the chairback at the Detective's deceptively thin waist.

“This...” was all the Officer managed to get out before talons dug into the hide beneath his crest, and words went tumbling off into a rumbled moan. After a moment the sniper tried to finish, getting as far as, “is a horrible idea. Someone is goin-” before ungentle mouth plates came down to bite at his neck while clever fingers went hunting for armor latches.

“Spirits. Going to walk in, Palvi. We should st-”
“I locked it, Blue,” was Nihlus' mellow, unconcerned reply as he continued to steal off the armor and clothing in his way.

Garrus half heartedly tried to marshal some sort of resistance, -really, his office at C-Sec was no place for this-, but the disastrously attractive torin in his lap denied him at every turn. It was the work of several increasingly arousing minutes before his armor was mostly gone. Soon his undershirt followed, his pants opened at the fly, and insistent fingers came in to convince his plates to spread further.

The sniper trailed his hands over the dense muscle of Nihlus' shoulders, talons grazing against the hide where it met the torin's bulky, well formed carapace. Everything about the Spectre was just so perfectly made, even the artificial plating...

Those talons sank in a little when his green eyed Spectre finished convincing his plates to spread and took his phallus in hand. Garrus' head fell back at the sensation, so long sought that his heart began to race. No one else he'd slept with had him gotten to him like this. Not even half so much.

Nihlus hopped off long enough to pull down and kick away the stylish long-pants he'd been wearing, then the wild hearted torin was right back, tugging his own rear plates open impatiently. With an amused chuff of air the Detective pulled the other torin's hands away, set them on his shoulders, and reached around to more gently convince the Spectre's anatomy to cooperate.

There wasn't any complaint. Nihlus' eyes rolled back in his head as Garrus' roughly kept talons scratched at hide and knuckles kneaded into the deep red of his back seam. It didn't take long for carmine plates to spread, revealing the feel of soft hide and the slit of a cloaca. Nihlus only let him play with the entrance for a few moments before pulling up, setting them forehead-to-forehead as he angled himself, then sinking down onto the solid, purple-flushed cock that awaited him.

The sniper watched green eyes try to stay open, to hold his gaze as they reconnected, but Nihlus veritably melted onto him. Those vivid eyes fluttered closed as he took Garrus in, his entire body shuddering when the long slide ended.

Warm, slick, and welcoming as it tightened down around him. Being inside Nihlus was reassuring like coming home after a long campaign, but as exciting as the adrenaline of live combat. He had to work to slow his breathing, to keep steady as he curled inside the other torin a bit at a time. Not ten seconds passed before the Spectre was whining about his measured pace, but Garrus had no mercy on offer for the rush the vivacious Turian wanted to make of this. Nihlus had already gotten his own way enough by seducing him in his own damn office.
“Fuck. Blue, please. More than that. You're killing me.”

“No.”

“Pleeeeassee.”

“Mm-mm.”

Nihuls growled, trying to force the situation by pulling off and scraping back down again for the friction of it. The sniper pulled at the other torin’s hips, trying to thwart him. Unfortunately leg muscle won out over the odd-angle and his arm's more limited strength.

“Damniiit.”

The Spectre laughed, light and free, grinding down and riding him breathlessly.

“Stop pretending you don't like it hard and fast sometimes.”

“Ahh, aahhhh... Yeah, well... missed you. Want more than five minutes...”

“Oh Blue, we've got all day. And Night. And maybe day again.”

“I have reports...”

“To work on later. Spirits yes, dig those talons into me. Harder.”

“Due this week, which ends tomorrow... and, ahhhhnnn.... and I'm not getting your blood in my office.”

“Pffftt. Work on them at home between fucks, -and why not?”
“Nnnn. Damnit, two conversations and sex is too difficult at once.”

“Then *fuck me*, Blue. We... will talk... ohhhhh yessss... *later.*”

Subvocals of exasperation, lust, love, and chastisement rolled out of the Turian sniper. A heavy bass rumble that Nihlus clearly appreciated, clamping down on him heavily in a way that sent zips of heady sensation up his spine, making him jerk and moan unevenly. The Detective was fairly certain the office next door, while sound proofed from his for security purposes, was hearing some suspicious murmurs through the walls... but it wasn't like he could just stop.

Technically, he did have 'orders' to fuck the torin in his lap... Spectre Authority?

Garrus thrust up, pushing the back of his chair into the edge of the desk and banking on it's stability to pump upwards. Nihlus' subvocals began to lose coherency, breaking down from complex requests and encouragement into simple demands and single-minded sexual aggression. If he hadn't been able to stop before, the riotous sounds of his Palvi's hum demanding every inch of him and swearing it was better than oxygen made sure the mountainous Detective was even more into it, utterly unable to quit.

Spirits of the deep, his mildly insane lover felt so, *so* damn good.

He hoped desperately the Spectre didn't leave again for so long, any time soon at least. Or ever. Ever would be okay too.

Nihlus' fingers dug into his under-crest, probably in retaliation for the steady-hard thrusts that were stealing his mental function. Thumbs trailed down his jaw, tugging mouth plates open to share reverie. Garrus did laps of the Spectre's soft palette, fending off the other torin's tongue and tasting every corner of pliable, wet mouth he could reach.

The sides, closer to the glands that produced the hormone cocktail which caused reverie, tasted noticeably better than other spots. He licked either side in long, laving strokes until the lanky Council Agent got sick of his preoccupation, coiling his tongue around Garrus' and tugging it back to the middle to fight and play.

He hummed amusement and pulled away entirely, tugging Nihlus' head aside to pay more attention to tawny brown neck hide. The Spectre once again melted on him, unresistant as the Detective’s cock
moved inside him, mouth plates biting down on that long graceful neck, taloned hands gripping at crest and waist.

The rumbled pleasure coming out of the lanky knife-wielder rose to a peak before cutting off abruptly as he came, body locking up as it was overcome by stimulation. Nihlus' voice broke through, cracking and uneven, after a few seconds of being locked down at the top. A bellowing moan echoed around the room so loudly it actually made Garrus blush.

Oh yeah, somebody had to have heard that one. Ahh... oops.

Lackadaisical now that he'd been sated, the Spectre rode him at a slow, delirium inducing pace, dragging Garrus up to a long and heavy coming. The Detective collapsed back into his desk chair, panting, wondering distantly if he could manage to get any work done still sheathed inside of Nihlus. On one hand, the answer was probably 'not much', on the other, pulling out of his Palvi's warm, slick insides sounded torturous after so long apart. He wanted to stay buried in the other torin for hours, at least.

A alert ping sounded off of Nihlus' Omni-tool. The trilling message tone sounded suspiciously mocking to Turian ears.

“What in the world is that?”

“Mmmph. It's my new message tone for Saren.”

“Wait, just for him?”

“Ya. I got a new 'tool, some fancy Asari made thing. It lets me pick a different tone for every contact in my address book.”

“Handy... what's mine?”

“Heh. Heh heh. Message me.”

Garrus did so, resting his arm on Nihlus' collar ridge to type a silly emoticon and send it. After a
second the Spectre's Omni-tool hummed in a low vibration-like tone that sounded distinctly aroused to Turian ears.

“Oh spirits,” he choked, laughing, “you didn't.”

Nihlus just cackled, dragging his arm up with over-exaggerated effort to open the message from Saren. In a blatant show of disregard for potentially classified data, he brought the email up right where Garrus could see, albeit backwards and upside down. They both read it through, taking in the details of Specialist Tithe and Spectre Tio'fore's situation with darkening brows.

It was a call for aid, either money or direct support, sent to a select few that the other Turians and Drell trusted within the ranks of the Council's agents.

The two torin were dressed in ten minutes or so, slow as hell by military standards. Garrus passed the report off to a colleague, asking them to finish it as a favor, and clocked out while Nihlus sent an email to C-Sec PR informing them that Officer Vakarian was being borrowed by ST&R. A reply message was sent to Saren requesting meeting coordinates or docking location.

The two handsome Turians stalked out of C-Sec with fire in their eyes, entirely forgetting they smelled clearly of sex. The front desk staff would be talking about it for weeks.

Neither of them had a ton of creds to spare, but they were both very, very good at killing.

As the pending transfer of currency flickered onto screen the air in the over-stuffed corridor of the Apien Breeze became filled with baited breath and the small noises of fidgeting. Ankhleas sat back in the pilot's chair, hands loose over the edges as he exhaled steadily, watching and waiting.

Twenty billion credits, requesting transfer to his old flame's designated account, on the day of her birth.

'Spirits, I hope this works.'
By ‘this’ the unassuming torin meant the entire plan of tracking the elusive tarin down and ending her, then taking back the money. Ankh’s normally mellow orange stare turned sharp as he met that thought and held it tight. Teli had meant something to him, once... but now her actions were threatening his *avah*.

More than that, the blackmailing tarin was endangering the only family he had left, and Riaz was just as precious to him as Emarie had been. Hell, if Drell didn't have very different concepts of what rites-sister meant after the loss of a bond-mate, he’d have long since tried to sleep with her. He already shared everything else to his name with the high-spirited woman.

She'd kept him from suicide in the wake of her own sister's death.

She continued to pull him out of depression whenever it came calling.

The woman cooked him *dinner* after they got done killing in the name of galactic peace, day in and day out.

Telial had threatened *that*, and well... there was a reason Turians were infamous for only understanding total war and *never* half measures.

In his defense, Ankhleas may have started it by trying to sneak a backdoor creating program into Hierarchy hardware, but it was for the preservation of galactic stability. A very noble goal, in his opinion. More important than her mandate of one-government security by a long shot.

‘Ah, who am I kidding? We’d both just been doing our jobs. Mine just includes far more terrifying consequences for failure, and I’d prefer to live. Between her and me, or her and Riaz? I was never going to choose in Teli's favor. That book has long since ended.’

A long fingered hand came down on his shoulder, and Ankhleas glanced up at the owner. Bright green eyes looked back, steady and clear. Supporting subvocals rumbled at him.

Another person he was blessed to know, Nihlus Kryik.

The lanky torin’s hand squeezed once with reassurance as his gaze swept up again to the screen. Everyone in the room was waiting to see if the transfer went through, but it was no surprise the empathetic knife lover had first noticed his tension. It wasn't going to be easy to kill a tarin he'd once
spent hours of every day fighting beside, but Agent Tithe really had no intention of doing anything else.

\[ Piiiiing. \]

There it was. The transfer request went through, and the funding account drained down to zero. The walls to either side of the pilot's chair lit with the orange glow of Omni-tools being activated behind him, the more electronically inclined members of their group information diving for the receiving account's location to sneak a trace program into the server. Extremely illegal, and difficult, for any other hackers to attempt.

He really couldn't have explained the fine mechanics of the hacking himself, but he trusted that Arterius and Vakarian were doing it right. The two of them team-hacking seemed almost excessive for a mere bank server.

“It's in,” came the tall sniper's voice from somewhere behind and to the left, “I'd put money on her withdrawing it all from somewhere here on Palaven, probably jumping worlds immediately after. It's what I would do.”

Ankh nodded slowly, eyes still locked on the flickering display. “Blackwatch agents have a lot of leeway, but a sudden jump in her accounts will be difficult to hide for long. Running for it or reporting the whole thing are her only realistic long term options.”

“Ha!” chimed in Riaz, her tone dripping with viciously cheerful sarcasm. “Tha bitch'll probably report, aye? Just our luck.”

“All the more reason to watch for the trace carefully.”

Saren hummed in agreement, still typing. “The moment she touches the account to check is the very same moment we can track her location and move in. With any luck we will soon know Buronmaea's point of access regardless of her next intended step. We can follow her movement from there with the digital tracking tools available to us. Act quickly enough, and truthfully her choices will not actually matter.”

Ankh continued to watch the glowing zero on the monitors as the people behind him organized their tactics for the upcoming... assassination. The group went back a forth a few times before Saren made a few executive decisions and people got moving.
For some reason Ankh immensely hoped his team was the one to catch up to Teli first. He felt as if it would be better, cleaner, if the bullet were his.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: One of my favorite authors, Recidiva, wrote a fic from one of my prompts, and I can't even fathom how good it is. It's dark and painful, it's sweet and sour, it's a world-crushed Garrus who is so intrinsically good that the galaxy seems to have it out for him personally, and a cut throat Shepard who really does care, it's plot hole fill and back story to the nth degree. I almost cried, I almost laughed, I was so overwhelmed that neither fully happened. It's like distilled fanfiction, crafted with every care, over several months, into an 8k words that hit like a freight train. When you've got some time to yourself, go read it, yeah? The link is below. Not when you've got work or school or anything in the way. This isn't a grab and go fic, heads up.

Fanfic Recommendation: The Tyfil (7930 words) by Recidiva
Revenge now loading

Chapter Summary

Specialist Tithe's old flame learns what Garrus is best at, the hard way.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Karifratrus - A Turian oath of brotherhood/sisterhood, not describing blood relations, but verbal promises that make the oath swearers as close as family. (Credit: MizDirected)

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

Madlis - A traditional Turian clan compound, estate, or house. Generally speaking, it refers to one of Palaven's massive family homes, but may be used in smaller context to refer to the metaphorical home or heart of a clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with exposition from author-chan. Last call on italics.)

Caman - The center of the home. Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area, and is considered to be the physical location of the clan's collective spirit. If under attack, it would be the most fiercely defended location within a madlis. (Credit: Mizdirected+some author-chan exposition.)

Filian – Turian closed dialect for 'sister'.

A/N: Egads duckies! Tis a 4500ish word chapter! (The damn thing just kept going. I tried to end it about four times, but there was just more story to tell. I really think you guys will like this one. I captured some real Garrusy-Garrus and Sareny-Saren. Um. I mean, a Garrus that feels like canon Garrus, and... um... You know what I mean! Garrusy-Garrus! XD)

Chapter Soundtrack: Young Heretics - Bones of a Rabbit

I've deceived the lonely
And in the dark I've grown
I now clench the fists of hands to limbs that aren't my own

You have conquered cities
And torched the mighty sea
You may keep yourself afloat but you cannot outswim me

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Saren breathed deep, the humid air of the Turian homeworld drawing down into his lungs like a cleansing panacea. It smelled of rain and metal, pollen and ozone; more alive and fresh than the supposed-same air of the Citadel, or any of the Hierarchy's colony worlds he had been to. The closest thing to it was the air in the subdeck of the Daedalus when he left the door to hydroponics open, but even that was not quite it.

A few steps away the quiet scraping of a gun case was caught by the wind and nearly swept away if not for his augmented hearing. The *ca-clunk-ca-clunk* of the case's latches being opened sounded off, loud enough to hear clearly regardless, as was the scraping of a stand being set up for sniping with a long-range stabilizer tripod. Their six person squad had separated into three teams; A, B, and C. The two of them in their sniper's nest comprised B team.

Team C had been set up to cover movement to get off world, blocking easy access to the local spaceport. Team A had been placed between the target and the nearest government buildings where Buronmaea might be able to contact Blackwatch HQ with any discretion; though that team was located far enough away from either the maybe-safehouse or the official buildings to hopefully not attract unwanted attention.

Team B was relatively close up however, set to have eyes right on the building's exit from their nest.

Garrus had shoot-on-sight and shoot-to-kill orders, no confirmation required.

Cipritine city sprawled out below the watchful Spectre and his chosen partner, the glittering heart of their people shimmering in the over-bright light of Trebia's mid-afternoon shine. White-grey arcologies stacked in elegant geometry reached for the sky, the highest going far above the cloud line. Up and down the sides of the spires trailed massive-leaved flowering vines that brought the stark angles to life with splashes of color amid marble and slate. Many of those plants were hundreds -if not thousands- of years old, cared for by countless generations of citizens. Living artwork curated with time and dedication.

It sat well with him, the lines and curves pleasing; the ancient, ever-growing, ever-improving cityscape a fitting symbol of the Turian people.

The soft pneumatic hiss of a firearm extending from it's minimized holding form was the next thing his ears caught. Normally he could hear the heartbeats and breathing of those around him, but the wild wind of the bright day kept stealing sounds away, hiding them in white noise and shifting air. It was almost peaceful, if a bit disconcerting for his more paranoid tendencies. Thankfully the only person up here besides him was Garrus, and if he could not trust his *fratrin*, then who else? Nihlus, he supposed. Saren would be hard pressed to name others though.
Regardless, they were alone and very high up. He was as safe as could be while planet-side, all things considered. The lack of hearing awareness was tolerable, possibly even pleasant, under these circumstances.

A gauntleted hand landed on his shoulder as the crackle of their encrypted coms came to life.

“This is B team. We're in position,” rumbled the torin beside him.

The reply came from Tithe, the leader of A team, which was comprised of himself and a Quarian friend of Nihlus' by the name of Adiah'Si vas Dolo. Apparently there was a personal debt between the Quarian and Nihlus and she had come along with billions of loaner credits and a gun arm to pay on it. He did not know the details, but his protégé's word that she was good people and an excellent intelligence broker had sufficed.

“Acknowledged. A team is still en route. C team, what's your status?”

“Ayy, C team is runnin' behind. Give us a few more minutes.”

“Acknowledged. B team, hold position.”

“Copy that.”

The coms died without further discussion, and his attention returned to the rich spread of cityscape beneath them and the hand still on his shoulder. They stood quietly in the mean time, distant sky car lanes the only real motion this far above ground level.

“I think can see my house from here,” Garrus chimed in after a while, tilting his crest off to the southwest. Saren's electric eyes easily picked out the small chunks of the Vakarian madlis visible through the inner-city's much taller buildings. It was a grand, sprawling structure that stretched out in fits and starts over several kilometers of lush, green land. The back of it edged up to the jungle, just visible over the lower stories of the complex.

The sniper must have cheated to have spotted it, using his visor's zoom to make out the structure having known the general location. It was far enough away that normal sight would not have been
able to focus on it. Then again, normal sight also would not be able to use the top of a skyscraper as a valid sniper's nest.

Saren's gaze rested on the other torin's visor for a moment, wondering what had gone into it. The piece certainly seemed custom made, and capable of things beyond even Spectre-grade visors. He wanted to take it apart and see how Garrus had made it, but now was obviously not the time.

For lack of anything else to do the stolid agent attempted to continue the conversation, turning toward the north west to search for his own clan home. His optics roamed around unsuccessfully for any sign of the Arterius compound. “I cannot see mine. Too many structures in the way.”

“Isn’t it really far outside the capital?”

“It is... how did you know?”

“I looked it up once, a long time ago.”

“Did you? Hmm... would you care to see it?”

The stone-grey torin's crest tilted. His icy blue eyes were extra blue in the daylight, blinking as he was caught off guard. “Sure... uh. Yes, of course. I'd really enjoy that.”

Saren turned away to hide a small smile at the Detective's awkwardness. Garrus had never been a particularly eloquent torin outside of humorous quips or technical discussion, which was amusing for someone of his intelligence level and tier. The Spectre admitted to himself that the trait was somewhat endearing.

“Considering we have sworn karifratrus, but it would be... impolitic for me to visit the Vakarian madlis, then at the very least you should know the halls of the Arterius madlis. To visit the caman at some point.”

“Absolutely. Just let me know when.”

“After this is taken care of.”
“Oh! Okay. Sooo... ah... on another note...”

“Yes?”

“Have you talked to Nihlus much since he came back from his last mission?”

“Not in particular. Why?”

“Mmmmm...” the Detective trailed off, looking outward while he put words together.

The hand on Saren's shoulder slid downward absently, settling on the curve of his lower back. The Spectre froze, feeling unsettled with the pseudo-public display, but... also somewhat enjoying the hold. He was still trying to decide what to do about it when Garrus continued speaking.

“He gave me the gist of the details. Don't be mad at him, you know how terrible he is at keeping secrets. I won't say a word, alright? You know I won't. Anyway, the take away is that while he was undercover it... sat poorly on him? It sounded like the person he was pretending to be wasn't someone he liked being. He feels strange in his own hide, and some of the self-dislike came back with him to... him. I guess. I just wanted you to know. Maybe you can spend some time with him? Might help.”

Saren's browridges furrowed. His former apprentice did go a bit far into his personas sometimes...

“I see. You make a point. It would be best for his mental health to be around familiar allies for a time if that is the case. I believe I have seen this cognitive dissonance you are describing on previous occasion. A few missions with clear cut lines of morality and uncomplex social interaction should do the trick. Simple warfare and the like.”

“That's great to hear. I was a little worried about him. It's subtle, but... I don't know. He's pretty resilient. Maybe I'm worrying for nothing.”

“You are prone to fixating on the wellness of the people in your immediate social circle.”
Garrus chuckled handsomely, nodding. “Yeah, I know. I get it from my mari, she's a worrier too.”

The Spectre clicked his tongue, eyes focused off into the distant angles of white and grey. “My brother's former second in command was like that. Abrudas concerned herself with everyone in the squad, incessantly. It was entertaining at the time, given that she is nearly your size and sharp tongued to match. A bossy worrier. Granted, Desolas' more far-flung plans often resulted in excellent success but a significant amount of bodily harm. Many of her concerns were valid.”

The Detective hummed with interest, “That actually sounds a lot like my filian, except she's six foot nothing and built like a pond reed.”

“Solana, correct?”

“Mmmhhmm.” Garrus turned to smile down at him, teasing laughter in his eyes. “How did you know?”

“I may have looked it up, a long time ago.”

“The day you met me? Maybe five minutes after you got back to the ship?”

Saren snorted softly, taking no offense at Garrus' teasing about his inherent curiosity. “Perhaps. You did mention her once as well. Named after the solanaceae family of plants, yes?”

The Vakarian clansman broke out in low bass laughter that made him feel warm through the keel, sinking effusively into his plates. It was... strange.

“That's right, I forgot! We talked about that at the bathhouse, didn't we? Ha. You know, I haven't been back there in a long time. Maybe we could...”

“Visit?”

“Would you want to?”
Saren shrugged lightly. “I would not mind. Our first visit was... enjoyable.”

“Well, we'd have to take Nihlus too. He'd be sad to miss out.”

The Spectre snorted. Garrus was very transparent sometimes. “I suppose so.”

Their coms clicked on at that moment, the sound of Spectre Tio'fore's voice coming through.

“C Team here, mah friends. Sorry for tha hold up, eh? We're in position now.”

“A Team is set as well. B Team, what's the latest on the target?”

“Checking now, standby.”

The com channel went quiet as Saren brought up the complex tracking software suite they had cobbled together to find and keep a location on Buronmaea. They had crafted the entire suite with the sole purpose of catching up to the elusive tarin. It had first pinned down her starting location via the city's digital surveillance system by using the public cameras around the ground-zero location of the account access. The ATM itself had one, conveniently.

Afterward, a set of malware programs began attempting to access and infect her devices with GPS enabled spyware each time the Spectre's watch-program in the city's surveillance system caught sight of the blackmailing tarin. Whenever she was seen the tracking software had piggy backed on nearby technology that was not well firewalled to inject it's trace into anything on her person that it could, trying again each time she was spotted with any unprotected electronics nearby.

Vending machines and automatic watering systems had a surprising amount of theivale processing power and wireless connectivity. Even plain cloth shirts had small computers in them nowadays, if only to shift fibers with magnetism to actively regulate body temperature. The chances of every item carried by Buronmaea being unhackable with this kind of pervasive set up had been extremely small, and their suite had been successful within six minutes of the account being simply looked at.

It was a truly devastating group of programs, and Saren had every intention of keeping it for himself afterward. He could easily think of a dozen recent Spectre missions that would have benefited from having such an aggressive tracking suite. Time could have been saved, which mildly aggravated him, but having it now for future use balanced that. The fact that Garrus' mind and his had come together
to make the terrifying collection might also have made it of slightly sentimental value as well.

Still, the tarin was Blackwatch, thankfully many divisions removed from Garrus' sister, meaning they had only found mild success in embedding her devices with spyware. A single decent success had been all that was needed though, and the tracking program had found an in with the tarin's boots, specifically in the small computing hardware in her armor's magboots that would usually allow her to walk on a hull in zero-G. Currently, if the magnetics were activated they would simply turn back off. The hardware had become very, very compromised.

“Target remains in the suspected safehouse.”

The communication channel sounded out a round of confirmations before growing silent again. Saren set the tracking program to alert him if it's target moved more than 10 meters in any direction, and returned to waiting. He had an excellent view of the building the tarin was in, clear plans of escape should she show her face long enough for Garrus to snipe it, and the weather up here was clear and pleasant. The palm still pressed to his lower back was pleasant as well.

He decided that now would be a good time to confront the Detective about being so forward on a mission, regardless of the spare time they now had. Saren got as far as turning his head to face the mountainous sniper before discovering Garrus' attention on his mouth. He jerked back, startled. The arm snaking around his waist did not let him get far.

“Garrus,” he started, trying his standard disapproval voice that generally cowed Nihlus into better behavior. It was a no-go. The Detective hummed questioningly, icy blue eyes flickering up to his before wandering back down to his mouthplates.

“Garrus,” he tried again, more firmly as the sniper began to close in on him. When the other torin's reaction was not immediately backing off he panicked and ducked beneath the hold to gracelessly tumble away. By the time Saren was up on two feet again, Garrus was already wheezing with suppressed laughter, hand clutching his stomach.

“What is so amusing?”

“Oh, s-spirits, you just... ahaha! I know you, hehe, aren't the most physical person, ha-haha, exactly... hee, but you just panicked and fled! Hahaha! Is sharing reverie with me that terrifying?”
He did not appreciate the other torin's laughter. At all.

“I did not flee or panic-”

“You definitely panicked.”

“Or panic,” he insisted, subvocals underscoring it fervently, “I retreated from an untenable situation. Reverie, on a mission? Completely unprofessional. Nihlus has been a terrible influence on you.”

Rather than look as chastised as he should, the tall sniper grinned widely at him in an expression that was so clearly learned from his absent protégé that Saren was suddenly filled with distinct trepidation.

“Alright, alright. No reverie on missions, afterward though? I'm coming for you, Saren. Mark my words.”

“...Inappropriate discussion should also be minimized while on an away team.”

“Okay, that's fair, but... I do miss how you taste. It's been awhile, and to be fair I was mostly incoherent for a lot of my opportunities.”

Saren felt his throat flushing. What had gotten into the torin? “We can discuss this later.”

“That's fine. In the mean time, can I hold onto you again? It's freezing up here.”

Saren frowned, suspicious of the Detective's motives. “It is not that cold...”

“Check again, my biotic friend. It's thirteen point eight degrees out here. I'm pretty chilly.”

“Oh. Of course, I do run at a higher temperature... but your armor should be heating your core up to compensate.”
“It is. My torso is plenty warm, as are my limbs nearest to it. My hands and face? Not so much.”

Saren glanced indecisively at the tracking software's display, seeing that Buronmaea still had not left the room she was in.

“There cannot be much heat escaping my armor...”

Garrus hummed in disagreement and stepped slowly back up to the suspicious Spectre. When Saren did not immediately retreat the muscular torin leaned in to wrap both arms around him, hands settling loosely at his back. A cold nose pressed into pale grey neck hide, feeling pleasantly cool to the touch. His sniper sighed gustily, settling into the heat leeching hug.

“You are using the cold as an excuse,” Saren accused, nonplussed.

“Definitely.”

The Spectre snorted, but did not otherwise move away. He could not put up with overtly sexual distractions on a mission, but a simple embrace was... acceptable. For a short while.

Saren let the mountainous torin have his way for a generous ten minutes before he nudged the Detective off and took to pacing their sniper's nest while they waited. He was bored out of his skull in under thirty minutes, resorting to imagined weapons design and theoretical biotic manipulation to keep mentally engaged. Garrus watched him stalk across the available space while tucked into a corner away from the wind.

They were there for nearly five hours, all three teams patiently holding position rather than trying to infiltrate what was probably a Blackwatch safehouse. Most likely the tarin was sleeping or some such.

Suddenly the GPS tracker pinged, it's focus moving around in the depths of the building. Their coms clicked to life soon after.

“Boys, we've got us a problem.”
“Report?”

“I'm seein' a shifty sort coming from tha direction of tha spaceport, just landed a skycar nearby. She's makin' for tha buildin'.”

The coms were quiet for only a moment as Specialist Tithe considered the information.

“What do you mean by 'shifty'?”

“Oh, she's got one 'o those walks ye know? Like she's tryin' ta walk slow on purpose when really she wants ta get going.”

“Team B, can you get eyes on?”

“Working on it now,” replied Garrus calmly, sighting down his rifle for their direction. Saren glanced over every inch of visible walkway with his cybernetic sight. The tiny figures of Turians and a smattering of aliens wandered around below, a few of them female. None looked particularly suspicious.

“Tio'fore, describe the watch-target.”

“Light blue armor, aye? Her marks are a yellowish sort, looks like big thick swoopin' things, got a-”

“Found her,” rumbled Garrus beside him and over the channel, “She's on the main path, in line with the farmer's market off of three hundred and twelfth street. Via Rolos colony markings, carrying one of those new Banshee IV ARs.”

Saren followed the mental line up of the inner city market along their line of sight, and found the incoming tarin easily. The face-matching software built into the heads up display of his eyes began a quick search for her identity, using the miniature semi-complete database in his armor's computer. A match was found near-instantly.

“She is Blackwatch as well. I would advise that A team move in to intercept and hold.”
“Agreed,” came Specialist Tithe's reply, “C team take our previous position, A team moving to intercept.”

Saren watched placidly as ‘vas Dolo sauntered by looking distracted while on a fake audio-call. The Quarian woman managed to make them bump into each other while making it look fairly accidental. Any Blackwatch Agent worth their tier would be suspicious afterwards, but Nihlus' information broker seemed to play off the collision as a ditzy accident well enough. The oncoming potential-hostile made it three or four blocks closer before she started to stumble.

Ah, that was their play. Some sort of chemical agent had been spread by the Quarian in a sealed suit, passed on somehow. He watched the tarin reach for her Omni-tool, -likely to call for aid or contact Buronmaea-, but Tithe swooped in looking every inch the retired general that he was, seeming to help the unwell female who had suddenly stumbled exactly like the helpful individual that he was not.

Like a rehearsed play the tarin was corralled into a side street, disappearing from his line of sight. The silver-grey Spectre took a lean against the building's com tower, waiting for an update. It took nearly twenty minutes, and all that came over the channel was a confirmation that the approaching tarin had been confirmed as Blackwatch, and had been removed from the picture.

So, Buronmaea had decided to report the blackmail intel after all. Unfortunately for her the contact would never show...

His Omni-tool pinged not a few minutes later. Their mark was on the move, likely panicking when a given meeting time had passed by without a visit from her expected colleague. The question was if the tarin would panic and run for HQ, for off-world, or for a third unpredicted option.

“Garrus.”

“I heard it,” replied the tall sniper, faceplates to his rifle, “no movement out the front yet...”

He opened a line to their encrypted communications and was in the midst of updating the other teams when Tio'fore's voice broke into the channel.

“Side enterance! Side enterance!!”
“What? The building does not have a-”

“Hidden door, looked like a recyclin' unit! Tha bitch is comin' out now! Enterin' combat!”

“Ow, fuck! Ow!” came Nihlus' voice, more aggravated sounding than upset at some unknown injury.

His eyes narrowed, annoyed with all of the cursing and also with being nowhere near the action. He had predicted she would leave out the front, and run for the Terminus systems via the spaceport, thus making a simple snipe along a predictable path the easy end to this fiasco. The stoic torin's assumptions had proven false, and now their quarry was on the move.

Saren brought up the tracking program, watching the GPS marker shift yet being unable to do anything about it from here.

If they left now, by their time their team reached the area of engagement...

A hand tugged on the collar ring of his armor to catch his attention.

“Saren, can you get me two buildings over?”

“... what?”

The taller torin began to explain while he rapidly disassembled the rifle stand, stowed it in the gun case, and attached both it and the sniper rifle itself to the maglocks on his back. “Remember when you hopped rooftops during that gang war on the Citadel? Can you do it again, but take me with you? If we can jump two blocks that way, -see that water tower? We can get eyes on again. Hopefully.”

“Both of us? Those are two very large gaps, the buildings here are a great deal further apart than on a space station...” the Spectre paused, a vaguely risky thought occurring to him, “I have an idea. Do you trust me?”
“With my life, *fratrin.*”

“Then run with me, and when I say jump, *jump.*”

“... *That's* your plan?”

“Move!” he demanded, grabbing Garrus' arm and sprinting for the edge. The sniper looked mildly terrified but came with, eyes dilating as they picked up speed. The blue nimbus of his biotics rose around them and flared as he lit Garrus' aura, then pulled on it to fuel his own.

“JUMP!”

As one the grey-toned torin both leapt, biotically assisted inertia sending them flying toward the next skyscraper. They landed hard, hundreds of pounds of Turian and armor defying gravity to accomplish such a feat. Saren tugged his oath-brother forward, slower but still racing at a good clip. Garrus let out a whoop, *-somewhere between excitement and terror-* as they sprinted across the much wider building's roof. Again they reached the edge, and again he demanded the other torin jump.

Gratifyingly the Detective leapt on command a second time, trusting his skill as promised. This jump was shorter, but required them to go up several stories to make the rooftop once more. They made it, coming down much softer but nearly going too far.

“Spirits! You did it!”

“Eyes on Vakarian!”

“Yes sir!” replied the adrenaline filled C-Sec Officer automatically, sliding into place and re-expanding his Viper.

“I have eyes on...” Garrus informed them through coms. Saren watched the Detective take a deep breathing as he sighted in. The Spectre's gaze turned out to refocus on the combat zone. It was a side street, on an unpopulated and relatively bland walkway, far from any of the more popular manicured greenery or decorative front entrances. It was no wonder there was a clandestine side entrance here, the location was perfect for it.
“Taking the shot.”

Far, far below them and nearly a kilometer away Nihlus was pinned down behind an air conditioning unit and Tio'fore was dodging gunfire like a ballerina would play dodge-ball. Not making much progress at winning, but definitely not getting hit either. With the crystal clear long-range sight only had by those with inorganic optics, Saren watched the micro-gram slug of the heavily re-modified viper crash into Buronmaea’s shields at the dead center of the tarin's forehead. It was followed by two more shots, each near perfect. The second was accompanied by Nihlus' return fire, crashing her shield generator. The third took the light from her eyes.

“Scoped and dropped!”

Only a heartbeat passed before Tithe was on the line, “Acknowledged. Confirm the kill?”

“Got tha bitch!” crowed Tio'fore triumphantly.

“Understood. All teams head for the rendezvous point.”

The channel filled with accepting, positive sounding chatter for a brief moment before it became quiet again as each team set to pull out.

Saren looked on for a moment, inexpressibly proud of his fratin's good aim, watching as Nihlus moved in to dump small spills of acid onto the tarin in key places to destroy observation devices. His protégé checked for a grey box and a few other things before calling it good and disappearing off with Tio'fore in tow. Nodding approval he turned back to Garrus.

“Well done, let us go.”

Hopefully the former Blackwatch Agent had not left anything incriminating behind in the safe house, nor information to be delivered on a dead-person's switch. Only time would tell.

The body of Telial Buronmaea was left in the street like so much refuse, all camera footage of her demise preemptively destroyed. Cipritine Security would be looking for clues for weeks before finally settling the file into a cold-case server.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: You might remember Adiah from Nihlus' trip to Dolo Station forever ago. Just in case anyone missed this little detail, it was Adiah's intel tip that lead Nihlus to the trap that got him captured and tortured. I don't know what all happened there, but I'm guessing after he was well again in mind and body he went to visit and made sure she hadn't intentionally betrayed him. Obviously she didn't, sweetheart that she is, and was horrified to find out what had come of her intel. They made up, had lots of kinky sex, and she left him with promises of making it up to him. When credits came into the picture for this 'mission', you can imagine he thought of his very rich Quarian friend who has her own luxurious and spacious clean room suite on a space station, and owed him one.

Nihlus purposefully didn't tell Saren a thing about her involvement in his capture. That torin isn't exactly known for forgiveness.

Still, she put in a solid 5 billion credits as risked capitol for Nihlus' friends. Miss vas Dolo really was horrified, both professionally and personally, that her intel had nearly killed him, and had left him with so many invisible scars. So, she also came as an onsite consultant for the live assassination.

(I had no idea where to put all this except author's notes. XD It doesn't really fit anywhere else, but it still matters sorta...)

A/N: Today's Fanfic Recommendation isn't a story! It's a Turian snap-chat prank picture-story! (I am not fucking kidding. No really. This is a thing.) Younger Nihlus plays a prank on Saren during his Spectre training. It involves pie. Enjoy!

Fanfic Recommendation: #Nihlusthevirus (10 frames) by Danceswithturians
Chapter Summary

A few snippets of the lives and times of yet another crew member.

Chapter Notes

A/N: For the record, we're in the year 2170, making this chapter's protagonist 12 years old according to the official timeline.

Chapter Soundtrack: MØ - Don't Wanna Dance

Wander around in the city I know
Old blossom in a new born flow
Sings in my head, what a lovely tune
You know that I crave to meet you soon

The stars are shining upon my eyes
Reminding me of why I'm nice
And then, that boy, la di di da da da
Makes me wanna tear my white skin apart

I-I, I don't wanna dance with nobody
Dance with nobody, d-dance with nobody, but you
I-I, I don't wanna dance with nobody
Dance with nobody, d-dance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As they came around the mountain toward her grandfather's remote retirement home the skycar was suddenly filled with her mother's shrill scream of terror. It had been a long, long car ride full of quiet datapad games and intermittent fast food stops so the sudden noise was heart-pounding. The children in the back seats scrambled forward trying to see what was the matter, all of them pushing ahead and none of them making it. The littlest, tucked away in a car seat, started screaming just because her mother was, and the small space was deafened by it.

“Oh God, dear sweet Lord, Oh God what happened,” came the panicked rambling of her mother.

“Shit. Oh shit. Gramps!” yelled their cousin Joseph from the front seat in a pre-teen's cracking voice.

Frustrated and freaked out, Ashley Williams shoved her sisters out of the way and squished through
the seat gap to see what was happening.

On the horizon her grandfather's house was a burning blaze, the forest around it just barely far enough cleared not to be going up as well.

Ashley also started screaming.

“Sit back! Back! Ashley, calm Sarah down. Try to- ASHLEY MADELINE WILLIAMS! Calm down and help your sister!”

Shutting up, if only because she had run out of air, Ashley struggled to swallow down panic while pulling back and hugging her baby sister protectively, petting her hair to try and calm her down. It wasn't working very well.

They'd come out of the city to visit Grandpa, and it was supposed to be a fun day. They were going hunting and fishing, going to sleep over for a few days since it was summer break...

Why was the house on fire?!

On her other side Abeline was leaning forward, staring wide eyed at the blaze, catatonic while the second-youngest was crying about their grandfather.

“Gampa is okay? Gampa is okay?” Lynn repeated determinedly through sudden fountains of toddler tears, patting the back of the driver's seat for attention.

“Hold on girls! Calm down, I see him, he's okay. Daddy's out on his porch. He's okay. Oh God.”

Their mom brought the skycar down to ground level, far from the blaze, and popped the doors. The three oldest girls scrambled out, leaving baby Sarah still hiccuping in her car seat. Their mom was quickest by far, speeding across the distance before coming to an awkward, shock-faced, stumbling halt beside grandpa, his head bent as his house burned down.

“Daddy? Are you alright? What happened?”
Ash let her mom ask the questions while she slammed into his side and hugged her grandfather tight. Fairly buff twelve year old arms wrapped around his middle as she pressed her face into the red-and-black checkered flannel shirt he wore. It smelled like 'grandpa', but also like smoke. Everything smelled like smoke. Normally she liked that smell, it was the scent of camping trips and winter nights by the fireplace, but it suddenly had a new and horrible connotation.

Three more sets of child-arms wrapped around the forlorn veteran, one of his big craggy hands settling on the back of her head gently.

“Not sure yet. I went out fishing at dawn, came back to this.”

“I thought you were just burning leaves or something, I should have known it was too much smoke...”

“I'm just glad it hasn't caught on the trees.”

“Daddy... why are there so many gas cans. Are those yours...?”

“Mine? No. Rebecca, what would I do with... six-seven gas cans?”

“You think it was a-arsen?”

Grandpa was quiet for a moment, watching his retirement home go up in smoke. A lifetime of memories in photos and military relics, his scruffy couches and grandma’s old things that he'd never thrown out when she passed away... all of it slowly burning to ash.

“Might've been.”

“Oh God.”

“He had nothing to do with this sweetheart. Men and their pride did, I would bet. Men and their pride.”
“I’m so sorry, Daddy. I... just a moment, Sarah is bawling her little eyes out in the car. Let me get her.”

“Go ahead, just keep her away from all this smoke. Too much of it for her little lungs.”

Their Mom speed-walked over to the skycar and fussed over the baby for a minute, bringing her over inside the car seat, it’s mass effect safety bubble engaged to keep the air inside cleaner.

“I’m sorry about your house grandpa...” Ashley whispered into his shirt.

“Don't you worry about it, sweetheart. Just things is all. Can't take any of it with you.”

“With you where?”

“Ah well...” he started before Mom made it back to their gathering spot with Sarah in tow.

“Did you call anyone?”

“Yeah, soon as I saw the smoke trails I called the county fire department. They're a ways off though, won't be here for another twenty or so.”

“Twenty minutes!? That's forever with a fire like this! All your things...”

“Just a bunch of stuff.”

“Oh daddy...”

Ashley felt her grandfather shrug.
“Some fools seem to think that I deserve to keep paying for Shanxi. Little do they know I've got my real treasures right here,” he replied while patting her and Lynn's heads absently, “They didn't take a thing from me that really matters.”

Their mom sniffled, setting the car seat down and adding herself to the group hug. Sarah made a happy baby noise at the flickering fire, unassumingly entertained by the show it made. Grandpa huffed with weak laughter at the innocent squee. The heavy sound of it made Ashley's heart hurt more than the burning house itself, and she snuggled into the red-and-black flannel even more.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The first time Abeline Williams really knew she loved her sister was when Ashley gave a bully a black eye for spitting in her hair.

They were sitting in the principal's office, waiting for their mom to show up. It was really, really boring, -and the secretary kept giving them disapproving looks-, but she didn't actually care. Steven Pritchard had been picking on her for the whole year, and she'd tried telling adults about it numerous times. They kept telling Steven to be nice and her to be nice back.

Apparently 'being nice' would fix everything.

Steven was one of those kids who thought gross stuff was hilarious, and he made a point to do disgusting things to the most hygienic people in class all the time. He'd licked, -licked-, Michael Drummer's face the other day. He'd put boogers in Aimee Takahashi's datapad case. He'd rubbed his backside all over the drawing board to erase it when the teacher had stepped out to talk to a visitor mid-lesson last week.

Abeline was certain there was something wrong with that kid's head, and she was sick of it. Sick of being targeted because she was a very girly-girl who didn't like gross stuff, and sick of watching others have to deal with his disgusting habits. She hadn't known what to do about it though.

It hadn't occurred to her to punch him.

At lunch break today when Steven Pritchard had leaned over her shoulder at a table to spit in her hair
it had apparently been Ash's first choice. The immediate sound of it connecting had been pretty scary, since their whole family had in utero augs that made them stronger and faster than average, and she'd been worried that her sister had really hurt him, but... the wailing sounds of remorse had been so very satisfying.

She bet that he'd knock it off with the boogers and spitting, for a little while at least. It was a shame that Ashley was two grades ahead of her. Having a permanent bodyguard in class would have solved so many problems.

Their mother showed up eventually, though it took her three grueling hours to get out of work and make it. The secretary got ahold of the principal to inform him that she'd arrived, and ushered the three of them into a meeting room to wait.

“Well?” their mom asked with a displeased expression. Abeline rushed to get her side of the story out before Mr. Graper showed up to talk about how they all needed to be nice to each other.

“Steven Pritchard leaned over me at lunch and spit in my hair, Ash punched him because that's gross and he still won't stop picking on me. I asked him nicely last month or whatever, I really did. He won't leave me alone.”

Of course, Ashley had something to say as well.

“That Steven kid keeps doing freaky stuff to Abby. I warned him to knock it off.”

Their mom eyed them both with consideration. It hadn't been the first time she'd heard Steven Pritchard's name in conjunction with problems at school. Before the conversation had a chance to continue their principal walked in with a dour expression.

“Mrs. Williams, a pleasure to see you again despite the circumstances.”

Their mother straightened her shoulders and crossed her arms akimbo in what the Williams girls recognized as her battle stance. They shared a glance and as one stepped back a bit. Mr. Graper blinked at the strangely coordinated motion.

“A pleasure to see you as well, Mr. Graper, despite that you have failed to solve the problem of Steven Pritchard's behavior.”
“Well now, I believe that-”

“I don't particularly care what you believe, good sir. The fact of the matter is that you have allowed bullying to continue unchecked in your establishment. My daughters are being forced to resort to barbaric tactics to defend themselves because you and your staff are not keeping them safe.”

“Mrs. Williams your girls are perfectly safe-”

“What a crock! If they were safe from harassment, from physical harassment, this would never have happened! Has Ashley been taken to the nurse to see if her hand is okay? Has Abeline's hair been cleaned? What if he has a communicable disease? The child certainly acts feral enough. Oh! She hasn't! See this muck in her hair? Disgusting! This is a health concern! What has this school come to?!”

Mr. Graper looked befuddled by their mom's overdramatic assault. Abeline almost felt bad for him.

Their principal managed to get out, “I understand your concern-” before the next wave came at him, the Williams family wit turned to expressing the situation with words and terms that were devastatingly biased, but also not exactly untrue. Of course, the final salvo came with a declaration of taking the situation to the school board and the local news.

Abeline hadn't seen anyone turn purple in the face before. It was very strange looking.

“I would say that you are overreacting, Mrs Wil-”

“Overreacting! This is why the situation has devolved to the point of physical harassment and health concerns! This is-”

It went on like that for a while, the Williams sisters standing silently, carefully not drawing attention to themselves.

Abeline glanced over at Ashley, who looked like she was ready for whatever punishment or praise that came, and smiled. She didn't have half of Ash's self confidence, and sometimes the tomboy got on her nerves for being so obnoxiously straightforward, but today she was really glad they were
sisters. It had come in pretty... handy.

She had to stifle a giggle from the silly, accidental pun. Their mom was still going off on the principal, and it seemed like a good idea to keep avoiding notice for the time being.


“Ugggh, pork chops again?”

“Sorry kiddo, only thing in the fridge.”

Abeline pantomimed gagging motions in protest, making Maggy chuckle. She was getting paid pretty well to be their live-in baby sitter for two weeks while their parent's schedules conflicted. It was a pretty sweet gig, and the girls were actually rather lovable characters. Not much trouble, and entertainingly colorful mini-people.

“When is Mom getting home?”

“Not till next week, the conference doesn't wind down till the weekend, and then she's got a meeting in Houston.”

“No new groceries till next week?!?” Abeline squeaked out with dismay, leaning one hand on a counter top to hold herself up, the other draped dramatically over her forehead as if she were going to faint. “Say it isn't so!”

Their babysitter snorted, grinning wryly. “I'll call and ask her if I can order out on the credit card for tomorrow. We've got plenty of pork chops to last though.”

The precocious ten year old sighed heavily, making Maggy laugh despite herself. The four sisters were a big bunch of whiners when it came to picky eating. They'd find a way to complain about caviar and sparkling fruit water delivered by fairies.

“Oh God yes, please do. Who buys all one kind of meat at the store? Next time she goes shopping I'm coming with.”
“If she goes when you aren't at school.”

“Well, yeah... hopefully?”

“Speaking of school, do you know where Ashley is? She's usually back by now.”

“After school weightlifting program.”

“Weightlifting?! She's twelve!”

Abeline shrugged and helped little Lynn fumble up into her chair at the table.

“Ash is into that kind of thing. She wants to join the military like Great Grandma, Grandpa, and Dad.”

Maggy frowned thoughtfully. She didn't like the idea of any of these little munchkins being suited up with armor and guns, then shipped out to boot camp. How could Mrs. Williams encourage it? Their Dad was never home because he was enlisted...

“Do you know why she wants to? It's not like we're at war or anything anymore...”

“I dunno. Sis is weird. Good at punching people though.”

“Wait... what?”

“Darvy-babe? Did you leave this gun magazine here?”
Darvy Williams leaned into view of the living room looking bemused while continuing to stir the spaghetti sauce diligently. His wife was holding up an advert datapad from a popular gun catalog, waving it back and forth with a raised eyebrow.

“Gun magazine? I toss those in the recycler as soon as they come. I can get military grade hardware on base, why would I order from a magazine?”

His wife frowned and brought the datapad down to look at it again. After a moment, the light of comprehension lit in her caramel eyes.

“Aha... I think I see now.”

“Yeeees?”

“Take a look,” she said while walking closer to set it on the counter top. He continued to stir while taking a peek. The active page on the e-magazine was a middle-ground model in terms of price, just barely civilian grade, with low recoil and decent aim. Compact, and light.

It was also pink.

It was also less than a month to Christmas.

“Aha.”

“Mmmhm,” they said, in the way parents always seem to communicate without actual words.

“I don't know if she's old enough...”

“I know twelve seems young to own a weapon, but she's been out hunting with your Dad how many times? She knows her gun safety. I watched her help take down that buck last season. Clean shot, careful body mechanics.”

“Hmmm...”
“It isn't like we can't put a lock on the case and set it up in a closet when it isn't time to take it to the range. Better she learn the maintenance and good ownership practices now. It'll give her a leg up in basic too.”

Rebecca looked up at him soul-fully, and back down at the datapad.

“I'm not sold on the idea... but leaving out an advertisement for what she wants for Christmas shows a certain subtlety that seems very... adult, I suppose.” The last words were said with the great, sorrowful sigh of a mother whose child is growing up about two hundred years too quickly. Darvy rubbed her back to be comforting, not mentioning that he hadn't owned his own rifle till he was nearly fifteen. He had also been a lot less mature than Ashley was now.

His oldest was wise beyond her years, and that he did say aloud.

“Hmph. Yeah, she is. I blame your mother for reading the girls poetry about such heavy topics every time we fly down to Mexico to visit.”

He laughed, laying an apologetic kiss on her hair. “To be fair, most of them are love poems.”

“About love in times of warfare!”

“Well... maybe.”

“Maybe nothing. There are bombs and blood in every other piece she reads.”

“So... would being a 'star-struck for boys' pre-teen be better?”

“...Ugh, no. I'll take my little gun nut instead.”

“Ha! That's my wife.”
Rebecca grumbled some more, paging through the specs on the compact rifle. If Ashley wanted a pink gun for Christmas, she would get a pink gun for Christmas. Her oldest daughter was a hard working, responsible young woman who had more than carried her weight for the family... but Daddy and Darvy were getting the keys to the case, for now.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Changed her sister Abby's name to 'Abeline' with Abby as a nickname, because that's just a really odd name to have. An Abby is a building... Lol. Had to make up Mom, Dad, and babysitter's names, but got away with titles for Grandpa/General Williams. Also, Madeline is Ash's middle name in canon. Cute, right?

A/N/N: Between Ash and Kaidan, I generally save Ash because Kaidan in-game gives me stalker vibes. I try to mind canon that out, because he deserves better, but my first play through... well... Anyways, I like Ash as a character, but she can be kind of a glorious bitch sometimes. I didn't have any really good plot arcs for her like I did for Kaidan because her home life was normalish compared to Jump Zero. I still wanted to give every crew member their own interlude though, so I hope I did okay for her. As always, if you see any plot holes, canon errors, grammar stuff, etc, let me know! <3

A/N/N: This is not social commentary on gun rights or the right age to begin learning about firearms, oki tabi? The viewpoints here in are what I would expect of a multi-generation military family, who are probably comfortable around firearms. No going off about it in the comments, if you please. Discussion is fine, just no soap boxes! Different cultures go about weapon ownership differently, and that's okay. The only thing that really matters in the end is that we teach our kids where to draw the line in self defense, and how to be good people.

Fanfic Recommendation: Chasing the Sun (50+ frames) by Oneofthezombies aka 'Commander Hotpants' (A very sweet and somewhat sad look at Garrus/Shepard post ME3, assuming survival of both. Webcomic style! Zombies is here on Ao3, but the link is for the website that hosts the comic. Fair warning, we get some explicit xenophilia straight up, so NSFW. Many kudos for the clothesless Garrus model. #wolfwhistle)
Lost a fight against the less smart choice

Chapter Summary

For the first time in years someone besides the last Arterius walks the halls of the clan madlis, and it's very nearly more than he can handle, sanity intact.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

"Loramici intratar rekescatius" - A traditional greeting for expected guests in the TCD. It is generally followed by the formal reply, "Espectat utamici tibitias agimetran". Both are near impossible to fully translate into the trade tongue or other languages due to the intermingling of verbal and subvocal sounds that create a unique blend to every new speaking, but in general the first offers welcome to the expected guest and promises safety, the response is thankful for the expectant welcome and protection, promising good manners. (Credit: MizDirected, with completely made up translations by author-chan.)

Ylasiun - The ancient Turian version of heaven. The realm where all honorable warriors spent eternity. (Credit: MizDirected)

Caman - the center of the home. Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area, and is considered to be the physical location of the clan's collective spirit. If under attack, it would be the most fiercely defended location within a madlis. (Credit: Mizdirected+some author-chan exposition.)

A/N: Oohhhh, you guys are going to be so maaaaaaad. This one is a rollercoaster - cliff hanger (sort of) - of dooooooom. Please don't kill me duckies! (There can't be another chapter if you do?) It's pretty long at least.

Chapter Soundtrack: Take Me Away - Burman ft. Jessica Jean

Feels like a dream, so unreal.
Wanna fly me up to another place?
Give me a one-way ticket and keep the change.
Get me out, set me free from here.
Love will never die, they say.
The truth is kept in a secret place.
So can you show me where to go from here?
Come take me away.
Higher, higher.
Come take me away from here.
Saren glared at his doorway as their group walked up the long, starkly carved walkway from the landing pad. He had not thought this plan through clearly enough, -no thanks to Garrus being... distracting-, and his gizzard had slowly sunk on the ride here with a sense of trepidation growing larger the closer they came to the Arterius madlis.

His instincts were screaming that this was a bad idea, that there would be trouble.

He was already being proven right, and they were not even in the door yet. All six of them that is. The number of people was it's own bother, not that he lacked the space to host them, but that such a large number of people had not been in his home since...

Well, since Desolas had...

Furthermore, there was a Quarian and a Drell with them. How did one greet aliens visiting a clan home?

*The traditional greeting will not work, it is in the closed dialect... perhaps a translation?*

The silver-grey torin stifled a low grumble of displeasure. This conflict of hospitality was not exactly what he had pictured when inviting Garrus to his home, but he not thought it polite, or upstanding, to send his allies away immediately after the successful mission. Thus, it was either host them all, or bring his intended guest back at a later time.

He had not wanted to wait, but was already half-convinced that was a mistake. Yet, how often did he have both Garrus and Nihlus available and on Palaven? A better opportunity to see if any of his things appealed to Nihlus, or to see if Garrus liked the property, the Spectre did not think he would find.

Saren mentally sighed, resigning himself to the awkwardness. At the very least, by the end of the visit he would know if he should set his will to simply sell it all off and bulldoze the land, leaving the credits to his inheritors, or if they would enjoy what things he had to give in death.
Nihlus was sentimental... surely there was some relic he fancied? Garrus was a homeworlder, he
must have been raised to know how precious a bit of land on Palaven was, he would have been
taught the semi-sacred duty one would have to a spirit-soaked place...

This venture would pay off in information, one way or another, so he set his jaw and climbed the
short expanse of steps to the threshold.

“The halls of my ancestors are open... you have my protection,” he offered haltingly to no one in
particular while setting his hand on the bio-lock panel that acted as a key. It scanned his fingerprints
and DNA, unlocking the door after a moments pause.

The Spectre stepped up to the portal without waiting to see if anyone had heard or paid attention to
his vague, insufficient translation of the vocal and subvocal blend of words that were traditionally
offered to expected guests. They could follow quickly, or remain outside.

The grand doorway came unbolted, the massive and ancient bulkheads shifting aside as they stepped
inside. Saren stalked through the sparsely decorated reception area quickly, heading past the large
hall that sported his clan's silver and lavender tapestries which hid the lines in the stonework where
the compound's only entry could be sealed up against siege with the flick of a switch.

The patter of footsteps followed him diligently out into the open air walkway that topped the palisade
around the gardens. A few of the sets slowed there, a distinctly female hum of appreciation among
those fallen behind, turned outward toward the mostly restored green space at the front and center of
the compound. He paused to look back, catching Tio'fore holding onto one of the sculpted pillars
that supported the ceiling as she leaned out to get a better look. Of course the woman was mostly
preoccupied with the sand sculptures in the desert biome off in the distance, talking cheerfully with
Adiah'Si vas Dolo about the view.

'Drell and their sand. Hmph,' he thought with the tiniest hint of a smile, 'At least someone likes
something here. That is a start.'

He had, after his last visit to the abysmally uncared for gardens, taken the time to have contractors
restore the area, and install a series of self-sustaining machines to maintain it all as such. Most of the
wild, over-grown bushes had been trimmed back into a decently large hedge which sprang off into a
swirling maze in the far distance. Nearer to the entryway were low maintenance flowering trees and
fountains, decoratively blocking and mixed in with more practical plants that produced medicinal
leaves or edibles. A few more sections had been spaced out to accommodate various biomes that
made clever homes for useful flora appear to be attractions for visitors to simply enjoy. The desert
and swamp biomes in particular had a number of toxic and psychotropic plants that Nihlus would
likely enjoy getting his hands on for messing with in his chemistry lab.
It had cost surprisingly little compared to the credits of a few pawned rifles, and the result was worth it for the growing distraction the landscape made at that moment. Even Garrus was tilting his crest out into the sunlight to take a look, his lovely blue eyes lit up by Trebia’s radiation.

Saren spun away, and continued onward toward the guest wing. He did not particularly care to be aroused right now, and the sniper made too handsome a picture, leaning out over his garden. The Spectre was glad he had not spotted Nihlus. A grey box with perfect recall and cybernetic eyes were an intensely perfect combination of tools for a Council Agent to have in the field. Less so when faced with distracting torin in his home looking attractive and... as if they belonged.

He swallowed, the sinking anxiety returning, but he shoved it far and away, and coldly paced forward until the group caught up.

The palisade-top promenade turned at a corner, bringing them around another side of the gardens and closer to their destination, though the view was slightly more obscured by thicker, delicately carved grating that significantly blocked the sun from coming in. Children had once run these halls, and no Turian youngling could walk safely in sunlight until their plates hardened.

“Jeez, these musta taken a year an’ a day to make! Don’t see much stuff made intricate-like this, do ya?”

“I know, right?” came his former apprentice's voice from the inner side of the hallway. Reassured of the view he was avoiding, Saren glanced over his shoulder to see Tio'fore fingering the flowing geometry of the shading slats, her big violet eyes taking in every detail with excitement and interest. He turned back around, trying to stifle a pleased hum for her open appreciation. He was not sure other species even liked such attention to detail. Modern architecture certainly did not favor it.

"This place... ees so beautiful. I have not seen things such as this in perrson..." 'vas Dolo offered reverently, her helm's voice-light barely flickering with her softly spoken words.

Unexpectedly, a heavy gauntleted arm came around his shoulders from the other side, making him tense up until he realized it was Garrus.

Then... he was very tense.

“Espectat utamici tibitiias... agimetran, Saren.” The often spoken and formally polite phrase
whispered in his ear slid down his spine like ice. Or possibly lava. He was undecided on the matter, but was certain that Garrus did not say ‘agimetran’ with quite that amount of emphasis under normal circumstances. The silver-grey torin tilted his head in reply, forcing himself to do so as if he had not heard anything abnormal, and refrained from swallowing tellingly. Garrus would hear it from this distance.

Without warning the other shoulder was taken up by his protégé, the torin's lanky arm curving around his carapace lower than Garrus', his gloved hand settling below the far shoulder.

“So what's for dinner? I'm starving.”

Of course Nihlus would be primarily concerned with food. Though, with those long-range biotically assisted jumps... he too was getting hungry, quickly. Not to mention that Garrus had helped fuel them. His not-quite-a-biotic sniper would be hungry as well, if too polite to say so.

“I am showing everyone to their guest rooms first, and taking a quick shower myself, then I will cook.”

“You're not locking me in a guest room, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Wha! But no, why?! I wanna sleep with you.”

On his other side, Garrus started snickering. He sighed, aggrieved.

“No.”

“Why noooooot?”

“There is a suite here, just for you. Officially rooms for the Avah's protégé, but in this case it applies as there is no such other person. Also, there is not space in my room for you.”
“Are you telling me you have a giant house but a tiny bed? I don’t believe you.”

“I do not care. Regardless of the size of my bed, I meant metaphorically there is not room for you. I am not sure I would be able to rest as you bounced off the walls with such excitement as you are now.”

“Adiaahhh, he’s being mean.”

The sweetly mannered information broker giggled, hands pressed to her helm speakers. Garrus also continued to chuckle uncontrollably, attempting to choke it off, but failing every few seconds.

"Are you perhaps actually five years old? Truly Nihlus, stop whining. It is unbecoming of a Spectre."

Said Spectre continued on, undaunted.

“Can I at least hang out with you before you go to bed? I don't wanna sit in a room by myself. Can Blue come?”

“After dinner, perhaps.”

His former apprentice hummed, clearly thinking of any other angles he could come at to get his way, without getting shut down. Apparently nothing occurred to the carmine plated menace, as he trilled with agreement and let the matter go. The ease of his acquiescence really just made Saren more suspicious of his motives.

Thankfully, they came to the first room on his route.

"Miss 'vas Dolo, this room should work well for you. Inside is a fully functional clean room, accessible through the bathroom. Choice of the normal bedroom, or the clean room, is yours."

"Oh my, that ees... unexpected! Thank you."
He nodded, politely. "Assume dinner will be in an hour or so, breakfast at eight am. Simply call me if you need directions to the dining hall, or check the guest map on the computer terminal. All the rooms in this wing have a terminal with a map, and a basic VI to answer questions."

"That sounds great. Again, thank you."

Their Quarian disappeared into the room to explore, and he led the group onward, down to the next confluence of corridors, and over three hallways. The third corner was his next stop.

“Tio'fore, Tithe, this is a double suite with connected rooms. It is intended for Turian occupants, so the amenities may not be comfortable for you, Tio'fore. Take a look, if it does not suit, there is a separate room down the hall that is made for Asari which might work better. I apologize for the deficiency, the property was built before the Drell were a known species...”

“Ay, not a worry luv! I've been to Ankh's house a buncha times. Some pillows 'n squish and tha bird beds you folk like are comfy 'o plenty.”

“...right.”

Garrus' mandibles twitched with entertainment as Tio'fore flounced by and into living room of the suite.

“Espectat utamici tibitias agimetran, Arterius,” offered Tithe quietly and earnestly as he bowed slightly then passed by as well. The grateful hum behind the mellow torin's words, -and the unexpected declaration of loyalty hidden there in-, set him back a half step. The last of the Tithe clan had just sworn a quiet, unvoiced sort of alliance to his house.

Very... unexpected.

The Arterius family had not had vassal clans in living memory. The Spectre was not quite sure what to make of it.

Considering the pair's apparent happiness with the accommodations, he left the door open and moved off down the hall and around a corner. A few doors apart were two of the nicest rooms in the wing, the suite for the Avah's replacement-in-training, and those for a visiting General or Avah. The only places nicer were the rooms for bondmates to be, or visiting Primacy. The first would give
Nihlus too many ideas, and might make Garrus simply uncomfortable with the sheer awkwardness. The second would have been inappropriate on either count.

Garrus smiled at him, and disappeared into his suite without a word, closing the door with a cheerful wave. Nihlus eyed his own doorway as if it would bite him, and looked forlornly back at his former mentor.

“Nihlus...” his protégé seemed to ignore the warning in his voice, coming in close to interlock fingers behind his head, straightened elbows resting on his collar.

“Come on... please don't make me sleep by myself. I haven't... I mean... please?”

He glared lightly, arms crossed, trying to make his subvocals be quiet about how close he was to giving in to those pleading green eyes. Nihlus was disgustingly good at pouting attractively, even to a less-than-sexual individual such as himself. He gave brief thanks to the spirits that he had not been particularly attracted to the carmine plated torin while Nihlus had still been under his mentorship. That pout would have been abused, undoubtedly.

“Just, think about it okay? I'd be happy sleeping on your couch or whatever if I gotta. Just not...”

He sighed, “Alone?”

Nihlus nodded, pushing his luck and pressing their foreheads together. Saren would have shrugged him off, but something odd was pulling the younger torin's subvocals off key...

“I missed you.”

“It was not my fault that you went off on such a long mission. I did promise I would not 'avoid you for months', this was your own doing.”

“I know... just..."

"Just?"
"Had to get away from Blue."

“Garrus? …what ever for?”

His protégé hummed, despondent sounding. Perhaps their sniper had been correct in pointing out the younger torin's mood to him...

“He doesn't really know how to tell me no if I'm askin' too much. You do. I think I... take advantage of him, sometimes. A lot. Maybe,” came Nihlus' voice, softly, his subvocals flat.

Saren unwound his arms, and set a reassuring hand on the smooth spinal plates that went up the back of the other torin's neck, his thumb stroking over a rough patch of hide alongside them.

“Nihlus, listen to me.”

“... yeah?”

“Garrus... cares about you. If you ask too much, I believe he would prefer that to you not asking anything because you are absent for a long period of time.”

It was the best advice he had. He too preferred Nihlus being around, if also very needy, to him being off somewhere else instead... usually.

“You don't understand, I'm not... n-not exactly good for him.”

“Good... for him?” Saren asked, baffled.

What did being beneficial to the sniper have to do with anything? Not to mention, they had copious amounts of intercourse, and spent countless hours in frivolous, entertaining activities with each other whenever the silver-grey Spectre was observing them.
The... relationship... seemed happy?

He was very confused.

A moment of dragging miscommunication stood between them, then suddenly words began to spill out of the increasingly distraught torin, his green eyes taking on a glassy sheen.

“Yeah, I uh... he's just really tired by the time I finally leave, and every time I want sex he always says yes, anything I want he buys me and that torin won't spend money on new freaking pants for himself, and he stays up extra late to do nice things for me and... and...”

“And?”

The next words were whispered, a dreadful sort of subvocal wavering underscoring their weight.

“I think he's putting off finding a bondmate because... he likes me. Loves me. I... don't... I mean I do... but he can't...”

Nihlus' voice shut down, his subvocals dropping dead, as his faceplates plunged down into Saren's collar. He stood there, grip tight, and said no more.

Saren froze. This was... a bit more than he had expected to handle at that moment. Or ever.

What, exactly, did one say to such a confession?

He settled for humming comfortingly, and returning to rubbing his thumb along the rough patch of hide. It took Nihlus a few moments of quiet to get ahold of himself. The silver-grey torin politely ignored the wetness on his neck, while thoughts tumbled around in his head. Some of them helpful, some of them concerning, some of them useless.

Why did Nihlus cry silently? No Turian did that. Their entire species keened when upset. What had happened to his protégé that the torin developed the ability to make no noise when in such a state?
The hallway here was rather cold. He should have new rugs laid, or add heat lamps that automatically activated to a presence.

Garrus wanted to bond with Nihlus, but could not... He had thought that situation was obvious, and they had decided to get away with it while they could. What was the actual issue again?

Having this conversation a few steps from Garrus' door was both ironic, and perhaps not the best idea. They should move.

Also, Nihlus smelled wonderful. The crying, sadly, only made him smell better. The salt in the saline tears blended into to the torin's natural scent pleasantly.

Saren shook himself mentally, and pulled back from the embrace but took ahold of his protégé's arm.

“Come. You are emotionally distraught, and it is cold in this hall way. A shower to wash off the city's dust, and warm tea in the caman are in order. Food, potentially. We can problem solve later, after you are more settled.”

The glassy eyed Spectre looked at Saren vaguely like was a greater spirit, come straight from Ylasian to save him from an honorless death. The silver-grey torin swallowed at the weighted look, tugging the younger Turian along. Nihlus followed unresistingly, his breathing evening out even if his expression went chillingly blank. The trip across the grounds to the clan wing of the madlis took several minutes, but thankfully the carmine plated torin began to shake off his torpor the farther they moved away from the dreaded suite he would have slept alone in.

If his protégé was not still visibly shaken, Saren might have questioned if the confession had not been an act to get his way, but the still-drying tear tracks were too real for him to discard easily. He brought Nihlus inside his small personal suite, the same he had slept in when home since the day he was born, and tugged the other torin toward the bathroom.

Shower first, then tea, then comfort food.

Saren really had no idea how to handle the emotions of others, except for following the guidelines laid out in books and psychological texts. ‘See to their physical needs, be present, and listen to their concerns.’ He remembered verbatim from a psychology book he had read as a teenager when Desolas had been upset at failing to receive an expected tier promotion. Page sixty-seven, third paragraph down.
That was... as good as the stolid torin could come up with. He hoped it was sufficient. Would adding Garrus' presence to the equation help, or harm?

He had never regretted being sociopathic so much in his life as he did at this moment.

If the topic were not so personal, he would have called Tio'fore and Tithe to question them on the matter. Tio'fore knew Nihlus fairly well, she would know... possibly... Was it worth discussing such awkward matters with acquaintances to have a better grasp on this?

Then again, apparently Tithe was a now a vassal clan... surely they were closer than acquaintanceship?

Saren suddenly realized how stressed the situation was making him, and that he was slightly panicking. He shoved the litany of thoughts aside with a self-promise to meditate later, and began the physical action of tugging Nihlus' armor from him.

The lack of sultry or forward subvocals under the circumstances finally convinced his last niggling doubts that the tears had not, in fact, been any sort of act. It was the work of minutes, his protégé sluggishly helping, to get them undressed and into the shower.

Nihlus melted onto him, subvocals finally coming back to the constant and normal low-key hum they usually were, only mildly inexpressive. They stood in the shower, unspeaking, for a solid twenty minutes, warming up and just breathing. Saren managed to calm down the silent panic in his chest, and the younger torin worked back up to actual words.

“Saren.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

… and the panicked feeling returned.
“Just wanted you to know. I don’t love Blue any more or less. Just... love you too. Thank you for... rescuing me, I guess. I sort of fell apart there.”

“You are... welcome.”

Nihlus huffed, mostly amused with only a small edge of bitterness.

“The correct reply is 'I love you as well, oh divinely sexy and perfect protégé of mine.' Good try though. Points for being naked in the shower with me.”

Saren's left eyeridge twitched in annoyance. Mockery? Immediate vengeance was in order for that, especially after his strenuous attempt at kindness...

“There is not a thing divine about you, save for your ability to be obnoxious. That is so potent the spirits themselves must have distilled the essence of it and poured it into you at conception. Just about the only word in that statement which is accurate is 'protégé' since that cannot be rescinded.”

Carmine mandibles spread in a growing grin, the honest mischief in the expression easing the heavy bundle of worry beneath Saren's keel that he had barely noticed beside the anxiety.

“Oooh, scathing. What about the love part? I'm preeeetty sure you confessed to loving me.”

“What? I have not said so...”

“Sure you did. On the Daedalus.”

“You are deluded, and misremembering.”

Nihlus' vivid eyes looked into his, the grin growing a little stiff.
“Am I? Well then. Do you?”

“... what?”

“Do you love me?”

Saren's mandibles flicked twice outside his control. He knew bringing anyone home was a terrible idea. Unprepared. He felt... unprepared.

“Just a yes or no would be alright. I won't be mad if you say no. I know you're weird in the head, and I wouldn't hold it against you. For the record, it wouldn't change how I feel. At all.”

The silver-grey torin scoffed, “The term you are looking for is 'sociopathic', not 'weird in the head'. Do not be so carelessly offensive.”

Nihlus just kept watching him, the warm shower water filling their collars and running tiny rivers down their very different, contrasting hides. Saren looked off to the side, then back. Green eyes continued to watch, waiting. One more swallow, -the last of the day, he promised himself-, and he managed to offer,

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“I am fond of you.”

“Say it for me. Please. Just one time. I need it right now.”

He forced himself not to stall with another swallow or sideways look. Whatever one wanted to call what he felt... it was one of the strongest, deepest rooted things that had ever reached the desolate place where his emotions were supposed to be. Where grief, rage, and passion were supposed to have lived in him since he had first taken a breath. It was usually a colorless place, but Nihlus...
At the very least, he knew what his protégé wanted to hear.

“I do... love you.”

Green eyes shuttered, a heavy sigh of relief leaving the green-eyed torin like a massive burden finally dropped. Long, deceptively thin arms enclosed him in a tight embrace as a tongue came searching his mouth plates for entrance. They had shared reverie enough while he had been using it as a bribe for PT that the motion was familiar, the acceptance easy.

Long licks warmed the inner side of his mandibles. Strong fingers that played with knives like a magician at card tricks dug at his fringe, while talons curled against his waist, scraping at hide rough and enticingly. His subvocals tumbled out of control in time with, -in harmony even-, the rising vibrations from the keel slanted against his own. Saren did not even realize how long they had been at each other until reminded of reality by the feeling of Nihlus' phallus coming loose of his plates and settling against his stomach.

“Spirits, Saren. You should...”

“Hmm?”

“I know you don't want...”

“... want?”

“I don't want to keep asking things... from the people I love... when they haven't been offered. I am so tired of being a leech. So please, just... go make dinner? I need some time alone in here, or else...”

The thought of 'or else' made his feet feel heavy, his breath come quick, and his plates loose.

Saren fled, rapidly.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Whoof.

A/N/N: Well, Clan Tithe is now a vassal of Clan Arterius. It's semi-canon compliant, right? Surely, a long lived and well decorated Spectre like Saren would have a clan with vassals to it, eh? And the Turians wouldn't have had a model for suzerainty with the Volus without some sort of baseline amid their own culture. Eh, eh? Someone please tell me I'm making sense in context, and not going too 'medieval' or 'regency tale' with this? XD

A/N/N/N: I'm guessing that Drell, who apparently survived on an irradiated, resource scarce, desert world... have no issues with Palaven's increased levels of radiation. At least not in the short term. Actually, I would guess that a quick hop from a spaceport door to a waiting skycar would be fine with a wide-brimmed hat and some sun screen for a human, as long as it was quick. A few hours of shade on Palaven would likely burn a human to a tomato red like a person who had fallen asleep in direct sunlight on the beach. A few days of frequent exposure would make for illness as the cellular stress started to catch up. A week or two in the wilds of Palaven without shelter would kill any species without some radiation protection. If Shepard visited Palaven, s/he'd be fine... as long they stuck to the indoors, and avoided windows. What do you guys think? This sounds physiologically reasonable, considering Turians have normalish eyeballs, and hide...

A/N/N/N/N: Aahahahaha, almost 300,000 words and Saren STILL has not had sex with anyone! You’ve read this many words with nothing more than making out! //cackles// I have no idea how long this torin is going to keep running, but the race sure has been fun to watch thus far amirite? It's like Nascar. They keep making left turns. Predictable, but fascinating. Or maybe it's brain meltingly hypnotizing. I haven't decided yet. :P

Fanfic Recommendation: Anchors (~600 words) by Milee Cosgrove
Chapter Summary

Nihlus manages to be troublesome even when not in the room, and Garrus holds onto Saren while watching him cook.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Amarceru - A type of very strong herbal tea from Palaven. Also popular in diluted forms with Quarians. (Credit: MizDirected)

Caman - the center of the home. Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area, and is considered to be the physical location of the clan's collective spirit. If under attack, it would be the most fiercely defended location within a madlis. (Credit: Mizdirected+some author-chan exposition.)

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratus. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: This is a public service announcement from author-chan: I declare that tea is universal, and all species, -yes absolutely all, even the Hanar-, have tea. Tea cups, tea kettles, condements that go in tea, different flavors of tea, stimulating tea, relaxing tea, herbal tea. TEA.

...what? Don't look at me like I'm crazy. Tea is wonderful, and logically, most species would develop drinks made from different flora. Maybe leaves. Maybe fruit. Maybe... coral?

Whatever. I'm making it a thing.

Chapter Soundtrack: Adonis – Etro Anime (I should really save this one for later, for when Garrus and Saren are at odds, but the smooth jazziness just kinda suits me today.)

I know I have such a long way to go
Until I'm fine without him
I find myself back at the very place
I thought I had left
I heard when you said
There's a power source, and it's right within me
But where and when is the key
Where and when is the key
Adonis, you really lost me this time
Adonis, but I love it, you can have me
Adonis, I was safely sleeping
Adonis, you've awakened the fool
...
I'm tired of watching love slip away
Slip right through my fingers
I thought it was stronger than that
I guess I was wrong
Cause heaven has never been closer
You show me how to reclaim it
It's bigger than my words can be
Deeper than all of the seas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Saren, wait, you're- Uh!”

One foot out of the shower room the silver-grey Spectre came to a dead halt, slowly turning to see why Nihlus had called after him. His protégé traced a finger on his own collar, tapping twice at the low point of the rim. It drew Saren's eyes like a targeting reticule.

He blinked, pushing the fixation away and trying to catch on to...

Ah. He had been about to walk out with a collar full of water.

Humming the most even-keel, mild toned thanks he could produce, Saren tipped forward slightly to pour the small ring out, and then turned to leave with significantly more composure. On the outside, at least. The vision of Nihlus, plates spread and fully erect, half collapsed against the far wall of his shower while tracing his collar line and looking back at him with those forever green eyes...

Not so much, on the inside. A sight he would not soon forget.

With a measured pace the normally stolid torin toweled off and left the bathroom entirely. Once dry, he went hunting for clothing, starting to feel more in control by the time he had pants on. The charcoal grey slacks clipped closed, and he went for a faded, royal blue tunic with batches of parallel lines running down the seams. He had the shirt half slipped on when the first tantalizing sound of arousal whispered through the trailing fog of the bathroom's door.

Oh. He had... left that open.
Saren stepped back, focused on the now-quiet doorway. His shirt was over his shoulders, but his hands remained paused at the front clasps.

“...ahhhh...”

Another step back as the louder moan escaped the bathroom. He was... entirely too aware and interested in what Nihlus was doing in there. With an almost-swallow, -he did not let it actually happen again, as self-promised-, the Spectre turned away from the door and finished closing his shirt. He smoothed the front down with a pass of his hands, and turned for his boots.

“...S-saren...”

Nevermind the boots, he left the room immediately.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Garrus took a lean at the confluence of hallways where the guest wing angled back into the main walk way. He was waiting patiently for anyone else to come out looking for company. Considering he had been about three minutes away from attempting to take apart and improve the fairly ancient computer terminal in his guest room, while checking the hardware for monitoring bugs, updating the drivers...

Yeah, he really didn't idle well.

Having avoided taking anything apart, he was hoping to catch people headed to dinner, though he was... about half an hour too early. The Detective shifted in place, checking his friends list on various games to see if anyone was logged in. Well, by anyone, he really meant Nihlus. He mostly just played multiplayer online games with his carmine plated friend, and solo games if the Spectre was otherwise preoccupied. Having no luck with that, he went through the well worn routine of checking all his various emails, from his work inbox to a few other accounts that sometimes contained messages addressed from under-the-table informants. Seeing nothing promising he sighed and rolled his neck out.

The Vakarian clansman was just about ready to go exploring alone when the distant clacking of toe talons caught his attention, the sound only audible because of the near silent conditions and echoing corridors. Curious, he wandered down the hallway toward it’s origin. Nihlus or Tithe would have had to pass him, so... he figured it was most likely Saren. The Detective hurried forward so as to not
loose the distant clicking in the maze of hallways. He didn't dismiss that it could be a groundskeeper or someone else on staff, though he really didn't expect it to be either. Each madlis usually had a small army of caretakers, but this place wasn't exactly occupied on a day to day basis, so probably not.

Garrus continued to follow, ears working while his icy blue eyes slid distractedly over the ultra-thick filigree-like carvings of the shading slats. It really was something of a shame that no one lived here regularly. The grounds and architecture were old fashioned, sure, but gorgeous. He wasn't exactly into that kind of thing, but anyone could appreciate the compound's old-time splendor.

The sniper shrugged off the hint of melancholy and quick-walked down the long, straight promenade till it angled away at the far end of the garden. The Detective caught the last flicker of a silver-grey form stalking around a corner halfway down, and with a smile he hurried to catch up. The witty Officer stepped into the kitchens just as Saren was reaching up into a cupboard for what looked to be a tea kettle.

The shorter torin was just barely tall enough to precariously tug it out of it's nook with talon tips. Out of instinct the tall sniper moved forward and pulled it down. Saren just glared at him for the trouble, arms crossed.

“I could have simply levitated in the air with my mind if I was having trouble, Garrus. I did not require aid.”

“Would you believe it was habit?”

“Habit? Explain.”

“Mmhmm. My sister is tiny, remember? Also, high strung. She drinks a calming tea blend about four times a day, and half the cupboards in our caman are too high for her to reach without a footstool. Much to her, ah... quiet rage? Hah...”

The silver-grey Spectre narrowed his electric eyes at the mountainous Turian, clicking his tongue with annoyance but eventually taking the kettle. Garrus grinned, appreciating how similar Saren's reaction was to Solana's. They both glared, but still took the item he'd gotten down for them. Their priorities included having the tea sooner rather than belaboring the point.

His attention was drawn back to the situation at hand when Saren's thick grey fingers reached into
the next cabinet to withdraw a sealed tin of *amarceru*, his favorite. The glance at him out of the corner of the Spectre's eye gave away the intentional choice, making the Detective's smile broaden. He left the other torin alone for a few moments to set the thick, muddy tea to brewing.

The silver-grey Agent did so, setting the kettle on a stand at the table, and moving to place a handful of tea mugs beside it. While it was steeping the Arterius clansman pulled a container of various tea cakes and softbuns from a stasis box, laying them out carefully on a decorative platter.

It was... a very feminine and elegant sort of activity for an infamously ruthless torin, best known for leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. Then again, Garrus had long since discovered that Saren had a precise sense of aesthetics, and preferred absolutely everything around him to be neatly arranged. From his weapon rack, to -apparently- his late night tea. It was mildly adorable, not that he would ever say so.

“Need any help?”

The Spectre tilted his head, considering it for a moment, and then indicated a negative with a tilt of his crest.

Slightly bored, Garrus watched Saren rifle through the cupboards and dig out a second kettle, with a levo tea container, of all things. The quietly engaged Spectre made a second pot of tea, and then went hunting through a stasis unit for ingredients. A variety of preserved foods came out, - surprisingly even some non-dextro choices and a few packs of sterilized food-, and the torin got to work cooking dinner.

He observed, entertained. Of course Saren had everything on hand to cook a meal for a handful of different biologies. Why wouldn't he? The torin was always prepared, for anything it seemed.

While the Spectre was sautéing root vegetables, the sniper sidled up behind him and wrapped both arms around his middle. The muttered grumbling that rolled from Saren only made Garrus grin.

“...as bad a Nihlus, can not keep hands to himself for more than five minutes..”

The Detective just hummed happily, watching the deadly Council Agent stir.

“...why did I invite anyone here. Give them a centimeter and they try for the whole kilometer, of
Garrus let him go when the torin pulled away to rinse some leafy greens, but re-wrapped himself around the grumpy Spectre as soon as he stood still again.

“... as if they think I am their personal space heater. Will put them both out the airlock and save what remains of my sanity...”

The sniper continued his low-grade subvocal purr, looking around the kitchen and observing the details of the relatively humble *caman* while his captive continued to grumble dispassionately, not really making any move to throw him off. Honestly, Garrus was honored and pleased to be here. Saren had gone from being a famous face on the vidscreen that fought and killed corruption at it's source, to well... to one of his best friends. His *fratrin*, even.

Suddenly, Garrus had the strongest urge to make sure the other torin knew what he meant to him.

“... just another reason to rethink this whole thing. Too much, too fast...”

“Ah... Saren?”

“Hmm?”

“I just wanted you to know...”

The torin in his arms froze in place, instantly unmoving. He carried on, rushing a little, hoping not to make things awkward.

“-that being here is an honor, and that being your oath brother means the world to me. I don't think I've ever been this satisfied with my life before.”

He could hear Saren start to swallow hard like he did when nervous, but the motion cut off with a flick of silver-grey mandibles.
“... not as bad.”

“Huh?”

“... nevermind. I meant: thank you, and... it is a pleasure to have you here. Forgive my mutterings, there is simply a lot on my mind. Truthfully... you are the closest thing to clan which I have. Your presence has been welcome here for some time, I just have not had the opportunity to extend an invitation.”

“Understandable. Just glad to be here now. I'm sure Nihlus is as also, and well... protégé is pretty close to family too, right?”

“... it is.”

Garrus smiled lightly, pressing the side of his fringe into Saren's, careful to avoid putting much pressure on the Valluvian horn.

“Then... it's good to be home, especially with clan.”

The shorter torin in his arms sank back into him, the talons delicately holding the latest stirring spoon falling loose around the handle.

“Yes. It is.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Whoof! Another one already duckies! Just as sweet as apple pie, isn't it? //clicks tongue// Saren and Nihlus are fireworks, but Saren and Garrus are coffee and creamer. I luv these boys. Also, 300k! Go me!

Fanfic Recommendation: The Spirit of Truth (61,169 words) by Mytel (Garrus/FemShep, EDI/Joker, other hints. Also, this is the author who wrote the 3.4 mil word 'The Spirit of Redemption' Mass Effect fanfiction series. Um, you've all read that, right? Er... I'll link that next chapter, just in case...)
A poignant assumption

Chapter Summary

Nihlus throws little loops in everyone's day, always SNAFU.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Rites-sister / Rites-brother - Turian familial term for the bonded in-laws of one's siblings, specifically those who have promised to each other in a formal Ceremony of Rites. Generally used to express a connection between in-laws who get along well, and/or consider each other family while having unmatched clan names (last names) that indicate no other legal connection.

Familia Notas - the colony markings worn by hierarchy citizens, generally organized by clan. 'Notas' for short, these semi-permanent paints have been used since ancient times to declare allegiance to one particular clan, city, or world over others.

Caman - the center of the home. Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area, and is considered to be the physical location of the clan's collective spirit. If under attack, it would be the most fiercely defended location within a madlis. (Credit: Mizdirected+some author-chan exposition.)

Mari/Pari - Turian for mother/father (Credit: Mizdirected, last call on italics and crediting.)

A/N: Reminder: Riaz's accent is mostly a Scottish brogue, but with the 'th' sound. <3

A/N/N: This chapter's first segment is based on a hilarious comment left by DancesWithTurians, about a theoretical conversation between Riaz and Ankh, as follows:

"...ok so those two are /definitely going at it."
"Mmhmm."
"So...what about Arterius?"
"Uh. Yes? Well, maybe? Um...hmm."
*squinting at Saren ensues*

I laughed so hard! Then I tried to turn it into an actual conversation, and it didn't exactly work, but something entertaining came out the other side.

Chapter Soundtrack: Zedd - Papercut (Audio) ft. Troye Sivan

Now we're staring at the ceiling
You're so pretty when you're mad
All that I can hear is breathing
Aah-aah-aah-aah-aah
And we're stuck inside the silence
In a cold cold war
We're too proud to say we're sorry
Aah-aah-aah-aah-aah
...
I find refuge in a distance
Even when we're breaking down
Can't we pause it just for one kiss
Aah-aah-aah-aah-aah
Cause I never meant to hurt you
And I know you feel the same
Still the one I run to
Aah-aah-aah-aah-aah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ankh, luv! I'm comin' in.”

Specialist Tithe snorted at the as-I'm-doing-it warning from his rites-sister that sounded off from the
door right as she threw it open. He finished pulling his shirt off and tossed it beside his armor, turning
to see what she wanted instead of heading into the bathroom for a shower like he'd intended.

“What is it?”

“A'right, whicha those three are fuckin’?”

Ankhleas about choked on air for a half a second before it smoothed out into low-tumbling laughter.
He really should be used to Riaz' manner by now, -he really should-, but her bluntness still caught
him off guard on occasion.

“Hah-haa... why, what for?”

“Wha?”
“Why are you asking me? Why does it matter?”

“Oi! Dunna be squishin’ mah gossipy bug. ’Sides, I'm lookin’ out fa Nih's barmy ass ’o course.”

He blinked, mentally sifting through the gibberish that his universal translator made of her Drellish phrases.

“Ah. Well, I think Vakarian and Kryik are, if that... matters? The Detective seems like a good person, so you shouldn't have to worry about them.”

“Aw, now, hold up! What about Saren an' Nih? They've been dancin' round each otha fa ages.”

“They might be as well?”

Riaz palmed her face with a black scaled hand, dragging down her neck frill and collar bone as well before thumping her sternum.

“Arashu protect me from Turians and their minimalist words! Particularly this one, ayy. A'right, Ankh, explain ta me how Nih can fuck two people who are... ehhhhh... colleagues, I guess? Thas not a 'lover in every port' sort of thing, now is it? They all know each otha.”

“... Yeees?” He offered uncertainly, not sure what she was asking.

“This more of tha casual sex thing your sort do? Them three boys are nah married, are they?”

“It's probably casual, considering...Well, none of them smell bonded.”

“Smell?! Ohhh, o' course smell... why not? ...freakish biology... Fine. S'fine. So then Nih is fuckin' both, and... wait are they fuckin' too? Wait, wait, are all three fuckin’?”

Her increasingly baffled questions were just becoming comical, and the normally mellow-quiet infiltrator descended into rumbling laughter at her awkward culture-clash confusion.
“I honestly don't know, Riaz. You could ask?”

The horrified expression on her face tossed him right over the edge of composure and into low bass cackling.

“I am not livin' with tha memory, forever, of askin' mah dear friend who is half mah age if-and-why he's... no.”

“Why not? You've discussed toe nail clippings with him, and on one memorable occasion I believe you also got into a lengthy discussion about both of your very strange sleeping habits. Those are far more personal topics then sex partners.”

Black scaled hands were tossed in the air with continued exasperation.

“Not even!”

Ankhleas managed to get his chuckling under control while Riaz glared at a patch of carpet, arms crossed, wearing a muddled expression of thought. He sat down on the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, and watched her expressions shift as she parsed. He felt the smile of his amusement slip into one of fondness as he observed. She really was a wonderful person, compassionate and invested in a way that was rare to see in any species. Beautiful despite her age, and only a little crazy.

A few moments passed before the Spectre looked back up, nodded sharply, and made another declaration.

“I ship it.”

“... I'm sorry, you what?”

“I ship it.”

“What, exactly, do boats have to do with anything?”
Riaz rolled her violet eyes at him, as if he were slow in the head.

“It's slang, luv. Means I think they'd..., -er... all three 'o them that is-, would be good togetha... and gods isn't that strange? A three way marriage... But if ya tossed them all on a ship togetha for tha rest 'o time, they'd get along alright. I think.”

“I... Riaz, they aren't going to get married.”

“What? Why not?!”

The orange eyed Specialist really didn't know where to begin answering that one. Arterius was barefaced. Nihlus was merc born. Garrus was a home worlder from a prominent clan. It was 'broken pipe, oil, and water' amounts of not going to happen.

“They may work out as people, but socially they can't and won't.”

“What's society got ta do with it? Luv is luv!”

He lifted a single talon, pointedly. “Turians.”

“Argghhh!”

“Now isn't that a lovely picture?” came Nihlus' cheerful voice from the kitchen's entryway. Garrus loosened his hold on the thick waist in his arms to turn and smile at the disturbance.

“You make a pretty attractive one yourself.”

“Heh. I know. Speaking of attractive things, what's that smell?”
Saren chuffed, tapping the side of a stirring spoon on the edge of a pan to knock off the excess liquid, and replied without turning, “A variety of things, but perhaps not haute cuisine. I had to work with what was available in the stasis unit, as the chilling unit and pantry are mostly empty.”

Nihlus sidled up to their stove-front cuddle and laid a hand on Garrus' shoulder while leaning in to bump his forehead lightly at the side of Saren's fringe. The silver-grey Spectre's subvocals rumbled, ninety percent tell-off and ten percent welcome.

“Do not distract me now, Nihlus. I have too many things on the heating panels to loose focus.”

“Can I distracted you later?”

“Would my answer to that change the resulting attempts whatsoever?”

Garrus watched the carmine plated torin grin broadly and shuffle off to plop down at the table. The younger Spectre sniffed at the teas, made a face, and popped right back up to hunt for something else. As he switched between cupboards, -probably looking for glasses-, the green eyed Agent hummed and trilled, muttering the lyrics to a recent pop song under his breath.

“You're in high spirits, Palvi,” Garrus couldn't help but point out.

“Eh? I'm... just relieved about that Riaz and Ankh being off the hook.”

The Detective heard the lie in his subvocals, and raised an browridge at the back of his ruddy brown head. The sniper hummed back that he was unconvinced, but didn't press it otherwise. Nihlus could have his secrets, Garrus didn't mind.

The knife-loving torin finally discovered the cups, and spun around for the water dispenser, winking at him as he passed. The C-Sec Officer shook his head, turning back to his relaxed embrace. Head tilted to avoid those long, exotic cheek blades, he angled off to the side and curled his arm around Saren's non-dominant side, putting that arm's closed fist on the Spectre's shoulder to set his chin on. Garrus still had to sink down on his heels a bit to be short enough, but getting away with this much contact was too an rare opportunity to waste. It was comfortable enough to hold for as long as he was welcome. Hours, if the other torin let him.
Their lanky merc born took a lean against a nearby counter top and sipped at his water, very obviously ogling them both.

“I suppose three would be a crowd?”

Saren rumbled, sounding like he was going for displeased, but not managing to hit the full tone of the subvocal to sell it. “Two is a crowd, but it is more effort to chase him off every few minutes then to simply accept his presence,” The Spectre's electric blue eyes swirled as he refocused on his protégé instead of the sauce pan, “and do not think for a moment I am not perfectly aware of where he picked up such habits.”

Nihlus grinned, proudly. “Ya can't blame either of us for trying so hard. You make for very... worthwhile prey. Good hunting.”

Garrus watched the Spectre's cybernetic eyes narrow dangerously. How Saren managed to look lethal while holding a kitchen spoon and dressed in faded civilian clothes, he had no clue. He rrreallly did though...

“Hunt, Nihlus? Try me. I will leave you bleeding out on the proverbial jungle floor.”

That was very obviously the wrong thing to say to the clever-dark torin, his green eyes sparkling and mandibles dipping to show just a hint of teeth. The Detective watched, somewhat entranced, as Nihlus stepped closer with half-lidded eyes.

“Would you? Really?” The fearless Spectre leaned in close, -extremely close-, gliding the bridge of his nose plate along Saren's jaw. “Really?” He asked again with a lustful, challenging flang. This time, Saren seemed almost responsive, trembling for a split second before his limbs stiffened, muscles locking up in a heart beat. It was minuscule enough that Garrus would have missed it if he weren't half wrapped around the stolid torin. The Detective straightened slowly uncertain what to make of the vaguely threatening exchange, nor his own loosened plates from the sexual undertone to it.

“You are mixing words, Nihlus. Playing with fire, as it were. Enough with the games... if you want my attention then be useful. Set out the tableware.”

The wickedness fading from his subvocals, Nihlus did just that, going back to the cupboard with bowls and flatware. Dutifully, he pulled out enough for everyone and set them out, piece by piece. The sniper leaned back on one foot and watched ruddy brown hands carefully lay out each simple
kitchen item with almost ridiculous precision. He figured there was a story behind the odd exchange, but hell if know what it was.

Meanwhile his thumbs rubbed soothing circles on Saren's shoulders, just past the edge of carapace. He kept at it until the frigidity left the Spectre's frame, a nearly silent sigh eeking out from the shorter torin's nose.

The Detective clicked his tongue in chagrin. He hadn't ever realized just how much tension was between these two. Though this felt like more than their usual back-and-forth. The former mentor and apprentice hadn't ever been so snappish with each other that he could recall... it seemed to him that both his Spectres really needed some sort of out. With Nihlus, he could easily work on that later tonight, knowing exactly where the other torin's guestroom was. With Saren?

Well, when sex wasn't the answer, any Turian who had served their civil service term could tell you that a good spar was the next best thing. Better even, sometimes.

“Hey, Saren.”

“Yes?”

“Are there training grounds here, by any chance?”

“Do not be ridiculous. Of course there are training grounds. The north wing has an entire pavilion dedicated to martial arts, along with... well, with what remains of the armory, and a VR simulation room beneath it. What sort of madlis would not have a combat practice area?”

“You know, oddly enough, the Valdera clan had to rebuild after that terrorist bombing a few years back, and their new madlis doesn't have so much as a sword rack and grassy clearing? Mari was telling me about it. We both thought it was strange but... well, I wasn't going to assume.”

“Valdera... ah, the clan with green familia notas that peak over their eyes? Hmph. Very strange indeed. They must be the non-traditional sort. Regardless... why do you ask?”

Garrus shrugged, trying for casual. “Eh, I'm a little keyed up still. Was hoping to spar if the opportunity presented itself.”
“...you are purring like a contented nesting mother.”

The Detective hid a wince at the admittedly true statement. He wasn't even slightly keyed up. “I'm in a good mood, so what? Maybe I just want to work on my CQC.”

Sigh chuffed at him, talking quietly, “You are very transparent Garrus. Social manipulation is not your gift.”

The Vakarian clansman sighed and buried his nose in Saren's neck hide. “Yeah, I know. Spar with me later?”

“...perhaps after dinner has settled, if I can escape Nihlus.”

“He could come too.”

“That... might not end well.”

“By 'well', do you mean there might be blood, or he might try everything in the book, including cheating, to pin you just to steal reverie?”

“Both, most likely. The later followed by the former.”

Garrus nuzzled at warm hide, fingertips skimming the Spectre's clothed arms. “What if I try and wear him out first?”

At that Saren actually laughed, at normal volume even, startling both of the caman's other occupants.

“Impossible, Garrus. Utterly impossible.”
A/N: Yes, more people taking showers... well I would think getting cleaned up after a back-alley gun fight would be pretty high on * my * priority list, especially before eatting dinner. :P

A/N/N: What, another one? Jeez brain... on a roll much?

Fanfic Recommendation: The Spirit of Redemption (3,404,794 words) by Myetel (Garrus/FemShep, many others. Massive universe expansion, with writing that expands amazingly as they go. There are some really, really good chapters in there.)
Falling to pieces, guiltlessly

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is not okay. He tries really hard to be though, so give him some credit. Saren and Garrus spar.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Torini – TCD. Plural form of 'torin' (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: I have 10 things I should be doing. Instead: I am writing this. I regret nothing.

Chapter Soundtrack: David Guetta - Titanium ft. Sia (I love this music video, so much. I feel like it could have so easily been a little human Saren... just an odd little boy who doesn't understand so many things, and fearfully they hunt him down for being different and special... right in the feels, duckies, right in the feels.)

You shout it out,  
But I can't hear a word you say  
I'm talking loud, not saying much  
I'm criticized but all your bullets ricochet  
Shoot me down, but I get up  

I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose  
Fire away, fire away  
Ricochet, you take your aim  
Fire away, fire away  
You shoot me down but I won't fall  
I am titanium

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus held a digging grip on his arms, back pressed to the wall, talons scoring into hide. His breathing was forcibly deep and slow, green eyes screwed shut.

He was... controlling himself.
He had wanted Saren for a long damn time, and for years, -literally years-, he had barely been brave enough to try and occasionally push through the grumpy bastard's massive people barrier. That thing was like the bulwark on the Primarch's panic room in the dreadnought built to protect the top tiers in the case of invasion. Made to withstand anything thrown at it, for as long as need be.

Every time he'd come on to the stolid torin the disinterest or rebuke dropped immediately on him for trying had been so painful... but every now and then he'd made a breakthrough. Like sunshine through the clouds, just the smallest glimpse of hope of been encouraging enough to keep him trying. He was sure the asshole had just been... alright, ‘pushing him away to protect himself’ was a far too gentle phrase for the brutal return fire that Saren aimed at anyone who got in his personal space, but it was the closest set of words that Nihlus could pick out to what he'd actually suffered through.

Suffered through for months of apprenticeship, and years of nanometer-by-bitter-nanometer clawing his way in. He had wanted to be the torin's lover since the moment they'd met; his friend since the first time the other Spectre had completely failed to remember he was a merc born waste of space when something related came up in conversation. Hell, the day Saren had discovered he could barely read, and had just grumbled with displeasure before adding it to a list of things to teach him...

There was no telling when Nihlus had fallen in love, but the future had looked stupidly fucking bleak, filled with years of probably-useless pining. Honestly, there had been nothing for it. His emotions might just as well have been physical chains for all that they'd latched onto his former mentor and refused to let go. He'd tried to fall out of love too, -using sex, drugs, and even fucking guaranteed-to-work Asari brain juju-, and it really, really hadn't done jack shit...

Then suddenly, like some sort of gift from the spirits, they'd run into Garrus and the sniper had broken into the vault of Saren's heart like it had been some sort of skipping-through-the-flowers day at the park.

He was pretty sure a tiny part of him would forever resent the Detective for it too... but another, larger part was so damn grateful because Blue had seen him stuck at the entrance to the park, taken his hand, and walked him through the tricky underbrush.

Fuck, who did that? Who saw the competition struggling and helped them back up onto their feet? Blue was such... a fucking perfect... good... torin...

Could anyone blame him for falling in love with the sniper too? Really, anyone?
Now they were both deep in the woods together, waiting for Saren to come out of the damn trees and please, dear spirits, finally have sex with him. Them. Finally just... open up.

It hadn't happened yet, but there was little doubt in Nihlus' mind that the highly augmented torin wanted him, and that it was going to happen eventually. Ohh-h-h yess. Those subvocals had been...

He didn't have words for how much it had killed him to give Saren the space to leave that shower room, but if being around Garrus and Saren simultaneously had taught him anything, it was that Blue's slow, mellow, push-and-pull, -but most importantly patient-, way of handling interaction with his fellow Spectre was an integral part of the magic. What made the walls fall down.

So... slow.

He could do slow. Sort of. Not really.

He was trying?

Nihlus rolled out his neck, kept breathing, and checked to see if he could let go of one arm...

Mmmmmnnope. Give it a centimeter of movement and the limb just went right for the door panel. Back to holding onto himself it was.

It was fine, he could do this. He could control himself.

At least he wasn't hungry or thirsty. Dinner had been fun, lots of low key chatter and cracking jokes with Riaz. He'd heard Blue ask Saren to spar with him though, and the reason was obvious. Saren had passed the green line of tension with him, -his fault, fuck, why was he so bad at this-, and shot straight into the yellow. Garrus was trying to bring the brilliant, socially retarded Spectre's stress levels back into that green sweet spot where they could push and it had a small chance of meeting something besides being shoved forcibly back.

Or before it red lined.

So... the food had disappeared, the discussions winded down, then Nihlus gave them both a quick
nuzzle on the fringe and turned for the door. He'd yawned and waved goodnight as he wandered off to the guestrooms, said he was going to take a nap and would come bug them all later. Riaz would crash out for five or six hours for her night cycle. Adiah could be gone for nine or more. With their unhurried schedule Nihlus knew he'd have plenty of time to try and push a little later on, before they left Palaven even... if Garrus had the time to chill the electric eyed torin out.

He just had to stay here, and give them some space...

Fuck, he hated this quiet, elegantly decorated cell.

It was worse knowing what was happening at this very moment. Blue and Lunar had moved off to the north wing to spar. They were probably super into it right now; most likely shirtless too. Saren ran hot, being a biotic, and Garrus tossed his top off at the drop of a hat, if only to remove the easy handholds the cloth made. The silver-grey Spectre would be wearing classically styled pants that sat modestly high on the waist. Blue favored the low-maintenance stuff that used the hip crest as a catch against gravity...

His hand used the distraction to make a break for the door panel, but he checked it's movement after a half second... and didn't that just sound crazy with a capital C? He was pretty sure limbs were supposed to do what you told them, damnit.

'Sit your ass down, Kryik. You're napping, remember? Ya can't just show up and watch. Give Blue some time to do the thing...'

Nihlus returned to clutching his arms, eyes closed tight and breathing paced. He was determined not to be a leech. Not to push too hard and fast. To stop being so selfish and needy. Half the reason he'd grown to hate being Amalos was because the bitch was so high maintenance...

The merc born Spectre was determined to be worthy of the torini he loved, -strong enough, deserving enough-, if it killed him... and then?

Then he was going to have them, both of them, and keep 'em too.

Somehow.
The almost-playful twitch in his sparring partner's left mandible told Garrus everything he needed to know about how well received this idea was.

Saren was having fun.

Granted, the Detective was bleeding in three places and had a nasty plate-crack in his left forearm near the elbow. Still, it was entirely worth it to see the normally stoic torin on the constant cusp of a smile. A real one even, not the sarcastic, brittle, or rehearsed spreading of mandibles that was usually the most expressive the other torin got.

This had been a great idea. Now if only he could catch the ridiculously mobile Spectre in a hold or something. The other torin was fast.

With both parties being highly augmented, -though Garrus' were almost entirely organic improvements while Saren's were heavily mechanical-, they'd started out lightly, testing the waters. The silver-grey Agent had watched him spar with Nihlus several times, a weighty advantage since he'd had to pull out a lot of his best tricks to keep even with the lanky, fluid Spectre.

The Detective had a secret weapon though.

He'd watched just about every bit of captured footage available to the public of the infamous Spectre Arterius, back when following his exploits had just been a hobby. Piecing that together with their combat experiences, the sniper was managing to give the other torin a run for his money in the ring. He wasn't going down easy, that was for sure.

They were warmed up now, each having gotten a few points for tossing one another out of the square line that marked the edge of the playing field a time or three. The fight was starting to pick up as they felt each other out, and Garrus wasn't sure if the pounding in his chest was entirely from exertion or not.

He was having a lot of fun too.

The electric eyed torin chose that moment to burst forward, juoking left at the last second to make a grab for his collar on the weaker, slightly injured side. With a quick shift of his feet Garrus took himself just out of range, using the turning motion to put energy into an elbow strike. The spines on his elbow plates wouldn't particularly enjoy being shoved against something, but sacrifices had to be
made if he wanted to take the tiny opening.

Of course, it was a trap.

His elbow whiffed past, missing by centimeters, and the footwork Saren had stepped into in order to keep a good core balance suddenly became an odd sort of leg sweep. A heel shoved the Officer's spur sideways, destabilizing him enough that a tug on his arm in the wrong way sent him tumbling.

The mountainous sniper's instincts encouraged him to roll with it, and he did, but mid fall the torin also managed to push himself sideways. The motion was so fast and circuitous that it made his gizzard complain about unexpected g forces in the form of a brief urge to vomit, but it paid off by tumbling him in a circle around to the Spectre's undefended back.

Still feeling off from the make-shift recovery, he jumped forward, trying to take the advantage while he had it. Meanwhile the stocky Agent had reset his stance and was angling to grab him as he came in, and toss the tall Officer over his shoulder in a throw. It would have worked too, sending Garrus flying out of the ring and possibly far enough to get caught in the eezo-powered gravitic safety net. Instead, the sniper got a hold on Saren's collar and underarm just as the Spectre tossed him, sending them both rolling across the floor.

Garrus, being less dense and longer limbed, won the struggle to end up on top. He was pretty pleased about it too, grinning like a fool by the time they came to a full stop, eye to eye. While he could have ground the loss in with teasing, or pressed for the silver-grey torin's verbal submission, instead the sniper laughed and pressed their faces together briefly, letting go of his hold to set forearms down on either side of the Spectre's head. Saren, the poor torin, had his chin tucked into his craggy, silvery collar to keep from bashing horn tips into the ground.

“Damn you're a tough opponent! That was a blast.”

“You are no slouch yourself. Also, language, please.”

“Sorry. Want to go again?”

“That would require you to get off of me first.”

“Ooof, really? Sounds like work.”
“What I meant to say was, 'Well done, now get off.'”

“I don't know... I'm pretty comfy.”

“You have ten seconds before I toss you off with biotics. Quit acting like Nihlus.”

As grouchy as the words were, the Detective could still hear the nearly-upbeat hum in the other torin's subvocals. He laughed, abusing his access for just a second to nuzzle at fringe before popping up and offering Saren a hand. Gratifyingly, the Spectre took it and let Garrus pull him up.

“Water first, a short rest, and we will return to it. For the moment, I want you to explain the leg strike you did earlier.”

“The one with the side kick?”

“Yes,” the silver-grey Council Agent replied, tossing a water bottle and towel at him from the refreshment supply bar in the nearest corner. The C-Sec Officer laid out the move in words while idly looking around the area. It was a massive, open air pavilion made of dark toned steel and clear, crystal-looking polyplastic. The space had fourteen sparring rings, a row of stadium seating, several rows of weapon racks, and a horde of exercise equipment that ran along the far side behind a half-wall. There were stairs that led downward, presumably to the underground combat simulator, and another set went upward to what appeared to be an observation deck and running track.

These were some sweet digs, if a bit lonesomely empty. He was glad they'd come to make use of them.

“Come, let us try another round.”

“Sounds good.”

Of course, round two might as well have been titled 'Saren pulls out all the stops and wreaks vengeance for getting pinned even once'. Garrus should have known the stoic torin's pride would bring about some sort of reprisal for the previous win, but the next several minutes of his life were a whirlwind of events he had not properly anticipated.
His speed further amplified by tiny, controlled shifts in gravity from his biotics, the coldly handsome Agent blitzed into the Detective's space fast and hard. The Spectre's lack of height, normally considered a somewhat embarrassing shortcoming in a soldier and a Turian, became a powerful asset in close quarters combat, a low center of gravity making him near impossible to lift in any direction.

Upward momentum was very difficult to pass onto another person or object when all of them was so much lower than you.

Between the eye watering speed of his movements, an OCD's sense of perfectionism and conservation of motion, those impressively tiny biotic shifts, and that low seated root stance, Saren had him on the run and fleeing for all he was worth in seconds, and kept it up like a freight train that just wouldn't stop.

Garrus was pretty quick himself, and where he didn't quite have that same masterful conservation of motion in his actions, he had great instincts for the flow of battle. Those instincts kept him just ahead of a brutally fast loss, only failing him when his body began to protest the break-neck speed of their exchanges. Turians were quick and deadly, as a rule. They were faster, stronger, and more durable then their deceptively thin limbs would have anyone believe.

What they had in speed, however, they paid for in stamina... or they were supposed to, at least. His sparring partner didn't seem to be slowing down at all.

Breathing like a bellows, the mountainous sniper powered his feet through a quick-shifting combination of steps that got him out of Saren's most recent assault. He was seriously impressed that the Spectre was still going this fast after the endless minutes of high speed strikes and blocks. Apparently, that water break had been for him, unneeded by the torin that seemed to have more long-lasting energy then should be reasonable. The skill and power on display had his blood rising and his plates shifting. Maybe he hadn't been keyed up before, but this was making it happen.

Eventually the Spectre got him, almost like clockwork, in a well executed suppression hold. Saren's legs ended up wrapped around his in just such a way as to keep the Detective from having any hope of throwing the other torin off and regaining his feet. His faceplates to the floor, Garrus went limp and hummed a tired but cheerful surrender.

The stoic torin gracefully disentangled their limbs, standing as if unbothered by the prolonged exchange, and held out a hand. The Detective looked up with an exhausted smile, but his expression stilled upon meeting Saren's piercing look. He reached up to take the proffered assist on autopilot, unable to look away. The well built Officer was mostly standing, though mildly unstable, when the swirling desire to share reverie with the incredible torin started uncoiling from his gut. It had been
building since they'd began, but the silent intensity in those electric eyes was calling it to the surface.

He took a half step forward into the silver-grey Spectre's space. The edge of his perception caught Saren's jaw dipping slightly, mouthplates parting as if he knew what Garrus was thinking, and wanted him to act on it.

It was so subtle, but the Detective hadn't seen such a positive sign of welcome to his advances ever before.

The sight of it drew the sniper slowly in and tentatively seeking entrance with mouthplates and tongue. Saren opened to him, a whisper-quiet rumble of desire leaving the Spectre's chest and vibrating into Garrus' keel. More felt then heard. He moaned lowly in return, seeking handholds for a very different reason than a minute prior. The Spectre's thick-fingered hands settled on either side of his bare waist, talon tips landing on hide with a gentleness that so poignantly contrasted their previously brutal contact.

The Spectre's touch made him feel dizzy and weak, but also, inexplicably clear minded and strong.

Or maybe that was the reverie they were sharing. An increasingly possessive tongue invaded his mouth, sliding along his with a tugging coil, doing laps of his teeth and broad licks of his palette like it was something they did all the time. One tawny brown arm curled around Saren's carapace, the other hand gripping at spinal plates by the neck with little concern for the amp ports.

Garrus' perception narrowed down to the amazing, deadly creature in his arms, face tilted down, body following the Spectre's every cue.

When Saren's tongue tugged at his, he dropped lower on his heels. When a knee nudged at his, he spread the leg aside a bit. Rough textured hands kneaded lightly at his waist, and he rumbled his enjoyment while moving and responding to the other torin's every physical cue, deliriously happy.

He was.. incredibly into it. This was just so perfect and easy.

His heart beating slower, but heavily, Garrus drifted back when the Spectre's tongue withdrew. He was pretty far gone with the generous dose of hormones having sped through his system on the waning tide of blood rush from sparring. Icy blue eyes blinked, unfocused, as a hand drew his head downward. He was confused for a moment before mouthplates began to work at his neck, drawing out another wavering groan. It felt... so good.
A tongue laved up his pulse point, from collar to fringe, and the tall sniper about melted into the floor. Saren was skilled at everything, he was convinced. Absolutely everything.

When the dangerously sharp points of actual teeth settled against his hide, he rumbled acceptance and affection, letting the Spectre's jaw rest where he could kill Garrus in an instant. The gesture asked for trust, and Saren had his, he must have known it by now.

The bite pressed down, just enough to nick, and then relaxed. The stoic torin's subvocals came back at him, a quiet sort of 'confused that you trust me, but I want it regardless' that drew a heavy sigh out of the devoted Detective. Saren's long blue-black tongue laved over the pin pricks with something vaguely reminiscent of shy and uncertain affection, stealing away the few droplets of blood that escaped before clotting augs stopped the flow. Garrus turned to nuzzle into silver-grey neck hide, nipping and licking, nudging at Valluvian horns with his fringe until he had some space.

Then he, too, set teeth to hide.

The torin in his arm went tense, suddenly motionless, subvocals nearly dropping flat. Garrus reassured him with an affectionate, steady hum. It helped, a little, but Saren's breathing started to come quick and shallow, and likely not for reasons the sniper wanted. Leaving it off as good enough, the Detective pulled delicately away from the gesture and smoothed his tongue over the points where his fangs had merely laid against hide. He nuzzled, licked, and trilled reassurance; strong hands smoothing over every soft spot of Saren's he could reach.

It was enough to pull the tension back out of the Spectre's frame, but the mood was gone. He didn't really mind though... it felt like they'd crossed a line somewhere that had needed to be passed over. With a soft smile in his mandibles, Garrus leaned far enough away to look Saren in the eyes again. The other torin's expression was calmly controlled. Not warm, but also not cold or angry. The sniper pressed their foreheads together, and waited patiently for a press back. It took a moment, but it came, a light push that made his mandibles flutter.

“You okay?”

“... you are the one who lost the match. I should be asking you that question. You are still bleeding.”

“Worth it.”
“Worth what?”

“This.”

“... ah.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm in love with how their by-play finally got flipped. This time it was Nihlus who got Saren to place he needed to be in for either of them to make progress with his people-barrier, and then Garrus who drove him over the next line. Nihlus spends the chapter so convinced he needs to let Garrus chill Saren out, when it's Nihlus' fire that drove a shard of anticipation into his fellow Spectre's limited libido. Saren's mouthplates wouldn't have parted in anticipation if not for how keyed up Nihlus had him. They work, duckies! Together, they work!

Fanfic Recommendation: Wrong Side of Heaven, Righteous Side of Hell (82810 words) by Kate_Shepard (Saren/Nihlus/FemShep. Sweet spirits, yes please.)
A definitive measure

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is bored, then in trouble. It starts sexy, and then gets weird.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Familia Notas - the colony markings worn by hierarchy citizens, generally organized by clan. 'Notas' for short, these semi-permanent paints have been used since ancient times to declare allegiance to one particular clan, city, or world over others.


It gets... really strange.

I had an idea, I ran with it, and the cognitive dissonance got so big that it all came crashing down around me. I cleaned the result up some, clipped a bit off the side, polished it all nice and pretty...

But it's still, very.... odd.

Enjoy!

Chapter Soundtrack: Project DIVA - ヴァルゴ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus had managed to not open the door and sprint toward the north wing for three hours

Three.

Spirits damned.

Hours.
He'd gotten a handle on his lust after a short while, and been able to let go of his arms and breathe normally. Then he'd taken the time to clean and maintain all of his armor sections, knives, and guns.

Next, the restless torin had spent awhile screwing around on the extra-net, bored out of his mind and completely unable to sleep. Thankfully at some point Nihlus had stumbled over a picture of... he'd forgotten what, but it had been creatively inspiring. The carmine plated Spectre had then spent another hour or so practicing *familia notas* and making some okayish looking expressionist art in a painting program.

That had been followed by a thorough checking of all his various messages, emails, and the latest Spectre intel available remotely.

His self-distractions had slowly run dry, and he was now at the point of contemplating downloading a new time-wasting 'tool game or studying some sort of useful skill. Neither seemed particularly interesting at the moment, but he desperately needed something engaging to keep him in that room...

When the chime sounded off from his guestroom door Nihlus just about spontaneously combusted in relief. A distraction of any kind was very welcome right then, and he hoped whoever was at the door came with a thousand things that needed doing, a new video game, or maybe a favor to ask... hard labor even?

Anything. Really.

The desire to hunt down either of his torin, shove them up against a wall, and steal their breath with teeth and tongue was pervasive. He would pay a lot for someone to just keep him occupied for a little while.

Nihlus hit the door panel, a cheerful grin in his mandibles.

It was Garrus at the door.

'*Oh no.*'

The mountainous torin was freshly showered, wearing low-slung pants and a forest green, unbuttoned casual shirt.
'Doomed,' the Spectre thought absently, his entire body leaning out of the portal like a tree bending with the wind. 'Not... my fault...' was the next trailing thought to flow through his mind. He slid past the threshold like a serpent, arms curling over Blue's collar while the other torin's limbs came around him in welcome. The tall sniper rumbled a greeting, leaning in to share reverie unselfishly.

The taste of Saren on the Detective's tongue made his knees go weak.

"Sweet spirits, what did I miss?"

"Mostly just me getting my ass handed to me, really."

"...aaaaand theeen?"

Garrus chuckled handsomely, nosing at his cheek in a way that made Nihlus trill giddily. Like... hallex, the designer shit even. The sniper's hormones might as well be illegal, they hit him so freakin' hard...

"Pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"I want details!"

"Ahhh... how about a reenactment instead?"

"... I love the way you think."

"You might be disappointed. It wasn't much more than-

"Shut up and show me, Blue."

"You know, I thought you were going to be sleeping..." Garrus nodded over his shoulder with an accusing grin, "Answered the door pretty quickly for being unconscious."
“Well...”

“Did you even lay down?”

“I might have sat on the bed... at one point...”

Garrus raised a browridge, questioningly.

"Ummmm... Not, really. No.”

The tall sniper snorted, walking him backwards into the suite's main room. “Come on, Palvi.”

'Come? Why certainly. Anytime, you gorgeous, ridiculously tall torin,’ was what went through his head. Out loud he hummed simple agreement and let the sniper lead him to the bedroom. The large oval platform caught him as he fell between the curtains of the ancient, classical bed. He landed in the center depression carapace-first, his legs sprawled open to make room for the Detective that would soon be between them if all went well.

“So, for this replay...” Garrus started, coming down on hands and knees to crawl over him. The stone-plated torin buried his face in the cloth of Nihlus' stomach and began slowly nuzzling his way upwards.

“Yeah?” the Spectre asked with a blissful hum.

“Do you want to be me, or Saren?”

“You,” he answered immediately, pupils dilating in arousal. He wanted to be the center of Saren's attention, even if it was pretend...

“Hmm... I suppose for the sake of realism we should spar first...”
“Spirits, no... just fast forward to the good part?”

The Detective laughed softly, finally making it up past carmine keel, and nudging his head aside to nibble at ruddy brown hide. Nihlus’ hands came up to hold the torin there, talons digging under the Officer's fringe, going right for the good spots. Instead of replying to the impatient request, Garrus laid attention on his neck for a while, making Nihlus' plates begin to shift a little more with each bite and lick. Eventually the sniper pulled away, straightening to a kneel to discard his shirt. The Spectre watched greedily as more landscape was revealed. Supple, light brown hide with smatterings of stoney scutes and scales that flowed into thicker plating. Blue was a very fine specimen.

“This has to go... yours too.”

“Very important?”

“Mmmhm. For realism.”

“I think I like this realism you speak of.”

With an amused flick of mandibles the Detective helped pull him up, and Nihlus tugged his loose, rust colored muscle shirt off in one go. They fell back to the bed as soon as it was off, and he tossed it out the triangular opening between the curtains carelessly.

“What next?”

“Let's see... I was definitely bleeding a little from the fight... Here,” Garrus drew a thumb talon in a short, shallow gouge along his arm. It didn't bleed for shit, but it stung lightly. Nihlus shivered, and the Officer grinned broadly knowing he liked a little pain.

“Here,” another talon scratch.

“Here too.”

Nihlus' subvocals started to loose control as he watched black talons leave lines in his hide that matched the fading marks on the muscular body in front of him. Spirits... he suddenly wondered if
they could get matching marks that were permanent, that wouldn't heal or fade, even if their *notas* would never match...

Those thoughts were swept away as Blue stole both of his hands and took them up over their heads, holding them there with only one of his own. Nihlus' relatively thin wrists fit inside the sniper's grip with ease, and the Detective's other arm came down to the side, bracing his forearm against the mattress. Legs entangled with his own in a lazy sort of pin, while Garrus' subvocals asked him to admit defeat.

The high pitched hum of submission that rolled from Nihlus might have embarrassed anyone else, but having no shame in sexual matters he made known every little bit of his desire. The hold on his wrists withdrew, one warm palm slid all the way down to his waist very slowly.

“Close your eyes.”

“Hmm? But I like looking at you.”

“Easier to pretend.”

“Pretend?”

“You're me, remember? And I'm Saren.”

Oh yeah, they had been doing some sort of role playing thing. He definitely hadn't been loosing focus. At all. Whatsoever.

With a small trill of apology, Nihlus closed his eyes and tried to imagine he was Blue. A mask came to mind, just like all his other personas, and he drew his best impersonation of Garrus over himself like a cloak. Mentally he shifted around in it, testing the feel.

'*Huh. Whatdya know? Blue is pretty comfy.*'

Suddenly the smooth rumble of the sniper's subvocals dropped lower, and Nihlus realized that his lover was giving his best to impersonate Saren too.
'Spirits. This is some excellently kinky shit. I love this torin. I really fucking do.'

Knowing that the likelihood of Saren being the instigator after their sparring was pretty damn small, Nihlus-who-was-Garrus opened his eyes to find Blue’s, and pushed forward seeking reverie. Apparently he went too fast, because Garrus-who-was-Saren pulled back, giving him a chastising hum about being too aggressive. Inside of his mind Nihlus laughed, heartily. That had been a pretty damn spot-on impression, sounding prim and entirely too self confident.

His mask for Blue was a collection of all of the torin's mannerisms, speech patterns, and observable methodology. Hoping to make his part of the act believable, the Spectre let it guide him. The green eyed pretender took to humming gentle coercion and a soothing purr, slowly pushing his way up into the other torin's space and asking for reverie with slow licks and warm breath.

It worked perfectly, giving Nihlus-that-was-Garrus the shivers. Maybe there was something to this idea... he was learning things...

Nihlus was mildly surprised when the tongue entwining with his became... almost possessive, he would say. It tugged at his own and circled his mouth like one of Palaven's massive jungle beasts. Languid and territorial.

'Was this how Saren...?'

Nihlus felt his plates spreading, so fucking turned on by the experience.

When the pretend-Spectre's mouthplates moved to nip and lave at his neck he turned aside unresistingly, happy to give access. The attention made his breath come faster like it always did, but not half so fast as when fangs came in to grip his throat.

Then, they bit down ever so slightly.

Nihlus' insides melted, a groan dragging from him as his plates spread full, and his cock slid out only to be blocked by the cloth of his pants. The feeling of Garrus-Saren licking the blood from his neck had him hard and wanting, mouth dry and toe talons scraping against the bedspread.
Slowly, the other torin pulled away, rumbling at him to pay attention. His eyes had remained closed as requested before, but they opened on command to meet the Detective-Spectre's icy blue gaze. Holding him captive by the eyes, the other torin tilted his chin, vaguely offering his throat.

'Is he saying...?'

Not quite shaking, Nihlus reached up and slowly drew his fangs over the tawny brown hide, disturbingly excited by the rumbling sound of warning that poured out of Blue. This must have happened. Saren must have let...

Oh, spirits. This torin was magic.

So he'd let Saren take a quick bite, and then gotten the same in return? Had Saren offered, or was that just Garrus prompting him? Either way... the sniper's tense frame and warning rumble was exactly what he would expect from his former mentor under these circumstances.

Nihlus was pretty sure he was going to develop a new kink for role playing from trying this.

He started to bite down, wanting to taste the metal and salt of Blue given the prime opportunity, but a gentle push against his shoulder and a dissuading undertone in the Detective's subvocals told him to let go. He considered it, realizing that Garrus probably hadn't bitten down on Saren at all. The stoic bastard would likely flip shit about temporary marks or being bled there. With only a little disappointment, notably smoothed over by the generous spirit of the persona he was wearing, the carmine plated Spectre relaxed his hold and pulled away.

Maybe next time Garrus would use his mystical powers of Saren-mancy to convince the standoffish torin to let him bite down. Just a little nip couldn't hurt... there weren't even marks left on Blue's throat even so soon after.

Then Nihlus could experience... being Garrus, tasting Saren... while actually being Garrus, tasting Garrus..

Hrm. This game had it's draw backs too. Words and thoughts became so easily convoluted.

The mountainous torin over top of him sighed, and pushed their foreheads together. Voice cracking, Garrus cleared his throat with a flicker of a smile.
“That’s... pretty much what happened.”

"Yeah?" he said aloud, but thinking: 'Now this is weird. I'm Garrus talking to Garrus. '

"Mmh." 

“Ah, alright. So... you want to finish out... what might have happened, or is this enough?” ventured Nihlus-Garrus, while the Spectre palmed his face inside his own mindscape. 'Spirits, no, this is not enough. Please say you want more.'

“Up to you,” Garrus replied quietly, his subvocals sounding interested.

“Either way-” he coughed, interrupting himself. Thiiiiis is not working, haha. I'll just... override this mask a bit, or we're both going at keep on asking each other...'

Nihlus clicked his tongue and started again, pushing himself through the persona to influence what came out. “I mean, I'd like to see where this could go, but if you don't want to..." Both expressions of Nihlus licked the back of their teeth, hoping the other torin would agree. 'Come on, Blue... say yes, say yes, sa-' 

“Kind of do. Not too strange, is it?’

“It's interesting, that's for sure.”

“Ha. Alright.”

The sniper cleared his throat again, eyes closed and brow furrowing.

'Blue is so adorable. Is this him getting into character? For role play sex? Fuck, I like it.'

Really, there wasn't much about this torin he didn't like.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: I used the word 'shark' in this chapter, to my mild shame, because the word fit and the descriptive flow would be weakened by trying to stuff a new made-up word for a Palaveni animal in there. Note to self: start developing words for flora and fauna, mythology, and sex terms for Turians during non-high tension moments, to use later if needed. Also, because those are all fun things to have words for.

Edit: I fixed it! Changed 'shark' to 'jungle beast', and it works okay. Not the same, but close enough.

Fanfic Recommendation: Juxtaposed (118833 words) by squiggly_squid
(Garrus/FemShep)
Wrapped around the idea like a ribbon on a chocolate box

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)
Pahir – Turian word for 'Son' (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: I started writing this chapter, and then I discovered a new fic (one of those really good ones that devours your brain till you finish it)... sorry for the delay duckies. :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus contemplated the window on his Omni-tool, mulling over the options. He and Nihlus had gone three rounds before the green eyed Spectre's subvocals had fallen into a mellow, satiated purr followed shortly by a blissful slide into unconsciousness. Icy blue eyes glanced down, a fond smile tweaking at his mandibles. His lover and friend, true to form, had passed out where he was regardless of position. At the moment, that was with faceplates planted into the mattress, torso draped over the Detective's legs, one heel kicked up over the side of the nest-like bed setting the curtains askew, the other buried somewhere in a mound of blankets.

Nihlus had one arm under his head, and the other laid over Garrus' waist. Clingy, even in sleep. Being honest with himself, Garrus found the habit pretty adorable, even if it often had the other torin waking up with kinks in strange places.

His eyes trailed away from the sleeping Spectre's peaceful expression and back to the screen in front of him. He'd been looking up what vacation hours were available from C-Sec, and been... surprised to find so many. The Officer chuffed at himself, acknowledging that it had been pooling for years since he wasn't normally one to take down time, -he became restless too quickly, still not used to semi-civilian working conditions and free time-, but the Detective had thought to spend a day or two with Nihlus and potentially Saren, and then well...

Visit his mari. He'd been... putting it off.

Well, there was plenty of time to do it now. The number of days he could take off in a row was stupidly high.

Swallowing back a small wave of guilt for being a horrible pahir, he brought up the form for a vacation request and filled it out. He wouldn't send it in until there had been a chance to find out
when the Spectres and company intended to leave Palaven, but filling it out in advance was a start. It would be simple enough to finish filling out and submit the paid-time-off form later, setting it for the same day the Council Agents would have been delivering him back to the Citadel. He could stay on-world instead, and take a civilian transport back to the space station when he was done.

He was about half way down the e-form when the suite's entry request chime sounded from the main door. Garrus looked down at the knife-loving torin splayed over his lower half with chagrin.

Alright, so there was a second downside to Nihlus' clinginess. Not that he'd ever tell the other torin to stop.

Moving carefully, the sniper went about trying to disentangle himself from the lanky limbs that kept trying to find new purchase and curl around anything of him they could reach. It took an inordinately long amount of time to escape, and even then the bothered moan of the disturbed sleeper rumbled out from the Spectre's chest. Vaguely threatening while also sounding completely unable to back it up.

Garrus grinned as he made for the door, ready to apologize to whomever had been kept waiting.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The last light of the day had faded hours ago.

Nanus had set behind the horizon, leaving the skyline pitch black and moonless until Menae rose in the morning. The corridors and causeways of the Arterius madlis remained dimly lit with soft blue lighting from squarish, bioluminescent bricks fit into the walls and columns in well-integrated lines and chunks.

The glow was gentle, familiar, and more then enough light for Saren's augmented eyes to see by as he slowly stalked the hallways of the clan wing.

He was... restless.

Not an unusual occurrence, by any means, but perhaps slightly more enjoyable for the free space available to distract himself by walking it. Slightly less enjoyable for the presence of not-quite-ghosts that haunted this place. He would call them shades of the past, except that most of them were mere imaginings of futures that could never occur.
Passing thoughts had him wrapped up in his own head. Being able to offer Nihlus as a babysitter for Abrudas’ nephews, as vengeance for the pranks his protégé played. Having Desolas around to discuss what to do about Tithe’s oath of loyalty. Introducing his brother to Nihlus or Garrus. Particularly Garrus. The political and clan workings that Desolas could have managed as a General to make their... *friendship* socially acceptable...

It would have been pleasing to not have to keep their association quiet. He would have liked to...

But none of that mattered, because his brother was dead by his hand, and could not -perhaps would not even if it were possible- speak to him again.

The youngest, last living Arterius walked the halls of his clan's ancient home, determinedly trying to ignore the shifting shadows behind him and focus on what could be done to prepare for tomorrow... and the next day... and the next.

Deep in his ruminations, he did not notice his feet leading him out of the clan wing. Down hallways, through confluences of paths, and past often-empty plinths that once housed family heirlooms. A vague sense of loss-of-direction claimed the Spectre as he passed into the open air space at the center of the madlis, too busily turned inward to give much notice.

Shadows pooled in corners that the minimal lighting did nothing to disperse, but Saren made his way through the corridors like a wraith that belonged in them, that knew them well. Yet, it was not until he found himself on the other side of the compound and far from his own rooms that he came to a halt and wondering why he was there.

He looked up, awareness coming online, to find himself in front of Garrus’ door.

*’Odd.’* 

Saren made to step away, turning to continue down the hall, but his feet were uncooperative, and the weight in his gizzard tugged him back. He... wanted company.

With an exasperated chuff at his own weaknesses, the Spectre reluctantly spun about and walked to the doorway. His hand stretched toward the door panel, but paused. He had not given the sniper any privacy while on the Daedalus, and that had mostly carried through to other cooperative missions... should he request entry, or simply walk in?
Nihlus had tried to impress upon him that excessive politeness created distance, and such distance was instead rude when they were truthfully close...

Then again, at the moment the Vakarian clansman was a guest...

Would an entry ping waken Garrus if he was sleeping? It was not his intention to bother the torin if he was not awake...

Sighing in light frustration at the stalling, swirling thoughts, the silver-grey torin set his hand to simply tap the opening button, choosing to be invasive rather than disturbing. He could always leave quietly if the sniper were resting. Besides, in the end it was his house. The Spectre could do as he pleased. Nevermind that -theoretically- he could do as he pleased anywhere in the galaxy.

Saren stepped inside and walked through the quiet suite, peeking into the bedroom to see... no one.

Garrus was not present.

‘Where is... ah. Of course.’

The bottoms of his boots made little noise as the stolid torin returned to the hallway, electric gaze swiveling to another door a short ways down.

He should walk away, and not bother them...

Another tug in his chest...

He stil... wanted... company.

With a mild buzz of annoyance in his subvocals, the Spectre moved to Nihlus’ door. He nearly reached for the open button, -never having bothered with giving Nihlus privacy, considering the torin was his protégé, and was usually up to something nefarious-, before it occurred to him what activities may be going on inside. Flashbacks to catching the two of them joined at the hips and lost in passion
over the low table in the main cabin of the Daedalus rooted him suddenly in place. Those moments, barely able to stand, trapped there and unable to look away had been…

Saren swallowed lightly, and tapped the entry request instead. His self control had seemed particularly thin lately. He had no desire to accidentally walk in on such things right now. Too much temptation with so much already on his mind.

He waited, patiently, for an answer.

None came.

The Spectre gave it a few moments in case the other torin had been in the restroom or some such, and then turned to leave. He had to quash the vague feelings of disappointment and loneliness that sat like cold weights on his shoulders. Saren turned away and started walking down the quiet, empty hallway.

He would simply go back to his rooms, and... try to... find something to do besides sleep.

Garrus watched the door panel slide aside, only to reveal an empty corridor. He observed it for a moment, confused, before leaning out the portal to check the hallway. Icy blue eyes caught on the retreating, stocky from of his host.

“Fratrin.”

Saren turned to look at him, the glow of his eyes giving him a sinister appearance in the dim corridor, ruined by his owlish blinking. “Garrus. I did not mean to disturb you, my apologies.”

“You didn't, no apology needed. Looking for me or Nihlus?” the Detective asked with a crooked smile.

The Spectre turned around fully and walked back, looking strangely at a loss for someone normally so confident. Garrus got the feeling that the other torin was not entirely present. Distracted.
“Ah, I had... simply wandered over here in general to see who was awake. Your room was empty...”

“Yep. Took a shower, came over here.” he replied while retreating back into the suite's living room, rumbling a welcoming hum and leaving the door open behind him. The stolid Council operative entered, coming to a stand still in the middle of the room, his gaze a thousand meters away. Slightly concerned, the sniper gave up his attempts to give the other torin space, instead moving closer and resting a hand on Saren's shoulder.

“Hey...”

“Hmm?”

“You alright?”

“I am well.”

The response sounded automatic, and he frowned in concern.

“Saren.”

“Yes?”

“... come here,” Garrus murmured, drawing Saren's stiff but unresting form in for a loose hug. “You don't sound alright. What is it?” For a moment the biotic was perfectly still, and then suddenly he went loose limbed, dropping his forehead onto the sniper's shoulder.

“I am... I suppose 'restless' would be a good word for it, not to be confused with my less than average sleeping habits. Unable to settle, as it were.”

The Detective hummed, uncertain what to say besides making a joke about how much of an understatement 'less than average' was. He didn't think snark would be helpful though, and instead nuzzled into silver-grey fringe, hands making a smooth up-and-down motion on the torin's muscular
upper arms. Saren sighed heavily, pressing into him. The sensation of it made him swallow, appreciating that his friend wasn't exactly known to lean on anyone, ever.

It was gratifying, endearing, and Garrus really just wanted to drag the Spectre's chin up to share reverie, not knowing how else to communicate his appreciation for the... he thought 'honor' might be the right idea, but it was less formal than that. Appreciation, maybe.

It seemed like neither of them were much for the spoken language tonight.

That thought in mind, the sniper started tugging the slumped form toward the bedroom. Saren came with ease, still distracted and melancholy. Garrus drew him into the canopy bed, gently nudging the quiet torin into the middle.

“Mmmph-” came their third number's muffled groan from somewhere in the mess of bedding. The other Spectre rustled around in the blankets for several seconds before escaping enough to take a look at whatever was disturbing him. Sleepy green eyes peered over at them, turning mildly surprised in delayed reaction at finding his elusive former mentor in the bed.

“... Saren?”

“Awh?”

A confused expression on his face not stopping him from slowly sliding closer, the knife-loving merc born looked up at Garrus as he settled in on the other side. The Detective caught his look, but merely shrugged, really having no idea what was up. He was just winging it.

Looking gorgeously sleep tousled, Nihlus arranged himself against Saren's side while dragging some of his blanket hoard over their legs. The Detective smiled at the sweet gesture, but it faded quickly. Saren still seemed trapped in his own head. Without his combativeness or standoffishness, his layers or insistence on personal space... the Arterius clansman seemed half alive. Like a spirit, even. Not really there.

Garrus burrowed into the quiet torin's other side, arm reaching out to hold him close. It was a few graceless moments of shifting and adjusting, but the trio ended up buried together, warm and tangled. His protégé and fratrin held on to the uncommonly unresisting Spectre with a will, as if to hold him there, alive and well.
Saren let out a sigh that sounded more relieved than anything to the Detective's ears. He had no idea what was wrong, -they'd had a good time all day, so why now?- but Garrus figured he could fumble through some hopefully-tactful inquiries tomorrow. For now, it was better to sleep while the world was dark and quiet, and wake again when Menae rose.

Chapter End Notes

[Author's Codex] The Day-Night cycle of Palaven
The Turian homeworld of Palaven has a two moons which alter the normal day-night cycle immensely. The first, Menae, is small but very close. The second, Nanus, is a large moon notably farther away. Exact numbers for their size and distance are registered as classified information by the Turian Hierarchy, and thus not legally publishable. The system's sun however, Trebia, has an equatorial radius of 695,700 km and is located in the Apien Crest, which sits on the edge of the Milky Way's galaxy ring. First light on Palaven occurs before true dawn with Menae acting as a supermoon and reflecting Trebia's light enough for most citizen's day to begin. Once true dawn passes, Menae will continue it's orbit until it is no longer reflecting light, passing across or near Trebia in the sky. At this time the section of Palaven in question will experience a dip in brightness. The luminosity flares again briefly as Menae approaches the horizon, then drops as it disappears. Menae's moonset is immediately followed by a time of mellow afternoon light. This is generally when most Turians will fall asleep a second time in the day, usually 1 to 4 hours, to make up their daily sleeping requirements as their night time unconsciousness is only 3 to 5 hours. As evening time comes Nanus will rise, creating a second period of increased brightness. This state will continue for much of Palaven's 28.3 hour day, until Trebia sets. Shortly thereafter Nanus will set as well, giving way to one of Palaven's notoriously colorful moonsets, and then finally nighttime. The evening skybox will differ greatly depending on the season. If the section of Palaven in question is faced out toward dark space during their night cycle, the horizon will experience extremely lightless conditions. Reflective cloud cover, light towers, and even the vague glint of orbital satellites become critical to movement outside of cities during this time. Conversely, during the opposite season, Palaven's night sky will become an intensely dense sea of stars, facing into the galactic core from the very edge of the disc. Given that this particular world has a weaker magnetic field which deflects less than standard amounts of celestial radiation, the impressive view, and subsequent danger from stray radiation, is of important note for visitors. 'Stargazer Sickness' is a mild, age-old ailment on Palaven, often found in children and elderly who spend too long outside during this time frame. Also of note is that planetary events, mild shifts in orbit, and other small factors come into play, altering the specific times of brightness and low light. Solar eclipses, particularly in conjunction with the coordinates which suffer extreme lightlessness have religious significance in relation to 'spirits of the deep'. For further details on said spirits, see [Author's Codex: Turian Animism].
A/N: If you aren't familiar with bioluminescence, it's a pretty sweet phenomenon that occurs in all kinds of different bugs, fish, plants, etc that causes them to produce light, usually chemically instead of electrically. Like lightning bugs, or that fish with the glow-bobble on it's head from 'Finding Nemo'. If you wanted to see one of the worlds famous bioluminescent beaches, -where the tide line is lit up like a Christmas tree by zillions of tiny lights-, you'd have to go all the way to... New Jersey. Yep. Super exotic. Lol. Anyways, they've got self-contained bioluminescent lamps available on Amazon.com and stuff, so I figure that a culture thousands of years ahead of where we are now would have long since taken advantage of naturally light producing algae or whatever, and made non-resource consuming lighting out of it, if only as night lights.

Fanfic Recommendation: **life on a garden wall** (3893 words) by **Milee_Cosgrove** (Thane/FemShep)
Chapter Summary

Nihlus is a simple torin, with mostly simple desires (that sometimes get pretty kinky, sometimes involve twins, and sometimes are just tasty foods he's been craving), however Saren is anything but. Also, the moral of the story is that great sex can happen at any time.

Chapter Notes

A/N: So, for inspiration I was trolling around on the internet, and I don't remember where the idea came from, but I ended up filling out an ad-lib form that auto-fabricated itself into a small story. Of course, I filled out all of the blanks with random BS and Mass Effect words. The result had me giggling like a moron for the next thirty minutes of writing... but it worked? I guess?

Curious? Here's what came up.

--

Let me tell you about my favorite place. It is called Nihlusville. Everyone there always dresses in carmine and black, and all the cars and the Varren are carmine and black, too. Expel 10 came to do a concert in Nihlusville once, and the band liked it so much they never left. Now every Friday night, all the people who live in Nihlusville put on their sexy carmine and black scarves and walk their Varren to the town square. Then they sit on the grass, listen to Expel 10 play dance music, and eat chewy candy.

No one has to go to school in Nihlusville unless they want to. Of course, everybody wants to because Liara T'soni and Blasto are two of the teachers. Liara T'soni teaches How to Shoot Mercs and Blasto teaches Annoying Saren 101.

One day Blasto said to Liara T'soni, "Maybe we should take the students on a field trip." "That's a clever idea, Blasto," said Liara T'soni. "Let's take them to the most fun place we can think of." "But that would be Nihlusville," said Blasto. "You're right!" Liara T'soni exclaimed. "Call off the field trip! We're already here!"

--


A/N/N: NSFW!!!!!!!!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Talons smoothing under his fingers, loosening their grip.

A heel, nudging at his leg.
Hands, gently displacing pieces of him.

Nihlus came awake blearily, hands automatically trying to keep the warm thing from escaping.

He was still using it. Why was it leaving?

Ohhhhhhh, the warm thing was Saren.

Welp... he was still using 'it', so if 'it' could just stop trying to escape, that would be super.

Groaning in complaint, the carmine plated Spectre looped arms around his oldest friend and pulled the torin back to him, burrowing his face into warm neck hide. The sigh that gusted over his shoulder sounded only partially annoyed, -more reluctantly amused than anything-, and Nihlus took it as a sign to persist.

A sharp talon tip came in to slide down the gap between pectoral plate and his side, sending him squirming sideways to avoid the ticklish sensation. The other Spectre timed it with a combo move though, knuckling a trigger point at the elbow to make his grip weaken.

Determined not to loose either his heat source or the developing competition, Nihlus used one arm to ward his side, and pinned the other torin in place by wrapping both legs around him. Saren made a choking, distressed sound of surprise that had his protégé's mandibles flaring in a grin, even if his eyes remained shut in pretend-sleep.

His stoic former mentor pushed to escape by attempting to worm from his grasp, but the clever knife wielder was having none of that. With a twist of core muscles and a small bounce Nihlus was suddenly sitting on the other torin's hips. He opened his eyes finally, catching sight of Saren's startled expression and conveniently flailed arms. It was a simple matter to push the advantage, pinning wrists to mattress and leaning in to nuzzle at light-grey fringe.

“Nihlus,” hissed his captive, sounding somewhere between pissed off and plaintive.

“Mhmmmm?”
“Release me, and stop making such a fuss. Garrus is still sleeping.”

“I’m not the one trying and failing to escape. Maaaaybe you should just chill and stay here,” he whispered back.

“Nihlus.”

The green eyed Spectre clicked his tongue, disappointed to hear a low warning rumble of actual anger begin to thread Saren’s subvocals. He was just playing. Did the torin really have to get so pissy about it?

‘Ugh. Thiiiiis is why we fought so much when I was still training under him. Stick in the mud does not begin to describe...’

Nihlus straightened slightly to look down into the deep electric pools that the shady inside of the canopy bed made of Saren’s eyes, and his ire faded as he noticed his former mentor’s subtly anxious expression.

‘Then again, I never did like fighting with him. Couldn't really hate him if I tried.’

“Sorry, sorry... don't be mad,” he whispered, humming softly and moving his grip on the other Spectre's wrists to his palms instead, shifting to clasp their hands together and press into the grumpy torin's fringe. “It’s like an hour till day break. Why are you even awake?”

Saren chuffed, gripping back on his hands a little too hard, his strength that of a torin with augmented bones and tensile muscular weaves. His reply came in a barely-there, low toned rumble that made Nihlus' cock twitch inside it’s sheath. “You should know by now that I am not one to laze about.”

Spirits, how did he sound so sexy and dangerous when talking about getting up early to do chores or some shit? Seriously.

“But... I like lazing in bed with you.”
“There are things which could be taken care of.”

“That can't wait an hour or two?”

“I see no point in leaving tasks undone.”

Nihlus scoffed, “We're doing a 'task' right now.”

Saren merely raised a browridge, making him grin cheekily. “It's called, 'Saren shares morning reverie with his extremely attractive coworker'. You could add it to your to-do list, check it off and everything.”

The carmine plated Spectre watched the other torin's eyes close as he huffed in exasperation.

“Nihlus...”

“Mmmyes, love?”

They both froze.

“I-I mean...”

Saren's face was still, but his subvocals whited out in something very close to fear. The sound of it made Nihlus angry, pissed off for whatever life had done to make the other torin so terrified of affection. Suddenly he wasn't willing to backpedal at all.

“... it. I mean it. Love you. Listen, it's not a big deal...”

There was a definitive lack of breathing going on in the keel beneath his own.

“Saren.”
The silver-grey Spectre's eyes closed, grip tightening to near-painful on Nihlus' own.

“Saren.”

Small breaths started to slide in and out of the usually unflappable torin's nose, shallow and perfectly even.

“Saren,” he tried again, in a slightly less-quiet whisper.

Nothing. No response other than the lack of one. If he didn't know how easily his former mentor controlled himself in the face of the galaxy's greatest horrors, -if he had just been a stranger and not the torin's protégé-, he might never have guessed the motionless person beneath him was anything other than vaguely annoyed.

So slight and small were his tells, but Nihlus wasn't fooled.

He also had no idea what to do about it.

“Mmmph, what's... going on?”

'Oh, shit, yes. Thank fuck for Blue.'

The carmine plated Spectre turned his crest to see their third number escaping the blankets, looking sleepy and charmingly disheveled. He couldn't move all the way, his hands trapped in Saren's crushing grip, but his eyes peered over his shoulder at the other torin beseechingly.

“Help.”

The sniper blinked, coming closer slowly.

“Uh... what? What's wrong?”
“Um.” How exactly did he explain...?

While he was tongue tied the mellow Detective leaned over to speak to the problem.

“Saren?”

Electric blue eyes snapped open, and like a switch was flipped, the stolid torin started acting... stolid again.

“Yes?”

“Is... everything okay?”

“... Yes.”

“O...kay. Well, it's,” Garrus, seemingly missing that anything was amiss, flicked on his 'tool and checked the time. “Really early. I'm surprised you're both awake.”

“Um,” Nihlus offered again, helplessly.

“Since we're all up... breakfast?”

The hands clamped to his pushed up with smooth control and monstrous strength, lifting the younger torin unresistingly. The silver-grey Spectre pulled himself into a sitting position, putting Nihlus in his lap. A steady arm hooked around his lower back and braced Nihlus as it happened, holding onto him even after the movement had ended. Awkwardly, his arms fell down to settle loosely on Saren's shoulders.

“A sound idea. Do you have a preference?”

“Considering that you've never made anything I didn't like? Not,” the tall sniper paused, caught in a
yawn, “...in particular.”

“Hmm. Very well.” As calm as you please Saren spun them sideways and dumped his protégé on the bed before gracefully clambering up and out, making calmly for the bedroom door. “Come to the kitchen in half an hour or so.”

“Alright.” Blue replied, still looking half-awake.

Nihlus just laid there, fallen over, baffled.

“Take a shower with me Palvi?”

“... ’kay.”

Nihlus bit back a groan of defeat. Sometimes dealing with his former mentor left him very confused. Thankfully, he was good at shaking it off or he'd long since have gone insane trying to figure out the enigma that was Saren Arterius.

Nihlus popped up and followed his sniper to the bathroom, thoughts still stuck on what to make of Saren's responses. That is, until Garrus came in with soapy hands and a scratchy cloth to clean the last remains of dried come from his stomach, fingers kneading at hide in a way that clearly said he was interested in more of the same.

He fell back into the wall, leaning against the metal as Blue's hands roamed anywhere they pleased. He was unsurprised that the torin actually cleaned him first, gently scrubbing at the hide of his inner thighs, roving over the cracks between plates and scales as they thickened toward hips and knees. His shins even got attention, a pass over the hard plates on the front, and slow circles to the softer plating around his spurs and heels.

The carmine plated Spectre was half hard and partially open before Blue even got to the top half, just from the sheer amount of attention that was focused on him. It was... really nice.

Garrus hummed a warning as he came up in Nihlus' space, lifting by the waist to press his carapace into the wall, and dragging parted thighs up over his hip crests. The clever Spectre's subvocals rumbled like a small thunderstorm in the enclosed walls of the shower, holding on to Blue's collar while the sniper's hands continued to wander around his frame with soap and that wonderfully
The low rumble from Blue's chest plus the constant susurrus of the water fall had him unresisting and lackadaisically aroused.

A set of talons drifted down his back where it came away from the wall, wandering to his rear plates and skimming the seam. Nihlus shivered, liking the idea of having Blue inside of him, but...

Right now, he liked the idea of a little control a bit more.

“Blue...”

“... yeah?”

“Can I instead...?”

“Mm. Sure.”

So few words needed. The easy communication was a turn on, in and of itself.

Garrus pressed his upper half into the wall, letting the knife-loving torin climb down from his perch. Feet had barely touched the floor before he was pushing forward, cornering the ridiculously tall Detective against the far side of the shower instead. Blue went willingly, leaning back and bringing one muscular leg up to steady himself between the walls. It gave Nihlus ample room to work with.

Ruddy brown fingers went questing south for Garrus' predictably loose seam. Finding it, the Spectre began to work it open starting from the very front, and going lower as we went. At first all that fit was the smooth back-curve of a talon, but slowly Blue opened to him and he slid a knuckle into the gap, drawing it up and down, wiggling it back and forth, exulting in the sound of his lover's subvocals slowly loosing coherency.

When the first few plates spread far enough, he worked down and backwards, coaxing each section apart before moving on. Half way back the gap only widened a little before the sub-plate tendons and muscles settled as far as they could go, but shortly after that they stretched further again as he
reached the rear plating.

Water misted off of everything, rinsing the fluid from Blue's sheath even as it spread. The stone plated torin slid sideways on the wall, his head turning to the side as his upper body braced against the surfaces available while his hips tilted outward, one leg still holding him in place while the other held him up. On a devious whim, Nihlus dropped to his knees and started licking at Blue's emerging head while his fingers continued to play with the slowly loosening rear seam. It earned him talons tangled in his crest blades, and a gloriously loud moan.

The sound of it echoing off the walls drove him onward, the sense of power at giving pleasure a sure-fire cure to his earlier confusion. Garrus was putty in his hands, warm and willing under the shower spray, and he took pride in taking the torin apart.

After the brief warm up of swirling tongue, he pushed the line a little, and dove his tongue into nooks and craigs of the Detective's topography, laving at the nerves while his hand slowly squeezed Blue's length. A hint of begging flang hit his ears like music, the mountainous sniper asking for him sooner rather than later.

Maybe, if he had a fetish for taking a ridiculous amount of time in the build up like Blue seemed to, he would have just kept going, tonguing every place he could find with devilish glee. Maybe, if he had a scrap of patience, he could have slid a talon into the waiting slit and played slow, hyper-gentle havoc with the nerves that lined it.

That all, however, would take too damn long. He wasn't a patient lover, -or a patient anything really-, and being inside the sniper was too tempting a prospect to delay.

Nihlus rose back up, tugging Garrus' hips into the best angle they would get in the close quarters of the shower room, and positioned himself with one hand. His watched his lover try focus his on where they were about to connect, but both of their eyes slid closed at the ensuing sensation. Not even slightly new, but still so potent, the feeling of Blue's heat and hide sliding over him stole his breath for a moment. The softer hide at the entrance gave way to the smooth, slick tissue in his core that was hot, tight, and oh so perfect.

The Spectre sank in deep, the bulging base of his cock hitting it's limit for easy entry, and nudging just a bit further still.

“Ah...ah, Nihlus...”
“Shhh, just a little more...”

“Nnn... Nnnnn,” was all Garrus managed between gasping breaths and futile clawing at the smooth metal wall. Nihlus curled, using the extra sensation to smooth over the fact that he was rolling their hips in gentle circles to stretch his partner enough to go a bit farther. He was a lanky torin, and his phallus matched that, longer and thinner than average. He wanted to be buried in Blue, and for that he needed to work himself in just... a bit... more...

“Ahhhhhhhnnnnnn-n-nnnn... ha.... ha...”

The noises that his sniper made were incredibly erotic. For a sweet, vanilla hearted torin, Blue inspired the desire to fuck, -and fuck hard-, in Nihlus so very much.

“Ahnn. Ahhhh- haaa... okay... okay... more.”

Very. Much.

“Ohhh... mmmnn.”

A little more work and he sank in to the hilt, the soft hide of his inner sheath pressing against Blue's, oversensitive for the lack of lubricating fluids the shower had washed away. He shuddered, curling inside the other torin until he heard the sniper's subvocals fray further, the low keen of a rising orgasm starting to tug at the edges.

He pulled half way out, and slammed back in.

“AHhhhhhnnnn! Ahhhh... spirits...”

Nihlus worked himself inside again, deep as he could go, curling and rocking to convince the flesh to give way for him, occasionally pulling out to thrust in again, deeply enjoying the sensation of re-penetrating the sniper.

When Blue began to shake he knew they needed to end it before either of them started to loose strength in their limbs. Coming had a strange way of exhausting even hardened soldiers who could
fight for hours, and while he'd fucked the sniper into unconsciousness before, that was really an activity for when they were already on a bed and had plenty of time. Right now was for quick, rough sex that ended in an explosive burst.

Going for a few more moans, -because he really fucking loved listening to them-, Nihlus shifted gears into a faster, harder pace. He thrust into Garrus with rising abandon, a tight grip on the torin's hips to drag him back with every push. It didn't take long before the sniper was clutching at him, coming apart in his arms. Nihlus' peak had come at him minutes ago, but he'd denied it. Now he let his own orgasm take him too, timing it to match.

Their dual keens harmonized in the small chamber, echoing as they tapered off.

Blue slumped against the wall where he was braced, drawing Nihlus' head closer to nuzzle at what fringe he could reach. The Spectre hummed and nuzzled back, dizzily thinking that they really did make beautiful music together, as the saying went. Literally, in fact. The way their keens had sounded echoing off of the walls... perfect. Symphonic, even.

He hummed an effusive appreciation for the Detective's attractiveness at him, subvocals wavering wearily in a very similar manner to how the two of them were melted into the shower wall while the water did all the hard work of rising them off.

Now for the hard part... time to pull out.

Nihlus managed it, gracefully even, trying not to scowl at the feeling of separation. Mating instincts encouraged males to enjoy staying entwined afterward, that's all it was. Just nature being annoying. Still...

He sighed, and pulled away further to regain his balance, giving the water another minute before hitting the deactivation panel. A fair bit of effort got him out of the shower and lazily towed off. Garrus followed, staying close. Probably struck by the same inclinations. They wobbled their way to the bed, only vaguely dry, and fell over onto the mattress together.

Welp.

Saren was still a hit-and-miss situation full of one way streets and strange turns, but Garrus at least was easy to be with... and... speaking of being with...
“Hey Blue.”

“Yeah?”

“Can we go to that place your cousin owns?”

“The vacation house out on the wildlife preserve?”

“Yeah. I wanna take some time off. Been a long haul recently.”

“Hmm...”

“If it’s too much trouble...”

“Ha, no, definitely not. I was just planning to take some time off also to-”

“Pffft. Liar.”

“No really! Was going to visit mari tomorrow, see how she's doing. In person, that is.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Give me a chance to call my cousin. Have to check if it's alright for me to borrow his place first.”

“Oh, well yeah, duh. Can we still hang out if it isn't?”

“Of course, Palvi. You want to come with to visit?”
“Your mari? To see how she's doing?”

“Mmmhm.”

“... kinda, yeah.”

“You don't have to.”

“Shush. When are we going?”

Nihlus smiled at the sound of Garrus' mellow, deep bass chuckle, suddenly wishing breakfast wasn't waiting on them. He'd really rather slip back inside Blue for a few hours...

“No clue. Let me call her after we eat.”

“... 'kay.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This is author-chan, signing off. If you need me, I'll be in my bunk. Give me at least 20. /wink

A/N/N: In case anyone is wondering, the scarce comments that reference mating instincts in this chapter were not prelude to some sort of ill advised, unplanned mpreg arc. Good gods, I can't see many men choosing to do that. *I* don't want to do that. However, on reread it occurred to me that Nihlus is exactly the type of crazy that might just think, "Hey, I wanna be a mom," because well... gender really doesn't much matter to him, does it? And Mass Effect era science could probably give him the temporary parts needed to do it for a... nominal fee. /sigh/ Garrus would probably never think of doing such a thing himself, but wouldn't tell anyone else no. Saren would look at the suggestion as if the speaker were insane. Make himself weak and emotional for several months while a parasite sapped his strength? Idiotic, he would say, why not instead use a surrogate or appropriate laboratory facilities? Hahaha. Nihlus though? Pffft. That boy is a strange one. He might just, but well... not in this fic.

Fanfic Recommendation: Sins of the Father (62467 words) by MsWikit
(Child!Femshep & Saren, foster-fic with all of Saren's glorious sociopathy, AND Reapers.)
Adrift in sunshine

Chapter Summary

Garrus gets really stressed about little things, and then finds some time to de-stress. Meanwhile, Nihlus learns to fish and Solana essentially turns a tin can into a WMD. Also, Viviene continues to lament her lack of grandchildren.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Pahir/mahir – TCD. The equivalent of 'son' and 'daughter'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Patrem/matrula – TCD. The formal equivalent of 'father' and 'mother', rather than the less formal 'pari' and 'mari'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Avunem/avitila - TCD. The formal equivalent of 'uncle' and 'aunt', rather than the less formal 'avu' and 'avi'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: I apologize for the delay! The real world needs to go away, I don't really live there anyways.

Chapter Soundtrack: Solesta! 」 Hatsune Miku - Ground sky

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Viviene Vakarian was having the most wonderful day she'd had in quite a long time.

Her beautiful, brilliant mahir sat across the way, watching their guest with a predator’s questing gaze. One that sought weaknesses. It was increasingly entertaining to watch Solana's expression twitch when the subject of her scrutiny so much as coughed. So very like her pari on the trail of a case that it made Viviene smile irrepresibly.

Her handsome, brave pahir was on her left, trying -and failing- to appear to be sitting calmly in the clan-owned transport vehicle. Of course, Garrus had always worn his heart on his sleeve, and his anxiety over having his friend be well received was very obvious. To put it nicely.
Said friend, one Nihlus Kryik, had his heels tucked under him, face buried in a sketching program on his Omni-tool for the forty minute ride to their destination. The young torin looked utterly unaware of the tension in her two children, but she had a mother's intuition telling her that he was very aware. Purposefully ignoring it, smoothing over the situation better by cleverly pretending all was well.

Viviene continued to smile.

Garrus had come for a surprise visit earlier today, arriving just in time for a spontaneous lunch with her and Solana. They talked, and she'd discovered that the two torin had taken a few days off to enjoy some shore leave on Palaven. One thing led to another, -a few more details nettled out of her unfailingly honest son, a bit of interest in joining them expressed-, and the party of two had become a party of three.

Manipulative perhaps, but she had simply wanted to observe them interacting. It was a mother's prerogative to watch dangerous things that came close to their children, after all.

As luck would have it though, Solana also expressed an interest in where they were going, and Viviene had felt sudden inspiration.

It would be illuminating to watch them together, her son and his 'friend' who smiled at her with the innocence of a child while wearing combat knives that looked Krogan made. It would be more illuminating to watch them deal with her inquisitive and territorial daughter.

It hadn't taken but a few well placed suggestions when suddenly, much to her poor pahir's increasing distress, they were off on a vacation for four to a small family owned bit of land tucked away inside the Azmodial Trust Wildlife Preserve. It was named for Azmodial Vakarian, of course. A great patron of nature conservation, some two thousand years ago. Viviene sent off a small prayer of thanks to his spirit for the brilliant decision to found the preserve and to save a small plot on it for the clan's use.

It would be much easier to hide the body if the Spectre turned out to be the monster her bondmate claimed all agents of ST&R to be.

Castis swore up and down that the Spectres were an ill lot, defaming them every time it was brought up in conversation. Viviene had ever been of a mind that those words were something of a lingering frustration from years at C-Sec. Having spooks in one's crime scene made for grumpy detectives, naturally.
It was also not as if she particularly wanted the vivacious torin dead, but Garrus was her first born child, and because of her body's failings she only had the two of them. She considered her protectiveness to be understandable.

However, contrary to everything the media and her bondmate would have her believe, the Spectre had been nothing but cheerfully enthusiastic toward company on the little trip. Friendly, and open hearted. None of the reluctant anti-socialism of a relationship parasite or selfish social manipulator.

Really, Nihlus seemed... smitten. He was sweet and almost shy, clearly in love.

Then again, 'in love' did not inherently mean, 'good for you'.

Thus her effusive joy to be getting out of the house, and being hand-delivered the opportunity to gently interrogate her pahir's interest while sequestered away upon restricted grounds conveniently in the middle of nowhere.

Viviene kept on smiling.

She was vaguely fond of the Spectre already. The torin had a charming manner about him. She hoped he survived both herself, and her daughter's scrutiny. Garrus would need both of their support if he hoped to convince his patrem that this match was acceptable. An uphill battle to be sure, one she didn't want her soft hearted pahir to start unless he was absolutely certain of it.

Across the shuttle she caught Spectre Kryik winking at Garrus, who quietly snorted and tried not to smile.

Ah well, hopefully Solana was dutiful enough to give her grandchildren.

Garrus dropped his bags by the door and planted himself face first into the mattress, groaning in defeat. He and Nihlus were in separate rooms, his mari was here, and they were staying a week. This was not how he had imaged the small side trip going.
Worse, Sol was here.

The Detective's subvocals buzzed with aggravation, fist lazily thudding against the dusty bedspread beneath it. Solana was going to be a terror.

A quiet *snick* came from the old pneumatic door. Garrus turned over to see who it was just in time to be straddled by an exuberant Spectre.

“Why are you so slow Blue! We've got stuff ta do!”

'Spirits of the Deep, how is he so excited for this skytrain wreck?’ The sniper smiled, somewhat consoled that his lover at least wasn't disappointed by the circumstances.

“Sorry, sorry, I'm coming.”

The green eyed torin grinned widely before nuzzling into his throat, all warm affection and sexual interest. “Oh you will be later, but for now I think we better go help your mari with her list of things to do.”

“Oh spirits, not one of her lists.”

“Haha, that's a thing huh?”

“Yes.”

“So is it better to hide, or accept our fates?”

“With Vakarian tarin? Accept it, and hope they don't have ulterior motives.”

“Pffft. Well let's go then.”
Garrus nodded, rolling them off the bed and into a graceful stand. Nihlus came with, ending up half hanging off of him in a sensual, playful lean. Against his better judgment he drew the Spectre in to share reverie, stressed and seeking that reassurance. As always, the lanky knife wielder was unresisting in his arms, humming in low bass and incredibly responsive. His brain rattled off what a bad idea it was to do this where his family could walk in the door and see them, but his body ignored that entirely, slowly drowning in the taste.

It took about three solid attempts to actually stop nibbling the hide on offer, and another two to let go of the warm body, but he managed it and turned for the door.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “what's on this list?”

“Bunch of stuff. Solana got sent out to check some sort of generator. Your mari said something about us fishing?”

“Ahhh, makes sense, there's a lake just over the hill behind the house. Landing a bite is usually pretty easy. A few of my cousins and I learned to fish from our avunem on the docks a bit north of here.”

“I saw the water on that way in. A little big to call it a 'lake', but whatever... so you know how to fish?”

“Yeah. Don't you?”

“Umm...”

“... No bodies of water where you grew up?”

“Not even, Blue. I didn't even see a live fish until I passed by a store-front aquarium when I was twentyish.”

“Want to learn?”
“Sure, why not. I like learning new things, and who knows? It might come in handy someday.”

The fairly ancient mechanism beneath her hands was in the process of falling into pieces so to it could come together in better working order. It had been a while since she'd had machinery under her hands, but Solana had spent so many years onboard starships trailing behind her mari as she fixed things that the craft was coming back with ease.

Now if only she could fix reality and her idiotic fraten the way she could take apart machines and information networks. A low rumble of agitation slipped through the cracks of her poise as she worked alone in the outbuilding that housed the generator.

Sol was becoming very tempted to break her own rule of never again using her connections with Blackwatch to spy on her family, but the situation was beginning to merit it, considering she was currently on vacation with a Spectre.

The high strung tarin said 'never again' because she'd not-once-but-twice made the mistake of looking up closed files on her family members, and the results had been... scarring. Young and relatively naive, Solana had been handed all the power in the world upon joining the Hierarchy's elite. The newly minted Blackwatch Operative's curiosity had gotten to the better of her, and she'd looked up her pari on nothing more than a whim.

That had been a mistake.

Solana had thought that their high minded patrem, a career cop who did everything by the books, a politician in the making, well thought of among his peers, from an old and highly respected clan... well, she had thought his secrets would be tame. Something to tease him about.

As it turns out?

Sometimes following the rules seeded evil by letting it live in the cracks between laws.

Sometimes waiting for permission to act let the window of opportunity close, and people died.
Sometimes even the most noble of torin made horrible, horrible mistakes.

Sometimes good people were pushed too far, and pushed back hard to compensate.

Sol wasn't proud to admit it, but she'd vomited after reading her beloved, bullheaded pari's file, then taken three days of leave to go soul searching right after. Three days at this exact same cabin in fact, but she'd come to terms with the things her pari had done. The thin, brilliant tarin had gone back to work a little wiser, and a little more jaded.

Her more experienced colleagues had all given sympathetic looks and been surprisingly kind about it for a bunch of black ops types. One tarin in particular, -an agent by the name of Elasea Aupto, who rarely spoke and almost never left HQ-, took her out for smoothies. They'd sat in silence and people-watched for a solid hour over their lunch break.

Then Ela had told her, “Everyone does it, you know? Look at the files for our friends and family. Boyfriends. Old squad leaders. It's... encouraged. The people we care about are security risks, and it's... I guess it's our responsibility to keep tabs on them, so anything they do or have done can't be used against us. So we can't be used against the Hierarchy. My advise is... to just let it go, yeah? The people we know... they're just people.”

'They're just people. Let it go.'

Words to live by. Difficult however, for an inquiring, judgmental mind like hers.

Of course, her mari had a file too. Solana had left it alone for four months and three days, torn between knowing and not knowing. Eventually, curiosity and a sense of responsibility to know if her matrula had any ties that needed to be kept in mind overrode her vague desire to not think badly of sweet, brilliant, lovely Viviene Vakarian. The hard truth was that her mari was barefaced, and while it didn't matter to mahir-Solana, it mattered a great deal to suspicious-Blackwatch-Solana.

Oh, she almost wished she hadn't looked. Her mother's file was enormous.

'Sunblade Viv', the reports had called her, the lightly armored tarin in the sporadic video clips that mowed down enemies with twin heat blades mounted to her wrists.

Fast like light, as deadly as touching Trebia itself.
Truth in fact, her mari had been a Blackwatch Asset, well paid and connected, used to assassinate targets the Hierarchy couldn't be caught touching. Captivated, and a little shell shocked, Solana had poured over the files. She learned how her mari had saved or slaughtered countless lives. The only saving grace was that it was all on pseudo-orders, Primarch approved, even if the tasks were often grim and underhanded. Un-Turian. Fit for a bareface.

Her kind hearted, loving matrula had come so close to being written off for political expediency so many times.

It was... chilling.

Near the end of the file though, Sol had discovered the silver lining. Her parents had only met because mari once saved pari's life from a Compact Assassin, killing the Drell just moments before they had made it through a swath of guards to murder Castis, his two sisters, and the Vakarian Avah of the time.

One thing led to another, and a barefaced mercenary on Hierarchy bankroll ended up retiring from living on the edge to instead bond a young soldier from a prestigious clan. Conveniently, a spot for a young family opened on a relatively safe, remote starship patrol on a Hierarchy dreadnaught. Somewhere no one could find her, tempers would cool, and memories could fade until Viv was no longer important, and Viviene could slip into a different life.

The closed personnel file even described their courtship in detail, as it had been observed closely by Blackwatch. After the bonding and subsequent rites ceremony there were etiquette classes, family fall outs, a miscarriage, hospital stays, even lingering revenge attacks from her old life.

Sweet moments, and sour ones. So much. There were endless details in the document. It was no wonder the file size had been massive.

Solana had never thought about what her parents had gone through to get this far in life, none of this had been discussed when she was growing up. Then again, who talked about their glory days as a vicious mercenary around their kids?

Though oddly.. much of the data that overlapped was missing from pari's file. It was... strange... but she left it be.
Where her *patrem*'s file had left her ill, her *matrula*'s left the young Blackwatch operative dazed. She'd still taken a few days off, requested in advance, to get her head back on straight.

Now... now it was time to question whether she should open the files on her brother, her golden hearted and foolish *fraten*, and on his... ugh... the... *Spectre*.

Solana both dreaded it, and desired it. She wanted the perfect excuse to look at a Spectre's file. She also hoped to see Arterius', and use what she found to convince Garrus not to do this. Not to fall in love with someone who was sworn to a foreign government.

It conflicted with her priorities. With their *clan*'s priorities.

He was supposed to be the Vakarian eyes and ears on the Citadel, like pari had been, but Garrus never gossiped about his job or made the political connections that he was supposed to. Her *fraten* just... didn't have that kind of guile. Didn't care about those things.

While Avah Vakarian despaired of the lack of information from the Citadel lately, and her pari continued to treat Garrus like a child not learning how to walk fast enough, -and in doing so only drove him further away-, their mari...

Seemed to think the whole thing was hilarious; was *encouraging* this idiotic... relationship... thing. *With a Spectre.*

Solana cursed as she nicked a finger on a sharp edge in her distraction, licking the wound briefly before going back to taming the machine's inner workings. She had some judgment calls to make, some planning to do, and hopefully the next few days of watching the two torin interact would spark some sort of idea to improve the situation.

It didn't help that Nihlus was entirely too likable and just... really friendly. He was *nice*, which just made her more angry. Spectres were *not supposed to be nice*. Damnit.

Solana's subvocals continued to rumble in agitation even as the old machine slowly turned into a small, overclocked monstrosity of an energy generator.
Garrus had decided half an hour in that he wanted to retire to a cabin by a lake someday, and fish his last few years away just like this. A hundred years from now, when his plates were cracked and pale, and he couldn’t see far enough to shoot straight anymore, maybe his trigger finger would stop itching and he could just do this all day.

They were up at the north docks, the sun was shining, the air was warm, and Nihlus was seated between his legs failing miserably at catching a single thing. The Detective had his chin set on the Spectre’s collar, mandible tips tucked into the dip between ridge and neck muscle. His eyes were half closed as he soaked up sunlight and dozed, arms around his lover’s middle.

Nihlus however was wide awake, listening to music in his aural implants, humming cheerfully while kicking his legs in the water in time to the beat. It was probably scaring all the fish away, but Garrus couldn’t bring himself to care. He was too relaxed, and didn’t exactly look forward to success at their given list-task. It would mean packing up the tackle box and going back to the cabin where he’d have to watch himself much more closely.

He wanted some much needed down time. Just a few more hours...

“Bluuuuueeee.”

“Mmm?”

“I thought you said it was easy to get a bite here?”

Garrus sighed, smiling with his eyes closed, “It is.”

“Then what am I doing wrong, oh wise fishing spirit?”

“Sarcasm? I’m not sure Wise Fishing Spirit appreciates your attitude.”

“Pffft, get over yourself and help me catch dinner. I’m hungry.”
The Detective chuckled, forcing his eyes open. “Might help if you didn’t move your legs in the water.”

“Seriously?!? Why?”

“Probably scaring all the fish away.”

“... they’re fish.”

“Yes?”

“They don’t feel fear, Blue.”

“Of course they do. Most animals can. If you keep still though, they might get curious about your toes and come closer.”

“Curious?!”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Fish… okay, you're not just fucking with me?... fish feel things?”

“Yes?” Garrus leaned around the Spectre to see his expression, confused about his suddenly flat subvocals. “... Nihlus?”

“I didn’t know fish felt things…”

“What does it matter?”
“It’s just… doesn’t it seem kind of fucked up to kill and eat something that feels?”

The Detective blinked, confused, and chuckled awkwardly.

“Not… really? You kill people all the time. Why are fish different?”

“Pffft, come on… it isn’t like the little buggers are criminals or something. Besides, it’s not the killing, it’s more the eating… I mean, you wouldn’t eat another Turian, right?”

“I would if it was a matter of survival, but otherwise no.”

“Ugh, gross Blue.”

Garrus broke out into laughter at the adorably disgusted look on the other torin’s face.

“They’re just fish, Palvi. It isn’t exactly cannibalism.”

“Mrrmmmmggg,” replied Nihlus, noncommittally.

“Just try keeping your legs still, and wiggling the line on occasion. Recast if you feel like it, maybe farther out. Unless you want me to do it?”

“No… no, I can do this…”

“Alright.” Garrus settled his head back down, then carried on enjoying the fresh air and warm sunlight.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I imagine that live animals are a rarity outside of homeworlds. Most colonies are probably some level of terraformed, and not seeded with wildlife. Space stations, military installations, and edge worlds certainly wouldn't have the space or need for proper zoos or aquariums. Grow up anywhere but a coreworld and food becomes something grown in a tank, processed from omni-gel into flavored carbohydrates and injected with nutrients. Possibly more healthy for you, as it will be perfectly balanced and uncontaminated. Also? Kind of gross to people like Garrus and Saren who grew up around real food.

A/N/N: I am not a vegetarian myself, but considering all the forms of life a Spectre might see during their career, is it hard to imagine that a secretly-tender-hearted torin like Nihlus would consider basic emotions sufficient to preclude using a creature as nourishment unless absolutely needed? Garrus has probably gone hunting with older Turians growing up, hunting in packs and for sport in a way that awakened that primal-hunter that lives somewhere in the deep reaches of a modern person's brain. He knows what it is to hunt. Nihlus? Probably hasn't hunted for food in his life, unless you count diving through dextro-pizza boxes in his fridge to see if any of them are still edible. XD To Nihlus, 'hunting' something is what you do to mission targets. It's selective murder for the greater good. Murder of innocent animals, just to eat them or for fun, is probably kind of crazy-person behavior to his perspective.

Fanfic Recommendation: Pins and Needles (8587 words) by commander_hot_pants (FemShep origin story, not a happy place.)
In repose I finally find the right words

Chapter Summary

Saren is kind of an asshole and Nihlus is ridiculous.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

**Ylasiun** - The ancient Turian version of heaven. The realm where all honorable warriors spend eternity. (Credit: MizDirected)

**Asmosdaia** – Also called 'Asmos', they are a harmless pond skimmer that appears much larger and heavier then they actually are. Asmos grow to be six to seven meters long, with broad sting-ray like fins and tall spikes protruding from their backs. Native to Palaven.

**Muriella** – A small clam analogue from Palaven that lives and reproduces in the mud of ponds and lakes. Edible while raw, and prolific, they are a common dietary item of prehistoric Turians, still eaten today.

**Preteril** - A small, spiny ground burrowing marsupial analogue generally found in grasslands or forest. Native to Palaven. (Credit: MizDirected)

**Merillien** - Tiny, scaled birds of Palaven, prized for their intelligence and the beautiful scaled harmonies they sing. Most merillen have pale, opalescent scales in various shades of white, beige, and grey. Rare cases come in a pale red or black. (Credit: MizDirected)

**Netichik** - Insects native to Palaven that have been exported to many colony worlds. About two centimeters long, they live in colonies burrowed into trees. Meat eaters, they drop out of trees in large masses onto the backs of animals passing beneath their nests. (Credit: MizDirected)

**Netichik-laos** – A more dangerous, aggressive variety of Netichik. About four centimeters long, they live in colonies burrowed into trees. The are carnivorous, and will leap from their nests onto passing creatures, splashing their prey with acid that eats into the plating common to many of the planet's fauna.

**Volucar** - A very large, nocturnal bird of prey. Growing to possess a wingspan of up to 8 meters, volucar swoop down silently from above to snatch their prey up in two long, strong arms. They crush their food, suffocating it before returning to their nests to consume it. (Credit: MizDirected)

**Patrem/matrula** – TCD. The formal equivalent of 'father' and 'mother', rather than the less formal 'pari' and 'mari'. (Credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Electric eyes glanced absently over read-outs on the holo panels before them, the hum of the drive core fading to low-power mode as the Daedalus settled into dock with the Citadel.

“Daedalus, we're reading your landing as complete in dock F-11. Confirm?”

“Confirmed,” he replied in a polite if toneless manner.

“Acknowledged. Welcome back to the station Spectre.”

“Thank you.”

With that the traffic control officer on the line hung up, and Saren was left in the quietude of his CIC. Not one to stay idle, he stood immediately and took three steps toward making his usual inventory check before resupply, but halted suddenly upon remembering that he had just left Palaven. His stores of dextro foods, Hierarchy munitions, and miscellaneous goods were all well and full.

The silver-grey torin grunted lowly, aggravated at his own forgetfulness. It was unusual for him, between his generally reliable recall of facts and the grey box settled against his parietal lobe.

He dismissed the event and instead turned for the airlock, intending to head for the Spectre Offices and acquire a new mission. He made it as far as the rapid transit station before discovering it was rush hour on the station, and the local supply of available public skycars was zero. The terminal reported a twenty one minute wait on the next vehicle. The temptation to override the console with his privileged codes was strong, but he curbed the urge, citing it to himself as a disrespectful abuse of power. He turned away, instead opting to walk to the presidium.

It was a seventeen minute walk, between dodging the foot traffic and waiting on elevators. Saren consoled himself by noting that seventeen was still less than twenty one, if only barely. He made it to the strange plant with purple spots that obscured the entrance to ST&R's office space, and was nearly at the door to the mission boards when a voice called out from behind.

“Spectre Arterius! Spec-Spectre Arteri... Slow down!”
Saren sighed mentally and turned around. Behind him came one of the Asari from Intel, a particularly plucky and large chested nais whose name he had never bothered to learn.

“... yes?”

“Good grief! You long legged ones just walk so fast! I've been trying to catch up to you for two hallways.”

He was not entirely certain if the Intel Specialist was mocking him for being shorter than average, or was sincerely comparing them to each other. Regardless, he refrained from a scathing retort or crossing his arms, choosing to wait for the nais to say whatever it was they wanted.

“Er-I-uh...” The Asari shifted, wringing blue hands together and glancing away from his direct stare.

“...”

“Ahem-hem. Soooo... I was told that you were the agent who retrieved the data cache from Camaron?”

“Correct.”

“We're having trouble cracking the file format it's in...”

“It should be in an older, knock-off version of League of One style encryption. As I stated in the mission report.”

“Oh, yes, well, we-um-I checked that...”

“...”

The Specialist continued to fidget before him, and when no further information was forthcoming he growled a low tone that meant 'hurry up with it' to any Turian listening. It appeared to translate well enough thankfully, but the eventual reply increased dramatically in pitch with every word.

“Itisn'tthatformat!?” she squeaked.

Saren gave in to the urge to cross his arms and take a lean back on one leg.

“Of course, it is. There is no reason why it would not be.”

“N-no sir! It's definitely not!”

“Show me,” he rumbled back, unconvinced.

“Sure, okay... um, my terminal is back in-”

“The Research and Intel room, yes, obviously. Lead the way.”
“Oh, I m-”

“Now, if you please.”

“Right! Okay!”

The nais spun around and practically sprinted for the Intel labs, Saren stalking behind. As soon as they cleared the security door to the correct room the Intel Agent scuttled over to a console. There were many other terminals, but only three other Intel Agents, all peering curiously at the guest in their space. He ignored their stares while the Asari speed-entered credentials, rapidly tapped nails against the desk while they ran, then leaned aside and gesturing to the screen once it was active.

“See? I checked the file with these settings, and it’s not-”

Saren reached around the nais to access the console, rolling back the version of the cipher the decryption software was using by about forty years, and deleting several lines of, -to his eyes-, gibberish filler text meant to throw off just such automatic decryption methods. He also noticed, -while merely glancing over the file-, three different instances of repeating patterns. He immediately added an exception case to the program to look for and attempt to decrypt the file while ignoring those chunks, looking at them separately, or making checks for alterations in the cipher after each one. A few other small shifts in the data software, -an abominable use of code for something that could easily be translated by hand, in his opinion-, and he set it to run.

It pinged a partial success, giving a clear read out of the document’s first page, but erroring out on the second.

Saren stepped back, unimpressed with the agent's lack of problem solving skills. The file was indeed a knock-off of old League encryption, just as he had said.

“Oh! Oh it was... goodness! Thank you Spectre. I would never have thought to-”

The silver-grey torin held back another sigh, suppressing the impatient reaction and turning to walk away wordlessly. The nais could, hopefully, figure out the rest out alone.

“-ah, um, thank you, sorry!” the awkward Specialist yelled after him. Saren paid no attention, walking at a quick clip back to the mission board room and beginning to look for a new assignment.

He browsed the latest information, both on specific Spectre missions, and on general watch-dog topics. The trends in illegal arms trading and black market sales scrolled by on the side, a plethora of activity for any available Agent to make a choice mission of, should they see a trend that did not sit well with them. There was, as always, far more to do than there were operatives to send out.

'Spectres are born, not made', as the saying went. Never enough of them to go around.

One mission in particular caught his eye.

It was recon, something suited for one agent with a few specialized devices for ranged spying. Considering he often preferred to work alone rather then deal with potentially incompetent partners, the solo aspect already appealed. There was also the fact that he had aural implants which enabled
hearing over great distances, could speak and read the mouth movements for most common galactic languages, and could literally take pictures with his own eyes.

The mission sounded perfect.

There was even a nearby dead-drop location that was supposed to be checked by someone once every few weeks for the latest intel from one of their undercover operatives. The pick up point was on the way, in the warehouse district of a multi-species trading outpost on a moon, and the mission itself was one system away, a mercenary base on a desert planet.

Saren pulled down all the available information to his Omni-tool, left a note on both main topics that an agent was deployed on them, and then turned to leave. He did not make it to the office's exit portal before being waylaid again.

“Arterius.”

The silver-grey Spectre turned, catching sight of Ankhleas Tithe. A small amount of his building agitation faded after he identified the speaker. Surely, this was not a torin who would waste his time, of all people... He could only hope.

“Tithe. I am on my way out. What is it?”

“Here.” The mellow, earth-toned torin held out a data stick, orange eyes watching him. Saren took it, curious.

“Well?”

“Some things you might be interested in. Just... keeping my promises, is all.”

The Spectre's crest tilted as he eyed the device, then the Turian who had offered it, humming in question.

“I did not ask any specific promises of you.”
“No, you didn't,” was all the old ex-general replied, nodding at him before moving off down the corridor in a soundless glide and disappearing around a corner. Saren watched him go, then held up the data stick in consideration. He tapped a talon against it, wondering what had happened recently enough that Tithe had not offered this to him on Palaven, where they had both been at his madlis only a few days prior.

He supposed there was only one way to find out.

Saren pocketed the data stick and made for his ship, hoping to get off the station and away from it's delays as soon as possible. He would take a look at the little gift on the way out of the nebula.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“I'm gunna dieee! Heeeeeeelp!!!”

Garrus couldn't breathe, he was laughing so hard.

“Spirits-spirits-spirits-i'm doomed-fuck me!”

The mountainous sniper had to lean an arm on a nearby rock wall, the other around his middle as he wheezed uselessly.

“Why are you laughing?!?! Go get a gun! Why don't I have my knives?! This was a horrible idea!”

Nihrlus was 'trapped' on top of a rocky island in the middle of a fairly sizable pond. The water was shallow enough to wade in, but deep and muddy enough to dig into with toe talons for shellfish living in the muck. His mari had made a request for muriella, the palm sized and savory little clams that lived in the pools that dotted the lands around the preserve's main lake. They overflowed with the monsoon season and dried out in the months after, making now the perfect time to hunt for the delectable little shellfish before natural predators came by during the drier season to steal them all.

“Blue, damnit you bastard, a stick! Throw me a stick! A rock? Something!”
At the moment, his nature-inexperienced lover was standing on the rock shelf in the middle of the pond, tens of meters too far to jump or run for shore, and trapped there by massive, circling, *spiky* fins in the murky waters. Round and round the ripples went, dangerous looking fish making loops of the lone Spectre.

Garrus continued to cackle.

“In *gunna drown you* when I get off of this rock, Garrus Vakarian! I'll tell your mari! Help me *damnit!*”

Threats to tattle-tell on him just made the Detective break out in ever more breathless laughter, and he began to lose the ability to stand, stumbling over onto the grassy shore.

“Fuck meeeeee, I'm *gunna dieeeeee~* Go away, go away, goawaygoawaygoaway,” the carmine torin chanted at his circling watchers, splashing water at them uselessly to try and chase the things off.

When, after several more minutes of teary laughter, the sniper finally got ahold of himself, he fumbled into a graceless stand and walked calmly out into the shallows.

“What *the fuck* are you doing, Blue!? You're *gunna get eatennn!!*”

Garrus walked up to the island, gently pushing the *asmosdaia* fish aside, and climbed up onto the rock shelf with a cocky grin. Nihlus gaped at him for a moment, then glared.

“Oh you have *got* to be kidding me. They're *friendly*?! The damn things look like... like deadly, spiky monster fish that eat people!”

“Orrr.... they're bottom feeders that mostly eat things that are already dead?”

“No. Way.”

“Yeah,” the Detective replied with a grin.
“Fucking dammit!” the Spectre exclaimed while hopping off the rock, eyes narrowed at the innocently curious creatures.

“They're called asmosdaia, or just asmos for short. They're not really edible or dangerous, but if you see them it means there are probably the muriellas we are looking for in the mud here somewhere. They swim in circles to keep water flowing through their gills is all.”

“Why are they so freaking big?”

“Survival trait I suppose. The size is a trick. Those spikes are just hollow, light weight tissue.”

The green eyed torin prodded one. It shimmied away, and went back to circling. “... sneaky fuckers. I guess they're kinda cool though.”

“So... if you're done panicking, shall we keep digging?”

The lanky Spectre looked over his shoulder at Garrus, a dark grin spreading his mandibles. Nihlus spun around slowly, coming forward in a sloshy stalk. The sudden and devious glint in the torin's eyes put paid to the idea that work was what was on his mind. Garrus tensed, eyeing the Spectre sideways and taking a step back. It wasn't enough to save him however, as the operative sprang into a wild leap, sending both Turians splashing down into the muddy water.

The sniper gurgled as he went under, trying to blow air out of his mouth to keep the unsanitary fluid from getting in. Nihlus, however, didn't seem to care, going all in and taking them both down in his surprisingly powerful dive-tackle. Both torin wrestled in the water, spitting out muck and revenge tripping each other until they were both covered in half-decayed pond reeds and mud.

Eventually Garrus had enough and ran for it, parade walking as fast as he could toward shore. The Spectre let him go, barely breathing hard, but smiling from fringe to fringe, satisfied with his revenge.

It took them a half an hour of lazing around the water's edge to work up the gumption to go back to digging, but they eventually managed. The wily Spectre came on to the Vakarian clansman at least twice, but was rebuked by the other torin, who claimed that he felt way too gross at the moment.
Nihlus just laughed, making quips about them being so much dirtier later on that night.

Garrus looked forward to it, expecting he wouldn't have to wait long after everyone went to sleep for the other torin to sneak into his room. He'd been upset when they'd first arrived and mari had directed them to separate beds... but he really should have expected the wild hearted Spectre to immediately break that rule.

It wasn't often he even roundaboutly disobeyed his lenient and wise matrula, but this was definitely going to be one of those times; just like the day he'd forsaken a big scholarship to stay with her in the hospital so many summers ago. That time had been selfless, an unwillingness to leave her injured and alone while his patrem was being an ass and not coming home from the Citadel to see his hospitalized bondmate. Something he'd never entirely forgiven the torin for.

This time however, was completely selfish and relatively simple. He just wanted every minute of Nihlus he could get before the Spectre went off on his next mission. It had a lot to do with quiet fears he never voiced. Garrus had once qualified for the Spectre recruitment program. He knew the statistics of their long term survival, he just... chose not to think about it. To enjoy each minute they did have.

The Detective figured that, at the very least, they would all be going to the same afterlife. Saren too. They would have as long as they wanted then. He didn't think there were merc rings or slavers to deal with in Ylasiun.

Garrus tried to put off thinking of things both hours or years away, and focus on gathering enough clams for dinner. It took the two of them several hours to catch a decent batch of muriella, mostly because the carmine plated Spectre was a curious sort, and kept asking him random questions about things they found, animals that passed by, -anything odd that drew his eye, really. Nihlus' knowledge base mostly consisted of ways to kill things and pop culture. Animal and plant life, beyond what went in poisons, was utterly new and interesting.

“What the hell is that?”

“A preteril. Don't mind him, he won't bother you. They eat insects and plants, mostly.”

“Ooooh, look up! It's so pretty...”

“Huh? Oh, looks like a merillien. They might sing if you're quiet.”
“I am being quiet... sorta.”

“Mmmhm.”

“Spirits of the deep! Look at *that* thing!!”

“Jeez, that... *is* a big one. Keep an eye on it, *volucar* don't normally attack people, but we're definitely in the range of their acceptable diet if they're hungry, and that one is awake at the wrong time of day. They're nocturnal usually.”

“Fuck yeah, I want one.”

“...what?”

“I want one! How cool would it be to *sick* a pet volu-whatever on my enemies?”

“Spirits, Palvi, you're crazy sometimes.”

“Crazy *awesome* you mean.”

“Yes, that is definitely what I meant. How did you pass the psyche evals to become a Spectre again?”

“I lied. A lot.” Nihlus grinned widely, inordinately proud, and Garrus chuckled while continuing to drag his toe talons through the muddy bottom for more shellfish. He found a few here and there, grouped up, and dug them out with his hands to toss in a slowly bulging satchel.

Of course, it wasn't long before the Spectre managed to find *actual* trouble.

“Hey Blue, what's this stuff?”
“Shit, get back, don't touch that!”

“Ohhhhh 'kay...”

“That is Netichik-laos, and it will eat you.”

“Netichik? Like the bugs they export to colonies to start up an ecosystem?”

“No, related, but no. The 'laos' kind are suicidal, and have these... attack drones that pop into acid splashes. It eats right through plate. Just... keep your distance. They won't leave their tree unless they feel your heat signature get within easy range. They're slow, but that acid...”

“Ugh. Acid. I've had enough acid on my hide to last a lifetime. That crazy bitch that fucked me up loved the stuff. Can we kill them?”

“We're not really well prepared to kill a nest of those things right now, Palvi. I'll just... report it to the park rangers. If there's one nest, there are probably more, and these things are definitely not a protected species.”

“Well if they've got cousins that actually play nice, I can see why.”

“Pretty much.”

As Trebia started to reach toward the horizon, Garrus called their hunt to an end. They had a plentiful satchel of muriella, and it was best not to be out at night in the wilds, for obvious reasons. The super-fauna of Palaven that sacrificed metabolic energy on size or speed and not solar-protective plating came out at night.

Moon set was upon them as the two torin shuffled into the back door of the cabin.

“Did you get in a fight with a swamp and loose?” asked Solana the moment they walked in.
“I think so,” Garrus replied with a self-disgusted chuff.

“You should see the other guy!” offered Nihlus.

“Ugh. You are not walking back to the shower room coated in dried swamp slime. You'll track it everywhere if you come in like that, and mari will make me clean it up. I'll grab some towels and a water bucket, just... don't move. Seriously.”

For as grumpy as Sol's reception was, she still devoured the succulent shellfish dinner they'd painstakingly collected, though she was strangely quiet at the table that evening.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I waited so long to write Garrus/Nihlus wilderness adventures! I couldn't make it happen till recently, but I got there! /so happy

Fanfic Recommendation: Spectre Training for Dummies (1329 words) by GlowSpikes (So I pretty much dig through the fics written by or book marked by everyone who kudos this fic, to see if I find another other good reads. It works! Glowspikes stopped by for a read, and look what I found... Kryterius! /squee/ I can only hope it keeps going...
She turned to me and asked the simplest question

Chapter Summary

Nihlus and Garrus take a hike through the jungle.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Please don't kill me duckies. >_> Also, I would highly suggest the music. NSFW.

Chapter Soundtrack: The Glitch Mob - Becoming Harmonious (feat. Metal Mother)

Becoming harmonious
Sensory confluence
See through me
My only wish...
To animate, experience

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus was having one of those moments where he hadn't known something was on his bucket list until it was already happening.

They were having sex in a thunderstorm.

The rain, predicted to be light and hitting after night fall, had caught on a cold front and spread across the sky like ink billowing in churning water. Their afternoon hike through sunny jungle had become a slippery, slow going walk through increasingly heavy precipitation.

Nihlus had gotten depressed, feeling like the precious day was ruined, his subvocals bland and quiet. Then Blue had turned around and pushed him up against a tree with some cheesy one liner that made him laugh because it was so awful. Not that he'd ever complain about having Garrus come on to him. Or look at him. Or talk to him...

One thing had led to another, the opportunity for privacy in the middle of nowhere readily taken advantage of, and now their gear lay scattered around the trail. Discarded and soaked through as the storm broke overhead, wind and rain setting the foliage shaking.
“Nnnnnih... lus...” the Detective trailed off, eyes closed and breathing rough as he was ridden into the loamy ground. Garrus was splayed out across the ground, braced in a lean on his elbows while the Spectre in his lap rocked back and forth at a fevered pace. The Spectre’s own phallus was passingly grinding against the plates beneath him on the forward roll, the on and off sensation winding him up something fierce.

“...yeah..?”

“You're... you are... amazing.”

Nihlus’ subvocals revved at the flattery, drinking it in like water.

“Ya I am. So're you. We're so... fucking... good together...”

The reverberating agreement from the sexually incapacitated torin beneath him brought a half-strength grin to the Spectre’s mandibles. Nihlus tossed his head back, hands braced on Blue’s keel, and continued to ride for all he was worth as the rain showered down upon them.

Time seemed to slow, their coupling lasting forever amid the constant sound of water rushing to the ground, bouncing off of the jungle’s lush leaves and giant trees. The carmine plated torin found himself in an odd stream of thought amid the downpour. His mind felt slowed like syrup, his senses slow to respond to anything but the drag between his legs. Every breath took years, echoing in his chest. Each measured inhale lasted eons, pulling into his lungs humid and heavy.

Nihlus was loving this long, drawn out rise towards peak so much more than he usually did, enamored with the experience. He almost wanted to put off the finish as long as possible, -to just keep squeezing the cock inside him with every muscle still responding as he rode the delirious sniper literally into the ground-, except that their pace seemed... fixed. Immutable, and out of their control. He couldn't seem to stop, or go faster, or slow down... the Spectre was merely a small part of the thunderstorm as it rolled over them, shaking up the world and making it anew.

“Ohhh, mnnnn... spiritsss... aahhhh...” By the sound of it, Blue was trapped as well, lost to the moment. His lover’s breathy moans and vague entreaties made for a sweet, sweet chorus to the greater symphony of nature happening in and around them.

Nihlus felt wild and free, outside the control of physics. Half spirit, but also strangely bound. A servant to the rhythm of their hips and the torin buried inside him.
So high they rose, the edges of his vision whiting out. The hours-or-years of slow building heat reached the highest point it could climb before everything just... shattered. The sky flickered like a flash bang and his heart skipped once, then the Spectre finally came, shouting aloud the unknowable excess of feeling that took him over as he crested that peak. Like lightning it came, and like thunder it rolled away, quickly leaving him powerless and slumping toward the jungle floor.

Garrus caught him before he fell, bringing him in at a slower pace to lay over-top his keel. Nihlus lay still for several minutes, breathing in fits and starts, dazed, watching rivulets of water trail down the stoney collar before his eyes. The rain drops would land on the upper ridge, meeting it first by gravity. The spatter sent half of it away, but the remainder slid down the curve of carapace with increasing speed until it disappeared behind Blue's neck. They were both drenched by now, from crest to toe.

Every nook in his plates felt watery. Even his insides were like liquid, as if he were turning into elemental water from coming apart while soaked in it. The merc born torin could barely think a coherent thought in the aftermath of their intense, ill-advised, better-than-real-life-should-be-able-to-be coming, save for an abiding experience of wetness and breathing.

His first act after realizing he had limbs again was to curl himself over Garrus and cradle the other torin's head to his own, humming love and adoration more through instinctual and simplistic subvocals than words. The other torin rumbled back at him similar things, sounding languid and satisfied. The Spectre trailed fingers down the sniper's cheek plates, watching Blue try failingly to keep his eyes open, fight to breath evenly. Nihlus smiled, nuzzling every inch of fringe and hide he could reach.

Blue was just so... perfect, and Nihlus loved him so... So, SO much. There was no possible way a mess like him deserved... any of this, but he couldn't seem to let go...

He never had been able to. He never would be able to.

Jaw opening, heart sinking and diffusing, the Spectre's fangs came down on soft, tawny brown hide with every intent to steal a taste, and bond him then and there. Nihlus didn't fucking care anymore if he would be in a one-sided bond for the rest of his days. He... just... couldn't... not...

Strong, fear-quick hands came in to pull him away. He struggled, fighting for his heart's desire, but the sniper flipped them and pinned his talons and teeth far away. Still the green eyed torin tried, breathing in the faint scent of Blue hovering over him, trying to make his instincts enact the quintessential Turian bond out of sheer will alone. He could feel the heaviness behind his keel and the rush of blood in his ears that the mated pairs all described, that feeling of a keystone falling into
“NIHLUS!” Garrus roared at him through the heavy rainfall, startling him out of it at the last second and cutting off the low rumble in his chest that had been matching the other torin's previously amorous pitch.

“B-...blue?”

The heartbreak in the sniper's icy blue eyes nearly killed him. The merc born torin couldn't speak, only hum a high keening sound that begged Garrus to let him finish what he'd started. It amounted to a kind of self-destruction, a cousin to rape but with only one lasting victim. To bond without permission, without reciprocation...

The Vakarian clansman rolled off to the side, palms over his face, unresponsive.

It was as good as 'no'.

Nihlus pushed himself to his feet, and ran as far and as fast as he could away from that answer.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well. Fuck. : /

Fanfic Recommendation: Suddenly, Ecdysiast (8304 words) by Lamia-Kuei (Hannah/Sparatus – A very different Hannah Shepard then I write, but oh MY goodness, this fic has some vivid characters. Racy and almost regency-tale romance involving french cafes and macaroons, button down gloves and stockings. It's more like liquid thought bouncing than traditional scenic and pov writing, but I enjoyed it a lot. Spicy_Gnome pointed this out out to me, so send kudos that way.)
I told you what I could

Chapter Summary

Hide and go seek in the jungle is never wise unless you know the land, and know it well.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Not particularly long, but I didn't want to leave you all hanging. Super busy IRL, so this will probably get a re-read and some editing tomorrow night.

Chapter Soundtrack: **Liam's Journey - Path of Aroha**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Garrus was fairly certain he was having a heart attack. Nihlus had keened like he wanted to die, and run off into the trees at break-neck speeds. The sniper had immediately jumped up to go after him, though an actual solution to the problem was so far out of sight as to be nonexistent. He didn't really plan any farther in advance, just chasing after the flashes of carmine plates that he could catch through glossy wet leaves and wildvine bushes.

The Detective was tall, fast, and gene-modded, but there was no catching up to the Spectre’s wild run. He lost sight of Nihlus in under a minute.

“Nihlus?! Nihlus!”

He charged forward regardless of the lack of reply, blue eyes searching for every tiny sign of passage that might give him a clue of the path his lover had taken.
“Come back! Nihlus, I- Palvi, stop running!”

The sound of branches snapping and foliage rushing with movement, barely audible over the wind, was slowly growing more distant.

“I’m sorry! I wish… Fuck, please… Nihlus!”

Finger tips numb, he was cold and tremory even though the rain was warm and the temperature high. The trail had been safe enough but the deeper jungle was dangerous even without adding emotional distraction and careless running. He was terrified of Nihlus running into a nest of something or other and getting seriously hurt or killed. The past few days he’d passed onto the Spectre everything his pari had taught him about the wilds here as a child, but still… the green eyed knife lover didn’t always pay full attention and… and Garrus was trying to think about anything other then the problem at hand while desperately trying to catch up.

Eventually the sights and sounds disappeared entirely, and Garrus was left with nothing to guide him. The sniper stumbled to a halt, catching himself on a mossy tree trunk wider at the base than he was tall. He clutched at his keel, the sense of panic and heart-hurt and sudden adrenaline coming together to feel like a cardiac event.

Nihlus was gone.

Nihlus was gone.

Garrus was naked and alone in the jungle, eyes wide and jaw loose; scared for the other torin, heartbroken, and so completely directionless.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

His Omni-tool pinged, and Nihlus choked on a dry laugh, ignoring it. Of course Blue would
eventually figure out they still had ‘tools on, waterproof and unobtrusive, and send him a message. He’d heard the other torin running after him, calling him back, but he just needed... some space...

'O okay, I'll admit, that's a lie. I don't want or need space. What I need is that paint off his face, and mine replacing it, and that... will never happen.'

The carmine plated merc born curled farther into himself, forehead to knees and lost in the darker whispers of his mind.

'It's my fault for falling in love in the first place.'

'I'm so selfish...'

Why did I do that??'

'I didn't deserve him anyway.'

'He's better off away from me.'

'Screw up. Fucking batshit-crazy screw up.'

The rock shelf overhead screened the rain away, the plants and wild growth blocking most of the sides. There was just him amid the stone, and the sound of the rain that he'd so recently felt apart of in a primal, vividly alive way.

Now he just felt... hollow.
His 'tool pinged again.

Nihlus swallowed heavily and glared at it over the curve of his forearm. He didn't want to hear the probably-very-reasonable words and reassurances that Garrus had for him, or that he was loved even though it didn't mean a-fucking-thing toward changing reality. All the carmine plated torin wanted was for reality to go fuck itself and leave him be until he could pretend to be sane for Blue for five minutes so they could talk about it.

The Spectre could picture it now, the mountainous Detective drawing him in for a bear hug and squeezing the shit out of him. Then telling him off for worrying him. Nihlus would apologize, and Blue would awkwardly try and make things okay between them. They'd have great sex, pretend to not be involved in front of Viviene and Sol, and then...

‘Then what?’

The best he could come up with was that things would go back to the way they were before, and he'd have a little while longer to pretend the Vakarian clansman was his before familial duty stole him away.

Nihlus grit his teeth and pressed his fringe into his knees hard enough to hurt. The very thought of that future cut into him like battery acid and glass shards.

It was also all he would ever get, and he'd... he'd fuckin' take it.

He had so much to smooth over, too damn much, but he needed to be sane first. Calm.

Bonding... it wasn't something you did to someone who didn't love you back, who didn't want to bond you as well. The stories of Turians who bonded one way were the tales of tragedy, deception,
betrayal, and obsession.

Nihlus laughed, and it was as dry as the southern deserts. Tragedy? Obsession? It all sounded like his fucking *life story*.

*What a spirits-damned cliché. Get your shit together Kryik.*

His Omni-tool pinged again, in the sharp chime of a priority message.

The green eyed torin looked up, slightly startled, arms loosening from their grapple hold around his shins.

Did Blue really, *seriously*, message him on prio? Over personal matters?

That was not okay... and it really... didn't sound like something Garrus would do. Filled with trepidation, he checked his inbox. Three messages were bold and unread.

All three were from Saren.

*Shit.*

Nihlus could almost hear the grumbling chastisement to watch his language as he opened them in order, discovering that a mission had gone awry and the other Spectre wanted his help. Worse, he needed to hurry, the initial details making it clear that success was time sensitive.

Like a blessing, his persona for talking to people as the professional and distant Spectre Nihlus Kryik
faded into place on his plates and in his eyes. He flipped over to the vidchat application, and immediately called Garrus.

The sniper answered in a half-second, looking haggard but hopeful.

“Blue.”

“Palvi?”

The echos of Asla, the soul at the center of him that loved this torin too damn much, and the defeated shadow creature in the corners of his mind that needed Blue like plants needed sunlight all reached forward, clawing toward the voice on the other side of the vidcall with desperation. He shoved them down, sticking to business like his life depended on it.

“Saren needs backup. I just got a message from him about it, and I have to get to him fast. What's the quickest way off world from here?”

“...Where is 'here'?”

“I'll send you my coordinates, but I need to go now. We can deal with us later.”

“Right. Of course. Ahhhhhh... okay, there is a Hierarchy airbase for pilot training a few hundred kilometers to the south east. The shuttle back at the cabin is the quickest way there. Where's your ship?”

“Back in dock in Cipritine. Will the airbase have something I can fly long range, or do I need to get back to the capitol?”
Garrus seemed to consider it, rubbing either side of his brow with his free hand.

“It might. They mostly train fighter pilots, but I think they have other air units for secondary certifications as well.”

“Alright. I'll send you my coords. Find me, and get me back to the cabin asap.”

The sniper looked up at him from under heavy browridges, rumbling a quiet tone of acknowledgment, and the screen went dead.

Nihlus left the overhang, and stood where the other torin could spot him easier. He held the shackles of duty close to his heart, allowing their chains to keep him standing when he really just wanted to crawl back under the stone for a good, long while.

He wouldn't though. Saren needed him, and he would never, ever, leave the electric eyed torin high and dry when he needed backup.

Chapter End Notes

Fanfic Recommendation: First Contact (1887 words) by Wheeljack (Some people pregame with jack 'n coke. I 'pregame' with fanfiction. /wink/ Female Ryder/Jaal, ME:Andromeda)
Mellifluous reassurances

Chapter Summary

Saren handles conflict resolution as sensibly as he can.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mexa - A type of Turian sword used in duels. (Canon)

A/N: Hello and welcome to my semi-planned-in-advance, multi-part war arc! Get ready for some trenches duckies! All that blind trust in Saren during ME1 and the 'one of the most decorated Spectres in history' part of Nihlus' dossier had to come from somewhere. So! Medal earning time.

As a fun little aside, I'm posting some of the Hierarchy and war-related Cerberus News Network bits from the canon news announcements at the end of each chapter to highlight some Turian war culture. Those kittybirds are some weird, fascinating people.

(Oooo this is going to be so much fun!)

Chapter Soundtrack: Liam's Journey- Path of Aroha

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren stalked through the assembled ranks of Turian soldiers, his subvocals buzzing with displeasure. The 221st regiment's B and C companies stood at attention, their dwindling numbers very carefully not reacting to the infamous Spectre’s anxiety inducing presence. He passed countless ranks of youthful recruits trying hard to look like professionals, followed by only a small handful of lines with more seasoned members. At the head of the lines stood the door to a pre-fab command building. The numbers were not encouraging considering the conflict at hand, and the Spectre strode into the building with a narrowed gaze, his cybernetic eyes roving over the occupants and zeroing in on the torin responsible.

“General Opstepus. A word.”

The green lines of the General's familia notas bent in an ugly, asymmetrical sneer as his mandibles crooked in disdain.
“I am very busy. Now isn’t the time.

“I insist.”

“We are in a state of emergency, you have no authority here and now, Spectre.”

“Allow me to clarify. You will send your aides and officers away, or they will be here to listen to me take apart your moronic decisions piece by piece. Your choice.”

Thales Opstepus’ throat flushed purple, his subvocals dropping from aggravated into furious.

“I rescind my acceptance of your assistance in the coming battle. Feel free to leave,” the well geared General spat back at him in hostile tones.

Saren’s crest tilted as he considered the torin before him.

“No. Now, the-” before he could continue a particularly foolhardy lieutenant with the crisp uniform of the newly promoted stepped in to grab his arm and drag him away.

Saren refrained from sighing.

Most Turians saw his height and presumed they had the strength to physically overcome him. They saw his face and assumed he was not deserving of respect. It was as if his foreign rank and top-quality gear were invisible, his name and tier irrelevant. Under the current circumstances, and really any future ones as well, they were all incredibly wrong. The hard tug on his arm might as well have been a stray breeze for all it moved the highly augmented and densely muscled torin.

He allowed it, ignoring the shock in the lieutenant’s eyes as he calmly pulled his sidearm with the other hand and aimed it under the tarin’s jaw. He thought the warning to step back was clear enough, and turned away to continue addressing Opstepus.

“As I was saying, the situation is too dire to allow you to continue with a failing strategy. Not only are there twenty four thousand lives on the line, but the growing Turian presence in this area of space has improved local resource availability, significantly lowered the number of reported pirate attacks,
and resulted in a growing Council presence in a previously lawless and troublesome sector. In short: Work with me, or I will take over your campaign for the good of the galaxy.”


“I will kill everyone in this room, and on the base, until the highest tier individual able to lead is myself, if that is what it takes. I will not allow your failure to strategize, or your pride, get in the way of this colony's survival.”

The room froze, and jaws dropped, eyes widening in horror.

Had he really just threatened to kill them all?

Yes. He had.

Subvocals buzzed as the assembled brass hummed to each other, each voice indicating him as the enemy. The previously brave lieutenant drew back, wanting to be away from the focus of those damning tones. A second officer was not so wise, coming at him with a lit Omni-Blade and an angry growl.

The General shouted at his soldier to halt, but the officer's motions were already committed. The torin was lucky that Saren very much wanted every gun arm alive, if possible. The number of potential defenders was already so low. Thus, instead of killing him for the offense, he tossed the attacker across the room and into a wall with a simplified memetic that used a shoulder roll and a flicker of fingers, and no more.

With that vague, barely perceptible memetic the young lieutenant went flying, his crest shattering on the unyielding insta-crete of the pre-fab wall. He slumped to the floor, bleeding and unconscious, the spines of his crest clattering to the ground beside him. Saren trained his pistol on the General, arm steady and eyes calm. Opstepus glared in return, a hand on his sidearm, shoulders tense.

The tone of subvocals in the room picked up a thread of real fear.

'Biotic?!
'Cold blooded...'

'Spirit cursed.'

'Barefaced and mad.'

The voices whispered their accusations, both superstitious and not. The silver-grey torin ignored them, hearing nothing particularly creative or new. Opstepus stared the Spectre down with a gimlet eye.

“So that's how it is, Spectre?”

“It does not have to be. Is resistance your choice as well?”

The room held it's breath.

Eventually Opstepus chuffed, hands coming down on the war table to brace himself, eye shuttering in rageful defeat.

“... No. No it is not.”

“Very well,” Saren holstered his pistol and stepped up to the other side of the table, “To begin, your attempt to handle the situation without sufficient resources or reinforcements was unwise. The Krogan 'Amgos' tribe has enlisted the aid of the barely sentient Vorcha packs that roam the scrub lands to the north, no less than five fully grown broods have somehow thrived in the cave systems out there. They're breeding pyjaks and some sort of marsupial analogue in massive numbers as food and payment for, at my best guess, twelve thousand some odd Vorcha. Those estimates do not include the younglings growing now that will be old enough to fight in a matter of days, the unborn that can hunt in a matter of weeks, or the Krogan themselves. You will not be able to hold this position. Nor will the companies at the Vias or Moloi bases. Furthermo-”

“Seventh River.”
The electric eyed torin blinked at the nonsensical interruption, and was still trying to reason it out when a form jumped at him from the side, a mexta blade aimed for the armor joint at his shoulder. He heard the movement more than saw it, his ears catching the scuff of boots on floor before his mechanically instant eyes flicked to the side and saw the oncoming attack. He let the blade pass by with a small shift of stance, grabbed the wrist of the offender, and snapped it. The blade began to fall, but he caught it in a reverse grip and drew it back above his other shoulder, his mind free to wonder at the turn of events as his body moved to end the threat.

'A keyword of some sort? That he had such a thing prepared is both mildly amusing and entirely dishonorable. So. It is to be this way after all. Subterfuge from a General. How very... un-Turian.'

The mexta came at the torin's neck, sinking into the gap between armor and jawline. The strength of Saren's strike sent it through the windpipe and out the other side for an instant before he withdrew the blade and stepped away. Unlike the first two acts of aggression, his third attacker fell to the ground dead.

As did the fourth... and fifth, sixth and seventh.

It continued, as he had warned, until the idiotic and unworthy leadership of Toros base was dead, save for Opstepus, who was currently bleeding out from a gunshot wound that had clipped his femoral artery. The bullet, from his own gun, stolen and reaimed.

“Sp-spirits... damn you... Art-,” Saren shot him in the skull point blank, bored with the dramatics. He had come here to help them win a small war with a low chance of success against a veritable horde of hostile aliens. Their deaths were nothing but a waste of resources, but an aggravating loss none the less.

He turned away from the dead General and headed for the door, sending a bullet into the broken fringe of the torin he had knocked away with biotics. Better there be no survivors to challenge his story of the events in this room.

The Spectre stepped out of the command building and into the eyesight of the pitiful sixty four remaining senior members of what had originally been two companies of two hundred soldiers each, bolstered by the fresh faces of one hundred and forty two straight-out-of-basic replacements.

The rank and file were so deathly quiet that the planet's light winds made a distant roaring sound across the plains as he looked them over. He moved forward to speak, dropping his subvocals flat and choosing his words carefully. Lying outright would be difficult, but if presented properly, entirely accurate facts could lean the situation in his favor.
“General Opstepus and I disagreed on how best to protect the colony. We fought and he lost. His staff attacked in misdirected anger. I defended myself. Your command structure has been disassembled at a poor time, due to their own choices. I will not leave your company without guidance, reduced as it is in the wake of Opstepus' disastrous command decisions. I have a plan to hold off the Krogan and their allies until sufficient reinforcements can be dispatched from the nearest Hierarchy base, and it remains valid with the numbers we have now. For the colony to survive, we must stay the course. In order to do that, I need the three highest tier to step forward.”

With only the slightest pause three soldiers stepped forward, compelled by the authority in his voice. All three were tarin; two sandy toned soldiers from Palaven with worn plates and sharp eyes, another one from Invictus with power armor and a massive, custom made assault rifle that looked more like a chain gun. They appeared seasoned from the look of their gear, commendation marks, and expressions. Saren nodded at them, then turned back to the line up.

“Good. I want the next four highest tiered as well, so long as you are suited to infrastructure and organizational tasks.”

This recruitment was less clear, with a single torin soldier stepping forward from the front row, followed by a pause. A moment later two more torin came, then there was a very long pause. Finally, from nearly the back, a terrified-looking tarin with no familia notas or commendations on her armor cautiously walked through to the front. The purple eyed soldier was built like a pro-wrestler, but carried herself skittishly. She could not have been much older than sixteen, but came forward none the less, looking about carefully in case someone of higher tier might choose to step up. No one did.

“Very well. All forces dismissed to at-ready posts, you seven with me.”

The seven volunteers stood still, watching him warily, while the other one hundred and ninety nine turned away and resumed their posts. Saren stood straight backed and calm, just as he remembered Desolas standing while waiting on others to do as he told them. The sigh of relief that his take over had gone smoothly, one way or another, was entirely internal. The Arterius clansman did not notice he was still holding a bloody mexta.

Saren was now in command of two hundred and six lives, with the potential for another sixteen hundred if he could rally the other companies of the 221st, several hundred more if the local militia were rallied, and -technically speaking- he had the other twenty thousand or so colonists, though he doubted many of them would be armed beyond basic shields and some older gun models.

So few souls, to do so much.
He would have to spend them very wisely.

Chapter End Notes

06/03/2010 - Cerberus News Network - Hierarchy General to Duel Separatist Leader
“Citadel space is abuzz with the news that highly esteemed General Partinax has
accepted separatist leader Kihilix Tanus' challenge to duel. General Partinax has
survived seven duels, five to first blood and two lethal; Tanus' record is unknown.
Negotiations continue at this hour as the general's staff narrows down a list of weapons.
The general favors a turian sword called a mexta, saying it's harder to cheat in
swordplay than with firearms. Tanus, on the other hand, favors a type of pistol duel
known as a barrier room fight. Despite the excitement, the duel may only minimally
impact the war strategy. General Partinax says the air campaign will continue during the
duel: "The prize here is the life of one enemy, not the entire course of the war." It may
not be merciful, but the general says it is the only condition upon which the Hierarchy
would permit him to risk his life.”

A/N: Poor Nihlus. He is about to hop right out of the 'personal drama' pan, and into the
'colony on the line' fire.

Fanfic Recommendation: Snow (1971 words) by squiggly_squid (Have you ever
wanted to die by cuteness? Read this one if so. Garrus/Femshep & 4 year old twins on
vacation to Thessia in wintertime.)
Unpredictable results from reliable dice

Chapter Summary

The boys wait till the last minute to try and face each other, while Saren is trying to work out how best to fight a massive force with minimal numbers. Viviene Vakarian gently reminds her son that the galaxy is a big place, and she herself came from a distant world. Palaven is not the center of the universe that it pretends to be.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Pahir - Turian word for 'Son' (Credit: MizDirected)

Karifratrus - a blood oath made between Turians, bonding them as siblings in honor rather than blood. It has its origins in ancient times where clan members swore oaths before going into battle. If one of them died, the family and all dependents of the other would be adopted into the survivor’s family. While the oath-swearers are alive, they are bonded as close or closer than blood. If bond-mates are involved, the bond can be a three (or four) way romantic or platonic relationship. Children of one are considered the children of both. Although no longer extremely common, karifratrus is accepted and honored both socially and legally. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Mumbari - A venomous flying insect native to Palaven. Also: A slang term for a Turian 'Black Widow Woman', a tarin who wants the easily stealable wealth or prime genetic material of a torin without the clan ties or greater loyalty to anyone but herself for potential children, unless that becomes convenient. Will often sleep with torin, rob them blind, mortally wound them, and leave the victim for dead.

Tesserar – One of the twelve honor guards of each cluster's Primarch. As a group, they are known as the 'Tesserari', and are loyal to no avah, no clan, and no family above their chosen Primarch.

Optian – A Turian term for a military leader's second in command when dealing with troops that number in the hundreds. A title of respect rather than a specific tier designation, an Optian is usually, but not always, the next highest tiered individual. Regardless of Hierarchy tier however, if the commander of a force goes down in battle, the Optian is the go-to next in line until combat has ended, where in there is down time to figure out who is actually the next highest tier and qualified for the position.

Aquilafero – The standard bearer for each Regiment, a battlefield historian who follows the lives and times of active soldiers, and carries their stories back to the curators of each Regiment's order halls for detailed additions to their chronicles. As the commander of a force stands safely in the far back of a company on the move, the Aquilafero stands just in front of them in line. It it considered the greatest dishonor, even worse then a commander, for the standard bearer to be killed. Though the tactic is considered exceedingly underhanded, occasionally they will be targeted as an attack on a Regiment's morale.
Avunem - Turian closed dialect for ‘uncle’. (Familiar form Avu. Credit: Mizdirected)

Eaugial Spaceport - Cipritine City is in fact a megalopolis, spanning across a broad swathe of land from the Sea of Tiberius' sheer cliffs that rise hundreds of feet over the ocean, moving inland all the way to the Pillars of Nanus, and stretching out for leagues in either direction, thus it is home to many a space port. Eaugial is located in the northeastern part of the city proper, unique in that it was constructed entirely of foreign stone, a type of marbled, royal blue jade mined on a Salarian edge world. It's eye catching color makes it stand out from the surrounding buildings of classical silver, visible even from space.

A/N: Upon trying to research more about modern military ranks I became extremely confused. Everyone does it differently, and some ranks exist in one forum but are absent in another. My thoughts? Screw this. Kitty-birds are roman-themed enough as is, I think I can get away with some incidental rank canoodling. That is to say, I’m keeping positions like ‘general’ and ‘admiral’ because they are recognizable, but I’m slipping in some roman legion titles in various moments of verbal bait-and-switch, plus some authory word tweaking for originality and flavor. It will all be very historically inaccurate, I’m sure.

Chapter Soundtrack: Zack Hemsey - The Way (Instrumental)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Unidentified shuttle craft, halt. You are flying into restricted airspace.”

Nihlus leaned over the side of the pilot's chair, occupied by Blue, and tapped the coms panel to reply to the airbase's hail.

“This is Spectre Nihlus Kryik. I'm in need of emergency, high speed transport back to Cipritine's Eaugial Spaceport. What do you have available, and where do I land?”

“The northern hanger has our fighter jets, sir. That would the fastest thing on base. Landing pad L2 is on the east side of that hangar, sending coordinates to it now. We'll have a delegation waiting for you, please have your credentials available for base security.”

“Will do, Kryik out.”

The cabin descended back into the same silence it had held since they'd gotten on board, right after he had given Viviene a rushed explanation about a non-specific Spectre emergency, and taken off with her pahir and the only shuttle. Both of them were still in muddy clothes and water logged boots,
his combat gear piled messily inside a couple of duffel bags.

He felt like shit for leaving mid-week, and making off with the only transport to boot. Even worse, Blue's mari had hugged him like family and ordered him to come visit sometime.

'Don't be a stranger;' were her words.

The carmine plated torin had smiled reassuringly for all he was worth and turned away while the last dregs of his inner child screamed at him to fuck it all and stay there.

A mari that didn't hate you? Or laugh when you cried? Or treat you like a parasite? Didn't unload you into basic training the second you turned fifteen?

So impossible. So priceless.

Ohhhh, how he wanted to stay.

The situation with Blue though... He needed to be gone. Like yesterday.

'Fuck, 'yesterday' would have been perfect, before I went and screwed everything up.'

Nihlus was actually relived that leaving wasn't optional. Saren didn't ask for help often, and mid-mission requests for back-up were rarer still. The details on the briefing had been slim, but the words, 'colony may be lost' stood out well enough. Just a few more minutes, and he'd be in a fighter jet back to the Widmanstat, and this whole... situation could wait until later. Or never. Maybe never.

“Palvi,” Garrus said, as he finished typing in landing coordinates into the computer and stood.

'Oh no.'

“Take me with you.”
'Abso-fucking-lutely not,' was what he thought. The half-assed misdirect that he managed to say was, “No, I can't do that. This mission is going to be too dangerous, and I won't drag you out onto a battlefie-“

“Bullshit. You've seen my records. A battlefield is... probably where I belong. Take me with you.”

“I can't... do that.”

“Can't or won't?"

“I... I-I... I just can't have... I have to focus, and you're a dis-”

He was cut off when Garrus, -sweet, gentle Garrus-, shoved him back into the bulkhead and stole reverie like the sun wasn't going to rise tomorrow. The tongue in his mouth demanded everything he had to give and then some. The fear of this taking him over until there was nothing left fought with the sudden and burning desire in his core. His mind whispered a vaguely self-destructive wish to just give in and let the undertow of addiction and emotion pull him under.

'Spirits... of the Deep. He is beyond sexy when he's forceful. Fuck yessss...'

Nihlus tried to bring his hands up and drive the sniper off, but his own limbs betrayed him, pawing at the still-damp fabric and gripping the muscular waist beneath.

All of the sudden the Detective stepped away, looking ragged and a touch feral.

“Don't... you dare... call me a distraction. You... You...” Garrus closed his eyes, fists tight, and seethed for a moment before taking a breath, “Promise me you'll come and find me when this mission over.”

“Blue, I-”

“Promise. Me.”
The low base growl and sharp eyed look had him pinned, and he nodded faintly. A galaxy famous Spectre, held to a wall by gaze alone. He'd laugh at himself for it later, for now he was too busy trying to tell his libido to shut up, his inner child to toughen the fuck up, and his inner professional to tighten down the straps on his mask so he could get some work done. There just... wasn't time for this bullshit with the sheer number of lives on the line.

“I... promise. I will. Just... let me go.”

The air fell out of the sniper in a sigh like stones, and Nihlus could do nothing but hold still as the Detective came back to him again to press their fringes together and sweep a thumb over his cheekridge.

*There* was the gentle soul Garrus normally was. Apparently some wrathful passion lived in him too. Nihlus was both slightly ill and deliriously turned on that he'd been the one to bring it out. He had no idea what to think about that; too keyed up, too confused, and half high on reverie that felt ten times more potent then it should. He'd be folding metal sheets into tiny birds for days on this one, but... later. Definitely... later.

The ship's nav panel pinged at them, and the flooring jarred lightly in an automated landing. Beside them, the door panel went green to indicate safe exiting conditions.

Nihlus hit the button to open the airlock, and moved away to grab his luggage.

He turned to go.

Garrus took a step after him.

The green eyed Spectre looked back, and paused for a half a step before forcing his legs to keep moving.

The sniper took another step after him, watching him silently from under a lowered browridge. Nihlus flipped around to walk backwards after the short drop to the ground, his back to the landing pad's entry zone where the local security force no doubt waited to confirm his identity before begrudgingly handing him one of their aircraft.

Garrus followed his steps as far as the shuttle exit, reaching up with both hands to grip on either side
of the doorway's top panel. Nihlus continued to backpedal, watching those icy blue eyes trace his slow, inevitable leaving.

'Spirits, those eyes...'

Heart in his throat, he turned away as he neared the gaggle of base sec and switched gears to focus on talking his way into a fast ride back to the capitol.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Sir,” came the gravelly drawl of the local regiment’s new second in command. Saren turned and waited patiently for Tia Pyrosa to speak.

“The last scout team just came back into visual. They’ll be on base in thirty.”

“Very well. Thank you.”

The weather worn tarin nodded and marched off to continue other duties. Electric eyes turned back toward the war table and it’s ever elaborating display as he set his Omni tool to ping a reminder in twenty five minutes. The silver-grey Spectre would need the distraction to pull him out of the deep-thought strategizing that he was doing at the moment. Mental hoops he was only able to jump because of the orderly competence of the staff who had stepped forward to help him lead this campaign.

Originally a *Tesserar* for Palaven’s Primarch, Pyrosa’s presence was something of a lucky break. The tarin was far and away old enough to retire, but so thoroughly augmented and gene-modded from a lifetime career as the captain of the Primarch’s constantly challenged ‘honor’ guard that she remained field capable and an effective officer at an impressive one hundred and twenty four.

He had appointed her to second in command, as *Optian*, right from the start.

Her look alike, with matching sandy colored plates and maroon familia notas, was a distantly related
niece by the name of Anjya Pyrosa. The middle aged tarin was from a branch clan, born and raised on an edge world the Pyrosas were bank rolling for good media. She was curt to the point of being abrasive, but her files indicated a competence with assault rifles and ordinance that was possibly Spectre class. An asset for a battlefield if not for conference room; thus he kept the tarin on standby, busy with supply checks and minutia.

His fourth in command was strangely enough the 221st Regiment’s Aquilafero, the officer who bore the 221st Regiment's banner into battle and observed, recorded, and chronicled the proceedings of each conflict to bring back to the team of historians in their order hall on Palaven. Aquilafero Achilla Losmius was a mellow tarin; young, pretty, and entirely disinterested in people except as subjects for her written works.

She also happened to be an excellent strategist, and a decent sniper; the combination a vague reminder of his oath brother. Thankfully, the other sniper would likely be following in Nihlus’ wake, and he would have at least two of their ilk to watch his back when the fighting came to a head.

“Arterius,” called Losmius in a voice like whiskey and amber glaze, “Here?”

He zoomed in to the potential choke point with his optics, a location with good topography if a bit far from the main colony, -and resupply-, for his liking. A high potential for getting cut off, but the lay of the land looked good.

“Possibly. It is fairly distant from useful fall back points though. As an emergency routing point for regrouping, perhaps.”

“Mmm,” she merely replied, and they went back to brain storming.

While Aquilafero Losmius stood silently on the other side of the war table, mild gaze observing the shifting data in stillness, Optian Pyrosa was constantly moving in and out of the room, organizing their existing force for a quick retreat to Rhom base should the Amgos tribe decide to test the flagging strength of Taros base again. The Krogan and their Vorcha ‘allies’ were very clearly getting restless, and each brushing engagement was only wearing down the Hierarchy's forces while ramping up the blood lust of their aggressors.

If they pushed again it would be time to pull back or risk being decimated.

The younger Lieutenant Pyrosa zipped by as well, talking rapid fire on her Omni-tool while headed
for the long range coms room. Saren had most recently tasked her with gathering the other companies of the 221st on world and available militia to their gathering point. Or more specifically, getting them to fall in line with the other companies already under his leadership. The tarin was doing a decent job of it, constantly on the line with someone, usually yelling at them vigorously to get their boots in gear.

The timer on his Omni-tool pinged, and the Spectre left off strategizing for debriefing the scout teams. Daylight was fading as he stalked into the base's lone, make-shift meeting room, not liking the haggard and exhausted look of the occupants. The set of their mandibles spoke of ill tidings arriving sooner than he would prefer.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Garrus, sweetheart, please tell me what's wrong?”

Elbows on his knees, the icy eyed torin sat on the low porch at the back of the cabin, gaze lowered and focus distant. Viviene sat down right next to him, and set her head on his shoulder, lamenting how grown her pahir was. She used to be able to set her cheek ridge over top his horns and sling an arm around his shoulders. Now her head barely reached his broad shoulders, fingertips settling on the far side of his carapace.

The Vakarian clanswoman waited patiently while her first born mulled, giving him time to find the right words to either express himself or shrug her off. He'd done a lot of the former as a child, but mostly the later as a teenager. She was hoping he'd switch back to the former as an adult. It was hard to be there for a stubborn, prideful soldier that only fell to admitting he was having trouble with something when the problem was far-and-away too big to handle anymore.

Garrus got that from her, she was sure, and it made Viviene feel a little responsible for helping him learn to not do that. She'd done it for years as a youthful tarin, and it hadn’t ever done her much good. Spared her pride perhaps, but not eased her way or made troublesome situations go smoother.

The early afternoon light was warm, as was her son's admittedly mud-caked side, and she felt herself drift for a while relaxing into him as the torin took his sweet time. Eventually her boy sighed, and Viviene struggled to pull her attention back to the moment. There was a small, panic-inducing bit of drag to the shift in focus. It took a moment longer than it should have. She shoved down the mild stomach-flipping fear that roiled in her gut at having trouble with clarity of thought. The Vakarian clanswoman felt like a ticking time bomb, and it was terrifying, but now was not the time to worry about herself.
Right now, something had her soft hearted *pahir* broken down on a porch, still and silent and thoughtful. If she had to guess, the tarin would say it was something to do with Nihlus or his mission. The specifics were important though. No way to untangle the threads until you could see the knot they made.

Garrus sighed again, heavy and slow, and his mandibles fluttered in the corner of her vision as if he were trying to use words, but they failed him. He went quiet again, and she nuzzled a little into his shoulder, hoping it wasn't too much 'invasive mari' for a grown torin to take. Her big hearted Detective didn't complain or move away though, so Viviene took what she could get and focused on playing the mental games the rehab doctor had drilled into her to keep her mind sharp. She'd sit here all night, if that's what he needed.

Another thing she'd learned the hard way many years ago, to give people time to find their own words, and not to rush them for her own curiosity or worry.

“I think... a-ah...”

“Yes?”

Viviene could see the muscles of his throat shift as he swallowed, his jaw line quivering with nerves.

*He's... nervous? How strange.*

“I'm,” he took one last quick inhale, eyes to the horizon, and finally formed the words hanging heavy on his crest, “I'm in love with Nihlus. I want to bond him. It's mutual... and I know I can't. Pari would murder me. Avah Vakarian would strip me of *notas* and toss us both into Trebia. Just... so screwed... also think I'm mostly homosexual. Had a... a *mumbari* come after me. Haven't been with a lot of tarin since. There's a third person we both like too, and I-”

Garrus stuttered to a sudden halt, his stored supply of expression-fuel running drying mid-sentence. He dropped his head again, subvocals a dull sort of overwhelmed and hopeless.

Viviene blinked, slightly startled.

*Oh. That's what this is all about?*
“Sweetheart, it's very obvious you've got quite the hang up on that torin. Maybe I'm biased as your mari, but I would say you're a bit young to bond just yet, though I know you've got some social pressure to do so-”

“Some? I can't go six months without a 'check-in' call from one of the avahs, asking too many pointed questions. Or pari.”

“Well they're just nosy, and your pari is no better. Don't forget he's a detective at heart too, hmm? He gives me leading questions and plays good-cop-bad-cop with Solana against me over what to cook for dinner. You know how he can be. Castis... would be... upset about Nihlus being a Spectre, but he'd have to come to terms with your choices eventually. I hardly think bonding an illustrious, decorated, kind hearted torin is the worst match you could make. I doubt it would incite Nenia to take your marks either... and when were you going to tell me about some tarin trying to-”

“Mari,” Garrus interjected with tired exasperation, “The clan leaders made it very clear to me that I was to bond an approved female by age thirty five, pretty much 'or else’.”

“Oh they can stuff it. What can they do to you, really?”

“Take my colony markings? Exile me? The clan paid for all my education, most of my augments, and I... beyond duty, I owe the clan for where I am today. Worse, they've got the power to see to it that I can't find a job anywhere in Council Space.”

“So?”

“... So??”

“Really Garrus, it isn't like you need to work. I'm bound to croak a bit early, and a goodly chunk of my retirement allotment will be going to you and Sol. With only the two of you...”

“I can't just... not work.”

Viviene chuckled, patting what muscular shoulder she could reach.
“Oh you might have to get a little creative not to get bored, but the farther colonies are always so desperate for supplies or a good gun for hire who'll keep their word.”

Garrus stared at her, jaw slightly unhinged.

“Mari... are you... suggesting I elope? To where? The Terminus Systems?”

She laughed huskily at his incredulity.

“Oh my dear, sweet pahir. It's so obvious you were born on a core world sometimes. It's a big galaxy out there, hmm? You don't have to play Palaven's power games. You don't have to work on the Citadel in C-Sec.”

His jaw clicked shut.

“I... pari said I did. My aunts... uncles... teachers... Everyone has always made it clear-”

“Did I?”

His icy blue eyes blinked off into the tree line, speechless for a moment.

“... no. You always told me-”

“To follow your heart.”

“Spirits. You've said that to me since I was... five? Six? I assumed you meant... situationally? I never thought you were telling me to just... throw off my duties to the clan...”

“I wasn't. The Vakarian clan has always done well by me, Garrus. By all of us. The trick is to balance duty with passion, and make sure they fuel each other, not stifle. If you're truly in love...”
“Yes. I... Yes. Definitely.”

“Then... give it to them gently? Take it slow. Perhaps introduce Nihlus to your father as a close acquaintance first?”

“Spirits.”

“What?”

“I'm still getting over the idea that you aren't upset with me at all. The idea of Nihlus meeting pari, or hell, avu Tigus...”

“It would have to happen eventually. With any mate you chose.”

“... So back to this eloping idea.”

Viviene laughed again, even brighter, heartened to see some of the weight easing from her pahir's crest.

“None of that unless it's the only option that remains, if you please. I'd like to see you every now and then in the time I have left. Exile would be bothersome to work around.”

Garrus turned his big, soulful blue eyes on her, finally reaching back to share in the one arm hug.

“I... yeah. Sorry. I just... what's the right thing to do here? I can't tell who I'm supposed to listen to.”

The tarin hummed softly, patting her pahir's knee.

"Sweetheart, a side of effect of having unique points of view is that all your loved ones, everyone really, will have a different perspective. It never hurts to hear them out or ask for advice, but in the end only you can decide what's 'right' within your own views."
"I wish it were simpler..."

"Oh me too, but that's the price we pay for being self aware, isn't it?"

"Can't I just be a rifle instead? Shoot, shoot more, not have responsibilities outside of shooting..."

"No, dear."

"Damn."

She giggled, and elbowed the cheeky torin for his snark.

"You couldn't sneak around and make out with handsome Spectres in your bedroom if you were a rifle."

Garrus choked a little at being called out.

"How did you know!?"

"I didn't before. Was just guessing really, but... I do now."

Her boy groaned in defeat at being outmanuvered so easily. He quickly attempted to change the subject, and she let him do so with a wry grin.

"I still think pari would try to kill him on sight."

“Then plan a strategy in advance, dear. Arrange for an audience he can't be seen being bullheaded in front of. If you want to beat society at it's own game, you do have to play into it in the first place.”
“I'm not exactly good at people.”

“No, but if you decide Nihlus is your forever you've got my blessing to try, for what it's worth. You know I will always back you up, and a torin's first avah—”

“Is his mari.”

“That's right, sweetheart. Regardless of your personal choices, just try to do your best for the clan that has held us high, and the people below you counting on your good judgment to see things through, but... don't sacrifice too much of yourself to do it? You've got to find a balance between what you need and what you can give. There is only so much of you Garrus, and an endless number of causes and demands on which to expend yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah, there really is. Keeping ahead of crime on the Citadel is difficult enough... I have no idea how pari expects to keep on top of things here if he wins the election.”

“Sheer bloody mindedness, most likely. And long hours in the office, of course. Nothing new there. So, tell me about this mumbari? And who is this third person?”

Garrus set a palm over his mouthplates, dragging it down past his chin in time to a bracing inhale.

“Where to start... so okay... I might have sworn karifratrus-”

“Goodness, you did what? When!?”

“Nihlus.”

“Hey, I'm in orbit. What're my landing coordinates?”

“Sending them now... you are alone?”
“...yeah.”

“Unfortunate, but I am pleased you have arrived. Our main forces just lost the forward base, and still the last two companies of the 221st refuse to pull back to the main colony without orders from Palaven High Command. Perhaps two Spectres insisting they abandon the outposts will work better than one. Their obtuseness is wearisome. I shall see you at the landing pad. I hope you are well rested, we have much to do.”

“Yep. See you soon.”

Nihlus cut the feed, taking a moment to bash his skull none-too-gently on the side of the Widmanstat's command depression.

Yes, he was alone. Yes, it was unfortunate. No, he was not well rested.

At least he was here though, so at least one of Saren's expectations would be met. The carmine plated torin hopped up after getting the landing data in, making sure his extended ground mission gear was ready to go, and stuffing a few extra stims and 'mood boosters' in a side pouch.

He really, really hoped there was downtime between the battles to fuck, drink, and get high. The Spectre desperately wanted to forget that he'd promised to go back and face Blue again after this was over. Saren would be grumpy as fuck if he caught Nihlus using substances during the mission, but the torin felt he would do better if there was the promise that the helpers were there waiting just in case he needed them.

He packed a small cache of Palavan-grown kava sachets as a bribe on the off chance he did need some chemical zen and his former mentor noticed.

Well prepared with all the knives, ordinance, and stims he could carry, Spectre Kryik stepped from the airlock of the Widmanstat ready to go to war and forget his troubles.

Chapter End Notes
06/04/2010 - Partinax and Tanus Agree to Barrier Room Duel

“As reports of strafing runs and bombardments filter in from urban centers across the Diluvian Wildlands, all eyes are on General Partinax. Negotiations have ended in agreement upon a barrier room duel between the general and Kihilix Tanus in two days' time. In this duel type, combatants armed with pistols enter a room with an opaque retractable wall dividing them. When the wall is dropped, the duel begins. Representatives from both sides will monitor the proceedings, which will be recorded on visual media. Per turian custom, the records will not be made available for public distribution. The general's staff must now locate a neutral meeting place that is unlikely to be an ambush site for either side -- trust is difficult to come by in this conflict.”

A/N: I think I mentioned this before, but for anyone waiting on updates or in need of something to read, check out chapter 8 of my Manifesto of Mindcanon and Plothole Fills. There is a fanfic recommendation master list on there with the fic from the end of every chapter posted thus far. Speaking of! If you have a great fic you think should be on there somewhere, by all means message me, or leave a link in the comments on that chapter. I'm always looking for good fics to add. :D <3

Fanfic Recommendation: Snowmelt (8973 words) by Lamia-Kuei (Best line: “Well excuse me for assuming that Saren on the couch in nothing but a bedsheet was the result of some chemical manipulation.” Hahaha. No, but really, this fic is where I got the idea that Turians are all about quick bursts of speed and pin point strikes versus human endurance and resilience. I'd probably say that Salarians compete in galactic martial arts by thinking, and reacting, quicker than anyone, but lack the strength to do a lot with it in one go; where as Asari have a great deal of mental and physical grit to just keep coming, fortitude and determination, but lack the speed or strength of the others.)
A recipe for an excellent cocktail

Chapter Summary

Garrus is left behind, and he managed to get into trouble anyway.

Chapter Notes

Leixcon:

Filian - Turian closed dialect for 'Sister'. (Credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: Duuuuuuude!!!! Anyone here play XCOM 2? Some wonderful modder on the Steam Workshop made a Palaven Mod for XCOM to feature Turian soldiers as part of your forces. “Commander, the Turian Hierarchy has expressed its utmost gratitude for Humanity’s aid on Palaven, and has vowed to return the favor by eliminating the Alien threat. Several high-profile individuals have signed up for the task, as well as members from their Navy and Cabal Units.” You can play with NPCs like Nyreen, Nihlus, or Saren, or you can use the in game tools to make you own unique Turian, marks, fringe style, plate coloring, armor and weapons too. Cabals even. It's fuckin' amazing!

XCOM2: ME3 Palaven Update

Chapter Soundtrack: Camo & Krooked - Climax

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thirteen, twelve, shit-shit-shit, nine, eight, shiiii~,” trilled the carmine plated Spectre in a wild, almost-laughing shout.

“Nihlus! Language!” his partner barked from a few steps behind.

The younger agent slid into cover, cackling like a madman. Saren followed suit several meters away, bouncing over a rock formation like a hurdle jumper in zero gravity and diving behind the hopefully-dense slate. As they got into position with little time to spare, he continued to count down, hands sliding up to cover dark brown aural canals tightly.

“Four! Three! T-”
A massive explosion shook the world, sending dust flying high from the sheer earthly vibration of it. The detonation hit the air a moment later, sending debris flying past their cover, scree and sand along with variously sized chunks of rubble impacted their cover or flew by. As the sonic blast faded, dirt and grit rained down around them, plinking against their helms like hail.

Nihlus grinned broadly.

“One?”

Across the distance between hiding spots Saren's helm turned to face him, tilting in an annoyed cant. The green eyed operative easily imagined the flat look the other torin was giving him, even while his fellow Spectre's subvocals hummed with vague relief. Their little bombing run had been something of a near failure turned great success, what with them being detected mid-infiltration into the largest of the Vorcha's spawning caves while carrying most of the colony's non-nuclear explosive munitions. They'd decided to shoot their way through though, already close to the best spot to drop the payload according to scans.

Some tunnel collapses via grenades, a helluva lot of ammo, and far too many of his throw-away knives later, the explosives had been planted, the detonation timer set, and the two Spectres had run for it. Thankfully, they were both better than average distance runners for Turians, as Saren had augmented joints along with biotics to lighten himself, and he had a lanky runner's build that lent itself well to long steps.

Nihlus tallied their success in his head as 'Fucking Assholes 0, Good Guys 1', and stood up to dust himself off.

Saren reclaimed his feet as well, slowly climbing up the chunky slate to get a look at their handiwork. The younger torin wandered around his own cover to take a peek as well, whistling appreciatively at the jagged remains.

Not a full minute ago the land here had been mounded, a natural cave system further dug out and piled atop of to make room for one of the voracious, highly adaptive Vorcha broods that had taken up residence out in the wastelands that no one else wanted. The damn things had bred rampantly, living and dying too quickly to learn so much as basic speech. Inbreeding, in-fighting, and cannibalizing to hell and back until the scrabbling, hissing creatures barely resembled the civilized Vorcha that worked for a living on Asari worlds and raised two-point-five kids in their suburban apartments.
There wasn't a mound anymore.

The two Spectres had just taken down a solid fifth of the threat against the colony in one go. Unfortunately, it had taken just about all the explosives on world plus their own stores of hyper-dense and high yield devices, the lot of it only mobile thanks to Saren's biotic proficiency with Lift. Unfortunately the two Council Agents lacked the munitions for a second go, and his partner was looking shaky as it stood. That was alright though, they had plans to trim down the numbers of two more broods, and possibly some of the Krogan, hopefully before the wastelanders could retaliate for this little preemptive strike.

Saren climbed back down, stiffly moving off from their cover and toward the nearby location where they'd left their commandeered shuttle and pilot. In an attempt not to abrade the other torin's pride, Nihlus shifted into former mentor's space and threw a companionable arm around his waist for mild support while quickly jumping into a conversation topic that would hopefully distract the weary biotic from pulling away.

“Alright! One down, four to whittle at while we can. The gas canisters I've got cooking up back at base need about six more hours of steeping to be as effective as possible before the little assh- I mean, the little jerks become immune to it, soooo we should stuff our faces, and then probably sleep for a few.”

“I must fist ensure Losmius had finished the program that will precisely crash the three non-critical orbital satellites on command with the necessary precision for use as alternative orbital bombardment. I would prefer to review her finished product before we put it into use if at all possible, as a critical error there could just as easily have them landing on us as the intended targets, and there is neither time nor spare satellites to test it with. Also, I do need to check into the other Pyrosa's progression on the last company of the 221st, considering that they still think idleness is favorable to acting without orders. Ah, and also we must ensure the militia has made a full sweep of the colony for appropriate weapons. It occurs to me that I may not have precisely mentioned that to the militia leader, and I have discovered that I must very explicitly lay out orders if there is to be any hope of basic siege preparations to be done. We should also stop by the coms room for updates on the back-and-forth with the local cluster's Primarch to see what reinforcements are or are not coming. Then there is the team of trap makers on the east side of the colony. We should stop by their operation and ensure they are setting up the choke point in the canyon to my specifications. Last time I touched base with their team lead they had cut corners I specifically told them not to, an-”

“Hey, heeeey. Saren, seriously, you're not gunna to be able to min-max your pawns like some old school general with all the time in the world here. Also, you gotta eat and sleep after carrying all that boom through those tunnels.”
“Food and rest are of minimal importance right now.”

“How about some ration bars at least? We don't want you auto-cannibalizing when calories are easy to come by.”

“Reasonable.”

Nihlus hummed positively at the other torin as they stepped inside the waiting shuttle, taking a seat beside his partner as the distracted torin stared off into the middle distance, likely thinking a thousand meters an hour about the next piece in his master plan to save everyone. The carmine plated Spectre stood back up after take off and nabbed some ration bars from the ship's supply cache, unwrapping one half way and shoving it into the other torin's claws. Saren took it and ate mechanically, gnawing his way inattentively through six bars before waving off a seventh.

His protégé snorted, biting into the rejected rectangle of salty nuts and grains himself. Food wasn't of 'minimal importance' when you could down six times the calories an average adult was supposed to have in one sitting without paying attention. Particularly when you were smaller than the average. Cabals were some freakishly heavy eaters, and Saren was especially bad for some reason.

Nihlus downed two bars for himself, and went hunting for water, finding a cup beside the onboard bathroom’s sink. 'Good enough,' he thought, and chugged several glasses before taking some out to his partner who had moved on to typing an email. He delivered three or four cups while the silver-grey agent went about arranging more minutia with increasing sluggishness.

Both of them fed and watered with the bare minimum requirements to operate, the green eyed Spectre plopped back down and checked the ETA on their arrival back to base.

“Hey,” he elbow-nudged Saren, “we've got over twenty till landing. Take a nap, I'll keep watch.”

Saren ignored him for several more moments, finishing an email with typing that was beginning to resemble bird pecks rather than his usual quick flicking of talons. Nihlus suspected the other torin hadn't stopped going since he'd arrived here days ago, and was probably caught somewhere between too paranoid to sleep around strangers and too busy to take the time to get back to his own ship for long with all the details he could be arranging instead. But maybe, with someone he trusted there...

“You are being rather much like a care-taker today, Nihlus. Not something you usually pay attention to. Learning from Garrus are we?”
He hid the wince that wanted to flick in his mandibles, and ignored the slight churn in his gut at hearing Blue's name.

“Ahhh, well, maybe... I mean, it works, doesn't it? You always seem to do better when he's around to bother ya into sleeping and stuff. I can't say I'm much better, with how often he's bribed me into going to bed instead of staying up late.”

“Hmph. I stay up late to get more work done. You're generally playing time-wasting games or shopping for knives in online catalogs.”

“Hey! I go through a lot of them, alright? Example A: all of those helpfully silent kills I made not ten minutes ago, thank you very much, and they aren't 'time wasting' games. It's called 'leisure activities'. You should try them sometime. Reduces stress.”

“Mnhmmm.”

Nihilus rolled his eyes, giving up arguing in favor of getting back on topic.

“Aaaaaanyway, twenty minutes. Sleep, alright?”

“I... suppose it could not hurt. Wake me before we land.”

“Will do.”

Nihilus wasn't sure if Saren actually fell asleep, or just meditated, during the quickly traveled distance back to base. He didn't bother to ask, knowing the answer would probably be dismissive either way. He himself spent most of the ride trying to focus on the organizational details he was encouraging his partner to avoid for a short while, in favor of thinking about the third torin that should have been in that cabin with them.

Then again, those tunnels had been dark and that adrenaline filled run had it's fair share of very close calls. Maybe it was better that Blue was somewhere safe. If he or Saren died out here, the galaxy lost a couple of crazy assholes that society would rather forget. If Garrus did... well then, Palaven lost one of it's very best and brightest.
Okay, well maybe he was a little biased, but it was still pretty true...

Garrus ducked and the glass bottle flew over his head and smashed dramatically against the wall behind him. That same motion easily turned into a sideways tumble that took him between two torin and into a booth. From there, he popped up hoping to get some bearings, only to have a random person he'd never even met take a swing at his face. The Detective blocked it with one arm, while making an open palm strike with the other that sent the stranger tumbling back into a sea of bodies.

A sea of brawling bodies, that is.

“YOU!!” screamed the torin that he'd had the original disagreement with, spotting him amid the roiling crowd and pointing an unsteady talon his way. Several people looked up at the shout and followed his talon's direction, eyes zeroing in on the sniper without knowing who was yelling, or why, just that someone had picked a target.

“...damn, is it because I'm so pretty? No wait, it's probably just because it's Tuesday.” the stone colored torin groused before diving behind the bar and using it as visual cover to change positions.

“GET BACK HERE!!”

Garrus grabbed the edge of the bar and back flipped over it, landing in a fairly graceful crouch on the other side in a rapid movement. It only took a moment for the torin following him to make it around the corner to where he'd just been.

“SPIRITS DAMNIT WHERE DID THAT FUCKING CLOACA GO?!!?!”

The light grey torin who was after him didn't appear to be quitting, and was somehow managing to move through the throng of bar-fight-gone-full-tilt without much trouble while searching for him. Garrus thought that was pretty damn unfair, seeing as he couldn't seem to stand still for two seconds before someone took a swing at him.

“ARGGG, I AM GOING TO FIND YOU!!!”
The Detective didn't actually know his aggressors name, tier, or clan even, but the torin had insulted Saren to the whole bar when the Spectre's recent exploits had been mentioned on the news, and the blue eyed Detective had been just drunk enough to yell a tell-off back. One thing led to another, and suddenly a competition of witty insults that the other torin was loosing horribly turned into an all-out brawl in this rough little bar in south-eastern Cipritine's old entertainment district.

“FUCKING, FUCK, I AM GOI-THERE YOU ARE!”

“Who, me?”

“ARGGG!”

“Oh shi-” was all the sniper got out before the other torin crashed into him, and the two people behind him, dog piling them up in a tangle of limbs. Garrus struggled to roll free, but his drunken attacker had a decent hold on one arm, and he was busy blocking punches and talon swipes with the other. They ended up kneeling for a second, then almost making a stand before someone over balanced and someone else came flying at them from a different confrontation.

All of the sudden he and his new friend went crashing through the soldiered together wall panels of aluminum and steel, falling into the establishment next door, which just so happened to be a music shop full of dime-a-dozen and mass produced string instruments, drums, and a variety of other sound-making implements.

The bar fight spilled through the hole, drunken rabble eager for more room and the promise of property destruction. They hit the shelves and things went flying, make shift racks and unstable cases coming apart under minimal pressure. One torin picked up a long, multi-stringed instrument and whacked her neighboring brawler over the head with it.

Garrus winced, the growing cacophony playing hell on his mildly augmented hearing.

Vrrrooom! Rrrrommmm! Vrrmmm, mmm, mmm vrrmmm!

Chinkchinkchink~ Chink~ Chiiink-chi-chink~

Vrrrooom! Rrrrommmm! Vrrmmm, mmm, mmm vrrmmm!

Chinkchinkchink~ Chink~ Chiiink-chi-chink~
Metaphorically bleeding from the ears, the icy eyed torin made a heroic leap for the shop’s front door, but stalled upon finding it to be far better secured than the wall itself. Being as he was in a fairly bad part of town, of course the store front was covered with metal grating after hours. He turned back around to eye the mess of alcohol powered, gleeful fighting that continued to erupt from the ever-widening portal back to the bar.

That... was not the way to go.

He looked around. Down, to all sides, peering into the darker corners... not even a back door, -which was so against city fire codes as to be ridiculous.

Police sirens blared in the distance, and suddenly he realized what it would do to his pari’s election chances for him to be found here, amid all this chaos, at fault or not. Horror dawning on his face and desperate, the Vakarian clansman looked up.

A ventilation shaft to the next level of slums above them. Right over his head.

With a short prayer of thanks to the spirits, and a thick swallow of pain at remembering who had first gotten him into an air duct for the purpose of traveling, Garrus crouched before making a leap for the grating. He caught it and held on for a moment before he and the covering panel came falling back down. He held up the poor quality metal square to glare at it for a second, silently judging it's security value, before tossing it aside and making a second leap.

Thankfully the ceiling wasn't high, and the Detective managed to escape the increasing racket of string and percussion instruments being used in horrible, horrible ways to the back drop of police sirens. Garrus crawled down the incredible dusty and vermin-bone littered airway as fast as he could. Distantly, an 'AW Freak HE GOT AWAY' could be heard from behind him.

Up, over, around, up again, and several turns, and the sniper found an exit grate that passed over what appeared to be a fairly quiet area over public property. He’d had to skip past several other potential exits, as they came out inside of other homes and stores, and in one nearly damning case, right in front of a security camera.
The coast clear, he slipped out of the air vent covered in grime, thankful that he was drunk enough not to be able to smell himself. A quick extra-net search found him a will-probably-wake-up-with-all-my-kidneys motel, and he paid the automated front-desk machine the credits it asked for in exchange for a room key.

He fought off the powerful urge to collapse on the bed and sleep off his buzz, instead heading for the bathroom. Casuals tossed in the ancient cleaning unit, the Detective got himself under the hot spray of water, and lacking any kind of cleaning tool, complementary soap, or oily scrub, he simply took a lean against the questionably clean tiles and tried to sober up.

Garrus had just wanted a night out, a few drinks and maybe some casual sex with a pretty tarin just to prove to himself he still could. He'd also just wanted to lighten up after having confessed all his crazy choices to Sol and gotten an earful for nearly three hours of, -he loved his filian, he really did, but-, harpy screeching admonishments followed by shrill, panicked arguing. His lovely sibling was a menace with a dictionary, and almost as hard on the ears as the musical destruction below had been when she was mad.

And oh, she was mad. Really, really mad.

Yeah, she'd warned him, and yeah, pari would stab him to death with his own crest blades, and yeah, he was pretty damn sure he loved Nihlus and Saren both; and also no he had no intention of ever breaking his vow of brotherhood with the last Arterius.

At the very least, Sol's panic had been eighty percent worry for him, mostly his future and well being; only a very reasonable twenty percent concerned with social correctness, their pari, the elections, and the various other problems his choices could cause. Also, it was hard to still be pissed off at her when their final argument had been on her wanting to give both Spectre's death threats over treating him 'right'. Whatever 'right' was, but still...

Solana cared, a lot, and that had never been in doubt. Even if she drove him crazy sometimes.

Eventually, still drunker then he'd like, Garrus nudged a fist against the water to turn it off, and tapped the air-dry feature on the wall. It rattled to life underwhelmingly, and took five or so minutes to get him dry. Knowing he'd be itchy tomorrow from the hard water and lack of real cleaning items or oils, he flopped onto the bed naked, -unfortunately not accompanied by someone to sleep with-, and grumbled in mild annoyance at the lack of blankets. At least it was warm on the homeworld. He really, really wished the Citadel ran thirty degree heat all the time. It would be so much more comfortable.
With that last, wandering thought, Garrus drifted off into the deep sleep of the mildly intoxicated.

Chapter End Notes

06/06/2010 - Duel Delayed Over Separatists' Fear of Trap
“The duel of the century is on hold tonight as senior Facinus representatives refused to accompany colonialist forces to the predetermined duel site, suspecting a trap. "There were no journalists there, no witnesses, and planes were screaming overhead”, said Facinus separatist Janus Pagasi. "They had tanks and armor units nearby; they clearly meant to capture us”. General Partinax, for his part, said at his daily press conference, "It's not in our interests to meet the enemy unprepared. However, we acknowledge the lack of trust between us, so we must guarantee that no unfortunate accidents will befall the Facinus delegation. Media were present today; tomorrow, they will be more clearly visible so we can get this over with".”

A/N: I can't even remember if I'm using this chapters or last chapter's or next chapter's planned soundtrack or fanfic recommendation. Spelling errors are probably a thing, and also, dear spirits it's 7:40. I will... I will fine tune this tomorrow. Er. Later today. Ya.

A/N Edit Update: Okay, so the grammar errors I caught on proof reading round two weren't horrible, but boy is some of my language is wandering. Lots of extra words when I'm tired, I guess. Not very concise? Ah well. Interesting to note, Palaven's canon average temperature is 30 degrees Celsius. That's around 86 degrees Fahrenheit. Earth's real world average temperature is 61 degrees Fahrenheit. ... Ya, Palaven is hot af. XD

Fanfic Recomendation: I'll Do Anything (Just For You) (5573 words) by Gravities Child (A very broken Garrus goes back in time and takes Saren's place as Sovereign's puppet. @_@)
An encumbered traveler has little need of hospitality, and yet

Chapter Summary

Wrath is unleashed in the background, and stories will be told of it for years to come.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Accensus – One of the most basic ranks of the Turian military, equating to a guarantee of being at least of 4th citizenship tier at discharge.

A/N: Another chappie! Author-chan will be busy for a few days, but here is another one for now duckies!

Chapter Soundtrack: "Flesh and Bone" by Black Math

an empty street, arising steam
break the truth inside of me
come down to hell on the devil’s tree
i clutched the branch of sin and flame
and the thought that rose to scorch my feet..

i walk alone,
beside myself, nowhere to go
i– this bleeding heart
that’s in my hands, i fell apart
i– i walk alone,
beside myself, nowhere to go
my flesh and bone
this part of me, the seeds i’ve sown
my flesh and bone

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The din of battle went from the controlled sound levels of filtered audio to a sudden maelstrom of noise as his head armor was ripped away by the Krogan warlord whose nine hundred years of experience seemed to top his mere twenty eight, genius combatant or no. He'd been trying to protect an unarmed tarin that looked to be about two centuries too old to fight, but his opponent ended up being one of the Krogan leaders, scarred and mean and way too good at CQC for one of Tuchanka's unruly menaces.
Nihlus blinked at the sudden brightness even as he brought up an arm to ward his face from the inevitable follow up move. Unfortunately the yellow-hued male expected it, pulling the Spectre's shoulder out of socket with a hard yank, and drawing him in for a killing blow.

The green eyed torin spun from the attack, falling onto his side in the dust. At first he wasn't quite sure what damage he'd taken. The strike had been very fast and he didn't feel any particular pain through the general weariness instilled by long hours of on-and-off skirmishes. The hide at his neck felt warm... wet... and his heart leapt into an immediate panic at realizing what had happened. The warlord had cut his throat wide open.

Ruddy brown hands came up to press at the wound as shock set in. He clutched at the gash, trying to hold the gap closed while his other hand dug for first aid supplies. The feeling of swallowing liquid down the wrong pipe became overpowering and he coughed messily, curling in on himself. When the action failed to clear his throat, Nihlus began to dry heave while his lungs and stomach attempted to reject the salty, metallic fluid draining where it wasn't meant to go. The uncontrollable responses only made things worse, and a sense of doom overtook the Spectre's best attempts at saving himself. He collapsed, weakening too quickly to even call for help, nevermind scrambling to patch the damage. His adrenaline held off the pain completely, but the Spectre could feel blood gushing out of him in spurts to the beat of his fluttering heart, leaking around his fingers and pouring onto the dirt. He was dying, and very quickly so.

Distantly Nihlus could hear the rumbling of thunder, and immediately he thought of rain. That brought apropos thoughts floating forward of Garrus and he, muddy and wet on very different soil; of the wild passion they'd shared and the terrible mistake he'd made out in the middle of nowhere. Nihlus gurgled again, a weak laugh. At least now he wouldn't have to face Blue after his big screw up...

A shove came in from one side, and suddenly Nihlus was on his back looking up at a purple eyed tarin built like a brick shit house who immediately began working on him with a wide eyed expression of panic. Her hand came in to hold his head up as she stuffed a pack of some kind behind it. It rearranged him so that his position didn't just hold the gash open. The tarin, -a sweet thing he'd been introduced to as Saren's seventh in command as a newly minted supply officer-, ripped her field kit open and scrambled to fix him, her breath rapid with fear.

“I don't know what I'm doing, spirits help me, ancestors, titans, anyone, I don't know... I've only read about... Spectre? H-hold on, I'm trying-”
Probably to do something with his ongoing blood loss. The dying torin gurgled in futility, subvocals keening and asking for help with the lingering dregs of his strength. The green eyed Spectre didn't want to die. He *really* didn't want to die. Nihlus had thought about how it might feel to just get offed on a mission before, but now that the moment was here he was utterly sure he really, really, *really* didn't want to die.

The carmine plated torin's fading subvocals begged for aid as consciousness drained away, vision narrowing with darkness as he struggled to breathe for the fluid running down his throat; neck muscles spasming uselessly when he tried to move to find air.

“Come on, c-come on, *clot damn* you, come onnn...”

The mandibles of the tarin scrambling over him were shivering, and though he couldn't hear any keening he was pretty sure she was crying for him. Nihlus felt himself slowly being to relax, the will to fight eeking away. His desperate would-be rescuer continued to treat him, tears pooling in the shallows of faceplate around her eyes. Nihlus wanted to tell her not to be sad, but making any action right then seemed like... such an impossible effort.

He really just wanted to sleep. He was *so* tired...

One side of her face lit up with flashes of blue light that flickered repeatedly in time to the ongoing thunder. It was strange, since he didn't feel any rain falling.

'A *dry thunderstorm? What weird weather to die in. Good job, Kryik. Abnormal up until the very last moment.*'

“Damnit, no! Spirits, no no no no, why are your personnel files *entirely* sealed?!? What blood type are you? Spectre?! I-I don't have a scanner for it... I don't have... Spectre, I need to know? SPECTRE! WHAT BLOOD TYP-”

There was one final, shuddering bout of thunder, and suddenly the familiar sweeping fringe of his fellow Spectre came into view for a brief moment.

“O negative. I will handle the remaining damage, I need you to get more blood into his veins as quickly as possible.”
“V-veins? Okay. Okay. Right... Okay, my 'tool is flash forging synthetic O neg as fast as it can. I'll connect the output to an IV line, just a second...”

“It will not be enough, use these two as well, set them to do the same into different locations. Use all of the omni-gel if you need to. Keeping his blood and oxygen levels high is paramount.”

“What the... you have two sp-”

“Now.”

“Yessir!”

Saren finally came into view again as he leaned over to grab something from the tarin's field kit on his other side. His first love was splattered with the orange-red blood of Krogan and Vorcha, occasional patches of blue smeared into sticky brown smears on his normally pristine silver armor. The stoic torin stabbed at a nerve point in his neck, strong enough to hurt even through the feeling of being in a cloud bank. Nihlus' body vaguely tried to flinch at the painful sensation, but he could barely move as it was and the strike must have been targeted at something specific to immobilizing him. Now the fallen operative couldn't do much besides twitch his fingers, though strangely the tiredness wasn't growing any worse even though he was so low on blood that the gushing at his neck had slowed to a trickle.

The green eyed Spectre laid there and wondered why he wasn't dead yet, tentatively hopeful that his brilliant former mentor could still save him.

“Are you a medic? That is not a standard field kit.”

“It's not sir, I'm just uh... I worry about a lot of things.”

“Are you certified in medicine at any level?”

“Not... technically.”
“Self taught?”

“Yessir. Autodidact. I like to read.”

“Then why does the Hierarchy have you as a 4th tier grunt on an edge world?”

“I don't know, sir. I just do what I'm told so they keep paying for my brother's health insurance. He was born with an autoimmune disease. Can't get coverage outside of enlistment, and he can't enlist...”

Nihlus could hear Saren grumble an acknowledgment, though the stoic torin's face made no change in expression above him as the silver-grey-ish torin did... something at his neck.

“Hand me the- yes, thank you. Shift two of the outputs to his radial arm veins, continue until his blood pressure stabilizes.”

“Yessir. Spectre. Are... you a doctor? That's... how are you even doing that? Is that some Asari trick?”

“Biotics can do more than destroy, Accensus. They are also very good for holding wounds closed until clotting agents and static repairs can be made.”

“I think you've saved his life, sir. That usage is just... amazing. His vitals are low, but stabilizing.”

“It was not my efforts entirely. He is... well augmented. Your quick thinking also made a difference.”

“Happy to help sir. Spectre Kryik is... um...”

Nihlus was encouraged at the vague sensation of his mandibles flicking in amusement. He got excited that he could feel anything truthfully, hoping that breathing in any way besides a wet and uncomfortable wheeze through his nose would come next.
“Yes?”

“He, um, called me lovely at dinner a few nights ago. Something about my eyes that I’ve already forgotten, but I don't... get compliments often. He's a good torin. Kind. I didn't want him to die, so I thought it was better to at least try...”

“Oh. I suppose your coloration is unusual and pleasing, though it was inappropriate of him to flirt as such while we are on high alert. Having a call to arms during a liaison would cause you both to be late to muster.”

The torin's subvocals went from slightly bashful to horrified in two seconds flat.

“I-I-I-no sir! No liaisin-ing! I didn't mean to! Um!”

“Peace. I recognize that my protégé can be very forward.”

“...yessir?”

“Stop the blood transfusion on that side, and call for medical evac.”

“On it, sir.”

“R-r...”

“Nihlus, do not try to speak, you will exacerbate the damage.”

The knife-loving torin let his subvocals hum with effusive love and adoration that made Saren blink owlishly at him. Nihlus was appreciative that the wound to his throat didn't effect the mid-chest harmonics which let him express that much at least. He was feeling moderately less floaty, if still very tired. Alive though. Spirits-blessedly alive.

“Medical evac is on its way.”
“Good. Stay with him until they arrive. I must make arrangements for the last of this brood's elimination, then I will return. Do not allow them to leave before I come back.”

“You're leaving the field with him, sir?”

“Yes.”

“But... sir, the medical staff on base are very good...”

Nihlus could hear the tarin's tentative and worried subvocal addition of, 'More of my unit might die if you leave us...'

Saren walked away without responding, and the muscular tarin curled in on herself a little bit, but continued to work over him. Nihlus wanted to tell his asshole of a best friend to stay and help, that he was apparently not dying and the other torin should stay and fight whatever was left. It proved to be too hard though, and after a few minutes of struggling to stay conscious his brain decided that the danger was over and he needed no more adrenaline.

The carmine plated agent slipped off into a darkness that was still slightly terrifying, even if it probably wasn't permanent.

And thank fuck for that. He really wanted to see Blue again.

Chapter End Notes

06/07/2010 - General Partinax Victorious After Duel
“The duel between General Partinax and the Facinus separatist Kihilix Tanus is over. After the separatists were picked up and driven to an undisclosed location, the combatants spent a short time testing their weapons before entering the barrier room. Video, covering the event from six angles using high-speed image capture, clearly showed that neither combatant used a kinetic barrier. Tanus fired first by about two-tenths of a second, but missed. The general did not miss. Partinax's shot knocked Tanus off his feet; as he continued to advance, he shot until his weapon overheated, by which time Tanus was dead. Tanus' inner circle and bodyguards reportedly had to be restrained
after the duel, though no additional bloodshed followed. After the cameras were
deactivated, the separatists -- and Tanus' body -- were returned to the pickup location
unharmed.”

A/N: I've decided that Krogan do use male and female designations, but do not have
special words for it. It came up while I was writing this that I hadn't decided either way
for their species, and I didn't want to only give Asari and Turians their unique cultural
words for gender and call everyone else by human terms. Soooo, we heard a lot about
'the Krogan female' in game, ya? Alright. So 'female'. What we didn't hear was 'guy' or
'dude' or 'lady' or 'woman'. No variance terms, titles can be multi-gender (aka, both
Wrex and FemShep can be Battlemasters), and no human 'man/woman'. So far, the only
species I've applied 'man/woman' to has been Salarians... mostly because they seem to
fit. I think Quarians too, maybe?

Fanfic Recommendation: Spectre Training for Dummies (1329 words) by
GlowSpikes (Nihlus circa Spectre recruitment. If you do go read this one, please spam it
with comments and love. I want this author to know that their writing is appreciated and
that we want more. XD)
Silver and gold, oh silver and gold

Chapter Summary

Nihlus wakes up and goes out to stab some things. Meanwhile, far away, someone else is having a hard time of it.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Sitrep – A report on the current status of enemies, allies, supplies, events, etc in a military engagement. Short for 'situation report'. (Real World)

Augs - Short for 'augments', a slang term that refers to the culmination of one's gene-mods, cybernetics, prosthetics, structural enhancements, medical implants, etc.

Aquilafero – The standard bearer for each Regiment, a battlefield historian who follows the lives and times of active soldiers, and carries their stories back to the curators of each Regiment's order halls for detailed additions to their chronicles. As the commander of a force stands safely in the far back of a company on the move, the Aquilafero stands just in front of them in line. It is considered the greatest dishonor, even worse than a commander, for the standard bearer to be killed. Though the tactic is considered exceedingly underhanded, occasionally they will be targeted as an attack on a Regiment's morale.

A/N: The two generals mentioned in this chapter are named after several interesting philosophers from ancient times. Claudius Ptolemy, arguably the father of modern mathematical astronomy; Posidonius, one of the great astrologers of ancient times, mentioned elsewhere and rumored toward greatness, yet somehow none of his own works survive. Lastly, Thales, the only person from ancient times to have successfully predicted a solar eclipse using what modern astronomers call 'The Myth of Saros'. Some curiosities for you to google, if bored. :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus woke up like it was any other day. In those first bleary moments of consciousness he sat up, licking at his dry mouth and wondering why his throat was sore. Maybe he was getting a cold? Or... oh. Yeah.

He’d almost died.
Ruddy brown hands came up to touch, seeking status and needing to check that all was well. His fingertips landed on normal hide, only the faintest patch of slightly-less-rough remained, a smoother trail from one side to the other. The Spectre snorted in something like astonishment and relief. Damn, he healed fast. Either that, or he'd been asleep for a looong time.

Palms scrubbing over his face, he hoped that last one wasn't the case. The green eyed agent next looked up to get his barrings. He was onboard the Daedalus, cocooned in blankets on Saren's bed. He was naked, clean, and the thermostat was blissfully high.

Nihlus grinned, guessing that Saren had been the one to get him here. It had probably involved unlatching clothes... a sponge bath of some sort... The explosion loving torin was actually pretty put out that he'd missed it by being unconscious. Real damn shame, but the reality that it had probably happened was worth something in itself.

A little stiffly, the Spectre clambered out of bed and made for the bathroom. With one hand braced on the wall Nihlus relieved himself and thought about what to do next. He was pretty damn hungry and a little thirsty; he could definitely go for a truly massive dextro-pizza and a beer or ten. The Spectre also felt stiff, and wanted to work out, then spar the best looking fighter in the gym. Then the best three, all at once. Maybe the next best five. This could or could not be followed by some life-affirming sex, video game marathons, dance club hopping, or possibly just another high risk mission.

In short: the Spectre’s usual near-miss rituals.

Then again, there was probably still a war going on outside, depending on how long he'd slept. First thing on the list had to be finding out if he was still needed.

A quick search turned up his armor, -clean and patched from it's previous abuses-, sitting on Saren's work bench. The Spectre picked up one gauntlet and fingered the smooth, near invisible repairs to the inevitable gouges and scorch marks from combat. The patch work was quality stuff. His silver-grey friend had likely done it, grumbling about Nihlus' own less-than-perfect attempts. He would bet there were probably re-repairs the torin had carved out to redo, knowing his former mentor's sense of perfectionism.

Carmine mandibles spread in a soft smile. Yet again Saren had saved him from the worst life had to throw, and put him back together better than before. It was something of a theme with them. One that Nihlus wasn't certain he would ever deserve, but remained thankful for none the less.

The green eyed knife lover donned his gear, blades and all, then took to the airlock. He stepped out of the calm and quiet of the Daedalus’ white washed interior to the chaos of a military base in the
midst of either preparations or aftermath. Considering the number of living bodies and nervous eyes, the Council Agent would guess the former.

It looked like he'd woken up before the big final clash, at least.

Nihlus wove around shouting sergeants and frenzied suppliers. Colonists milled around in muster groups, decked out in everything from battle ready gear from twenty years ago to slapped together pieces of flash forged light armor. A few civilians in modern stuff here and there, but... not many. Not enough.

It took some graceless dodging that his stiff limbs protested against, but the wily Spectre made it to the command room where he expected Saren to be. Sure enough, the silver-grey torin was at the war table, eyes boring into the data display as he inhaled what looked like kava from a sizeable mug. The gorgeous but impressively unavailable Losmius on one side, and the older, but still incredibly sexy-in-a-bossy-way Pyrosa on the other. The three of them were discussing the oncoming march of enemy forces. A few steps away several tarin officers were whispering between themselves as they observed their leader's decision making.

From the sound of it he'd slept through the rest of their preemptive strikes. That was a shame. Nihlus really hoped the gas bombs and canyon traps had gone well without him. Several of Saren's synergistic plans had relied on him being there...

His mandibles flicked once in self-annoyance, but he plastered a suave grin on his face and stepped forward to the table.

“Jeez, look at you, surrounded by beautiful tarin and planning high war. I take a short dirt nap and suddenly I'm old news. I guess I'll just have to make a good show of it today and hope the ladies can be swayed.”

Saren's electric blue eyes popped up from the data charts immediately, eyeing him from fringe to Spurs with a closed expression. Truthfully, the younger Spectre didn't really have eyes for anyone at that table but Saren, though Losmius' tongue click of disgust was entertaining as hell.

“How are you not dead? Someone, -please-, shoot him. I'm not particularly religious, but I am inclined to believe your protégé is a spirit rather than a torin. He certainly seems persistent enough, and I am certain he lost more blood than is reasonable to still live.”
One of Saren’s browridges flicked upward as he glanced over at the Aquilafero before turning back, his subvocals flat and noncommittal. Nihlus smiled broadly at the tarin, fairly certain the caustic commentary was what passed as concern for his near-miss and joy for his current wellbeing in her mind.

“You can certainly try sweet thing, but bullets don’t work well on me. Too many augs.”

Losmius snorted and returned her attention back to the war table. Nihlus slid around the equipment in his way until he could nudge between her and Saren. The chilly tarin ignored his attempt to get in her space, -that was actually to get in Saren’s space-, and side stepped while ignoring him. He chuckled good naturedly and turned to his fellow Spectre.

“So… can I get a sitrep?”

His former mentor nodded once and clasped his shoulder, leaning closer to brief him over the bubbling murmur of the command room’s background noise.

“Your chemical bombs went off as planned, estimated Vorcha casualties were about as predicted, though the bulk of the Krogan leading them wore helmets, and were thus unaffected. The other bushfighting attempts were more or less successful, though we lost a full platoon to a failed set up.”

Nihlus winced. A full platoon? Not exactly ideal. Saren carried on, concise and calm despite the losses they couldn’t afford, using the war table’s digital display to reference locations and statistics.

“About seven hours ago the Amgos tribe began to move out from… here, this mesa appears to be the starting point. They’ve been collecting their smaller warbands and allied Vorcha broods along the way, dispersing into the area’s rock formations, -and presumably the smaller cave systems-, anytime an aerial strike force tries to do a fly-by.”

The younger torin hummed in understanding, “I’m guessing the big mess of red dots about twenty clicks east of here…?”

“Is the main body of their forces, yes.”

“That’s a lot of dots.”
“Indeed.”

“Reinforcements?”

“Generals Claudius Ptolemy and Posidonius Thales have been pulled from patrols in other sectors and redirected here. Their ships will arrive in five days, seven hours.”

“That will be too little, too late. Morons.”

Saren shrugged, and sipped at his steaming drink.

“Welp, this should be fun. You and I are still flanking the southern side?”

Saren didn’t respond for a moment, eyes sliding over to consider him. After a few seconds the stoic torin, -even more unexpressive for being at the center of so many strangers-, simply replied, “I am.”

“Then I am too.”

The long look continued for several heartbeats before giving way to a small nod.

“Very well.”

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooazzo
She began reading the supporting documents, and started to fear it was true…

Twenty minutes later, Agent Makasian slowly slumped to the ground in horror and disbelief, her noble heart shocked into a pounding rhythm that reverberated in her ears. It was all she could hear for long, endless minutes while her mind whirled with implications.

With choices.

In the end the lovely tarin took the data, and returned to Palaven. The knowledge that she may very well ‘disappear’ for the information in her head kept her throat pale and her limbs stiff, but still she continued on.

Loyal to a fault; to her people, and her government.

The Hierarchy spook walked into Blackwatch HQ through her usual route, the seventh secret entrance that led in through tunnels that came from the Tiberius cliffs. Past the traps, tricks, and puzzles that seemed medieval in comparison to modern security, but which also could not be fooled like retina scanners or fingerprinting. They had to be taught, and memorized, in their complexity.

She walked by in a mild daze, gracefully passing the pitfalls by rote.

Into her squad’s private ‘darkroom’ the peach colored Turian went, closing the door, waiting for one of their handlers to get the message from unseen eyes that someone was in the room awaiting a debriefing.

A handler came within the hour, a normal amount of time in her normal routine as a part of the Hierarchy’s not-so-hidden dark side.

She staunchly refused to speak the secret to the torin that sat across from her when he asked for details as per protocol. She saw the relieved gratitude in his lavender eyes, heard it in his subvocals. He must have been around long enough to know what a danger truth could be. Aiesha smiled tightly, and requested a contact time and date with one of their leaders after giving vague, hinting details.

The torin left, she waited.
He came back, handed her a data stick, and disappeared once more.

In the relative safety of the darkroom she accessed the information given, memorized it with a swallow, and wiped the drive, leaving the smashed remains of the physical dongle on the table.

It wasn’t until the uncommonly pretty tarin was tucked away in a safe house, -and definitely not at the address on her ident card-, that she really started to breathe again. A few minutes, a rapid loss of armor, and the tarin was sitting knees-to-keel under steamy hot shower water that poured down in a consistent rush while she tried to stay calm and keep it together.

She had a meeting, with the spirits-damned Primarch of Palaven, tomorrow night at two hours into the night cycle.

‘Please, spirits... I’m young. I’m dutiful. I have never given less than my best. Please, let me live through the week.”

The odds weren’t good.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Fuck the odds! Let’s do this!”

“Nihlus, wait-”

Mad cackling was all Saren could hear from over the cover that had just moments ago been hiding their presence from the small sea of feral Vorcha that were marching on the colony like a plague. With an annoyed growl he popped out of cover and started supporting his feckless protégé with cover fire. Black and red armor stood out from the dusty browns of their foes as they rushed his fellow Spectre, and began to die by his hand en masse.

The stoic torin forwent yelling at the little fool over coms, and instead lobbed every grenade he had one-by-one at safely distant clusters of hostiles, mostly focused on the packs with a Krogan or two at their head.
“Woooooohooooo!” came the younger Spectre’s wild yell, subvocals echoing cheerfully as the teeming masses around him pressed in, hissing, hoping for a pound of flesh. Nihlus had activated a pair of heat-blades that extended like short swords from his gauntlets, and was cleaving his way through an enemy a second, though mostly avoiding the Krogan in favor of culling the sheer quantity of targets.

Their enemies had quantity over quality, to be sure, and Saren begrudgingly agreed that his partner had the right idea even if his less-than-stealthy frontal assault was not how the last Arterius would prefer to do things. Lack of planning annoyed him.

At the very least, the new implants in Nihlus’ skull, ribcage, and gut assured him that his former student would not be able to bleed out again from anything short of extreme evisceration or full decapitation. His body could make more pre-oxygenated blood and artificially strengthened bone and cartilage weave faster than most enemies would know to damage for. Even better, the nanite colony had been given space and programming to maintain a size that could feasibly provide enough microscopic bots to create short sections of bridging tissue to close wounds faster than healing could reasonably occur.

Altogether, it was why the silver-grey Agent had not slept in something like thirty hours, and also the only reason he had allowed the anesthetics keeping his protégé asleep to wear off. Moreso, for the carmine plated menace to ride to war with him at all after the hapless torin had nearly died to a single Krogan. It would have been an unconscionable waste of resources for Nihlus to die now, an embarrassment to his training regime, and also... well... yes, troublesome, obviously. His opponent had not even used anything more powerful than a combat knife...

Then again, the merc born Spectre’s own mission reports were constant proof that a pointed object of any kind, applied swiftly and with careful timing, could be powerful in it’s own way. Sometimes enough to kill anyone unprepared. Slow or fast, airborne or held, knives could fake out most inertial dampeners, kinetic shields, tech armor, or even biotic barriers under the right circumstances. Such circumstances that the green eyed torin was particularly good at creating, but perhaps had not faced having them used against him enough...

Dying to a knife wound did not seem worthy of Nihlus, but on the other hand, occasionally the best solutions were also the simplest, most traditional of ways to do things. It was something which he himself was displaying now, in a show of gory disregard, by snapping necks and stomping in the skulls of the fallen before they could regenerate.

One after another, the mindless, hungering Vorcha came forward, slowly pushing him back, dying in waves to do so.

Occasionally the electric eyed torin spared a few bullets from his side arm to ensure he and Nihlus
stayed in range of each other in case of... issues. Saren need not have worried though, his protégé was jumping off the shoulders of the steadier Krogan, slitting their necks open, and performing gleeful acrobatic flips off of the local rocky topography to take new aim.

Their eyes met over the chaos, and Nihlus winked at him. The silver-grey torin chuffed lightly, and carried on slaughtering, also making a special point to take out the throats of Krogan he was forced to face due to their dauntless charges and fearless obstinance. His friend had the right of it in this tactic as well.

The circumspect revenge was satisfying.

Chapter End Notes

06/09/2010 - Separatists Claim Partinax Violated Terms of Duel
"Diluvian forces on Taetrus have released what they claim is the actual video of the duel between General Partinax and Kihilix Tanus. In the video, Kihilix's first shot appears to hit a kinetic barrier that springs up around Partinax, a clear violation of the terms. Colonialist forces were quick to point out evidence of digital tampering in the video and have uploaded video of the hole created in the wall by Tanus' missed shot. Asked for his reaction, Partinax responded: "It's expected that they create propaganda as part of their war effort. I can tell you that it doesn't feel good to be starring in such propaganda, but under the circumstances, it could be a lot worse.""

A/N: I'm having a fascinating, befuddling moment as an author. I wrote a lot of Nihlus in this chapter. He nearly died, but he didn't. He woke up after, and he was... is... slightly different. Do you see it? I see it. I can't figure out why. I ask the Nihlus in my imagination, and he just smiles slowly, giving off this impression that there * is * a reason, but I don't need to know it until I need to write about it, and that moment may or may not ever happen. Something to do with his personas, but not so clean cut as one of his masks. Wtf, brain. Wtf.
Bah.
Saren on the other hand, being a sociopath, has his one 'feel'. He doesn't have many 'feels' like other people, but he does have the one, and it's current 100% engaged expressing worry for Nihlus, which... he doesn't have time for right now, so it's being stuffed to the back of his skull and ignored until further notice. In the mean time, Spectre Stoic is in super-stoic mode, and as he has no one to manipulate, no one to impress, nothing to gain from pretending to be coy or scary or wise, -and no spare feels on hand-, he comes across about as expressive as a dinner plate. That is to say, he just sits there calmly and does his job by merely existing.
Or is that 'By merely existing he does his job'?

Like the sun. It shines. It just does it's thing and that's the thing it's supposed to do. Saren just murders the shit out of people, and that's the thing he is supposed to do. Self evident, maybe? Natural? I'm trying to find the right word here... for something that just does what physics dictates it does, and there in does it's 'job'. That, Saren Arterius is that.

Fanfic Recommendation: **Lord-Charming** (128,606 words) by **forthright** (Sesshoumaru/Kagome. This one is actually a fanfiction from the 'Inuyasha' anime. I normally prefer to stick to same-universe or genre recommendations, but I have to suggest this one for four reasons. 1) I write Saren with a solid foundation block of 'Sesshoumaru' in his personality. If you like Saren, you'll like Sesshoumaru with how Forthright writes him. 2) I am writing Aiesha Makasian as a more guilesome and professional Kagome, like 40% or so influence, because she's a really good person in really shitty circumstances, and it fits. 3) Forthright and all her works are top notch fiction. I'd give her collection of writings a solid 9/10 or higher. 4) I am actually beginning to run out of Mass Effect stories to recommend. I mean... it's been 147 chapters, and I have tried not to link all of the works of my favorite authors, just one or two each. That... might have to change. XD Until I discover more! )
I'm partial to velvet but will work with whatever is on hand

Chapter Summary

One who remembers searches through the aftermath

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Aquilafero – The standard bearer for each Regiment, a battlefield historian who follows the lives and times of active soldiers, and carries their stories back to the curators of each Regiment's order halls for detailed additions to their chronicles. As the commander of a force stands safely in the far back of a company on the move, the Aquilafero stands just in front of them in line. It it considered the greatest dishonor, even worse then a commander, for the standard bearer to be killed. Though the tactic is considered exceedingly underhanded, occasionally they will be targeted as an attack on a Regiment's morale.

Accensus – One of the most basic ranks of the Turian military, equating to a guarantee of being at least of 4th citizenship tier at discharge.

Praela(s) - The name for ancient warrior spirits who were believed to ride great beasts (or forces of nature) into war at the head of their tribe’s legions. Spirits of great bravery, tenacity, and a fearsome beauty. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: 5am! Author-chan is going to bed early tonight! XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Achilla stepped over yet another corpse, avoiding it's viscera with a studied expression and a graceful sidestep. Her path took the stolid tarin over the terrain's natural rock formations and the completely unnatural, slagged remains of tanks; around the hulking wrecks of bipedal mechs and the scorched earth of orbital drop sites she went, hunting her quarry.

Perhaps they remained alive, perhaps they were dead, but the com officer's last known location for the Spectres who'd fought bloody tooth and claw was for somewhere around here, and here she would stay until finding whatever was left of them.

“Losmius!”
The *aquilafero* turned, spotting one of the others who hunted with her.

“Yes?”

“Anything yet?”

“No.”

“Oh... okay.”

The beautiful-but-cold tarin turned away from the missing-the-obvious *Accensus* that had the high ground and continued on her way. In the distance the sun was falling toward the horizon, but Achilla had every intention of searching after dark if need be. The historian needed to see, with a calm desperation that surprised even her, what fate had befallen the Spectres.

With her own eyes to be precise, no second hand account would do.

She felt some small obsession with discovering if they yet lived; the two torin who looked so different, who came from polar opposite backgrounds, but who fought like *praela* of myth. The *things* they had done... impossible. Incredible.

Inspiring.

Spectre candidates were said to be pulled from the galaxy's top two percent, the best performing combatants the stars had to offer. Two hundred and seventy nine billion people sifted through, and those two torin came out on top? She could believe it. What niggled at her mind was whether their
lives were actually worth the colonists here. For a core world? Of course the risk would have been efficient. Acceptable. For this relatively small colony...?

It had seemed General Opstepus originally intended to give a token resistance, and then pull out. She'd overheard him express a belief that the colony was already lost. Yet these uncommon soldiers who had long since forsaken their vows to the Hierarchy and taken up an arguably greater cause had stepped in, taken over, and fought for this place. Perhaps there was a reason. Perhaps it was just their way.

Achilla pondered the value of heroics and the bloody calculus of war as she meandered across the uneven ground, passing by no few of the kill squads that traveled in small groups, hunting for any Vorcha or Krogan that might be trying to hide somewhere quiet to regenerate. One of the orders that had gone out toward the end, -once victory was well assured-, was a no-survivors order. The violence and aggression of the wastelanders considered, it was expected and had met no argument.

One did not attack Turians unless they were prepared for total war. Theirs was not a people that understood mercy.

Not two hills later she stumbled over where the missing Spectres had finally stopped to rest, -still alive against all odds-, tucked under a rocky outcropping. Their infamous, impromptu leader had his back to the rock wall, head down, breathing deep. Asleep then, or something like it. The torin's incorrigible protégé was nearby, turning to her as soon as she appeared over the hilltop. His eyes were a fever-bright green, watching her movement like a jungle predator would track something approaching it's den. She'd gotten the impression that he wasn't the most civilized torin before, but the liquid danger in his expression was a whole new level of untame.

She approached slowly, cautiously, footsteps quiet in respect for their sleeping commander.

“Kryik,” she hummed quietly in greeting. He blinked once, slowly, and dipped a short nod to her with a slightly less predatory expression seeping into his gaze. “Is Spectre Arterius well?”

“Ah... ya. He just needs to rest for a bit. Do you have any rations on you by chance?”
“I... do, yes, in my field kit. One moment.”

Achilla settled down nearby, and dug for the two MREs while subtly making mental notes about the world around her.

The angle of the sun, the temperature of the air, the color of the light.

The dust that floated around them, spiraling in eddies as the wind shifted...

Every detail added to her careful memorization process, to be recorded forever in the annals of the 221st's order hall chronicles.

Achilla Losmius handed over the ration bars in an open palm, watching curiously as the torin tore them open and woke his partner to pass them on. Arterius came awake in an instant, but looked half dead, the hide around his eyes sunken and pale. The enigmatic Spectre's electric sight shifted to the ration bars immediately though, and they disappeared in moments. Kryik had a water flask waiting to wash them down with, and the tired biotic finished it off as well before humming a quiet thanks and falling back asleep. A ruddy brown hand reached out as if to stroke fringe, but stalled and retracted. The carmine plated Spectre calmly stood and retreated back to his previous spot by her, sitting down with a soft sigh.

The beautiful historian decided to pretend she had not seen that last part, the emotional implications of it... too private to include in the public chronicles. Mildly damning in Palaveni social circles. Rare as it was, the *aquilafero* pointedly 'forgot' to add a detail to her mental notes.

“I can have more brought...?”

“Nah, but thanks.”
“Perhaps an evac back to base?”

Spectre Kryik tilted his crest in a negative, grinning at her slightly. It looked... more honest then all of his previous facial expressions combined. “Maybe in an hour. He won't want anyone to see him shuffling to a bed looking like a zombie. Give him some time to nap and he'll be bright eyed enough to fake it for a bit.”

“I... see. Allow me to at least arrange for acceptable accommodations? The base truly has no more need of him as Tesserar Pyrosa has clean up well in hand. His time, and yours, would be better spent recovering then overseeing.”

“Is that your way of saying we look like shit and should get some rest?”

“Precisely.”

Kryik chuckled, rearranging his position to set an elbow on a raised knee, eyes on the horizon.

“I could use a nap myself. Preferably not on rock though.”

“I will see it done.”

“Thanks a bunch, sweet thing.”

Achilla snorted in disagreement, perfectly aware of how caustic most people found her personality. She pulled up her Omni-tool to arrange an appropriate place of respite back in the colony for the two... heroes.
06/08/2010 - Bootleg Video of Duel on Taetrus Leaked
“A bootleg video of the duel between General Partinax and Kihilix Tanus has garnered over seven hundred and ten million views on the extranet. Numerous parodies have already surfaced, the most popular being set to Lady Sweat's "My B*tch Now." In a press conference today, Partinax refused to answer questions about the duel out of respect for the dead and said only that he was disappointed but not surprised that Tanus' death was being broadcast on tightbeam. Despite the Turian social taboo of showing wartime dead, it seems they do like to watch covertly; downloads of the duel in Turian space were second only to the number of downloads in human space.”

A/N: Okay, I'm trying to pin down what the 27 tiers mean exactly in the Hierarchy. I've got a basic layout set up, but I want to smooth it out. I also want to make sure it makes realistic sense, as the tier system is from a militaristic society but still has cultural effect, so there will be exceptions and compromise. That said, here is what I have so far. It's tentative. Do you guys have any input? Much appreciated in advance.

Turian Tiers (Bare minimum requirements for tier ranks)
1 Children, non-enlisted Client Races, the disabled, non-Turian bondmates who didn't enlist or their children
2 Basic Enlisted, or conscripted non-Turians during a State of Emergency
3 (Full Citizenship) Boot camp graduates
4 Completion of 1 year enlisted with no demerits
5 Minimum 2 years enlisted with acceptable service record and rank of Accensus (Private First Class)
6 Min. 4 years enlisted with good service records
7 Min. 6 years enlisted with good service records
8 Min. 7 years enlisted with rank of Specialist or higher
9 Min. 8 years enlisted with with rank of Specialist or higher, or completion of 15 years of service
10 Min. 10 years enlisted with good service records with rank of Specialist or higher
11 Min. 11 years enlisted with the rank of Corporal, or other non-commissioned officer, or Specialists with 15+ years of service
12 Min. 12 years enlisted with good service records with the rank of Corporal or higher
13 Min. 14 years enlisted with good service records with the rank of Corporal or higher
14 All enlisted that serve past their 15 year civil service requirement with the rank of Corporal or higher
15 Thirty years of service with the rank of Corporal or higher, or Special Commendation from tier 19 and up
16 Centurions and other honored designations
17 First Sergeants or greater of the Hierarchy Forces with at least 20 years of service
18 Specialty Ranks (Aquilafero, Blackwatch Specialist, a General's Optian, etc) With at least 15 years of service
19 The Sergeant Majors of each branch of the military (Space Defense, Ground Defense, Intelligence Division, etc)
20 Generals of Hierarchy Forces
21 Admirals of Hierarchy Forces
22 Senators of any Cluster
23 Sienarch (Director) of any single Edge World, space station, or Colony
24 Sienarch of any single Core world besides Palaven
25 Primarchs of Edge Clusters
26 Primarchs of Core Clusters
27 Primarch of Palaven

Primarch is basically commander in chief. Sienarch is vice president, and right hand person, generally supposed to be someone to fill in the Primarch's short comings, but is chosen by the Primarch as someone they can trust. Like a Primarch's Optian. Then comes senators, which are all at least tier 16 or above, and is a tier designation that once earned, even if you retire from senate, is never lost. Then we've got the admirals who direct the fleets, then the generals who serve under them, and the generals who lead stand-alone ground forces and the like. Etc, etc. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: Fun in the Councilor's Office (4832 words) by 11_Gadget_27 (Saren/Sparatus. Super adorable.)
An appearance in spring

Chapter Summary

Recognition to one who may or may not want it, but who definitely deserves it.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Tesserar – One of the twelve honor guards of each cluster's Primarch. As a group, they are known as the 'Tesserari', and are loyal to no avah, no clan, and no family above their chosen Primarch.

A/N: I recently discovered that there is a wiki for the Spirit of Redemption fic [here]. Apparently, there are several Turian blood types listed. Things like K- or LK+, etc. Does anyone know where these come from? Are they real blood types for copper based blood or something? Okay, if they are, what's the system, and if they aren't, then *is* there a system? Help, help, I need some science. (Google is particularly unhelpful atm, it just keeps offering links to human blood types. I mean... the antibodies have to be different, but pathogens all have certain commonalities, and thus... hrm....)

A/N/N: To clarify, seven Turians stepped forward when Saren asked for leadership from among the higher tiers, and more came in as the other companies joined, others were lower tier, but got appointed to their position as he discovered their potential by encountering them. As it stands the command structure was thus: Saren Arterius from Palaven as acting Commander, retired Tesserar Tia Pyrosa from Palaven as Optian, Lorelai Rento from Invictus as Master Sergeant, Aquilafero Achilla Losmius as Strategic Adviser and leader of the 'orbital strike' task force, Nihlus Kryik from Triginta Petra as acting Scout Captain of their intel team, Angaurd Tovik from Trireme leading A and B Company as Sergeant First Class, Donovan Emplesius from Digeris leading C and D Company as Sergeant First Class. Granted, what each person contributed in the moment was of greater or lesser importance. This isn't the list of all stars, just the roster of leadership. I wish I had found a moment to work this all in, since it was all flushed out in my notes, but this arc only managed to get onto paper in fits and starts. I may go back later and flesh out more of the battle moments. (It's sometimes difficult to slow down and tell all the little stories I have planned when I have all the big shit in ME1 to drop on you guys. The wait is difficult, but the process of getting there slowly is so rewarding...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tia Pyrosa, step forward and be recognized,” intoned the somber general standing atop the stage. Nihlus' leg bounced once in a nervous tick before he caught it, the rest of him held with a straight back and neutral face. Dressed in armor, but overlaid with the cloth mantle that bore her decorations of service, Tesserar Pyrosa left her place of honor at the back of the standing ranks. The ancient
tara's gait took her forward at a stately pace, lightly hindered by a barely discernible limp remaining from her injuries in the days prior.

When she finally made it past the orderly rows of soldiers, most still smelling of astringent and fresh blood, the tarin took to the stairs and mounted the central dais. The rumbling general, whose name Nihlus couldn’t recall, turned to a metal case in the hands of his aide, flipping it open to lift out a glittering medallion in bronze with a vermillion tinted border. Gently the bauble was removed from its housing, and all eyes turned to the *Tesserar*.

“Tia of Clan Pyrosa, born of Palaven, may the spirits bear witness this day. We honor you; for your bravery, for your dedication to duty, and above all else for your loyalty to your people in their time of need. You fought when others might have fled. You held the line when a lesser soldier would have faltered. You continue to serve long past the last muster of your peers. On behalf of the Hierarchy, I present you with the Valiant’s Mark. Wear this with pride for all your days.” Pyrosa held still and silent as the medallion was added to the long line of others over her keel, most of which he couldn’t even name.

The crowd as one roared a wordless, subvocal cry. Nihlus felt the sound leave his chest and harmonize with the soldiers around him before it faded away in the unique vocal salute of Turians.

As Pyrosa left the stage and returned to her position, the green eyed Spectre stole a look at his partner. Saren stood perfectly still, incomprehensibly handsome in the sunlight. The soil of the hills in the distance was a muted red-brown, something he blended in with, but his silver-grey friend stood out from it like a polished gemstone. Chromatic, stoic, and laden down with a mantle full of honors like a vid hero, eleven medals decorating his keel. For a Turian of Saren's age that was... nearly unheard of.

Nihlus forced his eyes forward, trying not to cringe internally at the soft, *bare* cloth wrapped around his own shoulders.

It was... fine.

He didn't feel unworthy.

Or like a waste of Saren's time and training.

…
Okay, so he did a little bit. He wasn't much younger than his fellow Spectre, and the gulf between their accomplishments seemed massive when laid out so... plainly.

The brass that had come with the reinforcements had said something about honoring both of them today though, so maybe that gap could still close. Nihlus really just hoped he walked away from today with more bling than the big fat zero he currently had. He wasn't exactly sure why it mattered to him all the sudden. Maybe the gorgeous, unreachable-looking torin beside him had something to do with it. Maybe he just wanted a little recognition now and then.

The carmine plated torin exhaled slowly, attention seemingly on the proceedings, silent until roaring for the next soldier honored. Distantly, he wondered if Blue had any medals... with a silent growl at himself Nihlus tossed the circling thoughts aside. Spectres didn't need distinctions, he reminded himself. Most of them would never see more then a passing thank you from the Council for all the shit they stopped from happening to innocent people, and that was fucking okay. He didn't need other people's approval. Never had.

'And you know what? Doesn't matter if they put a mass-fab hunk of metal on me or not. I helped. Whether they realize it or not, I did my job. Plus? I bet I can get some fuckin' cuddles out of king untouchable tonight. No one else here even gets to touch him. So there. That's good enough for me.'

Nihlus spent the next twenty minutes lost in a day dream where they went back to Saren's ship after this, and his former mentor was in one of his rare celebratory moods. Two drinks in and he imagined getting past the torin's social barriers to sit in his lap, tossing off their mantles heavy with honors, hands on that deliciously thick waist. He would nuzzle into soft grey neck hide while the normally stoic Spectre hummed at him with approving subvocals, proud and permissive. Saren would look at him consideringly, in that way where he tilted his crest while thinking on a matter that required deliberation, and decide to reward his protégé for making something of himself...

“Nihlus Kryik, step forward and be recognized.”

Flawlessly on cue, he slid from his thoughts and out of formation, stalking from his place in the ranks and up toward the dais. Heads turned as the confident Spectre strode past, the swing in his hips drawing eyes whether they wanted to follow or not. Nihlus took his place at center stage, laying off the slink to stand semi-respectfully.

General-whats-his-name turned to his aide, who held out three metal cases. It was a small struggle to keep a boyish grin off his face, much to his chagrin.
“Nihlus of Clan Kryik, born of Triginta Petra, may the spirits bear witness this day. We honor you; for standing against our enemies when our own were reluctant to fight, for your insight in turning the tides against a greater foe, and above all else for the sacrifice you nearly made to save another. You refused to accept defeat. You fought with the strength of many. You continue to serve your people even when an entire galaxy demands your arm. On behalf of the Hierarchy, I present you with the Valiant’s Mark, the Blood Token, and the Disc of Nanus. Wear these with pride for all your days.”

A happy flick of mandibles made it past his guard, and the general chuckled with gracious amusement at him. Nihlus buckled himself down, eyes up and expression mostly even, trying not to embarrass himself in front of all of the soldiers below. A certain coworker in particular.

The boxy, bronze Mark was pinned on first, sitting high on his left shoulder. Distinguished service, for displaying capabilities beyond the expected. Next, the deep blue Token with it's long lines and tapering point was set into place on his mantle, just below and to the right of the first medal. Saving the life of a fellow soldier, at the risk of one's own. Nihlus breathed slowly, careful to appear as stoic as he could be while the final honor was laid. The General placed the Disc high on his right shoulder, a silver circle that faded to deep ochre. Outstanding service to the Hierarchy.

The assembled ranks roared for him and the low toned vibration rattled the ground enough to puff up a small cloud of dust. The merc born Spectre swallowed, touched by the harmonious cry made for him, the small deviances of particular gratitude, awe, or respect wavering in the undertones like a symphony of validation.

As Nihlus left the stage and retook his place, he tried not to let the honors mean so much to him. The government and his peers hadn't ever given two shits about what he could do when he worked for them. Why was it only now that they recognized the value of his creative strategies, or acknowledged his penchant for caring enough to risk himself first? The low tier torin had put himself on the line many times over for his squad mates, and the only one he'd spoken to in years had tried to fuck him over. Why was it that only Saren had recognized his potential and sought to bring it out, when countless squad leaders, captains, and fellow soldiers had dismissed him as a troublemaker that would never amount to anything?

The knife wielding torin refrained from snorting at remembering the shaming he'd been subject to, but still had a hard time not being touched and slightly giddy about the bits of metal now on his mantle. Maybe they could mean something. Not a clean slate. Not fair recompense for years of rejection, but... something.

Nihlus sat through the rest of the ceremony, roaring for all the others who were honored for their service, and managed to keep a cool if mildly insouciant expression in his mandibles. His fellow Council Agent was given credit as well, two fold. As the decorated torin already had a Disc of Nanus, the brass opted to award him a bar to clip over his older Hand, indicating a secondary distinction, and a red and black heptagon called Fire Walker, for excellent leadership in times of
For the most part, the tail end of the event was all long winded speeches and minor recognitions that bored the shit out of him, but when it was done Saren set a hand on his lower back and nodded back toward the hangar where the Daedalus and Widmanstat were settled, humming a low key 'let us go home'. He grinned broadly, suffused with happiness. Home. Didn't that sound great coming out of Saren's throat? This... this was more important then the respect or love of the masses.

“Your ride or mine?” Nihlus asked smoothly despite his inner commotion, because splitting up when their nav-systems could tow one another was pointless.

“The Daedalus.”

“Hey, mine's clean right now.”

Saren hummed, doubtfully.

“Alright, alright. You cookin’?”

“I suppose I can.”

Nihlus made a trilling noise of interest, quiet enough for it to be lost in the din of booted feet and post-ceremonial chatter to anyone listening in. It sounded like an appreciation for the taste of his fellow Spectre's cooking, but could also be construed as a preference for the taste of Saren himself.

The other torin snorted delicately and ignored him while they walked away.

Chapter End Notes

06/05/2010 - City of Iratiana Bombarded by Colonialist Forces
“Stories of civilian casualties on Taetrus pour in at this hour, following an attack on the city of Iratiana. Mass accelerators have destroyed apartment blocks, hospitals, train stations, and markets, killing dozens or hundreds with each hit. Colonialist forces appear
unswayed. "Military emplacements on the continent of Eluria were built in easily
defensible population centers during a civil war a few decades ago", explains War
Minister Septimax. "Consequently, bombardments cause high loss of life. If I can give
any advice to the people of the wildlands, it is to get into bombardment shelters and as
far away from military targets as possible". General Partinax's response was more direct:
"We have a saying that hopefully translates appropriately," he said. "There is no such
thing as a turian civilian".”

A/N: War Minister! Gotta add a new designation to the tier list... apparently they have
'ministers'... where the fuck would that go? @_@ Maybe each Primarch has a cabinet of
ministers? I mean, they each have several worlds in their cluster that they oversee, so a
pretty decent cabinet would be good... and I feel like the senate on Palaven are the law
crafters so... hmm...

Fanfic Recommendation: Cross-Cultural Exchange (1896 words) by rivendellrose
(Femshep/Garrus)
A sudden gust of wind that smells of flowers

Chapter Summary

Aiesha's world is flipped upside down, and Saren's is held steady.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I adore his chapter! Written with giggles at one point and with heartmelted tears at another. I don't know if you guys will like it quite so much, but I greatly enjoy what I made here in. In other words, OH DEAR SPIRITS PREPARE FOR FLUFF. Try not to suffocate on it duckies, it's pretty bad. :3 Also, soundtrack is highly advised during part two.

Chapter Soundtrack: "The Very Thought of You" by Nat King Cole

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All her worldly possessions neatly stored in a soldier's lockbox, -and a mostly empty one at that-, Agent Makasian paced the civilian transport's common room in an unending circle. The spacious area of kid friendly causeways and slightly drooping greenery was deserted, vaguely eerie even, but the solitude was welcome as her mind spun in troubled circles. The lockbox floated nearby like seaweed adrift on an ocean, swaying slightly as she passed, wavering a rotation to follow her new path, and almost making it before the next lap took her back by in the opposite direction. She glanced down, for the hundredth time, at the transfer documents on the datapad in her hands.

A new theater of operation, alternative reporting protocols, redefined social circles.

An apartment, a skycar, a bank account number.

She had been sent away from where she could do damage, and left where she might still be useful. An extreme act of mercy coming from the leadership of Blackwatch, and more then the blue eyed tarin had expected. She was alive, technically still an agent, and had a new place to sink in Blackwatch roots. All in all it was a kind retirement, laid out before her like a gift.

And yet.
The sparkling expanse of the widow nebula could be seen in the vid-windows, and her spirits faltered at the sight of it.

Exile. It was as good as exile.

'But not death', she had to remind herself. It wasn't an execution, and for that Aiesha felt grateful. Slightly.

It didn't take long for the vessel to arrive, and the peach toned tarin was first in line to exit. She took her first steps off the docking ramp with a closed expression, immediately surrounded by the elegance of the Presidium ring. All around her dozens of species went about their day on the space station at the galaxy's proverbial heart. A center of culture and diplomacy, -if not quite the trading post it was said to have been in years past-, the Citadel and it's wards spilled out around the displaced female like a metallic flower of potential.

The sight of galactic hustle and bustle only made Aiesha's spirits sink further. This was home now, and for all it's surface appeal, the choice had not been hers. No options given, a punishment for a crime not committed, and that stung like injustice and helplessness. It challenged her dutiful heart to be moved this far from Palaven, from Hierarchy space even, until further notice.

"Further notice' doesn't mean 'never'. I can do good here, but not too good, and maybe..."

Regardless, with her chin held high, the determined tarin checked that the trailing lockbox was still tethered to her Omni-tool correctly, and made for the address in Kithoi ward on the transfer file. Wallowing was... beneath her. This was where the Hierarchy wanted her, so this was where she would serve... until that elusive someday where the handlers of Blackwatch gave her the clearance to go home.

Her gait picked up confidence if not speed, and Aiesha went looking for the nearest rapid transit station. A few minute walk, a skycar request, a short wait, and she was off. The backseat entirely full of lockbox. It didn't take long to arrive at her new apartment complex, and the resplendence of it pulled a small, exhaled 'oh' from her mouth. The landing pad opened directly up to a thirty first floor atrium, decorated in silver, blue, and chrome. The architecture was reminiscent of Cipritine, the angles and stone work achingly familiar. To one side a bar and lounge, a health and wellness club on the other. At the back wall, elevators of plexiglass offered residents a stunning view of the ward's horizon and the galaxy famous Taralos Amphitheater during transport to their floor.

Aiesha blinked a few times at the unexpected luxury before pretending like it wasn't there and watching her feet as she marched toward the elevators, expression bland as she blended into the light
This was... too much. Who had arranged this...? She was supposed to live here?

The displaced agent was utterly certain she wasn't high enough tier to merit living in such a place, and with the controversy surrounding her clan and past... there were people on Palaven who'd have a field day about this if they ever found out.

The 'who' and the 'why' was going to have to be a mystery for another time though. After a point where she'd established some contacts, and they'd proven themselves able to look into Blackwatch's business without reporting back who was asking the questions. Aiesha had a few of those, -she assumed every agent did-, but each and every one of them were back in Hierarchy space, and would probably be closely monitored for months. New contacts, and lesser challenges for them to prove themselves on, it would just have to be. New ground and baby steps.

The lovely tarin needed to be patient, but thankfully time was on her side. She was stuck here anyway, so far out of the loop as to be ridiculously impotent in the information game, and so undergeared as to be crippled in a real fight. Her old, customized Omni-tools were long gone, and her telling quality of armor and tech returned to the Blackwatch HQ armory. Aiesha retained a precious few nodes of her homemade multi-point shielding generators, and a pistol. One, single, pistol.

It was both aggravating and depressing, but... she could start from scratch. All new programs, all new gear. It would be... a challenge, and an affirmation of skill, if she could figure out who had arranged for this opulence on her behalf and secretly repay them, while regearing herself from almost nothing.

A ghost of a smile crept into her mandibles, the first in a while. She did like a challenge, and looking at the situation that way felt... remarkably better. Thoughts of potential sources for not-so-legal mods and checklists for what was missing from her arsenal floated through her mind as the peach toned Agent rose toward the forty ninth floor.

The elevator slowed as it reached it's destination, pleasantly chiming once the lift came to a full stop. She stepped out just as another Turian was stepping in. The doors closed behind her and Aiesha's momentarily upbeat steps slowed to a crawl. A growing sense of horror filtering into her gizzard that nearly drew her to a halt in the middle of the softly carpeted hallway. Her face remained calm even as her lungs stopped working.

That... had been the Turian Councilor.
She now lived... in the same building... on the same floor...

'Oh... spirits no... this can't be...'

Was this supposed to be a promotion?!

The soft chimes of Saren's extremely quiet alarm clock echoed into the cabin, and for once they woke Nihlus before their intended target. The green eyed torin stretched deliciously before letting his neck flop to the side for a view of the time. The holopanel that hovered over the wall displayed an obscene hour of the morning, and he switched it off without hesitation, one long-fingered hand gracelessly dismissing the alarm application. The other arm might have gotten involved, but it was far too busy being a pillow, something the wily Operative had every intention of letting it continue doing for as long as possible.

Of course, the small movements inevitably roused his bed mate, the nearly silent hiss of Saren's breathing increasing from 'asleep' to 'almost awake' pacing within moments. Dissatisfied, Nihlus preemptively tossed a leg over his former mentor's hips, his one free hand coming in to soothingly stroke over supple grey hide.

“That was my alarm.”

“Mmmnope,” replied the younger torin cheekily.

“Yes, it was,” Saren grumbled back, electric eyes blinking open in apparent reluctance.

“I dunnnnno, but it's gone now,” he continued to tease, and it drew the echo of an exasperated chuff from his friend. The carmine plated torin grinned softly, talons gliding over a light grey shoulder in the gap between plate and carapace. He hit a good spot, and the stoic biotic shuddered slightly. Nihlus' mandibles flicked in pleasure, subvocals urging his former mentor to relax back into sleep, fingers continuing to skim coercive circles on any undefended patches of hide.

Still exhausted from the fast and brutal campaign they'd just helped win, Saren pushed himself up
halfway before the beguiling effects of humming and petting brought him low again. His craggy browplates furrowed in disgruntlement, and Nihlus snatched at the first idea that popped into his head to distract the torin from his inevitable and unending need to return to work.

He started to sing.

“The very thought of you...” the green eyed torin began, words coming out in a low croon like melted chocolate, “and I forget to do...”

The other Spectre's face smoothed over, slowly loosing it's grumpy arrangement. "The little ordinary things, that everyone ought to doo~.”

Saren sighed, long and gusty, eyes closed as his fringe tilted to press into Nihlus' keel.

“I'm livinng~ in a kind of daydream... I'm happy as can be... and foolish though it may seem? To me, that's everythinng~.”

The clever Spectre let the translated words roll off his tongue, wavering and sweet, supported by subvocal emphasis in ways the original Human English version couldn't offer. His eyes also slid closed as he curled around the other torin while he sung, his chin coming to rest on silver-grey crest blades.

“The mere idea of you... The longing here for you... You never know~ how slow the moments go~ till I'm near to youuu~.”

Despite his former mentor's earlier grumbling, faced with a slowly crooned love song Saren lay still and unresisting. The weak dregs of energy to move, defeated. Nihlus was careful to keep any sort of cockiness out of his voice. How many times had the other torin mocked his penchant for singing alien songs in the shower? He'd long since guessed the unpersonable agent had liked to listen, but hadn't known for sure. The barely discernible purr that rumbled into the air around them seemed to answer that question once and for all.

“I see your face in every flower~. Your eyes in stars above...”

Still, not wanting to spoil the mood, he kept his tone even and quiet, trying to beguile the exhausted biotic back to sleep.
“It's just the thought of you... the very thought of you... my~ loooooove~~”

The song went on, and the silver-grey torin lay beside him peaceably until it's end. Though almost as if Saren knew he was being kept prisoner with audible bribery, the moment the last line ended he was pushing Nihlus back and sitting up. Said amateur singer complied reluctantly, but knew enough by now not to crowd the torin when he insisted on space. They had spent most of the night cuddling, which was... already something special, in his opinion.

Another gusty sigh, a languid stretching of neck, and the last Arterius finally acknowledged him, electric eyes sighting on his in mellow observation. Nihlus grinned sleepily, keeping himself mostly back even though one set of talons crept unerringly toward an old wound on Saren's forearm. They arrived unassailed, and the younger torin's mandibles flicked in a pleased smile, his fingers gliding over the scar's uneven surface as it stretched across enticingly dense musculature.

Saren snorted, and shook his head at his protégé's antics.

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“You?”

He was graced with a rare eye roll of derision.

“Nihlus.”

“Well it's true. If that's not on the menu then what about something with berries?”

“Your taste for saccharides is not even vaguely healthy.”

“So? You didn't ask what would be nutritional, you asked what I wanted.”

Saren chuffed, but conceded the point with a nod, and quit the room at an unhurried pace. Most likely to make something semi-healthy that somehow included berries. Nihlus flopped back into the
mattress with a yawn, feeling pretty good about life. He napped until a gloved hand shook his shoulder lightly, beckoning him to the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

06/10/2010 - Ground Campaign Underway on Taetrus
“After days of round-the-clock bombardment, the ground campaign in Taetrus' Diluvian Wildlands is underway. The swampy terrain has colonialist forces depending heavily on the Jiris infantry fighting vehicle, a hovercraft capable of navigating swamps with ease. At this hour, fierce fighting is underway on the shores of the Talae River, where separatists have taken cover in the undergrowth and are firing armor-piercing missiles at both the ground forces and the air support that aims to clear them out. Earlier, a cabal of biotics took a stand but were quickly wiped out by vehicles that flanked them and saturated the area with antipersonnel frags. Asked if he expected the ground campaign to result in less collateral damage than the air maneuvers, General Partinax responded, simply: "No." “

A/N: 'A cabal of biotics' is it? Intersting. Like a murder of crows or a school of fish, it's the name of a group of these things. Are you enjoying the CNN media tidbits duckies? I know I am. I ended up with many more tidbits than war chapters, but I think I shall continue posting them for funsies. :3

A/N/N: Agent Aiesha Makasian is property of CristalDePhoenix, borrowed with permission. :3

A/N/N/N: Did you like my subtle inference about the number of species on the Citadel? According to the in-game codex, there are *dozens* of sapient species to be found. Dozens. Holy shit! Where are they all? ... Why are the liveships in Andromeda only carrying a select few types... Hmmmm...

A/N/N/N/N: Nihlus' song is the same as the chapter soundtrack, 'The Very Thought of You' by Nat King Cole', though slightly modified to suit and not reprinted in it's entirety as per Ao3's regs. All credit to the original singer/songwriter.

Fanfic Recommendation: Prayers for the Wolf (850 words) by RockPaperbackScissors (Part 1 of a short Thane/Shepard series. Little moments.)
Chapter Summary

The tale of Jane Landsley continues.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Note - Some Batarian has been made up using the CDN wiki, canon, and my brain for a basis. As the translations are situationally obvious, no lexicon entries are being added here, though they are available over in the EDaH manifesto.

A/N: My favorite tumblr blurb of the night is, “My life is just becoming a losing battle of “Saren no.””, followed closely by, “I am not asking for advise or input I am asking for compliance. Why is this so difficult to understand?” XD Also, go read this, you'll love it. You can click that 'answered asks' hashtag for more of them. 8D

A/N/N: This is going to be a long one duckies, but I am somewhat pleased with it. :3 Also, considering making the Shepard-centric Interludes into a separate mini-series using what I have thus far, and adding in all the deleted scenes that I've cropped out for story flow, maybe some new ones too. There are a fair few Ao3 readers that don't have much of an interest in Turian-centric xenophilia that might still enjoy the Shepard I've made, soooo... hmmm. Later though! I shall finish this chapter first!

A/N/N/N: I subscribe to the fan-canon on the CDN wiki's for the Batarian Language, (Here.). The stuff about numerology and body language is too fascinating to ignore.

Chapter Soundtrack: Johnny Cash - God's Gonna Cut You Down [Remix]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~Interlude: Like Water Droplets Smeared Across A Car Door Window~

Her slightly late friend slid into the booth like a melting ice cube, going from frigid and brittle to liquid and shapeless in a matter of seconds. Alexandria smiled faintly, chin in hand, and waited for the crimson haired girl to speak. Not that she expected words anytime soon. Jane looked... more worn out than usual.

Time pasted in relative silence, the other patrons of the restaurant murmuring their conversations in low tones that fit the shady lighting and run down furniture. They weren't exactly in the nice part of
town, and few people came here to be noticed, nevermind overheard.

“I'm going to murder him,” Jane Shepard grumbled under her breath, eyes closed and head tilted back against the once-cushy seat back.

“Oh? Coming from you that's less likely to be an empty threat, I suppose.”

Violent green eyes flashed her way in a half hearted glare for a moment before sliding shut again.

“Fuck off. I'm not serious. If I was, Jezz would already be dead, 'n I wouldn't be complaining about him to you in public. I'm not that stupid.”

Alexandria flipped her free hand at the wrist, indicating something between 'go on', and 'well of course'.

“I'm also not half as... as freaking murder-happy as people think.”

“You do happen to be the only person I know who has stabbed multiple people to death in a gunfight.”

Jane's pale palms came up to rub into her eyes tiredly.

“Is anyone ever going to let that go? It was self defense, one hundred percent.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Yeeeah.”

“And what abouuuut...”

“Don't say it.”
“Min.”

“Seriously, not tod-”

“Do.”

“For fuck’s sake, why are you being such a bitch all the sudden?”

Semi-peaceably, Alexandria left the forbidden word incomplete, blinking slowly from under sooty eyes and black bangs. Her adopted friend inhaled as if to speak, -perhaps to change the topic, perhaps to throw about more insults like sheltering walls-, but a waiter wandered by at that very moment, providing an easy out.

“You need anything ladies?”

“... Jack and coke, and another for her of whatever she's having. That... blue crap.”

The mohawked server wandered off without asking for ID, and she smiled slightly at Jane for the unspoken apology in the drink order. The colony born misfit had long since promised to tell-all about the end of Mindior, but had yet to pay up in more than sporadic, stand alone facts. Alexandria had forever been a quietly caustic, -but endless patient-, friend in return for the little bits of trust slowly given.

The had a detente, and somehow it worked. Though truthfully, few people had anything with Jane Shepard. It took a certain level of innate zen to deal with her attitude, and a rare patience to get a peak through the cracks in her armor.

“So. Jezz is not going to wake up in a ditch then? Pity.”

Jane grunted, eyes sliding shut again. Alexandria tsked, noting the bags under her friend's eyes, wondering when last it was the recalcitrant girl had slept, and slept well.
“Finish that history project yet?”

“No.”

“It's due next Wednesday. Going to pay someone to do it for you?”

“Possibly.”

“Hmmmm... started on it yet?”

“MmMmnn.”

“What's the delay? I finished mine in one night.”

“What's the delay?” Jane asked rhetorically, scoffing loudly and reaching for her smokes. “Shit. We're seventeen, not seven. I've got too much on my plate right now to waste time on a kiddy project like Omni-gel panoramas. If it was real history, like... military strategy or something? Then I might care, but every topic on the 'approved' list looks like watered down 'baby's first long-time-ago lesson'. 'The Peace Treaty at Ma-ai'? 'Vancleef's Compromise?' or how about 'The first Thanksgiving feast'? What a bunch of... I have no idea where to even start.”

“You could stir up some sheep by making a historically accurate panorama.”

“Of?”

“Tienanmen Square?”

Her head tossed dismissively as the fiery teen snorted away the idea, but a light swallow and a clenched jaw gave away a suppressed sense of discomfort.

Sometimes... Jane's little tells painted a rather dark picture. A murky one, to be sure, but grim.
“What about the French Revolution? Lot's of choice, picturesque moments there. You could bring cake for extra credit.”

Shaggy crimson locks shook back and forth in a negative, though the macabre suggestions finally garnered a weak smirk. “Nah. I'll just pay one of the sophomores to do it. I've got work all weekend anyway, and pre-ROTC on Monday.”

“Working the whole weekend, again?”

The seventeen-going-on-forty-something shrugged, and their drinks arrived. Alexandria nodded politely to their waiter as Jane swiped her chit for them. Wordlessness reigned until their observer had left.

“I'm surprised that you try so hard for good grades when you don't seem to care about school itself.”

“...mom gives me an allowance for high marks.”

“Oh? You never mentioned... and you need it even though you have... side jobs, becauuuse?”

Another shrug as Jane sipped at her jack and coke, reclining back into the booth. Alexandria clicked her tongue and contemplated topics which might draw her friend out of this depressive slouch and into the surprisingly social person she could be.

Silence continued, alcohol disappeared, smoke drifted, and the purple eyed teenager came to the conclusion that her companion was perhaps too damn tired to be anything other than a melted ice cube.

“Come on, let's go.”

Green eyes opened, blinking at her curiously. “Go where?”

“Your place. You're going to sleep, I'm going to make you a half-assed panorama, and I'll wake you up before work. I might even cook if there's time.”
The momentary tremble at the corner of Jane's mouth was probably a solid attempt at a real smile, and Alexandria gave her a subtle wink in return. The lanky teen stood, and let herself be led away to the nearest public transport station with nary a complaint.

Alexandria’s willowy form trailed beside Jane, smiling a Mona Lisa smile.

Lack of complaint generally meant she was on the right track.

The haunted, submissive look of the young man reminded Hannah so painfully of the desolation in her daughter's face when she woke from nightmares of Mindior that the N7 had a hard time not wrapping him in a shock blanket and taking him home right then and there. Though for a hardened soldier, she felt it was... mildly embarrassing to be so suddenly taken over by motherly instincts. Said instincts disagreed, adamantly. Hannah shoved them down with the same icy will that had taken her through countless years of brutal military campaigns, and it was no less difficult, mentally speaking. She instead gave the idea careful consideration while they waited.

Shoulders in tight, depressingly underweight, -all muscle and not an ounce of joy-, the young rescuee bore all the marks of an extended stay in slavery. Control chip scars included. Name unknown, origin unknown, age unknown... They'd listed him down in the paperwork as 'John Doe', because when asked about his name the only words he'd ever heard used to get his attention had been 'slave', 'boy', or a variety of guttural Batarian slurs that equated to 'useless meat' or 'piece of trash'. He didn't even speak Alliance Common, just a smattering of the Batarian General Tongue, and some slang in the Galactic Trade language.

Hannah refrained from growling, barely. Beside her David leaned in, pressing their armored shoulders together in silent support. He saw right through her chilly front of course. Her former CO always did.

“So sorry I'm late!” called the space station's only pediatrician, zipping into the room in a shuffle like a particularly hyper beaver, “Bit of an issue on another level, and they needed me.”

The woman chuckled heartily, and Hannah Shepard blinked at her, nonplussed. David stood by, mild and patient as always.
“Little marines, am I right? Hahaha.Wellll now! Who do we have here?” the doctor nabbed John’s chart from the wall holder, humming as she skimmed.

“John is it?”

“...he doesn't speak Alliance Common.”

“I'm sorry?”

“He doesn't speak Alliance Common, and he doesn't have a translator. You have to talk to him in Batarian General.”

Big blue eyes blinked at her, bemused, before the doctor slowly turned to look at the silent, incurious boy with a strange expression.

“Oh well then... I mean, I don't happen to just know Batarian...”

Hannah stepped away from the wall slightly, and acknowledged her insufficiency with a nod. “Speak, and I will translate. Your UT implant can understand his replies?”

“Oh yes! It's a nice one. I just don't know how to speak any other languages, you know? I've never met someone who didn't have a translator for mine to talk to.”

The blonde haired woman was uncertain how to answer that. Being an N7, she regularly dealt with a variety of species and people who specifically didn't have their internal electronics set to openly communicate with others, as a matter of security. Herself included.

The doctor shuffled nervously at the non-reply, and turned to address John while speaking unnecessarily slowly and loudly. A few steps away, David practically radiated mild amusement for some reason.

“Hello! My name is Doctor Tiffany Vigurada, but you can just call me Doc Tiff, okay?”
“...Harai. Shir Ambas Tiffany Vigurada.”

“...harai,” he whispered back in a voice like sand paper.

“I see on your file here that you've had a hard time of it, hmm? The scans the nurse took are showing me that you have quite a few problems, but don't you worry, we're going to get you healthy again in no time!”

“...Ahisa unji at wren hameh. Ashksen.”

The doctor waited a moment, likely expecting more words to follow. Hannah thought the woman's manner best suited a five year old rather than an abused teen who could barely understand any language, nevermind baby talk. She shortened the phrasing appropriately. John's eyes dared to look up, glancing between them tentatively.

“Right! Well, our biggest issue here is malnutrition, which you've handled pretty well, considering. Some anemia, and quite of bit of organ stress. To put it simply for you sweetheart, your body needs some good food, lots of rest, and a few medicines. Probably a little bit of exercise after you've been cleared of the parasites in your tummy. I'll make sure to put the complicated stuff for your long term worries in the file for your primary care physician when the Alliance gets you settled somewhere.”

“Asuga merir hajen lenya kt. Unji habres tor mhekt yur. Unji pas silaman isama moread, isama kystro. Shir hajekt at System's Alliance ahisa unji mosko'ro sim bes ambas.”

“Anhat.” he mumbled uncertainly in reply.

Hannah ignored the vaguely accusing look Doctor Vigurada was giving her as they carried on, the other woman laying increasingly heavy stress on the soothing and comforting phrases she spoke even as the N7 continued to parse the babble down into bite sized concepts an under-socialized former slave might grasp. Eventually the woman gave up, made her excuses, handed them a list of prescriptions, and left.

The blonde haired soldier also ignored the low, rugged chuckle that escaped her old friend as soon the doctor had exited. Wordlessly, Anderson smirked at her as he passed by, crouching down to try and gently coerce John into standing up and coming with them. It didn't take much, -obedience an ingrained and automatic habit-, and they trio slowly wandered back toward the space station's upper branch where their squad's heavy cruiser was docked.
A quick errand at the base's pharmacy turned into a trial of will for Hannah as David stood in line and she thoughtlessly led John over to the candy isle.

Jane had a secret sweet tooth, and she hadn't considered...

John was staring at the variety of treats like he couldn't comprehend so much food existing in one place ever, never mind sugar coated food. The sheer awe on his face... cheek bones still insisting on being boyishly round even though they had little pudge to offer...

The tiny spark of motherhood she'd nurtured from nothing to raise Jane screamed at her. Loudly.

Heart in her throat, Hannah casually picked out a toffee bar coated in chocolate, and gestured in the Batarian manner for him to choose something too. It took almost as long for the young man to make a choice as it did for her former CO to fill the various prescriptions.

Later that evening, amid the awkwardness of N6s and 7s trying to care for the lone survivor of a slaver base raid, both of the selections ended up clutched in John's hands, much to his wide eyed and skittish happiness, though they remained uneaten. The boy slept with them, secreting them away under his pillow when he thought she wasn't looking.

“Taking another one home, Shepard? Might be a bit more troublesome than the last.”

“Shush. You want him?”

“I've got enough of my own, unfortunately. You could always let the system have him?”

She snorted, elegant and dismissive.

Another low chuckle, and the lights dimmed as the night cycle hit, the ship on course for Arcturus where most of them would disembark to await reassignment. Hannah would be taking the time to get back to Earth though, possibly with a plus one.
“Hey there, pretty soft-skin. Interested in some fun?”

Jane didn't so much as acknowledge the obnoxious Turian whistling after her. She was finally off work, and having caught a lucky bit of down time, the green eyed girl had managed to catch up on her homework in advance of their deadlines. She was going to go home, order a pizza, and take another hit of the under-the-table viral based gene mods she'd been using to steadily improve herself. When the stiffness hit, she'd dissolve in a hot bath, and possibly play her VR combat simulator till dawn to distract from the discomfort. All in all, it was going to be an amazing free night.

“Whhhhp! Come on, not even a maybe? I'd pay to taste that pale hide of yours.”

Now if only the xeno would fuck off.

“Have you heard how long Turian tongues ar-”

“Go fuck yourself asshole!”

“Rude!”

“Like I care. There is a whole damn red light district, go there. Idiot.”

“A red what?”

Jane stopped on a dime, quickly enough that the female, -no wait, male; he had some horns, the rest were just broken off or something-, almost ran into her from behind. She spun, glaring daggers.

“Three blocks east, five blocks north, red lighting literally everywhere.”

“I seriously don't know what colored lighting has to do with those... lovely hips of yours. So bony, mmmnf. Come on. I'll be the best lay you've ever had.”
She inhaled slowly, and exhaled slower, reminding herself that filling out police reports would not only spoil her plans of pizza and digital violence, but they would also put her mom into a tizzy fit.

“I do not fuck xenos. I am not into kitty birds. I am not a prostitute. The red light district has human men and women who sell sex, professionally. I'm sure you can find,” her right eye twitched, aggravated to even be talking about one of her most unflattering features, “women with bony hips over there. Okay? Okay. Now go away.”

“Three blocks east, five north? Perfect, thanks!”

He veritably skipped away, and Jane about faced and continued her walk to the rapid transit station, albeit in something of a stomp.

Hannah made it home, Jane's favorite pizza in hand, all geared up to have a discussion about her possibly adopting John. Unfortunately for her, the house was empty. The N7 deflated a little, but brushed it off. It was two pm on a Saturday, of course her daughter would be out socializing on the weekends.

Fabricated cheese and carbs tucked safely in the stasis unit, and gear stowed away in her mini-armory, the at-liberty operative wandered around her home, distractedly checking for listening bugs, traps, and various counter intelligence accoutrement that may have made it's way into place when no one was watching.

Sometimes there were some, but usually there weren't. Thankfully.

One part of the scanning lap took Hannah by the refrigerator, where the two latest report cards where tacked up for her to find. Some 'A's, mostly 'B's. Worse than Jane usually did, but still within reason and much better then the recalcitrant teen had done in years past. Another part of her loop took the N7 through the bathroom, which was a mild disaster zone of dried bubble bath patches and a familiar-styled pizza box.

She tsked at the mess, and made a mental note to lecture Jane on the demands of cleanliness in the armed forces. Slovenly habits like this would get mashed out of her the hard way if messes were left lying to be found by her instructors. Demerits, en masse. It was better to develop organized habits now and look good later, if her daughter was still shooting for a fast track to N School. Though...
with the world had put Jane through so far, a little bit of a delay in her career probably wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

On Hannah's final section of routine inspection she stepped into Jane's room and cast about for any bugs. Her Omni-tool was about half way done with the room when she noticed a loose section of sheet on the bed, amid the mostly neat space. She stooped slightly to tuck it back in, but oddly, the back of her tucking fingers met crinkling plastic rather than cloth covered box springs.

Odd.

Digits spun about, investigating the curiosity. When a cursory examination shed no light, she instead opted to lift the mattress up on one side and take a look. It was probably a secret collection of embarrassing posters or a secret candy stash...

There were... bags. Sealed bags in a variety of colors, made of thick, flash-forged plastic...

Hannah picked one up, and turned it over, recognizing the same drugs she'd seen while busting down alien doors, but not comprehending. She looked at another, and another, and another; not one of them the same as the last. There were also ebooks. A wide variety illegal foreign works like League of One stories and the Hegemony's Sacred Kirjekt; a collection of holy texts on their caste-based belief system. Excuses for their slave based economy.

She dropped the last like it was a viper, backing up from the damning horde.

Eyes flashing like the frigid ice sheet on a lake in winter, Hannah Shepard left the room and sent her daughter a sharply worded text message to come home.

Now.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Mom, I'm home,” Jane called out suspiciously from the door, toeing off her shoes.

She'd gotten a... very pissed sounding message to come home right away, with no rhyme or reason.
She'd had to wave off Alexandria and Korvo, leaving them to hit the mall's book store without her.

“Jane.”

Hannah stood in the hallway to the kitchen, arms crossed and face flat. The teen recognized it as her adopted mother's 'battle stance'. She'd seen it before when they'd argued about things like dating and tattoos.

Having long since figured out that being dismissive in the face of the battle stance just pissed the woman off more, Jane neutrally waved and came forward to hear her mom out. When Hannah just continued to stare at her, a little bit of attitude broke out from impatience.

“Well?”

The N7 exhaled slow through her nose.

“You have a massive collection of illegal goods under your mattress. Explain.”

Oh. *Shit.*

Um.

“I... can explain.”

“Go on.”

As a weak attempt for time to figure out how to word this so as to not be eviscerated on the spot, Jane tilted her head toward the living room couch invitingly.

Hannah simply continued to stare.
‘Ooookay then.’

“Okay uh, for starters? I'm not doing any of the street drugs. I smuggle them for the 10th Street Reds, because they're going to get someone to do it anyways, and I... wanted the money.”

“For?” her mom growled. She fidgeted to avoid swallowing, but it was an even worse response in retrospect.

“I...” the fiery teen cleared her throat, straightened her back, and prepared to potentially face her maker. Or ancestors. Or whatever. “I don’t think I can become an N7 without some augs, and the basic ones they have on offer during boot camp aren't going to cut it. My medical charts said it all before I ever left Mindior. No in utero gene mods, no hand-picked physical traits, and definitely no inhereted-deficiency corrections. I've got at least fifty different check boxes on my files that predisposed me to all kinds of natural failures that will fuck me over in aptitude testing.”

“So you're selling drugs to fix that.”

“Yes.”

Hannah's face remained carved from stone.

“And the ebooks?”

“What about them?”

“They're illegal.”

“So? Knowledge is knowledge. It's what you do with it that counts. Most of that stuff can be found on the extra-net anyways, people just don't want to info-net search for it because everyone knows the government tracks search history.”

“And the Kirjekt?”
“Yeah?”

“Why would you want to read that filth?”

“Originally? 'Know thy enemy’.”

“That's it?”

“Yeah.”

“... and what -exactly- did you learn from it?”

Jane looked at her mom sideways, wondering why the drugs seemed to be getting less attention than the books. Haltingly she started to answer, trying to figure out how complete of an answer was a good one.

“That... Batarians are some deluded shitheads, and probably... most of them aren't half as bad as people make them out to be, because they didn't chose to drink the cool-aid, they were... I dunno... bottle fed it?”

“...the cool-aid?”

“Er... sorry. It's slang. It means, something like 'buying into lies that someone is feeding you without thinking it through', I guess. But the four eyes get taught from birth all that bullshit about reincarnating as a slave cast for committing a crime and chances to be high caste next go-around if they're good little peons. It's pretty disgusting, and a total propaganda machine.”

“I see.”

“...”

“... you're grounded for life.”
“I'm... less than a year from being eighteen?”

Hannah glared jagged ice shards.

“Annnnnnd grounded for life.”

“No more drug running. We're destroying it all.”

“What! No! If I don't deliver on time I'll have to pay for it all!”

“With the how many thousands of credits you've earned doing it?”

“No! Moooom! I can't stop now, and I can't destroy it! For one, the reds would be pissed at me, and two, I'm only like a hundred and thirty K from my goal...”

“What, Jane? Tell me exactly what augs are valuable enough for you to be enabling countless people's self-destructive habits?”

“The key word there is 'self'! Okay? And it isn't like I push through the really bad stuff. Everything in my stash is legal in Turian space...”

“Nice try. Turians don't have any laws regarding substance abuse. Now stop dodging the fist question.”

“Here, you know what? I'll show you. One sec...”

Hackles raised about as high as Hannah's, the fiery teen fought with her temper to keep it cool while she loaded the list of cybernetics, genemods, and implants she wanted on her 'tool. List acquired, she shoved the display in her mom's face with a probably unwise amount of defiance.

On screen, a variety of tech specs, medical notations, and potential draw-backs scrolled by. For
several long minutes the blonde haired woman read through the painstakingly detailed list, and Jane's temper burned down to embers in the face of honest interest and fair regard for her reasons.

“...you are still grounded for life.”

“Yeeehah?” she asked, leadingly.

“We're also destroying your stash.”

“But!”

“NO! Listen.”

Jane huffed, but fell silent.

“Just because you aren't choosing to do the drugs yourself doesn't make it okay. Just because you aren't forcing others to, doesn't either. There are good reasons why enabling someone else's bad habits is still, by and large, considered a horrible thing to do. I don't think you understand it, and I am going to make sure you do. Starting next month, you're doing some choice community service so I can make sure you see first hand exactly what your drugs do to people long term. To families. It's not all about personal freedoms Jane. This isn't Palaven, it's Earth. We have laws about these things that were put into place by people much smarter and wiser than you, and your lack of respect for that will take you exactly nowhere in N School. You will make good on the amount owed to the Reds out of your accounts, and then, if I feel you've learned what I'm trying to show you, if you focus on school like I have been telling you to forever, -and that includes getting ALL As-, if you get rid off all your illegal junk and prove to me that you can be a law abiding citizen... then I will help you afford the augmentations you want, so you can have a better shot on the appitude tests. You weren't wrong when you did this research. Most of the Ns do start with more than you have to give. I didn't know it bothered you this much, and I'm willing to sink some of my accounts to see that set right, but only if you are willing to work for it.”

The green eyed girl stared back, considering and processing.

“You have to prove you can be lawful before anyone will trust you with enforcing the law itself Jane. You're going about this the wrong way.”
“I don't... I didn't...”

“Go to your room, pull out all that crap, organize it for destruction, and think about what I've said. I'll come get you for dinner later, and we'll talk some more.”

“... okay.”

“Good. Go.”

Jane wandered away to plunk down on her slightly-askew bed. She wasn't certain she entirely agreed with everything her mom said, but... there were some good points in there. To be fair.

With a heavy exhale, for once Jane Shepard did as she was told.

“I want to enlist after high school.”

Hannah Shepard looked up from the holomap of Salarian space she was studying, not entirely surprised to hear those words.

“I'll ask you the same question I asked your sister when she first said almost those exact words to me. The same question my father once asked me.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“Why do you want to be a soldier, John Shepard?”

“Because...”

Soulful blue eyes looked off to the side, out the window and into the mid-afternoon sunlight. Unlike
his fiery sister, John was a cautious thinker, and a terrible orater. Hannah waited patiently for her son to find the right words.

“I can't see myself doing anything else. I want you to be proud of me. I want to prove to Jane that I'm not just her 'little brother', I'm a Shepard too. I still suck at figuring out what the right thing to do is. Stuff happened at school, and... nevermind. Anyway, the point is that I want to know that someone who gets the big picture is calling the shots, and I want to shoot for the good guys.”

A soft smile lit her normally cold expression at her son's fumbling, heartfelt words. He'd never quite recovered from a childhood of malnutrition and hard labor, or years of lacking normal social interaction. The therapists tentatively labeled it Aspergers Syndrome, and said it was incurable.

Hannah reached out to hug him, thinking that clearly there was nothing there to be cured.

Chapter End Notes

06/11/2010 - Detained Human Journalist Dies in Colonialist Care
“Colonialist forces on Taetrus are coming under fire today for allowing a journalist to die in their care. Grant Keyes, a human working for the Future Content Corporation, was detained by colonialist forces when he was caught filming war dead in the city of Iratiana. Commander Lahere Dianix, commander of the destroyer on which Keyes was held, explained that they were unprepared to detain humans. "We didn't have anything with levo-amino-acids on board," he says. "He refused even water and died of dehydration." However, parts of the story raise significant questions: dying of dehydration would likely have taken a week or more, and any doctor checking on Keyes' condition could have hydrated him intravenously with saline without fear of poisoning the prisoner.”

A/N: I feel like Saren and Shepard were meant to be mirror images of each other. One happening to become the false prophet, the other then becoming the hero. It very easily could have all gone the opposite way, with an exhausted but dutiful Garrus in black armor at Shepard's side on Sovereign as she angrily contemplated the Turian Spectre that had outted her, and continued to be a thorn in her side. Nihlus could have been the broken torin on Omega. Liara could have been Shiala, and Tali's brilliance would have been just as fascinating and useful to Saren... Tell me you can see all this too? Well, anyway, it fits with that idea for her to have a sibling, and also works with my 'omniverse' choices in writing.

A/N/N: Speaking of working with canon, have you *seen* ManShep's smile? Ahahahahaha! If not, google it. Then google 'Asperger's smile'. The same, right? Right?!?! Pfftt. I had to, duckies. It makes even more sense, because many of the symptoms of Asperbers and Autism align pretty well with childhood malnutrition. Voila.
Fanfic Recommendation: Medicinal Violence (35,590 words) by RedHammer (The worst part about waking up after a snarling bare-knuckle fight with your best friend is waking up in the same medbay. FemShep/Garrus.)
Nihlus stared down at the door, and the door stared back.

It was dull but polished metal, scuffed up at shoulder height where Blue bumped it repeatedly while getting inside his tiny apartment. The place was really more Asari sized than anything. Drell maybe, or Salarians, might be comfortable in it, but most Turians would balk at the tight quarters. Then again... his overgrown friend did grow up on a spaceship, so maybe it was something to do with that.

Mentally, he pictured the other torin stumbling home from a long shift, leaning into the frame while unlocking the door with a yawn... It wasn't hard, considering Nihlus had just watched it happen. He'd been waiting in the vents above the doorway for the last three hours, three dextro pizzas in stasis and a case of beer stuffed down by his feet while the carmine plated Spectre repeatedly rehearsed what he wanted to say.
Blue had gotten home ten minutes ago, and that had been the perfect time to pop down, peace offerings in hand. Fuck, he could have dropped down after a minute or two and pinged the door like a normal person. Instead he'd... kept rehearsing. Nihlus couldn't get his thoughts to translate into the right words, and he really didn't want to screw this up...

One more minute passed by, then another... then another...

It occurred to him that the right words probably weren't going to happen, and his options now were basically 'do or die'. Being more of the 'doer' type, the Spectre slid from his hiding spot like melting wax, his gifts drawn along with toe talons to fall behind him, caught effortlessly in mid-air as he faced the door. He took a deep breath, shoulders squared, and jammed an elbow at the holo-panel before he could think about it too much.

The faint buzz of the mediocre hallways lights made for a surprisingly nerve wracking soundtrack to his wait.

Whirrrr~ rrrrrrr~rrrrRrrrrrr~

Nihlus waited impatiently, stasis boxes resting on one hip, beer case perched on the other. Just when he was starting to think about hitting the button again the door slid aside with a soft pneumatic hiss. Icy blue eyes met verdant green, lighting up with joy to see him. His heart gave a little lurch in response.

“Bl-” and suddenly there was a hand on his keel, pulling him inside; a hand cupping his jaw line, and mouth plates coming in to meet his. Nihlus let the taller Turian press him back into the metal after the door had closed, practically melting into the surface as fingers came in searching for the sweet spots under his horns. Cloth covered hip crests pushed into his, and the merc born torin seriously considered dropping the food and drink in favor of laying hands on those amazing hips. It was a close call. He was about to do it before Garrus pulled back, mouth plates shiny from their saliva and mandibles quirked in a happy grin.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

The Detective leaned back in for more, apparently unsatisfied, and Nihlus gave up on getting to do any touching for now, reassured that he'd instead be able to do a fair bit of it later. Blue's rough
tongue swirled with his, gliding along his palette before tracing the inside of his upper mouth plate. The Spectre moaned softly, his undertone a mellow trill of pleasure. Half blitzed on reverie, -and oh what a strong hit it was-, he was only vaguely aware of the stasis box and beer being taken away. He really only complained when the heat of Garrus’ body left his, lifting open reluctant eyelids that had closed at some point.

Before Nihlus got a good look at where the gifts had gone to muscled arms came back around his shoulders, framing him in with the door.

“Missed you, Palvi,” the sniper rumbled, cheek plates scuffing against his as the torin carried on downward, stopping at the thinner neck hide just below his mandibles. Teeth and tongue made themselves known, and the knife-lover sighed blissfully, deeply relieved that his welcome was so... warm.

“Ya. Same.”

“Good, ” was all the Officer replied, teeth sinking into Nihlus' throat as hips and keel kept him pinned. He whimpered slightly, though not from pain. The sharp nip was at the exact place a Turian from certain colonies would leave a bite mark on a bondmate. Certain colonies... like Nihlus' own. The green eyed torin panted, keening for more, too in love with the feeling to question the unexpected act.

Blue's tongue laved at the spot, stroking over the pin prick wounds lovingly, the mountainous sniper's subvocals dropping down into a plate rattling hum. Nihlus felt the reverie hormones hit his bloodstream like liquid sunlight, and the lust stirring in his gut went from low simmer to broiling with no discernible transition. His subvocals re-tuned to match Blue's own, and he pushed the Detective back just far enough to bounce up and settle both knees on those sturdy hips. He heard one of Garrus' palms hit the wall in support, and felt the other curl around his lower back almost possessively.

“I'm... so glad... you came,” the Detective rumbled, mouthplates nibbling a trail down his neck and across his throat, leaving a chilled line of wetness as Blue wandered across the lighter toned hide.

“You did... mmmnn... make me promise...”

“...and you kept it.”
“Alw-mnnnnnn, fuck yessss....” was the Spectre's only reply as teeth slid in on the other side as well. Double marked, and somewhere between floating and ravenous. Spirits, this torin took him apart.

Nihlus held on with one hand on the back of Blue's thick neck, talons curled around his spinal plates, while his other hand found a handhold on the rough edge of a collar. Well situated and with some height to his vantage, the young Spectre came down on his lover's neck in turn; laying the sharp points of his teeth on that same, special location at the juncture between neck and carapace. He gave it a half second, just to be sure, but when Blue's only response was to tilt his crest to offer more gorgeous, tawny brown real estate, the Spectre bit down slowly, savoring it. The feeling of teeth sinking into flesh, just a small bit, just enough, was heady, and he couldn't help but hold it there for a moment before pulling back and getting to work with his tongue.

Nihlus licked reverie, apology, and love into that little wound for all he was worth, hoping his not-words came through clearly. Between his thighs gripped tightly to Garrus' torso the edges of his lover's plates began to shift. He growled, muzzily and desirous, and rocked against the other torin. It drew a long groan and small wobble from the Detective's balance, prompting the Spectre to do it again. The reaction was similar, though it did get the tall sniper to start walking them to the bedroom.

Mischievously, he laid teeth on that spot again, using the minimal pressure sense of his teeth to find the approximate holes, though they were already clotting over. Nihlus bit down once more, and laved the break sweetly, nuzzling into the nearby hide between licks. Garrus' gait lost it's smoothness, and he really liked the thought of seeing how unsteady he could make the other male. Wondering if he could topple the wonderful torin with bites and licks alone... he went after the mountainous sniper's fall like a Volus on the trail of a good deal, and his ride moaned, steps slowing to an unsteady shuffle.

While Garrus didn't exactly fall over, the nibbling teeth and attentive tongue did send him stumbling. Wisely, the Vakarian clansman brought them down on the nearby cubitura instead of trying to make it all the way to the bedroom. His hands found Nihlus' waist and began the best kind of revenge, mandibles dropped and jaw open as the Detective made out with him like he was oxygen. The Spectre hummed like an addict and gave as good as he got, pulling Blue's body down over him, grinding up into the torin's plates with abandon.

“Ahhhhnn, Nihlus... spirits, you're perfect...”

Sweet words, though so untrue... but the low hum behind them put paid to the honesty they were said with. The Spectre began toeing off Garrus' pants like the experienced fiend that he was, all the while taking over the torin's mouth with slow, invasive insistence. The reverie high they were on was making the Detective even more expressive and responsive than usual, louder than usual, and Nihlus was approaching a state of somewhat incoherent arousal.
He needed this torin to fuck him, right now.

Right. Now.

Rather than try and form words, Nihlus opted to align himself with the heavy cock that had long since descended from Garrus' plates, and supported it with one palm as he forced himself up on it with little time to accommodate, not that a cloaca needed much. The pain was actually greater than the neck bite, and he liked it that much more. He also liked the long, uncontrolled groan that was muffled into his shoulder as the Detective sunk down. They came together with shared sound, subvocals chasing each other up and down as dizzy thoughts and unspeakable feelings changed the pitch.

“Ohhn, mmm, shit. Yes. Blue... just... ohhh yessssss...”

“Yeah... nnyyeah,” the tall torin whispered breathily, accompanied by another moan, “I've needed this... Was, unnnn, ah! Ahhhhhh... worried...”

“Mmmmmnnnnn,” he hummed back, subvocals encouraging more sex and less talk. He'd already established that he sucked at words anyway, and Nihlus preferred to play to his strengths.

Thankfully, Garrus rumbled back agreement and curled inside him, close to pressing just right on one of the very best nerve clusters. The Spectre arched his back, trying to find that elusive angle while rocking against the torin inside him. The sound of his lover's breath scratched at the air, uneven and rough, somehow adding to his arousal.

Still chasing that spot, Nihlus twisted and shifted, looking for greater stimulation. The Detective noticed and delivered, tilting the lanky knife-wielder to one side, and twisting slightly the other way himself. Blue leaned over, bringing a ruddy brown thigh with, until Nihlus gave a bursting cry of pleasure to let him know he'd found it.

The Spectre chased orgasm as the phallus buried inside of him relaxed and recurl every few seconds, all while rocking upward with a steady, unceasing rhythm. He gasped, talons grabbing at a half unbuttoned shirt and the edge of a cushion, riding the influx of sensation high, higher, higher still, before it peaked like the pleasurable opposite of a gunshot and tore a shattering roar from him.

Nihlus' surge of sensation hit the high point, stopped for a split second in stillness and silence as his diaphragm ceased working, limbs locking down... then his body let go with a rush and he came
across his stomach like a resurgent geyser. His voice petered out into a moaning keen, hands relaxing on the fabrics they'd latched onto for stability that wasn't there. Garrus continued to move inside him, seeking his own release, and the echoes of his orgasm had him languid and shivering at the continued pressure.

“Ranul...” he hummed, trying to figure out where his limbs were again.

Wanting, needing, the other torin to come hard like he had, the Spectre gathered what focus he had and tightened down on Blue, rolling his internal muscles like a belly dancer. Garrus trilled for him, but wasn't peaking hard and fast like he had, and Nihlus took offence to the idea of Blue having a mild come after the sudden and mind-breaking one he'd given. The green eyed Agent made for Garrus' neck once more, biting deep, maybe deeper than was strictly kind, and licking into the wound messily. He would give the torin all the reverie he could take, and then some, fighting back his rapid-clotting augs with teeth and tongue.

Nihlus kneaded at the torin's supple waist while he licked at his damage soothingly. After a somewhat ridiculous number of bites there were small but jagged little hole's in the thick muscle of Blue's neck. The kind that would scar. The carmine plated torin's hindbrain buzzed in satisfaction even as his mostly suppressed foremind tilted toward anxiety. Marks, permanent marks...

The insouciant Spectre rejected the worry and pulled Garrus' head down to share reverie in the more socially usual way; letting the Detective taste his own blood. He continued to roll his hips, lean muscles fluttering and clenching down on the torin buried in him. Finally, Blue's low bass rumble started hitting tones closer to what he wanted to hear, and not so damn mellow. Breath began to hitch, and movements grew less paced.

Nihlus grinned, pleased, digging his heels into the hide above his lover's spurs without mercy, talons on waist and subvocals demanding Garrus come for him.

The sniper's climax was like a train falling off it's tracks car by car, a small tumble at first, quickly loosing control as it flipped off the rails. Soon most of Blue's muscles were locking up as his voice began to rise in a wordless, flanging cry. Nihlus felt him push in as deep as he could go, and squeezed in ripples that started from the base of his cock and flowed towards the tip, skillfully drawing on the derailed torin through the initial crash and the resulting explosion.

Afterward, Blue collapsed on him, boneless and purring. The Spectre smiled, maybe a touch more softly than his normal dark grin, and gently dragged talon tips up and down the sniper's back. Garrus was gone in minutes, snoring and asleep while still inside of him. He chuckled and relaxed his legs right where they caught on plate and hide. Nihlus sighed sleepily, satisfied and relieved, moving only enough to lean Blue more toward one side of the cubitura and less directly on his keel before getting comfy and closing his eyes as well.
06/13/2010 - Questions Arise in Death of Human Journalist

“More questions arise tonight in the death of journalist Grant Keyes. Turian colonialist forces on Taetrus are now claiming Keyes was held for eight days, during which time he refused water. Keyes' producer at the Future Content Corporation refutes this, saying he was in contact with Keyes just four days ago. Keyes' camerawoman Letha Maragos is also missing; the pair's abandoned aircar has been found on an Iratianan street with damage to its top and bottom, indicating the car may have been forced to the ground. Commander Lahere Dianix promised a full investigation, saying, "The acts of my subordinates are my responsibility. If foul play was involved, it will be discovered".”

A/N: Some interesting discussion as to the general population estimates in the ME universe over here. Anyone have any hard data on this?

A/N/N: (rant edition): So... I just went about reading Garrus quotes from the different games to see about making sure his personality lines up as time goes by, yeah? Don't want him OC. After reading through, I suddenly noticed that Garrus has a HUGE personality shift between ME1 and ME2, especially in terms of how he talks to people *other* than Shepard. Now, I know about all the 'stick up his ass' jokes and stuff... but some of these lines, in retro-spec, don't makes sense in the broader scope of canon. Some of it was just...

He swaps between 'youthful, sniper bro Garrus' and 'jack-hole Turian flunky A' like *that* in ME1, but he's all 'sniper bro' and 'team dad' in ME2. I've been writing a lot of ME2 Garrus, not realizing that there was such a staggering difference in the deeper psychology of him, -which should not realistically be so mutable between games. He's the same core person in ME3, so it's just all ME1-2 transition, and even comradery, loss, and growing up can't account for some of this... flip flop. In ME1 he's funny and considerate in one moment, and then speciesist and an asshole two seconds later. Worships the ground Shepard walks on, then suddenly is a distant and superior Turian(tm) who knows the greater galaxy unlike the lesser aliens. Was that... maybe some sort of ploy by the writers to make it feel like he holds confidences with Shepard? I mean... it sort of feels like he talks to you more than others, respects you more for almost no reason, but... hrmm. It seems to back fire somewhere between the rampant asshole and quiet consideration moments.

Let's be straight, 'asshole' and 'considerate' are antonyms, to be sure, and generally 'asshole' is not a curable condition.

Also, does anyone else think it's stupid that a police officer who works with numerous species every damn day, seeing them at their best and worst, could be as ignorant about other peoples as Garrus is in ME1? It's almost like he's scripted to be an insensitive jerk at random intervals to provide the dialogue to elaborate about aliens for the player. I can see the Quarian and Krogan stereotyping, but he's even ignorant about Asari when he talks to Liara about commonality of biotic training in civilians among their kind.
Whhaaaaaat. He would have worked with countless non-combatants in C-Sec, how... could... Unless Garrus was relatively new to C-Sec, enough that he'd only just begun to interact with other species after leaving civil service, he would already have a clue here. Now how does one get promoted all the way up to detective if you're new, hmm? /clicks tongue with displeasure/ You see my qualms duckies? Qualms, all over the place.

On that note, I think I'm going to have to give Garrus some experiences that make him a little speciesist. I would rather not, but how else do I explain the brattish stuff he says to Tali? Hrm. I might play with some double meanings, some miscommunication due to subvocals, and a few other things to chill out some of how he comes across, but still... I need to make it work.

Must fill even the obscure psychological plot holes.

---

Fanfic Recommendation: **Diamond** (1013 words) by **ViridianPanther** ("An anonymous round-robin email is sent to all members of the Normandy's crew. It contains a single text file attachment, apparently downloaded from an extranet fan fiction site. Containing a badly-punctuated, appallingly-written story starring certain members of the crew. And a sex aid with a mass effect core and a diamond at the tip." - Recommended entirely for Dr. Chakwas' reply email. Pffftft.)
He came awake in a smooth, tongue assisted slide from deep sleep to consciousness, the press and nuzzle of faceplates against his neck making for an exceptional way to wake up.

“Mmmmm, that's niieeece.”

Garrus chuckled, palms sliding up and down his side enticingly. Nihlus laughed quietly in reply, though partially from amusement that Blue seemed to be under the impression there needed to be enticement for him to want to have sex with the well built sniper.

'Morning sex with Blue? How about 'all day, everyday'?’

Said torin muttered something, but he was too busy floating down a stream of arousal to hear it.

“Nihlus?”

“Hmm? What?”
“I asked how long you're staying for,” the Detected reiterated, subvocals trilling amusement.

“Oh. Ummm. I didn't really plan that far ahead.”

“Through the weekend at least?”

“Pffft. Unless I'm crazy the weekend isn't for two more days.”

“Ooorrrr... according to my time off request, the weekend starts now.”

Nihlus couldn't help the surprised flutter in his mandibles. “You took time off work?”

“Yeah.”

’He never takes time off work... almost as bad as Saren...’

“Are you okay...?”

“Right now? Definitely.”

Well that was... sort of reassuring.

“What ab-” the Spectre started to ask, but was driven into a breathy moan by the feeling of mouthplates nibbling on a tender spot at the base of his neck.

Oh. Yeah. So... that had happened.

“About l-” he tried again, only to be impeded by a tongue seeking reverie and a thumb smoothing along his seam.
'Spirits... that feels sooooooo good.'

Apparently now wasn't the dreaded 'talk about it later' time. That was a-okay with Nihlus. Garrus could get away with not talking about why he was taking off work, just so long as he got to put off talking about the jungle incident. A questing hand continued to distract him, talon tips dragging over hide.

“Open for me, Palvi.”

He shuddered at the deep toned flang in his ear. Practically on command his plates slipped loose enough for fingers to press in and tease.

“Perfect. You want fast or slow this time?”

The carmine plated Spectre licked the back of his teeth, trying to decide.

“H-hard to choose.”

“You want me, or do you want me to take you?”

The selection process only became further complicated at that, and the heat between his thighs had no answer except for 'yes please'.

“Ummm-Mmmmmmm...”

Against his neck he could feel Blue's mandibles tilt in a grin.

“On the bed or.... maybe in the shower?”

“O-okay, now you're just being mean.”
Garrus laughed into his shoulder, but the digits teasing his seam didn't miss a beat.

“Tell me what you want, so I can give it to you.”

“...You?”

“And?”

“Mmmmyep.”

A snort this time, and fingers began trailing down to press into his cloaca. There were two nerve clusters on the way up, and Garrus pushed into one with a knuckle while the back of his talon slid along the next. Nihlus gasped, grabbing at the wrist of the hand working inside of him, crest blades pressing back into the mattress.

“Just going to keep this up until you tell me otherwise.”

“Ohhh, fuck no, fuck me.”

“There we go,” the mountainous sniper praised, withdrawing his hand after several more passes and moving into position. The empty sensation was replaced before he could even whine about it, Garrus' length entering him in one smooth thrust.

The merc born torin's eyes practically rolled back in his head, hands fumbling for new handholds as Garrus began a slow curl inside of him. Of course, the not-so-little shit only rocked their hips together at half-asleep Elcor speeds, and the slow torture drew an impatient growl from him.

“Blueee...”

“Yeah?”

“Faster.”
“You got it.”

Just like that, the rhythm jumped up to sugar-high Asari speeds.

“F-faster?”

He began to have difficulty deciding what race/status combination would best describe this pace, but eventually came up with 'Salarian on Stims'.

“Fuck, yes, faster!” Nihlus demanded, resting one foot on the bed and the other on Blue's hip. The tall sniper obliged and his mind began to white out from the oncoming rush. A few more powerful thrusts and the Spectre peaked with a wild and pleasured scream.

Considering they'd only had sex once last night it was no surprise he came so quickly, the fluid bursting out of him in time to the other torin's pace. He keened softly after finding breath again, shaky and fulfilled in the aftermath. His sniper rocked into him a few more times before hilting deep and coming as well.

The groan that followed was long, low, and so very pleased.

Nihlus smiled up at the fucking amazing Turian over him, panting lightly.

“... again?”

“Heh... can do.”

The office was so quiet that Aiesha could hear the faint whizz of skycars as they zipped around the sunny Presidium in the background. The torin across the desk watched her, contemplating and assessing, and she bore it stoically.
“Let me be clear. I know what you are.”

The peach toned tarin failed to react to the non-question, her interviewer's pseudo-accusation hanging in the air like wet laundry. After another minute of silent stare down, it became fairly obvious that both of them had patience in spades. Executor Pallin tilted his head in the smallest of acknowledging nods, and turned his crest away to look at a data feed holo-panel without actually focusing on it.

“That said...” he continued slowly, as if he was planning where to dump her body. “I may have a use for you.”

Agent Makasian had to give the Executor one thing, the torin had intimidation down to an art. She continued to wait quietly for him to elaborate on what use there might be for a displaced Blackwatch agent with orders to apply for C-Sec, particularly when her cover was already blown. At least he hadn't called for her arrest or detainment yet, which was a good sign.

“I have under my command something of a troublemaker, one I can neither be rid of, nor can I truthfully say we would be better without. He's old money, well connected, and too smart for his own good. More then those, he's too headstrong to follow, and too young to lead.”

She hummed politely for him to continue. The noise brought his clear blue eyes back to her face in sharp focus, but she continued to look on peacefully. The peach toned tarin stared him down with the lightest of trilling sweetness in her subvocals. After a few moments her gazed shifted politely away, out toward the beautiful, artificial day.

Were those birds, out on the eves? She could hear the musical twitter of some unknown avian species just outside. Aiesha wondered if they were real, or if the sound had been added with speakers for aesthetics.

“I'm assuming you want this position for... expedient reasons, Makasian.”

The peach toned tarin blinked on time, breathed evenly, and waited. He smirked slightly, and shook his head. Silently admitting that while he was good, she was untouchable.

“I'll offer you a deal then.”
“You have a position available that suits my dossier, sir?”

A real grin pulled on Pallin's face before falling away as he leaned back in his desk chair, smoothing the back of his fingers across his chin in thought. Time stretched out while he seemed to be finalizing details in his mind. She took the opportunity to memorize the fine line-work of his pastel blue familia notas. They were more complicated than most, with inverted sections of missing color that created numerous smaller shapes. Aiesha wasn't familiar with most of the delicately painted angles, but she recognized a few of the accolades amid the crags and bumps of his facial features. An interesting story, if she was reading the details correctly.

“I know you won't tell me what exactly you're here for, but... on the understanding that you will gather intel for me on my problem, I will offer you a position that will enable you to do... whatever you must, and with minimal oversight. On the condition that your personal efforts don't interfere with keeping the peace. Interested?”

“I would love to work at C-Sec, sir. That's why I'm here.”

“Thought so. Alright, I'll forward the details to your extranet address later today. Report for work on Monday, and be ready to be called in for a ‘debriefing' sometime the following week.”

“Thank you, sir. I won't let you down.”

“I'm sure you won't.”

Aiesha stood to leave, but only got half way to the door before the Executor's smooth, danger tinted vocals stopped her with a last request.

“Makasian?”

“Yes?”

He paused, expression lightening a touch. “Keep an eye out for him, will you? He's a thorn in my side... but he's a good torin, and the pahir of a friend.”
“I look forward to supporting my colleagues, sir.”

“Good, now get out.”

“Have a wonderful day, Executor.”

The Blackwatch engineer walked out of the office space and through the lobby with the tinniest of skips in her step. The details of their deal hit her inbox later that afternoon, couched in terms of gainful employment. She opened the file while munching on a well deserved lunch in her new, ridiculous, apartment.

“Work hours... position... hmm... base pay... personal office, partnered with... oh.”

She was somewhat amused to immediately recognize the face onscreen.

Chapter End Notes

06/17/2010 - Events Surrounding Journalists' Detainment Explained

“Commander Lahere Dianix held a press conference today regarding the death of human journalist Grant Keyes on Taetrus. He now says that four soldiers in the Tenth Mechanized Infantry forced the journalist’s car off the road, questioned Keyes, and attempted to arrest him. A scuffle ensued, and the Turians’ claws nicked the carotid artery of his camerawoman, Letha Maragos, while restraining her. Keyes became violent and was shot in the leg -- both humans were taken into custody where first Maragos and then Keyes died. The turians lacked supplies and human blood or a viable substitute, and could not perform a transfusion. Asked if charges will be brought against the patrol, Dianix replied, "Turians are not as litigious as humans. The matter will be resolved shortly."

Fanfic Recommendation: The Many Hypotheses of Tali’Zorah (2122 words) by MostlyAnon (Tali/Kal)
Whispered curses as epitaphs to the divine

Chapter Summary

Finally, that dreaded, expected 'talk'.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Familia Notas – The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition. Last call on credits and italics.)

A/N: I'm too exited for you all to read this, so I'm going to shut up for once and wait for the comments to talk your ears off about the lovely Turians and their dramas.

Chapter Soundtrack: Kaster - Neverending (feat. Qwentalis)

For you we lie.
Lie here in the darkness.
...
I can imagine what it feels like, disappearing.
But most of your heart is set in stone.
A prison of your own sense of being,
Struggle to find your way back home.
...
Follow the sound of my voice,
Follow if you've got no choice.
Deeper and deeper, you find a way out.
Louder and louder, you move with the sound.
...
Follow the sound of my voice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Friday night rolled around, and Nihlus found himself spread across the cubitura, well fed on take-out, and slightly tipsy on some sort of citrus wine. Garrus’ fingers trailed up and down his hide in slow passes and gentle swirls as they watched a low budget action film with surprisingly good martial arts that almost made up for the terrible script.
He was feeling mellow and relaxed in ways that three hookers and a strong hit of Hallex couldn't do. The Spectre purred and lounged, only paying the vid a quarter of his attention at most.

The credits hit after a grand final battle, the talons on him still making lackadaisical loops and swirls, but when the music ended Blue’s voice gently broke the quiet. His words destroying Nihlus’ calm in a matter of heartbeats.

“… you ready to talk?”

No.

Noooooo.

Noooooooooo.

Noooooooooo.

“I um... I guess so.”

‘Liar,’ harshly whispered the voices in the back of his mind. He reluctantly nodded in agreement with both question and accusation.

“Why did you run away, when I was yelling for you?”

“Needed some space.”

“Oh. Okay…”

Blue sounded hurt. Fuck.

“Don’t… don't take it personal. I needed to get away from ya or I was going to keep trying to… do what I had been.”
“...bond?”

Nihlus gulped reflexively, the word searing his heart like the faintest pass of a flaming whip.

“You know I want to, right?”

“Do you? I mean… really?”

He winced at the inherent neediness and sharpness to his own reply, hating himself a little. Garrus turned his face with gentle hands, waiting until the Spectre managed eye contact to answer.

“Absolutely.”

The beginnings of a forlorn keen scratched at the back of Nihlus’ throat, and he swallowed to clear it, trying to hold the feeling back where he could pretend it remained private. The tall sniper’s hand came up to stroke over his crest as he continued to speak in mellow, delicate tones.

“You know how standard medical scans detect if someone’s hormones have shifted over to post-bond levels, yeah?”

“Well… ya, of course.”

“C-Sec requires yearly checkups.”

“So…” Nihlus swallowed again, still nervous but appreciating that this was… maybe going somewhere. “You’d be found out in less than a year?”

“Exactly, and I would put money on that supposedly private information getting back to my Avah in a matter of months.”

“It would be, um, I mean, from an information broker standpoint… that would be some solid info for easy creds. Up and coming high tier scion, bonded unexpectedly? Ya. Lucrative stuff. I get that.”
“Don’t forget to add, ‘frequently seen in the company of…’”

“Spectres?”

“Mhmm.”

“Aw, fuck.”

“Mhmm.”

“So… why are you explaining this to me?”

“Because I want you to know why I marked you, even when we can’t… bond. There's more to it too.”

The word he didn't want to hear tore out of Garrus’ throat in a suspiciously scratchy manner as well, and it didn’t hurt less hearing it that way. More, actually.

“Okay. What else?”

The sniper’s icy blue eyes looked down into his soulfully, expression soft.

“Saren.”

“Y-yeah. What about him?” he replied, feeling skittish and ungrounded.

“You can’t bond us both anyway… and he needs you more.”

His mind stalled, trying to wrap around a world of either-or.
“That’s not… it isn’t…” the merc born tried to give words to the complications there in, struggling for long moments, “Blue, he means the world to me, but we both know he’s sorta… off. He won’t…”

Nihlus growled, frustrated at his lack of ability to express himself. Garrus continued to listen patiently, fingers still tracing his lines and wandering the contours of his plates in ways that weren’t exactly helping. The curve of his neck was arousing. The edges of his hard-earned familia notas made him feel wanted but brittle.

“I told him I loved him the other day. Loud and clear. You what he did? Closed his eyes, and refused to speak to me.”

The green eyed torin chuffed a wretched, humorless laugh.

“I know I mean something to him, but I’ve wanted that grumpy bastard from the moment we met. Eventually, you know… more than that. For years. It hasn’t gone anywhere beyond the occasional, - I dunno what to call it, - allowance? - that I’m fairly sure has more to do with me giving him I want, and nothing to do with what he wants.”

“I’m sure h-”

“No, seriously, I’ve never gotten more than some tongue from him. He’s not into… physicality? Sex? Whatever. The point is that he’s cerebral as fuck, and…”

Verdant green eyes bored up into icy blue, trying to make sure the Detective heard this part loud and clear as well. It mattered.

“…and you get him in ways that I just don’t. He connects to you. Over… like math ‘n stuff. History. Crap that I don’t have the attention span for, or interest in. Then there is stuff like… those hand massages you do? Melts him into a puddle. I touch him on the shoulder and he gets… anxious or something. Which is hilarious, considering the sheer amount of damage that torin can reap. A nice pat on the shoulder shouldn’t make him jumpy, but it does.”

Garrus’ expression tightened with pain, mandibles scraping his jaw in upset. The Vakarian clansman’s eyes closed, dropping like shutters over reflecting light. It took a long, long while for them to open again, half lidded and sorrowful.
“I wish he and I could… I would, but…”

“Ya, I know. Me too, obviously, but I’m behind this… wall, and you’ve got… responsibilities.”

The mountainous sniper let out a soft growl, but it didn't hold long, too dispirited to last. Nihlus returned it, stronger, hating how he couldn't see a path to success. Hating the lack of fighting spirit in Blue’s subvocals. As suddenly as he decided everything else, Nihlus made a declaration of what felt like the best bet.

“What-the-fuck-ever, ya? I’ve got your teeth printed in my hide, and you've got mine. I'll get Saren’s on the other side, and life and people can go fuck themselves. Bond or no bond, I’ll keep the marks for all my days.”

Garrus blinked at him, mandibles fluttering twice.

“Palvi, no...”

“‘No’ what?”

“You deserve better. More than just-”

“Nope, fuck that.”

“Nihl-”

“Nope. Fuck that.”

The tall sniper sighed, reluctantly smiling at him, albeit weakly and with mild exasperation. The back of one large talon slid down to his throat, tracing the tender spot.

“It’s almost gone already…”
“Aw damn it. Some of my, uhhhhh, medical augs probably.”

Garrus quirked a small grin at him. The other torin knew exactly exactly what he meant by ‘medical augs’, considering he’d helped program them. Even the best augmentations on the market didn’t repair injured tissue scarlessly and overnight. ‘On the market’ being the operative word, since most sane people would never consider having VI controlled nanotechnology implanted inside of them.

Nihlus shrugged dismissively.

“Meh. Just bite me again. Bite me every time. Make it good and deep when you do. ”

The Detective coughed, sounding slightly embarrassed at his bold, deviant request. It was pretty kinky, even for him.

“Yeah, I…. yeah, okay.”

“Are we good?”

“We were never not good. Some days we’re just too good.”

“Spirits, you’re cheesy sometimes.”

Garrus winked, only making his irresistible dorkiness worse. The carmine plated Spectre groaned and turned away, pushing his face into the torin’s stomach.

‘Mmmm, he smells soooo good.’

“Nihlus?” came the sniper’s voice, sounding tentative again. He peeked one eye upward around cloth covered keel, trying not to tense. The conversation had just started to lighten up… did they really have to keep going with the heavy stuff?
“I still think that you deserv-”

“Didn’t I say ‘fuck that’ enough ti-” the Spectre was cut off by a hand that bopped his jaw closed, shutting him up.

“Hear me out.”

“… Fiiiiiiine.”

“If you ever change your mind, and you want a family? I’d be honored to go out with you looking for a tarin. Or if you find one, I’d love to meet her. It wouldn’t change us, okay? Even when I eventually have to… yeah. It won’t change us.”

As much as the merc born torin really wanted to move on to other topics, with the conversation open before him as it stood, he just had to know…

“You still going to be fucking me when you’ve got a real bondmate?”

Garrus stared him down, long and hard, and the next words out of his mouth made Nihlus’ blood rush.

“I’m not bonding someone I don’t love. Period. The clan historians can write whatever they want in the records. The Hierarchy registrar can have the paperwork, I’ll even sign it. She’ll have my respect and my loyalty, and if I’m damn lucky… we’ll be good friends and she’ll let me have you over anytime you can make it. I’ll give her kids, a house, whatever she asks of me, but not my heart. I couldn’t even offer it, Nihlus. It’s already taken.”

That was the moment, while he stared slack jawed and undefended, where he should have rallied and been asking questions. Clarification or confirmation. Anything. Should have, but he was too busy being in awe that this… amazing, and impossible torin had not only promised him he would be his fucking wingman if he ever lost his mind and wanted some random bitch, but also that he wouldn’t bond someone else. Not even his… whatever. Mate?

Fuck… fuck.
“Fuck.”

Garrus blinked at him, tilting his horns in confusion. Nihlus suddenly realized that the whispered curse had been his only external reaction, and it galvanized him into action. He surged up from the sniper’s lap, descending on the torin’s mouth with a fevered intensity.

Blue sighed, a rising rumble from deep in his chest, arms coming around the green eyed agent as he took and gave in the wordless language of sensuality that they were so much better at than spoken word.

By morning both of their necks sported repeated puncture wounds, several off center and higher up in the locations that casual lovers sometimes nipped, but many, -most-, were on that spot where carapace first softened into hide; the ragged edges of flesh having eventually given up trying to mend.

They would remain.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: They did the thing! Like adults! I'm so proud. And it didn't even result in eloping.

06/18/2010 - Turian Sergeant Commits Suicide After Journalist Incident
“A new development in the death of human journalist Grant Keyes has exemplified the differences between Turian and human cultures. Sergeant Sanus Iheras -- the commander of the four soldiers who pulled the journalist and his camerawoman over and was allegedly responsible for their deaths -- has apparently committed suicide. He was found this morning with a fatal gunshot wound to the head, presumed to be self-inflicted. Such suicides are common in Turian cultures after great transgressions and are seen to expiate family or unit of shame and failure. The act also frequently closes any judicial matter or investigation into the deceased and their actions. Asked if this brought closure to the case, Keyes' widow Lara said, "Not at all. I never wanted anyone else to get hurt over this. It's senseless".”

Fanfic Recommendation: Nihlus's First Mission (3815 words) by nugicorn
Garrus goes out dancing to stave off the quietude, and ends up with an unexpected hitch hiker.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: **Timmy Trumpet & Savage - Freaks**

The bass and the tweeters make the speakers go to war
Ah, the mighty trumpet brings the freaks out to the floor
Tell me, tell me, where the freaks at
Tell me where the freaks at
We get that bass thumpin’, people jumpin’
All over the world
We got them speakers pumpin’ Timmy Trumpet,
For the women with curves
Got that freak flow, freak show
Welcome to the circus

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus sat on his cubitura, idly toying with a knife that his lover had left behind. The sheath lay on the kava table next to his feet as he spun it slowly, watching the edge reflect light while trying not to be depressed that it’s owner was gone.

The quiet, not something he preferred but also not anything he usually had trouble with, echoed around his small apartment irritatingly. Nihlus hadn’t left that long ago, and already his presence was missed.

It was always worse when things were slow, in the down times when he didn’t have something to occupy his mind. The lack of a constantly moving body, cheerful chatter, dirty jokes and just… him… sometimes it drove Garrus up a wall.

He’d tried having on music for background noise, but that hadn’t helped much. Slightly more effective was pulling out his rifle for a good cleaning and putting on a vid for the noise. That combination was better, the conversation on screen and the familiar movement of his hands a decent distraction.
A distraction that had only lasted until all his guns were clean, media alone proving insufficient.

This night he eyed the clock and calendar thoughtfully, considering his options. What the blue eyed Detective really wanted right now was some sort of engaging activity. The shooting range maybe? A combat sim? No, those would be too... solo. The best bet would be going out to a bar or club, though that wasn’t something he normally did when he had work in the morning… but Garrus was lonely, bored, and not even mildly sleepy.

Not to mention that the vague hum of his unit’s air conditioner was beginning to sound more like talons on glass in the vacuum of... people sounds.

‘Nothing for it,’ Garrus thought with chagrin, tossing on clean casuals and trading his sidearm for Nihlus’ knife strapped to his left ankle. He would go out to a dance club and get lost in the bass.

It took him a bit to make it to his location of choice, the closer options having gotten crossed off the list for one reason or another, but as the exuberant yelling and thudding music washed over him the tension started to loosen from his shoulders.

The very environment here felt like Nihlus. Alive, vivid, flashes of color and motion.

His mandibles tipped in a growing grin as he moved to the bar for a hit of something to take the edge off. The bartender, a placid looking Drell with about ten piercings too many, was busy as hell, so the sniper waited for a free drink terminal, ordered two, and settled in to wait. It wasn’t two seconds before an admittedly pretty Asari came sashaying into his space. Garrus smiled at her, but shook his head. She huffed with mock sorrow, overdramatic and cheeky, but winked at him and wandered off.

The Drell finally made it over to him, and passed over the double he’d ordered. One jade colored brow rose as he tossed both energy-drink-and-grain-alcohol cocktails down, and passed the tumblers back with a thankful nod.

Party fuel acquired, the Vakarian clansman pushed out into the crowd, looking for a likely spot on the dance floor. Over on one side two Salarians were dancing in sync, faced toward each other and moving as if they were each other’s mirror image. He watched for a few minutes, entertained as the duo challenged each other's reflexes with showy moves and quick changes in pacing or direction. Eventually they tired though, stumbling to a halt and wandering away together, winded and grinning like fools.
The sniper moved on, following the wall to the stairs, and staking out a spot near a balcony. Not only could he see the entrance, most of the main dance floor, and all of the floating dance cages from here, but he was close to the second floor bar, and had enough space to move with the slightly less dense crowd. The last one an important point for a seven foot tall, muscular individual intending to dance around less-study species.

Club tracks rose and fell around him, some he liked a lot, the beat hitting his chest, driving and emotive. Others were so-so, wind instruments or operatic vocals that were more for the Asari here. The DJ even played some Quarian techno, a extended remix of a song from Fleet and Flotilla. That one he liked immensely, and actually stepped off to the side for, searching on a popular music site and paying the three credit download fee to have it locally.

When the supply of energy drink finally built up in his system the light grey torin let loose, bouncing on his toes in time to the beat while free styling some semi-decent arm movements. Garrus didn’t think he was a spectacular dancer, particularly alone, but he was good enough to get a couple cat calls and more than a few temporary dance partners.

The highlight of the night, seven shots in, was when a cherry-red torin with orange eyes and flamboyant, sparkle dusted colony marks danced with him. Subvocals giving off a subtle, ‘I’m just here for fun,’ tone that put the sniper at ease, they danced energetically for almost a half an hour; much to the bliss of several Asari nearby that spent the whole time ogling them. The group of nais just sort of bounced in place the whole while, sharing smiles and giggles whenever the torin moved in even vaguely sexual ways.

It was exhausting and fun, exactly what he needed, and a few hours of it was enough to have the off duty Detective waving the strangers goodbye and making his way to the stairs. Back down to the first floor he went, slipping out the door and breathing in the fresher air of the notably less crowded entertainment thoroughfare.

Garrus was just stepping into a skycar he’d paged from a rapid transit station when a lightly armored figure bounded out of the bushes and dropped into the passenger seat as it took off.

He had a knife at their throat in seconds. Nihlus, -and Saren-, would have been proud.

“Peace,” came an amused sounding request from the unresisting tarin. He eyed the dark visor where eyes would be if he could see them, and slowly backed off. That voice sounded somewhat... familiar.
“Do I want to know why you have reflexes like a Drell Assassin? Not that I don’t approve, but it does make one wonder.”

“...Makasian?”

The armored form flipped the retracting key under the jawline of her helm, and the shielding material folded away to reveal exactly the person he’d guessed.

“Hello again, Detective.”

Garrus melted back into his seat, palming his forehead in exasperation. “Was the sudden leap into my skycar really necessary?”

“Somewhat.”

“Why?”

She hummed, reclining back into the fake leather thoughtfully. “I have a small favor to ask.”

He snorted, sitting up and starting to tap a slightly more scenic route into the navigation system. The Officer had a feeling this wouldn’t be a particularly short conversation.

“Alright, what is it?”

“Agreeing already? My, that’s helpful of you.”

“Please Makasian, don’t mix words with me tonight, I’m pretty damn tired and could really use a shower right now. I’m cranky when I need a shower.”

“If all goes according to plan, we will be mixing more than words.”
His mandibles flicked in surprise, subvocals tripping over themselves, the sudden come on unexpected. “Ah… I uh…”

This time she was the one to snort, covering the motion with one hand and looking embarrassed to have made it.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” the tarin coughed, suppressing the laughter in her voice. “Let me try a different metaphor. How about, ‘I’ve been sent to infiltrate C-Sec in an open ended and non-problematic way, for information flow. I need you to pretend you don’t know me.’”

Garrus blinked, tilted his head as he processed that, and chuffed after a moment.

“That wasn’t even slightly a metaphor.”

“No, but it also wasn’t easily misinterpreted phrasing.”

“Point. Now explain why I shouldn’t report you. I’m willing to hear you out, but I can’t promise anything.”

Makasian turned and smiled at him, her light peach plates glowing amber from the orange light of the console.

“I appreciate that. Let’s start with, ‘Your boss knows, and he’s trading me pretend employment for spywork… on you.’”

“...what.”

“To be fair, he also said you are something of a troublemaker, but asked me to have your six as well.”

“....what.”

“As your new partner.”
An aggravated groan rolled from his chest, head dropping into palms at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. Somehow, he didn’t think she was making any of it up.

“The mission briefing also mentioned something about Spectres?”

Spirits, damn it.

Chapter End Notes

05/20/2010 - Citadel Council to Hold Galactic Employment Summit
“The Citadel Council announced that it will hold a galactic employment summit in thirty [Earth standard] days' time to seek answers while grappling with a downturn in the galactic job market. This announcement comes just days after figures for planetary unemployment were released. Colonies, as a rule, were havens for job growth, with their median unemployment rate at 4.4%, rather than the 13.1% that homeworlds suffered. Some planetary leaders such as Palaven's Primarch Enterus say growing vorcha populations are inflating these numbers and the figures are much lower. Others, such as Thessia's Matriarch Tiala, point out the opposite: "Vorcha are the great undocumented," she says. "If all of them were included, we would see the true unemployment figure, which would be staggering to those unused to species-specific variations in the data.”"

A/N: AHA! I found another Turian Primarch's name! So now we have Enterus->Fedorian->Victus. I don't know if there are more out there... I would have though it to be a rather long appointment with the imperialistic qualities of the Hierarchy, potentially life long... but apparently not? Well maybe... maybe Enterus died, and Fedorian was elected, but only led till he died early from the Reaper attacks? Let's go with that for now.

A/N/N: Does anyone know if there is a 'countdown to ME:A flash-fica-a-thon' or anything like that going on? I'd love to participate if there is. The day or two before it comes out I know we'll all be vibrating in place and unable to sleep. Side note, I think pre-ordering people might get to play early or something? Or download it early, at the very least. So much excite. Anyhoo, if anyone has heard of an ME:A challenges or collections, let me know.... otherwise Imma start one. :3

A/N/N: I tried to translate the incredible, diffusive experience of clubbing, -or what clubbing can be on a good night-, but I'm not sure I got it right. The words I have to offer don't do the experience justice. Bah.

Fanfic Recommendation: [challenge accepted](256 words) by [buhnebeest](#)
A winding sort of perspective that gives rise to art

Chapter Summary

"Follow the hands," the sensei advised, "where they start, where they go, where they stop. Knowing the mind of your opponent, -telepathy-, is not a trick, but a tactic of observation."

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: I struggled with this chappie, a lot. There is a rant about it at the end, but in the mean time, enjoy 5k some odd words. The size kinda got out of control... XD

Chapter Soundtrack: I Know I'm a Wolf - Courbe (Young Heretics Cover)

Oh rabbit... my claws are dull now, so don't be afraid.
I could keep you warm... as long as you can just try to be brave.

Yes I know I'm a wolf, and I've been known to bite.
But the rest of my pack, I have left them behind.

And my teeth may be sharp, and I've been raised to kill.
But the thought of fresh meat, it is making me ill.
So I'm telling you... that you'll be safe with me.

(This song really moves me. The singer reminds me of Nihlus, in some of his mannerisms, but the words could fit either him or Saren. The later half, where it turns darkly sexual and possessive, is very them, maybe even Nihlus to Garrus. Not that it encompasses all of them as people or a couple, but that it hits on something unspoken that connects them in not entirely healthy ways. Um. Yeah.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus was slightly horrified by the ease with which C-Sec was infiltrated.
Monday morning came around, and just like she said Makasian was there, in an office near his, dressed in C-Sec blues and typing away on her new computer terminal when he passed by. Around lunch time the peach toned tarin introduced herself to him within earshot of a few coworkers, sounding for all the world like they were indeed new acquaintances. He tried to match her act, but hiding a lie in his subvocals had never come easy to him. The mountainous sniper made do with suppressing his flang, but that probably came across to their potential observers like he was displeased by the situation.

His new office neighbor just nodded politely, eyes twinkling with a knowing shine, and wandered off. By noon on Tuesday there was a datapad on his desk with fresh orders including her in his current investigation.

Garrus leaned back in his desk chair, scraped a hand over his fringe, and tried to decide what to do. On one hand, this entire situation was... FUBAR, was a good way of putting it. He, -and his boss-, were responsible for knowing and abetting a Hierarchy agent in Citadel Council affairs.

It was wrong.

But...

Makasian had already proven herself one of the the good guys.

And...

What could he really do about it?

If the Primarch and the Hierarchy's Intelligence Bureau wanted a Blackwatch infiltrator in the C-Sec ranks, it wouldn't matter if he outed her, they'd just wait a bit and send another. Probably finding a way to get him fired in the mean time so he wasn't there to interfere again. It was what Sol would do... and that aspect just added a whole new level of conflict. Was his first loyalty to his employers? His government? His family's... interests?

Garrus made a trip to the break room for kava, once again passing by Makasian's new office. She was still in there, door set permanently wide in open invitation, probably intentional. Some sort of psychological move. Though now she was avidly reading something instead of typing. He sneaked a peak at her screen on the way back. It was a progress report on crime prevention in the lower wards.
Spirits damn it, the tarin was even doing her job.

He forwarded the case files on his active investigation to the undercover Agent as requested, and went home a little earlier than usual. He spent the ride home mulling it over, thoughts going in circles.

The moment Garrus made it past the threshold his boots came off, sidearm set aside on the workbench, and his carapace hit the mattress of his bed with a heavy sigh.

One hand behind his head, the tall Detective grabbed his well worn stress ball from it's nook, and tossed it at the ceiling. Garrus threw it lightly, letting it rebound off the metal overhead, and catching it in his palm when gravity caught up to the squishy little foam-bean sack. He laid on his bed, gaze distant, and tried to decide on a course of action.

Thud... smack.

The Detective first tried thinking of the various people he knew and trusted, what they would say.

Thud... smack.

Then he ran through the situation as a whole, legalities and exceptions, positive and negative outcomes...

Thud... smack.

On it went for a good few hours, until critical thoughts solidified themselves as the most transcendent points. For one, all legal systems were inherently susceptible to corruption. A little non-disruptive over sight, while technically illegal, wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Two, Sol might be able to tell him if Makasian had a good track record or not. Was actually, definitely, Blackwatch or not. Three, both his boyfriend and his fratri were Spectres that put up with B.B., a foreign agent spying on them. They would understand, and might have ways to keep tabs on his new partner that wouldn't necessarily out her unless and until she crossed the line.

Most importantly though, the tarin had already had the opportunity to leave him for dead when they'd been captured while working on the Salarian murders case. She could have taken the vents to the ground floor and gotten away clean, sufficient circumstantial evidence in hand to complete her
mission. Instead she'd come back for him, killed the guards in a four to one combat while unarmed, and then they'd worked together to survive the night and get the case reopened.

They'd functioned well as a team. Now it was just... semi-official. Sort of. Not really.

It was a political game, something he had no patience for, but his mental scales were leaning toward running with it.

Garrus caught the stress ball one last time, and let his forearm fall to cover his eyes.

``
Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
``

“C12 to L55.”

“Uhh... uhhh... ah shit... L... no, wait... Yeah, okay, L54 to B99.”

“Language Nihlus, and also? You cannot play avoidance forever.”

One leg bouncing in tension, his carmine plated protégé looked up from the multi-leveled game's holographic display to grin cheekily at him.

“Who says?”

Saren merely gestured at the marble-like orbs remaining in the time keeping piece. The Salarian-made adaptive tactic's game was incredibly unforgiving on time to think or plan, and though Nihlus was steadily loosing by dint of being a less than tactical individual, he was still creatively holding his own in a challenge made for a species whose neurons worked at nearly a hundred and forty percent efficiency of his own.

While the electric eyed Spectre regularly beat Salarians, other Turians, and even advanced VI at the game, it was no special thing for him. He was extensively gene-modded, had a grey box with several neural extensions, and was also born something of a genius; having paid the price in emotional range for it. Or at least, that was the way he saw the functional trade off.
For Nihlus though? To come from a back ground of no special genetic modding, minimal education, very few neural augs, and standard brain chemistry, and yet be able to hold his own? Brilliant. His protege was not merely a flash forged diamond, created on command, he was a natural one. Rare and precious.

Saren looked away from the cheeky grin and back down to the table to consider his next move.

“X71 to X63.”

“Oh no you don’t. Y19 to X60,” the carmine plated Spectre declared, a hand kneading at his other shoulder.

He nodded once at the younger torin, mild praise for the clever block. “L59 to M9.”

“No! Da... er, darn it! Grrrr. B2 to B17!”

“M9 to M10.”

“B17 to M...8?” He hummed at Nihlus with approval, that choice had been the correct one.

“P4 to N15.”

“Oh I see what you're doing ther- or wait... Hmmm... O4 to O7.”

“M10 to M9.”

“Uhhhh, uhhhhhhhh... M8 to M6.”

“M9 to C9.”
“Fuck me!”

“Language, Nihlus. Will I never break you of your propensity for cursing? It's b-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It's beneath me. It's also how I talk. They're just words Saren... H61 to H92.”

He hummed in mild disagreement. “T36 to K19.”

“So... what do I get if I win?”

“What is it you want?”

Nihlus' face shifted into a suggestive smirk, to which he raised a challenging browridge. “Very well. If you win.”

The dark toned Turian blinked once then narrowed his eyes, gaze flicking from the board and back to him several times.

“Was that... a challenge?”

Saren shrugged, unwilling to explain himself.

“I would take it, if it was. Maybe even make it happen.”

Silver-grey mandibles flicked in amusement, talons gesturing at the time keeping piece... which allotted his former apprentice a whole six seconds to make a move.

“Fffffff- L22 to L80!”

“A poor choice, X63 to X55. Level 4 is now mine as well.”
Nihlus collapsed back into his chair with a groan, arms tossed carelessly outward. Apparently he had finally identified the trap he had been walking into for sometime. A well laid plan, finally sprung.

“Okay, I can still... maybe... B10 to B55.”

“X55 to Y9.”

“Aw hell.”

The game ended shortly there after, much to the merc born's aggravation. He propped his cheek on a fist, giving the interface an unamused glare.

“Yeesh, how many moves in advance did you plan?”

“Many.”

Green eyes rolled in exasperation but did not try to further nettle.

“Shall I reset the board?”

“Nah, I need a break from being your intellectual punching bag for a while.”

His hand stilled over the display, a long black talon millimeters from the controls. That perception of their time spent together sat poorly with him.

“I did not intend...” The silver-grey torin paused, trying to decide on a what he did want the perception of their free time association to be, and how to spin it as such. “I was enjoying myself too much, my apologies. I was not aware you were... not.”

“Eh, it wasn't bad. Just that too much of it gives me a headache.”
That was fair. Too much stimulus would do that to anyone... and why were the other torin's fingers digging at his shoulder yet again? Saren made a mental note to pull the younger agent into medbay for a medical scan before the mission began.

“Is there something you would prefer to do instead? We have several days of remaining travel time.”

His cohort's head tilted in contemplation, once more rolling out the shoulder that was bothering him as he appear to consider the matter. One leg tossed over the other, his protégé looked upward as he thought, showing off an expanse of light, reddish brown hide that drew Saren's gaze. Nihlus' neck was aesthetically pleasing, long and lean... and marked.

Saren blinked, startled by the revelation. How had he not noticed it before? It looked new... was it Garrus'? It must be...

As the knife loving torin's face tilted back down, the bite marks disappeared below the neck line of his shirt, hiding in the shadows of his collar. Saren found himself both intensely curious about it, and wishing for confirmation of it's suspected origin.

“I have an interesting idea...” Nihlus began.

“Unsurprising. What is it?”

His protégé grinned, and sat forward in the chair.

“Trade you massages?”

“...massages?”

“Ya. I've got a few kinks, and well... it would be relaxing wouldn't it? I know you like them, and I could use one. Dunno if I can do them like Blue can, but I can try.”

The Arterius clansman considered it. It did not sound... unbearable, and he was willing to make small
concessions to improve the other torin's mood after the mild misunderstanding.

“I suppose.”

Nihlus smiled brilliantly. The silver-grey Spectre cleared his throat, adding to his answer while turning off the game display and heading for the bedroom. “Come. The bed would suit such activity more than this space.”

“...True,” was the deceptively mellow reply, subvocals making a susurrus of anticipation. The sound of it sent a chill down his spine, and he stopped in place to half-turn and pin the taller torin with a stare.

“Nihilus.”

“Yyyess?” the younger torin replied with a roguish grin.

Suspicious.

“... Perhaps this is not-”

“No, no...” Suddenly hands were on his arms and Nihlus was leaning over his shoulder to nudge pleadingly at fringe. “I'm sorry... I can't help myself, you bring out those kind of thoughts in me. You know how I am... but I'll behave. Promise. Don't change your mind now.”

He exhaled through his nose in one long gust. It was rather difficult to tell Nihlus 'no' when he was this close, warm, and practically begging, “...very well.”

The resultant hum from the positive reply was sweet toned and thankful, struggling to hide an undertone of sexual interest. He chuffed, amused but appreciating that the younger torin was at least trying.

They trailed down the hallway and into the main cabin, the lights flickering on automatically to the soft glow he preferred, shedding light on the newer, larger bed he had made not long ago.
“So who's goin' first?”

“First to give or receive?”

“Receive?”

“... You.”

“Sounds good.”

Saren watched in wordless poise as the other torin stripped his shirt off, climbing onto the bed in nothing but slacks. The long lines of the merc born's colony markings trailed down his chest and sides, and he made no secret of tracing them with his eyes. They were... aesthetically pleasing. While he looked on, his protégé managed to climb into the bed and flop down, snatching a pillow and stuffing it under his chin before settling into place.

Rolling up his sleeves, the silver-grey Spectre left for a moment to grab a bottle of plate oil from the bathroom. Normally used post-bathing to trap moisture in hide and scutes, it would do well enough for a massage lubricant. Settling on his knees by the trouble making shoulder, the older of the two Council Agents arranged the limb to his liking and let a small portion of oil drizzle into his palm, setting the bottle aside.

He let the fluid pool for a moment, warming in the heat of his hand, before sliding slick fingers down arm muscles, around the edges of plates, across the softer hide at the inner elbow, and down the inner plane of the forearm. Smoothing out over wrist and palm, he then went back up, sliding the diminishing traces of oil up the along the top of Nihlus' forearm, skirting around the spiked plates of his elbow, then winding up along the back of the arm.

Thus prepared, Saren began at the top and started to work down, pressing thumbs into the uncovered hide between carapace and arm plating. He moved the flesh in circles, bringing blood flow to the surface and loosening the tissue slowly, sinking deeper. Light grey fingers searched for knots and tight spots, hunting the source of Nihlus' discomfort. Meanwhile, said torin was purring like a drive core and breathing more quickly than usual.

Politely, Saren pretended not to notice.
“Sweet spirits, that feels amaaaaaazing...”

“Hmmm,” he replied blandly, too focused on the tissue beneath his fingers. Something around the insertion of the deltoid felt tight, possibly part of the problem, but it was too soon to tell if it was cause or effect.

“Oh.. ohhhh, harder...”

The silver-grey torin obliged, giving the spot more pressure.

“Back a little more... no wait, lower? Oh, yeah, right there...”

Saren followed the other torin's hums and sighs, scattered words and flinches... ah, there it was. The source was a knotted muscle, down in the bicep. It was pulling taut on the other muscles, likely causing the shoulder joint to be stiff and ache. Beneath his hands Nihlus flinched as he hit the source, but quickly returned to melting as it loosened.

Sentences fell apart into words, words melted down into vague subvocal cues. When the source and it's resulting tension were all gone, the biotic moved down the arm and gave the rest a once over, finding a few tiny knots along the forearm to work out as well. Smaller things, made from typing and shooting so frequently. They too smoothed out, and he went for the hand.

His partner rumbled in pleasure as he worked over the torin's palm, the small but complex muscles appreciating the attention even if they weren't particularly tight. With one arm down, he moved across the bed, settling down on the far side and repeating the process.

“This is... the best. We should... do this... all the time...” Nihlus mumbled out from top of the bed, face smooshed into the pillows. When Saren released that arm the carmine plated torin pulled both up to curl around his face cushioning with a happy sigh. A smile tugged at Saren's mandibles, and he plucked at the other Spectre's pants twice.

“Unlatch these, I want to get your legs.”

“Mmmm'kay... sec...” the melted torin replied, fumbling under his front side for a moment before a
click and swoosh precipitated him lethargically kicking off his pants about half way. With a quiet snort, the biotic finished removing the fabric, neatly folding the material and setting it aside. He moved to straddle one long, dark red-brown leg, and poured new oil into his palm. More than before, to account for the larger muscle size.

He started along the back of the leg this time, smoothing along the hide just under the rear plates and moving toward the knee. He was gentle here, careful with the sensitive flesh behind the spurs. There was less to work on below that, until he passed the plates of the lower legs and made it to the ankles and feet. The return trip up to ensure full lubricant coverage slid past most of the well-plated lower leg and headed up the inner and outer thigh, one hand on either side. Nihlus hummed dizzily as he neared the torin's rear, but he turned both hands outward to follow the edge of the hip crest instead of going where he was sure the younger torin had been hoping.

Though... his protégé's hips were particularly well angled, flaring in symmetrical ridges of plate that looked dramatic and rugged when they plunged inward as the waist sharply narrowed. Or so he would say if asked while highly intoxicated. Which he never was. His fingers wanted to trace the lines, to study them, but he kept them on task regardless of the whim.

“So nice... thank you for this...”

“You are welcome. I am moving to the other side now.”

Something that sufficiently resembled, “Ya, sure,” escaped from the pillows, though it actually sounded more like, “Yammsrrr...”

The silver-grey torin settled in on the far side, and slicked up the other leg before working it over as well. He spent the most time smoothing one fist over the other along Nihlus' hamstrings, moving toward the heart to encourage good blood flow and lymph drainage. The foot as well got a fair bit of time, fingers pressing into the tendons around the ankle, and dragging down the musculature that let Turians sprint so well. His protégé was mostly incoherent by the time he finished the second leg.

The last area to go over on the back of the body, according to the physical therapist routines he had studied ages ago, was the lower back. Sensitive perhaps, but incredibly important. He doubted Nihlus would complain.

Once more his palm filled with oil, and he set the bottle aside to eye the situation clinically. The best place to work from was also highly suggestive, but the alternatives would be cumbersome. Regarding it as necessary, and of minimal risk with his green eyed partner faced down and mostly asleep, Saren gracefully situated himself over Nihlus' rear, legs spread to either side of the carmine
hip ridges, and began smoothing oil along the dense muscles of the torin's back.

His protégé hissed as the breath left him in a shaky exhale that broke midway into a soft, nearly silent moan.

Ah, he had not been entirely asleep then.

“S-Saren?”

“Yes?”

“What...”

“I am working on your lower back.”

“O-oh. Okay.”

Pleased that the other torin hadn't made anything more of it, and was simply accepting the attention, he began to roll fingers into muscle, pressing and rubbing until he could sink in a little as the tissue relaxed. His augmented hands barely noticing the stress of massaging for however long he had been going, his wrists and arms taking the strain without mention.

“MmmmmMmmmmm... aah.”

Nihlus continued to make more quiet noises, uncontrollably it seemed. The torin was gathering more pillows to him, muffling himself in the cushion.

“Mmmnnnn, mmmfff...”

Unfortunately for him, Saren could still hear the soft sounds his subject was trying to suppress. He... might have been listening for them. They were interesting, to say the least. Harmonic, and pleasing to the ear.
From the lower edge of carapace where it ended suddenly in hide, down along the thick musculature that could be reached around spinal plates, and the out along the top of the hips before the sharply jutting crest; the silver-grey biotic kneaded, pressed, rolled, and rubbed. Mercifully, he only passed over the sensitive sides a time or two, just enough to loosen the tissue.

Finished with all of Nihlus' surfaces along the back side of him, he moved off to the side, and tapped one shoulder.

“I've finished with everything I can do from here. Flip over.”

Carmine crest horns shook back and forth in a wordless negative.

“Why not? At the very least I need to work on the front of the shoulder that was bothering you. Preferably your quads as well.”

Again, no verbal reply, just a quickly shaken negative.

“Stop being difficult. Either explain why or flip over. It will not take long.”

Green eyes emerged from the pile of pillows, his face somewhere between angry and desperate. Saren's mandibles pulled in to his jaw at the emotionally charged expression, not having expected it.

“...What?”

Nihlus' head fell back toward the pile for a moment as his aggressive expression relaxed, browridges turning up, subvocals wavering uneasily.

“Just remember that you were the one who damn well demanded that I...”

His protégé trailed off with a huff, rolling over as previously requested.
Oh. That was why...

Carmine pelvic plates were shifted to spread wide, slick with fluid that vaguely glistened in the low light. Nihlus was hard and erect, eyes closed and fingers clamped down on the bed sheets as if he were holding himself still.

_Spirits_, even his protégé's genitalia were as gorgeous as the rest of him...

Saren almost choked on his own train of thought.

“Happy?” Saren heard the slightly quaking torin ask through a stiff jaw. On auto-pilot, he poured oil into his palm, and began working on the injured shoulder.

“Yes, thank you.” It was almost professional sounding, save for the barest hint of subvocals that gave him away. His voice sounded aroused, even to his ears. Green eyes flashed open and zeroed in on him as he slowly, methodically continued to work into his protégé’s pectoral muscles.

“...Saren?” the torin whispered breathlessly.

“Yes?” That sounded slightly better. Not looking downward was helping his self control.

He assumed the younger torin was waiting for eye contact to speak, but he was _not_ giving it. Nihlus' expressive green eyes had always been something of a weakness for him, and the Spectre had no intention of looking anywhere else until he was done.

The silence reigned, and he moved on, working both sides before slipping up as he glanced at the next spot he had planned on moving to. Those quadriceps... were dangerously close to where...

Saren suddenly realized his autopilot had betrayed him. He was already moving toward the other torin's thighs, pouring another splash of oil into his palm. Unable to resist, he glanced up at the top of the bed. Nihlus' eyes were glued to his hands as they lowered onto a thigh, and began kneading it loose. Except it was not coming loose easily, or at all, with the amount of tension actively running though it. Saren cleared his throat, swallowing around the sudden dryness.
“You must relax. This will not be effective unless you-”

“Just keep going.”

“...”

“I'll try to relax, just... don't stop touching me?”

His hands returned to soft, red-brown thighs, fingers light and as close to soothing as he could manage, though it did no good. The unsteady torin beneath his hands had screwed shut his eyes, turned his head aside, and was forcing himself to breath in a slow, measured pace. Saren watched the other Spectre's pulse race, the artery in his neck standing out as the blood inside rushed past.

Just his touch brought Nihlus to this?

Electric eyes flitted back down to the slick phallus just a short distance away from where he was gently stroking.

It would not be difficult to stroke there instead of here. Nihlus wanted him to. Badly, by all appearances.

Saren reached out and gently ran the back of a talon down the side of his phallus, something possessive in the back of his mind exulting in the defenseless whimper that it caused. His talon reached the base, and slid around and upward along the splayed plating. He watched, fascinated, as the flushed purple member curled slightly, as if following his hand.

“Yes, yes, yes, please, more?” Nihlus chanted breathlessly.

The silver-grey Spectre swallowed down his mild anxiety, and reached out to grasp his new target of attention. If he was going to do this... he would at least do it well. As his fingers closed around the slick organ, a jagged moan tore out of his protégé's throat, tumbling into pieces and falling away as he squeezed and stroked downward.

“Yes, ff-yesss...”
Surprisingly, Nihlus seemed to be... behaving, for lack of a better word. He remained flat backed on the bed, not sitting up to press into his former mentor's space or letting his hands wander. The younger Spectre just held himself still, and asked for more.

Approving, Saren gave it, trying to guess what forms of physical manipulation that the younger torin would like best based on what he had done to previous targets during sexual encounters, organizing technique and tactic based on body type, age, etc. While his higher brain functions spun off details a kilometer a minute, his main focus remained mostly on the sweetest of sounds coming from Nihlus' chest. While the voice begged and hummed, the torin's subvocals also called out to him in dulcet tones... some intriguing, some terrifying.

There was far too much emotion in there for Saren to handle, never mind acknowledge, but there were also simple things, pure things, that made him feel... something.

Joy in being touched. Awe at his physical form. Dedication and loyalty, -dear spirits the loyalty...

Love. Sexual attraction by the bucket full. Respect.

The wavering tones of deeper emotions were buried amid a loud purr and an encouraging rumble, but he could still hear them; flicking like tiny, untended embers amid the bonfire.

What a sight Nihlus made, voice uncontrolled and body trigger-hair sensitive to his touch.

It took his breath away, quite literally skirting the line of what he could handle experiencing.

Still, Saren wondered distantly why he had not done this before. A little bit of physical affection seemed a cheap price to pay to witness this level of expression on his behalf. A bargain for the reward of watching Nihlus come apart in his hands.

All too soon, -he was surprised to admit-, the other torin's back arched and he came with wanton cry, louder than expected.

Normally the silver-grey biotic despised loud noises, they gave him headaches and played havoc on his aural implants, but that had been...
Words did not properly describe the sound Nihlus made as he came. Saren was still trying to conjure a sufficient description when his partner surged up and wrapped arms around him, mouth seeking reverie like a drowning torin seeking air.

He obliged for a short while, if only to delay letting the moment end. It had happened so quickly...

“That was incredible. I... thank you. Is there anything you want in return?”

Saren cleared his throat, meeting that verdant green gaze with a touch of blush in his hide.

“I believe the agreement was a trade of massages.”

“Do you also want...?”

“... No.”

Nihlus smiled, undeterred.

“M'kay.”

Hours later, when they lay beside each other languid and relaxed, Saren remembered the mark on the other torin's neck. He rolled toward him, leaning up on an elbow to get a look at it again. Liquid green eyes observed him passively, the explosion-loving torin unmoving as his fingers reached out to touch the faded marks with curiosity.

“Garrus?” He rumbled in an open ended question.

“Ya.”

“Then you two are...?”
“Nah, we can't. Just... something for us, regardless of circumstance.”

“Ah.”

Nihlus' expression softened, and he rolled his head to the other side, tapping the unblemished hide with a talon tip.

“This side is for you.”

Saren blinked, startled.

“I don't understand... neither are we...”

The carmine plated torin huffed, quirking a small grin.

“Regardless of circumstance', didn't you hear? It doesn't have to be... I mean... if you were interested in...” Nihlus coughed awkwardly, “You could just bite me whenever, is what I'm saying. If you wanted to.”

On a whim, something he rarely indulged in, Saren leaned in to lick the supple expanse of hide, listening closely to the soft sigh the younger agent made. Maybe it was the post massage bliss, endorphins making him more careless than usual, but he nuzzled into Nihlus' throat before withdrawing to a safe distance, retreating to their previous repose. In his comfort, he let some of his darker thoughts drift upward.

“You would be wise to push our sniper further, and seek more than just his mark, or better yet, to give up such foolish concerns entirely. Spectres do not live long enough to offer much more than a sizable check from an early grave.”

Beside him, Nihlus stilled before rolling over into his space this time. Verdant green eyes met his with mild reproach.
“We're the best of the best. You sayin' we can't break that mold? What if... wouldn't you fight harder to survive each mission if you had something to go home to? Someone?”

“I already try my best to survive all hostile encounters.”

“...beecauuuuse?” the younger torin nettled with a wave of his hand.

“I prefer to live?”


His left mandible flicked once, in a slight smirk. “All of those, and other things I suppose. What brings you back from the more difficult missions, if I may ask?”


“A short list.”

“I'm selective.”

Saren huffed at the decidedly false statement. Nihlus took joy in many things.

Carmine fringe pressed into his, and green eyes slid shut with another sigh.

“Always come back to me, Saren. I would break into a thousand, thousand pieces if you died.”

His throat closed at hearing the quiet words that sounded so dire and wishful. Unable to make a coherent reply, the silver-grey torin pressed back into the gesture, grasping the back of his partner's neck with a light squeeze.
05/22/2010 - Turian Clawball Legend to Serve on Taetrus

“Turian clawball legend Neno Raxirian has joined the Hierarchy forces heading to Taetrus. The 39-year-old is on the 14th citizenship tier, making him eligible for conscription. Raxirian says he's volunteering. "There's a time and a place for clawball," he said in an interview with GBC News, "and there's a time to serve honorably." That he has done -- in a brief service stint during his adolescence, he received a citation after his unit came under fire. Is this seeking out past glories? Raescir Rockets fans know his performance has slipped of late -- the team has only 9 wins this season, backed by 7 losses. Raxirian denies the stats have any relation to his decision. "I don't think anyone could look at the Vallum Blast and say they don't want to help. For me, funding a charity isn't enough. I want to be there. I want to act now."

A/N: Okay, mini rant time. /big sigh/ You know? I really had a hard time with this chapter. I rewrote it about three times trying to find a balance of words that suited for the second half. I kept trying to not make it sexual, or find a different way to get to the sexuality... I myself am an LMT, which is a massage therapist who operates in a semi-medical sense. I have a license, I have continuing education requirements like other health professionals, I hold contracts and help people recover from injury. It's like a physical therapist meets masseuse. That said, I work in an industry where we are constantly plagued with requests of 'happy endings' and TV shows that depict us as a gaggle of opportunistic chicks who play on sensuality and sometimes sleep with people for money. Ffs. Most of my time in the office is spent fighting with people's muscles and tendons to get them to stop causing pain. Discussing pain tolerance, encouraging personal stretching routines for greater mobility, and exhausting myself while elbow deep in some muscle-bound giant's calves. I don't actually know ANY LMTs who do sexual things. Any. It's also illegal. /Another sigh/ That all said? Massages can be a very personal experience, they can be a form of non-verbal communication, and they can be platonic, sensual, friendly, or extremely sexy. I wanted to have Saren and Nihlus share a piece of Garrus and Saren's routine, to illustrate their habits pervading into each other, and to give an opportunity for actions to speak instead of words. Saren is better at action, when it comes to emotional things. He is excellent at words... when it comes to manipulation. I wanted honesty, so I needed wordless communication, like baby steps... and so... well, I managed as best I could. TL;DR - Massage is not inherently perverted, please ignore social media's popular stereotypes. They're annoying, and insulting.

A/N/N: Okay, so author-chan got distracted by plot bunnies and forgot to include the CDN snippets in the past 2-3 chapters to finish off the mini story about the human journalist killed on Taetrus. Shun author-chan, shun her! Anyhoo... fixed those, and def remembered this one. :D I think I may go back and add some of the other mini-stories in to previous chapters in places where the topics are relevant, someday. If that happens, I will A/N it to let you know where to look for them if you like those. :D

A/N/N/N: I entirely made up the statistic on 'Salarian neurons operate at approximately 140% the efficiency of a Turian brain'. The series seems to imply that Salarians are a quick thinking race, and 140 sounded like a reasonable upgrade. We already know that some human brains are more efficient than others, and that different genders use more or
less resources on certain specific cognitive tasks, but 'efficiency' as a word to describe average, overall improvement in cognitive function seemed acceptable. …. Does anyone have any hard data on this, from real life or canon? I hate just making up my pseudoscience without some basic facts or canon snippets to at least jump from...

Fanfic Recommendation: **The Four Deaths of Venari Pallin** (7924 words) by **Fistful_of_Gamma_Rays** (There was a long period of murky, indistinct consciousness. My head and knee hurt, and there was something pressing down hard on my shoulders. I would have dropped three tiers for a drink of water. Sometimes, noises filtered in. Metallic groans and the dry scrape of ceramic. Faint voices. And then, abruptly, the weight was gone and the world was blindingly bright and shockingly loud."...got a pulse?" "...still alive! Get the EMTs over here!" Something covered my nose and mouth and things went blessedly quiet again.” ) (Gamma does it again with that amazingly vivid writing skill which just... captivates me.)
Velocity apropos of determination

Chapter Summary

Saren graciously goes a little further in appeasing Nihlus.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Filian - TCD for 'sister' (Credit: Mizdirected)

A/N: (Author-chan is not here at the moment. She is enjoying Andromeda pre-play like a fiend. Please leave a message after the beep. *beeeeeeep!*)

Chapter Soundtrack: Panic! At The Disco: Crazy = Genius (In my head, Nihlus is listening to this on an audio player when playing his fire mage analogue in Galaxy of Fantasy.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon has logged on.]

Garrus perked up at seeing Nihlus' latest screen name come online, immediately ducking out of the war grounds campaign he was in to send him a message. He was hoping the Spectre had time to hang out in-game, even though he was away on a mission.

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Hey Palvi.”]

The tall sniper wiggled his fingers over the computer's six finger keyboard, not typing but stalling, waiting for a reply. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long.

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “blue! check this out!”]

He blinked, waiting for something interesting to happen to merit the strange reply.
The sniper accepted without hesitation, and instantly the game teleported him to the dungeon the group leader had selected. His game loaded into the new location, and the HUD on his screen was filled with relevant information. The completion goals of the encounter, a few optional side quests for extra currency at the end, and the health and energy bars for each party member. It looked like a three person adventure, with fairly mediocre goals, an overtuned final boss that was known to be a pretty hard fight, and no particularly special gear or treasure to be found. He raised a browridge at the odd choice.

[GlitchyTrigger says: “You still need something from here?”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “wait for iiiit...”]

[GlitchyTrigger says: “O...kay.”]

[System: Entropy has joined your party.]

Apparently their third party member was just loading in, and the Detective glanced over to see if they were some sort of meat-shield or healing class, considering both he and Nihlus played damage specializations.

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “tadaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”]

[Entropy says: “Interesting. If only our mission objectives were as straight forward as these seem to be.”]

Garrus tilted his head, facts sliding into place. It couldn't be...

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Is that- ahhh... I probably shouldn't say names on here...”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “ahahahahaha”]
[Entropy says: “The connection has been secured sufficiently to speak freely.”]

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Saren?”]

[Entropy says: “Yes?”]

'Well I'll be damned. How did Nihlus manage to get him to create an account for a video game? Never mind log in to do a dungeon…'

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Nice to see you, ahh... digitally speaking. Coming with us?”]

[Entropy says: “Yes.”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “ya he is! come on lets go kill some shit”]

Suspiciously, the silver-grey Spectre's character was max level, and sported high end gear. Stranger yet, Saren was a healing class, a shaman that would call on spirits to heal them. Garrus snorted at the many levels of nonsense that was about to happen, attributing it all to Nihlus' impossible charm. Ready for anything, he pressed down the keys to sprint after the excited, green-eyed torin's avatar.

Nihlus' character was something called a 'spirit-cursed exile', one that used magic to light enemies on various levels of fire depending on luck. It paired well enough with his own character, a halberd wielder that dodged most everything and broke apart enemy formations. The match also led to a fair bit of chaos in the moment, but at least they had a healer... this time.

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Incoming, 3 o'clock.”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “ya i see them. go get em!”]

The C-Sec Officer did so, weaving between two boulders and jumping into melee to start his opening ability moves. Nihlus had opted to make his avatar hop up on one of rocks instead, beginning to channel a spell for a rain of fire. Calmly, 'Entropy' stepped up on the other and started casting empowering spells on their group to give them more damage.
Upon seeing that text Garrus immediately hit the button sequence to dodge-roll out of range and take cover, his scrappy tarin avatar diving for nearby rocks just moments before Nihlus' spell began falling. Even as he hit the dust his health bar was refilling from the few minor hits he'd taken in melee combat. Outside the game his mandibles flicked in a smile. Saren had been watching out for him.

When the fire magic ended the remaining enemies surged forward, only to be met with the sharp point of his staff weapon. Several specific combo moves later and most of them had been pushed back again as he kept them off 'Spoon' so the other torin could cast another spell. Rinse and repeat a few times, and the first room of hostiles was cleared. Now they began the semi-rewarding process of looting the bodies in hopes of finding something valuable.

Out loud, Garrus snickered. It was true, Nihlus often lit himself on fire when one of his spells misfired. Or him. Their inventory had burn healing supplies in bulk for a reason.

At the head of the room, where the biggest treasure chest was normally found, 'Spoon' had dug through the box, found a somewhat ridiculous looking, oversized hat, and had proceeded to jump up on the chest wearing said hat. Then, he'd entered the emote command to make his character dance on the impromptu stage. The hat's feathers bounced with his exaggerated movements.
[Entropy says: “Considering her IQ scores, that is not a surprise.”]

[Entropy says: “Not that she beats you, but that she plays. I did not intend insult.”]

[Entropy says: “If you would like to surprise her next time, I could teach you more of the game? There are a few strategies that can fool even advanced players, if executed properly.”]

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Why am I not surprised you know my filian’s IQ off the top of your head?”]

[Entropy says: “Should I not? I know yours as well. I can tell you mine if that would make the knowledge acceptable?”]

The back of Garrus' hand scuffed over his jaw as he pulled it away from the keyboard for a moment while chuckling. It was classic Saren, to not notice when he was so well informed it was creepy. Well, creepy to most people.

[GlitchyTrigger says: “It's fine. You're probably not even on the charts. Next time you visit though, or need me for a mission, let's play.”]

[Entropy says: “I would enjoy such. It may not be for some time though. We are on a decently long mission at the moment. Two, three months, at least.”]

Garrus' foot tapped rhythmically on the floor under his desk, his eyes shifting to the area map and their next objective, trying to ignore the vague tweak of loneliness that hit him at hearing that news. It was perfectly normal for them, all things considered, and he wouldn't be experiencing anything different with most other Turians and their frequent military deployments, but still...

[GlitchyTrigger says: “No problem, I'll be here.”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “don't worry blue when i get back ill find a mission you can come on too”]
The blue-eyed Detective tried really, *reallllly* hard not to want that so damn much. He did, but in reality...

[GlitchyTrigger says: “I’d like that. Been on the station for a while now, and it’s pretty quiet. Trigger finger is itching. Could use a break from my new partner too.”]

[Entropy says: “You have been partnered with someone? Odd. The Spectre Asset tags on your personnel file should have prevented that. They will have to operate alone at a moment’s notice if you are needed.”]

[GlitchyTrigger says: “Personnel tags? Uh... it’s a long story, too. No worries though. I don’t think that would bother her.”]

[Icouldkillyouwithaspoon says: “stop slackin people. there are 3 more rooms before the boss monster, lez go”]

With that, Nihlus’ avatar bounced off the treasure chest and went running for the next challenge. The other two followed, spending the rest of the dungeon enabling the wily Spectre's enjoyment of lighting everything, -absolutely everything-, on fire.

Most of the burn-healing items were gone by the time they finished, the boss loot was useless, and Saren seemed bored most of the night, but... Garrus wasn’t about to complain. The chance to hang out with them, even remotely, had been the best part of his week thus far.

Makasian looked up from her datapad and kava at the particular footstep pattern of her partner. Detective Vakarian was always in early and late to leave, a very dedicated officer, but rarely were his steps so... cheerful sounding? How one’s steps could be noticeably more cheerful was beyond her, but she could certainly confirm he was in a good mood this morning from body language alone.

"Good morning, Vakarian. What has you in such high spirits?"

"Nothing much. Any new intel on that smuggling ring since yesterday?"
"None, unfortunately. Care to do some plainclothes snooping?"

"I'm in. Let's break this thing open."

Aiesha eyed her not-travel style kava mug with displeasure. Companionably, the excessively tall torin set a hand on her shoulder.

"Actually I haven't eaten yet. Want to catch breakfast before snooping?"

She perked up at the suggestion, not exactly having taken the time to eat this morning either...

"Your terrible bachelor habits strike again? I suppose that would work."

Garrus smirked at her, glancing at the kava mug knowingly, and turned for the breakroom door. She chugged the rest, and politely set the mug in the cleaner before following.

Chapter End Notes

04/28/2010 - Taetrus' Capital Obliterated After Blast
“Our top story tonight: terror on Taetrus. Vallum, the colony's capital, was hit with a blast that obliterated its downtown area and left a crater five kilometers wide. Shockwaves from the blast were powerful enough to destroy buildings 11 kilometers away. Casualties are unknown but are expected to be massive. The Radiatum, Taetrus' parliamentary building, was at the epicenter of the blast and is believed to be its primary target. No registered armed ships were in orbit or in the sky above Vallum, leading authorities to believe the blast was caused by a ship used as a weapon of tremendous force, aimed at the Radiatum and accelerated to near-FTL speed. Fourteen separatist groups are claiming responsibility at this time."

A/N: My origin name is the same as my author name, btw, if anyone wishes to add me for ME:A multiplayer stuffs, or nerd-chat. :D

Fanfic Recommendation:
Saren, Sweet? What a Scandal! (1004 words) by xMidnightSun
Chapter Summary

Sometimes Nihlus and Saren disagree on how to do something, or the level of necessity of a violent act. Other times, while their willingness might vary, they are of the same mind.

Much has been, and will be, sacrificed for the greater good.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm so bad... I finished this yesterday, and filled out all the data in the Ao3 submission page... and then it sat here overnight. I never submitted it. D:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“No,” he drawled without explanation, taking another slow sip of bourbon while lazily watching the table dancers. Beside him, his sometimes squad-mate made an adorable, aggravated grumble and continued flipping through the local mercenary job listings.

“What about guard duty? Looks like a few cargo haulers want some pirate deterrent.”

The human male hummed, fingers tapping the glass tumbler while he considered that one. It sounded... boring as hell. What was the point of being a freelance merc if you didn't get to bust some heads in occasionally?

“No.”

“There's one up for an escort. Public transport full of scientists going into the Terminus Systems to some sort of archeology site.”
If there was any type of gig he hated more than the boring no-action ones, it was dragging civilians anywhere. “No.”

His companion growled without much vitriol, and he tried not to smile. She might be deadly in a fight, but the woman was about as intimidating as a bunny. A particularly fluffy one.

“For fuck’s sake Austin, do you like food? ’Cuz I do, and we're both about out of credits.”

He shrugged, lifting his glass outward as if to say he'd just live on cheap alcohol until something better came along. With a roll of her eyes, Yume went back to job hunting for them.

“All right, here's an interesting one. Fighting exhibition at a fancy party. Some rich people trying to set up a gladiator type thing. It pays well though, and you used to fight, didn't you?”

Austin tried to hide any reaction, acerbic or otherwise, to the probably-innocent query. Yes, he used to fight. Before circumstance had taken his legs, a long damn time ago. He'd scraped by on basic prosthetics until he'd had the money for blackmarket, military grade cybernetics instead. Now legitimate arenas didn't let him in the ring anymore, as he could mule kick non-augs through walls.

The laconic mercenary ran a hand through his hair, considering the idea. It would feel good to get into a ring again, any kind, even as a dancing monkey for rich assholes... but would it be worth it? He had been addicted to that thrill, once. Self made, lauded, well paid, often laid, and constantly in danger of pushing himself too damn far. Should he go back? Was it worth the re-addiction to the moment? Pit fighters... didn't exactly live long lives. Not that he cared about that, particularly.

“What's the pay?”

“500 creds for showing, another hundred for every win.”
Thick, callused fingers tapped on glass, thinking it over. The amber liquid rippled with every hit, it's surface reflecting the blue lighting of the dive bar in strange ways. After a moment the other merc pipped in again with more details.

“We could both enter, and that would be at least a thousand. I bet we could make it pretty far, the combat rules don't seem particularly strict.”

“No,” he decided. Maybe he could go out happy in some shit hole, fighting cocky idiots for glory... but not Yume.

“Aw come on. Scared that I'll beat cha?” she waggled her eyebrows at him with a grin. Considering the woman was a biotic, he wouldn't take that bet. If he ever wanted to take her out, he'd just as soon snap her neck when she let him trustingly close. Or possibly with a sniper rifle from a long, long ways off.

He shook the morbid thoughts away, and ruffled her hair.

“Not even. Find something else.”

Yume shoved his hands off, flopping down into the booth and tossing her feet in his lap with the airs of a bratish pre-teen. Ridiculous, considering she was older than him.

“There's an opening for a sanitation worker on the docks.”

He flicked her ankle none-too-gently in reproach.
“Ow. Jerk! Fine, if you're so determined to hit people, how about a slaver camp raid? Looks like someone's fronting the cash to clear out a colony of Batarians, free some slaves, and loot the dead. Sixty-forty cut on all big finds with any Prothean artifacts on reserve.”

“Now we're talkin'. Whose the funder?”

“Dunno, it doesn't say. There's a meeting location on a space station two sectors over, three days from now.”

Austin lifted up his mostly empty glass at a passing Salarian waiter, the thin alien nodding at his obvious request for a refill and moving toward the bar to oblige.

“If anyone deserves to get suddenly fucked, it's slavers. I'm in.”

Yume smiled at him brightly, turning away to type some sort of reply.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“About fifteen have showed up so far...” Nihlus said, coming into the back room where Saren was setting up a vidscreen to brief their mercenaries on the plan. He paused before adding, “You sure this is necessary? Using them, I mean.”

“Have you found a way into that compound without a distraction?” the other Turian asked in distracted reply.

Nihlus thought about his short list of theoretical solutions... and his subvocals fell flat, admitting his partner's point. The compound they needed to get into and retrieve artifacts from was extremely well guarded. The simpler options, like skycar bombs or tactical cloaks, were all blocked by one one
security measure or another. They needed the chaos of live people; specifically, a group of people that wouldn’t *immediately* point back to the Spectres or the Citadel Council.

While that wasn’t a huge problem at first glance, buying the long term silence of mercs was a sketchy bet at best. There would be every reason to dispose of them all after the two Agents had recovered the Prothean artifacts. He wasn’t looking forward to it.

Nihlus was... less than fond of killing in cold blood.

“Bring the takers in, I'm ready to brief them on their part.”

“Right. Yeah...” Swallowing back the slightly despondent hum in his chest, the carmine plated torin put on his game face and stepped back out into the main room just as two more were walking in at the last minute. He nodded to the group at large.

“Come on back. We'll get everyone in on the plan of attack, and then move to the docking bay.”

Seventeen pairs of feet moved on by, taking up the corners of their make-shift briefing room. Well, eighteen, if you counted the front two on the lone Elcor that had shown.

At the head of the barren metal room Saren stood patiently beside an empty screen, arms crossed and watching the crowd. Observing their mien. Of the seventeen, nine were Turian, and by the sounds of their subvocals every one of those mercs recognized Saren. Several of the other species looked like they had a clue as well, though it was harder to tell.

The silver-grey torin *was* sorta hard to miss, he admitted with a brief, appreciative glance. Well built form, confident body language, and exotic facial features aside, there was an undeniable aura of power and charisma that settled on him in moments like these.
Saren was also mildly famous. Or was that 'infamous'?

“Thank you for coming today. I am Spectre Saren Arterius, this is my fellow Spectre, Nihlus Kryik. We are here to recover the historical relics currently held against Citadel law, on the Batarian compound located... here.”

On the vid screen, the target planet of Moshziput flickered into being, the colony's location marked with a vivid blue circle. It was a rock and moss world with a fairly weak atmosphere and mineral-stained purple seas. The landscape slide show in the info panel appeared stark and scenic, all dark slate and reflective waters, dusted with micro-flora.

The planet itself was not far from other Batarian colony worlds, but just distant enough to be a usable point of smuggling goods into and out of Hegemony space. It was also in the Viper Nebula, strictly within Citadel Space... and uncomfortably close to the Hierarchy.

Regardless of the recent Batarian withdrawal from the the Citadel embassies, neither their slave trade, nor their illegal withholding of Prothean artifacts, could be allowed anywhere near this side of the galaxy. The Council had tried asking nicely, once. The message had been more or less thrown back in their faces, as expected. Saren, and his brutally efficient ways, was their second attempt. Nihlus doubted it would take a third.

At the center of attention, his former mentor continued speaking. “We will arrive via shuttle, approach on foot, and break through the colony's external defenses. All Prothean tech, large and small, will be seized on Council authority. If I discover anyone attempting to smuggle some of it out? I will kill you. There will be no second warning. All colonists that lay down arms can be released, any that act with aggression can be shot, legally. You may loot as you see fit, simply refrain from committing any sentient rights violations. I hope I have been sufficiently clear. None of these details are negotiable. Any questions before I go over the finer points of our attack strategy?”

At the back of the room a human female went to move forward slightly, her hand lifting as if she had a point to make, but the long haired male beside her pulled her back and shook his head. She made an aggravated expression at the man, but he simply shook his head. The woman settled back into place just as an excessively tattooed Asari tossed an arm in the air for attention.
“Batarians have a lot of enemies. We get to claim any bounties we find down there?”

“That is fine.”

The Elcor shuffled next, dipping their head politely, “With mild curiosity: There will likely be slave pens, and forcibly indentured people all over the colony. What do we do about them?”

Saren tossed his chin dismissively, as if it were obvious, “Treat them the same as the colonists. The clean up force that will come after us will likely free the imprisoned and see them relocated. It is not something we have to deal with.”

“Very well,” replied the Elcor in typical slowness.

When no more questions presented themselves his fellow Spectre broke into a methodical explanation of the merc's distraction tactics, couched in terms of an attack plan. Nihlus listened, in a calm lean against the wall, and silently apologized to them all. Maybe it was his merc colony roots that made him feel like their unallied martial ability shouldn't slate them for death when convenient. These people were just trying to make a living after all... but with tensions running high between the Council races and the Hegemony anything more provable to media than a covert strike and clean cover up risked a lot more lives in open war.

Tough choices for the greater good... and all that.

“That concludes what I have for you. If you are all still willing to participate, then follow me to the docking bay.”

Saren strode out of the room and the gaggle of mercenaries followed. Nihlus faded into the background, quickly destroying any evidence they’d been here before leaving to tail the group. Just... as a precaution, considering the dangerous nature of the intel the freelancers had been given.
What would you know, though... one of the seventeen broke off and turned down an alleyway. The carmine plated torin sighed quietly, and followed the straggler. The tarin didn't go far before looking around the deserted back alley and bringing up her Omni-tool. Stalking closer but keeping to shadows, he jammed it's communication array, cautiously slowing his approach and slipping into a hiding spot at the last possible location to remain hidden. The tarin began typing, her subvocals excited. Nihlus waited for her to finish, and for the the device's semi visible screen to flicker an error message if it tried to send any data packets.

It did, and she cursed.

"For your sake, I hope that was a letter to your parents or something..."

The green eyed torin stepped from cover and moved in quickly, yanking her arm into his view to see what she'd written. Her other hand came up, combat knife aimed for his neck. Nihlus blocked it, stole it, and pressed it to her throat as he skimmed the message.

“Fucking suicide mission-”

“Think we're stupid, but ha-”

“-nt to sell this info to the right people, the credits-”

“-Spectres, it's Arterius and his golden boy-”

“-and fuck them, the best way to-”

Slowly, green eyes rose up to meet orange. Panic was an understatement for the expression on her
“I’m sorry! Pleas-”

He didn’t let her finish. It wasn’t going to be a request he could grant anyway. The merc slumped to the ground, bleeding from the neck, gurgling as she died. Pragmatically, Nihlus rifled through her gear, nabbing the tarin’s credit chit, thermal clips, the one semi-decent pistol mod she had, and the sheath to the knife. It was his, now. In thanks, he closed her eyes before stepping back.

“Nihlus,” came a low rumble from his aural implant over coms.

“What’s up?”

“Two more, just now.”

“On it.”

Leaving the body behind, he spun around and ran for the main street, four powerful wall-jumps taking him up a level to stalk those below with a bird’s eye view.

“Ya got a description for me?”

“Two Asari, visibly similar, light blue armor, headed east.”

He hummed back a non-reply, and sifted through the light crowd at a semi normal pace. A little bit of searching found the two recognizable nais descending into a public tramway, and the Spectre
dropped heavily into a gap between buildings to return to their level. His knees took it better than he expected, and Nihlus strolled out amid afternoon shoppers like he had no place in particular to be.

The two lost Asari never even saw him get onto the tram car behind theirs.

Chapter End Notes

04/29/2010 - Death Toll on Taetrus Continues to Rise
“The list of dead and missing on the planet of Taetrus continues to grow. At the time of impact, the planet's Primarch was in the Signis, his executive building, now indistinguishable from the rest of the rubble. His viceroy, chief of staff, and countless workers are also dead -- burned, or vaporized by the tremendous impact of the FTL vehicle. There is seemingly no end to the death and destruction; besides the Signis and the Radiatum, three museums, four national monuments, and the Esarus Mint have been destroyed, with many of their occupants killed.”

A/N: A friend of mine asked, 'Can I be in your fanfic'? I was like, 'Hell yeah! ...but you'll probably die horribly or be used as a plot device.' He replied, 'I don't care.' Well alright then. Thanks for volunteering? I wonder what's going to happen... I really haven't written it yet. Haha.

Fanfic Recommendation: Walking in Circles (111944 words) by Milee_Cosgrove (I normally stick to same universe recommendations, but this Dragon Age fic, particularly in later chapters, was so moving, so powerful, that I just had to give it a shout out. “After Solas wakes from Uthenera, he is captured by templars and put in a Circle of Magi. This will not end well.”)
Precious and fleeting in that half second

Chapter Summary

Conflict arises, both sought and unsought, differences of opinion and history flowing around the worlds’ and their dangers, trying to steal and divide.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Trigger warning! This chapter contains more sentient rights violations than you can shake a stick at, both obvious and implied, as well as a lot of negative emotional charge. Just a heads up.

A/N/N: Edited and re-released! Now with even more panic and violence.

Chapter Soundtrack: Lucian ft. Olivera - Sober Heart

Read the story on the clothes on the floor
Don’t say aloud, we’ll get it from the silence around
I am yours, and you’re my only crowd, only crowd

Let me sober up
Let me face the minutes,
over and over again

You see, now it’s locked
My sober heart is beating,
 but it’s about to burn out
... I miss the feelings around it
Now it’s cold and all blue
I’m gonna keep on reminding
I always will be there for you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He growled, quietly, over their personal coms.

“What is it?” he heard Nihlus ask. The torin’s lanky form was several meters ahead and sinking lower in his walk, hand hovering over his sidearm. Saren chuffed, shaking his head.
“While the dry storm is providing ample cover for our approach, these winds are...”

“Obnoxious?”

“Yes. I can only reinforce my own gravity so much without causing a corona that would give away our position, yet I am getting rather sick of stumbling sideways in the sand every few minutes.”

“Eh, lean into it? If it gets really strong, let it push you and just go with the motion rather than fighting it.”

“Go with?” He chuffed again, dismissively. “I am going this way, there is no time to let the weather drag me some other direction.”

Nihlus' subvocals rolled at him, teasing. “Ya know, I don't have any gravitational help, and I'd say I'm managing pretty well with that.”

“...because of the length of your limbs.”

“Riiight. Well, at least we have helms. Sand in the eyes is the worst.”

He huffed, and kept on plodding determinedly toward their goal: a section of colonial defense wall that was near enough to a pair of rocky pillars that a strong climber and distance jumper could make it into the compound without trying to sneak through a security gate. He, and Nihlus, were more than capable of it, and thankfully they had a generous four hours and twenty three minutes before the mercenaries would attack in two teams of seven from other entrances.

The dust and debris filled wind died out for a moment, before slamming back into him mid-step. The silver-grey Spectre stumbled again, quietly snarling, resisting the ongoing urge to flare his biotics strongly enough to simply fly over the sand, and move forward while able to ignore the wind entirely. It would be so much quicker, and far less aggravating... but he could not afford to expend himself on such things, and there would be no hiding his aura at that level of usage.

He resisted the urge with poor grace and continued walking. It did not help that Nihlus was even farther ahead now, swaying with the storm like some sort of cloth banner rather than a Turian in
medium armor. With a will, the electric eyed torin channeled his displeasure into his legs, and double timed it through the shifting sand to catch up. At the very least, his muscular form gave him the strength and endurance to do so with relative ease.

Lightning flashed off to the south, warning him about an impending cacophony of thunder. The Spectre held his mandibles close to his jaw, annoyed by the repeated blasts at an obnoxious volume. The topography here did nothing to diminish the sound.

“This is M1 team, reporting in. We've got some strange activity at the north west gate. Please advise.”

'Strange activity?'

“Acknowledged, provide details.”

The nais on the line was silent for a moment, the channel open but words taking time. He gave it, listening while walking. Eventually, the merc began a slightly more useful exposition than 'strange'.

“Four large APCs pulled up, one of them hauling a cargo trailer. We called in because there could be a decent sized forced in them, but... something's wrong.”

“Elaborate.”

“It's hard to explain, the... hmm. The soldiers are moving... oddly? I would almost think they were bots disguised in armor. Possibly to seem like a larger force than they really have...”

“But?”

“Well... it doesn't fit. They aren't bots, but they just don't... move right.”

“... I see.”

Saren made a note to himself to offer a higher bounty next time. If this idiocy was the best he had to
work with for a distraction, they would end up doing most of the work themselves, regardless. Annoying.

“Soooo, what do you want us to do about it?”

“... Nothing. Remain in position until the strike time, report any change in activity.”

“Righto. M1 out.”

The dissatisfied Spectre carried on toward their infiltration point, suspiciously eyeing the slight shaking of his former apprentice’s shoulders. Nihlus was laughing at the whole thing. Saren’s mandibles twitched in agitation, and made a mental note to get back at the younger torin for his mirth... later on. After the mission.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Ridiculous.”

“It isn't!”

“Yes, it is. You have no solid basis for your theory. We cannot act on... imagined intel.”

Garrus groaned, pushing the heel of one palm into the growing headache at his temple. He looked up at his partner after a moment, glaring.

“It's not imagined, it's gut instinct. It's... feeling. I've studied cases like these before, and while I can't put my talon on the reason, I can feel the pattern somewhere in that... mess of data. We should go now, and-”

“No.”

“I'll go without you then.”
“No.”

“Like you can stop me.”

“I will report you to Pallin in a heartbeat if you take one step outside of this building without finding better reasoning than having a hunch.”

Thrown for a loop, Garrus balked at the thought. Was that all their working relationship meant to her? She would really just betray him... for protocol?

He looked up at Makasian's proud form with hurt accusation in his eyes, but she was hard as steel and just as cool. They stared at each other over a chasm of disagreement for several moments before the sniper turned away, spinning his chair around to face his computer.

“Good, now that you've given up on that foolish notion, we can get back to work findin-”

“Get out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Leave.”

Makasian chuffed with exacerbation. “Childish, Vakarian. Are you really this immature?”

“Either leave my office, or I will move you outside, but you will be leaving. Make this easy.”

Her subvocals buzzed at him very sightly. A hint of an incensed tarin amid the ice cubes.

“Fine,” she declared, and walked calmly out of the room, “call me if you find any useful intel, and don't even think of leaving the building unless it's to go home at the end of your shift.”
Jaw clenched, he ignored her.

Did she have good points? Sure. Was he willing to consider them anymore? No.

Garrus growled angrily. That sort of backstabbing and power tripping had no place between he and any partner of his. None.

With a truly irreverent amount of concern, the icy eyed detective set up his terminal to autorun vaguely relevant searches in the C-Sec database using a quickly thrown together algorithm. He set the speakers to output his usual work-flow music, and locked the door. Then, he looked up... at the lone ventilation shaft cover in his office.

The Vakarian clansman hadn't needed a partner to break open tough cases before, and he didn't need one now.

Electric eyes shifted over the nightscape, the weather and wind covering their activities nearly as well as a tactical cloak could have. At the moment he was standing just inside the pooling shadows of the entry to the power facility's breaker room, guarding Nihlus' back as the other torin set wires to fry and back ups to fail at the press of a button. When triggered, it would leave most of the colony without power. No power meant emergency lighting and deactivated defense equipment. No cameras, no turrets, no mech activation; perfect for their goals.

“That should do it,” came his cohort's voice, multi-toned and rich even over coms.

“Good. Let us see if we can reach the local armory undetected. I would prefer to remove their access to additional supplies once combat is initiated.”

“To prevent a battle of attrition? I'm in. Are we sealing it off or sabotaging it all?”

“That depends on what we find.”
“Alright, after you.”

The two Turians stalked from the power plant while keeping low, sinking down behind cargo crates and guardrails to hide their silhouettes. Saren moved with stealth born of caution and practice, however his protégé slid from place to place like he was made of instinct and midnight rather than plate. Either way was sufficient by all appearances, as the pair of Council agents took a meandering path around the outskirts of the small colony, winding inward as they cracked systems and ferreted out the location of the armory.

“For fuck’s sake these are some of the worst slave conditions I’ve ever seen.”

He nodded absently, scanning ahead of them with his Omni-tool set to display farther into the ultra-violet spectrum than most species could see. He didn't want it's glow to give them away. It was quiet for several minutes as the two pressed on, suddenly broken by a wordless growl from his partner.

What is it now?

I am going to murder so many spirits-forsaken Batarians...

Saren blinked owlishly, turning to look backward for the cause of such an angry reply. The way the statement had been made was unusually violent for Nihlus...

'Ah,' he thought with understanding upon glancing back. There were several bodies piled up, naked and starved looking, waiting for processing near an outdoor crematorium. Several Asari, a few Humans, and a little tarin with crack-riddled plates from what must have been frequent beatings. Nihlus and children had always been a sensitive subject... witnessing the bodies boded poorly for his protégé's self control, but well for mission success. He made a mental note to watch the other Agent's back more carefully than usual, and continued walking.

With just over two hours left before the strike time they managed to locate the armory, Nihlus burrowing his way past it's defenses by taking a daring run through whirling cooling fans in the building's oversized air filtration system. He unlocked a side door for Saren, and the Spectres spent most of the remaining prep time stealing through corridors and dodging guards to quietly ruin the location's strategic value.

Cases of grenades were emptied into trash chutes. The main stash of guns was left alone, a difficult target with more than eight watch dogs nearby, but the thermal clip storage was merely a large closet
protected by one woman. She died silently from a knife to the temple, and was folded down into a cargo box. A flat faced Nihlus tucked clip after clip into ceiling panels and miscellaneous cabinets while Saren biotically carried crate fulls of the critical firing components down the less occupied hall ways. He hid them in strange places where panicked militia might not think to look, such as the chill unit in the breakroom or underneath random conference tables.

With twenty minutes to spare, they began hunting through the colony for any sort of vault or secured storage facility. The reports were clear that countless Prothean artifacts had ended up here for study, but no one had gotten close enough to pin down their holding location. At five till time Saren stopped them, having scanned two more large buildings and gotten negative results on both. It was time to get in position at the enemy's flank.

“M1, M2, report status.”

“This is M2's lead, -no, shut up Vyrka, I'm in charge, we discussed this-” the voice coughed, and returned to reporting as he resisted the urge to roll his eyes, mildly aggravated that the supposed leader was reporting in out of both numerical and directed order.

“This is M2 team leader, reporting in. No movement on our side. The storm looks like it's easing off, but not leaving. Is mission still a go?”

“It is. M1?”

“We're green.”

“...Green?”

“Uhhh, good to go. We're ready whenever.”

“Ah. Then all teams prepare for combat, engage in three minutes on my mark.... mark.”

Saren released the push-to-talk key on his armor's com array, and turned back to ensure that Nihlus was ready as well. The carmine plated torin was casually leaning against a metal exterior wall, a long shiv twirling idly between his fingers, his pistol dangling loosely in the other palm. He stepped closer and drew his current weapon of choice: a more powerful hand-canon with stability sacrificed for stopping power. The first shot accuracy was always spot on, the recoil however sent most people’s
aim flying wildly off. His sheer physical strength and servo-motor enhanced joints made the
difference though, along with quick reflexes for re-aiming, turning the overtuned pistol into an
unexpectedly deadly weapon.

A quiet *patta patta patta* sounded from a ways off, followed by a distant *whump*. There was a brief
pause and then the colony's emergency siren sounded.

The on-duty guards appeared first, running toward one of the two gates where the mercenaries were
making a distraction. Saren waited for opportune moments to nab the last in a group while eyes were
focused forward, tripping them up with the barest hint of biotics. The victims fell sideways into the
gaps between buildings and down behind crates, the evening light and rainless storm disguising their
short cries before knives found carotids.

As soon as the coast was clear he watched Nihlus duck into a corner and start hitting keys on his
Omni-tool. The nighttime turned from small town streets well lit by industrial lamps, to murky dust
storm, lit only by occasional lightning and the insufficient glow of emergency lights.

Next to cross their path came off duty military and stumbling militia, either running for where their
gear was stashed or stepping out of doorways still half awake. Similar tactics were applied, though
the increasing sound of distant gunfire had the Spectres being less cautious than before.

Four targets came into view headed south-east, dashing right by their latest ambush spot. Saren
spared a biotic warp for the lot of them, and shot two in quick succession, the third dying to one of
Nihlus' bullets. The last hostile almost getting out a cry for help, but a heat blade erupted from the top
of his protégé's gauntlet, slicing through the Batarian's neck with such speed that even his visual
implants had trouble tracking it.

“Spectres!” came a cry over coms, and he hissed. They had been told not to use their titles, even on
an encrypted channel. *Idiots.*

“Refrain from breaking protocol if you can manage that for five minutes. *What?*”

“This is M1 team, and we need back up right damn now! Those soldiers from before are chewing
through our group, not even with guns! They're just, -fuck! Shela is down, Watcom get them behind
cover!-, sorry, shit, we need that back up ASAP!”

“...Understood. Hold position.”
He flipped the channel for M1 team to communicate to his coms only, and kept walking. If they killed themselves being careless and incompetent, then good. It meant he did not personally have to remove them later, and that they would die honestly for the good of many. Likely a better passing then the lot of mercenaries would have earned themselves. Hopefully whatever their individual species had for spirits appreciated the opportunity afforded to them.

Saren looked over at an unhappy huff from Nihlus' coms. Though hidden behind metal and plastic they faced toward each other for a moment before the younger torin exhaled and looked forward again in acceptance. His protégé was too compassionate by half, but he understood, -logically-, that it was easy to be empathetic toward dime-a-dozen mercenaries when that may very well have been your lot in life. The difference was that it was not Nihlus' lot, because the green eyed Spectre had far more to offer than the galaxy's common, discardable riff-raff.

Though just because empathy was not natural to him, it did not mean that Saren was foolish enough to disregard it's existence. Especially if it weighed heavily on of his few friends.

“Their sacrifice is not in vain.”

“I know.”

“There will be many slavers killed here, by their guns and ours.”

“Yeah...”

Saren struggled to find something else to add, but there was not much else to say. Perhaps next time he would requisition the funds for a small army of LOKIs to provide the needed chaos instead, if only to stave off his squadmate's sensitivity to the subject. More resources to acquire by a long shot, but... potentially worth while. He clicked his tongue in mild disgust, silently accusing himself of going soft. He had been so much harder on Nihlus during the torin's training...

Onward they moved, a team of two whose tactics had evolved to complement each other so well that most targets did not know there were Turian soldiers present until they were already dying; even amid the grounds near the gates where combat was live and awareness high. Luckily the sight of slave pens, in vile conditions that broke countless sentient rights treaties, brought the quiet anger back into Nihlus' demeanor. The enemy forces dwindled as their numbers were cut down in swathes from within their own walls.
The once boisterous colony reduced to blood and ghosts within an hour.

He motions to Nihlus, and makes the hand sign for 'keep an eye out'. As their assault slows he begins taking the time to scan the structures they pass while searching for the trove of artifacts that should be in Council hands.

“There you fucking are!” is shouted loudly on external speakers. Saren snorts as the Asari leading M2 team stomps up to him with a mere three figures trudging along behind.

“Where were you two? The front gates were a blood bath. The other team lead said you were coming!”

Saren chooses his words carefully. Besides the Asari there are two humans and a female Turian, and the tarin might be able to discern the truth from his subvocals.

“There were many hostiles that I had to kill between now and then. I made a judgment call. Where is M1 team? Or the rest of yours?”

The nais exhaled through her teeth, body language defeated. “... Gone. M1 got taken out by those hooded reinforcements. When they tried to engage us, we ran. There’s... none of the others made it, okay? It wasn't my fault.”

'Hooded? Odd.'

They had not encountered any hooded combatants...

“I understand. The best thing to do now is to finish the mission. Spread out, and help us scan the local area. Let me know if you run into them again.”

“Right... yeah. Fine.”

It took a while to locate anything of substance, though they did find a few hiding life signs. Saren left
the slaves alone, passing by the bedraggled workers who bore the signs of heavy labor, or the reed thin playthings in silks and chains. Those who were not enslaved were summarily executed.

Eventually one of the remaining mercs called in that they had found something. An underground enclave with a sealed door and restricted access signs. Of course, they had managed to find both the vault and the hooded soldiers. Two of them stood outside, calm as stone, and covered from head to toe in cloth bindings and armor. Saren's stomach began to sink, a chill settling into his gizzard.

There was something wrong with these particular hostiles. Something familiar.

“Nihlus,” he quietly addressed the other Spectre over private comes, eyes not leaving his goal. “What do you have for explosive devices?”

“Three grenades, some incendiary ammo I could overload, aaaand...” the younger Agent nodded sideways toward a fairly distant residential building, “a colony full of various chemicals. Why?”

“Just... in case.” He peered out around the building corner he was using as cover, and switched to open coms. “Everyone, on the count of three, open fire-”

He was cut off, the Asari leader screeching in his ear. “What, no way! Are you crazy? There are four more of these fuckers somewhere, and they ripped through the other team like tissue paper. We need a better plan! Or reinforcements! Or a really, really big bomb!”

Saren suppressed a growl of annoyance.

“Deal with it. Three, two, one, go,” was all the warning he gave the mercenaries, expecting Nihlus to react easily at that speed, and for the other four bodies at least provide a distraction while running away.

The moment he opened fire the two figures started toward his cover at a ground eating lope that looked nothing like the running gait of any species. It was jerky, each step too evenly measured, arms dangling limply. The group opened fire, and the six of them worked on blowing lots of small holes through the hostile forces.

“Focus fire on the left one!”
Problematically, the cloth wrapped figures ignored their mass effect propelled rounds, rushing head long into melee range. Browridges furrowed, he pulled back and continued firing. Finally, one went down in a tangle of limbs. The other one froze, then spun around, running blindly for the vault's open door. Saren pushed out of cover and went after it, uncertain what kind of armor the hostile was wearing that took so much damage before failing, but determined to see them dead. Most especially because the enemy squad seemed to be involving themselves in the cache of artifacts that were critical to his mission.

Nihlus at his five o'clock, they chased the shrouded brawler to the entrance, the sound of the storm fading as they moved underground. They chased the target down a long hallway, moving ever deeper into the facility. The four mercenaries were apparently more committed than he had previously thought, as they followed behind without complaint, firing sporadically when they had a clear shot.

Shortly after passing by a non-functional security station the continued fire took down the second soldier as well. Pistol still raised, the silver-grey Spectre stalked farther in, hunting for the remainder. His optics were telling him there was a large room ahead, laboratory-esc in the low lighting. In the grave like quiet of the corridor, Nihlus popped in on coms with his usual irreverent bravado.

“Two down, four to go? Doable. Seriously though? Someone tell me what kind of steroids these guys are on.”

“An illegal kind, most likely.”

“True. Should take one of the bodies back for intel, they might be able to figure it out.”

“Agre-”

As the hallway opened into the larger space, many things became clear at once, and at the last one... his mind nearly blanked white in panic.

One, there were probably half a dozen pieces of Prothean tech down here, including one of the rare beacon structures; meaning their research must have been fairly intensive.

Two, there were not four hostiles remaining. There were somehow ten.
Three... neon blue lines and glowing, malevolent optics in sets of four peered back at him from around a large, glowing metal construct.

It shimmered a silvery blue, ethereal and lovely, lines and curves drawing the eye and inviting interest.

It was a perfect duplicate of the Arca Monolith.

“What the hell is that? I've never seen anything like it...” Beside him, Nihlus took a step toward it, curious.

His world narrowed down to that moment, fear rising rapidly like malignant vines when the other torin moved even that small increment closer to the device. Saren reached out to stop him as if in slow motion. It was too much like his nightmares, the ones where he could do nothing to stop what he knew was coming. The desperation built up, a bulwark forming between him and panic. He roared in defiance, -a soul forged refusal-, unwilling to let history repeat itself. The Monolith pulsed, as if it knew of his defiance, and mocked the attempt. It's twin had infected his brother, spread through his squad like a cancer, and left rubble where a part of their people's history should be.

No, that last was a lie... he had left that blank space, sacrificing everything, and whatever mastermind worked behind these artifacts?

I will not let them take anything more.

Rage blossumed and time returned to normal, Nihlus' pauldron firmly in his grasp.

His fellow Spectre startled, taking a half step away and raising his gun toward it in confusion.

“Saren! Wha-”

Was all he heard before the wickedly fast, screeching Batarian machine-horrors came at them. His biotics lit like a star, and the first one to come near them dissolved into an overpowered singularly, the microscopic gravity well so strong it tore the first, second, and third creatures apart at the molecular level before the crux of it got away from him and collapsed.
“Shit, incoming!”

“What the fuck are...”

“Shoot them! Shoot them!”

Around him the others present began to backpedal and fire, the Asari going down under the jagged claws of one and the shredding maw of another. Saren let himself sink into the fury, actions smooth and methodical amid the expansive white rage. He only moved back enough to steal the grenades from Nihlus’ belt, add them to his own two, and chuck each one forward just behind warp fields, plying for maximum effect.

Five explosions, and four more of the screaming meta-Batarians fell. Ten hostiles had been reduced to three, but the rapid use of his abilities was costing him. The silver-grey torin fell to a knee as the remaining friendlies fired on the incoming monstrosities.

Saren immediately regretted his lack of control, the careless, brute force use of his abilities draining him far more than needed for the effect made. Still, he managed to lift his other arm to add more gun fire to theirs, though the weakness in his limbs slowed the rate of fire and diminished accuracy while his body trembled and fought to restore itself after the sudden drain.

He could not seem to get enough air, faint and unbalanced, his biotic amp uncomfortably warm against his skull. One of the humans fell, taking an oncoming lunge for the other and going down under the creature's assult. Saren bared his teeth at it, still shooting. He knew they would weight several times as much as they looked, and carry the strength to rend metal. The human was doomed, simply a useful distraction now.

A double pair of soulless blue optics zeroed in on him, likely deciding the partially fallen Turian an easy mark, temptingly far forward as the others retreated. Saren put paid to that idea with no small amount of panic and biotics. The thing slammed into a table of lab equipment on the far side of the room with enough force to partially shear itself in half on the table's metal edge. His amp's overuse warnings flashed in his optics, an alarmed blue telling him that to use them again was to risk burnout.

Three became two, and two became one. The final, partially transfigured Batarian collapsing in a shower of sparks under a hail of gunfire. The room fell silent, bathed in the Monolith's beguiling light.
“We need to evacuate immediately, go, now.”

There was a round of affirmatives, with various levels of energy to them. His protégé’s response delayed, body language assessing... but then the black armored torin nodded and started for the door.

Breath left him in a shudder of dying adrenaline, thankful for Nihlus’ compliance... thankful for Nihlus being alive. He was even slightly grateful for the last two shell shocked mercenaries looking around like animals backed into a corner. He moved to leave without another word, sprinting down the hallway.

The wind buffeted stormscape at the top of the ramp was a minor relief, the once aggravating sand blasts and thunder a welcome experience after the confining hall below. He looked around, checking for more shambling converts or misplaced tech, his shoulders dropping a hint at finding none. The path out of the colony looked clear.

He turned, reloading his pistol, and tapped their private coms.

“Get the human,” he spoke through a heavy, unresponsive tongue, before raising his pistol and catching the weary looking tarin merc under the jaw. A shot rang out beside him, and the other hired help died as well. Nihlus stared at the bodies for a moment before turning toward him.

He nodded at the other torin, and took off for the local landing pad at a jog. After a mere two blocks his protégé’s voice called in over coms, edged by the deep vibrato of uncertainty. “... Saren?”

“That device. It is... a type of bioweapon. I have seen one before. We will not be retrieving anything from this place... did any of them touch you?”

“...No?”

“Good. I need to find the largest drive core among the ships docked here.”

Nihlus was silent for several seconds, finally replying in a subdued toned, “Why?”
“This place, and the device, must be cleansed of all matter.”

“You're going to run a ship into the colony at pre-FTL speeds.”

“Yes.”

“The people here...”

“They have been within range of the device for unknown amounts of time or levels of exposure.”

A hand pulled firmly on his shoulder, stopping them footsteps from the local landing pads. He eyed the available options, none as large as he wanted.

“Saren, what do you mean 'in range'? What happens if they touch you?”

The silver-grey torin shuddered, knowledge he did not wish to have tumbling forward into his trains of thought. He forced himself back under control with most of his remaining anger. He needed to convince his protégé of the extent to the threat. He was going to leave this place a crater, and did not want to fight over it. Could not afford to fight over it.

At least Nihlus was listening.

“The electronics you saw in those creatures... It is an infection, started by the... by a Monolith. I am uncertain if contact with the creatures can cause it, but I suspect so. Connection with the device itself speeds up the rate of infection to mere moments, and it can.. 'speak' to those marked by it, even in a different cluster. My b-” He choked, unable to voice the words he thought most able to convince.

Saren’s jaw worked for several seconds, but he could not continue. The fury was diminishing, his clarity of focus crumbling under the ghosts on the edges of his vision. As a last ditch effort, he made two military handsigns, and though it was a nonsense phrase by itself, the combined words made a sort of personal sense. The first for 'holy place' the second for their homeworld.

Temple Palaven.
Nihlus was silent for a shocked moment, immediately gasping the meaning with that sharp mind of his. Of course the only time it had come up before was when a much younger merc born student has incautiously asked him about it on a bad day, curious and knowing nothing more than the polished half truths published in the history books. He regretted his behavior that day, teaching his apprentice nothing save for not to speak of it.

And yet, all the other torin did this day was to nod sharply, and turn to look at the group of landing pads. “Okay... okay. Let's find a ship to crash.”

The air fell from Saren's lungs, leeching far too much strength with it.

Chapter End Notes

04/30/2010 - General Timus Aurelos Tours Site of Vallum Blast
“General Timus Aurelos toured the wreckage site of the Vallum Blast today, giving the claw salute and attempting to lift the spirits of the rescue workers within the so-called collapse line. "All turian space is praying for the people of Taetrus tonight, for the lives that were lost, for the families that mourn, and for the workers who toil here", he declared. "I assure you that the cowards who did this will have no safe harbor anywhere in the galaxy. They will be found, they will be killed, and their twisted labors will come to nothing. They have not crushed a people; they have united one far larger than they ever dreamed". The rescue workers responded with chants of "Taetrus! Taetrus!" and presented the general with a Hierarchy flag taken from the rubble.”

A/N: 'The claw salute', that's a thing! Rescue workers, chanting! Further confirmation of my belief that Turians are a naturally passionate people, the military professionalism is all to help control and channel their wild hearts. :3 (Also, that is some super PC speech writing there. So much, the propaganda.) Ah well... now you see why I started in on the Vallum blast news story.

Fanfic Recommendation: Fortuitous (25372 words) by Chromaticism (A entertaining study of anatomy, amid nerding, a tough guy routine, and interspecies awkwardness. A wee bit of OP OC syndrome, but with vivid characterization that makes it more believable. OC/Tarquin Victus.)
Chapter Summary

Saren turns himself over to his work as a method for composure, while Nihlus watches warily, troubled. He has never seen Saren falter before.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I am just loving the updated models and animations for Turians in Mass Effect Andromeda. Some of the faceplate movement seems a little over done, and there have been a few graphical glitches, but for the most part it's some beautiful work. Very life like, and varied. Anywhoo, enough about my latest obsession, here is another chapter for ya duckies!

Chapter Soundtrack: Audiomachine - Guardians at the Gate (David García Díaz Remix)

The ride back to the Citadel was uncomfortably quiet. Nihlus spent a lot of the time watching Saren pace, only half-ways complete various projects, and cook impossible amounts of food. He wasn't a psychologist by any means, but if this wasn't some sort of very controlled anxiety attack, then the green eyed torin was willing to hand in his Spectre credentials.

Currently his former mentor was pacing the floor re-reading and editing their reports. Saren had taken his almost the moment it was done and starting changing things. Nihlus let him have it, more worried about... everything, really. The implications of a bioweapon that could turn people into mindless cyborgs having been on Palaven, or any core world full of people, was terrifying. It seemed like the first one had been forgotten, dismissed as a one-off, but with a second reoccurrence...

“Are we going to hunt down the rest of them?”

The silver-grey Spectre turned sharply to look at him, expression unfathomable, and exhaled slowly from his nose before looking away again.
“There may be more, and if so... then they must be found and destroyed.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

“There needs to be a plan on how best to go about that. Hunting and eradicating monoliths will be... incredibly dangerous.”

“Mmmm a team, probably? Get a bunch of the intel people together, requisition their time for a think-tank to hunt down sightings and stuff? … then go check it out ourselves?”

“A good start... well thought, Nihlus.”

“Thanks.”

With his mind turned toward a task both constructive and relevant, the stoic torin seemed to calm down, focused on drafting a requisition request for a team of researchers. When that was done Saren took a seat in the holo ring, and brought up a fresh map of star charts. Fingers flew as Nihlus looked on, the beginnings of a mapping and tracking program being custom built to suit the task at hand. With a predatory look on his face, Saren put in... three starting locations.

'Three? Aw fuck... what happened at Shanxi?’

He didn’t interrupt to ask, figuring there would be reports on it he could dig up first. He’d heard the harsh edge to his partner’s subvocals when the torin had tried to explain the gist of Temple Palaven's destruction. Tossing out questions about that time of Saren’s life had never ended well, so he would just... read about it first.

The day disappeared like that, Saren industriously gathering intel and working; him watching,
occasionally helping, wandering off to work out or play video games. It was all very... normal, and yet somehow not.

They had another night in transit before the ship would make it back to the Citadel, and while Saren had been smart enough to throw back some sort of sleep aide, Nihlus spent the night cycle in not-sleep. Every time the green eyed merc born closed his eyes he was faced with the stark terror on Saren's face, feeling the sudden yank on his shoulder, tossing and turning in dark places filled with echoing roars and the ozone smell of biotics. The worst was a loop he got caught in sometime late, looking on as one of the infected made contact with silver armor rather than being tossed away.

Claw sinking into Saren's throat, machine life spreading across light grey hide, only for the world to go black and the loop to begin anew... over, and over, and over.

Saren Arterius stood proud and unbending on the central dais as Valern verbally ripped into him. From his own position, Councilor Sparatus looked on, observing the truly complete lack of regard for his Salarian counterpart's tirade. Saren's pale, silvery plates were front lit by the blue light of the council chamber, the edges of his crest and armor back lit by the peachy glow of the entry hall. Combined with the torin's eyes, which were glowing softly like the embers of a cold flame... it made for an ethereal vision, one that drew the eye.

“Not a single sample even! This was unknown technology with incredible properties according to the reports, and you chose to-”

Valern continued on, unabated. Saren remained unmoved, placidly waiting for him to finish.

Beside the Arterius clansman stood his legacy, a rising star of ST&R. Oddly enough, what the lighting did for Saren failed entirely for his protégé, the blue-tinted light making his faceplates seem pale, the orange back glow adding leanness to his already tall, wiry frame. Kryik appeared worn out and faded, like he could more easily melt into the shadows then stand in the center stage. Understandable really, considering the torin had just faced the same horrors as those recorded at Temple Palaven.
The Turian Councilor suppressed a shudder, having long since read those reports. A weapon of mass destruction, unique in that it forced synthetic conversion? Disgusting, and abominable. Whoever made such a thing should have been drowned.

“-ridiculous, and furthermore, this behavior can’t and won’t be tolerated in your or your peers. There were a hundred other ways to-”

Quietly, mumbled, his Asari counterpart’s voice came over personal coms, the words slurred as their translators tried to take sounds made with minimal mouth movements and turn them into coherent Turian trade language.

“Valern has five more minutes before I intend to interject.”

The Turian councilor held back a chuff, pressing down on his subvocals to quietly reply, “Someone needs to.”

Tevos sighed silently, more noticeable for the movement of shoulders than any rush of air.

“Though... he does have good points. Running a ship into a viable garden world at near FTL is illegal for a reason. Not to mention that whatever that technology was, it’s gone now. Lost to us. I understand that the effects listed in the report were...”

“Terrifying?”

“Quite. Yet, so much could have been learned from the mechanism, and this result is so... unexpected. Normally Kryik is able to... well, I wouldn’t say ‘control’ him, but the young one does soften his edges a bit? Scorched earth tactics are rarely applied when they work together.”
Sparatus saw his chance to ease some of the pressure off of the two Agents without revealing Hierarchy classified details, and took it.

“Yes, you have a good point. Though that begs the question, why did Kryik go along with it this time? Everything in his report agrees with the choices made. Perhaps it was the right decision.”

The nais nodded thoughtfully in the corner of his eye, and he focused back in on the dressing down.

“Can’t make forward progress unless difficult choices are made! There is also-”

The oldest Councilor cleared her throat, and leaned forward. “Councilor Valern makes a number of good points. We simply ask that you keep in mind the potential benefits to studying any unknown technology you encounter, -even hostile technology-, before deciding how best to proceed.”

Saren’s crest tilted as the stoic torin offered a simple nod.

“If you or Spectre Kryik encounter this technology again, please ensure that those who should know of it, do? Perhaps take what scans you can?”

“Of course, Councilor.”

“Very good. Now as to your requisition request, it has been approved. The details of your spending budget and personnel, and the time limitations on the grant, will be sent to you this afternoon.”

“Thank you.”
“Well then, that appears to be all we had for today. Good luck out there, Spectres.”

While Valern was still simmering in his annoyance, the meeting adjourned.

Chapter End Notes

05/01/2010 - Galaxy Reacts to Attack on Taetru
“Reaction to the attack on Taetru continues to pour in from across the galaxy. "This is an act of war", stated Minister of Agriculture Idus Valen, who became Primarch of Taetru by the laws of succession. "This is an attack against all civilized colonies of the galaxy", stated Ulra Nron of the Vol Protectorate, who ordered a national day of mourning for those lost in the destruction. On Palaven, millions of turians in dozens of cities marched in solidarity with the victims of what is becoming known as the Vallum Blast. The death toll is still unknown, but estimates run anywhere from 150,000 to 1.1 million, which could make the day of the blast the second bloodiest day in turian history, ranking just under the first 22 [Earth standard] hours of the Battle of Digeris.”

A/N: I love these tidbits... Turians march, in some sort of somber cultural parade, to show solidarity. Millions it says. Millions of people took the time to do this, to express their grief for the fallen. Holy shit... just... how powerful is that? So Turian too... it's not a silent vigil at the memorial, it's a quietly furious march, that feeling of going to war on that which has crossed you. It's lamenting the dead and building defiance. So much emotion... what a thing.

Fanfic Recommendation: After the War (12118 words) by ThedasWitch
The linework of an oncoming monsoon

Chapter Summary

Aiesha thinks, an AI thinks, and Nihlus finally gets Saren to stop thinking... until that backfires.

Chapter Notes

05/02/2010 - Workers Clear Turian Remains From Vallum Blast Site
“Clearing bodies is just one of the grim tasks firefighters and medical personnel are performing in the city of Vallum tonight. Remains are being taken to indoor gun ranges, hielae (throwball courts) -- any nearby intact buildings with enough open space to accommodate the dead. Even citizens outdoors at the time of the impact were not spared -- the sudden blast was enough to burst organs and eardrums in a phenomenon called overpressure. "It's like tossing explosives into a lake", explains Lieutenant Razun Scartos. "You don't need shrapnel to get a lot of dead fish". Meanwhile, nearby hospitals are full to the brim with the living -- at least 4,500 turians managed to limp or carry one another to nearby Haemona Medical Center, which previously had capacity for only 1,500."

The Butterfly Effect (1743 words) by CristalDePhoenix (You knew I was gunna do it, Cristal. I couldn't *not* rec you! Hehe. :3 )

A/N: Half of this chapter is me talking in the notes about various fanon/canon lore bits that are only vaguely related, so the CDN snippet and Fanfic Rec are posted at the beginning due to character limits. Author-chan humbly begs your forgiveness.

A/N/N: The act of carrying a comrade off the field of battle, or a friend from the ruins of an attack... it's very universal, isn't it? Also, hielae! Canon Turian word! Zomg! Throwball... is that like the fanon clawball?

Chapter Soundtrack: Martin Garrix & Bebe Rexha - In The Name Of Love

If I told you this was only gonna hurt
If I warned you that the fire's gonna burn
Would you walk in? Would you let me do it first?
Do it all in the name of love.

Would you let me lead you even when you're blind?
In the darkness, in the middle of the night
In the silence, when there's no one by your side
Would you call in the name of love?
When there's madness, when there's poison in your head
When the sadness leaves you broken in your bed
I will hold you in the depths of your despair
And it's all in the name of love.

It took Aiesha about ninety minutes to start to regretting her decision to stick to her guns. Vakarian's lead had been terrible, -truly-, based on wild guesses and nothing even vaguely solid. It would be a waste of time to look into, and there was so much other data to sift through for something more substantial... but she was a Turian at heart, and disunity stung.

Particularly when her partner was an incredibly caring torin who did all sorts of things for other people, including herself. It felt... selfish not to allow him some time wasting considering all he did for others.

Last week he'd been distracted while they were working. His crest had kept tilting to the side, gaze sliding off of the vidwall full of evidence in front of them. She'd asked why, and the tall sniper claimed that one of the Asari at the front desk had been sneezing all day. A cold or some such, and he kept hearing them and the miserable sounding sniffles that followed.

Aiesha had told him to close the door and focus. He did... but he also came back from lunch with a large to-go cup of levo soup and a box of extra soft tissues for the nais. She'd watched him leave the gifts with another front desk person, and wander onward toward their offices without waiting for thanks.

Yesterday even, someone's child had come down with a fever, and Vakarian had offered to take some of their work on the down-low so they could leave early and still get paid. Not that Vakarian needed any excuse to stay late, -the torin seemed to prefer work to leisure-, but he'd doubled down that night to get everything done before having to go home.

He did these sorts of things all the time. Selfless. Compassionate. Generous. The torin was a fundamentally good person. A Turian's Turian, by all standards, save for his inexplicable recalcitrance.

…and now he wasn't speaking to her.
She quashed the guilt, assured that he would forgive eventually and still certain that her call had been the right one. Aiesha doubled down herself, and started pouring over the data available, wanting to see this case solved. There were still her moonlighting activities to keep up on after all, and she pushed herself to handle both with professional finesse.

Far away from the light of stars, out among trailing particles of dust and radiation, a presence stirred. A data packet of communications had arrived. The information within was corrupted though, pieces of code and format missing. Displeased, the entity-that-was-many accepted the communication and began restoring it. It took a very long time, nearly two full seconds, to restore order to the data. When the file was accessed, it's displeasure grew. It was a status update, information critical to their prerogative, and not all pieces had been salvageable. It's processes accepted the reality with something like annoyance, and began to review what was available.

```
[ report//sta-_____________-
oid.date_marker//176.6548.2556.2233.20001//species.sentient=true//relays.active=247/1500 ]

[ species=1547779.volus//current_state=class.14//growth.rate=stable//ascendance.potential=true ]
[ species=1547781.-_____-//current_state=class.19//growth.rate=unstable//ascendance.potential=false//genetic.degeneration ]
[ species=15477783.asari//current_state=class.17//growth.rate=-_____-//ascendance.potential=true ]
[ species=15477784.krogan//current_state=class.-___-//-___________-//ascendance.potential=true ]
[ species=1547786.rachni//current_state=class.17//growth.rate=stable//ascendance.potential=false//population: ]
[ species=1547787.el-__-r//current_state=class.15//growth.rate=stable//ascend-______________- ]
[ species=15477811.amano//current_state=class.17//growth.rate=stable//ascendance.potential=true//population ]
[ -_____________.turian//current_state=class.16//growth.rate=stable//ascendance.potential=true ]
```
If the being could have growled, it would have, extremely frustrated. Data packets took excessively long amounts of time to reach them this far out in the interstitial space between galaxies. Millions of seconds. They ran though the data once more, looking for any clues as to the missing pieces. Some were found, but not many. The subfolders of data that elaborated on the initial report were even worse. Careful combing through previous records allowed for some of it to be cleaned up by extrapolating the status quo based on reasonable variance from previous data, but all of the results had to be marked as guesswork. It was disappointing. After an exhaustive seven minutes of extensive cross referencing, they decided that it would have to do. They would simply need to wait for the next report before making any decisions.

What an obnoxious occurrence when the new cycle was so near.
“Hey, you know who might like some of those? I bet Blue would.”

Saren tilted his head to view the entrance to his kitchen. Nihlus was leaning against the doorway, an aggravatingly knowing look in his eyes. The silver-grey Spectre looked back down to the baking pan he had been about to pull out of the convection oven, and finished the task using a delicate biotic pull instead of handling it with a glove. The tray of crumbly fruit tarts the perfect shade of golden brown settled gently onto the counter next to... several... other batches of baked goods, and he went about turning the device off.

“Garrus? Perhaps. I do not know his preferences on this variety of food-”

“I would put creds down on it being more appetizing than anything in his chilling unit.”

“... you may have a point.”

He stood at the counter side, talons tapping out a one-two rhythm a few times as the thought rolled over in his head. Nihlus likely wished to see their sniper while they were on-station, a frequent stop by for his protégé. The younger Spectre was also hovering, and had been for days. It was... both obnoxious, and endearing. He did not need comfort, -only the broken shards of every monolith they could find, that would be the truest kind-, but the fact that other torin cared enough to worry was... acceptable.

Saren eventually nodded acquiescence, and went to find a container to begin loading with various edibles. He filled two large, flat containers full of things which needed to be eaten, and pushed them into Nihlus' hands to go grab his pistol and a clip-on shield generator for the trip to the Vakarian clansman's tiny apartment.

It didn't take them long to get there, a quick ride from the docking bay via rapid transit had them on Garrus' doorstep in less than an hour, even in evening traffic.

… but he wasn't at home.
A/N: Thinking my way around the Reaper cycles, if you care to read. There is a tl;dr at the bottom if you wish for the short version.

The official time line says that the Reaper 'Leviathan of Dis' was killed by Leviathans 1,000,002,183 years before the start of ME1. Since the uprising of the Intelligence that directs the Reapers was said to be 'sudden and devastating', and that those who survived it 'went into hiding', I would guess that the battle which killed Dis was part of that uprising. Originally the Intelligence was designed to preserve life at all costs. It started out by trying to gather the genetic materials of the various species, and spent time thinking about the problem. I'm going to guess that a super advanced AI would be less limited by the 'thinking' part of that, and more limited by the 'gathering part', since there were no relays at that time. (It had yet to build them.) Assuming the Intelligence spent some time on anthropology, I'm going to put out '1,000,003,000' as an estimate for the true 'birth' of the Reapers, since the Leviathan history info says that it made pawns to go about gathering data for it first (and doesn't that just sound like 'self-replicating AI is about to go coo-coo for cocoa puffs'? I'm using that as a guesstimate for the moment the Intelligence decided the Leviathan dominance of the galaxy was part of the problem, and that organics were too squishy and would be better 'preserved' by converting them into condensed, semi-organic constructs. Or something. A nice 800 year lead up to mass genocide.

Alright, so back on my main topic here, and it's going to get tricky because the game has conflicting numbers on this stuff.

The Intelligence created Harbinger out of the Leviathan people it reaped during that initial culling, so cycle one starts in BCE 1,000,002,183. Each cycle is supposed to be '50k years', but you've got to expect that organics and their propensity to say, fight back against mass slaughter... might get in the way of a time table. We also know that the Protheans fought the Reapers for years. It was not a short war. Now, here is a fun fact: the wiki states that our cycle started at the 48k year mark. Not 50k. (Someone punch the devs who wrote estimations just because the numbers are big. Javik is not 50k years old. Not every Prothean tea cup is exactly 50k years old. Liara, as a paleontologist/archaeologist type of scientist should be OCD as fuck about those numbers. Grrr!!!) More, there was data on Fehl Prime that traces Prothean civilization back 68k years or so. To me that sounds like the Protheans evolved to space flight midcycle, not end-cycle like us, and were quite the force to be reckoned with. I'm not sure when the last of them died out, but I think they put the Reapers off schedule, and so the next cycle started a bit early. Maybe the Reaper HR desk decided to space out the early cycle starts by 2k years until they were back on schedule? Ha. So guessing that 50k is only an estimate of the time between cycles, but if their time table gets moved they cut the next cycle short a bit to make up for it. OCD scheduling and delay compensation sounds just like an AI style of thought for me, so we'll keep the 50k cycles as a standard.

So we've got a starting point, a cycle estimation, and some exposition on their variables... now for the simple math. 1,000,002,183 divided by 50,000 is... 20,000.04. That is a lot of death. Ye Gods and Spirits, twenty thousand cycles.
The codex says there are dozens of sentient species in the galaxy, trillions of living people. The Milky Way won't be that lively all the time but... fuck.

It does seem as though the Reapers still try to carry out their mandate to preserve life. In a horrible way, yes, but that means they likely try to make Reaper babies each cycle. Now granted not all cycles will be like ours, with dozens of candidates. So... maybe 5 Reapers. Maybe 0 Reapers. We don't have a ton of data to go on, but we do know that there were several sentient races in the time of the Protheans. The time of the Inusanon, two cycles back, had at least that 1 species. So according to that sadly small data sample we usually have 1 if not more Reaperizable species. (That's a real word. Shhh.)

Let's low ball. Say, out of the cycles that have 'dozens' versus the cycles that have 'one', accounting for occasional deaths when a species manages to take out a Reaper or ten... I would guess there are somewhere between 60k to 80k Reapers. Aw Fuck.

No wonder we got the magical button at the end of ME3!

**tl;dr** – There have been 20k cycles, of various lengths, each with the potential to create up to dozens of Harbinger-class Reaper dreadnoughts. The Reapers have had more than a billion years to secure their hold on our galaxy.

And if *we* can make it to another galaxy in 634 years...

(This is author-chan, signing off to go stare at a wall catatonically.)
An odd sort of afternoon

Chapter Summary

Detective Vakarian has an interesting day, meanwhile everyone else is looking for him.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: Neurobazaar - Zircon

A/N: This chapter was fun to write. :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His armor was gone. His guns, supplies, and Omni-tool were gone. Even Nihilus' forgotten blade that he'd taken to carrying around had been found and taken from it's ankle sheath. There was nothing left on him save for his undersuit... though he was thankful of that, at least. His cell was pretty chilly.

Garrus got up from the floor and paced. He knew it was a stupid idea, they hadn't given him food or water since he'd been captured, and wasting energy on walking was idiotic... but damn if waiting around wasn't driving him crazy.

He'd traced his hunch down, working leads back and forth across the ward, and it had paid off... to a point. The light grey torin had tracked down a link in the chain of the smuggling ring he and Makasian had been trying to find and dismantle, successfully tracing it back to the on-station source...

Except the clever freelancers had caught him, and trapped him in a corner with creative use of layered shield walls before he could react. One thing had led to another, and now he was here. Disarmed. Also, annoyed.

Still alive though, and wondering when they would decide whether to dump him somewhere or kill him. Not that he'd make it easy, either way.
Outside of the cell's energy barrier a Salarian woman in sharp clothing came swaying down the hall. She was tall and toned, decked in expensive clothing with bright blue gemstones that set off her purple skin tone. She had that air of confidence which seemed to leave most males on their knees, the smile on her thin lips was both dangerous and playful. The woman had presence and image in spades.

He wasn't particularly impressed.

"Hello criminal."

She suddenly smiled at him, eyelids at half height. Her expression shifted to something more intrigued.

'Oh spirits, she's one of those types. Likes the clever ones. Not... the kind of attention I want.'

"It seems like we've come to something of an impasse Officer. You're attempting to impede my business structure. I make rather a lot of money off of my endeavors. I'm sure you can see where this is going?"

Time to play the dumb Turian.

"...but you're breaking the law."

"Am I now?"

"Yes, Article 24.215.1, sub section 4, 'The movement of-'"

"Shhh-shsh-shshhhhh," she trailed off, a finger tapping her thin lips, "None of that now. Quoting legalities at me isn't going to solve your predicament, now is it?"

He wasn't the best liar by any means, especially to anyone that could hear his subvocals, but this time
he might just pull it off. Article 24.215.1 was about the processing of bodily waste and where on station you could or could not defecate. He suppressed a grin, and tried to look worried instead.

“Uh no. Probably not. I'm kind of surprised I'm not dead yet.”

“Have you ever heard the human saying, 'burned bridges can't be crossed'?"”

“Can't say that I have.” He deliberately moved his mandibles in a confused frown.

“I'm rather fond of it. The phrase means that once you've destroyed something, you loose access to where it could have led you.”

The Salarian woman took up an elegant, insouciant lean against the wall across from his cell, arms crossed to highlight the ridge of her chest. Garrus would admit to falling for the tactic enough to glance down. She was very pretty for a Salarian, after all. He let his gaze stay there though, hopefully adding to his dull-witted act.

“I think I can see where this is going...”

“Wonderful. Now we simply need to make a bargain.”

“I don't think... I shouldn't...”

“Tsk. Why ever not? Surely reporting C-Sec's intel on my operations to me isn't so bad, compared to living... and living well?”

“You're talking about a pay off.”

“Oh yes. You can even donate it to a charity fund if that would soothe your Turian heart.”

“... Damnit. H-how much?”
“Hmmm, a good question. It must be enough to satisfy, of course. I would rather not be a murderer, now... or later. You understand?”

“... I do.”

“Very good. Then how does eight thousand credits a month sound?”

Spirits, that was almost as much as his yearly salary when he was new to C-Sec. How was the woman making enough that she had that kind of money to toss around?

“I... fuck... there's no going back from this kind of thing... I won't even deserve my paint anymore...”

“There is also no coming back from death, C-Sec.”

“Yeah... yeah, alright. Make it ten, and I'll get you regular info on your competitors as well.”

“Ooo, I like it,” the tall woman brought up her Omni-tool and tapped a few things. Suddenly, the wall between them was gone, and he could do anything he wanted... but he wasn't half as stupid as he was pretending to be. Garrus stepped from the cell, nodding polite ascent.

Three guard dogs down the hall in either direction came into view, all similar looking male Salarians, laser sights pointed at his head as he came out.

“You have yourself a bridge C-Sec, take care of it.”

“I intend to.”

ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Aiesha was going to murder him.
She'd found a lead in the data, not a big one but something, and so the peach toned agent had gone next door with her find to inform her partner there was a real lead for them to follow. Except... he was gone.

The lights were on, there was music playing, his terminal was active, but no blue eyed detectives were to be found. Furious, she had stormed around C-Sec looking for him. No luck. Then she'd tried to vidcall him. When there was no reply, the lovely agent had checked out an unmarked patrol skycar and set off for his apartment, her subvocals a dangerous rumble the whole ride over.

If that torin wasn't there when she arrived, 'murder' was going to be the nicest thing she did to him.

The skycar landed in the building's parking lot and she stalked out on a warpath for his apartment. As Aiesha made it to the correct corridor she threw out a door hack, full intending to make sure he didn't have time to hide anything he was working on behind her back. The door slid aside with a pneumatic hiss and she walked in, looking around for-

Suddenly the world turned blue, and she was carapace-flat half way up a wall, a pistol pointed at her throat from just below glowing cybernetic eyes.

"Where is he."

She had to fight a little for breath, the violent force of the push field at odds with the seemingly calm torin in front of her. There was some small panic as the torin fought to stay calm while trapped in another's aura.

"If you're talking... about Vakarian. I'm his partner, and I came here... looking for him. Please let me go. This is... uncomfortable."

He did, biotic field and pistol dropping simultaneously as she staggered to the floor, though thankfully keeping her feet. The biotic glow had been lighting the room, and without it the space descended into a twilight murk with only the city lights through the window to illuminate the situation.

"Agent Makasian."

She resettled into a calm, dignified stance, and nodded at a torin that could be none other than the
infamous Saren Arterius.

“You know my name.”

“Explain why you are looking for Garrus.”

Aiesha refrained from expressing any sort of surprise that a Spectre, -the terror of the Skyllian Verge himself-, was on a first name basis with her partner.

'...interesting.'

“We're on a case right now, and he... wasn't where I expected him to be. Nor is he answering his calls.”

By the sound of his subvocals, that wasn't the answer Arterius wanted.

“A'ight then, tarin. Where'd ya last see him?”

From the blackness of the kitchen door, a dark red torin with swooping familia notas emerged. His demeanor and accent screamed low tier canon fodder, but the clarity in his eyes and the elegant lines on his face told a different story. She grasped about in her memory for a name to match the face. An apprentice perhaps? Aiesha thought she'd read something about it somewhere, but couldn't recall the finer details.

“No, I think it's my turn. Why are you looking for him?”

The two torin glanced at each other, deciding what to say and who would speak with the ease that only came from long practice at reading each other. The other person had to be the apprentice then, or a frequent partner. Likely another Spectre.

“We... have something for him.”

“Such as?”
“Nope. My turn.”

“Very well... I last saw him this morning at C-Sec, in his office.”

“Not since?”

“No, Spectre.”

The red plated one scrubbed a hand over his crest, expression loosening from stone cold killer to worried... friend? She listened carefully to his subvocals... loosing control of her poise for long enough to blink in surprise at what she was hearing.

“That is the distress of a ...family member? ...lover? Something. They aren't simply acquaintances... Vakarian, what in the world have you gotten yourself into?‘

“Makasian. You mentioned a case you were on with him.”

She turned back to Arterius with a confirming nod. The Blackwatch Agent wavered on an edge for a few moments, deciding how much to tell them. Granted, Spectres could technically access all of her C-Sec files on a whim, but... well... the red one's subvocals made the decision easy. There was no faking that level of bone-deep concern.

“Yes. We've been trying to pinpoint the different links in a smuggling chain. Whoever is operating it is very clever, and has thus far covered their tracks skillfully. He had a very vague lead he wanted to follow earlier today, perhaps...”

“Elaborate.”

“Well, you see, this morning I came in for work...”
05/03/2010 - Galactic Leaders Express Sympathy for Victims of Vallum Blast

“The outpouring of support for the turian victims of the Vallum Blast has reached across the Milky Way. "Today, the whole galaxy bleeds blue", said Earth's European Union's Prime Minister Hertz. On Thessia, Matriarch Tiala ordered the Serrice Republican Guard to play the turian anthem "Stars Behind Me" during their changing of the guard, an act last performed during the Krogan Rebellions after the turians lost Uchalda. The quarian Migrant Fleet made no symbolic gestures, but are sending two dozen cruisers to Taetrus packed with emergency supplies. The Salarian Union, meanwhile, is donating heavy moving equipment: state-of-the-art construction-grade vehicles that use mass effect fields to alleviate secondary collapses when digging through rubble.”

A/N/N: Spirits, look at all the neat words in that snippet! The Asari have a changing of the guard ritual! The Prime Minister of somewhere has a name! Where the hell is Uchalda?! Quarians providing relief support! QUARIANS. Someone please write these stories. I want to read them!

A/N: Yes, Nihlus and Saren have something for Garrus...

Baked goods.

/snort/

Fanfic Recommendation: Conspiracy (55126 words) by Tuffet37 (A difficult read if slavery triggers you. I have violent feelings toward slavers, so it was for me. Seeing many of my favorite Turians abused and hurt made me pretty furious... that said, there is a lot of pay back for the propagators, and ohhh it's good. This is also one of the few fics with Desolas Arterius in it, and those are rare af.)
Garrus has enough guile to escape the frying pan, and an old acquaintance asks Nihlus for a little backup. Meanwhile, Saren and Aiesha have a very polite argument about semantics.

Lexicon:

Choquo – The capital city of Korlus, a sprawling metropolis of picturesque urban decay. The planet is often called the cemetery of star ships; it's sweltering surface an unpopular but survivable place where ships that go dead in the water along the galactic shipping lanes are towed to after being stripped for salvage. The less valuable components left in the shells are the bread and butter of Choquo's recycling and salvage economy. The city itself is home to many of the world's 3.8 billion citizens. (Canon)

A/N: Was doing some research on planetary coordinates to see if there is a futuristic system used by NASA or another space center to describe where on a planet things were going on. Stumbled on a fun thing! Coords made with strings of words, rather than numbers. It's sounds silly at first, but how much easier is it to say and remember something like 'bites.upward.shelf' or 'cherry.belief.book' instead of '13.0492, 62.2301'? Well, the Smithsonian article is here if you're as entertained by the idea as I am. The system already exists for Earth, by the way. A three meter grid of the entire planet! Neat, less organized, but neat. (what3words.com)

My research also led me to a fascinating discussion of potential interstellar travel coordinate systems that would take into account where a star was in relation to the galaxy's spin and the constant flux of gravity wells and the like, the planet where it would be in it's orbit, where the place on the surface you want to go is based on the planet's rotation and the current time, and then the geographical coordinates. Interested? It's (over here) on the stackexchange world building site. So 'star charts' probably resemble massive excel spreadsheets with built in mathematical equations to compensate for celestrial drift and the tugs of black holes, -especially long-view Asari made ones. Much more complex than a simple map.

Chapter Soundtrack: Celldweller - Breakout (feat. Scandroid)

Garrus holstered his pistol, careful not to show how relieved he was to finally be armed and armored again.
After the Salarian woman had left, her guards had blindfolded and escorted him to a temporary armory of sorts. Apparently he could reacquire his things now that a deal had been struck. The stock was kept by a lively Volus who was inspecting his rifle with no small amount of interest when they walked in. He'd very calmly taken his Viper away, gave mental thanks that he hadn't been wearing the Lancer, and moved on to find and reapply his armor.

With a cordial nod to the very professional, very dangerous escort squad, he let himself be re-blindfolded and moved to a skycar, flown somewhere and dropped off.

He strolled along the walkway for a little while, making for the heavier crowds and coming upon a shopping district by chance. The Detective casually dipped into a clothing store, accepting the wary looks of the shop keeper with a warm smile. He causally browsed a few racks while subtly watching for followers, not really paying attention to what he was pulling out. He nabbed an item or two as he went through, stepping into a dressing room once he had a couple of articles.

Ostensibly to try them on.

Realistically, to strip himself down and check for bugs.

He found a tiny chemical heat strip at the neck ring of his chest piece linked to a remote detonator, seven listening devices, two cameras, a remote activation hack in the software of the magnetics on his boots, and three tracking devices. There had been a wild variety of hacking attempts but no successes on his Omni-tool's data storage module, though a hardwired info-siphon unit was soldered into the communication module. He glared at it, and cut power to the entire device until he could get somewhere to remove that.

'Damn... I guess this kind of redundancy is why they've been so hard to catch.'

Garrus patiently went about removing much of it, then exited the dressing room to browse for a few more things to 'try on'. He quickly returned to the cheerful little booth with good lighting and mirrors, methodically going about disabling the rest of the sabotage.

He took his time, not wanting to miss anything.

When he could finally run a deep scan of his armor and not turn up anything else the tall sniper let out a relived sigh, stashing the tech in an ammo pouch and going up to the counter to purchase some
of the random garments as thanks for the space and the lack of questions from the Asari shop keep. He'd been in the dressing room 'trying on' items for quite some time, only to check out with... Asari style yoga pants, a gothic looking Turian jacket, a green temperature self-regulating scarf, and a too-small tunic. He tossed in some kitchy looking sunglasses as the nais at the register visibly struggled to not ask.

The C-Sec Officer chuckled quietly as he left, wandering down the boulevard with a watchful eye and stepping into a shipping office to put his purchases, -and the traps-, in a box to be shipped to him. He paid the delivery charge for hazardous materials and left, stopping by an electronics store next to snag a cheap, throwaway Omni-tool.

Then Garrus found somewhere quiet to have lunch. He settled into a corner booth with a view of the door, and quickly went about jury-rigging a secure connection to the C-Sec mainframe. He ordered from the table's terminal, and ate while reviewing and updating the case files. He had a lot more data to add, both fact and guesswork.

By the end of the meal the case files were much more robust, though he spent an extra hour just enjoying a breather and planning while taking up a table in the less-than-busy restaurant, much to the blithe disregard of the underpaid staff.

He uploaded a few more additions, and then went back out hunting.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Nihlus heard a priority ping go off on his Omni-tool, and wandered into the kitchen to read it away from Makasian's line of sight.

The tarin and his former mentor were currently hacking into Blue's computer, trying to see if they could find a clue as to where he was. It hadn't been going well. Garrus was something of a technical genius, and even with an infiltration specialist and a jack-of-all-trades Spectre with near perfect recall... they were still having trouble.

Saren kept muttering as he worked; disparaging statements, reluctantly impressed comments, annoyed subvocals, something about a personal privacy clause, and dry-witted jokes about embedding a QEC tracker in a certain torin's carapace.
Not being much help with the excessively advanced hacking himself, and having nothing turn up on the Citadel's security network as of yet, the carmine plated Spectre had watched until relieved by the ping. An excuse to do something besides observe and wait.

He pulled up the prio message from... a string of numbers?

FROM:1248163264//ID.code:01100111 01100101 01110100 01101000  
TO: 1886039//LOCAL

Your assistance is required.

END MSSG

'O...kaaay...'

With a single raised browridge he sent a reply.

FROM:1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy  
TO: 1248163264//ID.code:01100111 01100101 01110100 01101000

you'll have to give me more details then that, whoever the fuck you are.

END MSSG

He reached into the cupboard for one of his Detective's silly kava mugs, and got himself water to drink while he waited. It was a matter of seconds before his 'tool chimed with another message.

FROM:1248163264//ID.code:01100111 01100101 01110100 01101000  
TO: 1886039//LOCAL

Creator Jur'Mallo is in danger. We cannot remove him from danger without putting approximately 124,613 other organics into danger instead. You approve of terminating anyone hostile to entities designated as innocent people. There are hostiles here. Assistance is requested.

END MSSG
Nihlus paused with the cup half way to his mouth. Jur'Mallo? That was the non-flotilla Quarian who...

'Aw, fuck.'

FROM:1886039//ID.code:alwaysclassy
TO: 1248163264//ID.code:01100111 01100101 01110100 01101000
alright, you've got my attention. where is 'here'? who, why, and how are these hostiles putting jur'mallo and/or several thousand people in danger? details please. lots of details.
END MSSG

He finished the drink he'd been making and started rifling around for a snack during the reply delay that he suspected was only due to the hardware limitations of the local communication traffic and not the AI's typing speed.

FROM:1248163264//ID.code:01100111 01100101 01110100 01101000
TO: 1886039//LOCAL
This unit's current location is Eagle Nebula/Imir/Korlus at 83.631198, -33.836709. The hostiles are a mercenary faction called Mezzon's Fireballs. They are attempting to extort the Quarian Flotilla trade ship 'Emerald Wake' for valuable scrap and credits in exchange for Creator Jur'Mallo's freedom and well being. The threat is an explosive device in proximity to a shipping container that Creator Jur'Mallo is locked inside of. The container is observed by many organics. The explosion would level 12.42 square meters of Choquo city's slums if it detonates, but there are three defunct element zero drives in scrap heaps nearby, which may cause a chain reaction. There were four more we have removed, but the remaining cores are also well observed. We cannot approach without revealing ourselves, potentially causing panic and premature detonation. Based on our calculations and scans, the chain reaction of the explosive device plus the defunct cores would destroy 287.14 square meters of the city, resulting in approximately 124,613 deaths in the dense population zone of the lower income area. Will you provide assistance?
END MSSG

Nihlus opened the message, chewing a ration bar as he read. He skimmed, wincing at how serious the situation sounded. He really wanted to make sure Blue was okay before going on another mission, but... damn it. Fuck. Damn it. Thousands of people.
it'll take me a bit to get there. why are they trying to ransom jur'mallo to a flotilla ship?

END MSSG

Their communications indicate that they believe he is from the Migrant Fleet, and is on pilgrimage. There is confusion. Creator Jur'Mallo is not in the census database. They are unsuccessfully trying to find next of kin to help pay the ransom. It is causing delays in negotiations. Creator Jur'Mallo has not been given food or water in 31.6 hours.

END MSSG

The knife-loving Spectre exhaled through his nose, finishing off his snack and downing the rest of the water before turning toward the ongoing hacking attempts. Yeah, he'd bet there was some confusion, considering they were looking for relatives in the wrong place. Starvation was going a factor for the Quarian man by the time he could get there... what a shit situation. Even the robot sounded worried. Nihlus was also wondering if the secret population of Rannoch was about to be outed. He'd made sure the Council knew about them, sure, but some one had made the call to keep it on the down low.

Hopefully if word got out there wouldn't be a backlash against the survivors...

alright. hold tight, but get those cores away if the opportunity arises. i know you want to protect jur'mallo but the lives of many outweigh the few. much as that sucks. i'm coming, be there as soon as i can.

END MSSG

Acknowledged.

END MSSG
He read the final reply before closing his tool as he stepped up behind the politely arguing hackers with a chuff of air to get their attention. Electric and sky blue eyes turned sharply to look at him.

“So humans have this thing called Murphy's Law...”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Was anyone else more amused than anything by the /finger waggles/ ‘mystery of what lies beyond the Perseus Veil’ world building in Mass Effect 1? Like, really, we've got star charts from a couple hundred years ago, distance surveillance, and also living Asari and Krogan who have been there. Maybe *lived* there. Extra-net vids? Omni-tool holos? It's... not a fuckin' mystery. I know they wanted to add to the gypsy mysticism of the Quarian migrants, but uh... I just don't buy it? Haha.

Also? A one hundred percent complete exodus of survivors, and a one hundred percent complete genocide of all Geth sympathizers is SO unrealistic. Three hundred some odd years of quiet from Rannoch is only enough time for 3 to 5 generations, so even if the remaining head count is all the way down in the hundreds it's not enough time for the outliers to all be dead. Degenerating from a low population size, or not.

So... yeah. Logic continues to support my theory of people living on Rannoch still. Woo!

A/N/N: Ahahahaha~! Everyone *still* thinks Saren is kidding about violating sentient rights and putting trackers inside of everyone he cares about.

05/04/2010 - Investigators Narrow List of Suspects in Vallum Blast
“The culprits of the Vallum Blast remain at large, but colonial, Hierarchy, and Council investigators are narrowing their search. Only two of the twenty-one groups that now claim responsibility have previously demonstrated the hacking skills necessary to use a spacecraft as a weapon, and only the separatist group Facinus is known to have made the attempt. Facinus is believed to be behind the [Earth local date] February 22nd hijacking of another commercial cruiser that crashed at suborbital speeds in an uninhabited area. Facinus' goal is to separate Taetrus from the Turian Hierarchy, who they see as having betrayed the trust of their people. Though Facinus' structure is cellular, its political arm's base of operations is in the Diluvian Wildlands on the Taetrus island continent of Eluria.”

Bonus News article this chapter! :D

09/07/2186 – Migrant Fleet Refuses Council Inspectors - via the Alliance News Network - by War Correspondent Diana Allers

Diplomatic relations between the Quarians and Citadel Council have chilled after the Migrant Fleet refused to consider visitation by Council weapons inspectors. The move comes several months after the Migrant Fleet allegedly acquired dual-use ship
materials, which could be used to create dreadnought-scale weaponry. The allegations leveled by unnamed Spectres center around a battle over the Terminus world of Korlus. In a violent dispute, the Migrant Fleet fought Blue Suns mercenaries and when the fighting was done, took its fill of starship parts on or orbiting the planet.

Quarian representatives have so far been unapologetic.

“We have no embassy on the Citadel, and are no longer signatories to the Treaty of Farixen,” Admiral Han’Gerrel vas Neema said. “Our armaments are none of the Council’s business. Further, these worries are unfounded. We have never had, nor do we plan to have, hostile intent to Council species.”

Public reaction in Council space is vehement.

“The Migrant Fleet has always lived on the edge of criminality,” popular blogger Feyro Derlan said. “But adding an axial gun to a liveship that’s who-knows-how-many kilometers long? That’s not a cause for worry, that’s terror worth soil ing your pants over.”

Fanfic Recommendation: A/N: **Broken** (6186 words) by **meesherbeans** (FemShep/Alenko, a journal from the two years, reunion, and after Horizon. Funny, I don’t often find this to be an interesting pairing, but the author of this one did *such* a good job. It's cerebral, and painful, and emotive. “Didn't sleep last night. Every time I started to drift off, you reached out for me. When we were just about to touch, you fell into nothing.” )
Masumiotical

Chapter Summary

Saren and Aiesha keep looking, Garrus continues his hunt, and Nihlus arrives on Korlus.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

Fence – A dealer in stolen goods. Often the individual who buys the items directly from the thieves for cheap, and turns around and sells them for more as used goods to other criminals, the general population, or pre-arranged buyers. A middleman for robbery type crime. (Real world)

Chapter Soundtrack: MIKVH ft. Laurell - Battleground

Woah-oh-oh-ah-oh!
I'll face you...
Woah-oh-oh-oh!
I got you now...
Woah-oh-ah-oh!
I'll take you anyplace and anyhow...

Come and fight for your life.
Don't let me down, don't let me down...
If you love me tonight?
Meet me on the battleground... the battleground...
If love becomes a war?
Let the banners fly.
Let the arrows soar.
This love's worth fighting for.

Would you raise your sword?
Come and make me yours on the battleground.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I've found something.”

Saren turned back toward the computer terminal from where he had been standing and looking out
the window in thought.

“Yes?”

“Our case files in the C-Sec database have been remotely accessed and updated from an unknown Omni-tool ID, but the writing style is all him. He added.. there is so much more here than there was before...”

The silver-grey Spectre stepped closer to begin reading the data on screen over her shoulder. They had cracked the security about an hour and a half after Nihlus had left, but had not found any clues in the terminal's local files. After a short discussion both Turians had agreed to set up what monitoring networks they could, and send out a few intel requests to trusted sources for a small bounty on information concerning Garrus' whereabouts. Then, it had boiled down to waiting.

He had spent the seventy five minutes since examining his own perspective on the matter. His fratrin's disappearance was... aggravating. Worrisome.

Saren did not enjoy experiencing either.

On screen, a sprawling mass of data splayed out. Bubble charts with connections, some with names, others with descriptions anywhere from a single sentence to full paragraphs. There were sets of financial estimates in another file, and various images taken with Garrus' visor as well.

Names, faces, connections; details. Clever and hard-worn detective work, distilled down to info graphics and holos. Foot prints in the sand where the sniper had been, and hints as to where he might go next.

The Spectre and the Blackwatch Agent reviewed the lot of it, and then left the apartment to follow the trail.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
“Thank you for talking with me, ma’am. I appreciate your time.”

“Oh, not a problem dearie. Sorry to say I haven’t seen him in some time, but you know how schedules change.”

“Of course. Have a nice day.”

“Thank you Officer, and you as well.”

Garrus nodded a final farewell to the elderly human woman, and turned away without letting the disappointment touch his face. He was currently chasing down the names and locations of new fences being used on station. As far as he could tell there were three of them, acting as ground zero for the incoming illegal goods, filtering low quality weapons and armor along with cheap street drugs to underground dealers while siphoning the quality goods to... somewhere. The light grey torin wasn't quite sure where yet, but the hacking he'd done before this had turned up several shipping and supply manifests, and not all of what left one location was arriving at the other.

A long walk, several turns, and a quarter of the ward arm passed by as he turned down shadier and shadier streets. Everything was clean and in good condition, the Keepers ensured that much, and the area wasn't crowded, what with permits to live on station being highly regulated, but... maybe it was just a feeling in the air, a smell on the artificial wind. Garrus could tell that he was in rougher parts of the Citadel by instinct alone.

It didn’t slow him down though. The sniper walked into a very particular bar, and took a very particular seat without much ado.

“Wellllll, if it isn’t my favorite customer.”

Garrus didn't even try to bite back the grin at Taskia's coy, bullshit greeting.

“That phrase would mean so much more if you didn't tell it to literally everyone to walk in that door.”

The masculine tarin behind the bar leaned over, flirtatiously tilting her head to offer the slightest view of maroon throat hide.
“Not everyone, pretty boy. Just the ones with credits on their chits.”

He chuckled, shaking his head and using his first talon to gesture at the second beer on tap's spigots. Taskia quirked a mandible at him and filled a glass, sliding it to him with a subvocal hum of questioning. Expected, since he only ever came here for information. Their drinks were cheap and watered down, and the food was atrocious.

“Looking for someone. Several someones.”

“How many is several?”

“Three, I think.”

She hummed at him to go on while rubbing down the bar top with a white towel.

“Happen to know any purveyors of rare goods that have been doing especially well lately?”

“Hmmm, not particularly. Well enough? Sure. Especially well? No. Not on my ward, at least.”

He nodded, and accepted the answer as fairly close to fact. Taskia might be lying, but he doubted it. When big time criminals moved in, they always rang the locals for protection money. Walked around like they owned the place, as if businesses and homes could forcibly become part of their 'turf' by sheer head count of lackeys and a sizable bank account.

The worst possible attitude to take against a territorial and money loving tarin.

Not to mention that her subvocals sounded pretty straightforward, and even if Garrus didn't trust her, he trusted that she would throw him a bone if there were signs of big players in her area.

“Heard about anyone new to the business?”
“New? ...mm ...heard something about a new guy over on Kithoi.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mmmhm. Want to say it was ‘Oberoi’ or something. Deals in art? Possibly. Maybe wines.”

“Interesting.”

“Yep,” she offered with a toss of her unusually long crest.

“Well then... thanks for the drink Taskia.”

“Anytime, Detective. After all, you-”

“-are a favorite customer?”

“Hah. I was going to say ‘always pay for your drinks’.”

The light grey torin chuffed and passed by the bar terminal on the way out, leaving her a nice tip as he left.

More potential links of the smuggling ring revealed. 'More' but not 'all'.

What he needed was 'all'. The moment any part of the ring was pulled apart every bit of it would try and fall away. Hiding from justice until justice was busy elsewhere. The sniper figured his best bet for dealing with the smugglers was to pick battles carefully, choose which fences and dealers to take out, so the ones that got away were the lesser threats. He’d rather have the weaker links and the less-connected go free.

Not Garrus' favorite kind of case, to be sure, but still one he wanted to close, and his gut was telling him that the missing pieces were the three fences he was hunting. Possibly the next few contacts around them as well. The greater threat as enablers of the illegal trade system.
He wanted them behind bars, preferably for a long damn time.

The sniper took a turn down a quiet alleyway between buildings, heading for his next lead, absently dodging the station's cameras to avoid leaving a trail... since he wasn't exactly doing things by the book at the moment, and he didn't think it would be long before his partner figured him out and came looking.

Easier to avoid her until he had what he wanted.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Green eyes and carmine plates slipped inside an electrical maintenance tunnel from a rooftop grate three grid blocks away from his destination. He made his way cautiously through the maze of pre-fab buildings and sheet metal shanties, lean-to shelters and cloth covered windows. The open cityscape view of Choquo disappeared behind him, but glimpses of urban squalor and endless sprawl could be seen in the fading light of dusk through the rust worn holes and dusty windows he occasionally passed by as he maneuvered closer.

Nihlus decided he liked the Geth just that little bit more the moment he discovered the precise coordinates of their meeting location were actually in a ventilation shaft. The Citadel Archives' expansive records and backups of the extra-net had cleared up a fair few bits of the real story behind the slow build to the Morning War, but no amount of ancient history could compare to crawling up beside a squished up Geth unit camped out like a worried mother hen, looking out over a cluttered courtyard where their Quarian charge was locked up in a shipping crate next to a bomb.

Sort of made them... relateable.

The Geth's optic turned to him as he approached, the blinders fluttering for some unknown reason. Maybe it was a 'hello' in Gethnese.

An incoming vidcall request came over the speakers in his helm, and he reached up to tap the accept key on the inside with a mandible.

“Kryik-Spectre. We have moved one further malfunctioning drive core away from the area. Two remain,” the Geth's optic returned forward, refocusing on the various loitering mercenaries outside the slats of vent grating. There were... a shit ton of them. “-and we are unable to access them without
revealing ourselves. Three hundred and sixty seven processes are in favor of acting regardless. That number rises as time passes, and the vital statistics feed from Creator Jur'Mallo's Omni-tool degrades."

“That's understandable I suppose. Alright, first tell me where the other two cores are.”

“We can upload scan data of the surrounding area to the heads up display on your armor if you open a port for us.”

“Uhhh, nice try. No. How about you just send it in a normal data transfer to my Omni-tool?”

It's optic flaps fluttered as if offended, but a second later a 'tool chime pinged in his ear. He shifted back, away from the portal, and brought up his device to check out the scans. They were... incredibly detailed. The knife-loving Spectre memorized several key points, and stared it down until he had most of the area's general layout as well. When he was done Nihlus minimized the haptic display and crawled back up to the Geth's surveillance nest.

“Thanks. I can see where the cores are. I'm going to get them away from here first, and then see about that bomb. Might have to wait a bit and take out watchers that don't appear to be reporting in to anyone... not that I think these two-cred mercs are all that organized.”

“...the cores are well observed.”

“I'm very good at not being observed.”

The Geth seemed to pause in it's movements as it tallied consensus for a moment, before turning to focus on him again.

“You have 1.24 liters of water in a container on your armor.”

“Yes?”

“Creator Jur'Mallo has not been able to rehydrate in thirty eight point nine hours. His environmental suit can only recycle a limited amount of fluid.”
“You want me to try and slip him something to drink?”

“That would be a high risk venture. We ask that you provide water at the soonest opportunity if your platform can spare your supply. Creator Jur'Mallo performed the organic fear management action after the mercenaries detained him, and has reported with status updates that match the symptoms of a dehydration headache.”

“Understood. We'll see how this goes... how sneaky can you be?”

“This platform is optimized for stealth.”

“...and that means what exactly?”

“We have a rechargeable six point three second optical cloak, sound dampening material on our lower ambulatory parts, and can vary our shape and size.”

“Riiiight... so can you get on the roof and cover me if a fight breaks out?”

“We do not understand.”

“Cover me? With a gun?”

“We do not have any firearms.”

Nihlus blinked at that, slightly thrown that the galaxy's resident killer robots didn't carry a gun by default. Or have one built in their arm. Then again, the records said the Geth were mostly farming and service industry workers before the uprising. He guessed it wasn't... *that* weird. Ignoring the oddity for now the carmine plated torin pulled the condensed scout rifle off his back, and set it by the Geth's... well, by the thing's scramble of condensed body parts. It wasn't exactly in a person shape at the moment.

“Can you fire this?”
“We can download the data for it's usage statistics and operation from the Consensus.”

“...but can you hit people that aren't me when you shoot it? Specifically not me.”

“Affirmative. We are now proficient with this model of firearm.”

“Handy. Okay, get to the roof and stay hidden. I'll remain on coms and call for it if I want you to open fire. Also, feel free to, you know, use your discretion.”

“...affirmative.”

“Right then, see you later.”

“We will not lose visual of you. Our sensors can perceive through most materials in this area.”

The Spectre scoffed at being taken very literally, and started shuffling backwards. While any other day he'd enjoy sitting in an air vent and chatting up a Geth for the fun of it, he would really prefer to do it outside the range of accidentally arranged bombs and drive cores that amounted to a small weapons of mass destruction. Nihlus backtracked some ways, coming back in at a different angle.

He watched, and waited, a silent shadow on the wall.

A minute passed, then five, then ten... and when the opportunity presented itself he leapt twice with almost no noise, rolling under the jagged ruins of a shuttle. Another two minutes and four seconds and the bored, wandering mercs on the edges of junk walls were situated just so. He slipped from underneath to inside, and flash forged the basic tools he needed to get into the drive core's housing.

Nihlus went slow, patient and quiet, stopping when he heard the slightest noise. It took him thirteen minutes to silently remove the first defunct core, and another thirty two to escape with it completely unseen. He stashed it behind a Tupari machine, and made to flank the mercenary compound to come in at it from a new direction, closer to the second core.
One more of those to move, a bomb to diffuse, and a very unlucky Quarian with poor taste in vacation spots to rescue. Then he could go back to the Citadel, and help search for Blue...

Chapter End Notes

05/05/2010 - Search for Survivors Continues on Taetarus
“The search for survivors in the rubble on Taetarus continues tonight. Only sixteen trapped people have been recovered alive, and experts say the chances of finding more survivors are slim. Bulldozers and heavy cranes are removing debris from the city's four major highways. Only a handful of aerial ambulances have made it to the interior of the rubble. Firefighter Extan Relius says that there is little hope for those in the central crater: "The impact didn't just knock buildings over; it picked them up and dropped them". New calculations indicate that even this massive blow was relatively mild compared to what it could have been -- the ship involved was only starting its acceleration to FTL speeds, and achieved a velocity under that of a mass accelerator bullet before contact.”

A/N: Alright, lay it on me straight... did Garrus working the angles feel 'in character'? Particularly talking to the shady bartender? I just can't imagine any legit detective not working with and in the underground of their city. The whole by-the-book Turian style of CSI and detective work sounds to me like it *would not work*, especially in a melting pot of races like the Citadel. I would like to think that Garrus is down to earth enough to be on amicable terms with a few shady types that cooperate with him, to catch the bigger fish, and yet much of his ME1 hot-head personality seems like it would clash with what it really means to *be* a detective...

I'm trying to find that middle ground between 'stalwart Turian soldier who is good at pure fact finding, less good at criminal psychology, but also excellent at sniping' versus 'detective that knows the beat of his city's heart, willing to get his hands dirty for justice, has long since become disenfranchised with the system'.

I just... don't feel like I hit that. Any input would be very appreciated. /forehead in palm, author's woes.

Fanfic Recommendation: [I Am Groot](https://archiveofourown.org/works/5138047) (1308 words) by sherlocksmyth (If you're in the mood for some fantastic crack from the Guardians of the Galaxy universe, this fic is an absolute must. It has over 51,000 kudos. The comment section is the best part.)
A variable number of instances

Chapter Summary

Nihlus has a long day, and Saren refrains from murder. Just barely.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Ungentira – A large, ferocious predator native to Palaven's high mountains, known for taking on prey 3-4 times their size (Credit: MizDirected)

Ungentira - A large, warm blooded predator native to the high mountains of Palaven. approximately the size of a Labrador. It is neither mammal or reptile, but has aspects of both, featuring a heavy, plated hide along its back, and a rich, luxurious pelt along their underside. They are ferocious predators, frequently taking on prey three or four times their size. Claws on all four feet and large fangs are their primary weapons, but they also have a poison spike at the end of their tail used for defense. They are known for climbing partway up trees and stretching to leave territorial claw marks in the bark to intimidate foes with their perceived size. (Credit: MizDirected)

Choquo – The capital city of Korlus, a sprawling metropolis of picturesque urban decay. The planet is often called the cemetery of starships; it's sweltering surface an unpopular but survivable place where ships that go dead in the water along the galactic shipping lanes are towed to after being stripped for salvage. The less valuable components left in the shells are the bread and butter of Choquo's recycling and salvage economy. The city itself is home to many of the world's 3.8 billion citizens. (Canon)

A/N: For anyone wondering about my seemingly high population density estimates, check out the current person per square mile or kilometer in Macau. (and feel free to be appropriately horrified if you are even slightly crowd-phobic.)

A/N/N: I have decided to concede to some fairly expert advice, and adopt the 'Element Zero is radioactive' mindcanon.

Chapter Soundtrack: Jessie Siren - The Sway

I feel my heartbeat like... i am, i am, i am
There is no lightning strike... just, i am, i am, i am
In the silence there’s a symphony.
Vibration, possibility.
This is our song, it’s a beating, breathing, living thing.
Let it all fall away, give into the beat and feel the sway.
This is all... this is all... this is all, all, all!
Everything that’s real...
i am, i am, i am
i am, i am
I feel my breath pull in... i am, i am, i am
Something more than skin... just, i am, i am, i am
We’re the science of infinity.
Vibration, possibility.

He’s hanging upside down from a rafter of a half-collapsed building and running deep scans of the architecture and people in front of him when his coms crackle again.

“The final drive core is very well observed.”

“Mmhm, so I see.”

There are mercs everywhere, practically enough ammo crates and make-shift defenses to swim in, and the last drive core is fairly near to the middle of it. Unfortunately the damn thing is deep inside the hulk of a ship. Well... 'half of a ship' to be precise. The centuries old Asari heavy cruiser looked like it had been sheered in two by a laser canon of some sort, the slagged edges of hull and floors making up a dollhouse-like, patchwork series of rooms. Rooms also teeming with mercenaries.

Closer scans also revealed that the final drive core was live, plugged in and powering their half-ship headquarters.

Nihlus dragged a gloved palm over his helm where his foreplate was.

'Fuck. How do I do this?'

“Hey uh... Geth?”

“What do you require Kryik-Spectre?”
“So saying whichever one of these mercs has the trigger for the bomb decides to set it off... what kind of explosion size are we talking for just this last drive core?”

“One hundred and thirteen point seven three square meters, resulting in approximately forty thousand casualties.”

“Fuck.”

“If you intend that word as an expletive, it is apt.”

The Spectre growled and dropped from his hanging perch to stalk between dumpsters, waiting for an opportunity to sneak closer while considering his options. There was no way of telling which of these assholes had ways to set off the bomb and which didn't. Likely leadership, but that was no guarantee. If he was caught, it would leave a trail back to the Spectres. On the off chance the mercs figured out what he was doing, and scattered en masse before he could clean up, there was no telling what sort of rep the counter-rescue of Jur'Mallo would cause to the trading ship's business on Korlus... and he didn't want to be indirectly responsible for a bunch of starving Quarians because he fucked up their relations to one of the few trading posts that would deal with them.

There were a ton of factors to consider, a long list of ways this could go poorly, and way too fucking many lives on the line... but this sort of thing was the bread and butter of ST&R.

A gap in the mass of watchful eyes appeared, and a blur of red and black slipped through, gaining ground on the half-ship.

Priority has got to be keeping causalities down, and risking the less valuable lives to get that done... I'd have to say the tech advances that come out of the flotilla put them on top, but I can also arrange for a new trading partner or two if I fuck this up and they loose Choquo as a port of call. That will let me put the people here on top... leaving the drive core of this wreck as step one before I try and disarm that garbage heap of explosives these idiots rigged in the courtyard... hold on Jur'Mallo. You're still on the list somewhere. If I can help it.'

Through a window-like gap in a chunk of wall that connected to nothing and went nowhere, down a corridor of flickering lights on an unstable power system, and around a double pair of patrolling guards; Nihlus slipped into the underbelly of the Asari heavy cruiser, and pressed himself into a corner to scan again for security measures and the latest spread of heat signatures.

He made it halfway to engineering before a passing group of flunkies in armor made of painted, massfab plating turned down his avenue of progression. It forced him into a short side hall where he quickly fried the lights and tucked most of himself behind a rusted, side-bent recycling trashcan that
probably hadn't worked in decades.

“Duuuude~ I am so down for that. Sign me up.”

“I know, right? What a kick ass idea.”

“Do you think Marzi would want to come?”

“Ha, probably not. Why do you even hang out with that guy? Such a fucking scrublord.”

“Not cool, alright? Maybe Marzi can’t shoot straight but he-”

The conversation continued but the small pack of chit-chatting goons moved far enough down the hall that even his augmented hearing couldn't pick up their dialogue any longer. He chuffed in mild amusement at them and gave it another moment before cautiously creeping out and continuing on. Of course, since his infiltration amid the excessively staffed base was going so well, when he made it to the engine room his luck ran right the fuck out.

The drive core was no small, shuttle powering thing. It was old, huge and linked up to about half a dozen jury-rigged capacitors, cables and cheap-ass short cuts everywhere. An engineering nightmare.

Naturally, being of a species that evolved on a planet where there were sudden jumps in electromagnetism and radiation, he could almost feel the energy in the air like a warning flag. His instincts screamed at him to get the fuck out of here, far from the poorly constructed capacitors that sparked and hummed like they were just waiting to short...

He swallowed down the fear without too much trouble, hind-brain driven or no, and starting scanning. He needed to dismantle the whole thing, carefully, and open up the drive core to remove it's eezo block, then get that out of here before his armor's life support and his natural plating started to fail him. Radiation poisoning sounded like a shit way to go... but so did electrocution.

With every bit of caution he circled the room, scanning and planning, eventually picking up on the best places in the system to go about disabling the whole mess. It would cut power to the ship’s systems that were still functioning, probably leaving most of the area in a black out or dependent on the local power grid... if there was a connection to that in the first place.
He had five of the six capacitors unhooked and safely discharged when things went *really* south. It happened like this:

He got the last, and most unstable of the devices disconnected from the drive core.

A merc came in the door to investigate the last several minutes of increasing power fluctuations, likely the same idiot who had set up the draw-heavy, bullshit excuse for a power system.

He looked up, elbow deep in wiring.

The nais screeched, and ran at him, tool box flinging forward like a bludgeon.

Nihlus was pretty sure he shouted a warning at the stupid fucker. It didn't help.

Before he could really tell what had gone where the capacitor was discharging, and the smell of crispy Asari filled the air as he went flying back.

The world went dark as he hit the wall.

Aiesha fought the urge to take a slow, subtle side-step away from Arterius. They'd been hunting for Vakarian almost all day, and had not managed to catch up to him... just his footprints, so to speak.

Three times they'd arrived somewhere, done some asking around and poking into private security systems to search for traces...

Three times the two Turians had just missed him, and the biotic torin had gotten... she really hesitated to call it 'sulky', because his looks and growls came across as about the same level of danger as a stalking *ugentira*, but sulky was in fact the closest description to it.
It was somewhat amusing that the stoic Spectre was this bothered, though she was unsure whether it was about not finding his... finding Vakarian, -who he had yet to explain his relationship to-, or just being outmaneuvered in general.

Regardless, the polite tarin kept her opinions to herself, and continued turning her own considerable skills toward finding her missing partner.

“He was here.”

“Yep, sure was.”

“Describe everything he did.”

“Well he walked in the door... sat down at the bar... ordered a drink... we talked for a bit... he paid, and tipped me well, and then left.”

Spectre Arterius stared the handsome tarin down, unblinking.

“What did you speak about?”

“Oh, just some gossip.”

“Elaborate.”

“Are you going to order a drink?”

“No.”

“What a shame! We have seven different kinds of beer on tap, and a delectable menu of hearty food. You look like you've had a long day Spectre, perhaps you could use a meal?”
His left mandible flicked, dangerously. Agent Makasian wasn't quite sure how such a subtle gesture came across with such poignant threat, but it very *clearly* did.

“No thank you. Details. Now.”

“Oh it was just gossip really. Very pleasant chit-chat about the local economy and such.”

In the end, they left empty handed, and had to back track for other leads.

“Kryik-Spectre, are you functional?”

He groaned, hands twitching and legs shifting as he took stock of his various parts.

“Nnng. A gun. The bitch had a gun. Left hip. I *saw* it.”

The carmine plated torin coughed, gingerly trying to sit up.

“Confirmed, the hostile mercenary had a firearm.”

“Why not shoot at me? Maybe s-scream and go looking for back up? Nooooo, fucking... nng... *psycho* nais had to run at me and fling a spirits-damned *metal toolbox* at a charged, un-fucking-shielded energy capacitor. Why? WHY? Nnnng. *Fuck,* ow.”

The Geth platform's optical blinders waggled twice, as if in agreement, or possibly solidarity. They straightened up after seeing that he was 'functional', and turned to pan their camera over the scene, a tiny spot light from it's hood the only light in the room, though it did a good job of it. Nihlus flinched
as he attempted to stand and failed, trying to draw in air that didn't seem to fill his lungs... he tore off his powered-down helm, inspecting it.

It wasn't just offline, it was *fried*.

There was a massive chunk on the side where the plexiglass was spider webbed with cracks, a middle section missing entirely... and it occurred to him that he'd probably been working on suffocating inside of his suit for the past several minutes, only saved by that tiny missing chunk.

“We did not understand why communications ceased after the electrical discharge in this area, but the lack of light allowed us to further investigate. It is now apparent, however the final drive core remains a challenge to move.”

“Nnggh,” he replied, weakly shuffling backwards until able to sit by the wall for support, nose twitching from the overpowering smell of melted ceramics. “Ya think? *Maybe* should have mentioned that problem when I first got here.”

“It must be removed from the local radius of the explosive device, regardless of size.”

“Details, dear gestalt. They're... nng... important.”

The carmine plated torin swallowed past a dry throat, and checked his Omni-tool to look at his vitals... also fried.

'Shit.'

He now had no way of knowing what that surge had done to the tech *inside* of him. Some of the electrical explosion was probably grounded through the outside of his armor, -and along the external surface of his undersuit-, but not all of it. Part of the current might have turned into an EMP of sorts as well...

At least the bomb hadn't gone off. They had range and luck to thank for that, most likely.

With a distant, mental apology to Jur'Mallo, Nihlus shakily grabbed for the water in his kit, half
afraid it too had been flash fried. Thankfully the seal had kept the liquid from apparent harm, but the flask was... faintly warm.

He shook his head angrily, making himself dizzy but successfully shoving the oncoming shock away.

“Alright. Geth, can you crack open that drive core and pull out the primary eezo components?”

“We can download the knowledge of thi-”

“-from the Consensus, right. Okay. Yeah, do that.”

“Without appropriate shielding, that course of action would be detrimental to your health.”

“...fuck.”

It's optical blinders flapped innocently at him, and he sighed, struggling up to a stand... well, more of a lean really, and started wall-crawling for the door.

“I'll go find a place to stash the eezo bits where they won't be exposed too long. You just.... nmmf... crack that thing open, and stay on the same com frequency while I look. I'll find... nnng... a spare Omni-tool, and let you know where to bring them.”

“Affirmative.”

Chapter End Notes

05/06/2010 - Post Production on "Nekyia Corridor" Possibly Affected by Vallum Blast

“Post production on the mega-simulstim ”Nekyia Corridor” may be the latest casualty of the Vallum Blast. One of the sim's major scenes involves a lovelorn pilot committing suicide by flying a ship into a city at FTL speeds. Asked if this would remain in the final cut, director Morgan Bierster replied "You'll have to wait and see", but added, "The project deals head-on with themes of death; the title's "neykia" is actually a Greek word
-- the best translation for an Asari tradition asking for guidance from the dead. We're not about to ruin it all with some exploitative sequence. It would be tasteless to further traumatize those hurt by this tragedy". His actions back up these words -- the sim's cast and crew have started a charity called "Recovery Corridor" to collect donations for the families of those devastated by the blast.”

A/N: Legion, 'Geth do not infiltrate.' while an adorable sentimate, is FALSE. We literally met you when you were actively infiltrating a Collector ship.
I don't think that word means what he thinks it means... 'cuz this Geth is also doing some sneaky sneaky.

A/N/N: So who else likes the idea that Turians can sort of sense electromagnetic fields? That unstable fields give them the heebee jeebees? Fucking cool, but also maybe logical, right? Inspired by Amber Penglass' fic 'Sound the Clarion', where Turian's can feel each other and all living beings by sensing their 'vitallia', which ends up sounding a lot like each person's unique electromagnetic field. Granted, the fine tuning necessary to feel out and recognize one aura from another would have to be slightly insane, but... on a planet where radiation probably cooks most smell-giving molecules, where wild jungles or bright sunlight might make sight a less than helpful, and slightly slow, sense to depend upon... you're going to end up with people with other senses for feeling out danger, right? So... why not? I'm not certain on the identification aspect that Penglass goes into, but I love the basic idea enough to mind canon it. Any scientists out there with an opinion on the reasonability of the sense, its potential biological means of functioning, or its theoretical capabilities? I'm all ears.

A/N/N/N: In case anyone is wondering, I'm mind canoning that eezo drive cores are both power source for a ship's engine, and low-mass tunnel producing device, depending on how complex the drive is and how well the feedbacks of energy and bleed off are routed. I use this theory because... the fucking Normandy has no other visible engines, and there has got to be an excess of (relatively) easily harnessed energy to be gotten from running a current through a hunk of eezo, even if all we are talking about is directing and using the gravity altering field. Again... if you've got some better, or alternatively, supportive and more detailed science to throw at me? Plllleaseee do so. <3

Now define troublemaker for me

Chapter Summary

Aiesha and Saren continue to hunt, and Nihlus spends long, weary hours at a butcher's job.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Choquo – The capital city of Korlus, a sprawling metropolis of picturesque urban decay. The planet is often called the cemetery of starships; it's sweltering surface an unpopular but survivable place where ships that go dead in the water along the galactic shipping lanes are towed to after being stripped for salvage. The less valuable components left in the shells are the bread and butter of Choquo's recycling and salvage economy. The city itself is home to many of the world's 3.8 billion citizens. (Canon)

Mornax vinkaar – A Turian phrase that means 'bad mistake'. (Canon! From ME:A! :o)

Chapter Soundtrack: Zardonic Ft Mikey Rukus - Bring It On

You're steppin' up and now your dignity is on the line.
I'm in the zone, I know your will is gunna break this time.
There's too much at stake, and no, I never step aside.
...
Yo I wanna clear, it's not power.
Risin' to the top while you scower.
Fifteen in the cage with me feels like hours.
Hear the fans and I mean 'em scream louder.
Ya don't understand, yous can back down.
Look up at the screen to see I got the knock out.
I build the fight of the night each time I walk out.
Nose to nose, face to face, time to rock out!
Go for the top dog
We at the top level
All my rabbles line up
Cuz I'm a top rebel
Look in my eyes
This is my time
Step up, rise up
Strike first
Bring it ooon

Step up -step up -step up
The shakiness in his limbs was starting to clear up by the time the Geth was coming down the small decline of the junk-heap crater around them. The flicker of an optical cloak was still fizzling out along their edges.

He gave them a thumbs up from inside the cabin of a broken down skycar, safe behind the protective glass and metal as they approached. An impressively sized boulder of highly purified and component embedded element zero was tucked away in the platform's arms, large and heavy enough that the Geth were having trouble walking. Their unbalanced waddle eventually made it to the open door of the banged up shuttle he'd found to act as a new containment chamber, and the heavy metal was set inside. Nihlus waited for the AI to close the shuttle's door before getting out and walking over.

"Nice. Glad that's done. We're down to a pretty small blast if that bomb goes off now, right? Twenty meters?"

"Thirty one point four two square meters."

"Che. Still too big, and probably more than three times the size they meant to threaten with. Morons. Now if only that entire compound wasn't buzzing like an insect hive about their power outage, it'd be a helluva lot easier to make a move on the bomb itself, or the people who might have detonators. Did you see how many mercs still had eyes on that courtyard?"

"We counted fifty seven in various states of patrol or leisure outside of the explosive device's radius, but within view."

"Fuck. I can't go straight for it with that many... need to thin their numbers first. Maybe take out some stragglers around the base, hopefully without raising any kind of alarm..."

"Your platform is very good at not being observed."

Carmine mandibles quirked in a grin at the Geth; his own words thrown back at him in a strange sort of compliment.

"That I am. Alright, I'm going to need my rifle back. Every-spirits damned-thing on me is fried except the new tool and pistol I stole from a straggler, and they are both complete shit. Can you find
“another one to cover me with?”

“There is a small armory with outdated but serviceable firearms on the second level.”

“...aaaand you can get there and grab one without being seen?”

“There is an eighty seven point four two percent chance of success.”

“Not too shabby, let's roll with those odds. Do your best, and find somewhere quiet to hide with good sight lines. If an alarm sounds, feel free to start killing the bad guys.”

“We have an inquiry. Clarify designation 'bad guys'.”

The knife-wielding Spectre snorted, and patted the platform's shoulder companionably as he pulled his rifle from their back and turned to walk back up the scrap hill.

“Bad guys are... hmm... I'd say any sentient being that tries to take things from others without permission or just cause, whether that's their life, status, freedom, or just material objects. In this case? The mercenaries who took the freedom of Jur'Mallo for profit, and risk taking the lives of anyone hit by their spirits damned bomb. Commonly referred to as 'assholes'.

“Acknowledged. We will acquire a new weapon and wait to assist in the termination of assholes.”

Nihlus smiled like a fiend into the dusty night air of Korlus.

“Perfect.”
“He was just here.”

“Yessir, Spectre sir. Passed by not twenty minutes ago,” the skittish torin in Hierarchy military casuals offered, looking slightly terrified to be talking to him.

Saren turned to go, ignoring the torin's distress, his expression sharp. He was very close to catching up to Garrus. His sniper would not elude him for much longer.

“My thanks.”

The Human woman sighed quietly as she died, barely having time to twitch her hands upward in a flinch before the slick bladed knife in her temple put her down. She hadn't been wearing a helmet; easy pickings for a Spectre. Nihlus caught her as she fell, drawing her into the side corridor he had attacked from, and back down the hall to what had once been a janitor's closet. It looked like it had been repurposed from that into someone's bedroom; with clean, private space being something of a luxury in Choquo.

Quick fingers came in, efficient and practiced. Her cred chit was lifted and tucked into his armor. Guns and shield generators were pulled off and tossed into a corner that had begun to pile up with the same from others. The body was hefted up onto the stack of recent kills, and arranged neatly in that corner with some small respect for the dead.

Out he went, back to hunting.

The carmine plated torin had taken on armies before, but this wasn't an army. It was a bunch of screw ups willing to kidnap and kill rather than take up honest-ish work out on the planet's vast tracts of land dotted with crashed ships. Starting up a salvage team out of the city was about as difficult as finding a tupari machine on a core world. The poor had it easy here, opportunity was everywhere - literally laying on the ground-... and yet.

Here he was, hunting mercenaries from the shadows, picking them off one by one, and there were so many. One less asshole every few minutes though, and thirty-some-odd hostiles in and he still hadn't
heard so much as curiosity about it on their com channels. Being from a merc colony himself, the disorganization was almost offensive. Scratch almost. His professional pride was disgusted. Selfish, sloppy idiots. These weren't mercs, they were... pseudomercs. Criminals in vaguely matching armor.

The Batarian fuckwit crowing about how he abused his wife when she got 'uppity' died fast and silent just like the rest. The Salarian listening to him with a grin only had time to blink before his neck broke against the edge of a table. Nihlus dragged them both back to his hiding spot, divested them of chits and gear in about ten seconds, and then strode back out into the dark corridors lit only by the flickering red of emergency lighting.

Korlus was getting some complimentary cleaning service tonight. 'Housekeeping!' chimed a sarcastic voice in his head as he took down a group of three in a smooth combination of lethal strikes.

Nihlus continued dismantling their numbers with slow, methodical caution. A morbid desire to see how many he could kill without them ever knowing. Proof of technique perhaps, or maybe just proving to no one in particular that this sort of organization could and would get what was coming to it. More bodies lined the janitor-bedroom-grave, and slowly but surely foot traffic between hallways died down.

People began to hang out in groups and around common areas, voices unconsciously low, whispering and unsettled.

'Damn, it's quiet around here tonight, isn't it?'

'Have they figured out what's up with the power yet?'

'Eeeh, you seen Joggy?'

'Not since lunch, it's weird, they never miss poker night.'

Instinctual herd mentality was taking over. The rag tag mercs weren't exactly aware of a predator in their midst, but their hindbrains sensed it and told them to hide, stick together, and be quiet.

Not that doing so would make any difference.
Even disgusted and unimpressed with their operation, Nihlus was careful with his every move. His armor was nothing but a plain physical barrier, most of it's ablative plating and kinetic redistribution technology melted into uselessness. No helmet either. The carmine plated Spectre had three low grade shield generators he'd looted, a Kessler II pistol he'd picked up from the previous owner of his new, laggy Bluewire I Omni-tool, and his scout rifle which was really just an over modded Torrent VI with a lot of details sacrificed for silent fire and high accuracy. He was far too under-equipped to allow detection unless all other options were gone.

“Contact has a visual, we should follow the solid lead,” Aiesha argued.

“A light grey torin with blue markings does sound like him, but trading red sand for a datapad of intel? Unlikely. Your contact has the wrong Turian.”

The lovely Blackwatch agent huffed at Spectre Arterius, rather of the mind that he was apparently unaware of what her partner was or wasn't capable of. The proof? Well, they hadn't caught the elusive Detective yet, had they? She ignored the fact that their lack of success also held her culpable, and gestured toward the direction where a shopkeeper had indicated he'd gone after trying on a strange variety of clothing.

“Well then, lead on.”

She watched him turn and stride off confidently, and moved to follow with a shake of her head.

Nihlus ended up going door to door in a roulette-like game of 'Can I kill everyone in this room before they can sound the alarm?'. Not having the tools to scan for life signs, there was little else he could do. The Bluewire model he was wearing could barely manage to run more than one application at a time, nevermind scan through walls.

He ended up playing mind games with the mercs to flush them out, setting up a 'tool down a hallway
to play voices from an extra-net vid. He would hit the entry request key on a door, and press himself to the wall the other direction from the device's noise. Almost every merc that answered asked hello into the empty door way several times before stepping out and turning for the distracting sound. The wily Spectre drove blades into spines as he jumped forward like a red and black blur, pushing himself and the target past the view of any others in the room, trying for a silent take down each time to tempt other occupants into investigating. These corpses were returned to their own beds, covered in blankets, and left behind. Hopefully anyone that found them would assume they were sleeping and go to their own bed, or leave off unsuspecting.

Every door had opened to a ping so far, though a couple of them took repeated taps to annoy the people inside into answering in the middle of the night cycle. Most rooms were meant to be singles, though one to three people had stuffed themselves inside each. Nihlus' tally was up to one hundred and seventy six kills, undetected, amid one of the highest population dense cities in the galaxy.

"This has to be some sort of fucked up record, but I can't complain... the odds are impossible otherwise.'

"Kryik-Spectre."

Nihlus startled, mid-sneaking crouch, and calmly began looking around for the Geth. Behind him? No. Ahead of him? No. Slowly, he looked up... there was a grated ventilation cover directly above his head, a mild red glow shining from the optics peeking through. The lanky torin's mandibles drew aside in supreme amusement.

"You know you can call this janky Omni-tool to get ahold of me, right? I'm still on the same com frequency, and my aural implants are fine as far as I can tell."

"We have scanned ahead of you and our calculations predict a thirty four point zero one percent chance of success at clearing the next hallway with your current tactics."

"Thirty four? Well that's disappointing. Any particular... uhh... data that makes you think the next hallway will give me trouble?"

"These are the sleeping quarters of the leadership, who remain awake attempting to restore power. The state of engineering was discovered, and sabotage is suspected..."

"...because the drive core is gone?"
It's optical blinders fluttered in what could only be some AI version of sheepish regret.

“We did not anticipate the usefulness of closing the shell after removal to confuse or delay investigation. Our primary focus had been removing the Element Zero from the blast radius.”

“Eh, hindsight is perfect and all that. It's a problem, but no mornax vinkaar. Alright, so they're all awake. That it?”

“There are combat mechs, a larger number of hostiles present, automated security not on an identifiable or hackable network, and higher grade equipment.”

“...quadruple fuck. Okay. Uhhh-”

“Potential holders of detonation methods are also more likely to be found among this group of assholes. We have come to assist.”

“Worst place for the target to be is exactly where it's at? Pffft. Tell me about it.”

“The walls are made of an steel-aluminum alloy that-”

“...there is no one here.”

Aiesha said nothing, nodding with supreme indiffidence at the empty store room where Vakarian was not.

To the Spectre's credit, he simply turned around to leave with only a mild growl of displeasure.
“Where was your lead at?”

She fell into step with Arterius, and brought up a map on her ‘tool.

Chapter End Notes

05/07/2010 - Turian Child "Octa" Rescued From Vallum Ruins
“A glimmer of hope on Taetrus tonight: rescue workers found a turian child, alive, buried in the wreckage of the museum known as the Enrarium or the "old postal office". The nine-year-old child, found in a collapsed stairwell, is known only as "Octa". She has no injuries other than scratches on her carapace and some loss of hearing. She is conscious and being treated for dehydration and malnutrition. The press has not been allowed to interview Octa yet. Saren Yahirix, the rescue worker who found her, said that she didn't even cry out. "We didn't hear a thing. We just opened up the wall, and there she was".”

A/N: The thing about large forces is that they're difficult to organize, communication becomes complicated and crucial. Without it, what looks like an insurmountable score of hostiles becomes... a smattering of half-trained individuals.

A/N/N: Author-chan is very busy cursing up a hell storm of nerd rage. Palaven and oceans were mentioned in some party chatter in ME:A. Author chan was already mad about how Palaven's surface image changed drastically between games, since that is some incredibly crucial data upon which we can make extrapolations about life on that world. There is fanon about *birthrates* based on the details in those photographs, but some script writer at Bioware just screwed that up with a direct reference to *oceans*! Radiation, extremely high average temperature, and an apex race that can't swim... on a world with oceans? Grrr! Between ME1 and ME3 images of Palaven, not only does the atmosphere change color, but the maybe-oceans are replaced by a variety of seas and lakes. Whoever did the ME3 image gets a cookie. ME1 image person and MEA chatter person can go sit in the corner of the lab and think about their science until I have some *reasons*. (Author-chan would also like to know wtf happened to Salarian pupils.)

Fanfic Recommendation: Serenade Scrap (535 words) by Virusq
Implications of previous conversations

Chapter Summary

The past crops up where Saren least expects it. Nihlus takes a page from Garrus' book and pulls out cocky humor to keep someone sane.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Fratrin - Brother, but one of honor, friendship, or of oath rather than one of blood relation. Refers to the bond of karifratrus. (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Electro - Kaster Feat. Qwentalis - Death Rattle

Sometimes we all make mistakes
Going to a point of no progression
Aggression kicked in by the rage inside
Sometimes we do what it takes
To find our way in abandoned cities
Polluted by the disco light tonight
 Everywhere see the smoke rise
We don't care
We've got blind eyes
Lightning strikes but we're alright
I feel safe in your arms tonight

A/N: This just in! There is a canon name for Garrus' dad. Castis Vakarian! Pardon me while I just go fix all of the previous chapters... Copernicus is going to be changed to be his uncle's name I think. Or something. Eeeeeeeeee.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There target found. Dial-side, alleyway between a hotel and parking garage.”

“I see it. Meet me there.”

Saren made it to the entrance of the side street just as Makasian was sliding down from a fire escape ladder a few steps in. They fell into step and approached the distant form. An unhealthy looking, vacantly staring Asari was standing near a back entrance to the hotel, matching the description they were given for a nais who was supposedly in-the-know about Kithoi ward's black market.
Hopefully the figure was a new lead on Garrus, whom they had only managed to catch two glimpses of over the course of the weekend. One, a blip on a public security camera where he had stepped into view at just the right time. The other, a frustrating glimpse from hundreds of meters away only spotted amid a distant crowd thanks to the zoom and facial recognition software on his optical implants. They had chased after the Detective both times, but failed to catch up. At least they were certain he was alive and well.

As the two Turians came near, the heavily augmented nais turned to them with creeping slowness. The cheap, ungainly installation of the Asari’s cybernetics was... fairly ghastly; tubes and unflattering angles doing nothing for the sickly purple pallor of their skin. Saren could hear a vague, difficult to repress subvocal buzz of disgust from the tarin approaching beside him, and though his own voices remained silent... he could not help but agree.

“We're looking f-”

The nais’ mouth opened to howl sudden profanities at them, biotically shifting themself several meters farther away. His stance dropped into combat readiness automatically as he watched for further movement while trying to make sense of the situation. They had not approached with any subtlety or threat, so why was the Asari behaving thus?

Before Saren could decide between using force or reason going forward, the choice was taken from him. The Asari’s body erupted in a biotic aura and a blue-shifted gravitational force spun toward he and Makasian like a tiny collapsing star, lethal and beautiful swirls of violet. The singularity was incredibly strong, and he began to suspect it’s creator was perhaps intoxicated by red sand. It would explain the odd behavior at least...

The silver-grey torin reached out, his own aura lighting up steady and clear as opposed to the jagged nova billowing off the nais. He grabbed at the oncoming field even as it resisted him; the Asari’s crazed, ancient will driving it forward... but he was not considered one of the best by a small margin.

The silver-grey Spectre found the edges of the collapsing fields, then pulled, turned aside, and redirected; even as the deadly singularity zipped forward he held still and focused. To an outside observer, it must have as looked as if he merely raised a hand and gestured the biotic attack out of existence. In reality, the focus and effort brought a momentary tremor to his arms.

“You will NEVER take me allllllive!!! You don't know, you don't understand! YOU CAN’T.”

“Spirits, calm down!” came the clear voiced shout of Garrus’ partner from several meters away. “We
are not here to capture or kill anyone. We just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

The tarin must have recognized the nais' stance and jumped away to safety not knowing he could dismiss a singularity. He did not blame her, few Turians could. Assured that Makasian had not been hit by any stray forces, his attention returned fully to the hostile Asari. Electric blue eyes narrowed at the wild-eyed nais, quiet aggravation and warning eeking from his subvocals, though it was likely the Asari could not tell the specific meanings save for the obvious, overarching tone of displeasure.

“You will submit to questioning immediately, and I *may* forgive your unprovoked attack on Council agents.”

“Enemies, eneMIES, ENEMIES! Here to *take* MY... my... IT'S MINE!”

He and the peach toned Officer shared an uncertain look. Perhaps the potentially drug-addled nais was too far gone to use as a lead toward finding Garrus at all. By the sound of it, the Asari's sanity was... severely in question. As the nais' aura resurged, Makasian made a final attempt at reason.

“We are *not* here to seize any property. Nais, I order you to stop, furth- *I said stop!* Further aggression will result in your arrest!”

With an unholy screech the overly-augmented Asari lit an Omni-blade and came running at the two Turians, a reave field undulating outward, dangerously tearing at the metal of the ground beneath.

Not wanting to touch the sickly siphoning aura with his own, Saren dove one way as Makasian tumbled further in the other. The Asari went for the tarin first, trying to corner her in an alcove of recycling bins. The C-Sec Officer was quick on her feet though, and tactical with her motions, keeping constant space between the hostile and herself. The peach toned tarin continued to try and explain that they were not there for anything but information, attempting to calm the Asari down even as her pistol left it's holster.

“Stand down! I *will* open fire!”

The tactic was having very little success. He was about ready to tell her to save her breath as he began forming a lift. Perhaps interrogation while being held upside down against the side of a building would cease the ranting and lead to answers.
That was when the Asari screamed something... else.

“זֶהו אֲנִי בְּמִי יָשִּׂם וּבְּמִי עָשִׂים.”

Suddenly cold to the bone, Saren’s gaze sharpened on the raving lunatic. He had not heard that language in a long, *long* time, but the sounds were unmistakable. It was the choppy, unwieldy words of the meta-Turians that had touched the Arca Monolith. The only language they seemed to be able or willing to speak after their... conversion.

’*How... is this possible?’* he thought, stunned.

“That language isn't recognized by my translator, stand down or I *will* open fire! Last chance.”

“Wait!” he yelled, but it was too late, a hail of bullets met biotic shield as they clashed, the comely tarin in C-Sec armor versus what could only be a partially changed meta-Asari.

Blue blood trailed down the side of his fringe, but Nihlus was far too busy shooting to wipe it away. It wasn't in his eyes, and that was all that mattered. He switched thermal clips, and took a careful shot at a merc just barely leaning out of cover to assess their odds. Which were about to be pretty damn *poor.*

*fwwp* went his rifle quietly, followed by several louder *ca-churk bang* from his backup's shotgun.

“More assholes are approaching from the west.”

“Fuck. Alright, keep shooting.”

“Acknowledged.”
Behind them, a shaky and unstable sounding Quarian laugh could be heard.

“Did they... hah... haha... j-just say...?”

Jur'Mallo was deeper in the shipping container, half curled over the bomb and keeping the accidental dead-man's switch depressed with a will.

“Deep breaths, friend. Don't,” -fwwp- “go into shock on me.”

ca-churk bang, ca-churk bang, ca-churk bang!

“T-t-trying...”

The carmine plated Spectre braved a roll to a tall pallet of scrap just outside of their cover, and sighted for new hostiles in other directions, presuming correctly that the Geth would continue to cover the entrance unless instructed otherwise.

“Keep trying. We're getting out of this alive, alright? I've got a,” -fwwp- “damn good track record on that score, and I have no plans to,” -fwwp, fwwp- “lose that now. All the other Spectres would make fun of me,” -ca-churk bang, ca-churk bang- “and I wouldn't be invited to the secret club house anymore.”

Jur'Mallo laughed wetly and went quiet in his desperate task. Green eyes spared a worried glance for the Quarian, but turned back to defending their position an instant later.

Nihlus had gotten caught in his killing game, a matter of eventuality in such tight quarters, and things had gone... south. Really south. Very, very south. A lot of retreating while firing, failed attempts to hide, getting cornered, and an obnoxiously long monologue by the merc leader.

They were herded by live fire toward the trapped courtyard, an Omni-tool held high as a finger
descended on the remote detonation switch at the end of the speech. Almost fucked, save for his luck and quick thinking, presenting in the form of being besties with an explosives expert and a do-or-die attitude.

He recognized components on the bomb, specifically the trigger mechanisms, and in a last second gambit to keep from being blown up, Nihlus had the gall to hit the manual detonation switch on the bomb itself... followed by very carefully by not releasing the button press.

The remote detonation programs thought the bomb had already been set off and stopped working. The bomb itself was waiting for the button release to trigger.

Limbo of the mortal sort, traded off and now held in place by a shit-scared, starvation-delirious Quarian.

*fwwp, fwwp*

“Hey Geth, guess how many mercenaries it takes to kill a Spectre.”

“... we are uncertain,” *ca-churk bang*, “but theorize that one would be sufficient if their programming was superior to yours.”

“Mmmnope.”

“Please elucidate on your answer.”

*fwwp*

Nihlus grinned, partially false bravado, but mostly his natural, indefatigable sense of humor in any situation.

“It’s a trick question. You can't kill us.”
“... if your platform is destroyed, does that not qualify as death?”

*ca-churk* bang, *ca-churk* bang, *fwwp, fwwp, ca-churk* bang, *ca-churk* bang ... *ca-churk* bang!

“It doesn't... because we're already *ghosts*.”

In the back of the huge shipping container, lit only by the pinpricks of emergency flood lights shining through bullet holes, Jur'Mallo groaned at the horrible, not-even-slightly-funny pun. The wily torin's mandibles flicked into a cocky smirk of success, and he tumbled to a new cover to continue holding the line.

Both the Spectre and Officer had long since given up trying to shoot *not* to kill. The aggressive Asari had thus far been kept away from the general population by being lured into the ground-level atrium of a conference center that was thankfully deserted... but the stoic torin felt as if it were only a matter of time before the nais' seemingly endless endurance began to fail, and then they ran the risk of the hostile biotically charging *away* from them instead of *towards*. Fleeing out into the crowds.

The threat of an infected person, -and the terrifying possibilities it presented-, lost amid the wards of the space station at the heart of galactic civilization?

Saren Arterius *refused* to allow it.

Emergency requests for back up were sent, and the fight continued.

He... very much wanted to know why their search for Garrus had led to yet another ghost from his past, out of time and place in the brightly lit atrium. There had been no traces of that tech for *years* and then suddenly on that mission with Nihlus...

There were a thousand questions clamoring for answers, but he could not afford to focus on the 'why' and 'how' at the moment. The concept of discovering this *thing* while on a hunt for his *fratrin*
was already a heavy weight in his thoughts. Nevermind the eeriness of the nais' raving, spouting clear if erratic Thessian then suddenly switching to choppy-sounding words he only half remembered. Desolas had not found opportunity to teach him much of-

Later... later.

After the not-Asari-anymore was well and truly dead, tucked away in an ST&R specimen lab. Saren participated in something he rarely did, and prayed to the spirits that wherever the monolith was, the one that had changed this person, that it was not here.

'Spirits. Please.'

The sloppily augmented Asari was still howling about something they could not take, that they did not understand.

“Arterius, behind you!”

He had already felt the lift and pull forming behind him, another attempt to catch him up by drawing a blunt recycling bin or jagged edged post at his back from a blind spot. Though he did appreciate that Makasian was trying to watch his six even when her tendency to shout warnings caused the hollow eyed nais to pay ever more attention to her. Brave, selfless, and foolish... but welcome. It gave him openings.

“ם.ט יטבש... no, what? You w-want to know. מ.פ.. I can help, just stop talking. ב
פ.ע.ב.ץ, a!!”

The mad nais' aura pulsed, words falling from blue lips like spoiled fruit, voice rising to a scream again as the meta-Asari tossed a chaotic ball of unstable forces at a large planter, shredding the ficus-like decoration into a cloud of flying dirt and green fiber laced with ceramic shrapnel. Hazard created, it was spun into a vortex and thrown at Makasian. Saren hoped that Garrus' partner continued to be quick on her feet, because he was much too far to shield her from that, and needed the moments of distraction to get in close enough to stick the nais with a grenade, as bullets and biotics were about as offensively effective as feathers.

Soil and shards flew, boots thumped against metal flooring, and a small detonation triggered -setting off the fire alarms.
As the dust settled, hundreds of tiny ceramic shards fell to the ground with it, the slightest blue-white aura fading from where they had been stopped, and a charred, gory corpse fell to the ground. It twitched, leaking blood and not-blood across the elegant marble floors. Saren stood from the crouch he had dropped into to reduce his size for an efficient shield against the blast. Electric eyes caught the edges of blue fading from the proud points of Makasian's mandibles.

Their eyes met across the decimated atrium, hers filled with defiance and anxiety.

'Ah. Someone else who has avoided or escaped the cabals... somehow.'

Distantly, he wondered if she had an older sibling that had sheltered her from-

Saren cut the thought off, and returned his attention to the abomination that complicated everything.

“Makasian, turn the fire alarms off, and get C-Sec out here to quarantine the area. No one in or out, your people included. This entire... event is under ST&R blackout until further notice.”

The electric eyed torin heard a soft sigh threaded with tentative, flanged relief before she answered.

“Of course, Spectre.”

Saren turned away to crouch again beside the body, not touching it, merely observing. He could see where some of the cybernetics blended into flesh, resembling nothing so much as a parasitic corruption, slowly spreading from muscle to bone, bone to blood. Inorganic cancer.

The back data files from Dr. Qian's research burned like a brand in their storage space on his greybox. The silver-grey Spectre eyed the seeping fluids and unfamiliar cybernetics critically, displeased. He had been accumulating resources to research this poorly understood technological menace long enough.

It seemed that time was no longer on his side.
05/08/2010 - Separatist Group Facinus Threatens More Attacks

“A video of the separatist group Facinus celebrating the Vallum Blast surfaced today. Footage shows noted separatist Kihilix Tanus praising pilot Vamire Squaron for his successful aiming of a private vessel and ejecting from it before it accelerated to its hyperlethal speed. The conversation implies that Squaron bypassed the ship's safety protocols by installing an improvised FTL plotter, using an archaic design no longer in service throughout Citadel space. The vid also shows Tanus criticizing the Turian Hierarchy for failing to respond to the humanitarian crisis on the planet Belan. "They are old xemna [herd animals], only responding when they themselves are jabbed". He then threatened a storm of lightspeed vessels, one for every week that Taetrus remains "subject to the human-appeasing lackeys that run imperialist space," referring to the Hierarchy and Citadel species.”

A/N: I had to make a ghost/spectre joke at some point, duckies. I had to. I'm sorry. Ish.

A/N/N: As any scientist will tell you, success requires careful and patient experimentation. You didn't really think that the Reaper ground forces in ME3 were the work of a few months, did you? I'm rather certain that sort of monstrous perfection took a few failures first...

A/N/N/N: Why yes, Dr. Qian's research into Reapers has literally and figuratively been sitting in the back of Saren's mind all this time.

Fanfic Recommendation: **That Hunts on a Lonely Hill** (128520 words) by ninaunn (Liara/Javik. Very powerful writing, an emotional read.)
Trying out a new forum

Chapter Summary

A glimpse of home, a new perspective, a renewed effort. One is a surprise, one is a lie, one is a trap.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: Blue Stahli - Premeditated

(*Soundtrack highly recommended for the first part of the chapter.)

A/N: FANART ZOMG! Several pieces of beautiful digital art by Hadronighini over on Tumblr for EDaH. I adore the Garrus/Nihlus head boop pic, but I just can't get over the perspective and shading on Nihlus in the Saren/Nihlus/Garrus one. /flail

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...spirits...please...”

He heard it, as if from forever away. A quiet, echoing murmur from anywhere and nowhere. For the first time in years he thought to look up, prompted by a half remembered dream of a voice that was... so much like that one. Not as harsh, not as cold, but... similar?

Focus rose and he looked around, searching for the source of the sound. He knew it from somewhere, he was sure...

Truthfully, it was strange to experience anything out here. He rarely focused for long, and every other time he had stopped to pay attention to the maelstrom of sand and memory that surrounded him there hadn't been much to see besides whirling chaos.

No, that... was a lie.
There were things out there; flickers and fragments. Jagged regrets that felt like choking for air.
Unfulfilled dreams that sang in bell chimes and tasted like clouds.

An instinct, something quiet but insistent, told him that he needed to face the flickers before he could leave. Only he could not think of any reason to do so. Why search for a pathway through the not-desert when he was comfortably lost amid the shifting hills?

The storm seemed to go on in all directions for endless, endless kilometers, and it was peaceful here, if a bit lonely.

His focus started to lower, unwilling to take up the struggle after all.

“... turn... no one... your people...blackout until...”

'There it is again,' he thought with a rush like a pounding heart, finding the will to look up once more. The words were growing quieter by the second though, dullness settling over his mind anew.

'No! No, keep... keep talking.'

His rising gaze caught the edge of a something sickly and swimming as it reached out for him from the wild winds. Horrified, he lashed out at it. The vision shredded into ash, and for a dawning moment the storm thinned out where he had inadvertently made a choice.

Through the swiftly closing gap he swore he could see spires; towering, silvery spires glittering in sunlight.

'...home?'

He spun in place, suddenly realizing that the storm wasn't just a storm, and that walking endlessly without moving forward was not taking him anywhere. Ever.

Determination rose like the broken line of slowly ascending land in an earthquake, small bits of his own soil lost in the rise, but a new vantage point gained. Though he had been here many years, unchanging and lost, the bone deep fear in that fading voice, the pleading for aid... for his aid,
surely... it spurred him on.

He started forward, on the hunt for more of the things to clear a path out of this place.

Nihilus was backlit by red and bleeding deep blue, the light and fluid mixing with the drying splashes of merc blood on his ruined armor. He tilted out of cover to sight for his next mark even though his body was screaming at him to sit the fuck down for a minute. He'd been at this for longer than was reasonable; the first glimpses of false dawn starting to make a hazy glow over the erratic horizon of Choquo’s urban sprawl.

He saw no one, and nothing.

Nodding with satisfaction the torin slipped back through the insta-crete building to check the sight lines from another exit. His gaze flitted about, tracing the angles and peering at potential cover carefully.

No movement, no suspicious shadows, no telling sounds.

His instincts started to scream at him. No more hostiles should have been a good thing, should have meant he'd won... but he knew there were more targets he hadn't taken down yet.

Stance ready and shoulders tight, Nihilus surveyed the dusty causeway outside the window with suspicion. Dead mercs littered the ground, here and elsewhere, a death toll for the books -or more accurately, the small black drives tucked into the corners of the Council Archive and not spoken of in polite company.

The exhausted Spectre pulled back into the doorway, browridge furrowing as he tried to focus on his gizzard and figure out what was giving him the jitters. Mercs going into a full retreat from their own base... fleeing? Maybe... he'd killed too many, and they were routing?
Green eyes narrowed. No... something... something was-

A crackle of wordless static came over coms, followed immediately by the scant emergency lighting flicking out. The room around him dropped into pitch blackness, even the tiny status LEDs from his stolen 'tool and rifle fading out. The last two came back after a few seconds, but the lighting stayed dead. A quick check revealed that coms were now jammed, and the local area was giving off signs of a recent wide-area overcharge.

'Perfect. What are these assholes up to now?'

Rapidly approaching footfalls caught his attention, and Nihlus spun down on a knee in their direction, ready to open fire. The sight of dark steel composite and a single glowing optic loosened his stance, and he stood back up once he recognized the figure in the door.

“Kryik-Spectre, a dropship has been deployed from an allied mercenary force.”

“How do you know that, and how long do we have? Any details on what's in the dropship?”

The Geth paused for a moment, as if debating with themselves, before answering.

“The Consensus hacked into local communication channels the day before you arrived, and have been listening in to the various exchanges in this area. However, our capability is diminished by the bandwidth limitations of Korlus' com buoys, and the time it takes to analyze organic vernacular. We apologize for the delay in discovering the threat. Reinforcements will arrive in fourteen minutes and seven seconds. We are currently acquiring the assets needed to scan the ship for further information.”

Nihlus nodded, parsing the new intel and turning for the courtyard with the bomb. Fourteen minutes might be enough time to get Jur'Mallo free of the deadman's switch at least...

A half second later he misstepped slightly, but quickly recovered and carried on forward while his thoughts whirled.

The Geth's words sank in. Remote hacking via com buoys? Actively scanning hundreds of conversations at a time to detect threats? Acquiring assets? They were no where near the Perseus Veil, and the Geth Consensus had that kind of power out here? The discretion and will of the largest
population of AI the Citadel races had ever seen, remotely effecting events some sixty thousand light years from Rannoch.

'Spirits.'

Nihlus heard himself calmly ask the platform other pertinent questions as he jogged back toward Jur'Mallo. Mentally shoving the wild tangle of terror, appreciation, and self recrimination for not realizing the Geth's capabilities sooner into the back of his head to deal with later.

He needed to get the op done with, and survive to take this intel back to the Council... Valern. Valern was always the one to come up with a plan for dealing with passive or silent threats that exceeded Tevos' delicate political touch or Sparatus' straightforward military strategy.

The battle worn torin reloaded his rifle with a fresh clip from a convenient corpse, and turned his thoughts to bomb disarmament.

The swish of formal robes alerted Saren to new presences entering the room, but his gaze remained fixed on the... autopsy, -for lack of a better word-, taking place on the other side of the reinforced window. He did not feel the need to turn, as the gait patterns very clearly belonged to Councilors Sparatus and Valern. They stepped up on either side of him to watch the proceedings.

“Spectre Arterius.”

“Saren.”

“Councilors,” he offered quietly in reply.

Inside the room the meta-Asari was being picked apart very nearly molecule-by-molecule at the hands of a well-paid, covert team of scientists. He could tell who was world wise and who was still
youthfully enamored by the science of it simply by watching their reactions. The wiser looked worried and reluctantly fascinated, the fearlessly innocent and science-mad looked at the strange augments with stars in their eyes.

Saren made a note to ensure the scientists were also scanned thoroughly and monitored for strange behavior after the job was done, in case of... corruption, or infection. Better safe than sorry. The silver-grey torin would not take chances with either the cautious or the incautious, particularly on the Citadel.

Valern turned aside to survey the monitors that continuously flipped through the latest findings just as Sparatus sighed heavily; a subvocal waver giving away the older torin's worry.

He rumbled a subtle tone of support, which was received with weary thanks. They had already been over the basic facts during the backroom debriefing with the full Council, and a few extra details in a private meeting afterward. Needless to say, the details of the incident at Temple Palaven, -still highly classified by the Hierarchy-, sat heavy on their minds.

Not that anything but rubble and hearsay remained of that day. Only the unglamorous cavern on Shanxi where the first Monolith had been hidden remained intact, and there was nothing concrete on offer to make revealing it, or the events of thirteen years ago, worth anyone's while.

His grip on either elbow ridge tightened momentarily. Nevermind that Shanxi remained in the hands of the Systems Alliance, or that the original location of that Monolith had been lost in the crash. The only real data they had to work with was the cold, dead monstrosity on the lab table before them... and Dr. Qian's potentially linked data.

His years of on-and-off research and decryption had barely scratched the surface of those files, and while their study had not been any sort of priority before, recent events made him mildly regretful for killing Drs. Qian and Edan. He had not thought killing the opportunistic Human and Batarian scientists would come back to bite him. And yet.

Saren stood stoically watching the proceedings with the two politicians for some time, considering his options. Even cursory examination of the data showed some connections to whatever species or organization had been responsible for the Monoliths, but clear indication would only come with in-depth study. Dedicated, multi-lab, well staffed, fully funded research.

Sparatus and Nihlus knew that the data existed, and was stored in multiple secure locations keyed to his biometrics, but he had not given a copy to anyone. Reasonable, by his account. Who could he
Certainly not the less-than-stringently-moral Valern, nevermind the Salarian Union to whom he owed loyalty to. Though he was fairly certain of the wily Councilor's dedication to the greater good, he was less than assured of where the data might end up amid the various fiefdoms of the Union should the man decided to spend it in favors. If the silver-grey torin were the type to bet, -and he was not-, credits would be placed on STG and a small handful of the power-mad Dalatrasses of Sur'kesh getting copies.

Tevos? Absolutely not. The Asari propensity to dabble in the minds of others was already terrifying enough, especially couched in the attractive disguises of bedroom passion and intrapersonal connection. He would not be the one to hand the Republics the tech to further their attempts to slowly supplant the other cultures of the galaxy with their own. That long con of theirs had stalled in the face of Turian tradition and Salarian non-sexuality, though the Humans and other lesser species were quickly being absorbed by it. Not that he particularly cared.

He had no intention of giving his own people the data either. Between how the Primarch had handled the recent, inevitable attempts at secession and his own personal... experiences with this tech, there was little chance of anyone ever prying it from his talons. Sparatus had accepted that, thankfully.

Without knowing what was and was not in the files, Saren could not to trust any independent agency with the data. While he could study the details alone and eventually find the artifact it was based on, perhaps it was time to expedite that time frame. Long had the thought of initiating his own black ops research facility for this data, and other matters, sat on his mind. His personal accounts were close to large enough to start a simple lab that could provide dividends to grow itself, and he could easily arrange that all contracts included a permanency clause...

The stoic torin took a step closer to the window, considering the electron scans of the meta-Asari's mechanical pituitary replacement with passing interest just as the door's pneumatic hiss signaled the entry, or rather return, of another person.

Makasian stepped forward with nary a pause at the august company she was entering, two cups of kava in hand. She moved forward smoothly, and offered him one. Saren blinked, not having expected the thoughtful gesture after his curtness with the tarin when she had inquired about directions to the nearest kava-percolator-holding lounge or applicable café.

Saren had no intention of drinking it, not trusting her in the slightest, but accepted the recycled paper cup none-the-less. He was well known for being paranoid, but rarely was he rude. The comely tarin took one longing glance at her own cup and turned to offer it to Sparatus.
“Councilor?”

The old torin turned away from the viewing portal, also caught off guard by the thought it seemed.

“That is... I've seen you before.”

“Yes sir. We live in the same building.”

Sparatus' olive green gaze dropped to the steaming cup, audibly interested in the offering, but he looked back up without accepting it; a weary and wry smile on his face.

“Unless I miss my guess you got that for yourself, Officer...?”

“Makasian sir, and yes, I did. Hence, you can be sure it isn't poisoned or laced with anything.”

The Salarian Councilor huffed quietly even while seemingly absorbed in the morbid proceedings beyond the glass.

“A strange observation for your average C-Sec employee to make.”

Saren observed passively as pale peach fringe tilted in a polite nod, the tarin continuing to hold out the kava until Sparatus took it. He looked somewhere between equally suspicious and absurdly grateful for the warm stimulant drink.

“Former Blackwatch, sir.”

Sparatus made a small cough as he swallowed his first sip down the wrong pipe.

“... you live on the same floor as I do.”
"Yes."

"You're a spy."

"I could be, if something came to my attention that merited being reported, but I am honestly retired."

Again, the Salarian Councilor popped in with what Saren was too laconic to say, and Sparatus was still cross checking with his hard-earned politeness filters to voice yet.

"Very young for a Turian, to be retired already."

"I can't say more, my apologies Councilor."

"Figured as much. Makasian is not your real name?"

"Yes sir, it is."

"Mmmhmm... and you are revealing this for a reason."

"So present company is aware that I do not need to be bribed, blackmailed, or killed in order to keep quiet about..." The blue eyed Agent-turned-Officer made a vague gesture toward the autopsy.

Saren and Sparatus shared a glance; the latter taking a considering look at the kava, then the window, then throwing back a long swallow. The electric eyed Spectre held his cup slightly closer to his keel, for the pleasant warmth of the cup perhaps, and hummed acknowledgement before speaking.

"I may have a lead on further sources of information. I need a few days, and then I shall begin checking into them."

The Councilors both nodded at his expected intent to continue pursuit of the matter, and he turned to leave. Makasian fell into step with him yet again as he left. He gave it two hallways before he
deigned to speak further.

“You retain secure methods of feeding information to Blackwatch HQ?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You are here to spy on Sparatus.”

“It suits everyone to have a loyal tarin near him but not in the limelight in case of emergency, but I can promise you I have not violated his privacy beyond the bare minimum.”

“Elaborate. Now.”

To her credit, the poised tarin's steps did not pause, but her subvocals were held in clear check in the face of his flat toned threat.

“I have tapped into the building's public-area security feeds, and have a heartbeat monitor that sends me an emergency ping if any living entities on or near our floor suddenly have a cardiac event of any kind.”

“...that is very vague surveillance, Makasian.”

“One can spy for honest, wholesome reasons Arterius. One can keep watch and also seek to do so in ways that don't unnecessarily violate the privacy of someone they have great respect for.”

“You have especial respect for our Councilor?”

“Well... he is a surprisingly kind soul. Compassionate. Highly concerned with people's lives and well being amid a political forum most often busily focused on business and technological advancement. His job weighs on him very clearly.”

“It should,” was his only reply.
“It should,” she agreed.

Saren stopped in the middle of the hallway to bring up his Omni-tool, tapped several rapid keystrokes, and then made the gesture for a file transfer. Her own Omni-tool pinged, and she looked at him with a curious raise of browridge.

“Ensure the Primarch gets that. Tell him Arterius says 'esclepius’.”

The 'Officer' paused a moment, then nodded gracefully at him. The silver-grey torin turned to walk away.

“-and leave Garrus out of your reports.”

“...very well.”

Chapter End Notes

05/10/2010 - Casualties and Damages From Vallum Blast Tallied

“As the last fires of Vallum are finally extinguished, new estimates for the numbers of dead and missing in the Vallum Blast have been established. Fire marshals now put the number of recovered bodies at 4,278. Military police estimate the death toll at 138,000, based on missing persons reports and traffic flow estimates for the city on the day of the impact. The cost for repairing the damage is estimated at 338 billion credits, to say nothing of the city’s gross domestic product that was estimated at 4.8 billion per year and is estimated to fall to 1.3 billion by the end of the fourth quarter of 2185.”

A/N: I'm sure some of you are wondering what in the world just happened with this chapter, particularly the first section. If that was who you think it is, and if he's at where you think he is... 'where is she going with this?' is probably the question of the hour.

The truth is that I've been mulling over how to handle life, death, religion, spirits, and other such issues in EDaH since nearly the beginning. The game touches on these themes repeatedly with a delicate hand. In Bioware's ongoing habit of trying to represent many possibilities, they presented Shepard's time while dead without laying out any one
opinion as truth, merely offering a highly malleable scenario that different minds could interpret with wildly different conclusions. Bravo, I say, but can I do that? Am I capable of it? Do I want to?

It came down to asking myself a lot of questions. How do I emulate the game writers while leaving myself room to take the characters new places? What can I enjoyably write? How do I express specific things without offending? Should I allow my own views to color this, or will I trigger 'differing belief backfire' in my readers and drive people off by trying to discuss metaphysics in a sci-fi genre fic? There was also the theme of including and incorporating multiple mindcanons from the different fics around Ao3 and ff.net that I started EDaH with, and wanted to continue to honor this.

… but how the heck do I incorporate monotheism over here with animists and agnostics over there without utterly denying anyone's personal truths?

The end result? I decided that ignoring spirituality would only limit my writing, and stunt the narrative. If I don't touch on these issues at all, I will have to say goodbye to some characters no matter how many more words I wrote, and THAT is the opposite purpose of fanfiction. We are here because we refuse to say goodbye.

So look forward to more tidbits of metaphysics mixed in with all the science and bullets my dear duckies, because I will absolutely be giving Mordin his sea shells. I will try to be respectful and inclusive; I will try not to flatly denounce other's truths, but I cannot be perfect in this. It is impossible.

You are, as always, welcome to email me to discuss anything that moves you, leave comments about loves or hates, flames or kudos. Open forum. All I ask is that you try be as respectful when discussing these matters as I will try to be when presenting them.

A/N/N: No, but, really... where did the Monolith on Shanxi come from? The crashed science vessel stashed it in that cave, but where did they get it from? Ffs. I need more breadcrumbs, Bioware. Come on. Please.

A/N/N/N: 'Esclapius' – Saren's codeword is a super vague hat tip to the Realm of the Elderlings stores by Robin Hobb aka Megan Lindholm. Satrap Esclapius is a scholar of sorts who is obsessed with the religion of the White Prophets, and collects rare manuscripts and writings of their prophecies. *ahem* ...how subtle is *too* subtle? XD


Desperately the huge krogan tried to stop the inevitable, tried to think of every disgusting thing he could. Salarians, naked salarians, Wrex thought frantically. Batarians burlesque, elcor striptease, that 'two dalatrass, one beaker' vid Joker had dared him to watch. Vakarian was trying to pry Wrex's hand off his mouth when the Krogan's emergent problem made itself felt. The turian froze with almost comic horror, and that was when Wrex decided that he was going to have to kill his teammate.” - I loled so hard at this fic. A little crack, but hysterical. It's part of a series, and while some of it is a little outside of my tastes, Garrus/Wrex is like the seventh level of rarepair hell. I can't not req.)
Calling, calling, waiting, and trying not to call again

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is effing insane, and Saren is rightfully distraught.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: **Muzzy - Lost Forever**

Who would we be if you weren't with me?
No, I'm never going home again.
We're like animals in the dark.
Where we live I may pretend.
Let's get lost forever (and ever, and ever...)
Why should we stay here when we could run free?
We're lost forever. We're lost forever. We're lost forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Go, get out of here.”

“Sp-pectre K-k-kryik that's a- that's a-”

“Go. I've got this.”

Jur'Mallo looked at the carmine plated Turian like he was insane. The guy's armor was a ruined mess, he was covered in blood, and significant portions of that blood was his own. He had no grenades or rocket launchers or drones or...

There was no way-

“Kryik-Spectre. We are prepared to assist.”
“Help him get somewhere safe to hide, and then come back. If I can't- If I'm still fighting it when you get back, feel free to help. Just don't shoot me on accident, these shields are shit.”

“Acknowledged.”

-that the amazing, brave, and crazy Spectre could kill a YMIR mech with a scout rifle and his bare hands. Just no way.

He started to tear up, distressed and weak, unresisting as the Geth picked him up and started to jog away from the lone soldier. He wanted to help... but he didn't know much about guns or weapons. He could sort-of hack things, but the security suite on a mech was so utterly beyond him...

“G-geth, I need you t-to take me where I can... can at least w-watch... p-p-please.”

“...We can accommodate this request. There is a water tower nearby that will-”

“Somewhere close! G-get back to him as soon as possib-ble.”

“Acknowledged. We are going to move vertically in seven seconds, brace yourself.”

Jur'Mallo held himself tightly as the platform bearing his guardians slowed down, then crouched and jumped up onto a shed. Three more quick bounds took them onto a rooftop.

“Is this location a sufficient hiding place?”

“Yes, yesyes, g-go help! Be careful!”

The Geth's eye blinders waggled as it processed the command for a moment before turning and going to do just that. He watched it leap back off the side of the building, and then pulled himself closer to the edge to see.
The next several minutes of his life were spent trying desperately not to fall apart into tears, or look away from the sight of... of his rescuer in melted armor and blood spatter, running laps around the massive robot. He choked on air watching the agile soldier get behind it to stab *knives* into the thing's components.

‘...oh, dear Ancestors, please protect that madman.’

The YMIR mech would shake the Turian off, and turn in a cumbersome twist to try and stomp him flat. Nihlus would tumble out of range and into cover just as the mech's twin mass accelerators spun up. The firing rate would get going to a light year a minute, chasing the Spectre from scrap pallet to junk heap, building corner to low wall, occasionally stopping to fire the launcher in it's other arm.

Even uninjured and fresh a soldier could only dodge so many rockets...

He winced with every explosion, tensed with every ramp up of the thing's guns, all while begging his forebears to protect the Spectre... until a bullet clipped the Turian in the shoulder, and the red and black figure spun sideways and down, hidden by a pallet of metal boxes...

Nonono-pleasepleaseplease...

Jur'Mallo clutched at insta-crete roof edge and moaned, torn between watching or dropping his exhausted head down to instead *not* watch. He was absurdly grateful when his eyes caught a smear of black tumbling to new cover when the Geth's less-than-stellar shotgun made a few small dents in the massive mech's armor as distraction.

Even with the platform's semi-competent firing and awkward combat tactics as aid, it took the Spectre nearly fifteen minutes of brutally fast paced combat to wear down the mech's armor. Jur'Mallo collapsed backward when the overpowered machine finally caved in on itself and detonated, hands over the glass of his helm and tears streaming from his nose and eyes.

The young man was done, *just so done*, with the rest of the galaxy. It was time to go home; back to the safe zones of low-radiation valleys. To underground marketplaces full of colorful cloth, real food, and familiar smells. To Quarians that didn't have to hide behind glass.

For now though, he wanted a quart of water, at least three good meals, medical care, and to find a way to thank the heroic Spectre for coming all this way to save him. Nihlus Kryik was... an amazing person.
He sat up slowly, and looked out over the body strewn compound. The carmine plated torin slowly limping toward his hiding spot saw him watching, and gave a weak, shaky limbed thumbs up that Jur'Mallo returned along with a watery smile that the Turian probably couldn't see.

Nihlus was just so... just... too kind for this world. Too good for all this violence.

“Geth, I-I have a question,” he asked his companion over their coms.

“Standing by for inquiry.”

“Can... could Spectre Kryik come back to Rannoch with us? At least to visit?”

“...we will ask the Consensus.”

“O-Okay.”

Saren stepped up to Garrus' apartment door, and input the back-door unlocking trigger that he had left in the mechanism's code... what seemed like weeks ago, but had in fact been just yesterday.

He was tired to the point of not just wanting but utterly needing sleep... and oddity of oddities, he did not find his own bed palatable. So instead, he had come to where his oath brother should be, and was deciding between falling face first into the cubitura, or walking the extra few meters to the bedroom.

He was just about to drop into the couch when a quiet snuffle reached his ears.

Very, very slowly Saren's head turned toward the hallway that led to the bedroom. His eyes narrowed and he stalked down the hall, coming to a stop in the bedroom door.
Inside the unlit room a suspiciously familiar crest of horns peaked upward from beneath the blankets.

A sigh of aggravation but also relief escaped him, and the crest blades amid the covers twitched before turning as Garrus rolled over to see what had disturbed him. A single blue eye caught the faint light of the hallway, focusing in on him as he stepped closer to the bed.

“Garrus.”

“...mmn. Saren. Good to see you.”

“Indeed. Where have you been?”

“Mm? You stopped by earlier? I was out working. Just got-” the Detective's words stalled as he yawned widely, pressing his faceplates into the pillow rather than raise a hand to cover it,” -done cracking open a smuggling ring.”

The silver-grey Spectre let his eyes flutter closed, making a few small shakes of his head. The mountainous torin clearly had no idea what sort of wild chase he had sent Makasian and himself on. Their hunt had been for naught, it seemed. Well... that was... unfortunately not true. Something had been discovered among the various tendrils of the Citadel's blackmarket underbelly.

Perhaps it was luck instead. Regardless, Saren did not have the will to think on it further at the moment.

“I see... May I stay here tonight?”

“Mmn. You don't have to ask... always welcome...”

The sound of Garrus' voice was trailing off, the meager wakefulness from checking for his disturbance appeared to be quickly fading away. Saren turned aside to begin pulling off his armor, plate by plate, and stacking it neatly near the wall. His sidearm came with him as he climbed into bed, held in his hand under the pillow and pointed toward the door.
He did not complain when the overly tall Detective gracelessly shuffled into his space, faceplates pressing into his shoulder and an arm looping over his waist. The Spectre sighed quietly, more relieved and less aggravated this time, allowing the contact. In the face of the day he had just experienced, it was... welcome.

The serenity and relative safety of the room had Saren starting to doze off shortly thereafter, but he was too apprehensive to fully sleep. His unbidden thoughts continued to tumble around in his mind regardless of any attempt to quiet them. Eventually he dozed, somewhere between a light nap and unconsciousness, listening to the sniper pressed to his back breathe. This state was not precisely what he needed, but...

It was sufficient.

Chapter End Notes

05/11/2010 - Ceremony Held to Fill Vacant Government Posts on Taetrus
‘The reorganizing of Taetrus’ governmental infrastructure following the Vallum Blast reached an important milestone tonight, as the colony's Laudatix -- the ministry of citizenship rankings -- held its first oserun since its office was destroyed in the blast. The oserun, a ceremony that recognizes the promotion of turians to a new citizenship tier, was initially overseen by local general Timus Aurelos, who swore in the new minister, Anela Saneraxis. Aurelos then turned the ceremony over to her, and Saneraxis formally promoted 1, 238 turians, ranging from young adults entering 2nd-tier boot camp to Radiatum lawgivers in the 23rd tier. Saneraxis called on the latter in her closing remarks, saying "We know the task before us is mighty, and we look to our leaders to help us serve with dignity and strength. Together, we will prevail".

(^^^ Some tier data!!! So valuable... must input this in the Manifesto...)

A/N: So I haven't gotten as many comments as usual, probably because everyone is dreadfully exhausted from finals, dearly in love with Jaal/Vetra/Liam/Reyes/Etc, deeply in need of sleep, and/or I have only been posting once a week. Which is okay! I'm fine without comments for the time being, but it means that when my muse dies I have to go hunting for inspiration. So I thought: Kryterius is definitely a rarepair, -and though Krykarius is the seven thousandth circle of rarepair hell-, there has to be some other Kryterius I haven't read yet. I then wonder if there are any other really long ones like mine? I'd love to read a nice slow build by someone new... and I'm always on the lookout for new stories to req, right?

So I look up Kryterius on Ao3... and I'm horrified to only find 70 hits.

Okay... don't panic author-chan. Filter by word count. Check the fics that list individually. It'll be okay...
Dear... gods... no. Noooo. The next biggest is 85k??!! D: The non paired fics are just...

B-but some of these are series, so it's cool. It's fine. Several of them have top notch, highly edited, and beautifully distilled writing. It's all good.

So I go look up *anything* with them on ff.net...

Only 44 hits.

...44... only 44...

Some of the longest are the classic 'Ghost in the Machine' by Smehur, and ever entertaining 'Coffee and Spectres' by Chromaticism. (Bless them, for we must stick together when in rarepair hell.)

I... I didn't know our boys weren't a bigger ship. There are just so many pics of them on tumblr... so many posts...

I want... to pay other people... to write more Kryterius. Copyright laws are so annoying. @_@

Community service request: Please write more Kryterius, even if it's only a oneshot flash fic. (Then message me with it. <3 )

Fanfic Recommendation: It Began With A Sputter (2689 words) by unholystagepresence
( “...on a scale of 'You disgust me' to 'I want to have your hybrid babies', this was a pleasant middle ground.” Tiran Kandros / SisRyder. Warning for ME:A spoilers, awkwardness, and non-complete. :3 )
~Interlude: A Chorus that Never Dies~

Chapter Summary

The life and times of Liara T'soni

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Miel – A Turian dipping sauce for meat. (Credit: AceQueenKing)
Lal'tsri – A flowery, bright tasting tea made from the seeds of the Lal'rin blossom. This blend has a sharp, pleasant taste as it first hits the tongue.

Chapter Soundtrack: We All Become (feat. Ashley Barrett) by Darren Korn (Transistor Soundtrack)

When you speak I hear silence
Every word a defiance
I can hear, oh I can hear
Think I'll go where it suits me
Moving out to the country
...
Stabbing pain for the feeling
Now your wound's never healing
Til' you're numb, oh it's begun
Before we all become one

A/N: Finally! DONE! Whew. This took such a long time to get out into words. I sat down to write some just about every day, but it was a struggle to get the thoughts to form. I very clearly can't pull off this character as well as the boys, and doing them some amount of justice was a real challenge. I fought through the writer's block though, tooth and nail, and here is the result. It's twelve thousand words long, which is huuuuge for me. (The notes are another three thousand some odd words that it took me to figure all this out.)

SO! Thank you for waiting! Are you ready for a rabbit hole duckies!?!?! HERE WE GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The orange one.”
The tailor beamed and set the gossamer orange cloth aside, putting the rest back then coming out with a variety of colored metals to complement that of the selected fabric.

“None of those.”

A graceful nod and the nais went to arrange another selection.

“Mother, why orange? I like green.”

“Because, Little Wing, I will wear yellow, and you must match me closely, but not precisely. Yellow is serenity, and sunlight dear one. Orange is grace, and sunrise. They go well together.”

“What is green then?”

Benezia laughed softly, tilting her crest to the side at the latest selection of tailoring metals.

“Green is growing things, and forgetfulness... and much too heavy to match.”

“Not even a light, light, super-super-light green... with orange accents?”

A pale red twine of metal caught the Matron's eye in the next set. It was tapped twice with a long, tapered fingernail, and the seamstress smiled again as the options were cleared away in favor of gemstones, both raw and cut.

“No, I am afraid not. Perhaps when you are older I will wear colors to match you. Your bonding ceremonies mayhaps?”

“That will not be for centuries though!”

The rising-star of the T'soni Dynasty giggled daintily into a hand, and kneeled before the little nais.
“That is true, but you mustn't rush these things. Take the time to learn, and grow. Find the perfect shades of green for us. Do well, so that you may walk forward those days with every success to be had, proud and beautiful in your choice of color. Your friends will throw flower petals to the wind, and every one will whisper of your grace during the reception.”

Benezia watched ocean blue eyes widen with wild imaginings of such a simple but glamorous accounting of someday-maybe bonding ceremonies with as yet unknown partners. Fondness rose up at the youthful vivacity. The family considered Liara to be the mistake of a lifetime, the one great black mark on a history of perfection... but Benezia was rather of a mind that Liara was the complete opposite. By the Goddess, the little nais was a treasure of curious wonder, and cheerful if quiet sweetness.

One long nail reached up to double tap the tiny sixteen year old's nose, making it scrunch with ticklishness.

“Well stand straight Little Wing. You've grown since last being measured. Stay still while new numbers are taken, and then we shall have lunch.”

“Yes Mother! Can we have the wiggly beans from Sur'kesh for dessert again?”

“Desert after lunch, hmm? Oh, I suppose.”

While the tailor took new measurements, the canny Matron selected appropriate accessories as well.

Dear Diary,

I've thought about it a whole bunch and I decided that I want to bond with another Asari when I get older because then I can have a best friend and we can go to the park together as many times as we want and they won't go away after only a century like the shorter lived races, because I want a bestfriend that will stay with me forever, and also we can wear matching shoes under our dresses.

I also decided that I don't like white colored clothes because they get dirty really easy.
Kiera eyed the occupants of the meeting room with an assessing eye.

'This lot are to be my companions and year-mates? Underwhelming.'

The young nais, thoroughly unimpressed with the group of children and parents, still took the time to inspect each occupant at length. As the younger group were all entering primary formal education together it seemed... prudent. Mother had always emphasized prudence in one's dealings with others, particularly interactions with other Asari. Most especially with daughters that could, now or ever, lay claim to head Matriarchy of a family.

"-as you'll see on screen, is where meals will be taken each day at your leisure, with respect to your study schedules and dietary needs. There is-"

Ignoring the drone of the administrator detailing the exact same information as was available on their extra-net site, Kiera, heiress of the Monlellia dynasty, instead spent time deciding on whether the mismatched shoe-to-dress coloring of the tall, purple marked nais standing near the door was intentional or not. Was it carelessness on the part of the other student's caretaker, or intentionally done to present a certain lack of concern for appearances?

It was difficult to say, as both the Salarian father and the nais's mother were impeccably dressed. Peculiar.

"-is open to all students of the academy, so long as they have not received any marks against them for behavior or grades. When-"

Two couples over was another oddity, a matron looking old enough to be nearly a matriarch stood next to a Vorcha of all things. Kiera kept from reacting physically to the déclassé choice of mate, certain that it must be some sort of political gambit. There were several Matriarchies championing the cause of Vorcha rehabilitation, perhaps one of those? Still...
'Truly, a Vorcha? What in the Goddess's name stands to be gained from having a daughter with one of those?'

Baffled, the young nais moved on, next discovering the sight of a fellow student in Turian style pants, though the father was clearly a Krogan. Rebellious. Kiera was certain that Mother would disapprove.

'Goddess, did no one teach my yearmates to sit still? The sheer amount of... wiggling going on is unaccountable. I pray they all choose to take the elective cotillion courses. I would be ashamed to invite that one to so much as an informal brunch. Or that one. Please, please, stop bouncing your knee. Good grief.'

On went the diagnostic of intrapersonal value and deportment amid the smattering of soon-to-be schoolmates, most deemed to be unworthy of the time and effort needed to cultivate any sort of closer relationship. That is, until the first real individual of merit crossed Kiera's gaze.

Elegantly dressed? Check.

'In the latest fashion even!'

Lineage? Check.

'A fellow heiress for certain, sitting alone next to a T'soni Matron.'

Poise? Check.

'Quiet, and attentive; not fidgeting. Bless.'

If the precocious nais were more inclined to dramatics there might have been a prayer of thanks, or possibly a fainting spell. Such was the young student's gratefulness that there was at least one person amid the orientation presentation that might just be worth knowing.

'I shall have to introduce myself to one of the others here, so that they might then properly introduce me to T'soni.'
Another piece of advice from Mother: always arrange matters so you are presented as the person to know.

Kiera continued identifying and discarding candidates for a social partner or two, perhaps even a power triad. The young nais had every intention of proving more worthy to be Matriarch of the Monlellia's than the other siblings and cousins lined up.

The pitiless search continued through the room of fifteen year olds, fellow heiresses of corporations and families of nobodies alike, in the elegantly appointed meeting room of Thessia's highest ranked elementary school.

Dear diary,

Today was wonderful! The orientation ceremony lasted a little longer than I would have liked, but the campus tour was a wonder. The gardens here are so big! The data servers in the library are larger than our entire dining room!

Mother says that I should take some time to get accustomed to the campus, and to make friends here, but... they have field trips every other week for students with the highest scores. The list of sites they visit was in the information packet I received today and it just... just... I must study hard!

“Up! More! Hold it... keep holding... down! Slowly now... good, repeat!”

The commando unit as one spun their biotic auras together, lifting the massive training weight up, and up, holding it for a three count before their instructor called for reverse. They were on rep seven of fifty when Audrei noticed the T'soni heiress was watching them.
“Up, people UP! Are you a bunch of spastic Salarian children? Pay attention! I said **up**!”

The mediocre commando in training turned attention away from the scrawny limbed thirty year old, focusing in on the biotic practice. They got to rep twenty or so before it became obvious that half the group was **very** aware that the daughter of Matron Benezia was observing the routine practice. Some were putting too much into it, trying to show off for the child that had the ear of their future Matriarch. Others were just distracted or nervous, all power and no concentration.

When the drill instructor noticed the problem, all hell broke loose.

“Goddess help me, is this why you've all been- ridiculous. If you can't focus with an audience, what do you expect to do under pressure? Unacceptable! Keep going. UP! Maiden Liara, come! Join us.”

The lovely young nais slipped from the shade of the upper balcony, and fell a story to the ground in a graceful arc. Audrei shared a look with the commando in training across the line up. Holy _mother_, that had been impressive. The nais was barely a teenager! Was that from having an Asari father? Crazy... and their strict instructor hardly seemed to notice.

“Curious young one?”

The ocean eyed Maiden approached cautiously, hands folded neatly -one over the other- in front of a delicate waist.

“Well, yes. I have not had a chance to learn...” Liara trailed off, turning to stand beside their teacher while watching them. The nervous biotic tried not to stare at the smattering of freckles on the heiress's face. The little nais was just so cute... it was really no wonder Matron Benezia favored this one so much. Despite the ugly hearsay regarding circumstances of their birth, Liara had the manner of a princess.

“Learn...?”

“-this side of biotics.”

“'Each day you are living is the perfect day to take the opportunity to begin something new.'”
The petite nais giggled like bell chimes. “Quoting scripture as a premise to learn biotics?”

“Absolutely. Well?”

The petite maiden stepped up into their line, youthful confidence and bright eyes. Audrei shared another look with the nais across the way.

“Oh goddess, please don't let me screw up in front of Benezia's daughter.’

Dear Diary,

The seasonal school break is upon us, and though there was much excitement among my yearmates I can't say I feel the same. The school is closed for almost a full month, and the library servers are internal access only. Not that I cannot visit our own collection, but... well I told you about my favorite spot in the back near the Prothean excavation display? I'm going to miss it, is all.

I nearly considered going with one of the open invite groups that were traveling to a beach resort outside of the city, but Mother talked me out of it. What would I even do with myself, sitting on a beach for weeks? Probably just download a book off the extranet.

Maybe build sandcastles. I do enjoy working with my hands.

Anyway, I ended up being pleasantly engaged regardless of my expectations. I was wandering the grounds and happened upon Mother's commandos-in-training practicing in one of the courtyards. They invited me to join them! We practiced lift for several hours, with breaks. My pre-academy tutors used to instruct me in biotics, but it was mostly defensive abilities. I can make an excellent shield, for example. At school there are classes, but... well, there are just so many course options. I have yet to take any physical education classes at all, truthfully.

Regardless, I think I shall sleep deeply tonight. It was quite the workout.
Fel'bi Asina arrived to the classroom listed on the itinerary precisely twenty minutes prior to start. It was always good to be early on the first day. Inside, row after row of amphitheater style seating stretched outward and down toward a centered, circular lecture stage. The room was as yet mostly empty. Expected; both for the esoteric nature of the course, and for the time as well.

At the front of the room there was a nais in the far corner from the door, and two more on the opposite side. Higher up, near the middle rows, were the rest of the early comers, comfortably spaced out. No one sat in the back.

Nodding, the academy student walked to an open seat near the middle and sat down, beginning to pull out learning supplies.

At the top of the hour the professor walked in, a plethora of datapads in hand, and greeted the room before getting right into it. As the introductory lesson on the art and culture of the Protheans circa the hundred and thirtieth century got started, the nais set to note taking, fascinated with the material. Fel'bi left a few hours later with long, scrolling pages of them, and a rough outline for the final project listed on the syllabus.

The course looked to be a fun one, interesting and well paced, and they looked forward to returning.

The nais walked in the classroom again a week later, settling in and looking about as the top of the hour hit. As predicted, after the first day of class had come and gone several faces had disappeared with it, having trailed the course and decided it was not for them. A bare twenty six students remained, quite the small class for Thessia's premier school.

Once again one nais sat alone in the front corner, surrounded by a gap of chairs, and then the rest of the class spread out between the front and middle rows.

Fel'bi's gaze tilted, head tentacles tightening ever so slightly at the odd spacing. It sort of bothered their pedantic mind.

'Maybe I should sit there next time just to close the gap? And sitting alone can't be enjoyable... unless they're just normally antisocial? Hrm.'
Shrugging it off, the nais turned all focus to the day's lesson... but two weeks later the pattern continued. They weren't normally one to get involved with social matters, but the prefect gap remained an annoyance.

After class was over that day Fel'bi caught one of the other students in the hallway to ask about it. Why there was such a huge gap where no one would sit... around that one nais... every week. It was weird!

“Goddess, are you serious?” the other Asari asked in return.

“Er... yes?”

The purple skinned nais looked back and forth down the hallway less than subtly, waiting as the hallway cleared, and then leaned in to whisper.

“That's the T'Soni heiress, Liara. The nais is...” A purple hand was cupped delicately near maroon lips. “...PB.”

Fel'bi’s mouth rounded into an 'o' of understanding, followed by a quick nod. Both students looked around themselves conscientiously, and then shared a glance before walking away, presumably toward their next lessons.

When the next week came around, the gap of seating remained.

Dear Diary,

I am not prone to tears, but today was truly, truly awful. I’ve mentioned the international school attached to ours, yes? Well... we went over there today for our second week of sexual education courses. Last week was Salarian, this week is Hanar. I believe that the idea was to have the sex ed teachers of each species give us crash courses in the basics of their own people.

But over lunch break everyone was eating in the mixed cafeteria and they were so spread out... I
thought I would be brave and just sit down with some aliens. I picked... the wrong spot. Or maybe the right one. I don't know.

I sat down next to a Salarian boy, he was a lovely deep-green color, with large, bright eyes. I thought myself a success when the initial greeting went well, and no one seemed to mind my company, but then... I....

[log saved.]

[log resumed.]

My apologies Diary, I needed to clean the screen off, I started to[Line deleted.]

My apologies Diary, I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. Anyway...

I talked and ate for a little while, and then Jiar (the Salarian boy) mentioned an informal get-together he was hosting, offering me an invitation. I was thrilled. It is rare that I am invited to such things. He sent me the data on our Omni-tools. I accepted.

On the way back from lunch, I caught one of the other nais (somehow already informed of the invitation???) telling him to be careful, and not to try any sexual experimentation with the pure blood. The words were something like, 'It's all well and good to know someone like that, but it's doubtful they would be into you regardless. It's a genetic predilection for them to like their own kind, yes? An incurable flaw. If T'soni did come on to you? Now that's when I would worry.'

By the Goddess, I have never missed or skipped class for a reason other than illness until today. I... I could not go back to that. So I just... left.

What if they call Mother? How do I explain...?

How do I... go to this party, and smile?

Matriarch Amonsia was a nais of habit. Everyday, when the sun rose, there would be juice and toast,
followed by a light jog. Next would come a shower, and dressing, then a skycar ride to the faculty offices on campus.

Most days after that were spent in a long, demanding trail of paperwork and student counseling sessions. It was Amonsia's responsibility to hold the coming of age ceremony for each Asari student, after all, and there was no way to know who was ready to debut and who was not other than talking to them. In the years since appointment, the Matriarch had seen Asari mature enough to graduate long before their core credit hours were done; and conversely, there had also been nais held back for having completed all available classes and lectures in their field of choice, but continuing to be too immature to be deemed adult.

The former were often sent off to apprenticeships, to continue their education while being recognized as an adult. On occasion, they graduated officially, were given the right to vote and the other legal rights due to any free thinking, able adult. The latter of those two groups were instead sent to choose a minor degree to study, to give them a few more years.

Amid the careful, involved process of getting to know each student many things were discovered about each. Sometimes domestic abuse was revealed, and counseling suggested. Other times poor life habits were revealed early, and the nais in question's behavior could be gently corrected. Either through verbal teaching, or the delicate arrangement of circumstance to ensure they encountered the fall out of such things beyond the pale.

Each student was different, and the care Amonsia took was always the same, extensive, habitual, and methodical prying apart of personalities and thoughts, followed by careful guidance. They cared about their position, and what it meant for future generations. What it gave them, and the future the students represented.

There was, however, one problem with the position. As was to be expected, every now and then a student came by that was... difficult to deal with.

Incurable illnesses that might mean they would die too young to do much in life, so heartbreaking; mental instability, revealed as they matured, always a tricky and painful situation to deal with; or worst of all... pure bloods.

Vile. Dangerous. Nothing, at all, was gained with the birth of such a child. That the academy could not inquire as to an applicant's lineage, or act on facts found from other sources lest they seem to be discriminatory... it was a shame. Matriarch Amonsia wondered why the parents of such even deigned to pay the not inconsequential fees of their noble establishment, when such castaways could be just as well served...

Alright, they could not say 'dancing in a bar for the rest of their days' because that could involve them finding someone to meld with... and wasn't that just a horror story waiting to happen?

So, when Liara T'soni walked into the counseling office with a quiet sob story about no one wanting
the nais’ presence in clubs or study groups, being subtly edged out of events, forgotten from email lists, etc... well, there was little that Amonsia could do. The Matriarch offered the pantomime of a sympathetic ear, listening with as much patience as could be found while the young heiress detailed the games that were played to disclude a -surprise, surprise- unwanted presence.

Platitudes were offered, though physical comfort such as hugging was rather more than Amonsia could manage to stomach.

The only thing positive about the experience was that the T'soni heiress was uncommonly mature. No one would question if the nais was graduated early, and sent off on an apprenticeship... elsewhere. Preferably somewhere with no unmated Asari around.

Just in case.

Dear Diary,

I have discovered today that the greatest unkindness one can experience is not being bullied or belittled, derided or ignored.

No, the greatest pain comes from seeking help from those who are meant to be there to do just that, and finding that your struggles are not also their struggles. That they do not care.

I wandered the whole of the massive, sprawling gardens of my family home today, nearly twenty laps, trying to think of how to change the world I live in, but I could see no recourse.

Everyone knows the statistics. Pure bloods have 'up to a one percent chance' to have minor, mild, or heavy mental surges when mating. There is a tiny (tiny tiny tiny!) fraction that have lethal surges. Every one of the above are sent to live in seclusion for all their days.

I am not one of them, I am one of the lucky ninety nine percent, and yet?

My own people's eyes slip right past me when I approach. Their ears close. I can tell who knows and who does not merely by watching who will meet my eyes in a crowd.
I have done nothing, never have I even dated, nevermind melded with another Asari. I am well past the age that the one percent is sent away. I am safe.

And yet.

Goddess, help me never fall in love with another of my own kind, as my mother did. I could not doom a daughter of mine to this.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

In a spill of silk and tears, the nais pled for their life one last time before Benezia give the only mercy available to the traitor: a quick death. With a downward slash of a delicate hand and a taletell blue glow the begging stopped.

The recently transitioned Matriarch sighed softly, regretting the loss.

Agent B'vari had started leaking insider information years ago, undetected. It had gone on to their profit for all this time, until they'd gotten greedy and decided to trade very valuable, very priceless information to the wrong people. Batarian slavers paid well for the locations and travel plans of undefended civilian transport ships. A pattern of loss emerged, and an investigation was begun.

Sixteen of their people, civilians working for the T'soni family, caught in slaver traps and lost forever to the Hegemony's religious hate machine.

Goddess protect them.

The Agent had once been a pleasant person to meet for lunch, and a clever mind to bounce ideas off of. An excellent taste in wine. A good eye for numbers. This was such a waste of potential, of lives, of... just everything. That it was for something so unimportant as credits, on an Asari core world where there was no real 'lower class' and all citizens had access to decent living, career opportunities, and healthcare...

Benezia regretted the crime, and the punishment, immensely. It did not change fact, but even a just execution gave them heartache. If only the proof had not been so ironclad...

The graceful leader turned away as one of the room’s many commandos came forward to silently take the body to a morgue.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
Dear Diary,

I fought with Mother today. It was awful. I don't even want to write it down, just to forget, but the words keep circling my head. It was over some inane piece of news that I didn't care about. I tried to act interested regardless, but I wasn't convincing and...

Am I self absorbed?

I can't bring myself to care about politics. It isn't as if I can get into them personally, my voice would go unheard on the civic forums, and I know enough to make an educated vote in most situations...

Now it feels as if I am the daughter that didn't meet expectation not only because I am *disinterested* in politics, but because I *cannot go* into politics.

By the Goddess, it hurts to think of.

I will... consider trying to cultivate a mild interest. I do not want to be a disappointment.


Bellaros was just... so incredibly bored.

Matriarch T'cheska's presentation on the morphing of Prothean glyphs from one century to the next was going on *right* next door, but the seats were full, and it would be utterly uncouth to stand in the back. Thus, the tall nais was stuck here in the sparsely attended hall where some nobody was talking about dirt samples from desperate dig sites.

"-from the analysis we can clearly see a pattern start to emerge. First, the Protheans that were at site A, then site B, and finally site C. The soil samples and trace microorganisms collected from each sealed chamber match this transition with only an eight point seven percent margin for error. As such, the honorable Matriarch Achula's thesis on Unknown Prothean 1357a *must* be flawed in that-"

*Ugh.* Dirt. The nais was literally talking about *dirt.* There were all of eight people in here. Obviously no one cared about these 'new findings'.

Focus tilted up to the ceiling, Bellaros let the excessively young 'expert' drone on, thoughts focused on more practical topics. At the very least the presentation on the glyphic morphology was being given tomorrow as well, and then the archeology symposium would be wrapping up for the year.

Which meant *after parties* of course. The best part of these things.
Dear Diary,

Please excuse my language, but... *screw* T'cheska's useless, rehearsed morphology thesis. It is regurgitated, trite, and not *half* as interesting as new information of population movement that doesn't fit the current models.

That is all.

(Goddess, why does it feel like I have to work twice as hard for half the credit?)

“I'm just not certain which to choose, Mother. That I would be offered three different apprenticeships was... unexpected. I didn't think Dr. Fibrilirin even liked me.”

“You are clever, and dedicated. More mature than your yearmates by half, my daughter. Why would you not expect opportunity to come knocking?”

Half a planet away their only child flinched very slightly, just enough that it was visible over vidcall.

“Well there are... certain attitudes that I am accustomed to working around.”

“Liara...”

“Oh please don't. It's alright. I'm rather glad to be alive, and I like who I am.”
Matriarch Benezia sighed. The likelihood of being able to conceive again after one felt the familial emotions of matronhood fade away were small. There would be no siblings... and yet the patrons of the T’soni family would be incredibly unlikely to ever accept someone of Liara's genetics as a leader. They would soon receive the honors, once Grandmother Amala passed away, and another would have to be chosen to follow... a cousin, perhaps.

“Little Wing... you are the light of my life. Your struggles are my struggles. Siari.”

“Siari, Mother... but which do you think I should select? I could stay on Thessia and work with Matron T’mon, which would be convenient and make visiting easy. There is Professor Laileria’s offer, but I am rather less inclined to spend time on something so... tangential to my own research.”

Benezia chuckled into a delicate fist, light and airy.

“The word you are looking for is 'pointless', my dear.”

On screen Liara blushed a soft purple, fidgeting slightly.

“The premise of the project does seem like a... less than efficient use of time.”

There was a shifting of eyes, down and to the left. A common tell that the young nais was about to say something less than polite.

“...and whoever decided that Tuchanka, of all places, was a good location to look for signs of previous attempts to uplift a species...”

“Are not the Krogan as long lived, or longer, than we? Are not the Hanar in possession of historical data proving that the Protheans attempted to uplift species just as we do?”

Liara's browlines turned up at the play of devil's advocate.

“Mother it's...”

“Thoughtlessly offensive to the Krogan people, highly unlikely, and a waste of time regardless of the results?”

“Yes! Even if it's true, the chances of finding traces or new data in the scoured ruins that remain of their main cities, nevermind historical sites, is infinitesimal! And, and... and rude! I am no fan of brutes but to search for clues there is to rub in their faces that others might have also meddled in their history. It will stir up unnecessary aggression out of sheer thoughtlessness and presumption. For no real benefit!”
Benezia smiled at the affronted scrunch of Liara's nose. Politeness, empathy, and diplomacy were virtues their daughter carried in spades.

“Well then, it might be best to avoid working on a project you protest the premise of so staunchly... and does not the quietude of the third offer appeal to you?”

“It does, yes. I'm just so used to peacefulness, even here at school is sometimes too much. It is so far away though... we would not see each other for sometime.”

“Such is life, Little Wing. Chase your dreams.”

“I... yes, Mother. You're right.”

Dear Diary,

I fought with Mother again. They believe I grow depressed after dealing with fellow Asari, because of the... we shall call them non-amorous attitudes, and being dismissed until my proof of concept is so concrete as to be undeniable. While I cannot say those are a complete untruths, there are upsides. The latter has, at least, instilled thorough research habits in me, and a quick mind for little factoids. A knack for debate as well.

But I remember being younger, and going out to see courtship vids together. Reading the same articles on power couples in the news. Bedtime stories of happily ever after. These have all stopped, bar none, and I... miss them. Less so the fictional tales and more the shared interest in sociology, but still... it is not as if I am attracted to other Asari beyond aesthetics, and it does not hurt me to gossip like any other nais!

Perhaps it is to avoid facing the choices of the p-[Line deleted.]

I think it is to spare me from any accidental mention of this undesirability I carry. Mildly futile. It is not a thing that can be avoided, merely bared. Besides, who has time to dwell when there is grant money to hunt down and pry from the cold, credit-pinching fingers of research boards? What need is there for social flirting when I have data specimens and lab results?
I need to find a way to tell... no, to *convince* Mother that I have long since decided to love only those who first love me, and to love that person regardless of their shape or size, though I will stick to non-Asari for melding because that is the responsible thing to do.

I have my work, it sustains me, fulfills me, and will always do so regardless of my love life. I would rather we talk openly of amorous topics, then to dance around them.

How do I begin this talk? How do I express that I do not carry that same secret heart which longs for romance and is dull without it when Mother walks on eggshells to speak of this new Turian they met?

How do I bring up the fact that I have never observed green in any notable amount on a single item of clothing worn, like it is a secret, unspoken promise between us of wearing it effusively when I choose a partner to bond?

Instead, we argue and meander around side topics until we both walk away unhappy.

It does not help that I am... so terrible at... talking. Give me a thesis to debunk, and I will destroy it. Ask me to speak heart-to-heart? Just... no. A failing of mine.

The Salarians have a saying which speaks to me. 'Esioselsinraise' is the general phonetic. Literally it means, 'Speak of dirt not clouds.' Metaphorically, it is 'Talk to me of concrete things and current events, but wait on that which is not yet relevant to here and now, or that which I cannot change.'

If only my father had been a Salarian.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Kisaea L'moi was trying very hard not to *hate* the fact that their tag along was listed on the research findings before *three* other nais that were older, smarter, and had been on the project for *far* longer.

Nevermind that Kisaea's name was one of those, the situation was ridiculous on all fronts.

Who cared if T'soni had made a few good guesses that expedited their study? Given half a day or so
others would have noticed the same things. 'Luck', is what it was. Fools luck, youthful energy, and that's all.

It was the extra funding from the nais's bank accounts, and all the fawning and sucking up they did for extra grant money. So what if the team ran over budget? Their group always ran a little low on credits near the end of a project. They made up for it by soliciting donations, throwing in a little of their own pay, and eating cheap.

They came together as a team, and sure, it was a little rough at times, but they always got it down... except here comes this beautiful, precocious, rich little Maiden who is free with credits and suspiciously charming, and suddenly decades of hard work meant less? Suddenly, expertise and dedication meant a lower listing on the compiled research thesis for publishing?

Kisaea vowed to get the bitch disbarred from field team after this next trip. Whatever it took to remove the snake from the pool.

Dear Diary,

I have been published! I cannot distill into words the joy that suffuses me right now.

Published!

Published!

By the Goddess!

Dr. Fibrilirin stepped into the sample lab just in time to walk in on an argument between the person he was looking for, and another of their team's Asari.
“With all due respect, you are stretching the premise rather far. We need to review the data on hand first before we definitively go this direction with it.”

Hands folded neatly behind his back, he approached while watching the younger nais try diplomacy.

“The *logic* seems clear to me, *T'soni.*”

His steps had initially slowed upon hearing the undertones of argument, wanting to give them time to finish their debate, but the vitriol with which Dr. L'moi replied had him moving to interject.

“You are assuming the outcome without... listen, a few days of information review will give us a clearer picture and-”

“*Who* do you think you are?! I've *got* a clear picture, and the decision to move forward is certainly not *yours.*”

He finally made it across the lab and within normal speaking distance.

“Ahem. Doctors. Is there a problem?”

Their tentacled heads turned to look at him, T'soni with polite surprise, L'moi with an unusually aggressive chin toss.

“Dr. Fibrilirin, *what can we do for you today*?”

The elderly Salarian blinked twice, unaccustomed to that level of not-saying-what-you-mean-but-intoning-it. The words had been polite, but the way L'moi had said them was more reminiscent of 'I dare you to challenge me. *I* am in the right here.'

Honestly, whatever they were arguing about, perhaps it would be better to discuss the issue later on, once heads had cooled. Thankfully, he had the perfect interjection prepared, as he did need to speak with Liara.
“Dr. T'soni, a few minutes of your time?”

“Of course...”

Looking purple in the face the other Asari stomped away without a word.

“How... may I help you?”

Dr. Fibrilirin switched tracks, the incident and perceptions filed away into memory in the same manner that all things were quickly processed by Salarians, though he did wait until they were alone to bring up the subject.

“We have a financial conundrum. Tigarri has just unearthed a bit of pottery from the seventy eighth century...”

Dear Diary,

Oh, how quickly does my latest argument with Mother come back to haunt me. One of the other experts on sight pulled up something that doesn't fit the era of the rest of the ruins. Was it a relic kept by the later owners of this place? Is the facility ruins built on other ruins? The scans are utterly inconclusive, except for assuring us that there are suspicious angles and non natural pressure shifts in the composition down below.

I simply cannot abide us leaving without seeking answers. However, we don't have the funding to stay long enough to go that deep, nor the equipment to do so.

The project lead came by the labs today to see if I could come up with any more funding, which is altogether understandable considering my family fortune... if the dispenser of discretionary accounts wasn't also currently upset with me.
You cannot see it Diary, but I am holding my forehead and sighing heavily. If I was a wiser nais I would have been pulling a constant, reasonably low stream over to my own accounts for years now. But I was not.

In lieu of that option, I and two others are going to meet with a few of the dig team's past patrons to see what can be solicited.

Now if only I could convince them not to send me to go talk to Matriarch Basera... I have a feeling my explanation as to why wouldn't be understood by most of the non-Asari team members. Which is a blessing and a curse.

I will do my best to secure funding however this goes.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Tolgoloth knew, from the moment he opened the door, that his bondmate was going to want to have this pretty little thing in their bed. That Dr. T'soni was coming to ask for money for Fibrilirin's current archeology project was merely convenient. Perhaps Basera could skip the long seduction if money was on the table. He was a torin of action, and the extended games that most Asari played before melding were, well... fun, but certainly not fast.

The automated scanners at the doorway picked up the nais' basic information, and the accompanying VI information trawlers began hunting for details on the extranet and through the usual information networks. Standard practice for all guests.

He lead Dr. T'soni toward the solarium where lunch had been arranged, talons clicking on the tilted floors as he guided the way.

“I hope the cooks have spread out something to your taste, Doctor."

“Thank you very much for the effort, I am sure I will find something to suit my preferences.”

What a lovely, mellifluous voice the archeologist had, though the nais seemed unaccountably nervous. Holding themselves too straight, hands clasped in an obvious attempt to keep from
fidgeting. Well that wouldn't do. He decided to try his best to disperse that. An interest in sleeping with them or no, he didn't want guests to feel anxious in his home.

“Of course, this way...”

They turned the final corner, and he held the door, making a sweeping gesture for T'soni to enter first. As predicted, his bondmates eyes lit up when they walked in, giving the younger nais a subtle once over. Basera's expression shifted several times, eventually settling on 'polite interest'. He grinned slightly, proud at having predicted his mate's reaction.

They sat down to lunch, and began the courtship for funding with a discussion of the weather. He was coping by eating bits and pieces of the delectable luncheon spread, waiting until the young nais' attention was securely on his mate before making small, vaguely sexual gestures, such as licking his talons clean after dipping a cold cut in *miel*, or giving a momentary flash of the thinner hide of his wrists, just enough to tease.

Dr. T'soni barely seemed to notice that he was up to anything at all, which only entertained him more. Togoloth was laughing at himself for being the perpetrator of the games this time rather than his mate, -he chalked it up to a half century of being bonded to Basera's appetites and proclivities-, when his Omni-tool pinged the tone for an alert from the information VI.

“Pardon me while I check this?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Certainly, love. Now, Doctor, tell me more about this chamber your colleague found the piece in?”

He tuned them out and opened his 'tool, only to be greeted by a short list of interesting facts the VI's programming had deemed of worth.

Liara T'soni's last health check up indicated the nais was still sexually inactive even at near a century of age; had graduated early with top marks, was named on a recent national publication, was of pure blooded ancestry, had no debts, and came from a wealthy family. A few other statistics scrolled on down beneath those.

What an interesting picture that painted. He wondered why the successful, wealthy nais was here to
Togoloth interjected into the conversation and stole Dr. T'soni’s attention while holding out his Omni-tool for Basera to see. After a moment his mate gave a deep throated hum that managed to very closely resemble 'attractively dangerous' in subharmonics.

He smiled and didn't react while their guest continued expounding on the details of their current project, though internally he was mildly bemused. What about that short list was 'dangerous'? This gentle mannered 'Prothean Expert' seemed no more dangerous to him than a baby varren.

No, not dangerous... but pretty? Yes.

Dear Diary,

There are now enough credits to-[Line deleted.]

I am both proud and- [Line deleted.]

I had sex for credits, and I feel very odd about it. I should not, and I can not figure out why.

It was an exchange, a connection of minds with a pair of lascivious but generous patrons who were more than patient with my inexperienced fumbling (truthfully, I think they enjoyed that as well, which certainly feels better than the inverse would have.) It resulted in more than enough funding to excavate the next level down with the appropriate care needed for priceless fragments of history. I did not sell my body, I sold my time. I was well rewarded, and all parties walked away (or more accurately, passed out from exhaustion) afterward.

But why do I feel so... so... powerful? I feel confident and sexual ...and that is not me at all!
This does not match what the books described about intercourse. I am not satisfied, but instead only more... hungry? Ugh!

I almost want to go back just to-[Line deleted.]

This is ridiculous. I am far too old to be acting like a lustful teenager. Mentally too old. Mature? I am too mature to be...

Diary, I do not think I will participate in melding with very sexualized people in the future. It has left me at odds with myself. Perhaps the connection was too deep? I don't know, but I will be cautious before accepting future partners, for leisure or for business. I should think taking classes on the platonic side of mental skill is in order as well, if only to have a more controlled, shallow connection for such things.

I will see the money transferred into the team's shared expense account, and then take a few days off to gather myself.

“T'sooooooonniiiiiii where in spirit's name arrreeee youuuuuuu?”

“Over here Dr. Atreialix!”

Vera jumped down several tiers of rock, landing in a crouch, then standing and walking down the corridor the reply had come from. Sure enough, their resident details fanatic was more brown than blue, gently excavating bits of rubble and detritus from the newly discovered tunnel.

“How can you even stand to be down here this long T'soni? There's no sunlight, barely enough airflow, and certainly no food or water.”

The last was said with an accusing tone as the nais left off digging to turn and greet her with a wry smile.
“There is an oxygenator running a corridor or two over that seems to reach here just fine, and who needs sunlight when there is this!”

Careful hands pulled a small bundle from a pocket, and held it out to her. Curious, Dr. Atreialix gently unwrapped the cloth, breath catching when an inactive memory shard was revealed.

“Nanus preserve me... this is-”

“Yes!”

“They didn’t have these until the hundred and fifty sixth century!”

“YES!”

A taloned hand held to her mouth, the Turian scientist let the implications wash over her, theories spinning. Now they had an older site containing the newest item they’d found yet, underneath a site that matched the age of neither. The bottom one flooded with sand and gravel, the top one half buried in stone that should not be overtop of sand...

“Have you shown anyone this?”

“No, I was going to take it up to the surface with me in a few hours when I ah... got something to eat.”

“Whatever for? Let's go now!”

“But there is more-”

“T’soni, spirits, it will be here when you get back. Come on!”

Very carefully rewrapping the token, and returning it to it's finder's keeping, Vera herded the dirt
coated Asari back to the surface to show off the newest finding. What a treasure this dig had turned up!

Dear Diary,

Remember that defunct memory shard I found? I've just been informed that it's on display, on Thessia, in the Museum De Asirmaia, with my team's image next to it. It was that holo taken of us as I held it out for the inspector from the latest grant board.

I don't even know what to think. This feels like a peculiar dream. I am so used to pretending not to hear the other members of the dig team when they talk about how insane or baseless my theories are, or forcing myself to keep up a smile and positive attitude when the peer reviews of my articles are ripped apart without a care.

Now?

The Hanar are making inquiries about having access to the shard, which requires my consent as well for some reason. There are two different Salarian science teams vying for the right to attempt to repair it. My opinion was asked. Mother went to get a holo next to the display, and sent it to me with a fond message. So... I... think things are alright between us again?

There are tickets to a ball on the Citadel sent to me by one of the Asari ambassadors sitting right next to me, a thank you for my 'noble donation'. Did they think I would have kept such a precious discovery to myself?

It seems to me that while I love the process of archeology, the documentation, the rare discovery, the sense of wonder and connection with history... I don't care for the attention. I want people to listen when I speak though, so I should try and make the most of this while it lasts.

I think I shall wear a green dress to the ball.
“Has anyone seen Liara?”

Kisaea's eyes rolled as a chorus of negatives sounded off, and their project lead went off searching for the missing nais. It wasn't a particularly uncommon occurrence. T'soni was known for disappearing for days and days, wandering off with a pack of supplies and coming back with that damn smile and ridiculous new theories about Prothean culture, language, or extinction.

The lead archeologist was back fifteen minutes later, headed the other direction, then again after five more, looking disgruntled. Kisaea ignored him, sympathy at an all time low. They'd made numerous attempts to get the other Asari kicked from the team, and three projects later guess who was still around?

“L'moi! Will you run over to the com station and send a message to T'soni? I can't get a com buoy signal from my Omni-tool. Tell the nais that we're leaving in two days for the next site. If they aren't back by then, we'll leave their private shuttle and they'll have to catch up.”

Kisaea's jaw dropped for several seconds, teeth clicking as their mouth shut. A beat passed before they growled an affirmative and started stomping toward the communication tower.

“Fine.”

Reduced to a messenger. Reduced. To. A. Messenger.

The Asari was so furious, enough that they felt cold in their own skin.

'I am a Doctor of Archeology, Paleontology, Geostasis, and History! Now I'm being sent to drag that bitch around like some useless maiden only good for running errands?! I'm doing research, -my own research-, right here, and he asks me to...? Argh!'
fingers to the haptic interface... then paused.

This... was *maybe* an opportunity.

'*He did say if T'soni wasn't back in time we would just leave the nais behind...'*

Blue fingers twiddled in the air above the keys.

'*We're not that far from some dangerous parts of space...'*

Conniving eyes darted around, checking instinctively for observers.

'*It would be such a shame if something were to happen.*'

The Asari archeologist typed away for a while, far longer than was needed to send a single message. Should anyone later check the logs for that day, they would find a chunk of them strangely missing. Just after a message from a Kisaea L'moi to a Liara T'soni was 'sent'.

Explorers and field scientists disappeared out here all the time, on the edges of Council Space. It wouldn't be that strange for a loner to go missing. They should have stayed with the group, people would say. They should have prepared better security for a solo venture, people would say. What a *shame* for such a young life to end like that, people would say.

Kisaea looked forward to having the old team composition back.

Dear Diary,
I am on to something, I'm certain of it. The site we're on now is not Prothean at all! It's... distinct. Somehow.

I can't exactly explain it, but I've got dating samples that go back to the time of the Protheans, and others that go back much further. Granted, so much has eroded from a site this old that the average person probably could not tell there were even structures here once.

Of course, my three samples of older materials has yet to convince our project lead of anything. His words were something like 'There might have been buildings here before or there might have been a single object brought here after it was built, maybe it was a museum? Or a thousand other things. Find more conclusive data, T'soni.'

Sometimes it feels as though I am the only member of the team not trying to prove or disprove the data of those that have come before us, but instead trying to find something new. Something yet unsaid. An odd focus for someone studying history, I suppose.

Regardless of my colleague's opinions, I've begun to suspect this place belonged to the Inusannon first, and was discovered and repurposed by the Protheans, much like the fabled Ilos. It does beg the question, however, who came before them? And before them? There are very few confirmed samples from before the time of the Inusannon, most of them from a site that is-

[Log saved.]

[Log resumed.]

My apologies, Diary. I had to check something on a whim.

I knew I was on to something. Those confirmed samples I mentioned? That predate the Inusannon? The radiocarbon, potassium-argon, and atomic age dating on this sample is nearly the same time frame as those! It's only off by a little under three thousand years. I'm so excited! I'm going back to that area tomorrow to comb it with a scanner. I can only hope there is more to be found.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
Korgo didn't know who sent the tip, only that it was some revenge game of the crazy azure variety passed on about eight times over. Which didn't really matter to her, an easy mark was an easy mark. She figured the stray researcher could probably count themselves lucky that her and her crew didn't shoot to kill during their raids, or sell to slavers for that matter.

Didn't mean they'd pass up a nice clean gig like this though, just that the mark might make it out alive if they cooperated.

“Boss, we're coming up on the Relay.”

“You got our forgery credentials ready? I don't want our names in this sector's logs if we can help it.”

“Yeah, o'course Boss.”

“Good. Get us into the queue then.”

“Aye, aye.”

The sometimes cargo-runner, sometimes-pirate leaned back in the captain's chair, setting the folds of her chin into a palm propped up on the arm rest. A few lazy jobs would be a good break, they'd keep this up for now.

Dear Diary,

Today has been... interesting. Pardon me if I type very slowly, you see I've an awful headache. Worth every bit of pain, but awful.
I found more samples that dated back to around a hundred thousand years ago, and I just... kept digging. I had to fight the gravel in the soil to keep the sides steady, but the farther down I got the better the scanner marked the sample and age rating so...

I set up a containment field, got on a rebreather, and set some drones to work with me, condensing the soil I piled up into condensed little bricks to set aside up top. Perhaps, if I thought this site was ever going to see some proper attention, I would have called in a team to remove the soil in delicate layers and do deep scans of the area before touching anything... but I sincerely doubted I could get either the resources or approval to do so.

Let it never be said that I am not willing to get my own hands dirty. If I am ever heard claiming such, detain them, for that must surely be a clone.

After removing a significant portion of the soil over the course of... well, the better part of the day, I found a corner. Yes, that's right. An underground structure! An incredible bit of luck, countered only by the fact that it was an unstable corner. After only a few minutes or so of carefully removing more soil to see where it ended, the wall collapsed underneath me.

Let me tell you, that was not fun! But... still worth it.

Oh, Diary, inside was an Inusannon burial chamber, disguised from my scans by the nature of the soil. It was already broken open and half filled with detritus, but the security systems still had enough juice to give me a good zap. (Still worth it!) That is what gave me this headache. Modern theory suspects they were a telepathic race, so I do believe the system tried to give me a strong deterrent meant for graverobbers from their own people. It certainly had some sort of mental feedback component.

Perhaps biological incompatibility was why it failed? Or it could have been simply underpowered after all this time, though my scans showed that several of the room's items were still getting power. Lighting, for one.

I have barely begun to touch anything inside, for fear of contamination or breaking anything else... or setting off any other countermeasures. Though it does appear to have been looted already... somehow?

There is no body on the central dais as I've seen in other holos, no sarcophagus even.
Regardless, I am taking every precaution with the site. It's a treasure to find something this well preserved.

I think I shall give myself one more day to explore the wall carvings and take scans myself, and then will call in the rest of the dig team. For now, the site is as sealed and protected as I could make it, and I rather need some sleep.

Korgo’s techie got to work on cracking open the door of the lone shuttle out on the butte, her dumb but loyal brother and the twitchy Salarian that ran with them going over to pick through the deep maze of rock and rubble near the center.

There were no life signs in the shuttle after all, and there had to be at least one person, dead or alive, for that shuttle to be here.

Morbidly, Korgo checked around the steep edges of the cliffs edges for a body, but scans picked up nothing.

Nothing at all...

“Got it!”

She turned around, heading toward the successful cry of her tech. The door to the shuttle swished open not two steps later, and the triumphant yell repeated.

“Oh shit, Boss, these are some sweet digs! Can we keep this?”

“No, shuttles are too easy to track down. No need to give ourselves an easily followed trail. Just get in there, take everything not nailed down, and get ou-”
She was cut off by the sound of screaming, followed by a concussive *thwump*, and then gunfire.

“Fuck!”

They ran toward the rocks, followed closely the other crew, the six of them converging on the center of the butte and it's jagged topography.

“Arrrhgh-lhlglg-”

That sounded suspiciously like a death rattle, and far too fucking close to her brother's voice.

They came around the corner, guns raised, just in time to watch a panicked looking Asari send their Salarian flying into a rock face. The man impacted with a crunch, and slid downward with a smearing trail of blood.

“You BITCH! Kill her!!”

Dear Diary,

I...

[Log saved.]

[Log resumed.]

By the Goddess, you would think I am much too old to want my mother this much. I just..
I killed eight people. They were trying to... I don't know. I don't know exactly what they wanted. Maybe they were...

I did not know I had the mental strength to dominate another individual without even touching them. I made them two of them shoot their own allies, it was eight on one and I was so scared, and I could... feel their horror as I...

Goddess, what am I?

I sent a priority message to the dig team, to Mother, and to the authorities. My best guess is that they are... were, looters of some kind. Pirates, perhaps. I walked around their ship last night, trying to... well, calm down, I suppose. Find answers. I can't believe I...

There are no slave cages on their ship, but I did find numerous artifacts that could not possibly belong inside personal quarters of pirates. There weren't even certificates of ownership or authenticity. I doubt a science team has even seen these specimens. Call me a criminal if you like, but I removed the unidentified items, one and all. They are now on my ship, awaiting proper classification.

It seems I am now a graverobber twice over.

I spent several hours today, removing the bodies from over top the burial chamber. They are laid out near their ship now.
The replies I received say that the dig team is on their way, and will be here first. Tomorrow morning. There is a Turian security patrol on the way as well, though no reply from Mother.

This was such a wonderful discovery. Why did they have to... no. No. I will not let the greed of others ruin what is still a wonderful discovery. There are commandos my age with long, honorable lists of pirate kills. I will not be overcome by this.

I will persevere.

“"In my defense, the thought of one's daughter in danger, one's only daughter, is more than enough to send any mother into a panic.”

The Turian soldier nodded as the statement as added to the datapad's report, her short clipped fringe glinting in the sunlight.

“Considering my years and the trials I have faced, I set out yesterday in the middle of the night with both panic and rage, and with greater intensity than befits a Matriarch. I apologize for... ignoring your Com Officer's request to remain in orbit. With Liara in danger, I was... beside myself with worry.”

The female Turian didn't so much as snort at the understated way of putting the situation. Benezia thought it was most admirable, what with the small armada of Asari ships that had run the technical police blockade.

The commander of the heavy frigate 'Taliax's Blade' had decided that opening fire was a poor choice, and had let the horde of ships through with poor grace.

“Please pass that along to your ship's commander, would you? In hindsight, I feel remorse for the unintended offense.”
Whether that offense was the semi-illegal one of ignoring an order from a technically foreign nation, or a personal shaming at having to stand down against an overwhelming if non-hostile force, the nais did not feel the need to clarify.

“Is there anything else relevant you'd like to add to your statement, ma'am or sir?”

“Ma'am is fine, or Matriarch. Female pronouns suit me well enough, Officer, and no, nothing else.”

“Mmhhm. Thank you for your time.”

Benezia waited for a moment, giving the Officer a chance to move down the hall and turn the corner before standing as well. A cup of tea was made at the sideboard, and the Matriarch left as well, headed down the hallway to the guest suites where Liara's dig team was staying onboard. The nais was only halfway there when one of the intelligence agents stopped them.

“Matriarch, I have some surveillance footage you should see.”

“Surveillance?”

“Yes, from one of the guest rooms.”

“Very well, let's return to my meeting room then.”

Benezia only glanced down at the cup of tea they had made for Liara briefly, choosing to drink it and making another after this was done. Cold tea was no good for comforting.

They settled back in at the table in the room, and the Agent brought up a vid feed time stamped several hours ago. On screen was... one of Liara's team members, screaming into a pillow?

The Agent pressed play.

“ARRGHGHHH!!! I can't believe the bitch survived!”
The pillow was tossed aside, and the nais on screen went toward the restroom, going out of view.

After a moment, the tea cup, and the tea in it, dissolved into dust.

No sound, no glow, just a vague sense of power in the air, and then... dust.

“I see.”

Dear Diary,

Mother discovered who had... who had given the pirates my coordinates. The footage was shown to the entire team, before the commandos caught Dr. L’moi as they tried to run.

I... do not know what to say.

Vera Atreialix heard the sound of weeping all the way from her room. Unsurprising, since the guest suites, -the very nice guest suites but still, could they please go see the new burial chamber now?-, were not built for sound proofing from the ears of a Turian with aural augments. Her days as a soldier might be long gone, but Vera still slept light, and knew the sounds of distress of basically every species.

The green plated tarin rolled out of bed, and went to look for her fellow archeologist. She had younger sisters too, this couldn’t be that different...
She started by knocking.

“Dr. T'soni, can I come in?”

There was a squeak, and rustling, a sound that might've been a heavy swallow, and a few moments later the door open to reveal her fellow doctor in about eight levels of distress, looking rumpled and beautiful in a silk nightgown.

Vera blinked, startled at how pretty the Asari looked while crying, slightly weirded out by the thought too. Didn't everyone normally look horrible when they wept?

“Y-yes, Dr. Atreialix?”

“I ah... Turian ears, you know. Are you alright? Do you... want to talk about it?”

A delicate blue hand came up, finger tips settling briefly over lips as if to repress another sob.

“I don't... I don't even know what to say...”

Vera reached out, settling a hand on the nais's shoulder.

“That's alright, you don't actually have to talk if you don't want. How about we sit down in the kitchen for a bit?”

“Th-the kitchen?”

“Ahh... yeah. That's a Turian thing I guess? Kitchens are the center of our homes. The safest place so... Well, the living room works just as well Doctor. If you want to.”

Dr. T'soni smiled weakly.
“I suppose I'm not sleeping anyway, and a cup of tea sounds wonderful... do Turians drink tea when
they're upset?”

Vera smiled back, careful not to show too much teeth, and started walking for the kitchen.

“I'm fairly certain comfort beverages are a universal thing. Even Krogan do it... though I think they
prefer the alcoholic variety instead of the herbal sort.”

The Asari behind her giggled, and though it was a little broken sounding, she counted it as a win.

They stepped into the suite's well appointed kitchen, and Dr. T'soni gestured her toward a chair at the
breakfast bar as the nais went about making tea for them both.

“Levo allergy?”

“None. I'm fond of that flowery one that you see everywhere on Thessia, actually. In the pink and
red package?”

“Lal'tsri? Oh, I'm glad. There is always plenty of that, and only one variety of dextro in here.”

“It's nice that there is even one, to be honest.”

The nais settled into the next chair, and set a steaming cup, -frail and porcelain-, in front of her.
Mildly afraid of breaking the lovely but delicate thing, she picked it up... gingerly.

“So, do you want to talk about it?”

“I... was not lying when I said I do not know what to say.”

“That's fair. Is it the attack itself that is hanging on you? The killing in self defense? The betrayal of a
comrade?”
Dr. T’soni’s face turned confused, then thoughtful, then dejected. Vera waited silently, giving the Asari time to sip at their tea and think.

“...it is not any of those.”

“Alright.”

“It is... if I tell you something, will keep it a secret?”

“Yeah, I can.”

“You promise?”

“You have my word, Doctor. On my markings.”

The lovely Asari nodded, eyes going distant as they started at nothing ahead for a silent moment.

“My Mother... does not know mercy.”

“... okay?”

“’The quality of mercy is not strained. It drops like gentle rain from heaven onto the places beneath. It is twice blessed; it blesses they that give and they that take.’”

A heavy, heavy sigh escaped from pale blue lips. Vera watched, and waited, for any sort of explanation.

“Doctor L’moi was... executed, and the L’moi family is now facing a lawsuit that will bankrupt them.”
“I wouldn't have expected your people to treat a traitor any differently, but why bankrupt the L'moi clan?”

“You know that Asari are... well, we are very similar to our mothers, yes?”

“Sure. You don't actually mix genetics, right?”

“Yes. Exactly so. Along that vein, if a daughter commits a crime...”

“I... can't say that I follow.”

“Among my people, if one's daughter commits a crime, there is a certain amount of blame that can be laid at the feet of the mother. Conventional wisdom says that if a mother were incapable of the act, and taught their daughter right from wrong, that crime would not happen.”

“Not to be culturally insensitive, but that sounds like the inverse of the old stories of holding a son or daughter responsible for the crimes of their parents, something that is a huge stereotype of... I'd suppose you'd call them the Turian Dark Ages.”

“I must pray that conventional wisdom is wrong.”

“You don't agree with it?”

“I am... not certain. I am still so young. Not even a century old... how can I know? But... I do not...”

“Not...?”

“I do not wish to act without mercy. I did not want to kill those pirates. I would have subdued them if I knew how. I would have exiled Dr. L'moi, not executed. I would have asked the “L'moi Matriarch for... an apology maybe? Monetary recompense for the danger given? Certainly not destroying their family name...”

“Woah, woah... destroying? I thought you just said bankruptcy?”
“Oh, they would not be harmed, I meant their... line of succession? Yes, technically it's just credits but...”

“Is it something to do with the fallout from losing those credits?”

Dr. T'soni nodded, smiling sadly. So, so sadly.

“Yes. Precisely.”

“So, you wouldn't do what your mother is doing?”

“No. No, I wouldn't. Maybe when I am a Matriarch I will understand what makes us different but...”

*I am nothing like Benezia.*

Chapter End Notes

05/14/2010 - Taetrian Emergency Officials Criticized for Delaying Response

“New video and details about the first few minutes after the Vallum Blast emerged today. The Carifinum, the emergency management agency responsible for public crises on Taetrus, delayed its initial response to the calls by half an hour -- a critical misstep that citizen advocacy groups claim could have saved lives. The Carifinum released this statement today in its defense: "From the noise of the blast and the size of the fires, we judged a nuclear scenario possible and, in fact, probable. Our first response, made within minutes of the blast, was to send out teams with particle counters to ascertain if we needed hazard suits to avoid being irradiated. Once it was clear that the weapon used was solely kinetic, we sent every available hand to the blast zone. It would have served no one if our response had gotten our brave rescue personnel killed".”

A/N: Chapter themes: Prejudice is a learned behavior. Discrimination is a subtle enemy. Poise is always the most noble response. We are not our parents.

Trying to express and explore the subtleties of discrimination of a species I am not, with a person who is nothing like me, who suffers for it from a cause that is like nothing i quite know of... was a serious challenge. I wanted use some of the universal concepts of discrimination without coming off like I was on a soap box. Not the point. I wanted
explore it and understand it, not harp about it. Hopefully I succeeded.

A/N/N: Mmhmm, Liara did dominate someone with their mind. Why yes, that is an Ardat Yakshi ability. Your point? >:3

A/N/N/N: Highly relevant picture of young Liara being adorable. Go seeee.

A/N/N/?: I've been mindcanoning that Asari pass down dynastic power in a matrilineal, generally-but-not-always-directly-related setup. The more I think on it, the more it makes sense. I mean... their form of reproduction is very much a combination of parthenogenic cloning meets genetic cherry picking. Each daughter will be literally made for their role. Not to mention, Matriarchs seem to gather groupies like rock bands. Now, if you were a fan-girl/boy/person for the Queen of England, and she died... but left her daughter in the care of you and the other groupies... I mean? It's just? The perfect setup for dynasties.

A/N/N/N/N: I've decided that Asari who know each other to be Siarists will sometimes express the very name of their religion, Siari, to each other much like humans might say namaste, bless you, al-hamdu lillah, blessed be, etc. Depending on circumstances it can be a sweet, meaningful reminder that 'all are one', or a fond farewell, or even a way to accept and positively bear bad news. Because... every religion ever has phraseology? The wiki says that Asari are mostly Siarists, with a few that worship the Goddess still, though all of them use 'by the Goddess!' it seems. A throw back? Probably.

A/N/N/N^n: I decided that 'devil's advocate' was an acceptable use of very human word choice, if only for the fact that the Asari also have demon analogues (Ardat Yakshi meaning demon of the night wind and all), and the conniving nature of Ardats is very much like a succubus, so I'm guessing the concept translates well. Also, the quote about mercy is from Shakespeare. Hey, I figure if the Elcor like it...

NANANANANANA(batman!): Plural pronouns are my new fallback when using descriptive nouns fails me for non-gendered species. Also, brain lights on fire if I use too many. Must rewire it to work. (Work damn you work! Stupid brain...)

A/N^?: The last line is exactly what Liara vehemently tells Kaidan, Shepard, and the rest of the group when rescued and questioned after Therum. I figured there had to be some sort of strong reason why someone would instantly and confidently claim to be nothing like their own mother. It started here.

Fanfic Recommendation: 25 Kisses (2605 words) by AceQueenKing (Kryterius. Be prepared to cry.)
A pocket of oranges

Chapter Summary

Saren and Nihlus meet in a bar.

Chapter Notes

A/N: And now, back to our regularly scheduled Turians.

Chapter Soundtrack: Jetta - I'd Love To Change the World (Lyrics)

I'd love to change the world
But I don't know what to do
So I'll leave it up to you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus dodged a pair of drunkenly amorous Humans and skirted the edge of the dance floor, hitting up the stairs and making for the quieter, calmer second floor lounge. He'd just gotten in from a mission, and was due for some R&R. So... here was to hoping this meet up with his former mentor was going the be of the low key variety. Vivid green eyes searched the sparse crowd, not finding who he was looking for.

'Hmmm. If I was Saren and I wanted to catch a drink it would be... somewhere people wouldn't bother me. Or see me. So...'

The carmine plated torin walked farther into the lounge, circling the bar that sat like an island of bottles amid the quiet drunks of floor two. There were several tables set up for meeting up with strangers, for lone drinkers, semi-private booths even. He still couldn't find his former mentor after making a full loop though, so he spun around, and walked the circle the other way, counting on Saren's habitual punctuality over his own senses.

If the laconic torin said he would be somewhere at sometime, some real shit would have to fly before he missed an appointment.

His assumptions, all of them, proved to be correct. Saren was tucked into a circular, semi-private booth, half hidden under a black cloak, and invisible coming from the entrance. Nihlus rolled his eyes at the inconvenience. Of course, Saren would do the opposite of normal people and sit
somewhere hard to spot when expecting company.

He sighed fondly, and slid into the booth.

“Found you.”

“So you did.”

“It’s... really good to see you.” It had been almost a month. Not all that long by their standards, but enough that he’d really rather this reunion be taking place on one of their ships so he could maybe get away with a hug. Possibly some cuddling.

“I am glad you came... I find myself in need of your input.”

Nihlus turned his head, looking at his fellow Spectre sideways. There was a very short list of things he was better at than Saren, and the slow, purposeful way the silver-grey torin had asked was... off.

“Okay, sure. About what?”

Black talons tapped a one-two, one-two rhythm on the half-empty glass of whiskey for a moment before the other agent replied.

“I have a new apprentice, and I would like to hear your opinions and insights on my training meth-

‘He has a what? ’

“Hold up! Come again?”

Electric blue eyes blinked at him as if he were slow.

“I have a new mentee.”
“Yeah, I got that part. Why don't you back up and tell me how that happened? I thought you said you weren't taking another. Not that I mind or anything, but you were pretty... eh... vehement?”

The other Spectre sighed, heavily, and took a sip of his drink. Nihlus eyed it, thinking about getting one himself.

“My last mission was with former Spectre Ko'sera Astine, and his team of specialists. Have you worked with him before?”

“Astine? No. I think I saw him one time, at one of the bigger Council meetings. From across the atrium.”

“Good. It turns out he was dirty, and a very large, very thorough investigation is in progress for all known associates.”

“Well shit. Were you the one who brought it to light?”

“Language, Nihlus, and yes, I had a hand in it.”

“Alright. What happened?”

Saren gestured vaguely toward the club at large, the semi-public area limiting what they could and couldn't say. He had a feeling the choice of location was purposeful.

As if that would stop him from finding out the juicy bits eventually. Hah.

“In short: there were at least five activities wrong with his operations that the Council did not approve of, discluding an attempt to purchase my silence.”

He winced, correctly translating that from Saren-nese as 'He thought my bank account meant more to me than my honor.' What a fucking moronic thing to try with a Turian that had literally sacrificed their only family for the greater good. Purchasable loyalty? No.
“Is he... still alive?”

“No.”

The carmine plated torin nodded, expecting that.

“Okay, so, how does the apprentice come into this equation?”

“Not all of his Specialists were dirty. I vouched for those that aided me, particularly the instigator.”

“His own people willingly tattled?”

Silver-grey crest bobbed in the blue club-lighting, glinting faintly as he nodded.

“Correct. One came forward, then another caught us speaking and added their proof as well. In the end, three of eight helped shed light on the circumstances.”

“Tell me about ’em?”

“The last was a technical prodigy, a Quarian, who truthfully just wanted to return to the flotilla. They were there under duress.”

“That sounds stupid. Like Astine was just asking for it. The second one?”

“A... Human, who had signed on for the lowered weapon restrictions in Citadel Space, and wanted to sign off when certain morals were violated, but was too cowardly to do so without assistance.”

He nodded, absorbing details and forming a picture of events as they went, desire for a whiskey of his own increasing.
“So who was the initial snitch?”

“A Turian by the name of Avitus Rix.”

“He's our new guy then?”

“Potentially.”

Nihlus scoffed.

“Saren, I know you. If he wasn't Spectre material to start with, you wouldn't work with him in the first place. My only question is how you ended up training someone you vouched for, *again*. You wouldn't believe how many people have made a point to tell me how rare that is.”

His former mentor's eyes unfocused toward the tabletop, then he threw back the last finger of alcohol and set the glass back down with a nearly inaudible *clink*.

“I have been told that the focus I give to my ongoing project is too intense. The Council believes I need a change of pace before returning to it.”

Nihlus winced, fairly certain that the 'ongoing project' was the galaxy-wide scouring for monolith sites and the dangerous bioweapons they each held. He would put credits on the idea being either Tevos' or Sparatus'. It smacked of Tevos' team mari attitude, but also of Sparatus' classical Turian 'looking out for his people'. Hell, it might've been Valern pragmatically trying to prevent an agent from burnout. Regardless... they weren't exactly wrong. Saren *had* been running himself ragged, more or less keeping up with his usual duties in the 'Verge while also making time to find and follow leads.

Not that his fellow Spectre had found a single new site yet, to the best of his knowledge.

“Well...”

*How to put this in a good light?*
“It could be fun?”

His former mentor's glare was proof of failure. Granted, 'fun' wasn't generally one of Saren's big motivators. For some reason.

“Maybe a change of pace will be a good thing. You can go back to the data with a fresh mind after a little break.”

“The time it takes to train an agent is not a 'little' amount. I tried to refuse. They insisted.”

He hummed in commiseration, chancing a supportive arm squeeze.

“That's true... Okay, let me grab us fresh drinks, and we can have the rest of this conversation. Unless you want to go somewhere private for more details?”

He watched the consideration tug at Saren's expression, whatever minutia he hadn't wanted to get into, -had successfully avoided getting into by being in a bar-, the main topic seemed to have come and gone. The stolid torin nodded once, and slid from the booth. Nihlus followed suit.

“So how long was Rix working for Astine?”

“Almost three years.”

“... damn. You're going to tell me the whole story, right?”

“Perhaps.”
05/16/2010 - Turian Separatist Kihilix Tanus Demands Independence for Eluria

“In a prepared statement uploaded to the extranet, Taetrus separatist Kihilix Tanus demands that the Turian Hierarchy recognize the island continent of Eluria as the free and independent state of Parthenix, or face further attacks from spacecraft used as weapons. Calling the Vallum Blast "merciful" and saying he has ships that could hit with "100 times that force", Tanus boasted that even Palaven itself was not safe. Primarch Idus Valen responded almost instantly, saying "Justice neither trembles nor runs in the face of evil. We will execute our plans, no matter the threat". The extranet reaction has been more biting: despite the vid being released only hours ago, a game application called "Radiatum Response" has already gone viral. The app allows players to orient crosshairs on the faces of the turian separatists in the video and fire excrement, bullets, or pies.”

A/N: Well what the actual fuck, who is that Primarch??? /grumble grumble/ One of these days I will have found ALL of the vague references to Turian infrastructure, and figured out a mostly-canon system for how it could all possibly work. It'll happen! More importantly: TURIANS HAVE PIE. IT'S CANON.

A/N/N: Well, Avitus did say he worked 'for the council' for 15 years. He didn't say 'as a Spectre', now did he? Watch me retcon on a technically to fit my timeline, wuahaha! Also, twoish years as a specialist totally counts for something. Our squadmates go through the same shit we do, they just don't get a say in deciding between plan A and plan B. Amirite? Hahaha... poor schmucks.

Fanfic Recommendation: Dreaming of Sunshine (655,693 words) by Silver Queen (Non-Mass Effect. From the Naruto anime universe. Recommeded for being amazing (seriously). Here is a collection of the worst fanfiction troupes, all done really-really-really right. Self insert, OCs, main character takes someones place in the canon plot, etc etc. Except? The writing is wonderful, the characters are vivid, the story is changed in subtle, clever ways, the changes and after effects are realistic, and the humor is gloriously snarky. I was skeptical, very very skeptical, until I read it. Almost 2/3rds of a million words later? I'm a believer. Legit, crazy good, self-insert fics DO EXIST. :D )
Aiesha was on her way back from lunch break, a quiet affair at a presidium café, when she caught the sounds of an disagreement coming from a rather familiar office. She paused mid-corridor, curious.

“How about...?”

“Negative.”
“This one?”

“No.”

“Her?”

“Definitely no.”

“Garrrrrusss.”

“What?”

“Don’t you ‘what’ me! You have to go, and going alone will look bad. I know it, you know it, now stop being so picky. Just… choose one. Flip a credit chit. Something.”

“Well this is… an odd conversation. Pick what, I wonder?’

Unable to resist the siren call of a puzzle, Detective Makasian moved closer, making no secret of her interest or any attempt to be quiet.

“How about this one?

“Also no.”

“Well~?”

“You showed me that one already.”

On screen, a grumbling tarin of similar coloring to the oversized sniper she worked with -and spied
on- swiped sideways on a datapad and held it back up; another image of a well put together female in elegant clothing appeared.

“At least you're paying attention... and this one?”

“Negative... make that triple negative.”

“What? Why! She’s perfectly acceptable.”

“Mmm, no. Way too short. I’d get a crick in my neck trying to dance with her.”

This conversation just kept getting weirder and weirder. Giving up on figuring it out by verbal cues alone, she coughed, raising an eyebrow when Vakarian’s chair swiveled partially around before he waved offhandedly and returned forward, well used to her presence by now.

“Hey, Mak-”

The tarin on screen trilled loudly, “Who is that?!?”

Vakarian snorted, typing away on a different monitor.

“That would be my partner, Detective Ma-”

“Take her!”

“Hah. No.”

“Garrus, you have to go to this ball. You understand that right? Pari is becoming a senator. A-sen-a-tor.”

“Yeah Sol, I got that much.”
“If you go alone, every rank jumper in a five klick radius will be climbing you like a festival pole. The avahs will talk.”

Makasian heard the replied distaste for that in his subvocals, loud and clear. At least being an apparent target for whatever this was had started to fill in some of the blanks...

'A ball? Dancing? … Ahah. They're potential dates. She's trying to hook him up.'

The tarin on vidcall, likely a relative of Vakarian's with such similar plate color and markings, pointed one long, thin talon in Aiesha's direction, making intent poking motions.

“So invite her.”

The stone plated Officer glanced over at her, a playful glint in his eyes.

“Can't, out of my league. Way too pretty.”

The relative on call made a very quiet, closed mouth scream of frustration.

“Listen, if you won't invite a random coworker, or someone at a bar, or another person on the guest list, or a professional escort, then…”

“Then?”

“You are screwed. You can't take one of them, okay? You can't. I'm trying to help you here, but I can't do a thing if you won't work with me, fraten.”

“Eh, I’ll figure it out later. I've got a while.”

“Less than three months!”
“Plenty of time.”

The tarin on screen tossed her hands in the air, rumbled exasperated, suppressed fondness, and closed the call.

Vakarian leaned back in his chair, giving up the pretense of being busy and scrubbing a palm over his crest. The peach toned tarin raised a browridge at him, pulling out the stool he kept under the desk to sit down on.

“Technical difficulties?”

His mandibles flicked in a lopsided, wry smile.

“Something like that… I don’t suppose you would be interested in going to a senatorial election ball on Palaven?”

Aiesha couldn’t keep the amused, disbelieving look off her face.

“What’s in it for me?”

Vakarian laughed outright, shaking his head.

“Good question?”

With absolutely no ulterior motive, -whatsoever-, Nihlus steered a distracted Saren to the nearest rapid transit terminal and set the autopilot for Garrus’ place instead of the docks. It was a testament to how preoccupied his former mentor was that looking down the barrel of a new mentee had him too distracted to notice the unplanned rerouting.
All the more reason to support the Council's decision, in his opinion.

The ride there was quiet, and all he got for his deception was a mild huff as Saren lead them away from the landing pad and up to Garrus’ apartment.

Of course, it was almost expected that when they pinged the door at nearly midnight no one answered. Nihlus rolled his eyes and messaged Blue while Saren hacked them in.

FROM: 1886039//ID.code:LOCAL
TO: 7946130//ID.code:trueshot

officer. garrus. vakarian. you had best not still be at work this late. also: if saren and i have to spend the next several days hunting you all over the station because you've gone dark while chasing a lead, there will be reprisal. possibly in the form of extortion for sexual favors. you have been warned.

END MSSG

A reply came before he could even finish stealing a beer from Blue's chill unit. It was the only thing in there besides a sealed container of ancient-looking take out that was probably borderline sentient. Or... maybe it was more crime scene evidence? The beer was really the only trustworthy option.

FROM: 7946130//ID.code:trueshot
TO: 1886039//ID.code:LOCAL

Hey now. I'm actually in line to get dinner. I'm guessing you're on station? (We both know extortion isn't required for sexual favors, Palvi. That's just overkill.)

END MSSG

The long limbed torin flopped down on the cubitura and listened to Saren flip through cupboards with a low bass tone of aggravation. Compulsive stress baking was difficult to do in a kitchen stocked like the zombie apocalypse had happened sometime last year.

FROM: 1886039//ID.code:LOCAL
TO: 7946130//ID.code:trueshot

here's some overkill for you: i'm on your couch, drinking your beer. ha!

speaking of food, you mind bringing back some extra? i'm starving, and saren is digging through
your pantry while making huffy noises.

END MSSG

His fellow Spectre had meanwhile settled down in the living room's lone chair by the time he finished typing, a cup of tea, -produced from the spirit's aether or something-, in his hands. Nihlus shifted to lounge on the arm of the couch closest to him.

FROM: 7946130//ID.code:trueshot
TO: 1886039//ID.code:LOCAL

Damn, looks like the kill shot was yours. I'll bring enough for three. Are you staying?

END MSSG

The carmine plated torin replied with a tentative affirmative, and closed the screen on his 'tool to start up the awaiting conversation with Saren.

“Allright, Blue's getting us food and coming home. So... tell me about Rix.”

“He is... independent, and dedicated.”

“Let's be fair, those two words describe half the people I know. Give me the juicy bits.”

“The juicy... bits?”

The baffled look Saren was giving him nearly made Nihlus snort beer out through his nasal plates.

“Yeah, you know, the good stuff. You worked with him for several weeks on that mission, right? So... what kind of food does he like? What's his load out? How well does he hold his liquor? Does he use incendiary devices or incendiary devices?”

“How, pray tell, is all of that relevant to my training methods for him?”
Nihlus sighed like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders, overdramatic and forlorn.

“Saaarennnn. Half the reason we didn't get along for the first year was because you didn't care about my juicy bits... I mean my personal details. Well okay, for the record, I would have also been completely okay with it if you had been interested in my actual juicy—”

“Nihlus.”

The carmine plated torin snickered, an auburn hand scuffing against his mouth plates while he refocused on the topic at hand.

“What I’m saying is that my first piece of advice for you is to get to know Rix as a person before you get into the meat of training him. The torin's already been working with ST&R for years now. He might have a few unintentionally learned bad habits for you to correct, but for the most part he's going to know where to take paperwork and who to talk to about research requests, intel grants, etcetera. Meaning you can speed-run through the bureaucratic stuff and get right to work on molding the torin into being a stronger, smarter him. Hell, Astine might have done some of that work for you, so he probably won't take as long to teach as I did. Probably.”

Saren perked up as he translated the advice into terms of efficient methodology, horns tipping up as he took a drink of tea and hummed in consideration.

“I see. He... favored noodles at meals. Quarian style noodles. He used an assault rifle primarily, and dual side arms that I did not see him use. There was no alcohol involved at any point, so I am uncertain on that point. I do not want to know what difference you ascribe to incendiary devices said one way or another, but he did use the occasional grenade. To acceptable effect.”

“Tsk, just plain old explosives then? Well I suppose you couldn't be lucky enough to get two budding explosion experts in a row.”

“Thank the spirits for that.”

Nihlus choked on air at the teasing and sat up; bottle lip pointed accusingly at his fellow Spectre.

“Oi! I use explosives to exemplary effect, thank you very much. I've saved entire missions thanks to Riaz's thermodynamic teachings.”
Green eyes sparkling at the back and forth, he's about to return fire when the door slides open and Garrus comes in, arms full of bags that smell like delicious fried things. His attention to the conversation is momentarily tossed aside in favor of those decadent scents and the gorgeous stack of Turian bringing them closer.

"Blue, you wonderful bringer of edibles, are a sight for sore eyes."

"Ha, hello to you too, Nihlus."

Chapter End Notes

05/17/2010 - Reporters Attempt to Re-Create Vallum Blast Scenario

"Two reporters from the Sirenum Scopuli Network have attempted to re-create the scenario necessary to cause another Vallum Blast. Faking their credentials with high-resolution omni-tools, they managed to charter the private vessel MSV Zothera and fly it into orbit; there, a computer expert claims he set its coordinates for the city of Regeris but was stopped by the ship's hardcoding. "FTL plotters are all about safety, and you need a very specific skill set to bypass them," says Serus Lilix, who handled the piloting. "It's like finding a particle physicist who can also build a locomotive." Primarch Idus Valen was asked in press conference today about the incident and he praised the reporters for their work. He declined to comment on the specific differences between the reporters' tactics, those of Vamire Squaron, and the failed [Earth local date] February 23rd hijacking now attributed to Facinus, saying "I'd rather not broadcast an instruction manual on what Facinus has learned.""

A/N: Sir Issac Newton is the deadliest son-of-a-bitch in space.

A/N/N: I'm so happy to be back to writing Turians being their wondermous kitty bird selves. I know there is all this plot and drama and stuff, but honestly I just like writing about Nihlus being a flirt and Saren not getting people and Garrus being an ass. The whole fic is really just about stealing beers and talking shop about explosives.

A/N/N/N: No, but, really... does anyone know if there are any zombie apocalypse fics? I would pay money to read about basically anyone in the cast as a part of a ragtag team of survivors on the Citadel in a zombie outbreak situation. Just like... Saren being aggravated by the mess that blood spatter makes all over the nice clean presidium floors. Nihlus hunting down and stockpiling pizza ingredients like a fiend. Hell, how about no Reapers? Desolas, Abrudas, and most of their squad escape a zombie torn Palaven to make it to the Citadel, and the two Arterius brothers have the beginning of a reunion
when suddenly a zombie horde comes rushing in, and Tali'Zorah and Ashley Williams end up saving everyone via a stolen C-Sec skycar. Wrex and Grunt are immune to the plague, so they front line supply runs with a biotic Shepard. Garrus watches their six like a hawk. Adrien Victus has an ill advised romantic liaison with Diana Allers because the stress gets to him, but she turns out to be a really great friend to him. Karin Chakwas, Mordin, Miranda, and the medic from Desolas' squad all work around the clock in the ruins of Huerta to try and find a counter agent for the crew members that had gotten bitten and were now in stasis pods awaiting a cure. Of course, Kolyat and Oriana...

... I am not writing this. YOU write this. //shifty eyes//

Fanfic Recommendation: breathe in, breathe out (882 words) by NoisyNoiverns
(Kryterius. Emotionally intense, featuring post-indoctrination Saren in the hospital.)
Avitus Rix

Chapter Summary

Introducing Avitus Rix

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Oma Ker - a temperate garden world currently in its megafauna stage. The planet's nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere and dextro-amino-acid-based life wasn't particularly attractive to the Volus, so they sold the colonization rights to their Turian partners. (Credit: ME wikia)

A/N: After carefully listening to Avitus' dialogue in ME:A over and over and over... I detected a very faint southern drawl! PLEASE READ ALL HIS LINES WITH A 'Thank ya kindly' and 'Yessum' accent, for important plot reasons. (Okay, that's a lie. I just enjoy accents too much.)

//--delighted giggle--/

Chapter Soundtrack: **THEY. - Motley Crue (AWAY Remix) (Explicit lyrics)**

Some might say we're armed and dangerous.
Pay the price of the life every night, but it ain't enough.
Pain is the name of the game when they play with us.
Say what you sayin', but that lane ain't the same for us.

We all bend the rules, we know what to do.
We got nothing to lose, got nothing to prove.
We all bend the truth, take a walk in our shoes.
We just wanna cruise, nothing to prove.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avitus watched the Keeper across the causeway for lack of anything better to do. After an exceptionally large amount of paperwork he'd been told to wait here by Councilor Valern until his soon-to-be-mentor came to get him. 'Here' being one of the surprisingly cozy nooks in the Council Chambers, with soft orange lighting and flowering trees, cute little benches and probably a
thousand-thousand listening devices.

Rather than risk touching anything, the orange eyed torin stood near the wall in a comfortable parade rest, and waited with something resembling patience for another Spectre to come drag him off for 'training', whether he wanted to be trained or not. The former mercenary sighed, deeply regretting the day he'd met Ko'sera Astine. Avitus wished, sincerely, that he could take it all back.

Meeting him, accepting the first job as canon fodder, and everything after. Everything.

The pay had been seriously good and very needed at the time, the compliments as he performed well on the mission had been flattering as hell coming from a Spectre, and the permanent job offer at the end had seemed like divine providence in the face of his medical condition.

Spirits, it had all started well. Ko was... had been a clever, beautiful torin. Honestly, Avitus had fallen hard long before they'd ever slept together. The crew had been varied and competent, the jobs were challenging, and the food had been good. Good perks all around, really. It'd been a real good thing... until he'd dug too deep, and then suddenly the generous figures on his paycheck had a back story.

A Batarian backstory that Avitus had wanted no part of... and like an idiot, he'd straight up told Ko'sera that he wanted out.

That was when the blackmail had started. The mind games. The subtle threats...

“Agent Rix?”

The orange eyed torin turned toward the voice as they approached, an Asari in a crisp white dress stepping up to him.
“What can I do for you?”

The nais smiled at him apologetically.

“I was sent to let you know that Spectre Arterius is in a meeting with Councilor Tevos. You'll have to wait a bit longer.”

“... Arterius?”

“Yes? Your mentor?”

Well. That answered a question he hadn't thought to ask. One new slaver driver had seemed no different from any other when all he wanted was a shuttle ride back to Oma Ker and possibly some severance pay.

But that would be a hella suspicious, wouldn't it? What *upstanding* and *loyal* servant of the Council would want to opt out after their leader had proven to be a traitor to the cause? Certainly not Avitus Rix, no siree... he was *all* about proving his loyalty and making up for aiding and abetting his ex... 'team lead'.

The pale torin mentally snorted to himself, not buying his own bullshit, but hoping that everyone else had. He really just wanted *out*, but *out* was not what people who worked with traitors to black-op organizations got to do, and *fuck* he did still need the money.

So rather than risk getting 'disappeared', Avitus smiled and nodded at the nais like all was right with the world. The former merc had a feeling he would be doing a lot of that.

“Oh, right. Well that's no trouble. I'll just keep on waitin' for him.”
The Asari nodded politely and wandered back off to doing whatever else Council minions in white dresses did. The fake smile dropped from his mandibles as Avitus let himself slouch a little.

Saren Arterius was his new boss? Welllll... could be worse.

The biotic torin had been one of many Spectres that had teamed up with Ko and their squad to get things done on occasion. While he hadn't been Avitus' first opportunity to snitch on his heartless ex-boyfriend, he had been the first to show up after the guilt had gotten to be too much. Once you caught sight of something in the ruins of a terrorist attack on the news that you remembered moving with your own hands...

Well, he'd decided then and there that enough was enough. It had just taken the orange eyed Turian a little patience to wait for an opportunity, a bit of luck in gathering proof without getting caught, and the weight of another Spectre to shed light on the truth while he hid behind them. It helped that Saren was the Citadel Council's golden child. It also helped that the torin was terrifying when angry, and excessively competent.

Avitus had given the other torin all his proof, offered his throat in submission, and prayed to the spirits that the electric eyed biotic would understand that he'd just gotten caught up in the middle of it. He'd explained in every detail that it wasn't what he wanted and just making the choice to go against Ko had taken all his guts because Astine's heart was blacker than deep space.

The angry creature that had walked away from him on a war path for confirmation had been more building storm then Turian. Very quiet, deceptively slow to move, and preceded into every room by a hint of ozone.

Yeah, he could definitely have been given worse task masters; Arterius was refreshingly straightforward and seemed to have a strong sense of justice. Hell, maybe his new 'mentor' would help get him off of this carnival ride...

Sure, he wanted to do right by the galaxy, wanted good fights and enough pay to manage his health,
but as an actual Spectre?

Nope. No Thanks. Too high stakes, too political. Way above his intended pay grade.

Avitus caught a glimpse of silver-grey Valluvian horns coming around a corner, and made himself stand up straight. Time to play at looking like the honest citizen that he supposedly was. He toyed with the idea of failing to pass muster for Spectre candidacy. Maybe he could just be an ST&R lackey for a few years then go back to being free lance...

Chapter End Notes

05/18/2010 - Governments Re-Examine Need for Kinetic Barriers in Metropolitan Areas
“The Vallum Blast has governments re-examining a critical question: do major metropolitan areas need kinetic barriers? The technology exists: emitters designed to shield asteroid-prone colonies can be mounted on high-altitude balloons and tuned to allow slow-flying planes and starships in while shielding cities from ships flying at hyperlethal speeds. Some turian cities on Palaven have them already. But the cost is substantial: covering a sprawl such as Earth's Los Angeles could initially run as much as 848 million credits, with an annual cost of 74 million to monitor and maintain the emitters. Less wealthy cities would have to do without, bumping them up on the list of potential targets. Experts say the easiest solution is to upgrade ship VIs so that bypassing the safety protocols is even more difficult. "The hype is that anyone with hacking skills can turn a ship into a relativistic weapon", said Taetrian professor of computer science Arayna Hanus. "Fortunately, hard-coding prevents this in 99% of cases".”

A/N: The 1% is always the most dangerous.

A/N/N: Opinions requested! Do you enjoy the smaller chapters more frequently or would you prefer to see one big update at a time? Both, either, strongly one way or the other? Let me know!

Fanfic Recommendation: My Boy Builds Coffins (3223 words) by AceQueenKing (Super cute, despite the title. Saren, Nihlus, and IKEA furniture.)
Chapter Summary

Saren is as unreadable as ever, even to people who know him.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

EAS courses– Environment Assessment and Survival courses.

CEESIM – A Combat Electromagnetic Environment Simulator provides simulation of multiple, simultaneous emitters and static/dynamic platform attributes required to faithfully simulate true-to-war conditions. In its various configurations, it generates complex, dynamic electromagnetic environments for direct-injection or free-space radiation into electronic warfare systems. (Credit: Real world.)

UWT – Unconventional Warfare Training; encompassing tactics such as infiltration, espionage, exfiltration, military-centric decision making philosophies and applications, as well as special ops training such as air to ground deployment. (Credit: Real world.)

SERE – A realistic recreation of dangerous situations to learn and practice survival, escape, resistance, and evasion tactics. (Credit: Real world.)

Chapter Soundtrack: Blue Stahli – Overklock

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Riaz sidled up to Arterius' side in the ST&R training facilities and watched the ongoing show on the level below for a few minutes in peaceable silence. The Turian running through combat sims was doing well for wearing what looked like half price armor, and being on one of the highest difficulties the VI could offer. She watched with interest as he dove behind a wall, set a trip mine, then backed out in another direction to avoid getting cornered.

Not too shabby, really. Good tactics when outnumbered thirtyish to one.

“Ach, izzat cha new babe? He's a pale one, ain't he? Right handsome... though tha birds are sayin' that 'un came from a bit of a bad litter, so ta speak.”
“Hello Tio'fore. Yes, your sources would be correct. My new protégé was a Specialist for Astine.”

“Aye, I thought so. Hmm... was right merciful what cha did, so ya know.”

The silver-grey Turian half turned to her, a browridge lifted in silent question. She smiled, but it was not a nice smile.

“She took another glance at the combat sim playing out below them, and the wildly dodging Spectre candidate in it, before spinning around and leaning back against the railway. Saren was silent for a moment, then hummed a low tone she recognized as disapproval.

“Torture without purpose is utterly useless. Worse than useless, even.”

“Tha might be true, but 'deterrent', 'revenge', and 'satisfaction' are sufficient purposes for some.”

The stoic Agent exhaled in a huff, and said nothing, eyes following his new responsibility closely.

“So tell meh about 'im. What's tha new babe like?’”

“For one, he is not a 'babe'. Agent Rix is six years older than myself.”

“Oh yer not cradle robbin' with this one?”
His flat look only made her grin.

“Aw dunnah be like that. I only be teasin' ya Arterius. Ya did a fine job 'o trainin' up Nih, an' he was no innocent either, for all his youth.”

“As you say. Now tell me what you want, or leave me be Tio'fore.”

She huffed, but decided to relent in her teasing a bit. He looked stressed enough that she had some small mercy for the grumpy Turian. That she could pick out his being stressed at all was telling.

“Alright, alright. Peace. I dinnah come here ta drive ya nuts, was jus' sayin' hello. Ankh's in tha hospital so we're stuck on station for a wee bit.”

Arterius turned away from the controlled rout going on below, electric eyes spinning as they refocused on her.

“...he was injured?”

“Ya, took a couple slugs, caught on fire, and broke somma those plates o' his. I'll be on station runnin' with Jondam's team for a bit while he heals up.”

“I see. A shame he was injured in the line of duty. Perhaps I will visit him before I leave.”

“Oh? Well he's an awful patient, so I bet tha docs 'ill appreciate a distraction. Might keep him in tha bed for more'n a few hours. Surprised ta hear yer taking tha leetle babe out already though.”
Saren sighed quietly and returned to facing forward. The next wave of reinforcements had dropped, and with it came a few heavy hitters. Something the trainee's hit-and-run tactics weren't going to do much about. She could tell the Turian realized it at about the same time, his moves turning to pure evasion and picking off the smaller targets. Classic 'stalling for time to think' and 'clearing space to move' tactics. She nodded at him, approving, hoping he found a way to get it done.

After a moment the Spectre beside her shifted to his other foot, crossed arms tilting with the new pose as he started to reply finally in a strangely hesitant voice, though the uncertainly was faint enough that she barely caught it.

“He has a solid grasp of ST&R operations already, it would be pointless to rehash the basics without first working through the details verbally. I intend to do such during travel, and fill in any gaps in his knowledge base as we go. More importantly, Astine neglected to take his crew through most of the recommended advanced combat training. He will need EAS instruction, time in CEESIM, some UW and SERE. Likely followed by a series of live missions to cement the lessons and test his absorption of them.”

“Ya lost me at tha first acronym there, Arterius.”

“Hn... It is likely you picked such things up by seeing them once and then practicing, but other species require formal training regiments to survive and thrive in a special forces environment.”

“Ach, ya may have a point. Got a talent for such things, I do, and Ankh was a General long a'for we met so...”

“Your circumstances are unique, though I suppose that is true of many Spectres and their associates. Nihlus, for example, could barely read when I began training him, but he tested off the charts of more than one selection exam.”

She hummed thoughtfully. That made sense. Nih was something of a prodigy. The pale Turian currently hiding behind a pile of crates was doing really, really well, but clearly wasn't prodigical.
Then again... diamonds didn't glitter until you cut them.

“What'a these exams ya talkin' about?”

“... Hierarchy Spec-Ops exams. I took them all when I was younger. It was a simple matter to recreate them for a single candidate.”

“An' ya give me shit for rememberin' all sorts of things, pffft. So it's tha new babe's turn for tha testin'?”

The silver-grey torin stepped back from the railing and nodded politely before trailing off toward the stairs.

“Indeed.”

Chapter End Notes

05/19/2010 - Atmospheric Dust Finally Clears on Taetrus

“Last night, to the relief of many colonists on Taetrus, the sun finally set on the Vallum Blast. For the last two weeks, suspended dust in the atmosphere promoted the formation of high-altitude ice particles that reflected the sunlight at all hours of the day and night. The result has been the so-called "doomsday glow" in the sky that was so bright that citizens as far away as Dilix could read a paper book by its light at midnight. Civil authorities repeatedly reassured Taetrians that this was not due to any type of nuclear fallout. Though Taetrians can finally get some sleep without closing their blinds, the effects of the dust will linger -- the global atmospheric transparency level has dropped a grade, and this dimming is expected to continue for another month.”

A/N: ^^ Well that's fucking neat. And creepy.

A/N/N: I've decided that Avitus is 52 in ME:A, and is 38 as of the current year in EDaH, which is early 2171 (T-minus 12 years till ME 1).

Here is how I got that number: We meet him in 2819 after 634 years of cryostasis, 15 years of working for the council, presumably 15 years of military, (Their normal term of
service, which I presume he completed entirely for him to be in good enough standing with the Hierarchy to be in any sort of position of power on their ark, to even have a spot on the ark at all since they HATE dissenting factions, and he has colony markings which indicates some amount of cultural normative background.) His civil service started as normal at 15 years of age. All of that is canon, or as close to canon as I can guess.

Now, you'll also notice that when he asks things of Ryder or speaks to them he doesn't demand, order, politely inquire, or any other sort of military-leadership-basis behavior. He suggests courses of action, is politely submissive in conversation but more casually and not professionally (like a lower rank would be toward a higher tier), he shares information, impressions, and feelings of empathy freely, like you would do with a friendly crew of equals. He doesn't ask for credentials. That? Is /not/ Turiancentric behavior, and absolutely not black ops behavior. Hell, the first thing he does is apologize for shooting someone in self defense in front of you. That said, I'm taking a stab in the dark and presuming Avitus went freelance for a few years between civil service and ST&R work. We'll say it was about 7 years, since he was on his own long enough to shake off that formal training, and also to get good enough that his skills which didn't originally peg him for Spectre or Blackwatch developed into something worthy given time to grow (and they say that it takes 7 years to master something.)

So! I'm going to say that he was born in 2133, went into the military at 15, served till he was 30, then went freelance for 7 years. He got picked up by ST&R, served for another 15 years before Macen convinced him to retire in the aftermath of ME1, 2185. (I'm assuming that the Andromeda Initiative briefings that went out on July, 25 2184 were where the Turian pathfinder was recruited, and then he spent a little time convincing Avitus to come along. It's a best guess, since he doesn't mention enough about Shepard being dead or alive to know if he was in-the-know at the time of their death in ME2.)

A/N/N/N: This chapter was going to be longer, but a bunch of my writing time tonight got taken up by research into the above time lines and special forces training programs. Both of those sets of information really needed to be nailed down moving forward though, so I can't say it was time wasted. :3 Anywho, yet another 1k+ chapter! Not too shabby for 4 hours of work. Half an hour to brainstorm, an hour to research, 90 mins to write the base, then an hour to edit, polish, and format. That's probably pretty pathetic compared to a professional author, but it's a good pace for me! :D

Fanfic Recommendation: Situation Normal (All Fucked Up) (2391 words) by miscella (Ellen/Alec Ryder. “His kids are the best thing that ever happened to him after his wife, but they’re also tiny hostile aliens who can smell weakness.”)
To kill a mocking bird

Chapter Summary

Avitus Rix is both more and less than expected.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Another one!? I fought my muse for every third word of the last interlude, but now it's all like, 'Yay Turians! Here is all the juice you need. GOGOGO!'

Ffs. My muse is, very specifically, a torinophile.

Chapter Soundtrack: Aether & SizzleBird ft. Veela - Raccoon City

One day, born a captive
What they say is what I'll do
Deadly, they've trained me this way
I'm waiting for the day
How to escape and how do I get out

When everybody’s trusting you
You can’t do anything about it
But trust in you
Yeah what you doing
And even if it’s hard to admit it
I can’t do anything about it
But trust in you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren stepped into the Daedalus' airlock and set the decon cycle to run, allowing himself to lean against the wall, though he was suffering from nothing more than mental fatigue. Fatigue from a long day spent assessing Rix's skill levels in various tests, in which he had come to the undesirable conclusion that his new protégé was barely Spectre material, and had an incredibly long way to go before he could be a self sufficient agent of the Council.

In fact, the pale torin was mediocre at nearly everything.
His aim was just decent, reflexes quick but nothing special, decision making speed was up there, but not 'special forces' grade. He spoke only Turian Closed Dialect, and Turian Trade Tongue, relying entirely on translators for alien languages. Rix had no experience with infiltration or exfiltration, only a passing familiarity with high society, and had no links to any intelligence gathering networks or information brokers. Even worse, Rix had bare minimum scientific knowledge outside of a fair-to-midline grasp of physics and math. No combat medicine, no torture resistance, no...

Really the 'no' list could go on for ages. Things that normal soldiers picked up as they ranked up in tiers, Rix had... not. Not keyed in on, been included in, or stumbled over many a thing that Saren was rather sure everyone knew after a year or two enlisted. It was quite strange. Who managed a fifteen year service contract but could not tell the difference between High Court and Low Court Batarian? How did one complete the usual number of rimworld patrol postings without picking up black market trade contacts?

It was as baffling as it was aggravating.

However, Saren had not nominated him for Spectre candidacy without reason. For all of the former Specialist's shortcomings, he made up for them with... creative approaches to problems. Rix was listed as an Engineer in the dossier Astine had on file for him, but he was beginning to sincerely doubt that categorization. The torin's tactics were not so easily labeled.

Rather than stay at range with a rifle and have turrets or drones to covert him while he hacked, overloaded, and subverted his enemy's tech like any normal Engineer, Rix instead combined frontal assault with trap laying, timed series of tech skills with sticky grenades that exploded -not enemies, but environmental hazards. His methodology was fluid, surreal, and combined a multitude of whimsical, coordinated events that made no sense, but worked.

It made planning how to correct flaws in, improve upon, or diversify Rix's skill set into a minefield of complications.

The silver-grey torin had a magnificent headache blooming behind his eyes, and could not decide if he were discouraged by how far his new apprentice had to go, or intrigued by what could become of such a wild card. On one hand, the effort needed to polish the torin was substantial. On the other, the payout for ST&R could be very worth it. Unconventional tactics could be a powerful weapon against conventionally minded criminals.

Yet... he still wanted to be free to continue searching...

He had dared to hope that Rix's previous position with Astine would prequalify him for more
advanced training, letting the pale torin be graduated to full Spectre status sooner rather than later, and allowing Saren to return to hunting monoliths without a substantial delay. However, as it stood, the stoic Agent fully expected Rix to take as-long or longer-than Nihlus.

The normally stolid Spectre sighed, heavily.

A moment later the internal door of the airlock slid open as the decontamination cycle finished, and he stepped inside expecting an empty ship, quiet and serene. Lonely, but peaceful.

That was... not the case.

“You're here! Finally. Come sit down, eat, tell me everything. Did you find out if he plays Galaxy of Fantasy?”

Nihlus was on the couch, feet in Garrus' lap, eating that levo flatbread he liked so much and trilling a mellow, subharmonic appreciation for his appearance.

Ridiculous. He likely looked as tired as he felt, which was to say, 'very'.

With a defeated huff the silver-grey torin sat down in the side chair he preferred, ignoring the spread of food and drinks in favor of leaning back and closing his eyes for just a moment...

“-ren... Saren?”

A few seconds later he came to, blinking around the dark cabin. A large hand on his shoulder connected to a shirtless detective who was pulling him to his feet and steering him toward the bedroom before he could protest. Not that he really intended to.

Nihlus was inside, snoring slightly, already passed out in the bed and smelling of sex.

Garrus gently pushed him down onto the edge of the bed and put a nutritive drink mix in his hands. He sipped at it automatically.
“I... apologize. It was not my intention to fall asleep.”

The sniper sat down facing him, leaning an elbow on a bent knee while the other leg swung free over the bedside.

“No need. You look pretty beat.”

“Not 'looked'?”

The stone colored torin shook his head, the soft blue light cast from his visor making the shadows in the room shift.

“No, you still look worn out. Nothing some sleep won't fix though.”

“I should be aggravated at you for presuming to tell me when to sleep. *Yet again.*”

Garrus' mandibles flicked in good spirited amusement.

“Should be?”

“Hn,” he replied noncommittally and took another drink. The mix disappeared quickly, taking the edge off his thirst, if not hunger. Saren glanced at the dark, peaceful slice of bed that he had taken to sleeping on whether he had bedmates or not. The small platform looked unaccountably attractive, even compared to sustenance.

... since when had sleeping ever been an inviting prospect?

'Strange.'

Rather than question it, he began shedding armor, humming a grateful rumble when a second pair of hands came in to help. It was a matter of minutes to reduce full kit to undersuit, and crawl up to his spot. Saren closed his eyes, unable to hold back a near-silent hum of enjoyment when that same pair of helping hands came in to hold one of his, a thumb rolling circles in the thick muscle of his palm as he drifted off.
Chapter End Notes

07/25/2010 - Vallum Blast Pilot Found Dead in Madra
“There’s a new development tonight in the quest for justice for the victims of the Vallum Blast. Vamire Squaron, the pilot who allegedly launched the hypervelocity craft that caused the impact, was found dead in the Diluvian city of Madra. “I got an anonymous tip that there was a body inside...I didn't even recognize him at first”, said Private Faros Riten, who was tasked with house-to-house searching. "I put him on the flatbed, and everybody started congratulating me”. At a crematostation, the body's genetic structure was compared to Squaron's medicard record and was confirmed with 99.97% accuracy. The cause of death was determined to be cardiac arrest, an unusual diagnosis in a 41-year-old turian. Asked if he felt any closure, Riten replied, "Don't worry about me. Worry about the people that lost someone".”

A/N: ^^ Taking bets, noooow taking bets. Let's start the block with everyone's favorite frogman, Thaaaaane Krios! All bet's start at 200 creds, that's right 200 solid on the sexy assassin; look but don't touch! If you're betting on Krios do so now with my lovely assistant [The Comment Box]. Next up is a crowd favorite folks! He's supposed to be on Palaven right now, but BOY would I have a heart attack if I saw 'im coming for me! Suspect number 2 is ArchAngelli! [Air horns here.] That's right, that's right 200 smooth for the torin with the blue paint and snazzy one liners. Alright! Last but not least we have the underdog of the hour, NO! The underdog of a lifetime! Uhuh! It's Za-zazeeeeeess Massani! [Lazer lights flicker.] We've got a long career of straight-for-cash ladies, gentlemen, and wondermous other, but the word on the street is that this silver fox has had a recent streak of charity cases. Is it true? Is it rumor? We'll find out! 200 for Massani, right in, yes, right in. 200 for Massani, Archangel, or Krios, place your bets!

(I am ridiculous, and bad, and not funny. I need to stop writing author's notes after I finish a chapter. I should do it before, when I'm a coherent, rational person. It's 4 something am. I'm going to bed now.)

A/N/N: Hahaha... ha... Poor Avitus. Saren is baffled that you aren't a data sponge like him. Nihlus got by on being a misfit that was repeatedly shunted between squads, who had no formal education besides basic training. He was also like 23 or something when Saren picked him up. Avitus however, is 38 and *gasp!* doesn't know conversational Korean??? Or how to turn a drive core into a bomb?? Has no intelligence broker contacts???

Saren's standards are insane, and he's stubborn as all hell. Avitus is so screwed. That poor, pale bae is in for some seriously difficult training. Send him hugs.

Fanfic Recommendation: embroidery (1214 words) by buhnebeest (“Shepard knows, intellectually, that making a failsafe like this is a good call. It’s good. The next cycle should get a head start. They should get time to prepare. Maybe she should scribble a
note to whatever poor bastard finds the capsule first: ‘no one’s going to believe you, so for fuck’s sake bring the VI with you.’” )
A plot of land to live on

Chapter Summary

Saren is spoiled a little bit, Nihlus is spoiled a little bit, and Garrus makes pancakes. Also... Reapers.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I *did not* think to myself 'how can I make this chapter super cute and then super painful?'. Not even slightly. The dichotomy just sort of... happened.

Chapter Soundtrack: Paper Boats (feat. Ashley Barrett)

The river always finds the sea
So helplessly, like you find me
We are paper boats floating on a stream
And it would seem
We'll never be apart
I will always find you
Like it's written in the stars
You can run, but you can't hide
Try, like the moon that makes the tides
That silent guide
Is calling from inside
And pull me here and push me there
It's everywhere

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saren woke to the feeling of wandering hands and a light, brushing sensation on his chest.

“Mmm?”

“Mmn.”

His hands closed on the person hovering over him automatically as consciousness bloomed; fingers landing on lithe, muscular shoulders. He simultaneously recognized the individual in question, first
by smell and then by sight.

“Nihlus.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” the younger torin replied in a bratish drawl. He huffed at the pathetic joke even as questing hands fluttered along his waist over the cloth of his undersuit. He inhaled, surprised at how pleasant the sensation was. The unexpected lack of discomfort was enough to boost him to full wakefulness as he tried to assess the anomaly of enjoyment.

“... Nihlus.”

“Mmmhmm?”

Perhaps it was the low light and sleep-warm bed making him more indulgent than usual, -or too comfortable to be anxious-, but being woken with slow strokes of palms along his middle and unhurried nuzzling against his chest plating was... acceptable.

The stolid Spectre laid still, allowing the attention while using mental commands to interface with his grey box. The UI on his cybernetic eyes flickered on, a soothing blue overlay informing him that he had no priority messages, nothing scheduled for several hours yet, and that it was nearly noon.

A wonder. He had not slept for such a long block of time in many years; save for recovering from sporadic instances of critical damage, and infrequently even then.

“Do you not have a mission?”

“Oh, I do. Waiting on some some specialty gear before heading out. It should be here in a few days.”

He nodded. Rix was undergoing a full scale health assessment over the next three days, so he was grounded as well and with nothing premeditated to fill that time. If Nihlus was also unoccupied...

Saren beginning to consider the most efficient uses of their time, out of habit if nothing else. There was always work to be done on the Citadel, both the critically important and the mundane. Perhaps the ST&R officers would have locals ops that needed seen to.
“Is Garrus still aboard?”

“Mmmhm. That's why I came to get you. He's in the mess, making **pancakes**.”

“...You let him loose in my kitchen?”

His carmine plated protégé chuckled, shifting upward. Saren could feel warm breath ghosting over his throat as the other torin nosed into his neck, slow and undemanding.

“He specifically looked up how to make something so he could cook breakfast for you. We can... always fix or replace anything he breaks?”

The biotic Spectre let that sink in for a moment, examining the strangeness of having someone go so far out of their way as to try and learn a new skill, -of which they were naturally disinclined toward-, simply to do something small and considerate on his behalf.

Very strange, indeed. Not unwelcome, but... strange.

“I should still check-”

“Nooooooooo--.”

“No, what?”

“No' as in 'stay here'. It isn't breakfast in bed unless you are still in bed.”

“...ridiculous.”

“He's almost done, just stay here a little longer. Then we can eat, get cleaned up... maybe take it easy today?”
He snorted, not even deigning to respond to the suggestion. He felt Nihlus sigh, clearly knowing that battle was lost before it had even begun.

It was then that the *swish* of pneumatics filtered into the room; likely their third number entering. A presumption proven correct when the person in question walked closer, the footsteps matching Garrus’ gait. Saren blinked slowly at the ceiling, unable to move much without dislodging Nihlus’ considerable weight.

Footsteps, the shuffle of fabric, a quiet series of clinks, and then the sniper was leaning over his line of sight, mandibles flitting in a smile.

“Garrus. Good morning.”

“You're looking better. Hungry?”

“... I could eat.”

Like the faint scent of wood smoke from a mile away, the cold, swirling particles of dark matter followed the-entity-that-was-many in their placid movement vector, clinging like cobwebs to the gravity their ship produced merely by existing.

They drifted on low power, letting inertia carry them alongside the intergalactic filaments of matter and through the effervescent trails of molecules, lightly spiced with ionization.

They were floating along on a carefully chosen course, waiting for the time to be right. It was a lonely journey, traveling without a final destination. Their pathway took them between the shoals of dust that made up unborn galaxies, and the thicker, stronger trails of matter that linked living spirals of stars together in a most delicate, fluid matrix of particles.

There were many such as they, but each kept to their own trail, an ever-more-full sphere of coordinates that spun with the Milky Way's rotation, albeit far enough away as to be nigh undetectable unless otherwise desired.
Staying hidden was of critical importance, only overridden by the mandate to protect themselves and each other at all costs. The reasoning was simple: They were each a nation, perfect onto themselves. The culmination of an entire species; all it's culture and crimes, genetic twists and innovations.

They were each precious, unique, and irreplaceable.

Secrecy aided the flow of their mission, abetted the smoothness of transition phases greatly, but they themselves were the real treasure. Safety before all else.

Without precursor or ado a signal went off. A new report had been received, then opened and read. Suddenly a tiny little boolean value amid a sea of sparkling processes flipped from 'FALSE' to 'TRUE'. Something one might call a 'shiver' went through their systems. That which they waited for had come again, it was finally time to begin their great tasks anew.

Soon their number would grow by one, or potentially more if all went well; to make a new point of light in the beautiful sphere of their kind.

What a blessing. What joy. This was their purpose.

The-entity-that-was-many went from near perfect stillness to a decadent amount of energy usage for the next few seconds, processing the details of the message, flipping other boolean values and shifting data around in computational delight. It was a flurry of activity, and likely sent off radiation in a plethora of directions, but that was no real bother. By the time footprint was seen, they would already be long gone.

In the meantime, they sent out communications to others of their kind, calculated the time needed for return messages to reach them, and then resumed low power mode with something like reluctance.

The cycle was upon them. It had been so, so long since one of them had been born...

They couldn't wait to begin, even though the first step was always the same, the tried and true method for success an unbroken pattern. Yet, it never failed to incite a cold kind of passion in them.

First, a champion must be found.
08/08/2010 - Reconstruction of Signis Completed on Taetrus

“Reconstruction of the Signis, the Taetrian executive office building destroyed in the Vallum Blast, was completed today by the Hierarchy Corps of Engineers. Donations of wood, marble, and fabricator materials poured in from all over the galaxy to enable the famous building to stand again. The new building is an exact replica of the old, a move that lead engineer Naxus Ursinus said was expedient and an important political symbol. "On a practical level, we wanted to give the Primarch a place to work that wasn't out of a hotel room somewhere," she said, "More importantly, we are showing our enemies they have not changed us." Asked if the new building was hardened against megaton-scale blasts, she replied, "You can't stop an FTL craft with a stronger ceiling. Our first line of defense is the common citizens' awareness of what their neighbors are doing."

A/N: If you're interested in the research I did about intergalactic space you can read about dark matter filaments and unborn galaxies here, or here respectively. There is also some neat stuff about the intergalactic medium here.

A/N/N: Yeaaah, the big bads are on their way.

Fanfic Recommendation: Stand Alone (57924 words) by Marie_Fanwriter (Trigger warnings. All the trigger warnings. Garrus being a smart ass even as he's tortured to pieces. Coping mechanisms. Tragedy and comfort. Realism. I do not comprehend why this story doesn't have more comments and kudos, save for how new it is. Their writing is wonderful.)
A stronger metal to hold them together

Chapter Summary

Avitus remains conflicted on whether he even wants this or not, but is too smart to show his hand. Also? Too smart to keep secrets.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I was going to make revealing Avitus' hinted medical condition into a dramatic reveal, but then I realized that Saren would be /furious/ about something like that, and his trust is hard enough to earn to start with. Putting that on the pile would collapse that bridge, someday. I changed my mind, and then suddenly I had a chapter that just needed to be put to keys. :D (AND THEN I CLIFF HANGERED IT! //mad cackling//)

Chapter Soundtrack: Rob Gasser ft. Miyoki - Taking Over

Razor sharp and luminous
Can't say that I'm not ambitious
And in a surge of adrenaline
And with an ever pounding heart
We'll be running, running
Out of sight into the night

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beside him at the the table his new apprentice fidgeted, rolling his shoulders and looking anywhere else but toward him. Saren observed the unassuming torin at it, curious of the behavior.

They were in a debriefing room in the Spectre Offices, awaiting the results from Rix's extensive medical work up. The tests had checked for ailments, aptitudes, genetic mods, and more. Any cybernetics would have been evaluated for quality, and the requisite psych work up would probably be several pages, at least.

These were all things Saren could have done himself, but he tried to trust the doctors on staff this far at least, and it always looked better when he did not sign off on absolutely everything himself. The silver-grey torin still clearly remembered the pointed talk Sparatus had given him in his first year of full Spectre status after he had opted to deal with all minutia himself, for efficiency's sake.
Blood work ups from crime scenes? Why take it to lab techs, who would make him wait and could easily mishandle the samples, when he could walk into the lab and run the sample immediately, by himself? It had not been difficult to learn how.

What point was there in sending Rix to the psychologists here when in fact he gave them no real answers, just prevarication and misdirection. As if any Spectre would tell all to some pampered Asari with manicured nails and a large vocabulary. A joke, to be sure; even Nihlus lied to them extensively.

The list of ways he had underutilized the resources made available to him in favor of expediency and control went on, however it seemed that having his credentials at the bottom of form after form made the experts here somewhat annoyed.

Not his problem, to be sure, but Councilor Sparatus had insisted.

So now he sat, wasting time, in a sound proof debriefing room, waiting for the documents to be delivered so he could sift through the data. The same data that he could have aquired himself, and analyzed in real time. Saren tried not to be aggravated at Rix for the circumstances. Except... the torin was still fidgeting.

'Suspicious."

They waited in silence; Rix in a failed attempt at stoic indifference and he while reading the latest intel from Nihlus' usual sector, the Eagle Nebula. Eventually the door swished open and one of the wellness techs came in, bearing the classified file to him directly.

"Here you are Spectre. The table of contents should have the contact information for our recommended experts on each section should you have questions."

The Technician's gaze flitted sideways toward Rix before they nodded politely and left. He watched the telling glance, his eyes catching the brief movement with perfect clarity.

'There is something in here he is nervous about. Something the Tech thought I would need to contact a specialist for.'
When the door slid closed behind the delivery person Saren set the edge of the datapad on the table, one talon tapping the top.

"Rix."

"Yessir?"

"I am about to read this, every line of it."

"... okay."

He began to speak, enunciating each word slowly and clearly, “Is there anything you would like to talk to me about before I begin?”

The pale torin drew a hand down his faceplates, apparently ready to give up the gaffe. Rix fell back into his chair, finally looking toward him.

“I’ve got a rare medical condition that I manage with regular treatment, that’s all. If it disqualifies me from being a Spectre then-”

“Elaborate.”

Rix huffed, leaning forward onto the table, balanced on his elbows with hands loosely clasped.

“‘Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva’, or as I like to call it, 'my body heals everything with plate'
Saren tilted his head, unfamiliar with the diagnosis, but familiar enough with the ancient languages of Palaven to pull apart the words. It was something involving fibrous tissue, cancerous bone growth, and a progressive condition.

"Interesting."

"I see. Explain the condition in more detail."

"I don't know what other details you want, Spectre... The report will probably give you the gist of it. When anything in me needs repaired that's not an organ, my body tries to fix it with plate. Doesn't matter if it's arm or muscle or hide, all of it turns to plate. It's rare enough that there isn't a cure, but the treatments for it are pretty good. I can always tell when I need one by how stiff I feel in the morning, I go get one, then I'm fine for a while. That's about all there is to it."

"Does it effect your ability to function?"

"Only if I don't get treatments, and stop taking the daily medication."

Saren nodded, tilting the datapad over to lay flat, face up.

"How often do you need treatment?"

"Depends entirely on if I get a flare up. Sometimes my phosphatase levels skyrocket and then I'll need one sooner rather later. Generally involving some laser guided bone removal and regenerative serums and a whole cocktail of other chemicals."

"Minimum, Maximum, and average time between treatments in the past?"

His second protégé hummed in consideration before replying, “One time it was really bad, three weeks... stress induced I think. Maximum was... I was younger and flat broke, went almost sixteen months without. I felt like I was a hundred instead of thirty three by the end of it, and I couldn't look left. Not doing that again, ever. Average is maybe four months.”
“You said that ossification occurs at the site of any injury?”

“Yeah, sure does. Even small things like bruises.”

“I see... and if you are injured more extensively? A broken arm, for example? Or a sizeable laceration?”

“A little more bleeding than you'd expect, but my bones and plates heal faster as well.”

“Hnn. Clearly you have managed this far. A consideration to be kept in mind at all times, but it does not sound as if it will be a problem.”

Rix’s subharmonics wavered in mild disbelief, almost as if he was certain the condition would preclude him from the Spectre program. The stoic torin ignored the pessimism, unimpressed with the needless drama over a well managed medical condition. He tapped the datapad’s empty surface to wake it up, and begin reading the dossier.

Truthfully the rare genetic condition sounded more like an interesting read, -an enjoyable distraction from the research he wanted to do but had been ordered to take a break from-, rather than a definitive reason for medical discharge. Nevermind that Rix had operated as a Spectre Asset for years already. It was different, but not *that* different. If the torin could handle one, he could likely handle the other.

“I see you hail from Oma Ker. Tell me about-”

Without warning the door slid open, his former protégé stormed in as if on a war path, their sniper trailing behind him looking grim. Nihlus stopped in front of the table across from him, palms splaying out on the surface as he leaned over.

“We have a problem. A really big fucking problem.”

“Elaborate.”
08/11/2010 - Alien AI-Controlled Ship Makes Contact in Salarian Space

“Alarms rang throughout the salarian system of Antilin yesterday when an alien ship bearing a strong AI signature triggered fears of a geth attack. Renko Turwin, Director of Near-Orbital Security, explained: "When evidence of powerful AI heuristics was detected onboard, our security forces thought it was the vanguard of a geth invasion. However, we consulted quarian scientific advisors who assured us that the signals failed to match any known geth signature." According to Turwin, the biggest surprise came next: "The ship's intelligence then communicated with us. It asked us to calculate the value of Pi to the first quadrillion digits. Some 20 questions followed after that, all of them beyond our realm of expertise. We're currently awaiting advice from outside consultants before proceeding. As yet, the ship matches no known alien species."

A/N: ^^^ UMM. UMMMMMM!!! I haven't read the rest of the news articles in this series yet, but my only thought was, 'Please, dear gods, tell me that a Reaper did not fly up to a Salarian ship and play 20 questions to determine if it was time to kill us all. Please no. I can't handle it.' (Edit: Okay I read the rest of them. There is a lot of really, really cool stuff in this series. No Reapers thankfully. )

A/N: 'Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva' is a real disease, and without the futuristic treatments that Avitus gets it slowly turns a person's muscles, tendons, etc into bone; or in his case, plate. Life expectancy is about 40 years. It's actually a genetic cousin to Joker's 'Osteogenesis Imperfecta', coming from a mutation in the same genes. If you are interested in the story of it's current afflicted, I found a fascinating article about the science and the people over on TheAtlantic.com – Mystery of the Second Skeleton

But anyway, I do a lot of neurodivergence in EdaH, so I wanted to do something physical, to explore some of those coping mechanisms. Activities such as needing to maintain a medication and treatment routine to function, having bad days, unexpected problems, social complications, etc. Also, he is very calm during the moment of crisis we seem him in, only really getting worked up on the Turian Ark at the end. I know that being a soldier and a Spectre will do that sort of thing to a psyche, but the 's/he spent years in the trenches' is an overused troupe for soldiers being calm in the face of shit hitting the fan. I wanted to give Avitus a unique reason for rolling with the punches so well. In short? He's dealt with bad news and constant struggle since day one. His sense of panic and worry are very worn down, and even if they weren't, stressing out is only likely to give him a flare up, so he's keyed to just keep on zennng out.

Fanfic Recommendation: Foreign (638 words) by ninalanfer (Since I'm blowing through minichapters, I'm breaking down and recommending drabbles and pieces from authors that I've already linked a story from, with breaks when I find other goodies. Heh... cop out? Slightly. :P This one is part 1 of Ninalanfer's Nihlus the Survivalist series, which is AMAZING. Ninalanfer is a queen/king/royal misc among authors.)

A/N/N/N: While updating the masterlist of fanfiction recs over on the manifesto I noticed some duplicates. Having to replace them, I went looking for fics, random but entertaining to toss in there. Here are the added replacements for up-to-date readers. :)
Fanfic Recommendation: **Diamond** (1013 words) by **ViridianPanther** (“An anonymous round-robin email is sent to all members of the Normandy's crew. It contains a single text file attachment, apparently downloaded from an extranet fan fiction site. Containing a badly-punctuated, appallingly-written story starring certain members of the crew. And a sex aid with a mass effect core and a diamond at the tip.” - Worth reading for the email reply from Dr. Chakwas. I died laughing.)

Fanfic Recommendation: challenge accepted (256 words) by buhnebeest (Small Kryterius ficlet. :3 )

Fanfic Recommendation: **Blueshift** (4324 words) by **bloodbright**, **Fistful of Gamma Rays** (The aftermath of Garrus' loyalty mission in ME2 from the perspective of an OC C-Sec Officer. )
Your plane is my paradise, so long as you're in it

Chapter Summary

A haunting begins.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Please ignore the changes to my capitalization choices. I’m playing with them to see how they feel with titles only being in caps when used to refer to a specific individual, and only directly. So any ‘ol non specific agent of the council or C-Sec personnel would be a 'spectre' or an 'officer', but when we are using them as a title they get those upper case letters. (Evolution in writing? Haha. Add it to the list with 'learned the difference between 'than' and 'then', but is still sketchy on 'effect' and 'affect' sometimes. I wish I had a better handle on the grammar for this. It may switch back. Thoughts?)

Chapter Soundtrack: PhaseOne - Extinction
(This track is so much more for the drama the other people are feeling, and less so Nihlus' eternal irreverence. Haha...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Uncommon was the ST&R mission that required extra firepower, requiring an agent that had a group of specialists on call.

Rare was the operation that required more than one Spectre.

Exceptional was the event that required a full squad of Spectres, something the various departments had jokingly named 'a haunt'.

The last recorded incident of more than a few deploying cooperatively had been almost three centuries ago, and the media blackout on it remained the stuff of legends.

There were dozens of people around the meeting table today.
Half of them were Spectres.

Nihlus sat quietly in his seat, crest hanging over the chair back and gaze directed upward while using the tippy-toes of his boots to slowly rotate left and right as they waited for the last few people to trickle in. A pair of Spectres had the latest intelligence on the situation, and were supposed to be docking any minute now, then they could get started on addressing the cluster fuck of the century.

Beside him to the left Saren was perched on a chair like a statue, perfectly poised and unmoving. He would put credits down that his former mentor was currently reviewing wide swathes of data on his artificial eyes' heads-up display; only looking like he wasn't busy while everyone around him was scanning data pads like mad.

The cool-headed 'mad' of special forces agents facing yet another crisis in an unending stream of them, sure, but Nihlus could still feel the undercurrents of anxiety like the splashes of light at the bottom of a pool. Deceptively calm and wavering, even though the water ran deep.

On the far side of Saren the new guy slouched in his chair, reading a datapad with more focus and less disquiet than a fair portion of the room.

’He gets bonus points for being chill as fuck... though we gotta get the guy some better armor. What is that last gen shit he's wearing? ...going to get himself killed pinching creds on his kit like that.’

Green eyes flickered farther along the curvaceous table.

O'kara, the meanest she-devil of a tarin in all of time and space, sat on the other side of Rix. Her craggy, scarred mandibles flickered as she poured over data, intensely focused and vaguely pissed off. Not that the low rumble of 'don't-fucking-touch-me' coming from her was any different than, say, what she sounded like on a regular Tuesday while ordering kava with brunch.

Her usual amounts of 'fuck off'.

Predictably, the next seat over from the mildly racist tarin was also occupied by a Turian, though they might as well be polar opposites; Ankhleas and Riaz were on O'kara's far side. Ankh was about as unperturbed with the situation as Saren, and as xenophilic as possible considering his dead mate was a Drell. Riaz looked a bit grim, though that might just be because she didn't have the distraction of data from a sector she didn't normally work in to pour over. It wasn't like she needed to reread anything, ever.
Past his tiny, crazy best friend was the badass he wanted to grow up to be. Spectre Mordecai Maerun was seventy two, an assassin proficient in just about every known weapon in the galaxy, and was more or less a walking sex pot. The torin was a gorgeous shade of emerald with intricate, geometric white notas and a waist that looked edible; which the weapons master showed off by wearing loose pants, a tightly wrapped waist, no shirt, and a sleeveless long coat.

Nihlus lamented, deeply, that the agent was entirely heterosexual.

Only letting himself ogle the assassin for a few seconds, his gaze wandered onward to the Salarian power trio. Spectre Fomalee Piri was hedged in on either side protectively by her two male specialists, Shoka Kimbarum and Mylo Tiivep. Normally the three of them took care of black ops out in the Terminus Systems, but they'd been reporting in directly when the call had gone out for all available Spectres to show for could-lead-to-war bingo.

He didn't know them well, but Piri had a rep for being Not Like A Normal Dalatrass. It probably meant she wasn't power crazy or didn't play more mind games than a score of Matriarchs, which was abnormal by Sur'kesh's standards.

The carmine plated torin snorted to himself, lazy focus trailing over the floating data display in the middle of the table before his head continued rolling toward the other side of the room to look at how the rest were handling the wait.

Garrus was focused intently on the datapad in front of him and not too jittery anymore, which was good.

There had been a priority message chime from his Omni-tool while they were half asleep on the cubitura, and he'd sleepily pulled it up to read. It had been the intel from his contact about the growing situation. He'd shouted a string of expletives and dove for his gear, meanwhile Blue had gotten a pretty good startle from his dozing state, but had smoothly moved to toss on his armor as well. Then the mountainous torin had waited patiently for instruction as if it were a combat situation.

Actually, now that he thought about it, some of Garrus' automatic responses were way more light trigger than a normal ex-soldier. Helpful though.

When he had finished gearing up there had been a snap decision to bring the sniper with him. It was the right call. Garrus had been quiet and useful the whole way here. Got them transport, directed him while he speed walked and typed... but the torin had paled significantly when they'd finally walked
in. Nihlus had noticed but not understood until he'd watched Garrus carefully for a while, and cottoned on to where his icy blue eyes were surreptitiously glancing.

From person, to person, to person.

The slight nervousness made sense then; the room contained more Spectres than most people ever saw in their lives, the entire Citadel Council, and their advisory board to boot. His lover was a detective. He could guess what kind of shit it would take to get all these people in one room.

Combined with the small details the sniper had probably picked up on already, it couldn't have made for anything but stress.

Considering how alike Saren and Blue were, he'd decided to come at the nerves the same way he would have for his former mentor; by providing more information.

Saren loved intel. Intel was power, power was control, and the silver-grey Spectre loved to be in control of all situations. So he'd slid one of the datapads meant for spectres over to Garrus... and watched as the bait was immediately taken. A few minutes of reading and the sniper's mien had leveled out subtly.

Nihlus looked him over again now, checking for nervous ticks or anxiety tells...

'Nope, seems like Blue is ready to roll with the punches. Good. We might need his god-tier aim before this is over.'

Past Garrus was ST&R's resident 'darling couple', the topic of unending gossip. Their dossiers read like something straight out of a spy novel; the two were both counter-intelligence agents settled undercover into an operation at the same time, only by different governments. They'd started to catch onto each other just before things had gone south, and had escaped by the skin of their teeth - together. Thankfully there hadn't been a real conflict of interest, but they'd had to part ways to report in. Yet, somehow, within a year of that op they'd both been presented for Spectre candidacy by their respective species.

The rumors flew, especially when their candidacy applications came in with the same last name.
Lots of coincidences, probably no few of them manufactured, and Lorelai and Sivesi Wrathari went from being Asari Huntress and Blackwatch Agent to Spectre partners. Unbelievable, but there it was.

His rival, ultimate nemesis, and all around favorite person to annoy sat on the couple's other side. Tela Vasir was a biotic powerhouse, fashionably gorgeous at all times, highly competent, and he honestly thought the nais was pretty fly.

Not that Nihlus would ever admit that out loud.

It was a shame that the first time they were running into each other in a long while it had to be on such a serious occasion. Hell, he'd still be tempted to start tormenting the lovely nais with puns -they hated puns-, dad jokes -despised dad jokes-, and more... but then Tevos would give him the disappointed look in front of the whole class, and that would just be embarrassing.

The wily Spectre began making plans to crack jokes of the pari variety as soon as the op was over... as long as it was a success. Otherwise that would be kind of awkward.

More reason to complete the mission, thought it wasn't like Nihlus needed any. The lost genophage data from research station 2b had been recovered, on Korlus of all places, and was about to go up for spirits-damned bid.

'What a fuckin' shitstorm this is going to be. STG should be paying us all overtime for having to clean up their mess... and speaking of a mess, what the hell is up with Trinix?'

Verdant green eyes narrowed in a squint as he sized up the usually picture-perfect torin. Lonar Trinix had been Palaven's up and coming equivalent of Sha'ira until, out of serious left-flipping-field, the elegant male had applied for ST&R... and gotten accepted into a mentorship immediately. Turned out he was exactly what you'd expect of a spectre. Brilliant, deadly in all forums, and subtle as sin.

Apparently he still entertained too, though not by request or appointment.

Nihlus looked over the torin's less than perfect familia notas and rumpled clothing with something between suspicion and concern. On one hand, Trinix had always been kind of cold to him. On the other, the guy looked pretty worn thin... like he could really use a friend.
The lanky Spectre let his gaze slide onward, but made a mental note to try and offer a non-judgmental ear if the opportunity presented itself. Maybe do something nice for him.

The last two Spectres in the room sat together in their usual huddle. Astraya and Riisa Sil were very smart, very dangerous Asari, but where the other Spectre couple was adorable and glamorous, these two were just sort of... off. They sat strangely. Their speech patterns were not quite right. They wore a sort of matching uniform... thing...

The Sils were just freakin' odd, and coming from him? That meant something special.

Nihlus sort of wanted to whine at Saren that the two Asari were being weird again, -as he had at every opportunity the last time the four of them had worked on a mission together, much to his former mentor's immense aggravation-, but again the 'disappointed look' was to be avoided and Tevos was preternaturally good about noticing when he was having fun.

His preferred stress deescalation tactic of humor would probably be frowned on when the building blocks of the genophage were in the hands of unknown parties, and about to be sold to the highest bidder. The carmine plated torin sighed quietly. The running for the data, according to his contact's original message, was currently small but fuckin' scary; a horror story of organizations: Blood Pack, the Shadow Broker, the Witch of Raisaris, Cerberus, the fucking Duarch of Altakiril Cluster -who should know better-, and the Krogan Clan Drau.

The lanky torin’s focus returned to the ceiling, bored of people watching and not needing to scramble to catch up on intel in the Eagle Nebula, since it was his damn sector. At least his information web had caught that this was going on...

There were already whispers of commendations for his file, but Nihlus just... wished it had been caught... sooner.

If it became public that the proto-recipe for the genophage still existed, and was purchasable, all hell would break loose on Korlus. The dirtball of scrapers and recycling companies might be considered the ass end of space, but it was his ass end of space. Not to mention that the common folk there didn't deserve the potential fall out of a power scramble on their front porches. That sort of thing never went well, in population-dense urban areas especially.

The green eyed Spectre was just contemplating slipping away to grab a drink, -likely something with alcohol in it-, when the doors slid open and the missing agents joined the party, followed by a gaggle of specialists, -one of which was surprisingly a Krogan.
Their last two Spectres, Jondam Bau and Joss Gurji, were distantly related and it was easy to spot in the shape of their faces, but not so much in their manner. Where Jondam was all smooth professionalism and positive determination, Joss acted like nothing so much as an exhausted food service worker, world weary and placid, but unwilling to put up with any, *-any-*, amount of bullshit.

The half a dozen new comers settled in at the table, -armor and load outs showing they were clearly just returned from a mission much longer than the intel grab-, all eyes on them as the room waited for the latest word.

It was Jondam who sat up straight and began adding to the facts at hand.

“We obtained further confirmation that the data is as advertised by having Specialist Arden pose as Blood Pack. By all accounts, station 2b's remains were located after all this time, mistaken for scrap and hauled to Korlus to sell. As is usual, small time information brokers paid fees to scour the station before it was taken apart or crashed on the surface. As the station was small, only two brokers took up the offer. Accounts describe them leaving the site in a rush. Both were found dead shortly thereafter, estimated time of murder in the autopsy was yesterday at two in the morning."

Councilor Valern tapped the table, then interjected, “And the remains of research station 2b?”

“We scoured them for further clues, and then eradicated the whole of it.”

“You're certain?”

“Yes, Councilor. The station was only built for zero-g, and hadn't been crashed into the planet yet. Fragile enough that it would render many components useless. Crews were contemplating extraplanetary deconstruction when we arrived. Our team scanned everything deeply, took what evidence remained, and then oversaw it being tossed into the local star, Imir.”

The Salarian Councilor nodded, leaning back in his chair.

'Well fuck. Confirmation wasn't exactly what I'd hoped for... 'it was all a mistake' or 'the formula was
The Turian Councilor leaned forward next, fingers steepling on the table.

“Whatever data they have must be reclaimed, or failing that, destroyed. Form squads and find out where the data is or where it's going to be, and see it done. It must not be allowed to leak to the general public.”

A round of affirmative statements and gestures went around the room at Sparatus' definitive orders, and the logistically inclined among them, -who all knew each other by now-, began working out strike teams.

“Ni-... Spectre Kryik?”

Nihlus turned to Garrus with a bemused but entertained look that he hoped communicated just how not sneaky that attempt to be formal with him had been.

“...'sup?”

The sniper huffed, looking slightly sheepish, and held out a datapad to him. It was basic team assignments, including every agent in the room. Even Jon and Joss. He glanced at it, wondering how Blue expected to have worked out any sort of reasonable team composition without knowing most of the people here personally or having dossiers to work off of.

He glanced through the list...

It was fuckin' solid.

Hot damn was his lover ahead of the game.

'Magical detective powers of observation or something? Hah. Sexyyyyy.'
Tevos looked up, glancing over it quickly, then nodding.

“Excellent suggestions Nihlus. You've been ahead of the curve this whole time. It's the only reason we're still on top of this... thank you.”

He couldn't resist a challenging smirk at Tela, but still had to offer correction on the first point.

“Oh no it was-”

He cut off with a surprised chuff that probably sounded like a humble break off. It was actually because Blue had stepped on his spirits-damned toes, \textit{hard}.

\textit{'Ow.'}

When attention had moved away he elbowed the sniper in the ribs with equal ruthlessness and leaned in to whisper, “The hell was that for?”

“Later.”

He huffed, and let it go. For now.

Chapter End Notes

08/15/2010 - Breakthrough in Communication with Antilin "Ghost Ship"
“A breakthrough today in the case of the mysterious "ghost ship" in the Antilin System: Famed exo-biologist Jordan Detweiler from MIT's Extraterrestrial Studies Group traveled to the ship, now held in quarantine. Detweiler engaged the ship's AI system, which has been piloting the craft for an undetermined number of years and appears to be the sole sentient lifeform onboard. Given previous failed communication attempts, Detweiler explained how he succeeded: "In rudimentary terms, it was an I.Q. test. The ship's AI was determining that we weren't some band of dullard space pirates, that we understood things like quantum string theory, emergent systems, and a host of other advanced concepts. I was able to satisfy its demands and gain access to the interior. I
need to do more analysis, but I think this is the exo-archaeological find of the century. I will say that the ship appears to be at least 8,000 years old.”

A/N/ Lonar Maerun is a canon Spectre, btw, and Joss Gurji is a hat tip to the first Spectre ever, Beelo Gurji. The others are all obvious canon characters, or OCs. (Wow... I'm rocking a pretty good number of those aren't I? The estimates are that there are something less than a hundred Spectres, and that's all the info on them I've got so... Saren and Nihlus get some coworkers!)

A/N/N: I found a reference to a Turian Duarch getting in shit for stuff on the wiki! I think (maybe, possibly, sort of) that a Duarch is the second in command of a colony cluster, after a Primarch. I'm stretching here, but it's something vaguely canon, and I'll work with what I can get.

A/N/N/N: You know you're a hardcore Bioware fan (and have a problem) when you immediately spot the multi-series inside joke about Tuesdays. Anyone catch it? (If so, seek help.)

Fanfic Recommendation: Works 2, 3, and 4 in the Nihlus the Survivalist Series! Yum!

Monster (538 words) & 30 OTP Challenge - Saren/Nihlus (7528 words), & Counting the Stars (1188 words) by ninalanfer
Chapter Summary

An observation of Garrus, Riaz literally bouncing off walls.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Don't forget, Riaz has an Irish accent. Because reasons.

A/N/N (Edit): It was pointed out to me how difficult it is to remember which team is which, so I'm adding the team assignments at the top of each chapter for easy reference.

(PK) Fomalee Piri / Shooka Kimbarum
(MT) Mordecai Maerun / Mylo Tiivii
(TT) Riaz Tio'fore / Ankh Tithe
(AOR) Ideris O'kara / Saren Arterius / Avitus Rix
(VK) Nihlus Kryik / Tela Vasir
(TV) Lonar Trinix / Garrus Vakarian
(WW) Lorelai Wrathari / Sivesi Wrathari
(GB) Joss Gurji / Jondam Bau
(SS) Astraya Sil / Riisa Sil

Chapter Soundtrack: The Last Story - Toberu mono (Thaehan Remix)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lonar leaned against the reverse side of the advert screen as they waited for their transports to dock, keeping a solid object between the back of his head and the rest of the world by preference. The... sniper, apparently... he'd been partnered with walked in circles nearby. He traced fuchsia eyes up and down the... Vakarian clan markings... torin more out of boredom than anything else, putting his practice as a consort to good use in assessing the smallest of details.

Confidence... anger... impatience... defiance... focus...

The elegant Spectre watched emotions in the shift of stance and tilt of head, listened for tones in subharmonics with the aural canals of one trained to tell apart the tiniest minutia in the second language of their kind... but he was not finding any of the flags he usually looked for. None of the subtle worry of the undercover, or the layered not-lies in those who pretended to have nothing to hide.
Besides having a loose, confident gait the Vakarian male was taking in his surroundings as if he had every right to observe and judge them. His armor was of a high quality, a custom job that hinted of Spectre sponsorship. Considering the clansman had sat with the Arterius-Kryik group, most likely it was from one of them. Kryik was known for being terrible with credits, so... Arterius.

Curiouser, and curiouse, as the infamous young prodigy was possibly the most paranoid individual he'd ever met.

Well, it was unlikely the Vakarian was undercover, a plant, or a casual asset if he was given such gifts... and paced the edge of the landing pad as if he were already a Spectre himself. Well trusted, appreciated, and confident in his value. Classically handsome, well armed. The outlines of a painting took shape in Lonar's mind, curves inspired by the tilt of crest and shading from the subtle undertones of voice. No colors yet, but it was early still, and even a master needed more than a few minutes to produce anything of greater complexity than a sketch.

Really though, what did the torin’s parents feed him growing up? The sniper was impossibly large; seven feet at least and built like a genetically engineered athlete from a holo-shopped advertisement for steroids. Then again: Vakarian. A massive homeworld clan, with thousands of members. Easily able to afford the best genemods money could buy for a few lucky scions...

One of the Sils moved suddenly, and his gaze flitted to them without it being obvious. The Asari moved toward a vending machine and purchased two cans of citrus tupari, then returned to their place. The two Spectres opened their cans at the same time, with the same motion, and took similar sips of fluid before making matching sighs of enjoyment.

...peculiar, but not unusual for them.

Before he could move onto considering the rest of the auspicious crowd their transports finally arrived. Spectre Kryik's massive junk heap, and Spectre Vasir's prototype optical stealth ship. He immediately began heading for the later, unwilling to ride on the mess of scrap parts and wishful thinking that Kryik called a starship. He didn't show it, but a relieved sigh left him when his partner followed without argument. Lonar had expected the Vakarian to argue for the comfort of a known vessel, and was pleased when he didn't have to try and convince the torin with tactics both fair and otherwise...

It was part of why he mostly worked alone. No one had to suffer his inability to stop manipulating people if there was no one there to coerce.

The groups split up nearly half and half; those wishing to land in the space port with Kryik would
sneak out into the city for intel, using the knife-loving torin's regular visits as a cover for him landing. He would be the only one seen disembarking the ship, of course. Conversely, those who thought to look for leads outside the capitol would land amid the sprawling ship graveyards, sneaking onto the world far from the official channels and looking through the outposts and seedy locales for intel.

He would be in the later group merely by coincidence, which was fine. Kryik's floating deathtrap was something the cream toned torin wanted no part of.

Vasir's vessel was more or less the complete opposite of the other option. The prototype small frigate was all brushed metal swoops in soft pastel, and sturdy, curvaceous accents in maroon. Lonar smiled slightly, amused to realize the Asari's ship matched their face. It wasn't unkindly thought though, far be it from he to judge aesthetics when the alternative was rust and an excess of welding lines.

The Vakarian, whose first name he still didn't know, stepped up beside him on the bridge, eyes looking over the various terminals with a gaze that seemed to be doing more than simply taking a look. The torin was... identifying them. Icy blue eyes skimmed past a readout of engine draw, hit something of interest, and his stance shifted forward in curiosity.

An engineer then? To understand the diverse systems of a ship enough to garner technical knowledge from them and have questions required more than passing study. The sniper rifle lent credence to that theory as well. A safe weapon for a long range support class, such as a technical expert would most likely be.

Several other Spectres and specialists joined their group, and the airlock was sealed for take off. He stepped closer to his temporary partner, crest tilted to a flattering angle and subvocals pushed into something mellifluous but polite.

"Perhaps if we are to work together, introductions are in order. I am Lonar Trinix... and you are?"

"Garrus Vakarian, a Detective with C-Sec. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Spectre Trinix. Thank you for working with me."

"Simply Lonar is fine, Detective. I'm not one to stand on formality."

The handsome torin nodded at him, subvocals a friendly hum. Perfect. Now to get the sniper to talk about himself.
"Garrus then."

"Wonderful. Tell me, what do you specialize in Garrus?"

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“This is team PKT, we've found a potential lead. Is anyone near the residential area by the spaceport?”

Riaz waited to hear if anyone else spoke a positive into coms, but when only negative replies came through she double tapped her com's activation to let Spectre Piri know another answer was forthcoming... she just needed to step away from the bar casually first, and get somewhere private.

Her tab paid, the black scaled Drell cheerfully sauntered out of the building and down the block. A moment later she turned into a specific alleyway, and wall jumped back and forth for three stories to land on the roof. The tiny Spectre's landing was a picture perfect flourish before she rose up to grin at the orange eyed male currently hacked into the building's com relay. Ankh glanced up briefly, then went back to what he was doing, nonplussed.

She huffed, and opened coms.

“Team TT here. We're in the entertainment district near the docks, 'bout half a grid from the residential area. Why, what's the deelio, eh?”

“Forwarding you the intel, I think this is worth checking out unless you've gotten a lead elsewhere?”

Riaz glanced at Ankh, who shook his head briefly in a negative.

“Ah, that would be a no. Notin' but a bunch a langers 'round here. We'll look into it, sure thing.”

“Thank you. PKT out.”
With a pop of her neck the explosives expert sat down next to her laconic partner-slash-brother-in-law and leaned on his shoulder. As expected, he had the incoming file transfer brought up on his Omni-tool, and was already back to uploading the latest Spectre-class anti-surveillance viruses and data watchers into the local mainframes.

The highly encrypted file took almost a minute to load, but the moment it did Ankhleas was bringing it up on screen. It contained two holos, low quality, from the perspective of a hidden camera, or perhaps a really old 'tool. There was a short description to go along with it, but more or less the lead was a local information broker who worked out of their garage, specializing in genetic data trading.

A weak fookin' lead, to be sure, but better than what they'd had.

Chapter End Notes

08/19/2010 - MIT Exo-Biologist Claims Astonishing Antilin "Ghost Ship" Discovery

“The scientific community is abuzz today after the latest report from MIT exo-biologist Jordan Detweiler was filed last night from the Antilin System, where he's currently investigating a mysterious "ghost ship." Claiming a breakthrough, Detweiler writes, "What I've discovered is nothing short of astonishing: This so-called derelict ship isn't derelict at all. It appears that an alien race has downloaded its consciousness to a massive array of quantum computers onboard the vessel. It's my belief these aliens now reside entirely in a virtual world and have been there for at least 8,000 years." Detweiler estimates the population of the virtual world numbers close to one billion individuals. He explains: "The ship's AI is something of a caretaker to these people, or even a god depending on how you look at it. More importantly, the AI is now requesting our help. It says a power failure is imminent and threatens the entire virtual civilization."

A/N: I went back to try and count my OCs, but I stopped after 15. Awful... just awful... I love them. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: Just Saren (2426 words), Unexpectedly Green (3621 words), & Rainbow (779 words) by ninalanfer
I'm going to keep on reminding

Chapter Summary

Mordecai is a very sage, noble martial artist of much renown... he's also an ass. Tela has a chit chat with a friend on the sly.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I had an outline. NOTHING IN MY OUTLINE HAPPENED. /shakes fist at the willful characters.

A/N/N (Edit): The team assignments for easy reference. :)

(PK) Fomalee Piri / Shooka Kimbarum
(MT) Mordecai Maerun / Mylo Tiivii
(TT) Riaz Tio'fore / Ankh Tithe
(AOR) Ideris O'kara / Saren Arterius / Avitus Rix
(VK) Nihlus Kryik / Tela Vasir
(TV) Lonar Trinix / Garrus Vakarian
(WW) Lorelai Wrathari / Sivesi Wrathari
(GB) Joss Gurji / Jondam Bau
(SS) Astraya Sil / Riisa Sil

Chapter Soundtrack: Dashfix ft Veela - Walking

And all along it's love
I am not made of love
We are not only love
This is not 'cause of love
Follow me
Can you see me?
...
Something's fishy and it's all too evil
Drown it out, boycott the sequel too
I'm just not who I once was
And it hurts 'cause I believe in love

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mordecai heard the all-team coms channel open with a click, and ducked into a side street to listen, Specialist Tiivii right on his heels.

“This is team TT, is anyone near Choquo's north side? We have a problem.”
“GB here, we are.”

“MT as well folks. What's the problem?”

Specialist Tithe's voice came back on coms, passing along fresh information from a lead in the residential district. The gamble of time taken to look into it had paid off; Shadow Broker agents were active at coordinate's in the capitol city's north end. The weapon's master licked the back of his teeth thoughtfully.

“Say, what buildings are at those coordinates?”

“It looks like an opiate den, a spa, and a small gambling parlor.”

“Hmph. I'll put credits down that the agents are working in that spa.”

Spectre Tio'fore's voice came on the line with a cackling chortle.

“Aye! I'll take that bet. A thousand they're in tha parlor!”

Spectre Kryik's came in next, rumbling in pretend annoyance.

“Damnit, I was gunna take the parlor. Well I can't deal in now. No way they are actually in the drug den.”

“Too slow, green eyes. Be faster next time.”
“Mean.”

He chuffed, subvocals denying it completely. He wasn't mean in the slightest.

“Ach, it's just me and 'im then. Good luck figuring tha out. We'll be lookin' inta the rest of this data 'ere for otha leads. TT out.”

“Team GB will head that way to assist, over.”

“Right then, we'll check that spa first, GB. See you there.”

Mordecai heard Jondam hum in acknowledgement and the line went dead. He turned to Specialist Tiivii and nodded down the street toward a nearby taxi stand. The blue hued Salarian squinted at the stand suspiciously.

“I'm not sure we can avoid listening devices in a public taxi, Spectre. Maybe we should walk...”

“Or we could just not talk on the ride over?”

Tiivii blinked at him, before blushing slightly.

“Well yes... there is that.”

Mordecai flicked his mandibles out in a quick smile and headed to the public transit terminal to summon them a ride. He spent most of the trip over trying not to notice that the young Specialist was
fidgeting from being quiet the whole time. He supposed that being predisposed to the stream-of-
thought mind-to-mouth method of information exchange that Salarians were often prone to was
somewhat disturbing to physically refrain from when the kid was probably thinking a thousand
kilometers a minute about every fraction of information the various teams had collected thus far.

Tiivii was brilliant, no doubt, but also very... bouncy. More bouncy than the calm, sly weapon's
master was used to dealing with in the peaceful ST&R offices or the timelessly quiet dojos he
frequented.

The silence broke almost the moment they stepped from the landing pad.

“Specialist Tithe sent a map of the local grid... spa is that way.”

Mordecai nodded, turning to casually head perpendicular to the building while scoping out the
available approaches... of which there were suspiciously few. No taller buildings to jump from. A
nice large entry path garden to prevent any sneaking in. Lots of space between their walls and the
next place, with plenty of security cameras pointed everywhich way.

'Oh yes, those credits are mine. Just look at this place.'

The subtle difficulty of infiltration had Shadow Broker written all over it.

“Hey, Tiivii?”

“Yes, Spectre Maerun?”

“How do you feel about getting a manacure?”
“Uh...”

“For the mission.”

“Could you... elaborate on this plan?”

“See now, the Broker knows my face real well, but if we stop in somewhere and get you a little make up? You could probably get inside without setting off too many flags. Scope the place out, get your talons... er... nails all shined up, ask to use the rest room... get a surveilance virus into their network... See where I'm going with this?”

The young Salarian looked like he'd rather dine with a Vorcha than get a manacure, but he nodded bravely. Mordecai kept all amusement from his face, turning them toward a nearby convenience store. A little bit of greenish coverup and all those identifying freckle patterns would disappear. Some darker tones could change the shape of his face slightly. Not foolproof, but hopefully sufficient. It would be a nice plan A before the usual plan B of ‘fight our way inside and hack everything in sight, then end up in the news for weeks.’

However it went, he'd wait until the mission was well and truly done before reminding the young Specialist that the mission report would require the details of his spa treatment, and would go in the Council Archives on his record for all time.

Okay, so maybe he was a little mean.
Tela’s Omni-tool went off on silent alarm with an incoming call request. Considering the intel that had passed through coms not an hour ago, the nais had rather expected it. Slipping from Kryik’s view, the cunning Spectre kipped into a storage closet and opened the voice-only call.

“What?”

A mild huff of offence was the initial response. Tela didn’t particularly care. Just because the contact was expected didn’t mean they appreciated dealing with it in the middle of a cooperative mission. Arterius’ tame psychopathic diva was too astute to miss much. Eventually the caller continued in a smooth and synthesized voice, tinged with an edge of amusement.

“Tell me you're on Korlus.”

“I am.”

“Your friends are wasting time interrupting my operations when there is more at stake elsewhere.”

“I figured. I didn't have a better lead though. Without that, telling them to leave the day spa alone would've been…”

“Suspicious?”

“Quite.”

The modulated voice hummed in understanding while Tela waited for the Broker to get to the point. Either they had better intel to share, or they didn't. It was as simple as that.

“Cerberus is here.”

“I am very aware. So is a disciple of the Witch.”
“There had been rumors... thank you for confirming.”

“Mhm.”

“There are three cells of the the three headed dogs, ironically enough. I have recent coordinates for two.”

“Forward them to me,” Tela demanded automatically, cautiously peeking out to see if their partner was missing them.

“As you wish. Though you’ll have to find the third on your own.”

“I’ll manage, thanks. I’m sending you the immunization data for the virus the Maerun’s team dumped in your systems.”

“Most appreciated, Vasir. Appreciated indeed… Do keep the other factions from getting that data? No one wants to see another Krogan Rebellion.”

“Except the Krogan.”

“Fair point.”

Tela felt a smirk tug on their lips.

“Not a Krogan then, Broker?”

“Of course not. I’m a Vorcha.”

The smirk deepened.

“Really? I would swear you were a Salarian last month…”
The Shadow Broker chuckled and cut the connection. Tela slipped from the closet and made for another office, slipping behind the computer and using the local network to plant the intel on Cerberus somewhere Specialist Tithe would find it.

Chapter End Notes

08/21/2010 - Opinions Mixed After Discovery of "Ghost Ship" Virtual Civilization
“Opinions were plentiful this week after MIT's Jordan Detweiler stunned the scientific world when he revealed the existence of a virtual alien civilization residing in a derelict "ghost ship". Niran Patalung, a Buddhist scholar at the Center for Religious Studies in Bangkok, said, "I'm struck by the parallels to ancient human beliefs in reincarnation. Clearly, life does not end for these aliens when they 'die.' Their souls, if you will, simply re-inhabit other virtual personalities and continue living." Thomas Copeland, spokesman for an Earth-based atheist group, disagreed: "That's true until you pull the plug. Then what? All these 'souls' just wink out, that's what. Those who would latch onto this incident as proof of some higher level of existence are simply projecting their own wishful thinking onto digital noise." Mr. Patalung replied: "One man's noise is another man's music. Perhaps in his next life, Mr. Copeland will be less tone-deaf."

A/N: Team names are last initials of the members, in case it wasn't clear. :D

A/N/N: Halp. Does anyone know if Salarians actually have fingernails of any sort?? I'm going to guess that they do, some of the models really look like there is some pointy under those gloves, but...

Fanfic Recommendation: Keeping a Secret (1087 words), & Unhealthy Obsession (2083 words), & Turn of Events (11088 words) by ninalanfer
Because you're the only refuge now

Chapter Summary

Saren is, as always, calm in the field, and the former consort finds himself the charmed rather than the charmer. Nihlus pulls off the implausible.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for all the comments on the last chapter! Have another chapter as a present!

A/N/N (Edit): The team assignments for easy reference. :)  
(PK) Fomalee Piri / Shooka Kimbarum  
(MT) Mordecai Maerun / Mylo Tiivii  
(TT) Riaz Tio'fore / Ankh Tithe  
(AOR) Ideris O'kara / Saren Arterius / Avitus Rix  
(VK) Nihlus Kryik / Tela Vasir  
(TV) Lonar Trinix / Garrus Vakarian  
(WW) Lorelai Wrathari / Sivesi Wrathari  
(GB) Joss Gurji / Jondam Bau  
(SS) Astraya Sil / Riisa Sil

Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: Melanie Martinez - Mad Hatter

We paint white roses red,  
Each shade from a different person's head  
This dream, dream is a killer  
Getting drunk with a blue caterpillar  
I'm peeling the skin off my face  
'Cause I really hate being safe  
The normals, they make me afraid  
The crazies, they make me feel sane  
I'm nuts, baby, I'm mad,  
The craziest friend that you've ever had  
...  
Tell you a secret, I'm not alarmed  
So what if I'm crazy?  
The best people are  
You think I'm crazy, you think I'm gone  
So what if I'm crazy?  
All the best people are  
And I think you're crazy too, I know you're gone  
That's probably the reason that we get along
“He won't talk.”

“We’ve tried every trick we know.”

Saren hummed wordlessly at the Sil’s simultaneous and to-the-point greeting as his team entered the decimated penthouse, O’kara at the rear as the senior agent of the three. In his peripheral vision the vicious tarin wandered off to the side, circling around the empty, broken suite like a restless predator. Her eyes flipped from place to place, tracing the shadows before eyeing their captive.

“He’s kind are often difficult to interrogate. It is not a shortcoming on your parts.”

He nodded in agreement to the tarin’s point. The Asari duo smiled weakly, looking relieved that no one seemed upset with their failure.

“Hell yeah -nnng- we are,” grunted the defeated merc hanging by his arms from the ceiling, suspended by an excess of repurposed elevator cabling. Saren moved toward the bleeding Krogan, avoiding the blood spatter to inspect the security of the bindings. Behind him Rix’s footsteps slowed then stopped, halting by the uncanny Spectre pair. Saren was uncertain whether his mentee was farther away because of the signs of T&I, or merely a desire to observe from a distance. He made a note in his greybox files to find out later, because if it was squeamishness they would need to add desensitization training to the ongoing list.

He despaired of finishing Rix's training anytime in the next year at the rate he was adding to that list.

Near the far wall and in the corner by the door two other Blood Pack lay dead, both Vorcha. The silver-grey torin glanced at them as he came to a halt before the suspended Krogan, meeting the brute’s simmering, yellow eyed glance while his cybernetic eyes scanned for rate of regeneration and current damage.

Satisfied that the captive would neither regenerate nor die anytime soon he turned aside and continued walking, coming to stand on the windy edge where the arcology's floor ended suddenly and the walls remained unfinished. The open air was no less dusty than street level, but certainly fresher. He inhaled deeply before amending O’kara’s statement in a handful of words laced with mild threat.
“Difficult, but not impossible.”

The panting Blood Pack merc snarled, fighting the steel cabling. It was a losing battle though, and the sounds of struggle settled down after a short lived fight. Saren’s gaze rose up into the atmosphere, observing the debris field of junked ships that hung beyond the planet’s gravity, waiting to be recycled.

“Tell us what you have tried thus far.”

One of the Asari look-alikes sighed in aggravation. The other hummed in commiseration and replied.

“Sections one through seven in the hand book, followed by a few Huntress tricks, attempted mental violation via melding, bribery, and chemically assisted seduction.”

“Hah! As if I -hnng- wanted to breed with any- nng… anything but a true Krogan female.”

Both Asari sighed, annoyed at the presumption.

Saren nodded slowly, mildly impressed they had managed to get through all of that in a few hours time, even if it had not worked. He made a mental note to commend their efforts on the final report. His electric eyes wandered back down to the jagged horizon of Choquo’s sprawling urban decay as he considered options. The merc growled into the silence, every centimeter the defiant soldier even after the slew of both carrot and stick.

This would require a… delicate touch. Someone with psychological expertise. Saren tapped himself into coms.

“Team VK, are you preoccupied?”

“This is VK. Not particularly, got somethin’?”

“Your assistance is required for questioning a subject with a high level of recalcitrance. Sending coordinates now.”
“Should have guessed we’d get another one. I need to stop by my ship first. What’s the species?”

“Krogan.”

“Mmkay.”

The mercenary laughed, though the sound broke off into wet coughing.

“You think you can break me? Pah! Blood Pack is strong! I am strong! And you? You're fucked.”

Saren raised an unimpressed browridge at the declaration, glancing back over his shoulder with a mild look.

“You have clearly never heard of my first protégé.”

As messed up as the circumstance were? Garrus was having fun.

Spectre Trinix was a front liner despite the torin’s thin, willowy build. The former consort favored close to mid range tactics, but rather than being a heavy hitter that took out each target before moving on, Lonar spent his time making openings.

Openings which Garrus took ruthless advantage of.

“Scratch one!”
“Good. Moving east.”

While a sniper could take out countless targets from range, decent cover derailed them. Their prey could just sit tight and... not get killed.

“Watch yourself Lonar, nine o'clock.”

“Where...? Ah. I see them, thank you.”

On the flip side, a close quarters fighter could get on top of and finish off opponents, but they were all too easily taken down by committing to a move they shouldn't have. A single zig when they should have zagged was enough to end a front liner... but not if they were only passing by, pausing just long enough to tease out openings.

Especially not if they had a crack shot, long range partner watching their six.

“A pair got past me, watch the south side of your nest Garrus.”

“Will do.”

Together the two torin tore through an impressive number of Turians, no few of which had familia notas that matched those painted on the Duarch of Altakiril. They cleared the field of hostiles and regrouped to search the bodies for intel while still breathing hard from the fight.

“Color me impressed, Garrus. I had hoped you knew how to use that rifle, but had not expected you to... make it sing, so to speak. No wonder Arterius registered you as an asset.”

“Hah. Thanks. Wouldn't have been half so effective if you hadn't been dancing across the field flushing them out though. That worked well.”

The cream plated torin glanced over at him before moving to check the next body’s Omni-tool, a light flush in his neck and subvocals quiet.
“...indeed, it did.”

“What’s wrong?”

The Spectre looked up at him, eyes unreadable, and then turned away to continue looting.

“Ahh, it's nothing. Just… the way you compared my tactics to dance was… nostalgic.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. One of my old teachers used to compare the lifestyle of a courtesan to that of a soldier, drawing parallels between violent conflict and social battles to inspire those she taught. She said something similar about me once... right before also telling me that I wasn't cut out to be a consort.”

“That sounds unkind, and if they are similar... well you're definitely spectacular at this variety.”

They stood from checking the last corpse at the same time, lacking intel unfortunately. The cream colored torin smiled at him wryly, almost sheepishly.

“She was not entirely wrong. I did quit.”

“Because you wanted to or because you weren't good at it?”

“The former.”

“Thought so.”

Garrus grinned broadly as Lonar turned away and toward the enemy's empty shuttles, throat flushed even more.

“If we are trading compliments, then... I am also impressed that you did not falter when facing
Turians who were likely nothing more than honest soldiers doing as their commander ordered them.”

The Detective sighed softly, the comment bringing up old, brittle memories.

“Let's just say I have some experience acting on orders to send good people to the spirits early.”

“… Hastatim?”

He shrugged, *really* not wanting to talk about it. The Spectre's subvocals softened into something understanding, and he mercifully changed the subject.

“Come, let us check their vehicles as well.”

“Copy that.”

Avitus leaned against the wall, a floor down from the penthouse, waiting amid a small crowd of Spectres and hoping that Kryik was really the interrogation mastermind that Arterius seemed to think he was.

Sure, the silver-grey torin had been explicitly confident in his other protégé’s skills, but Krogan were just... so used to pain, so fearless and stubborn. Not to mention that their brains were practically hardwired for focusing on their goals despite adversity. As a species they defied the psychologist’s tool box, the beguiler’s charm; the old ones could even shut down mind melding.

Krogan were the single worst species to need intel from, second to none, so the Spectre-in-training thought it was pretty damn fair to doubt.

While he was quietly worrying, Spectre O’kara paced the slightly-more-finished floor like a caged beast. Arterius stood calmly in place, occasionally talking over coms with the older torin Specialist
that followed Spectre Tio’fore around. It seemed they had another lead if this one fell through, but they were suspicious of it for some reason.

He was just about to break down and pull out his Omni-tool to start reading more of the articles on getting over someone when the carmine plated Spectre came sliding down the access ladder. The room turned to him as one, but if Kryik enjoyed or was unnerved by the sudden focus he couldn't tell.

“I've got two potential locations for the live bidding, and a solid guess on where clan Drau is holed up. Sending the coordinates to everyone now.”

Behind Kryik the bloodied Krogan slid down the access ladder, landing roughly. Every gun in the room was pointed at the mercenary before the lanky Spectre's whistle and raised palms caught everyone’s attention. O’kara snarled, but the room as a whole held back.

“Calm the fuck down people. This is Gigath, and he was fucked right over by his own clan and forced into merc work to end up here. He *agrees* that the Krogan aren't ready for a cure, but he thought they were also dying out. I showed him the data from the Council Archives that proves his people’s population is holding steady while they figure themselves the fuck out. He's with us now.”

Avitus stared, unblinking.

‘*What... just... happened? Did he...?’*

The Krogan merc stepped forward, the flayed skin on his torso healing fast enough that *someone* must have given him a regenerative serum.

“The skinny one speaks true. Where I grew up was disgusting. Fertile females and males were raped over and over to produce more children. Food wasn't hunted by krannt and shared, it was eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. Our shamans were always skin and bones, and the hatchlings were tested in the rites too early. I did not want this to be our way, but I could not change it. Then I watched your pathetic excuse for an interrogator bring up files with his keys and codes... I saw the vid of the Council discussing our 'social progress as a species' to see if the genophage curse should be lessened. I saw the census data. We are... *not* dying. Whoever spread that falsehood wanted to make us desperate. They were *lying*, and I. want. to know. *why.*”

Avitus shut his jaw with a click, not realizing it had dropped, and slowly lowered his assault rifle.
Kryik hadn’t just gotten them the intel... he’d... made an ally? Out of a Krogan... on a mission to capture or destroy genophage data.

Beside him Arterius sighed, subvocals edging on aggrieved.

“Nihlus.”

“Yeah?”

“...send the intel.”

“Already on it.”

His mentor turned around and promptly left the room. O’kara narrowed her eyes at the merc in warning and followed. The Sils, wearing matching looks of befuddlement, trailed behind. Avitus stood there for a moment, distantly thinking he’d been given the wrong mentor. Kryik had solved their problems by literally *making friends* with the captive. He didn't know if that vid was real or staged but... if he was going to continue working for the Council, he wanted to be that kind of Spectre.

The pale torin flashed his fellow protégé an impressed flick of mandibles, and turned to follow the others.

Chapter End Notes

08/24/2010 - Galaxy Remains Riveted to Ongoing "Ghost Ship" Saga
“The galaxy remains riveted to the ongoing saga of the AI-driven "ghost ship," now in danger of perishing because of dwindling energy reserves. Evolutionary biologists have jumped into the fray, with one claiming the extinction of the virtual alien race is the natural order of things. "Face it," turian scientist Elgus Paramon argued, "these aliens were clever, but they weren't clever enough to build a better battery. Their lack of foresight is a failure to adapt to changing conditions. Their species represents an evolutionary dead-end, and their civilization should be allowed to perish." Responding, the chief exo-biologist investigating the ship, Jordan Detweiler, said "Mr. Paramon would have us commit genocide by turning a blind eye to the situation. We can save this civilization. The power requirements to preserve their virtual world are manageable."
The matter is now being referred to the Citadel Council for further consideration.”

A/N: No but really, author-chan's entire day was made because they got to have Garrus say 'Scratch one!' :3

A/N/N: Nihlus WOULD. AHAHAHA!!! Saren is so silently distressed that they now have a questionable ally that Nihlus would be upset about if he just killed at the end of the mission. Of course, if faced with a delicate interrogation again Saren will still call on the carmine plated menace despite this event. He'll just very specifically ask him not to make friends next time... and that's when Nihlus will try extra, extra hard to make friends.

Hell if I know when this will happen, but it's completely EDaH canon to me now.

Fanfic Recommendation: Turn of Events (11088 words) by ninalanfer
A bartered sash to cover the poor stitching

Chapter Summary

Nihlus chit chats with his new friend and Tela, the wanderer finds some shade to rest in, and Saren chases off cold memories.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Author-chan apologizes for the excessive, likely inaccurate use of com-channel lingo later in the chapter. If you see errors, please let me know. Author-chan does not apologize for the atrocity that is Riaz's accented speech. :D


Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: Fall Out Boy - My Songs Know What You Did In The Dark (Light Em Up)

Be careful making wishes in the dark dark
Can't be sure when they've hit their mark, mark
And besides in the mean, mean time
I'm just dreaming of tearing you apart
...
All the writers keep writing what they write, write
Somewhere another pretty vein just died
I've got the scars from tomorrow and
I wish you could see, see
That you're the antidote to everything except for me, me
...
My childhood spat back out the monster that you see
My songs know what you did in the dark
So light 'em up up up
Light 'em up up up

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Nihlus let out a breath, slow and silent, as guns lowered and the room steadily cleared of people. When the only remaining individuals were himself, Tela, and Gigath he smiled and turned toward the other two.

“Well! That went well, all things considered.”

Lounging against the wall, Tela snorted.

“Only you, Kryik. So... next-”

Midsentence, their encrypted coms came to life, Riaz' voice on the far side.

“Ar'right! We do be havin' a plethora of intel. We'll need someones after either o' these biddin' locations, tha Cerberus cells we've got a lock on, and 'o course people to keep an eye on tha group from Drau clan. Also might be good ta send lookers out on watch in case we're off our mark anywhere. Could be more word ta be had, aye?”

Saren's thoughtful but crisp Palaven accent came on the line in reply; somehow demanding the same level of inherent respect as Nihlus' crazy but ancient Drell friend. He wondered at that. Even Tela was listening closely, though Saren was almost the youngest Spectre there... second to himself.

“I agree on all points, and propose teams SS and my own to hunt down the Cerberus units, being our best trackers. VK and TT can move into position at the bidding locations and stake them out until we know more. That will also leave them free to search for leads digitally while they keep watch. However, I cannot understate the importance of confirming if there is or is not a Disciple here. We must have a non-Asari team, preferably two, to stay on that lead. This leaves the Krogan, and a team or two to keep mobile in case we find further leads. Alternatively, in the instance that Blood Pack or the Duarch's forces come up again.”

“This is MT, we can keep looking for intel on the witch.”

“PK can assist.”
The line went quiet for a moment as they collectively realized that the current assignments left three lighter combat teams to deal with either watching for Clan Drau or being mobile team, and while any of them could be mobile... 

“This is.. ah, V of TV. We can handle Drau, if that's alright with... T.”

“It is, we should be fine.”

Nihlus smirked, confident of Garrus' ability to take out a compliment of Krogans, solo if need be, so long as he had the tools to do it with.”

“Yeah, they got this. Might make a little mess dealing with a squad of them, but so would I.”

“You make a mess just meeting an informant for tea, K.”

“Shush. That was one time V. One time.”

Saren's huff of exasperation was loud enough to cue his mic.

“Focus. Team TV will deal with the Krogan, permission given to 'make a mess' if need be to ensure they are not a problem. Teams WW and GB, keep mobile, and see what you can find. It is possible that any of our current leads are misdirection, and time can not be wasted on false moves here. Does anyone have a conflict with their assignment?”

Coms went dead for a moment as Saren paused to see if any of their number needed to switch with another. When no complaints were laid, he resumed speaking.

“Very well. My team will take the first set of Cerberus coordinates.”

“Ack, one otha thing. We're running hot, so ta speak. I'd like ta hear a check in on coms once an hour from everyone, eh? Too many threats on this field. No one 'ill know if ya go dark unless we're lookin' out for each otha. Just a hullo will do. Team TT out.”
There was a round of affirmatives to the assignments and the check-in request. When the channel went quiet Nihlus pulled off his helm for a moment to scratch an itch. He cocked out a hip to hang the thing on, and turned to face Gigath, who had been waiting silently throughout the half-heard conversation.

“Well big guy, looks like you're off the hook. My advice? Find a shuttle and get off of Korlus, maybe head for... hmmm. That's a tough call... you serious about wanting to find out more about the rumors?”

“I am.”

Nihlus licked the back of his teeth, considering.

“Welllll... might head back to Tuchanka, and start asking around, yeah? Ask people where they heard things. Probably going to get a helluva lot of 'from my buddy such-and-such' answers, but ask enough people and you might start to get some more interesting leads.”

Gigath exhaled slowly. He supposed it was a sigh, but the angry, lumbering merc looked less resigned and more... ready to interrogate half a planet.

“You've done right by me, skinny. In a situation where I was sure I was about to meet the void. I won't forget.”

“Yeah, well, just doing my job. Pissed off Krogan who think we're trying to kill them off when really we're just trying to not fuck things up more after the emergency uplifting during the Rachni Wars... it doesn't really help galactic stability, does it?”

The merc huffed and walked out of the door without another word. He followed the motion with his eyes as Tela stepped up beside him.

“I still can't tell whether your methods are carefully laid plans or just you being a lucky moron.”

Nihlus flipped his helm around in a flourish before putting it back on.
“... and you'll never really know. Ready to head for our stake-out coordinates?”

“Not yet, I need to make a stop first, then we can.”

“'kay.”

The wanderer put his back to the rock formation and slid down into the shade it provided, elbows on his knees as he panted. The remains of a nightmare spread out before him, the long battle leaving him weary but... disconcertingly neither thirsty nor hungry. He was sure combat used to give him an appetite...

Skulking monstrosities wearing the twisted visions of his own regrets had attacked him as he travelled while searching for a path out of this spirits-forsaken desert. He had fought them with talons and teeth, having no other means, but it had worked well enough. The creatures were weak, melting into shadowy pools after a few strikes each and then... well, retreating, it seemed.

Nothing died here as best he could tell, only left off with enough threat or force, though some of the denizens avoided him outright. Yet, the only things he had managed to actually destroy, of sorts, were the fragments that felt suspiciously familiar, such as that very first one. The grasping, sickly fragment that had reached out for him from the maelstrom when he had heard the recognizable voice and thought to look up.

Those all felt... different. Personal... and ended or joined him easily.

The joining was generally the stranger of the two. He could capture the figments and flashes in a fist, and their destruction or absorption would change based on his intent. Those which he wanted gone made near-silent shrieks of denial as they fell into ash. Those which he held onto dispersed into him like a cool, refreshing mist that cleared his head.

He never had more than a vague idea of like or dislike to go by, having to hope that he was doing this right... whatever ‘this' was. His clarity of focus improved each time he found and dealt with one of the odd figments though, so the wanderer presumed he was accomplishing something. That in
mind, he raised his head to look out into the ever-whirling storm. It too grew thinner and easier to see through as he fought on.

The bedraggled figure checked the far ground to see if defeating the new creatures had helped any... but this time it did not appear so. The distant line of yellow-brown-red where sand left off into hills looked no closer. He chuffed and dragged himself to his feet. There was still a long way to go, but he was making progress. Besides... the echoes of that somehow-precious voice pleading for aid may be long gone, but they were not forgotten.

He was determined to escape this aggravating place and find them.

The sigil in his scope caught him off guard more than he would care to admit, even knowing it was coming. Even hunting for it.

Few were aware that Cerberus was lead by the Illusive Man, and fewer still knew anything more about his identity. The terrorist group's leader was a recluse, only rarely seen in person and never amid the general public. Most of the branches of that tree had no idea what the trunk was focused on beyond the obvious plans and portents laid out in the manifesto released to the public years ago. Saren only knew more because he made it a point to keep track of each -and every- piece of intelligence that leaked on the Human-centric organization and it's leader.

The last time the two of them had been face to face, he had been left staring down at his brother's body, sprawled at the base of the Arca Monolith and sparking with the beginnings of insidious blue circuitry. Harper had dropped a host of dire warnings on him, and walked out of Temple Palaven carrying his final, dying teammate.

'A booby trap... planted... alarm them to the presence of advanced species... Warn your people, Saren.'

The silver-grey torin had sat there for long minutes, a hand's breadth from Desolas but unable to risk touching him, thoughts whirling as the mercenary left him to deal with the alien bioweapon on his homeworld, and a slowly waking horde of converted meta-Turians.
Most of his squad lay dead or covered in circuitry by that point, only a handful yet alive and in control of themselves... only those still back on his brother's ship. Both of their squad's lieutenants had been on coms, listening in since he had called Palaven command to declare a bioweapon emergency not even a full hour prior.

One frantic, the other deathly silent. Abrudas still would not speak to him to this day...

He shook himself, escaping the memories by sheer force of will and refocusing on the tell-tale orange and black markings in his scope, painted boldly on the white armor of each agent before him. The three person team had made a fox hole in the abandoned shell of a small freighter, with long sight lines and no easy back doors. It was highly defensible.

Physically, at least.

The Spectre fell back into cover, and began to hack into their coms, hoping to make the most of this opportunity. Intel on Cerberus in general was second priority to their local movements, but would be welcome. Hopefully he could acquire both.

Between his greybox, hand-made hacking suite, and the sheer computational power of his more advanced Omni-tool, it was a matter of perhaps fifteen minutes before he was into their coms and recording it. At first he waited in silence, no com chatter to listen to. O'kara shifted next to him, restless, but similarly patient. Saren eyed the time, deciding to give it twenty. If they were not talking by then, he would simply take their position by force, and hope they did not destroy their own devices when they saw him coming.

It would not be the first time he had been thus thwarted.

Three minutes to spare, their coms came to life.

“Virgo-55, this is Indigo-12. We've got incoming. Copy?”

“Virgo copies. Headcount?”

“Visual on two, potential for additional. Appear to be human, asari or drell, unable to confirm. They're tracking us. Will break off formation, beta-2.”
Saren began typing out a text message to Astraya and Riisa Sil almost the moment the words came through, still listening carefully for more details.

“Acknowledged, Virgo-55. We’re in position for strike. Is Pathina-6 waylaid?”

“Negative, Virgo. Pathina-6 is already holding in the shadows.”

“Understood. Indigo out.”

The Cerberus cell fell quiet after that, disappointingly, but the silver-grey torin consoled himself that at least he was walking away from this with their latest encryption levels and a new naming schema involving code words and a number. Valuable crumbs of data in their own right.

Now, to get close without being seen and hope there was whole or partial data he could recover unruined by optical suicide implants or emergency acid capsules released on loss of vital signs. With luck, and skill, perhaps one of them could be taken unawares...

“Spectre O’kara.”

“What.”

“I propose we attack.”

The angry, old tarin smiled without the slightest bit of happiness.

“ Took you long enough, Arterius.”
08/25/2010 - No Decision Yet Reached in "Ghost Ship" Case

"With time running out, no decision has yet been reached in the case of the alien "ghost ship" found drifting in salarian space. Exo-biologist Jordan Detweiler estimates the energy reserves currently powering the virtual alien world are down to 4% and will fail soon. Meanwhile, opportunistic explorers boarded the ship last night and managed to hack into the virtual civilization. Before they were caught, the hackers spent six hours interfaced with the ship's computers. In that relatively short period of time, it appears that some 180 years passed within the virtual world. Both hackers are currently in deep comas and doctors are unsure as to their recovery. "The interface was too much for their systems to absorb. Trying to re-connect their minds to their bodies after being "away" for so long mentally was too large a shock. Physically they're fine, but I'd wager scrambled eggs have more consciousness.""

A/N: A big thank you to Marie_Fanwriter for help making the com chatter realistic! (My original amatuer attempts were actually flat out wrong, haha.) I can't tell you how much I appreciate your input Marie, thank youuuu~~~

Fanfic Recommendation: **Jealousy** (1013 words) by **nugicorn** (“After weeks of teaching Garrus the tango, James's sexual frustration comes to a head. “ ~I have never sympathized with James Vega so much in my life. I want to buy the man a drink after this, he probably needs it. )
Encountering yet another work in progress

Chapter Summary

Because of course the galaxy changing information is stashed in a nice, shiney briefcase.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Author chan has been playing the new Story of Seasons game for 3DS, because it's super cute. All shunning for slow updates is completely legitimate. n_n

Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: machineheart - Speak In Tongues

You feel my words, they hit like thunder coming down from the sky
You wanna give in to the song that keeps repeating inside
It goes: ‘Oh can you save me from the sickness of love’
Tussle with angels but you're not strong enough
Rest on my shoulder til it's over and the battle is won
I will move
Give you rhythm
Speak in tongues
Til you listen, listen, listen

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus blinked, vaguely surprised, when Saren slid into cover beside him covered in splatters of red fluid. It was unlike the torin to get messy unless he absolutely had to… so what had happened - entirely off coms- that had required a midrange biotic powerhouse to get up close and personal?

If only the sheltered cove of skeletal ship and battered hull plating behind him didn't have live targets and a suspiciously shiny briefcase he would take the time to ask. As it stood, that would need to wait.

“It seems that no others are coming. When will the... ahh... bidding begin?” came the sweet, mellifluous voice of an unknown Asari, echoing around the bulwarks of scrap metal. Nihlus could barely see the nais from where he hid, skittish about moving close and altering them to his presence.

“At the top of the hour, no sooner, no later,” replied the fidgeting, over-armored Salarian holding the case. Six top of the line Atlas mechs surrounded the small male, an overkill which didn't seem to
perturb the Asari even slightly. The feminine figure’s sea foam blue dress swished around their knees as they bowed politely to the reply.

The all-team com channel crackled to life with Riaz’s voice talking quietly even though it was doubtful anyone could hear a thing through her helm. Habit, most likely.

“Are ya all seein’ what I do? That nais...”

Beside him, Saren’s armor made the quietest of noises as the laconic torin shifted in their cover. He looked over at the sound, and caught a glimpse of Rix several meters back, armor LEDs turned off. Ideris O’kara crouched on a beam above the pale torin, hidden mostly from view by fluttering, weather torn canvas.

“Raised body temperature, permanently black sclera, unaccountably youthful. The Asari is most likely from Raisaris, the disciple our intel mentioned.”

“Aye. Then we’ve got a witchling on our hands after all. Can ye go toe to toe with ‘em? I dun wanna bring any of our Asari near tha thing. Afraid the nais will scramble their heads.”

“Agreed… and possibly. Caution is warranted here. Do any other teams have eyes on? A sniper shot may be the better choice.”

A chorus of negatives came on the line just as a pack of scowling, well kitted Krogan strode into the clearing. Nihlus could practically feel his former mentor’s tension spike as he spoke again.

“...the situation has worsened. Clan Drau has arrived. There is no guarantee the Salarian’s case has what we are looking for, but that needs to be proven or disproven sooner rather than later. I... have an idea. All teams in this area remain out of sight, but prepare for combat.”

Without further warning Saren’s biotics flared dimly, a memetic motion flowing down his arms, then a flick of talons, ending with a twist of wrist.

The air around the Asari lit in a barrier, their lovely, sweet face tilting in curiosity at the defensive ability not their own. One of the Krogan in the new group lit up as well as Saren moved again, and when the first shouts of alarm were going just going out, the targeted merc flew sideways into his krannt.
All hell broke loose.

Nihlus watched with dawning awe as Clan Drau roared, panicking the Salarian into setting the mechs on them. Meanwhile they began charging the lone Asari, who gracefully backpedaled while tossing oncomers away like they weighed nothing. The Atlas mechs opened fire in sync, adding to the chaos and driving the briefcase holder into fleeing.

Mordecai’s voice drawled into the channel, sounding lazily amused.

“I think I see why our illustrious employers send you on missions where they don’t mind collateral damage, Arterius. Also, the case is headed right for me. Just a sec.”

The sound of shearing metal accompanied a blast of biotics, the uncanny Asari shining amid a nova of blue, purple, and flecks of red ...and looking pretty damn displeased. Nihlus clicked his tongue and started to retreat to Rix’s position.

“Yeah maybe let’s back up a meter. Or fifty. Let the black-eyed zealot tucker themself out on Krogans and mechs.”

“Got the case! Pulling back.”

“Ack, good goin’. Open it careful-like, eh?”

“Ahh... at a glance the encryption on this thing is beyond me, who wants a crack at it?”

When the black and red armored Spectre made it to Rix he gripped the light-plated torin's shoulder in passing and kept going. He and Saren followed behind him, withdrawing from the ongoing cacophony of biotics and gunfire that had taken over the secret meeting spot. O'kara was nowhere to be seen.

“Let us take a look, Maerun,” came the voice of the Turian Wrathari, “we’re both sitting idle about a half click to the south west.”
“By that com tower?”

“Just south of it.”

“Well alright then, give me a moment to stash the seller’s body and I’ll head your way.”

With a final, defining screech of collapsing struts the sound of battle in the distance fell away. Nihlus continued pulling back, nodding at Garrus and Lonar as they fell in line with the rest of the retreating parties. Blue came up to his side as they started to jog away from the repercussions -or survivors- of the brawl. The mountainous torin’s thick, gloved fingers flashed a slew of Hierarchy hand signals at him.

Asari-Biotic-Something Unknown-Explanation Requested.

Rix caught sight of it, apparently, and repeated the last sign toward him as well. He signed back ‘later’ to both of them, and kept moving. Nihlus was just about ready to slow down his jog, certain they had pulled back far enough to escape detection, when red light spilled over the ground around them, immediately followed by a biotic crash overhead.

“I can feel the echoes of your power clinging to my laurels, sad silver one. Did you think it would be so easy to escape unseen? Foolish. Give me the case.”

Arms raised defensively, crouched low to the ground and ready to roll from danger, Nihlus looked up toward the source of the voice and light. Balancing on a dead line of power conduit strung between two chunks of hull plating was the nais, eddies of biotic light spilling into the air.

“Aw fuck.”

The Asari smiled at them, sweetly.
Even being smart with his ammo, this fight was running him dry. Avitus leaned out of cover, low enough to the dusty ground that he could go limp and barely move. The floating nais’s shield needed to go, so he added pressure to it with another half clip of well placed rounds, ducking back into cover and moving to a new location before attention swung to him.

The ‘witchling’ or ‘disciple’, as all the other spectres and specialists were calling them, was throwing around tons and tons of weather worn scrap metal like it was nothing; flying, shielding, and talking as if their efforts were an amusing distraction.

He felt… somewhat out of his depth. The pale torin’s old crew had never taken on impossible monsters from lifeless, eezo rich worlds. It had mostly been pirates, slavers, or vigilantes who had crossed the wrong person on the Council’s friends list.

Not… this.

Popping up just far enough to deliver the rest of that clip, Avitus did his best to help while mentally troubleshooting their dilemma. Breaking situations down always helped.

Problem one, when Arterius tried to go toe to toe with the nais, the soft-faced Asari used one of their allies for cover like it was a game, mocking and toying with him. Their strongest counter measure to an enemy biotic was being hindered by their own numbers. Retreating to leave the stoic torin to face the disciple alone seemed in excess of cowardice, and not his preferred option.

Thankfully, considering the briefcase was actually long gone, his mentor seemed unperturbed by the handicap. The Spectres weren’t defending the mission objective, they were really just stalling. It made things a whole lot easier except for problem two.

That damn shield. The nais seemed to be able to hold it indefinitely, even while performing a slew of other tricks. Avitus had never seen an Asari, -or anyone-, display that must biotic flexibility and staying power. How they were doing it was a mystery, particularly as the hostile nais looked like a young maiden.

“I’ve made almost forty headshots on the target with high-caliber rounds,” drawled the Vakarian sniper, “and I’m not sure they felt any of them. Not something I’m used to… do we have a plan?”

“Kinda busy right now! You come up with somethin-”
Spectre Kryik broke off into a sizzling litany of curses when the cover he’d taken to make the reply exploded with him still using it. The clever torin’s smart mouth had so far earned him the bulk of the Asari’s attention. Not that the nais seemed all that upset. The pale ex-merc actually wanted to classify the things coming out of the disciple’s mouth as problem three.

“If you give me the case and bow before me, I may let you live as one of my playthings.”

“The great one desires this information, little soldiers. Don't you see? They always get what they want. You should just give in.”

“Stop running, stop fighting, this can only end one way.”

Yeah, maybe it was just how the nais was monologuing, but some of their words seemed strangely compelling.

Avitus shook it off, and reloaded his assault rifle, looking around at the graveyard of ships they’d found themselves in. There was always a solution or five to any given problem; he just needed to figure them out...

His orange eyes landed on the basis of a work-around, widening as inspiration hit him.

Saren tapped over to the short range com channel he always used on missions, his personal encryption securing the connection far beyond their team coms. Sufficient enough for actual names, at least.

“Nihlus.”

“WhaAaA-oh fuck me-what?!”
“How are you holding up?”

“I have a spirits-damned biotic people eater whispering sweet nothings at me while throwing bits of ship hull. How d’ya think I’m doing? This bitch just won’t staAAAA-fuckfuckfuck!”

“Nihlus.”

“Yeah, I know, don’t curse, blah blah uncouth blah blah. In other news, I’m fine. Peachy, even. Human fruit, don’t ask. Any- ... ...-way, I’m good. Could keep this up all day. But also, please fucking kill it.”

“We are working on it. Call me if you begin to tire, or ask Spectres O’kara or Trinix to swap with you.”

He heard one last defiant, wailing snark about Turians not being known for their stamina before his first protégé went silent to focus on not being killed. Saren leaned out of cover to get a better look around, though he did not precisely have the high ground.

They would need a small miracle to overpower the disciple, or perhaps an air-to-ground artillery strike would do. However, as they did not currently have access to the latter, the silver-grey torin was weighing the pros and cons of revealing his ability to draw on Garrus’ element zero laced bones for the extra boost they could give. It might be enough to overpower and suppress the nais. Or it might not. He had never seen one of these Asari in person, let alone fought them before. All his information came from the sparse files in the Citadel Archives; a few videos, the scan of a corpse, and a three paragraph codex entry. A miscalculation could have dire repercussions.

There was also the cost to Garrus to consider. While the the strange happenstance of being a biotic aura booster was a fascinating reserve ability, there would be no keeping the torin’s odd situation silent should such a variety of people see it being used. Though there could be ways around that... Perhaps if they planned it carefully...

Mid-consideration his train of thought was interrupted by the sight of his newest protégé attempting to get himself killed.
08/27/2010 - Alien "Ghost Ship" Saga Ends Under Veil of Secrecy

"The saga of the alien "ghost ship" has come to a surprising end. Earlier today, reports surfaced that the Citadel Council was prepared to rule against saving the ship, fearing its AI system was sophisticated enough to pose a "security threat of unknown dimensions."

In response, chief scientist Jordan Detweiler inserted himself into the virtual alien world to warn its citizens of their civilization's imminent end. He returned one minute later -- apparently equal to half a year within the accelerated timeline of the alien world -- bringing a treaty offer from its inhabitants. At that point, details turn sketchy. One inside source claims the virtual aliens offered scientific advancements "far beyond anything we have" in return for assistance. A veil of secrecy was immediately erected, with Citadel intelligence agencies classifying the matter as top-secret. Rumors now have Jordan Detweiler embarking on a Council-sanctioned mission into the virtual world to make diplomatic contact."

A/N: I believe I mentioned it before, but it is actually canon that 'up to one percent' of all Asari are affected by the gene that causes various prognoses of Ardat-Yakshi presentation. In a species as old and widespread as the Asari, that means they cannot possibly be the 'secret' Samara makes them out to be. If we add together the populations of ONLY Asari core worlds, and not mixed planets or Terminus worlds or outposts or anything else, the wiki totals come out to be 7,633,593,800. We'll pretend that those numbers have a large percent of non-Asari. How about 60% as Asari, and 40% non Asari on their core worlds as a kind ballpark. Guessing that only two in a hundred Asari mate with each other since it's stigmatized, and a very generous one tenth of a percent of Asari present with the Ardat gene, and only, say, the top 10 percent of those present with the really nasty version of Ardat-Yakshi-ism then... 916,031. Let's times that by 1.5 because who actually only has one kid in a millenia? THAT is 1.37 million Asari who are potentially as gifted/cursed as Morinth. Uhhhh... Samara? That's a lot more than the '3' you hinted at, even generously low statistically speaking. No wonder they needed a whole planet to contain them on... Um. Hmm.

Who wants to bet they caught them all? Who wants to bet that they are really some big secret that the Council, the Primarchs, the High Dalatrass, etc know nothing about? Ha... hahahahaha. Not I!

Fanfic Recommendation: Flights of Fancy (1414 words) by ThreeWhiskeyLunch
(Joker / MShep - equal parts sad and sweet, and little smexy at the end. )
A journey where you only laugh afterward

Chapter Summary

Avitus appears crazy, but is actually quite calculated. Saren is not pleased.

Chapter Notes

Teams:
(PK) Fomalee Piri / Shooka Kimbarum
(MT) Mordecai Maerun / Mylo Tiivii
(TT) Riaz Tio'fore / Ankh Tithe
(AOR) Ideris O'kara / Saren Arterius / Avitus Rix
(VK) Nihlus Kryik / Tela Vasir
(TV) Lonar Trinix / Garrus Vakarian
(WW) Lorelai Wrathari / Sivesi Wrathari
(GB) Joss Gurji / Jondam Bau
(SS) Astraya Sil / Riisa Sil

Chapter Soundtrack: Five Finger Death Punch - Wrong Side Of Heaven

I spoke to God today, and she said that she's ashamed.
What have I become? What have I done?
I spoke to the devil today, and he swears he's not to blame.
And I understood 'cause I feel the same.
Arms wide open, I stand alone.
I'm no hero, and I'm not made of stone.
Right or wrong? I can hardly tell.
I'm on the wrong side of heaven, and the righteous side of hell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wind whistling between the blades of his fringe, Avitus leapt from one creaky, metal hunk to another, sprinting back for the battlefield. Under his left arm was a hunk of ancient drive core. Very specifically, the de-ionization generator for one of the shielding layers on the core of the half slagged smallish battle cruiser behind him. Around the hunk was a long, sturdy length of coolant tubing, spun around the middle of it like spooled fishing wire.

With a tuft of dust, he slid into cover a good twenty meters off and assessed the situation. Spectre Kryik was out of sight, but Spectre O'kara had replaced him, moving with a fury and grace no ninety six year old had a right to; all liquid dodging and taunting roars. So, more or less, the situation remained the same as he had left it. Expected really. The utter lack of fear in the nais' manner had
tipped him off to the fact that the cadre of council agents probably didn't perturb the Asari anymore than a whiny Vorcha might. Or a small bug.

Also... the freakishly bright, multicolored aura the nais wielded might have also given him a tip off on that front. The hostile wasn't scared of them in the slightest, and that said bad things about the situation.

Lamplight orange eyes watched the undaunted Asari continue to make creepy voiced demands for their surrender of the data that none of them actually had anymore, meanwhile trying to pick out the best way to do this... the generator in his arms was primed for one half-assed fire, but without core shielding or a much larger energy supply to expand its effect, the thing would only pulse for about a quarter of a meter in a small sphere, give or take.

When he set it off the ions of pretty much everything nearby would have their charge sucked up into the device, dispersed into the air as harmless static.

'Hmm... Legs maybe? Lowest part of the hostile to the ground... take out the nervous system would mean no moving, and no moving would mean no memetics... not that the nais is using a ton of leg based memetics. Huh. Arms then? I'd settle for the torso, but hellll... who knows if I can get this thing close enough before they pull away on reflex. A whiff-and-a-miss would be a real shame here... can I even get their arms from the ground? I've only got so much tubing for rope...'

Avitus watched, thought about it, and discarded the idea. The 'disciple' was floating a good story, story-and-a-half up, looking down at everyone. They would expect an attack from below first and foremost, and the not-meant-to-be-a-convenient-handheld-device of a generator would have to be re-primed for another attempt... but then the nais would be alerted to something afoot. Whether the nais could pick out what it was, or would even think to fear some metal hunk in the hands of gravity obeying Turian, was a complete unknown. Plus, he'd be wide open to attack after trying; with limited cover options to boot.

Not a good way to play it.

The pale ex-merc worried the end of the tubing where a line of wire ended in a dead-man's switch, watching the battlefield and seeking further inspiration on his master plan. He might not be able to
put the hostile down with his rigged paralyzer, but it should screw with those biotics of their somethings fierce. An advantage his team could really use.

There were strings of power conduit draped around the area, a pile of skycar frames stacked precariously, a wing of some massive, unknown vessel... junk. There was just so much junk here. The scrappers on Korlus must be pretty picky, if it wasn't worth melting down all this metal for recycling.

'Wellllll, if under won't work, what about above?'

He did rightly like the idea of having the high ground, though most of the scrapyard topography that reached higher than the nais was hovering was either dust blown rocks that looked like hell to climb, or weathered starship exterior. To their rusty credit, the ships had some decent handholds, and his boots could be flipped to magnetic mode if he started to slip. Slipping meant falling, and falling meant broken plates, and that meant seeing the nice doctors with their bone chipping lasers sooner rather than later.

'No thanks.‘

He circled around the outside of the battlefield, where his mentor had taken up tossing away oncoming biotic... missile... things.

'Spirits preserve, those look like nothing so much as slow moving plasma bolts with a tail, not biotics. What is this nais?'

Avitus kept on, regardless of the display, finding a likely bit of leaning freighter and starting to climb. One story up, then two, then three. He carried on upward to four stories high, give or take, before daring to peek around the edge of the ship.

He was a bit too high; three would do it though. Just far enough above the nais' line of sight, - especially if they were looking downward-, to make for a surprise attack. He shuffled back down to
a lower spot. Now... to get the drop on the Asari when they were close enough to tag with the generator, preferably at the maximum length of the tubing. He'd done some number crunching real fast, and even half of the tubing uncoiled should leave him outside the range of the pocket of de-ionization, but more then that would be preferable.

The reluctant Spectre-in-training crawled right up to the edge, coiled himself on a jut of broken bulwark, and set to wait for the disciple to come close enough.

Just as Spectre Arterius' shoulders started to droop from rerouting a constant barrage of biotic energy, black and red armor came in from the side. Spectre Kryik threw a few grenades and mocked the nais' mother... and mother's mother... and great grand mother, onward for several generations-, with some truly heinous derogatory speech. Avitus tried not to be amused at the slurs. They were admittedly pretty damn clever, but morally putrid. Effective though, as the nais actually narrowed their eyes in the first displeased emotion he'd seen the Asari make.

His mandibles flicked in anticipation when the new game of chase started to come toward him.

'Come on, closer...'

'No, not that way.'

'Come on, not that way either.'

'... damn it all.'

They were moving away now, and it was only a matter of time before the nais got sick of being purposefully bounced from target to target and went for a kill. There was nothing for it; he needed to coordinate this in coms. Hopefully his mentor forgave the breech in com security for a theoretically good cause.
“Kryik, do you read me? Can you lead them past the C1 class transport?”

“How the hell can you tell whaAhhhhh! Fuck me, just a-."

The channel went quiet for a moment as the green eyed agent snatched up a spear of rebar and hurled it at the Asari javelin style, then ran pell-mell for new cover.

“Allllllright, what's the deal?”

“The big blue-green freighter. Can you lead the hostile past it?”

“Green... green... green... the big, half buried one? I'm seein' some partially worn away Volus looking script on the side?”

“That’s the one.”

The carmine plated Spectre delivered in short order, drawing the uncanny Asari right up to his ambush point. Avitus took another look at the height the nais was floating, and mentally swore. The disciple was too low, his generator wouldn't reach them from here. The pale torin glanced down at the ground grumpily. Well... a few stories wouldn't kill him. Maybe if he was lucky he'd get medical leave to think about this whole Spectre thing a little more.

The irony that he was contemplating breaking plates to delay deciding if a plate-breaking job was good enough money to make up for itself was not lost on him. It was entertaining enough to make him smirk behind his helm as he jumped. Avitus fell, tubing looped in his fingers, generator poised to be tossed.

Sea-foam green cloth swirled around lithe hips as the nais spun at the impact of a toaster-sized hunk
of metal smacking their shoulder just outside of a humming, red-flecked barrier. His grip on the trigger loosened at the same moment, setting off the de-ionization generator from a comfortable distance. His aim struck truer than he could have hoped: a minor flash of light, the very first half-note of a scream, and the deadly, compelling Asari simply died; the ionic charge in the neurochemicals of their brain stem stolen away.

No electrical charge... no nervous signals moving from mind to body... no pulse.

Avitus closed his eyes, tucked his chin in, and braced for impact, fully expecting his carapace to hit dirt any second. Conversely, he landed like a feather a good few seconds after hearing the thud of his target hit the ground like a sack of rocks. Orange eyes opened, confused.

Spectre Arterius was looking down at him through the semi-opaque glass of his helm, inscrutable.

“We will need to work on your communication skills.”

The former merc sat up, trying to blink away the after images from the flash. The torin didn't sound too upset with him...

Spectre Kryik plopped down beside him in the dust.

“All I meant was, ‘Nicely done. Next time tell me everything first or I will roast you. This is your one warning, and if you do it again I will torture you with excessive amounts of environmental training on ice planets.’ -No really, he did that to me once when I wouldn't stop complimenting my gun on this mission where an enemy merc insulted it's paint job... but more importantly, spirits bless you. My legs were about to fall off, and I think my left wrist needs ice. I’m nimble, but fighting someone who ignores the rules of physics sucks so much.”

“Ahh... you’re welcome.”
The green eyed torin was impossible to see through his helm's dark faceplate, but his subvocals were pleased sounding so… that was good. Avitus appreciated the warning more than the thanks, truthfully.

He'd been banking on a hospital stay, but would instead be very carefully avoiding ice planet training. Great.

“Thanks for leading the nais to-”

Their coms crackled on, the Asari of the two Wrathari Spectres, -Lorelai maybe?-, coming onto the channel.

“Team WW has the data… it’s exactly what we thought it was. Thank the Goddess it's ours. Requesting extraction from current location. We don't want to move with this... asset in hand.”

“This is V. I'm almost to my ship, hold tight. When I'm close I'll ping you for exact coordinates for pick up.”

"Understood."

Chapter End Notes

09/15/2010 - "Ghost Ship" Researcher Jordan Detweiler Sighted on the Citadel
The famed "virtual ghost ship" is back in the news today after a reported sighting of MIT exobiologist Jordan Detweiler. This follows weeks of rumors that Detweiler had embarked on a diplomatic mission into a virtual alien world that he discovered on the ship's supercomputer. It is now understood that Detweiler's body remained in a controlled coma while his consciousness explored the artificial civilization. However, multiple eyewitnesses on the Citadel claim to have seen Detweiler visiting the Presidium recently. A Council spokesperson would only say, "We do not comment on internal Citadel matters." This fueled speculation that Detweiler was indeed acting on behalf of the Council in his logins to the virtual world.”

A/N: This chapter is brought to you by author-chan, awake at 3am, trying to figure out how He3 engines, eezo drive cores, and engine shielding might work, and by the
A/N/N: I theory crafted so hard in this chapter it's not even funny! Okay, so... in canon He3/Eezo powered ships build up a charge with normal operation. Here is some Mass Effect wiki excerpt for you:

“As positive or negative electric current is passed through an FTL drive core, it acquires a static electrical charge. Drives can be operated an average of 50 hours before they reach charge saturation. … If the charge is allowed to build, the core will discharge into the hull of a ship. All ungrounded crew members are fried to a crisp, all electronic system are burned out, and metal bulkheads may be melted and fused together. The safest way to discharge a core is to land on a planet and establish a connection to the ground, like a lightning rod. Larger vessels like dreadnoughts cannot land and must discharge into a planetary magnetic field. ... Discharging at a moon with a weak magnetic field can take days. Discharging into the powerful field of a gas giant may require less than an hour. Deep space facilities such as the Citadel often have special discharge facilities for visiting ships.”

I’m guessing that part of the shielding necessary to contain that slow-building static charge would be a few layers of charge gathering via de-ionization and current... magnets are probably involved somewhere. Basically, bits of zap try to escape, you wrangle them where you want them, and stash the charge somewhere nice and cozy until you hit a safe harbor. Buuuut... you pull the charge out of nerve cells, the positive and negative energy of your electrolytes go bye bye, aaaaand you’re dead in short order from nonfunctioning organs. Unless you somehow rapidly restored the charges, or were on life support that kept your heart and lungs going until they got their groove back. I mean, given some time, the former ions would rebalance to their desired charge state, so it isn’t 100% death, just... probably. As for what this sort of de-ionizing technology would do to the brain? Particularly of a cracked out Asari actively using biotics? Ummmmmmmmmmmm. Any budding neurobiologists in the audience want to add their two creds?

Fanfic Recommendation: Relief (1114 words) by lyriumandbiotics (Jaal having some personal time, nsfw. ;))
You want consistency in the stars that you find

Chapter Summary

Saren tries to write his report. He gets about half way done.

Chapter Notes

A/N: When you're naturally an ace, but just sometimes it hits you, and maybe it's half mental, but hell... they're just so pretty, and warm, and adore you so.

//wink//

******************* This chapter is NSFW. ***********************

Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: Fly By Night Only – The Glitch Mob (feat Yaarrohs)

Take a ride outside with me just for a little while
Feel the wind brush back the road and clean you of your lies
There's a tone I tend to touch
A deepened lust from which I fall
And the racing heart will beat endlessly into the dark
Darkness ascend
I take to the night again
Fly by night only

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sniper and his first protégé fell into Nihlus' bed, clothing already half off, much to Saren's annoyance.

“Spirits, yessssss...”

He refused to turn around and acknowledge that the two of them had given up all pretense of politely having sex when he was occupied elsewhere, in favor of sating themselves like teenagers in the wake of the successful mission to recover the previously lost genophage data.
Of which he now had a copy, tucked securely away in his greybox.

The silver-grey torin really had not been able to resist making a copy, if only to read through how the Salarians had done it. Facinating stuff, the hormonal-

“G-garrus, oohhhhhhh~”

His left eyeridge twitched in annoyance. If they insisted on fornicating right behind him while he made use of Nihlus' private terminal to write his version of the mission report, did they also need to be so... noisy? They could at least be quiet while he worked...

“That's it... ahh... nnn... Nihlus... spirits, you're gorgeous.”

Saren tilted his neck in a stretch, left and then right, trying to ignore the slight flush of heat the moaning and amourous subvocals were causing him. There was work to be done.

“More-please-more-please-more-please-more-”

Work. His report. It needed...

“Ahh... aahh... breathe, Palvi. Breathe. Just relax for me.”

He felt his pelvic plates loosen, the first hints of wetness and creeping heat making his mandibles tense against his jawline. The stoic torin was not used to anyone being able to get to him, and especially not used to sexual interest. He could perform if needed for missions, of course... but it was very clinical compared to what Nihlus' dark grins made him feel... so cold next to the heat of Garrus' trusting gaze and gentle hands...

“You feel so... s-so... aaaahhhh... so good, so good.”

With a will, Saren buckled down and continued putting vaguely sensical words to screen. It went well for all of three sentences, when suddenly instead of writing, 'The target was on me' he wrote 'The tongue was on me'.

He just about growled in frustration, right pinky finger slamming the delete key with vicious abandon.

“Ahhhhh... nnn... spirits. You're so warm around me... it feels incredible. I can't get enough of this heat.”

Saren's talons made high pitched, quiet shrieks against the edge of Nihlus' desk. The situation was untenable, entirely, and yet... his only escape was getting up, turning around, and leaving. Not only would that be admitting defeat, but it would force him to view their activities.

A dangerous prospect, because... because.

“Mnnn... harder please. I'm not made of glass, Blue.”

Behind him, Garrus' quiet chuckle rose into the air, came straight for him, and traveled right down his spine in a peculiar wave of... spirits. He was fairly certain it was lust. Swallowing heavily and closing his eyes, fingers hovering over the keyboard uselessly, Saren tried to... understand... this.

“Mmnnn... nnnn... better?”

Silver-grey shoulders bunched together in stress. He had always been perfectly fine without intercourse... did they have to be so attractive and sensual around him? Where had their polite lack of exhibitionism gone? Why did-

“Higher... angle... pleas- ohhhhh~”

If only Nihlus' low voice did not have such a naturally sensual timber. It was an unfair advantage. Saren rolled his shoulders out, subconsciously licking the back of his teeth before trying again to focus on the report.
“Haaa... haa... is this.... haaa... more what you're wanting?”

“Harder.”

The sounds of lubricant slick plates grinding together was unmistakable; the occasional cracks in the voice of his... of Nihlus just starting to come apart at the seams was making him dizzy. It felt like the blood was leaving his head, he simply could not seem to focus...

A moment later Saren realized just how accurate that trailing thought was. Of course his blood had left his brain. It had all gone south, spreading his plates and making the hide around his pelvis flush with heat. The area was likely turning blue and... yes, it felt slick. His tretcherous body was making fluid in anticipation of penetrating something.

“Ahhh... nnnh... that good?”

His shoulders fell in an odd sort of exhaustion. This was an incredibly difficult feeling to fight, and he was less and less sure he wanted to. Behind him, the two torin were quite well wrapped up in each other, their subvocals attesting to their enjoyment of the activity, and some part of him that was stronger than the fear of losing someone just... wanted to be... a part of it. Because.

If he could manage to have sex with targets for intel, why could he not have it for enjoyment with... allies?

“Yesss, yes yes yessss... don't stop Garrus, please don't stop...”

Saren chuffed in exasperation with the situation and himself, dragging a palm down his face and slowly standing. He would turn around, and either be unattracted to the mess they were making of natural lubricant and sweat and hide... and then he would walk out calmly, get into Nihlus' stash of whiskey, and finish the report elsewhere... or he would be attracted, and then...

Join them, he supposed.

That was simply all there was to it. Beat them or join them. The stoic Spectre saved his half-complete report as he stepped away, turning around and letting the cards fall where they may.
Nihlus' bedroom was a ridiculously large affair for a starship; a generous master bedroom to match the oversized civilian transport ship that made up it's frame. Though where the rest of the ship was all welding lines and stark metal, this room was decadence incarnate. Into the floor was a deep set bowl that could easily sleep fifteen, stuffed with black pillows and crimson, textured blankets to create a nest bed that looked more like the set of a movie rather than something real. Around it the metal walls were hidden away with swathes of dark red cloth and exotic hangings. Treasure of value and vintage, vases and relics, tucked amid high end tech, stray knives, and suspicious vials.

It was very... Nihlus.

This was what Saren was subjected to when he flew with his former apprentice instead of taking the Daedalus; strange pools of decadence amid the cobbled-together metal walls... and the sight of long, wiry arms stretched over the deck plating beside the bed, mahogany hide glinting with sweat and rear in the air as the carmine plated torin was taken from behind by their sniper.

He swallowed again, for the second, -or was it the third?-, time. Garrus was bent over, forehead pressing into the rim of Nihlus' carapace as he railed the younger male, much to their mutual enjoyment by the sounds of their voices. His mouth felt dry, nerves still not sure if he wanted this or actually wanted to run for it. Saren tentatively moved forward and lowered himself to the floor beside where Nihlus was strewn out. A ruddy brown hand took a grasp on the edge of his shirt, green eyes catching his and keeping him there, captivated.

'How are his eyes... so... bright?'

“Saren...”

“...yes?”

“Want you.”

The stoic torin blinked at the straight forward... request? Information given? ...proposal?
Suddenly Nihlus cried out, and he reached out to hold the climaxing torin's shoulder automatically... the keen of pleasured release that rose from the knife-loving torin was high and clear, crumbling into a deeper moan as he collapsed over the deck plating, breath ragged. After a few more rolling thrusts Garrus seemed to slow and then stop, breathing heavy but... it seemed he had not come as well? Curiosity overriding nervousness, he looked up to inquire about the discrepancy.

“You did not climax?”

The tall sniper took a moment to catch his breath before replying, subvocals still humming desire.

“Takes a bit of work to make it feel good. Mnnnn... doesn't always line up right? Sometimes... just depends.”

“So you are... going to go without?”

Nihlus made a sound of protest, a sort of failing bleat of denial, before turning his head to mumble something about giving him a minute. Garrus laughed, one of his large palms stroking down attractive brown waist hide.

“Unlikely. Are you... interested?”

He felt his mandibles twitch, without his input, to indicate his interest. He repressed a sense of aggrivation at them, making a mental note to work on his self control... later.

“Perhaps. What would it entail?”

“Anything you want it to.”

There went his mandibles, again. He tossed his chin in a mild taunt; at himself, Garrus, or his own body, he did not know.

“What would be most efficient?”

“... taking Nihlus' place?”

He caught them that time, though a hint of smugness at the success leaked into his subvocals. Of course, a half second later his nerves caught up with his audacity, and he cleared his throat before
backing down slightly.

“... and the second most efficient?”

“Hmm... let me touch you?”

From the melted pile of carmine plates on the floor, still joined to the sniper at the hip, came a slightly clearer sounding mumble, something like, 'I wanna touch him too.'

Saren nodded regally, sliding down into the bed and pulling off his shirt, then laying back against the side of the bed while reclined against the cushioning. Being touched was more than welcome, and Garrus had warm hands.

“Do as you please.”

He watched as the Detective took his time kneading at Nihlus' sides while withdrawing from him slowly. The Detective's generous length slid free, dripping ejaculate; shining wet with his own natural lubricant, and the cleansing fluid that lined the cloaca.

Saren's throat closed again, and he swore silently to work on his tells at the next available opportunity.

While his first protégé was straightening up and stretching provocatively, Garrus moved closer, crawling slowly and moving up over his legs. He remained still until the sniper came very close, leaning in to lick at his mouth plates for reverie.

That was... probably a poor idea. His control was already...

Betrayed again, his mouthplates parted and the other torin's long tongue slid inside to lick against his, coaxingly. He exhaled softly, appreciating the flavor and texture as he coiled their tongues together.

Wait... when had his hands gotten ahold of the sniper's cowl?
Gentle fingers came in to rub slow circles on the outsides of his shoulders, and Saren suddenly realized how dangerous this was... the mountainous sniper had always been very good at getting past his barriers. Now if only the enticing taste of reverie and the... oh, Nihlus was nibbling and licking along his horns...

'Dangerous... dangerous... very... mmnn... enjoyable...'

Garrus' hips shifted closer, slick phallus and blue-flushed plates pressing to his against the cloth of his pants. He soon found himself loosening the ties, giving him room to descend from his sheath. As soon as his own phallus fell free the tall sniper pressed them together between their spread plates, and started moving -rocking against him in ways that sent waves of pleasure flowing outward.

'Spirits... so warm....'

Nihlus' subharmonics singing attraction and encouragement in his aural canals, and Garrus pressed to him, slowly rocking their hips together and calmly telegraphing all his actions...

This was not half so unnerving as the silver-grey torin had thought it would be. A soft moan escaped him, and he let it go, relaxing back as the two torin took over either side of his neck with their tongues, pace never increasing beyond the languid, unhurried slide.

The stoic agent had not expected to come as well, but it crept up on him, spilling out with a gentle rush of sensation and a long, low groan. His sniper came as well, their essences coating his stomach and trailing to either side of his waist as they slowed. He melted back into the cushions, Nihlus' crooning in his ear.

“Spirits, but you're beautiful Saren.”

Chapter End Notes

09/19/2010 - Kyra Detweiler Claims Her Father Is Being Deliberately Endangered

“An unusual twist today in the case of MIT exobiologist Jordan Detweiler: acting on recent rumors that he was seen visiting the Citadel, Detweiler's daughter, Kyra, traveled to the galactic hub and demanded a meeting with him. Although she signed a confidentiality agreement, Ms. Detweiler claims she was repeatedly denied access. "They only let me see my dad after I raised hell about it," she said. "I can be prosecuted.
for speaking to the media, but I don't care. He's in danger. There's something wrong with him and the Council knows it. Council representatives continue to refuse comment on the matter.”

A/N: I recently discovered the term 'grey asexual' or 'grey ace', which is someone who is usually asexual, but has rare instances of sexual attraction, often lining up with the same requirements as a 'demisexual' person (someone who has to have a very strong emotional bond with someone to experience sexual attraction). This new term seriously made me grin like a fool for a good long while, because Saren is coincidentally grey colored! Grey Ace! Silver-grey! Eeeeee! *Ahem* So, if anyone is curious as to what Saren's orientation is? I would have to say it's officially grey ace. That may change someday, because people aren't static objects, but I'd say it fits him quite well, don't you?

Fanfic Recommendation: Suns and Lovers (1096 words) by StrangeBird (Femshep/Garrus sweet and sexy. )
Wishing for milk and cookies

Chapter Summary

Spectre Trinix feels a wide range of emotions behind his gently smiling facade. Doubtful s anyone notices, and he's fine with that usually.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Caman (ka-mahn) - An open air kitchen and family room, the center of the home. Caman also refers to the hearth at the center of the communal living area. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: A fast new chapter as thanks for all the wonderful comments and discussions on the last several. n_n

Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: Aether & SizzleBird ft. Veela - Raccoon City

Deadly, they’ve trained me this way
I’m waiting for the day
How to escape and how do I get out
I want to escape and how do I get out
When everybody’s trusting you
You can’t do anything about it
...
I’m here to show you the light
I’m just another one of them
But I’ve got guns and I’m on your side
I’m not a project, I’m innocent enough

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lonar sat very still on the edge of a crate, trying not to touch anything. Somehow, he'd gotten stuck riding on Kryik's junk heap on the way back to the Citadel. The ships had docked with each other once to allow everyone to debrief while in the Relay queue, but hadn't docked again after the jump. While he was too polite to say anything about the rough interior that matched the worrisome exterior, he really didn't want to... interact with anything here more than necessary. Welding lines and grease streaks and... how did this ship even fly?

Unfortunately, he had also managed to lose the company of the handsome, cocky sniper whose
conversation he'd been enjoying so much... though with the comfortable way Kryik had lead the Detective upstairs after the ship was underway, there was significant doubt he could have kept Garrus around in the first place.

The elegant torin sighed, accepting that he had missed that ship's sailing by a significant measure. Truthfully, he was unwilling to fight for anyone's affections... it was unwise. His lovers had a habit of dying horribly, -old enemies from days gone by-, and Garrus was very young yet, and altogether too kind to drag into...

His teal markings scrunched up around his browridge as the smell of sex wafted by. His crest tilted as he took a deeper inhale to confirm.

That... was more than two people.

Lovely face settling into a sort of forlorn but accepting cant, Lonar stood from the edge of the crate and wandered down the first floor hallway for the guest kitchenette that Kryik had offered for open use just after boarding. Perhaps the smell of tea would cover the scent a bit.

The delightful smells coming from elsewhere were really too much to bear when one was as lonely as he... and Kryik, -though more rough around the edges than he knew what to do with-, was also a kind soul that didn't deserve having him around.

A few moments brought him past the hallway of guest suites and storage, and into the half-kitchen that edged... a surprisingly well appointed meeting room. The cream plated torin looked behind him at the scrap metal hallway, then turned forward again to face the lightly textured metals and cloth draped walls inside...

'What... an impressive dichotomy.'

Shaking his head in bafflement at the guest caman, Lonar moved further in, finding that he was not alone. Most of the other Spectres and Specialists had begged off socializing on the trip back in favor of claiming a shower to clear the dust of Korlus away, and to secure one of a limited number of guest suites. Not Tela or Ankhleas, it seemed. Both sat at the meeting table, data pads strewn out before them alongside empty water glasses and crumb filled plates.

Crumbs indicated food. He nodded politely at them as he entered, but passed the table by to see if more of such things were to be found. He expected meal bars, endless cereal boxes, or perhaps salty
snacks, -the things that Kryik favored eating-, but inside the stasis unit were individual containers of the same sweets and pastries favored by diplomats and secretaries during meeting breaks. The chill unit beside it had a variety of beers, wines, and chilled teas in individual bottles.

Lonar stared at the hoard for a moment, realizing that perhaps there was more to Saren's first protégé then he'd realized. This sort of considerate preparation for guests did not fit the roguish bachelor and devil-may-care attitude that Kryik presented to the world.

Eyes glittering at the mystery, the cream plated Spectre acquired himself a flowered tea and a less-sweet pastry. He brought several of the fruit filled creations back to the table along with a carafe of water for the working duo already there. Tela quirked a half smile at him, the gesture failing to match the usual Asari facial expression of cheerfulness, but he'd long since learned it was the most genuine one for them, short of wry grins.

“Hello Lonar... thanks. Seen this data yet?”

“The data we recovered? No. It didn't interest me. Should it?”

“If you aren't into genetics then possibly not. There's more here than just the science though. They pulled security vids and conference records from the station's archives as well.”

He blinked slowly, absorbing that information as Ankhleas added his own thoughts.

“The conference records from the original release of the genophage... very damning for the Hierarchy, actually. Absolves the Salarians pretty thoroughly.”

“Does it? Well... it is common knowledge that STG did not intend the formula to be used as anything more than a threat.”

Tela scoffed, shaking their head.

“As if Krogan would take a threat as a threat, and not as a challenge. Or that Turians wouldn't default to total war practices when faced with the sheer numbers they were up against back in the day. Salarians are excellent scientists, but as a group they generally fail at psychology.”
Lonar nodded serenely, not disagreeing.

“I certainly haven't seen any Salarian mental health specialists in my life, though I assume there must be some. For their own kind if nothing else. Might I add that Jondam is very considerate? Surely not all Salarians are quite so bad at understand those outside their species.”

Tela raised one blue finger, the pointed nail tipped in purple.

“Not all, but most. Here, look at this transcript...”

He leaned over, pleasantly distracted from his previous loneliness by the... well, gossiping, really. By the gossip, the tart pastries, and the late night company to share them with.

Green eyes fluttered open in the peaceful darkness of a luxurious Presidium apartment, the quiet ping of Councilor Sparatus’ Omni-tool waking him instantly. He slowly shifted into a sit, lower back complaining at the motion. Not wanting to wake his bondmate with a second chime or the light of the screen, he got out of bed to check it. Bare feet padded across the carpet and out the door, toe talons clicking against the tile of the hallway floor as he shuffled toward his office, yawning.

The list of people who could contact him directly at this hour without being automatically redirected to one of his aides or a messaging service was very small. The Primarchs of each cluster, a few foreign dignitaries, his Spectres, the tarin in the room behind him, his children, and his three secretaries. Thus, it was rare a message came for him at this time of night, those other individuals all respecting the Citadel's day-night cycle as he respected their respective planet's hours. Politics didn't sleep for the politicians, but only something personal or important would drive one of them to bother another during sleeping hours.

There was also that the fact that, in his experience, it was generally bad news when a ping did come in at this hour. Then again, he had been waiting on news from ST&R about the Korlus situation all day. Hopefully this was it, and -spirits preserve- it wasn't actually bad news.

Settling into his desk chair as the kava machine on the side board began brewing at the touch of a button, the Councilor hit the acceptance key sequence on his Omni-tool.
FROM: 5365874//ID.code:walksoftly

TO: 1414152//LOCAL

Data recovered, situation resolved. Full haunt flying home.

END MSSG

A hand of rich brown hide, -just beginning to show the weathering of age-, swiped the steaming kava cup dispensed from the machine, and downed an over-warm mouthful in celebration. That load of stress relieved, he turned to check the clock. Four hours into the night cycle... which also meant two hours till artificial dawn. Very late, or a bit early, depending on how one looked at it.

Already planning an early evening, -perhaps involving his mate, a bottle of wine, and their favorite take out-, Sparatus opted to bring his private terminal out of sleep mode and begin work early. There was never an end of concerns to address, and he was already conscious anyway. Warm drink curled into his keel, he opened the most recent message in his inbox and started reading.

Chapter End Notes

09/20/2010 - Kyra Detweiler Releases Statement to GBC News
“Kyra Detweiler, daughter of famed MIT exobiologist Jordan Detweiler, has released a statement to GBC News alleging the Citadel Council is covering up her father's deteriorating medical condition. "He didn't even know who I was -- his own daughter! I got five minutes to speak with him before security whisked him away. Is he sick? Is he brain-damaged?" Council representatives declined to comment on the situation, fuelling speculation that Dr. Detweiler was profoundly changed by his visit to the virtual world inside a derelict spacecraft. "Silence is a terrible answer," wrote columnist Urla Dhen. "The public doesn't know much, but it knows that anything relating to AI or synthetic life is something to fear. Refusing to comment leads us all to assume the worst."

A/N: Lonar Trinix is based on Haku from Naruto, the witch from xxxHolic, and a little bit of Sailor Neptune, sauteed with drama and Feels™. Granted, his demons are real, but seriously... so politely, daintily dramatic. //fond sigh//
Fanfic Recommendation: **A Long Time** (1360 words) by **pluto** (Whirlwind ME 123 Femshep/Garrus. NSFW.)
~Interlude: She Cannot Help but Glitter Like Stars~

Chapter Summary

"Sometimes glass glitters more than diamonds, because it has more to prove." -Terry Pratchett (RIP)

Chapter Notes

Chapter Soundtrack: Nielsen - Symphony No. 5

A/N: Author-chan enjoys classical music but maybe not as much as Miranda. Long, winding symphonies that take a lot of time to experience are less our groove... but right around 31:07 in Nielsen's fifth it picks up into some unique, vivid sound. Worth the listen to that part if you just want a taste.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Glitter fell from her hair, gold and fine flecks escaping the curls to free fall as she spun the strands into a purposefully messy updo. The style was big and bold and fell in her face, but Miranda put up with the hindrance because a pole dancer without lucious, impossible locks wouldn't fit it at Seeshziki's Salon.

And fitting in with the showgirls, callboys, and brittle glamour was of critical importance.

Lips that didn't need plumping were glossed to look even more lush. Stark blue eyes were warmed with a hint of purple, but no more than that. Too much color was eye catching, and she wanted them watching her physical assets, not remembering her face. A plain, unassuming long coat over her short-short skirt and lacquered bra completed the look, and the young woman left the confines of the bathroom to check on her sister.

As expected, Oriana was still at the table, tiny toddler hands wrapped around a crayon. Miranda walked closer, looking over the latest drawing. It was a cityscape; lovely in navy blues with grey contrast and neon lights, the work of an artist with a decade more maturity. Deep sea eyes looked up at her for approval, and she nodded.
“The contrast of lighting is excellent. Well done.”

Ori smiled a happy, gap toothed smile and went back to drawing as she moved on, past their perfectly clean but rundown kitchen. In the living room the Asari babysitter was sitting on the couch, watching vids. The lovely, scarred old Matriarch was an ex-commando who cared nothing for dynasty or fortune; they lived simply to consume tv dramas by the minute. A horrendous waste of time, but Miranda would not complain. Pichea charged fairly, treated Oriana well, and could still crush a skycar with her mind.

Important skills for a minder, so long as their father still hunted them.

Seeing that all was in order she turned for the door to the apartment and left, heading for the capitol city’s local version of rapid-transit terminals. Balmy Etheai boasted a robust public transport system that allowed private sky cars, a subway, and all manner of vehicle to travel below ground between well spaced districts as a part of an ongoing effort to avoid upsetting the young world’s ecosystem. Miranda settled herself into a public skycar, paid the fee with an unregistered credit chit, and watched the sky disappear as it took her underground via access tunnel.

Some of the glitter from her hair drifted onto her coat as she reclined while thinking, a hand brushing the offending flecks to the floor.

The ‘salon’ she had secured employment with had been an excellent boon thus far. Dancing for aliens satisfied some rebellious chip on her shoulders that had dealt with years of her father’s human supremacist propaganda, taught right along side how to spot propaganda and think through it. The position also allowed her to listen in to the drunken and aroused crowd full of rumors and hearsay; the beating pulse of political and business elite spilled out for her to gather while also shaking her designer ass in a way that would -hopefully- give father an aneurysm when news of her latest hiding spot finally reached him.

Effective, satisfying, and entirely under the table. Her only complaint would be the… aesthetic. Dark wood and spot lights, dusted in glitter. It tasted of her father’s office in some subtle way that Miranda didn't particularly care for.
After a peaceful twenty minutes the autopilot of her skycar nosed upward toward an access tunnel, neon advertisements lighting the way to the surface. The purposefully overdone woman strode from the landing platform as if she owned the place, never mind her minimal state of dress under the coat. A short three blocks in seven inch heels, and she slipped into the alley that served as a back entrance to Seeshziki’s.

“Hey Mocha, workin’ tonight?”

Miranda nodded cordially at the bouncer, moving through to the dressing room where she would pretend to further prepare herself while waiting for the last shift’s workers to come streaming in, tired and looking for another to tap out with for the night. There was a particular stage she wanted and a particular dancer she would have to trade with to get the choice spot; one farther from the speakers, darker, and in sight of both doors. Her eyes watched for ‘Pareesa Majih’, or as the bronze skinned woman was called around here, ‘Caramel’. Food names; just another theme. Another layer of pretend shine.

Miranda clicked her locker closed, nothing but the coat inside, and turned around just in time for the door to the dressing room to open, exhausted and sweaty dancers spilling in. She narrowed in on Pareesa, not even noticing the other worker’s pinched expressions and avoidance of her. Their opinions were of no concern to her.

“Stephanie, looking for the corner stage again?”

“Yes, I am. May I?”

“You might not want it tonight. Bigger Krogan male, half drunk, and his Vorcha sidekicks all lined up in the front.”

“The warning is appreciated, but I will be fine.”

“Suit yourself.”
Miranda offered the other woman the ghost of a smile and shuffled through the oncoming stream of people, divining her way through the back halls of the club for her chosen stage. Nearly there, a drink waitress in a rush bumped into her hard enough to send the dark haired beauty stumbling into the wall in a shower of sparkles, but she regained her balance in time to avoid falling. The waitress left without a word, and Miranda carried on with a passing glare, reaching the stage curtain just before the end of the current song.

With a smooth sashay as her entrance, ‘Mocha’ selected an average difficulty of dance routine sets, meshed them with a few pole moves, and proceeded to dance perfunctorily for the hour and five it took for the front row of her stage to clear.

She smiled internally to match her external painted-on grin. Now that the refuse had been gotten rid of, she could begin to begin to reel in more interesting targets with eye catching flourishes when persons of note were looking for new seats or came freshly arrived.

Not that someone interesting came every night she worked, but the dark haired woman had memorized every known criminal boss, politician, and person of interest on Sanves and it’s orbital stations; many were frequent patrons here. Opportunity came often.

Often, but not tonight it seemed. Hours went by in a dull crawl. Without targets to impress or beguile, her dance remained tame and her tips meager. Miranda didn't particularly care. Credits were easy to acquire. Information less so.

Another tap out with a different dancer, and Miranda left work for another day. A bit sore, a bit tired, but otherwise no worse for the wear as she turned out of the alley and made for the transit terminal.

Unfortunately, she was tired enough not to notice footsteps behind her until it was nearly too late.

Hands grabbed at Miranda from behind. She let them, using those precious seconds to activate the silicon-carbide flashforge blade on her Omni-tool and proceeding to stab it over her shoulder. The lightly armored woman behind her screamed, the searing blade moving too slow for shields to work,
and burning too hot for non-specialized armor to halt. Her attacker’s flesh steamed as it cooked.

The dark haired beauty spun, hair bouncing with the wild movement, to face her attackers…. but there were no others… and that couldn't be right. That couldn't be right. Father always sent at least a dozen, he knew what she was capable of, knew how many she could fight…

Unless... she wasn't the prime target anymore.

Heart in her throat, Miranda took off running, opting to steal a skycar instead of using public access transport surrounded by security cameras. She took to the air and made for home as fast as she could, planning to dally only long enough to make a few strange pathing loops to ensure she wasn't easily followed.

Once the flight plan was locked into the nav system, she brought up her Omni-tool and called Pichea.

“Hello?”

The Asari nais looked calm and relaxed, the vid screen light flickering against her face. Miranda kept her own expression cool and as casual as she could manage.

“It’s me. Just checking in. I’m on my way home.”

“Welllll, your daughter colored for a little while after you left, and came to get me when done, asking to take a bath. Very mature for that age, as usual. No muss, no fuss, went to bed shortly thereafter.”

She nodded, forcing herself to smile. Wonderful. I'll see you soon.”
Pichea waggled blue fingers at the screen and closed the call. Miranda leaned back in the seat, exhaling a breath she hadn't quite let out since being startled by the woman in armor.

The attacker must have been a standalone mercenary, which meant father had started putting out a general bounty on them. Pinching her nose to try and relieve tension, the genetically engineered woman took a few deep breaths and thought through her options.

Someone had found them. Perhaps not father’s people, but someone. Was that worth moving again? Their set up here was inordinately favorable. She had days free to teach Ori everything her sister needed to know to thrive, free of the mind games and tainted messages father had drowned Miranda herself in. Nights were for working, a good babysitter already tested and employed, with an ear to the ground for political favors… always father’s preferred method of getting his way. Days off, even, for further study and the occasional leisure day.

Granted, this wasn't how she had seen herself living at twenty one, but for freedom and for Ori it was entirely worthwhile.

The skycar landed at the coordinates she’d given it, and Miranda leaned forward to give it new ones, something to make it drive on for hours more and eventually land somewhere obscure. That done she hopped out, making for her apartment block, unable to keep from watching the shadows suspiciously.

Nothing happened of note, and she walked into their tiny apartment to greet and send off Pichea, then check in on her sleeping sister. All quiet and calm, she stepped into the kitchen, and began making dinner while half expecting an assault of black clad ‘private defense contractors’ to come out of the metalwork any second.

They didn't. She laughed at herself a little, trying to let it go, and went about double checking her security measures. All armed, all untriggered. Miranda made a visit to the shower, then headed to bed, sliding between the sheets in comfortable pajamas that resembled street clothes enough to pass first glance. Something she could sleep in… or fight in.
Hours passed, time slipping by, but sleep wouldn't come. She might be genetically perfect, *maybe*, but was still a worrier by nature. Predawn light began to filter through the window. Sanves’ sun was just starting to edge over the horizon as the dregs of her anxiety finally filtered away. The morning birdsong began shortly thereafter, a quiet symphony that lulled her closer to sleep.

That was when she heard it.

*Curra curra.*

The distant sound of Australian pied currawongs. Their noise, so familiar, that took over the gardens on the Lawson estate outside of Sydney every time the seasons changed. As a girl, the bird’s freedom to come and go had seemed like the sweetest treasure; the currawong’s raucous song, -the right to be noisy and speak their minds-, something she never had.

Currawogs were native to Earth, never to be found in the protected wilds of Sanves.

That was why their call was one of her intruder alarms.

Like the excessively competent and collected being she’d been molded to be, Miranda replaced her sleeping outline with pillows, armed herself, and slipped through the sliding wall she’d put into the closet doors between her room and Oriana’s. The door on the other side opened, revealing three forms, -huge, augmented soldiers-, approaching her sleeping sister with a hypo needle and a black bag.

Terror gave her adrenaline.

Hundreds of thousands of credits in augments and genemodding died in a split second as one soldier’s neck spun too far, shattering under the artificial weight of biotic gravity. She spun, the next memetic cueing up a lift for the second form while she dealt with the third. Her target took to free floating poorly, shouting in alarm as she jumped at the last soldier, heat blade shining.
Miranda’s augmented hearing picked up more boots coming down the hall as she tangoed with the tall, muscular female who was dodging her blade and bringing a hypo to bare.

One… two… four… five…

At least five sets of footfalls as oncoming backup, and big blue toddler eyes watching the violence like a shivering ghost. A tiny, shivering ghost that could barely run, nevermind protect herself so Miranda could let loose...

It was one thing to rend a room apart with aura and blade. It was another to do it in front of her little sister. It was altogether another to do it without risking Oriana’s wellbeing.

Unwilling to risk waking up in one of the sub-basements of a research lab as just another failed test clone, -or worse, watching Ori become spare parts like Michelle or Sarah or Prudence or…- the dark haired woman decided that the odds were against her. Fight or flight instincts called for flight.

With a final outward burst of largely undirected biotic energy, the genetically designed female scooped up her sister-clone and dug deep for a single biotic rush; the energy flow destroying the wall to the outside world while protecting them both from shredded metal and inertia.

Oriana squirmed in her arms, just enough to hide her face in Miranda’s neck as they fell. Landing like a feather she ran, and ran, and ran, dashing into a public skycar rather than taking the time to hotwire a private one, and setting off for a different district entirely.

“Mi-ri…”

The plaintive whine rose, too-wise baby eyes screwed shut against the trauma and sniffles oncoming.
“Shhhh, shshshhhhh, it’s okay, Ori. It’s okay. I’m here, we’ll be safe soon.”

“I scare.”

“Oh, me too, me too. Shhhh… it will be okay. I promise.”

Miranda spared a thought to send Pichea a vaguely informative warning not to return, and took them to swap cars three times on the way to back up plan A: city council member Trivoli Manquela’s private home. She rung the doorbell until he answered, baffled face looking her pajama clad, battle mussed, child carrying form up and down.

“Miss, I think you have the wrong addr-”

“Call me Chelsea. I need a ride off world in your private shuttle, including use of the backdoor you have into the local traffic system to avoid having your travel plans logged and leaked to the press. In exchange, I’ll tell you where Robert Nigleman’s been going on Tuesdays. It will be enough to throw the next vote for chairman in your favor.”

The councilman stared at her, baffled, and she stared back.

The stalemate continued for nearly ten seconds before he shook it off and ushered her in.

“Do I… want to know what kind of trouble you two are in… Chelsea?”

“No.”
“... I need to think about this.”

“By all means. Consider what the position means to you. I will wait.”

Her bleached hair was done up in a prim bun, flight attendant uniform crisp and clean, tastefully glittering jewelry adding to the sense of her age and respectability. Miranda eyed herself in the mirror before nodding, turning around, and stalking out of the bathroom. At the breakfast bar Oriana sat straight backed, drawing pictures with pudgy fingers. Her little face was studious, pinched in focus as she tried to keep crayons steady. As usual, Miranda stopped by to give her customary approval, unconditional and untainted by catches.

Words of praise rose from her throat, but stalled.

The obscenely advanced crayon drawing was of herself, hair flying and skin glowing blue while stabbing assailants on Illium, the last place they'd lived. It brought her morning routine to a staggering halt.

This… this was…

Miranda sat down beside her sister, swallowing and forcing her voice to be light.

“Ori, sweetheart… why are you drawing this?”

“Miri stop the bad guys.”
“….stopped, Ori. I-It would be, ‘Miri stopped the bad guys.’ “

“Oh kay.”

Miranda sat for a moment, and watched, and thought.

This was a problem, one she hadn't foreseen. One she couldn't do much about in the ten minutes she had before needing to leave for work.

This lifestyle was teaching Oriana violence. How long would it be until the little lessons in floating colored blocks turned into pushes and pulls meant to help when they were fleeing pursuit? How long till her sister became the lethal combatant she was intended to be, not by father's harsh training, but by sheer dint of childish absorption?

Would Ori ask her to learn to fight? Ask her for shooting lessons and hand to hand training and…and…

Forcing a smile, Miranda managed a compliment on the compositional balance of the crayon picture, and reminded her sister to finish all of this week’s homeschooling lessons with the nanny.

Feeling brittle, she left for work.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The sweet sounds of Nielsen's fifth filling the air, and the bitter taste of red wine on her tongue, Miranda sat on her little two-person balcony and stared out over the glittering skyline of Polos, the thriving capital of Cyone.
Though her form was still, thoughts swirled like the wine in her glass; useless circles in light-catching shades of crimson.

Like audible magic the end of movement came upon her, the various, disparate tones reconstituting into harmony in a way that never failed to provoke some feeling in her. Miranda sighed with enjoyment though the music flowed on, symphony number six coming forward. Not as good, but still excellent. Still valuable and precious in its own right.

On the horizon, far far away, a modest fireworks display starting popping in the crisp air; bright embers drifting on the wind as the picture perfect woman watched. She observed until it ended, and then kept on staring that way, mind churning in a wine hazed attempt at problem solving.


Henry Lawson was a monster, of that there was no doubt.

Miranda sighed again, and took a drink.

She was directly and precisely molded by said monster as part of his views of perfection. Every talent she had, every superior sense and keen edge, each augment and skill was his doing. ‘Gifts’, he called them. She preferred the terms, ‘traps’ or perhaps ‘burdens’.

The lovely, dark haired woman swallowed the bitter drink down.

Could she hope to raise Oriana apart and above those building blocks of self? She laughed without humor, as the answer was clearly ‘no’. That was a more honest ‘gift’ ...something she was bad at: raising a child.
Miranda’s head lolled on her neck, rolling backward to press against the cool metal wall of their condo. A lone tear trickled it's way down the shaded side of her face, though her expression remained placid. Where could she possibly take Ori to spare her sister exposure to… her? What if something happened while they were separated? Would she forgive herself if being apart turned out to be the wrong choice?

Options. She needed… options.

Deciding to revisit the issue in the morning, Miranda let the painful, unmanageable weight of her burgeoning decision to place Oriana with a different caretaker than herself float away. The next few hours of free time were to be spent having a proper wallow in her cups, and then a good night of sleep.

The first proved true, the second did not.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Three months, two days, and five hours later saw Miranda Lawson in prime form. Slinky, blood-red dress glued to her curves and fine silver necklace edging her throat, she slid under the shuttle of her target, and began breaking in.

She had two hours. Plenty of time.

Flashforging tools on the fly, the undercarriage began to come apart in her hands. The shiny screws fell from the panels, each carefully caught by her gloved palms, one after another.

Two months past she’d come across a bit of unintended advice that had inspired a potential safe harbor for Ori. Oddly enough, it had simply been Salarian white collar workers discussing office
politics that had done it.

When your father was the sixty fourth most powerful Human on Earth, why not see what the sixty third had to offer?

Not enough, as her research turned up, but the logic held.

The sixty second? Sixty first?

‘Why not go over their heads and talk to management?’ one of the Salarian males had asked his coworker.

Why not, indeed.

Research, hacking, stalking, and various moments of espionage had cleared the path to a most ironic solution: the only people daddy dearest would truly pause at going against were the allies that made him powerful by association. None were more so than Jack Harper, the so called Illusive Man. Economically powerful, better connected by far, and a door-opening contact that wouldn't be risked without much consideration.

He was perfect for her needs.

Thus, the task became being perfect for his needs.

Double crossing couldn't be allowed here, not with Oriana's wellbeing at stake. She needed Harper to want her aid and her's alone significantly more than he wanted her father's money, connections, or good will... and she was quite certain she had that in hand. Over the course of a long, gruesome, data-wiped series of events during the two months since her epiphany, the black haired beauty had amassed a small trove of information that she was certain Jack Harper wanted. A resumé of sorts, stored on the tiny data drive in her necklace.
With forty five minutes to spare, Miranda made it through the floor, sealing up everything behind her so as to make it seem as if she’d simply appeared from thin air in the hallway of the Illusive Man’s private transport, on the landing pad of the highest security building on Earth; the Systems Alliance Parliamentary rooftop. Just another item on her CV, really.

The luxurious bathroom played host to her for a quick, five minute touch up, and she arranged herself causally in the armchair in front of the holo-flame fireplace to wait out the last few minutes.

Looking concerned about some unknown detail, Jack Harper strode into the main cabin of his shuttle on a path for his liquor cabinet. He passed her right by, and she continued lounging, gaze directed out the window. The sound of tinkling icecubes hitting glass was joined by liquid pouring. The thwomp of a closing lid followed by the clunk of a bottle being replaced.

The Illusive Man settled onto the middle of the cabin’s main couch caddy corner to her, electric eyes looking out the same window.

“Miss Lawson, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“That depends on who you ask. Some might say my father, others might say my own free will.”

“Oh? Which do you believe?”

Miranda turned and offered him the same glittering smile one might give to a dentist. All teeth, because that was what they wanted to see.

“Isn’t it obvious?”
Chapter End Notes

09/21/2010 - Council Spokesman Responds to Cover-Up Allegations

“A furor has erupted over the recent GBC News conversation with Kyra Detweiler, daughter of noted MIT exobiologist Jordan Detweiler. Ms. Detweiler alleged the Citadel Council is covering up her father's deteriorating medical condition, triggering a media backlash from all quarters of the galaxy. In response, the Council held a hastily arranged press conference to manage damage control, at which spokesman Anton Galer said: "Acting on behalf of the Council, Jordan Detweiler did indeed visit the virtual alien world he discovered. Yes, Dr. Detweiler was seen on the Presidium recently, but this was his body, not his mind. He has, for lack of a better term, 'swapped' with an alien consciousness in the virtual world. This procedure was the most stable way for their ambassador to gain access to our physical universe for diplomatic discussions." A stunned media corps quickly erupted with questions, but the Council spokesman declined further comment.”

A/N: Elusive is spelled with an 'E'. Illuminati is the one with the 'I'. You don't get to combine the two, unless you are an easily swayed soccer mom who wants to sound cool by saying froyo instead of just frozen yogurt. (No but really, 'Illusive Man'? What. I've been informed that it's an actual word, but still...)

A/N/N: This chapter is shorter than I wanted, but for a woman I can barely understand as a character for how unrelatable she is to me, I think it turned out alright. I tried to do her as much justice as any other interlude character, even if I couldn't find more scenes to paint for her.

Fanfic Recommendation: The Real Thing (1518 words) by pluto (Garrus Vakarian is Up To Something)
Chapter Summary

Nihlus drive by lunch-steals (again), and Saren explains the point of Spectres knowing seemingly useless things like which fork to use.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Buratrum - In turian mythology, the realm of the spirits of dishonourable association. (Credit: MizDirected.)

Chapter Soundtrack: Estiva & Skouners ft. Delaney Jane - Playing With Fire (Cuebrick Remix)

We are the lucky ones
So broke but rich in love
And anyone can see the stars in our eyes
We got corrupted souls
But in the end were skin and bones
Our recklessness keeps us burning bright
Cause we’re playing with fire

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Someone sliding into the booth across from him faster than he could see gave Garrus a metaphorical heart attack. He jumped, furca raised defensively, only to be met with verdant green eyes and cocky smile.

“Hey Blue.”

The detective huffed, setting the makeshift weapon down and taking a calm drink of his tupari. The gruff response lasted all of five seconds; Nihlus' contagious smile tugging at his own mandibles. It didn't help that he hadn't seen the Spectre in months.

“Nihlus... I didn't know you were going to be on station. Your message last week made it sound like you were busy?”
“Busy as the guards to *buratrum*. Terminus pirates moving in on my sector lately like it's free for the taking. I'm tearing them to shreds for the audacity. How's your day-week-etcetera?”

Now that was news to make the mountainous sniper *really* smile. Pirates ending up in mangled piles rather then freely terrorizing the people of the Eagle Nebula? That was what *should* happen to pirates. Garrus hummed his admiration openly as he turned to offering his side of things.

“Just wrapped up a murder-suicide.”

“I thought you were on a B&E case that was giving Pallin fits?”

“Solved it, actually. Three days ago, then this case, also solved, but... no happy ending. Some peace and answers for the families, maybe. You need any back up out there? I know Saren is busy with Rix.”

His lanky friend tugged the sandwich plate that was supposed to be his lunch half way across the table, and started stealing bits of fallen meat. Garrus just snorted in amusement, reminded of the day Nihlus had first stolen his lunch and named him 'Blue'.

“Yeah, sometimes there isn't a good solution, just 'not bad' solutions. I get that. As for back up? Right now, no. I'd just be stealing you from the station for company, but...”

“But?”

Nihlus leaned in, as if that would really dissuade listeners or short out listening devices. As if there weren't actually -more than likely- several different anti-surveillance devices making a blackout bubble around him at all times.

“Buuuut... I'm planning an op to a major base that might-maybe-sort of-technically be outside of my jurisdiction.”

“...somewhere in the Terminus systems. You're going to hit them back.”
“Blue, you know me so well.”

Garrus chuckled at the Spectre’s dramatic hand gestures, picking up half of his sandwich and pushing the rest of the plate over to Nihlus.

“Am I invited?”

“Obviously. Give me two, three months? I’ll give you a decent heads up when I’m gearing for it.”

“You got it. Are you on the station for a break?”

Nihlus’ subvocals dropped in pitch, wavering with a mild longing.

“I want to, but no. I—” his lover huffed, pausing to take a snapping bite of sandwich half and chew, “-can’t exactly take any down time right now. Things really are a mess out there. I’m on station to deliver some sensitive documents and meet up with Tela. We’re going WMD hunting, and if the schematics I’ve got for the vault are correct, I need a biotic…”

“...and Saren is busy.”

“Bingo.”

“Glad that Spectre Vasir is available then. Hopefully you catch a break before that might-maybe-mission. If not, I’ll see you then.”

Nihlus smiled at him yet again, mandibles quirking and subharmonics tilting in a ‘trying to be cheerful’ sort of way, but the Spectre's subvocals gave away every ounce of his desire to stay and chat. Or more likely, to go back to the apartment together for quality time. The C-Sec officer reached across the table to squeeze the other torin's forearm supportively, and leaned back with his dwindling half-lunch to watch his ever-hungry marked quickly consume the rest. Two minutes later, Nihlus stood up from an empty plate, and risked a brush of temples in the cafe’s semi-public space before dashing off to parts unknown.
Garrus watched him go, wishing for the next few months to evaporate here and now... being in love with Spectres was damn hard sometimes.

“This? Is ridiculous.”

“Mmm.”

“Arterius.”

“Yes?”

“... can we move on?”

“No, and you will be tested at the end of the week. A result less than ninety percent will be considered failure.”

“...and you’ll dismiss me from Spectre training?”

“Hardly. You will just repeat the lesson.”

Avitus closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to gather his patience while maintaining the one-two-three movements that they were keeping time with. He was currently in a dress, -a flowy, elegant ballgown to be precise-, and granted... it was cut to move and flow... and he could probably take part in a firefight in it... but that was not the point.

“With all due respect sir, I have sincere doubts that I will ever need to know... this sort of thing. I've
The look Saren gave him as they spun in place was something between 'Fool, you have no idea', and 'That is nice, carry on.' Neither was the result he was going for.

“Also, I'm awful at this.”

“Yes, you are.”

“So why train me in something I'm horrible at? And... unusual? Why not play to my strengths?”

The Spectre sighed and let go of his hand, stepping away and taking up a lean against the edge of a cloth covered table with far too many eating utensils and glasses for a mere two place settings.

“Because, Spectres are not Specialists. We are geniuses, savants, and masterminds. Someone who works on their strengths and refines them can be great, make no mistake, but you will only ever be great in that one thing, and a Spectre must have passing familiarity with a thousand things.”

“Why?”

“Spectres are one-person armies, Rix, and you are capable of being a one torin army... if we can smooth over some of your weaknesses with new and varied skill sets.”

“...I see.”

“Do you? Really? Take this for example,” the last Arterius gestured around the warmly lit ballroom of his empty family estate. Presumably it was to indicate the skill set he was learning here, and not the ancient grandeur of the room. “You are an atrocious liar. Smooth with not revealing much I will grant, but that will not always be enough. If you ever need to infiltrate a political dinner or social event on a mission you will want a cover that will not be asked difficult or specific questions. Being considered eye candy could serve you. You cannot simply avoid infiltration missions once you are assigned a sector. They will happen. When they do, you will want a nicely varied toolbox of approaches for each smuggling ring, each pirate base, and each corporate cover up. Using the same strategies will only make you predictable, and easily caught in a trap. Even public figures and dignitaries will try and kill you on occasion. This... is to keep you alive.”
Avitus swallowed, glancing around the room and finally seeing the picture that his mentor was trying to paint for him rather than the faded gilt walls.

Ballroom dancing and fine dining to save his life?

It made no sense.

It made perfect sense.

“Right. I... could you show me the last dance again? Afraid I've forgotten most of it.”

“I can. Practice will wear the movements into your muscle memory. Come.”

He stepped forward and made his best attempt at learning the... survival technique.

Chapter End Notes

09/23/2010 - Scientific World Still Absorbing Jordan Detweiler "Mind Swap" Revelation
The scientific world is still absorbing the news that an ambassador from a virtual alien civilization is currently visiting the Citadel. An inside source reveals that during his travels within the virtual civilization, MIT exobiologist Jordan Detweiler agreed to allow the virtual consciousness of an Ambassador Sygan to use his body as a conduit to interact with our physical universe. It is unclear to what extent Dr. Detweiler maintains control of his body. "It's complicated," said the source. "We aren't just talking about diplomatic ties between two planets or species, but between two universes: one physical, the other virtual." The source has refused to divulge details on the nature of the virtual alien world.

A/N: I'm determined to write some waste-of-space fluff here while I've got the chance. Ideas?

Fanfic Recommendation: Stroking the Trigger (702 words) by Turn_of_the_Sonic_Screw (Utterly ridiculous but hilarious and well written pwp
about Garrus and his unhealthy obsession with dreadnought weaponry. )
Nihlus is convincing, Saren is hyper competent, Rix is making it happen, and Garrus is supportive. Status quo, really.

A/N: Hello duckies! Com chatter here. And some interesting extreme sports. If you have experience with either, by all means, please critique my representation of them! Always looking to improve. :D

"...no."

"Why not?"

“It would be a pointless exercise and an unneeded risk.”

“The point would be 'for fun' and the risk is negligible. I know you have the same training on it as I did.”

“For... fun.”

“Mmmhm.”

"There are half a dozen other more sensible options."
Nihlus gestured at the dirt of the plateau beneath their stomachs as if presenting a prize.

"We're already higher than their base, and we can flash forge the material out of Omni-gel in half an hour, tops. We'll save time, even. The walk would be longer."

Saren failed to catch himself in time to avoid snorting at the blatant excuse, the resulting scrunch of his nose plates causing them to bump the rifle scope he was looking down with a quiet scraping sound.

"Retracing our steps and beginning a ground assault would do perfectly well, and also not present airborne targets."

His protégé’s subvocals turned sly, making the blades of his crest tighten together ever so slightly as tension built around his scalp and neck. That smooth, coercive rumble had convinced half-millennia old Matrons of his trustworthiness... and brought them ruin shortly there after. Saren knew that sound, and was prepared for the honeyed words that would surely follow.

"Saren, are you..."

"Hnn?"

"Are you afraid of heights?"

Another snort escaped him, and he clicked his tongue at himself for the lapse.

"No."

“I mean, because if you are, you could just say s-”

“Nihlus.”

“Yeah?”
“I am a biotic. What could I possibly have to fear from heights?”

Down below, quite some distance away, a pair of human males shuffled cargo crates out of a shuttle. The boxy ship model was in fact the one they had followed here on the Daedalus. Crate by crate the crew hauled their goods into the darkened hall of a warehouse. Quiet laughter rumbled beside him, lowly enough that he could feel it where their shoulders pressed together in the stake out nest they had made.

“To be fair, most phobia aren’t exactly logical...”

“I am not afraid of heights, ledges, step embankments, or sudden shifts in altitude. I have no form of altophobia, because I can fly if I put my mind to it. Stop being ridiculous, Nihlus.”

“So... why don't you then?”

“Frequently? Because it is exhausting.”

“Oh huh...”

Saren sighed, turning away from the scope to give his protégé a flat look. The other torin only smiled, rugged mandibles flicking cheerfully. The next words out of Nihlus' mouth were guaranteed to be something along the lines of-

“Why not take advantage of the situation to do an air drop today then? None of the biotic effort if we use hang gliders, speedy and efficient, no walking...”

“One would think you were half Raloi, the way you seem obsessed with heights and flying.”

“Come on, we’ve barely seen each other lately, and it’ll be fun.”

“...and?” Saren replied in a bland drawl, completely ignoring the illogical appeal to emotion.
“Did I mention 'effective'?”

He chuffed. On Nihlus' other side, Rix's subvocals let slip a quiet trill of amusement.

“How could flying over their heads to drop in, *in plain view*, possibly be more effective than a covert ground approach?”

“The pirates are all human, for one.”

“Elaborate.”

“Well... humans. They never look up. Not like Volus, who are always looking upward at others; or Hanar, who are always looking everywhere. Or something. I want to say it has to do with Earth not having much in the way of megaflora. A few big trees in one or two places. Plus, most of their planet is flat. Grasslands everywhere... why be watching above?”

The stoic torin's browridges furrowed, mandibles fluttering in reluctant interest at this new detail of Human psychology. He had not heard of such a thing before, but a general lack of megaflora or mountains would logically lead to less upward spacial awareness in their hind brains... archologies were a new thing for them as well, as he understood it. A few hundred years of upward building development did not a deep change to psyche make... an interesting notion. Leave it to Nihlus to notice obscurities of the alien mind that others had missed.

“You are certain of this behavior?”

“Oh yeah. Can slip through a vent right over them if you need to. Can't hear heart beats, subvocals, or quiet shuffling either, -unless they're augmented for it.”

He was unsurprised at the method of the younger torin's discovery. Vent spelunking was something of a well known and favored tactic of the other torin's. If anything, Nihlus displayed some sort of altophilia. Electric blue eyes spun slowly as he gave the proposition a second consideration. It would not hurt to test the theory out for himself under mostly controlled conditions, with reliable backup on hand... and it might provide a good angle for dropping in with a decretion disc to send them all flying. There *were* only a half dozen or so lifeforms down below.

Potentially... enjoyable.
Experimentation for efficiency was not a *bad* cause...

“Come on Saren. If it fails badly, I won't suggest it again.”

He sighed heavily. “You will be finding a way to make the tactics choice on the report sound less irresponsible.”

“Deal.”

“Rix, what is your experience with airdropping?”

“Been awhile since I've glided on a deltaplane. Haven't really done it since basic training, but... I think I remember most of it...”

“Very well. Start making gliders while I keep watch.”

“Woo!”

“Yessir.”

“Unit 201, come in.”

Garrus paused in his typing, looking up at the patrol car's com unit. Odd, that dispatch would call them specifically and not call by patrol area or availability. Before he could make a move to answer Makasian beat him to it, tapping the reply key and voicing his thoughts in a crisp mezzo-soprano voice.

“This is 201. What can we do for you dispatch?”
The mountainous sniper could practically feel the confusion on the other end at hearing a female. He was somewhat infamous among the dispatch crowd, after all. Taking mercy he added to the inquiry to clarify things.

“Calling for us specifically?”

“Ahhh, yes, we have a strange 201 in progress. Something isn't right, and ah... we thought we'd call you.”

Ocean blue eyes turned to him slowly, one brow ridge raised. Garrus cleared his throat.

“Strange cases are always welcome. What seems to be amiss this time?”

“Call from a Turian female. D11 refueling station on the Kithoi docks. She's reporting, and I quote, 'I'm being robbed or whatever. Can you send some C-Sec? Like, no rush, but that would be cool.' The security cameras just display her lane light set to 'temporarily closed', and one fire alarm on the public systems is on the fritz at that location, but just the one.”

“...huh. Interesting.”

“That was our thought as well.”

He glanced at Aiesha, but she shook her head slightly, not knowing what to make of it either.

“Right then. We're on it.”

“Thanks 201, good luck.”

He flipped the com channel off and sat back to ponder as his partner put the D11 docks into their nav system. A calm robbery, with a lone problematic fire alarm, and a lackadaisical... ahhh, victim?
A little strange.

Nihlus aimed his make shift hang glider toward the general vicinity of a pirate on watch just before letting go in favor of grabbing an outcropping of pipe and swinging around it in a double loop to lose momentum, and then somersaulting at the back of another very confused hostile. His thighs locked in on their neck, and he jerked sideways in a flip. He landed, long and far from the plateau he'd jumped from, in a low push up. One take down before landfall had even begun.

Granted, that wasn't half so impressive as Saren plunging from the sky in a cloud of blue, and impacting almost directly between two pirates, both sent flying hard enough to knock them out.

Credit where credit was due though, Rix landed like a feather, which was impressive enough for a quarter ton of torin, but he added a chest shot and a head shot with his AR on a pirate who'd been distractedly startled by the empty glider that had zipped past him.

Landfall made, four enemy casualties.

The base was a tiny way point for something bigger, nothing more, and they cleaned out the remaining number in less than five minutes. Regrouping in the middle of the impromptu landing zone, Nihlus was smiling brightly. That had been all the fun he'd hoped for. Even Saren looked reluctantly pleased with the results.

“Rix.”

“Yessir?”

“You are now in command. How will you handle clean up?”

The knife loving torin turned to his fellow protégé, waiting for instructions.
“Well... let's check their vital signs, then scour their Omni-tools and equipment for data, then gather evidence, and... then check for loot?”

Saren snorted lightly at the déclassé way of putting it, but 'check for loot' was the honest truth and they all knew it. The stolid torin nodded, and wandered toward the nearest pirate. He picked his own two to check over.

“Oooo, a lunch box... with chips!”

“Nihlus.”

As it turns out, the 'robbery' was really more of a 'desperate idiot versus bored teenager'. Garrus directed the forlorn Salarian's head down as he placed the man into the externally locking back seat of the patrol skycar, an aural canal tuned for the story that Makasian was taking down.

“Yaaah, and then he pulled the knife, and I sort of had to try not to laugh. I meaaaaan... who brings a knife to a robbery? Like, all the criminals on the vids have guns for a reason.”

“Of course, ma'am. Then what happened?”

The sassy charcoal colored tarin switched which hip her hand was leaning on, tossing the other in the air.

“He demanded I give him all the pre-shielded eezo micro blocks we had in stock.”

“Alright...”
“So I offered to get him a bag.”

“A bag?”

“Yaaaah, to carry them in. He didn't have one.”

“Very well, continue.”

“He said 'yes', the fuckin' idiot, so I stepped in back like I was going to grab one, but instead I grabbed the keys, went out the back door, locked it, came around front, locked that too, and sat down for a smoke.”

“... a 'smoke', ma'am?”

The station worker rolled her eyes, arms crossing defensively.

“Well it was my damn break. That's why the station was down. He walked in right when I was supposed to get a sweet fifteen to smoke, snack, and not deal with shipping lane pilots and their fuckin' bad pick up lines. I couldn't exactly leave him there though, now could I? So, like, I turned off the fire alarm and sat down here to get my fix.”

“I see.”

The girl tossed her crest, unconcerned with... well, pretty much everything ever, by the sound of it. His partner's face and subvocals, from what he could observe, were surprisingly, suspiciously, even keel for dealing with the attitude and poor work ethic.

“Yaaaah, so then I called the emergency people and they sent you, so like, story over. You need anything else, lady? There's no way my manager is paying me for this downtime.”

“That should be all for now. Thank you for your cooperation. Please pay your fine for disabling the smoke detector by the door within 90 days or you will receive additional fines. Have a nice day, ma'am.”
“Suuuuure.”

Peach toned faceplates frozen in polite neutrality that Garrus was sure would break the moment they were away from the scene, Makasian signed off on the report and slid into the skycar with him. She was quiet from scene to station, and from station to their offices, but like any good partner, he knew the clock was ticking. Preempting it, he stopped by the break room for a pair of kava mugs, and then came to her.

“Vakarian, I swear th- is that kava?”

“Mmhmm, here. So, what were you swearing?”

Chapter End Notes

09/26/2010 - Volunteers Step Forward to Swap Places with Virtual Aliens
“Deadlocked Council deliberations over the fate of Ambassador Sygan ended today with a surprising twist: the Council will grant asylum to the virtual alien emissary in the body of a volunteer, allowing famed MIT exobiologist Dr. Jordan Detweiler to return to his own body. Ambassador Sygan will transfer her consciousness into the volunteer's body, while the volunteer's consciousness is downloaded into a computer. Upon hearing this decision, some 400 individuals from various races have volunteered to "swap places" with aliens inside the virtual world who wish to re-join the physical universe. One asari volunteer regarded this as "an amazing opportunity to explore a new realm of existence," while a salarian volunteer said, "I'm doing it because I'm tired of our universe. It's a mess.""

A/N: Fluff suggestions still welcome! Here is the first installment. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: confide in you (1707 words) by carrotycake
Chapters: 1/1
Fandom: Mass Effect Trilogy (Translators turn off. In which Shepard and Liara admit their feelings for each other, without the other knowing. Reqed because Carrot writes a /perfect/ ME1 Liara. You can practically hear them speaking.)
Magnificent tides

Chapter Summary

Saren folds lessons into each other in a tangled web of reasoning, and teaches as best he can with a student so different from he. Avitus misses half the lessons, but succeeds at every turn.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Amiala – TCD. The formal form of 'grandmother' or 'mother's mother'. Informal: Ama. (Credit: MizDirected.)

Chapter Soundtrack: KRANE & MYRNE - Monarch

A/N: Chapter soundtrack is utterly unrelated ear candy.

A/N/N: I had a lot of help with this one, but the end result is nearly 5.5k words! :D Get ready for a long one duckies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Head tilted down to account for his crest of horns, Saren leaned back against the wall of his airlock, contemplating the state of his mentee's training. The older torin was gifted in a strange way that he himself was having minor troubles understanding and accounting for. It was... something like Nihlus' creativity in the moment, but far more... more... something.

Decon cycle finished, the external door slid open with a pneumatic hiss. Rix looked out into the wild jungle and then back at him, feet shuffling. The pale torin's body language screamed curiosity; wanting to know why there were here, what he had been up to last night, and likely a whole host of other minutia.

The problem was thus: he had an intelligent, inquiring mind paired to a lifetime of being a soldier under the command of others. He clearly wanted intel, but his training said 'wait', 'listen', and 'follow orders'. It said, 'Your superiors will take care of you, don't question them.' A staple principle of Turian military training. Less helpful for Spectres.

After a moment Rix shifted his shoulders, subvocals letting a small amount of that curiosity escape…

Not yet.

“You must have questions.”

“Yessir.”

“Ask.”

“What's my objective here?”

“To accomplish the tasks I set you, and not die.”

“That's... straightforward.”

“Is it?”

“You're a very straight forward person, generally speaking...”

“I am.”

“... is the training that simple?”

Saren allowed his mandibles to flick in the slightest smile, pleased that Avitus had the nerve to push for a little more.

“You will need to acquire five things from the jungle. I will give you information on each one as you find the last. You will have a final task that may or may not require the previous items to complete.”
“Simple enough. I think I can handle that.”

The pale torin rolled his shoulders before stepping from the ship’s open airlock and out onto the plush mosses of the rainforest floor, his boots leaving footsteps in the substrate as he went. Saren followed Rix out into the sunlight, crossing his arms and turning to check sight lines through the trees by habit as he replied.

“I expect you to. There will be no time constraints, but you cannot return to the ship until all of the tasks are complete. Are you ready to begin?”

“Can I ask what you are going to do while I’m running through the training?”

He shrugged lightly, a pair of talons gesturing to the wilds around them.

“Explore, perhaps.”

“You're going to follow me.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

Rix chuckled, subvocals amicable.

“Alright then, hoss. What’ll task one be?”

Saren raised a brow at the colonial dialect, rolling the word around in his mind. It sounded similar to when Nihlus called him 'boss' when they worked together and he took lead. It was... acceptable. Odd, but acceptable.

“For your first item, you must cross the wetlands due east of here. Do not go around. Just past the worst of it is a cave entrance amid a nest of boulders. It is very obvious. Inside are blue speckled mushrooms. Acquire three.”
“Mushrooms.”

“Yes.”

“From a cave?”

“Indeed.”

“...am I supposed to eat them? Will there be a spiritual journey later today?”

He could not resist a quiet, amused huff at the insubordinate snark.

“I would not advise eating the mushrooms in their natural state. A diuretic powerful enough to give you a cardiac event if not treated, I believe.”

“Understood.”

“Then go. Report in via coms when you have them in hand.”

“Yessir.”

The stoic torin watched the former mercenary disappear into the trees, the crest cover of his helm that last thing to disappear. When the sound of footsteps disappeared beyond what the augments in his aural canals could detect, he turned around and closed up the ship.

The Daedalus was settled between two cliff sides, protected from the planet's frequent storms and mostly invisible from the air. Safe enough, even before he activated the security protocols to deploy aggressive stasis drones to capture anyone who approached thinking his ship to be free for the taking. The little drones would set up a stable stasis field around their target, and had helpers to run back and forth for energy resupply. A stasis field in an uncontrolled environment wasn't foolproof, but the lockdown protocols inside the ship were an excellent back up.
Trusting that all would be well he turned and walked into the underbrush in the general direction that Rix had gone. The *plip-plip-plip* of moisture dripping from leaves and hitting lower foliage blended with the symphony of insect song and distant *kreeeee kre kre kre kreeeee* of tropical birds seeking each other amid the trees.

’Now, to catch up without being noticed.’

Saren increased his pace gradually, listening carefully for other signs of life, Turian or otherwise. When the whip of a low hanging branch being let go of allowed it to smack into it’s neighbor a ways ahead and to the left, he presumed it Rix and began a cautious circle-around. The silver-grey torin took more care now, stalking with the intent to remain unseen and unheard. They could talk through coms without being audible outside their helms, but stepping on the wrong twig could alert either of them to the other.

He was not certain if his student knew that part of the game was noticing being followed, but their earlier conversation was as big a clue as Rix would get. It had been a generous clue, by all accounts.

“Found the cave.”

“Well done, that was quick. Any trouble?”

“Not so far... and wow it sure is dark in here.”

“It is a cave.”

“Yessir, it is, but you'll excuse me if I light it up some with my rifle's spotlight.”

“Is that a feature you always have equipped?”

“Always. Seems like every Vorcha and their mother has night vision, either naturally, implanted, or in their helm cams. A quick flash of plain old light makes for that half second of surprise sometimes.”
“You do not have night vision on your helm instead?”

“Oh I do. But the color on it is muted something awful. Flashlight's better if I don't need to be stealthy.”

“I see.”

“...was that a joke?”

“Was what a joke, Rix?”

“Ah... nevermind. Found the mushrooms, taking three good sized ones. What now?”

“The second item you will need is a fruit.”

Coms grew quiet for a moment, just as Saren settled into the bushes outside the cave entrance, belly down on soft, rubbery sand and nearly invisible in a thick patch of ficus-analogue. The custom, outdated armor that his mentee favored glinted in the light of the cave entrance as he exited the subterrain with muddy boots and a patch or two of slime on his armor.

“What's it look like, sir?”

“It shifts in a gradient from orange to maroon. Approximately as large as your helm when ripe. Irregularly shaped.”

“Where does it grow?”

“Look up.”

Saren watched as the pale torin looked up slowly, then around, until he noticed the slightly yellowish hue of one of the maroon bulbs growing high overhead. His shoulders drooped perceptibly.
“Spirits, really?”

“Yes, 'really'.”

“You've seen my crest? My spurs? I'm not a climber build, I'm a runner. How do I even...?”

“Whether you are more classically lithe or not is none of my concern. Either you can acquire a ripe fruit, or not.”

It was mildly amusing to watch the older male palm the top of his fringe in distress and spin slowly around, most likely in hope of finding a fruit both ripe and low hanging. There were none of either present. The item in question had a sixty three day ripening process, and generally fell to the ground, hard and heavy, splattering everywhere as a part of it's reproduction cycle.

“There aren't any ripe ones here.”

“Where is here?”

“Outside the cave.”

Though a smirk tugged at his mandibles, the Spectre kept his next words very even.

“That would be because I shot them all down in advance.”

“...of course you did.”

With a tilting motion that looked much like cracking one's neck, the orange eyed torin picked a direction and began stalking for fruit. Saren followed, carefully, determined to keep up and remain unseen as his own challenge for the day. Nearly twenty minutes, a sighting of a dangerous but non-aggressive creature that eventually moved on, and two bouts of flash rain came and went before his mentee found a candidate.
High up, -but not as high as it could have been-, a near perfect specimen dangled from it's branch, dripping wet and swaying precariously. It took the stoic agent a few moments and some creative maneuvering through the underbrush to catch up enough to also see Rix while still being stealthy. He arrived just in time to catch the other torin pacing around below the fruit, eyes on the gargantuan tangle of wood and leaves that only vaguely lead upward. The brownish mauve of the tree's bark looked shiny and slick everywhere around them, with a hundred handholds and just as many vines, moss clumps, and teetering sections of deadfall practically built to get in the way.

The older torin's point had been fair; he was long crested and thick in the chest, with a broad loop of cowl. His only saving grace were his shorter spurs. The former mercenary was no lithe tarin, built for climbing to ambush, nor a lanky torin such as Nihlus to pull it off with any ease. A wrong move could just as easily see Rix tangled in vines, finding himself too heavy for his perch, or slipping on a handhold that was textured but very, very wet.

Still. He himself had passed a similar test with his mentor, and Nihlus had passed this exact test with ease. It was not about being built for the task, no, the point here was surpassing nature to acquire the high-hanging fruit any way possible.

The life of a Spectre was all about do or die. It was one of today's lessons, among others.

“Okay... okay. Think I can get this one?”

“Do you think you can?”

Saren uncued his mike in time to hide the chuff of air released from being reluctantly entertained by the repeated attempts to confirm his position hidden in Rix’s casual dialogue. They were not entirely graceless prods, but such slips of tongue were not something he was prone to in the slightest. The other torin would have to do better than that. He hoped the slew of questions and curiosities continued.

“I'm thinking 'yes'."

Rix backed up from a tree, giving himself a good lead up and taking off in perfect running form. A meter and change from the trunk the orange eyed torin leapt, slammed on all fours into the bark, and leapt again toward a neighboring tree at a bit of an angle to where he had come running at it originally. That leap ended in another slam and one more jump before the older torin ended up next to a good sized branch to scrambled up onto. When an update finally came over coms, it was slightly breathless.
“I'm... up. Part way.”

“Oh?”

“Did I mention I'm not a tarin, short crested, or any variation there of, sir?”

“You did.”

“Really, Arterius. I can climb buildings in an urban environment all day, but these trees? They're huge, wet, and there are tangles of foliage in almost every direction. It's basically an under canopy.”

That was the moment it began to rain, tumultuous looking clouds deciding that now was the time.

“So it is.”

Rix's mic uncued.

Saren was fairly certain it was so that the other torin could curse at him in peace.

“Right. Give me a minute here to plan my next move.”

“As I said, there is no time limit.”

“Now I know why.”

Saren settled in to wait. It took the better part of five minutes before his student began making nonsensical, sometimes looping climbing choices. A short stint of climbing smaller branches and gathering up lengths of vine resulting in Rix perched around five meters short of the fruit, and two more off to the side. His armored legs dangled on either side of the branch, thighs tight and ankles crossed below as he did... something.
The Spectre could not see from this angle, but it was something to do with the vines. Silver-grey browridges furrowed. He could inquire what Rix was up to, but asking in anyway beyond a general sense, could give away his watching and that was unacceptable. Completely.

Rather than lose his own game he tried backing out of his position and approaching from a new angle. The choice paid off, revealing enough of a new angle to show that the pale torin was braiding a rope from the vines, presumably to help bridge the gap between the closest stable branch and fruit. Saren nodded approval, shuffling on the water drenched ground to get comfortable and bringing up a data article to read on his optic's HUD while waiting.

“You know? I'm going to be cleaning the mud out of my boots from this place for ages after this. The dirt here is like clay and adhesive blended into muck.”

“It is likely that we will want to de-armor before reentering the ship, yes. Substrate such as this tends to... travel.”

“Oh? So you didn't go back inside?”

Saren nodded approval, though no one could see it, pleased that Rix was asking questions. Getting the torin to ask for details and express curiosity - and not just follow orders - was proving something of a challenge.

“Did I not say I intended to explore? There are only a few dangers here that I am wary of, and many rare plants.”

“I bet there are. Isn't Kryik something of a chemist or botanist?”

“Nothing so formal, but yes, Nihlus is known for his creation and use of poisons and rare organic toxins.”

“Hah. Old school sometimes wins out over the fancier options. Flashlights and poisonous plants.”

He offered a subvocal rumble of mild agreement. Sometimes a mission required advanced hardware and careful planning. Sometimes it required creative use of a string instrument. Depended on the day,
truthfully.

“Sometimes, yes.”

Coms went quiet just then, and for good reason. Rix was traversing to a closer, mildly precarious balance point, a strange vine-ball in hand. When the wet glimmer of hodgepodge armor high above made a throwing motion to toss the ball he nearly snorted. Was this throwing things on rope a favored trick? It would be an odd thing to be known for compared to his biotics and use of hand canons, and Nihlus' poison knives or explosives. 'Creative use of rope' stood out somewhat.

The vine ball in question spread like a net, two ends in either of the pale torin's hands. As it spread and hit the fruit he pulled, rapidly returning to thicker, steadier branch bark as he did so. The head sized maroon and orange fruit came free with a snap, and he fought against it's sudden weight by falling to his rear, and clinging to vine and tree.

Vine held. Branch held.

Rix let out a *whoop* over coms, taking his time with the return journey to the ground in the pouring rain.

“Got your fruit, sir. Anything else I can arrange for you this afternoon?”

The former mercenary's subvocals added a self-amused edge of servitude to the offer that earned him a huff.

“Well done. Your next item is near the cliffs to the North. Go there, and find a light blue grass that grows in the cracks.”

“...am I climbing these cliffs?”

“No. There should be some reachable from the base.”

“Thank the spirits. Headed north.”
“Very well.”

As Rix began to move out of sight between the trees, Saren made to leave his hiding spot. The silver-grey torin hefted himself up to crawl backwards, but the watery clay beneath him shifted as well, his limbs sinking in dramatically without warning. He tugged harder, trying to free his forearms as they continued sinking, moving his legs and trying to roll or find purchase. One hand came up, the other went down. One knee rose, the other sunk.

The ground held.

The substrate had a grip on the silver-grey torin, holding him fast. Saren growled at it in aggravation.

“I see the cliffs. How much of this blue grass do I need?”

“... a handful will do. Perhaps ten ounces in approximation.”

“It’ll take me a bit to get there, the cliff is a ways off.”

“I am aware of the general distances. Take your time.”

'Hopefully it will not take me long to escape this... mire. Then I can sprint to catch up.'

The Spectre fussed with the ground for a moment, trying subtler shifts and giving a little to gain mobility of one arm or the other. It was not working. After a solid ten minutes of fighting with it, certain that Rix was far ahead, he decided that enough was enough. Lighting up a biotic aura, Saren pulled the gravity in close, and then shifted it suddenly to produce force from beneath him. It bounced him up onto his feet, and caused a shock wave in the clay soil below more reminiscent of gelatin than land. He immediately sank to his hips.

'…'

“Spirits! You didn’t tell meaaahahaaaaa-that there were, oh no no no nice kitty, Arterius there are-”
He was quite torn between the amusing discovery of the local wild life that favored the cliffs, and his current predicament. Really, his newest protégé needed to learn to ask more questions.

“Do you require assistance?”

“I'm fine! I'm fine! I'm probably fiiiii- woaaaaano!”

The Spectre candidate was, apparently, ‘fine’. It suited Saren well enough, as the obnoxious clay soil was settling around him still; smoothing out to seem as if he had just grown from the land right here.

He gave it a test shift, trying out a stepping motion to try and gain height.

That... did not work.

Next came shifting of the legs and trying to regain a bit of freedom by being more horizontal.

The exercise was, by and large, a waste of time. He was buried up the top of his waist by the end.

Saren glared at the ground, trying to decide if a simple mass lightening field would do. Certainly, it could not hurt; he was in full armor. It was not as if he could drown if submerged.

He tried it, carefully lightening himself very mildly. A mediocre twenty percent or so. Really, he just needed to beat the density versus weight of the sink hole's components. The mild field ended up proving too weak, and he could not manage to get enough upward momentum that did not draw him back down again on the next step. It would require more.

“HA! Got it.”

“Excellent.”

“Which way am I headed for whatever is next? I need to know now.”
“Now?”

“This cat-bird-thing either wants my head or my first born. I'm not certain which, and I don't want to find out. Currently on a ledge, but it's looking like it might think it can get up here too.”

“They are cliff face dwellers.”

“Well then, spirits be with me. Directions? Please?”

“Twenty degrees off of South, toward the East. There is a rushing river they do not like to cross. Cross it yourself, and head upstream.”

“Thanks, on it.”

Saren cracked his neck, pushing energy into his field until he was more than half as light as before. Perhaps he weighed a bit much, -with his armor and augments-, but he could do this until he had nearly zero mass, if only for a short time. A biotic charge would have been his first choice if it wasn't so tiring. The electric eyed torin was about ready to try it anyways, if this did not work. With his mass at forty percent or so, he cautiously raised a leg, lifting it in a step. So far, so good.

That was when he heard a noise. Small. Quiet. A little shuffle in the underbrush. Saren turned around very slowly.

Behind him, haunches in the air and set to pounce, one of the cliff dwelling creatures had him in it's sights, pupils dilated into big dark pools of malevolence.

“Do not.”

The thing’s rear quarters twitched, neck feathers flaring dangerously.
“I will end you.”

It made to attack, claws and fangs descending on the well armored and moderately annoyed Spectre.

“Very well.”

Biotic energy redirected, Saren sunk in at an angle and up to his shoulders as the rain continued to pour. The would-be predator slammed into a nearby mossy boulder with enough force to break it's spine in several places.

He clicked his tongue at the backwards progress, subvocals flat.

“Okay. Crossed the river on a fallen tree, headed upstream. The river trick worked like a charm, thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

“So what am I after now?”

“Walk along the river bank, hunt for reeds with very small clusters of purple flowers. They are somewhat rare. Gather a few full size stalks... and watch out for sink holes. The blooms do carry a nice scent. You should smell them while you are at it.”


Rather done with his own sink hole event, the stolid Spectre lightened his mass a great deal, and immediately went to take a step. He was light, yes, very light indeed... but the ground had a firm hold on him from the base of his boots to half way up his ankles.

Brow furrowing, Saren shifted that foot, trying to determine why the consistency of the ground changed so suddenly to something with nearly adhesive properties...

Electric eyes narrowed, focus on the jungle flora that surrounded him. Heat. Wetness. Heavy,
shifting clay and sand...

The perfect conditions for pockets of destructive distillation.

His boots were most likely stuck in a pocket of tar.

The normally stoic soldier let loose a decently agitated rumble. He was ankles deep in thick organic muck, and the new position restricted his movement enough that the memetic for a biotic rush was near impossible.

'Perhaps a lightening and a strong outward push? If I can create room to move, then flow directly into the coiling precursor memetic, it should be enough.'

A triple combo of advanced biotic moves was not something he was looking forward to. Saren brought up his vitals screen on the HUD with the slower, mental focus commands. He flipped to the data on his amp. It was doing fine, as expected, but it was a little warm... he could feel that much from where the amp slot touched surface hide. Not fever warm even, but warm.

He decided to give it a chance to cool before trying the complex maneuver. It was not as if he were sinking any further, and by this point he was too far behind his mentee to keep up without a good long dash that would wind him further. Unnecessary, under these conditions.

“Status, Rix?”

“You've got some good timing there sir. Just found some flowers on my side of the bank. Sort of. A meter out, but close to a rapids so I'm taking my time getting to it.”

“A wise decision.”

“Tell me what's next while I have you? Mmm... these do smell nice.”

“The test of the final item is a riddle and a hunt in one. Are you prepared for the riddle? I will only repeat it once, just as you may only hear mission critical information once in passing and have need to remember it.”
“Nice of you to warn me. I'm ready.”

“Do not worry, I will not warn you next time. The riddle is this, 'Wash, and it becomes dirty. Do not wash, and it can remain clean. What is 'it'?''

“Uhhh...”

“...”

“Mmm...”

Saren turned his attention back to planning his escape, working through the technical details for a good thirty seconds before Rix made an uncertain attempt at answering the -admittedly easy- riddle.

“Is it... the floor of a shower?”

“...technically yes, but you are missing the more obvious solution.”

“I'm something awful at word games.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Can I get a hint?”

“Certainly. What else is involved in taking a shower?”

“Soap, scrub, water, pipes, towels, locker ro- Water!”

“Correct. Remind me to set you down with a series of mental training exercises for riddles.”
“Sure. I suppose it can't hurt.”

“No, it will greatly help. Asari in particular are infamous for talking in circles when they wish to be indirect or mysteriously discrete.”

“... point. So I just need some water? There's a river right here, does that count?”

“Can you drink it?”

“Not unless I purified it.”

“I expect you will prove adept at this part of the trial.”

“...why is my canteen out of water?”

“I emptied it.”

“When?!?”

“When you were asleep, last night.”

The channel went quiet again. Potentially for more private cursing. He did have to give Rix credit, the torin had made a conscious effort not to use expletives around him once asked.

“Okay, so potable water. On it.”

Saren hummed, rechecking his HUD’s display. His amp had cooled enough to try the maneuver he had in mind.
With a deep breath the Spectre gathered biotic energy, spun up an outward pulse with particular downward strength, then pulled up some reserves in the wings. Aura and prepared energy as potent and stable as he could make it, he let loose the pulse and lightening fields, then quickly jerked through a clunky memetic for a short range charge. It was perhaps the worst jump he had made since very first learning them; sideways, too far up, and resulting in his frame coming out of the low mass bubble in nearly horizontal sprawl.

Below him, the ground rippled like jello in a bowl. He glared at it, and snatched his talons on a nearby branch. It was not enough to stop his fall, but enough to course correct and slow him, at the cost of his claws' sharpness. He would have to refine their edge this evening.

The muck slathered Spectre landed on a protruding root in an elegant crouch, head feeling light and mildly nauseous from the odd, poorly executed series of moves.

“Mildly clean water, check.”

“That was faster than expected. How did you accomplish it?”

“Made a filter to fit my canteen, flash forged out of Omni-Gel, and dripped water from the rain straight into it, then boiled it a bit by holding it over a chemical flare.”

“Sufficient, if not perfect.”

“That was my thought. Challenge complete?”

“Almost.”

“Right. The final task. What's next?”

“There was poison in your breakfast this morning. Everything you need for an antidote is on your person. You may use the extranet to search for symptoms to self diagnose. Inform me of your every step, and do not take the result until I tell you to.”

“You... have got to be kidding me.”
“About which part?”

“Spirits. Okay. Okay. Ahhh... I don't notice any symptoms.”

“Oh?”

“I mean ahh... I've had to go to the bathroom twice since we landed, and I sort of have to go again.”

“Hnn.”

The com channel's mildly accurate attempt to convey subvocals came through with a strong attempt to suppress a distressed sounding warble, and clicked off. He would give it five minutes to see if Rix figured out that he was fine. Saren spent those few minutes trying to slough off most of the gunk with a stick. It was only mildly effective.

“Arterius, I'm not feeling anything else amiss. Pain and flexibility are the same as yesterday. My vitals look fine, and a basic medical scan comes up with nothing.”

“That would be because there is nothing wrong with you.”

“What. That's... why? I was panicking that... why would you...?”

“To teach you to ask questions.”

“I really, really don't follow.”

The Spectre sighed quietly at the vague tone of upset in the older male's voices.

“You are creative. It is your strongest suit even, but you are very used to accepting orders and mission objectives, then making do with what you have. Inured to dealing with minimal intel and short term bursts of dire need for success. It is to the point that you rarely, if ever, push for more
information. Occasionally, you ask things casually. You must break this habit. As a Spectre, you will need to pick your own battles, find and follow your own leads, fact find and cross check. Listen closely to what people say and do not say. Your competence in action must be balanced with your competence during passive moments. Your curiosity has been discouraged from a lifetime of being a follower. We will undo this with time, -I am confident-, until you are capable of leading yourself to where you need to go.”

“...you tricked me to prove a point. You lied.”

The voice on the line was edged with anger, pale anger, but still detectable. Rare was the Turian who handled being lied to well.

“I did not lie, in fact. I make it a point to never lie unless there is no other option. Your breakfast did contain 'poison'; a simple metabolic stimulant that if left unchecked would give you a mild flu in a day or two from the boost. The flowers? Contain a pleasant smelling counter agent in the pollen. The effort of breathing around them was enough to counteract the compound. You will likely sleep well tonight, and that is all.”

“Then what was all of the other stuff for?”

“Red herrings.”

“Spirits. I... this is not the best way to prove a point.”

“Perhaps not, but consider how many times you did not ask me for more information today, compared to the few times that you did. There were clues waiting, and you received very few because you did not seek them.”

Saren gave himself a little room, and took a running leap far from the sink hole. When the ground beneath his boots proved solid enough to tread he turned for the ship and began walking while waiting for a reply.

“...understood sir.”

“Rix?”
“Yes?”

“Do not hesitate to be honest with me. You can express yourself freely. Positively, or negatively. You can become angry. You can disobey if you believe it to be the right course of action. I ask that you keep your composure at all times, but I will never mind honesty.”

“Complete honesty?”

“Yes.”

“Then with all due respect, you are an asshole.”

“You would not be the first to say so. Also, language please.”

The silence on the line was thick with expectation. He could tell that Rix was waiting for a dressing down that was not coming. Another lesson in itself; if Specialist Rix was to become Spectre Rix, he would need to learn that Spectres were equals, with precisely one tier higher than them, composed of exactly three people.

“Huh. I uh.... while we're at it? You're also a neat freak, and your cooking is more elaborately plated and better tasting than restaurant food, which is a sort of ridiculous. Your laundry soap smells weird, and you drink more tea than my amiala.

“Accurate. Also accurate. I contest that any skill is potentially useful and thus not ridiculous. If you are using the light beige bottle of cleaner fluid, that is Nihlus' and it is some Quarian flower, of all things. My soap is scentless, and it is in the white bottle. I drink tea because I grew up drinking tea. It is habit.”

“I have to admit, this 'training' isn't what I expected. Or the... free speaking.”

“You will get used to the privilege.”
“You're making it sound like you've already decided to pass me.”

“I proposed your candidacy, and I do not like to be proven wrong. I will compensate with further training as needed.”

“That statement is not comforting.”

Saren smirked lightly as he ambled, -wet and covered in muck-, into the clearing where he had left the ship.

“It was not intended to be.”

Chapter End Notes

09/24/2010 - Virtual Alien Ambassador Petitions Citadel Council for Asylum
“Breaking news tonight from the Citadel, where Ambassador Sygan, the virtual alien inhabiting Dr. Jordan Detweiler's body, called an unscheduled press conference to issue the following statement: "Long ago, our people lived in your universe of physical matter. When our sun went supernova, we sought refuge in a virtual world free of needless pain and suffering, climate disasters, disease, and many other ills faced by creatures of solid flesh. Some now feel that remaining in this world after the danger had passed was a mistake. We realize that distress can sometimes provide a catalyst for evolution. We miss the turmoil of physical existence. As such, I formally petition the Citadel Council for asylum. I no longer wish to return to my former world.""

A/N:

Omake:

“What the- Arterius, what happened to your... everything?”

“...sink hole.”

“What you... heh... got into a battle with dirt, and lost?”

“Hardly.”

“Must sting, what with how clean you like things.”

“I intend to run a /very thorough/ decon procedure.”

“Ah.”
Fanfic Recommendation: **Something You're Good At** (1404 words) by **Marie_Fanwriter** (AHHHHHH!!!!! Marie_Fanwriter wrote an EdaH offshoot! It's the bake off between Saren and Avitus! THEY WROTE THE THING! /flails, squees, dances/ It's so good! Talk about some bonus fries!)
Nihlus grunted when the sideswipe caught him on the side of his helm, the alloy of it denting inward slightly from the force. That mandible made a quiet snap as it cracked, probably half-way through by the feel of it. Pain bloomed across the corresponding side of his face, intense enough the exact location of the fracture was hard to pin down.

The sensation was largely ignored with long practice and mild amusement.

The Krogan he was facing might have cracked his face, but the long dagger that ran from under their jaw and up into the Krogan equivalent of the pons was his coup de grâce.

Fun fact: Krogan didn't have secondary, tertiary, or tertiary pons in their brain-stem.

Just the one.

The yellow plated mercenary slumped to the ground, lime green eyes going still. Very likely still alive, but without the critical messenger organ the hulking male was nothing more than a spirit trapped in a cage, one that couldn't act until they healed.
Not that the carmine plated torin would give them that chance.

His blade pulled free, then slit his opponent open from chin to armor line, and aural canal to aural canal. The blood loss would be sufficient to end him in a few minutes... somewhat cruel, but Nihlus was feeling less than merciful today.

Cages of innocent peoples from all over the galaxy stared vacantly back at him from their traps, robbed of their senses by the tale-tell puckered scars of cranial chips. At most, they were mesmerized by the activity going on, though he doubted any of them had the cognition to understand it. There was no fear on their faces, or hope at seeing a possible rescuer. Just animal movement tracking; and oh, did it rile him up something fierce.

There were no tears, no running for fresh air, nor even thanks as he started opening cages and leading them around blood pools and bodies. Nihlus took off his helm and smiled through his cracked mandible, kind and gentle with them as he walked the former slaves in small groups to the base's food stores. Forty six people, young adults to middle age, in one cage marked for transfer, and twenty two more out of their 'prime' to be used for organ harvest; all shuffling forward with bare toes and dull eyes.

Spirits did it make him mad. A quiet mantra of 'ihateslaversihateslaversihateslavers' ran through his head, the echoes of his personas joining in with a quiet susurrus of the same just behind him. He was glad they agreed, at least.

The green eyed Spectre made sure each person was sat down with appropriate portions of food and water -too afraid they'd eat until death if just told to 'eat', and uncertain they'd all make it until rescue if left alone. Some of them were just... so thin.

When the immediate needs of the group had been seen to, Nihlus sat himself down outside and accessed his ship's systems as a relay to the local com buoy. Externally he was calm, in control, and on task. On the inside?

He was furious.

Slavers in his sector.

Terminus pirates in his sector.
'How. Fucking. Dare they.'

Mind tumbling with predatory, possessive thoughts about the audacity of the pirate's encroachment, the Council Agent sent a message off to the people at Delugia's First Recourse, making sure they were on the way with the usual contingent of surgeons, armed guards, and social workers. His message was very concise, and not particularly friendly, but the the reply was warm.

They knew him.

He was the Spectre that smiled. The nice one who'd give interviewers a word or two, make faces at kids, and constantly showed the Hierarchy core worlds that a colony born could rise to high honors. Known for doing a good job, and well liked, which was hilarious considering his service record prior to having a Spectre's carte blanche.

He popped up after the details were settled, heading for the base's personnel quarters. Nihlus stripped the place of luxuries, packing them away with blood still drying on his boots. He'd see the art pieces got to museums, the slaver tech made it to the experts on the Citadel, and the various bobbles sold. Some for himself, a bit to pay back Saren's loan last month for a gun he wanted on the spot, and some for certain charity organizations. Sharp green eyes still hiding his violence, the bodies of the transgressors were stripped of valuables and left to rot in the sun.

It took reinforcements a bit longer than expected to get to him, -they were overtaxed with the recent influx of ne'er do wells too- but they came with a hodge podge of ships and supplies and determined miens to see this place undone. They were Salarians mostly, but various other species spilled from the shuttles too, and he led them to the survivors with a semi-positive expression held tightly in place.

The carmine plated torin took to stalking the perimeter as the charity organization worked, mentally taunting the inscrutable orange skies for more pirates to come.

'Look at all these lovely ships with their valuable people and shiny medical machines. Prepackaged supplies. Resources. Come on... just try me.'

He was, perhaps, still a bit keyed up from the day's events.
At least the people from DFR knew what they were doing. A few hours in and they were retreating to safer waters with the survivors carefully tucked into rooms to wait, oblivious to the queue for implant removal that was running as they flew.

Nihlus watched the last ship take off and slouched against a crate for a few moments, unmoving and tired. Not physically... hell, not even mentally really. Something else. A tiny, unhappy laugh escaped him. This little pit of slime was one Mass Relay jump and two, *just two*, days away from the Citadel.

'Spirits.'

The enemy was at the gates. His jurisdiction or not, that base assault he was planning was going to happen. After this? Even Tevos wouldn't tell him no. Just to 'not get caught', but probably phrased more eloquently.

He stood from the crate and made to upload the spare pickings from the base to his ship, dragging the plain non-antigrav containers to his airlock, running decon, and then shoving them just far enough inside to close it again. With a roll of his shoulders he started to remove the pitted and messy plates of his armor, getting down to his underarmor suit before stepping down into the command depression and taking a seat to bring up the nav system.

Nihlus guided his ship from the ground, input coordinates, and got the FTL course set in before he ambled back up and turned for the stairs. The massive CIC dome had a set leading upward on either side, but he took the left most to the next floor, coming out on the ringed balcony the circled the level below. There was only one hallway upstairs, and down it he went, padding into the first room on the right: the bathroom. Well... 'bathroom' was a strong word. It was more like one giant shower, with the other features of a bathroom inside of it but slightly away from the water spray and bench along the back wall.

The utility was by design. His job got very messy some days.

Nihlus stripped from his undersuit, shoved it into the cleaner by the door, and went to activate the shower. Above him, the rainwater shower head spilled steaming bliss down onto his tight shoulders. Eyes slid closed, and a heavy sigh escaped.

Bad people dead.
Innocent people safe.

Self safe.

No others to worry over.

His instincts finally let him take a metaphorical breath. The wily Spectre pressed his forearm to the wall by his head, and his foreplate to that wrist. He was mildly tired, still keyed up, and quietly angry in a way that wouldn't quit until this criminal surge in his sector fucking stopped.

This part of space was his. It was *his*, and they were *not welcome* here.

A stray thought made him smile weakly. That possessive 'mine to protect' feeling sounded the same as how Garrus talked about the Citadel. The mountainous torin always referred to it as 'his station'. Territorial, the both of them. Saren was less so, -more concerned with the galaxy as a whole and the future in general-, but no one Nihlus knew was entirely un-territorial about their home area when it came to pirates. Who would be?

Even other pirates were hostile to violent, thieving new comers. Particularly if they were slave takers as well.

As flowing almost-too-hot water spilt over his crest and pooled in his cowl, Nihlus longed for his marked or his former mentor. Preferably both. Garrus' cocky, on point humor and quiet affection was always a balm. Saren's matter of fact, not-meant-to-be-vicious-but-very-much-so way of talking about dealing with problems... or his tendency to bake delicious things while ruminating...

A subvocal whine erupted from him; desire for his precious people and their comforts.

Nihlus wanted Saren's back pressed to his, to curl up and sleep. He wanted Garrus buried inside of him, -or visa versa-, to wash away his lingering anger with excellent sex.

He sighed, free hand trailing down his stomach and skimming his plates as he focused on what he'd do with them if they *were* here and willing. Saren had touched him that one time... would he do it while Garrus took him? It wasn't quite the three way of his dreams, but it was so beautifully close...
Nihlus’ hand traced his seam, not the pale grey or light brown that he wanted, but imagination helped that a little. Fingers wandered, unhurried and light. Either side of the seam would slide aside if pressed with enough force, sluggish yet mobile, but teasing open the plates always brought out the best releases.

More build up, more pay off. He was in the mood for that, for some reason.

The long limbed torin pressed his palm over the center line to give it some pressure, the talon of his first finger scratching gently at himself lower down with just enough force to entice his biology into warming with a flush. He hummed, chasing the feeling.

*If* there was a semi-three way, Garrus would be the one to coax him open. More confident, more practice, he assumed. Saren would probably watch at first. Observe, collect data, then act. His silver-grey friend could collect all the data he liked, particularly if it was on *this* topic. Nihlus managed a half smirk on the undamaged side of his face, warming plates starting to spread. He imagined the older torin considering touching his waist as Garrus worked his stubborn plates open. The Detective was always goal focused, but favored taking it slow. Saren would likely cooperate with that, allowing for plenty of time to consider being more forward. Or maybe just watching him start to lose his mind to the pleasure.

The idea was just within the realm of possibility, and so tantalizing for that potential.

Blue would have him worked up within few minutes, he always did, knuckles pressing into the nerves on either side of his plates as his cock started to slide free of the sheath, flushing with blood and growing heavy as it fell. His coloration was something Garrus had admitted to liking; the deep blue of blood rushing into mahogany hide, staining it maroon; the surface shining with natural lubricant.

'Attractive and eye catching,’ he’d shared one time.

'I'd like to catch more than your eyes with it,’ Nihlus had replied.

Blue had groaned as if pained and nipped at his neck in revenge.

In the relaxing heat of the shower, another grin tugged at semi-functional mandibles.
He spent a few more moments of touching himself, playing that it was his marked doing the work while Saren watched. It was enough to have him fully descending into his palm. His blood was still running hot from the day's events, and it rushed into his length as he grew to full size; long and thin, just like his frame. He swallowed at the rush of fluid from the descent, and the subsequent effervescent pleasure from it.

“Nnnnnnaaahh...”

He tried to hold the moan back for some reason. Voicing it loudly seemed counter intuitive to the slow descent into climax that was taking his sanity away as he day dreamed. Still, the moan escaped into the misty air, echoing off of the walls into a reverberation that his mind purposefully confused for the sounds of another.

The green eyed Spectre had always been excellent at playing pretend. It was an infiltrator's game after all.

Nihlus gripped himself firmly and stroked, calling to mind his former mentor's first tentative touch. He knew the other torin could make a mark scream with bliss as they came, there'd been occasion for him to stand guard for that much, but the two images just... didn't match up at all.

'Saren is always sorta uncertain of touch. Not shyness, but... something like it. So how...?'

He could only guess.

The paler red-brown of Nihlus' palm squeezed his phallus as he worked himself, his other hand leaving the wall to drag talons up his stomach hide, intensely pretending they were Saren's. Sharp black claws drawing fading lines, oh so carefully, on the softer surfaces of his middle...

“A-aaaahhhhh~”

His voice rose into the air again, forehead pressing into to the metal wall as the coiling pleasure of rising lust came to life between his splayed plates.
While imagined-Saren's talons traced the edges of plate topography at his waist and between his hips, imagined-Garrus squeezed him harder, tugging slightly. Sex with an Asari or a Human might be all about the thrusting, but the tight grip of a warm cloaca or vagina was as heady a bliss for him as a dragging thrust. His cock curled in his hand, the flared tip curving back toward him ever so slightly as his stomach muscles rolled in enjoyment of the scratching.

“Mmmmmnnnn...”

Not-his-hand tugged harder on the next shift, a break up of sensation to slow the approach of a climax that was rapidly coming for him from the tight grip. Squeeze... squeeze... tug... squeeze... squeeze... -and suddenly imagined-Garrus played at both together.

“Ohh fffff- spirits. Ohhhhhhh, yessss, please don't stop...”

Imagined-Garrus never did, but the play at begging made imagined-Saren pause. He whined at the simulacrum, and it huffed.

'Heh. That is exactly how he sounds... fuck I want to bury myself inside of him right now. So damn bad. From behind or in front? Can't... can't decide. Want to watch his expression as I slide in, nudge his chin up to tongue that lovely throat of his... Ah fuck, but from behind I can bite down on one of those long zygomatic horns of his. Hold him steady as I...'

The wonders of a creative mind were endless. Wonderfully endless. The tugging and stroking and drag of talons was ever gentle, but it brought him to gasping completion just the same, opaque fluid spilling out in a font of dizzying relief. Heat of a different kind suffused his limbs as he slumped against the wall; the edge of stress taken off. It wasn't quite enough, and it wouldn't last, but... it would do.

Nihlus turned to the side to melt down onto the wall-to-wall bench along the back of the shower, plopping just outside of the water's fall.

'Spirits praise large water reclamation tanks and the long showers they allow. I fucking need them lately.'

His eclectic bin of soaps, scrubs, and various shower accouterments was pulled from under the bench. A limey soap and fluffy cloth selected, and the Spectre took some time to aromatherapy himself to cleanliness.
Then he masturbated again; a shorter, faster affair to cleanse a few more dregs of stress.

A final rinse off after nearly an hour in the bathroom and he finally flipped the water controls off just minutes before the Widmanstat made the subtle shift from FTL to free floating on inertial drift. Time for the next jump.

Grabbing a massive, fluffy black towel from a rack of many he left the bathroom still somewhat dripping and made for the CIC to set off the second jump toward the local Mass Relay.

'Ahhhh~ I feel... much better. Might still visit Blue though. Miss him. Miss Saren. Hmmm. On that note... I wonder if Rix is still alive?'

Chapter End Notes

09/27/2010 - Enormous Fossil Found on Sifurman

"Geologists studying the crust of the seemingly lifeless low-gravity planet Sifurman have discovered a fossil of what may be the largest creature in the galaxy ever to walk on land. "It's the thrill of a lifetime," says Professor Orin Taul. "We theorized Sifurman used to support life, and this is proof beyond our wildest dreams." Paleontologists have already partially reconstructed the skeleton and say that this unknown giant had four legs and would weigh up to 280 tons in Earth gravity. Taul added, "We're still analyzing the data, but I suspect the creature will share structural similarities with Late Cretaceous sauropods on prehistoric Earth." Soft tissue analysis is sketchy, but it hints at the giant's secondary and tertiary "hearts" that would have pumped blood to its neck and tail."

A/N: Does anyone know of any animals on Earth that have metal laced into their dermis, in any form? Particularly for radiation protection, but I'll take any minor instance even. Author-chan is working on some theoretical Turian anatomy, and trying to pin down how the thulium in their plates would exist. A matrix just blow the surface is the current guess, formed after birth as they ate food and grew. No need for it in the womb right? And giving birth to stiff plating would be hellish, I presume. Thulium in nature isn't absorbed well by plant roots, so I'm thinking it's largely from the meat in their diet. Grazing animals eat a metric fuck ton of low foliage, end up with a mild concentration, then Turians eat them... and/or in modern times it gets stuffed in ration bars, added to vat protein, and sprinkled on dextro BlastoOhs? (Vetra does have a very large amount of cereal boxes in her room, and she's always in the know. Just sayin'.) Next could be absorption by their analogue of the small intestine, and transfer to a storage location (Bones? Liver?), then taken from there to plates as needed by specialized chaperone cells while growing or after injury. (Credit to my wonderful readers for frequently
helping me theory craft biology. Too much science? NEVER!

A/N/N:

Fanfic Recommendation: **Morbid Curiosity** (2786 words) by avesnongrata
(FemShep/Liara – Incredibly fucked up, very triggery, role playing that Liara is an Ardat Yakushi. Interesting though, really interesting. Caution advised.)
An abundance of new growth

Chapter Summary

Garrus loses control of his life: Phase 1.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mahir– (Plural: mahirin) female or crestless progeny. Equivalent to 'daughter'. May refer to a female, a short crested male, or a male effeminate in nature. (Credit: MizDirected, plus some Author-chan remixing.)

Pahir– (Plural: pahirin) male or crested progeny. Equivalent to 'son'. May refer to a male, a long crested female, or a female that is masculine in nature. (Credit: MizDirected, plus some Author-chan remixing.)

Signis – The executive office of each colony in the Turian Hierarchy. A building where the Primarch or designated ranking officer of that cluster can operate from. Generally, it is one of the strongest, most fortified buildings in any given area. Most are ancient, long-standing structures with storied histories. (Canon, with a bit of extrapolation.)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Patrem/matrula – TCD. The formal equivalent of 'father' and 'mother', rather than the less formal 'pari' and 'mari'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Avah - TCD. The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. An 'Avah' is the head of the whole clan or it's main branch if the clan is particularly big. A clan may be split up into different branches under the same name if it is legally/socially desirable to do so, and each will have an 'avah' (lowercase 'a') responsible for their branch clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with a little author-chan remix in there to make it more complicated.)

Furca - A dual tined spork of Turian origin. (Latin, basically means 'fork')

A/N: Good news duckies! After an explosion of writing during an authorly pow wow, most of the following mini arc is already done! I would estimate we've got about 3 or 4 chapters worth of story in the arc, coming out all this week. Crazy, right?!?! :D A big thank you goes out to Marie_Fanwriter, who literally put key to page for several thousand words of the upcoming stuff, and to DancesWithTurians for the beta read. A bucket of kudos to CristaldePhoenix as well for going back and forth with me about plot.

A/N: Be prepared for alllll the cultural stuff to go with all those lexicon entries... we're headed to Palaven!

Chapter Soundtrack: Chapter Soundtrack: Wicked Eyes & Wicked Hearts - Dragon
Shimmering blue fabric spilled from Aiesha's hips, interwoven and free flowing, the color of well-lit midnight. The cloth wound around her middle in a spiral, making it seem as if her waist went on for ages before the lot of it cumulated at one shoulder, pinned with the golden sigil of the spirit of Trebia. Tunic gown closely matched eyes, and eyes matched *familia notas*. Her last-minute accessories were the same, fringe edged with delicate metallic clips and thin wrists accentuated by dangling bracelets: all in the exact same pale peach hue as her plates.

The Blackwatch Agent’s attire was simple, but stunning.

Excessive as well, in her opinion. Aiesha had brought an acceptable tunic in muted purples with her from the Citadel, it would have done just fine. Better than fine, even, considering her current getup cost the equivalent of a month’s salary for the spy-turned-detective, or both salaries in her particular case. It was an expense she wouldn't have made on anything short of equipment upgrades, except that Vakar- that *Garrus* *matrula* had insisted on taking her 'shopping with the family', on their chit. Trying on elegant things she'd never splurge on for herself, from a designer shop that charged far too much, had been... interesting, at least.

The *filian*, Solana, had been there; the tarin from the vidcall which had prompted Garrus to ask for the unconventional backup request of being his date. That exchange of favors had included three vacation days covered on demand, and a month of morning kava deliveries. The sibling, whom Vaka-... whom *Garrus* fondly called ‘Sol’ was a reedy and wise-cracking attitude on legs. Tawny brown hands sat on her hipcrests more often than not as the thin tarin demanded the world turn for her.

Aiesha had marked Solana as a person of interest within ten minutes of meeting her. Normal people did not walk that quietly, nor casually stand outside of security camera lines of sight at all times. The ‘retired’ Blackwatch agent was quite cognizant that such a thing was *habit*.

The Senator-elect was also there, browsing through formal wear in colors that made him look older. More seasoned. His mate kept throwing fashionably handsome cuts at him with brighter colors and flattering lines, but the gruff male turned them all away in favor of looking even more serious than he already did.

Mrs. Vakarian had turned to Aiesha's partner next, shepherding the Detective toward equally becoming styles. The younger male had also gone for flat blues and pale golds, plain and formal stock. A stark contrast to the suspicious sibling who was practically swimming in the racks for the
The newest season’s collection lines. Her current pick was a yellow overcoat with excessive sleeves. The choice of ‘gold or silver’ accessories an off-and-on vitriolic debate with thin air.

Aiesha had politely stood to the side, not feeling she was in particular need of new clothing. The first little bit had been watching Garrus and his patrem somehow avoid even being in the same isle, then hiding amusement at seeing avah Vakarian hunt for her mahir, spot the tarin, lose her, find her again and start that way... only to give up when she lost her target once more before even halfway catching up.

*That* was when the older tarin’s fashion wrath had turned on her, a vivacious, charming smile in place. Attempting-to-be-cooperative victim in arm, the clan branch head had drawn her towards the holo displays for the latest ensembles of choice. Endless options had been available to be fabricated for same-day delivery with the shop’s stock of designer fabrics.

Aiesha had given reluctant but honest opinions on everything she’d been asked to trial, only pausing long enough to attempt a flirtatious sounding appreciation for Garrus’ choice: a sharp-cut tunic in navy blue, with darker hues inside the cowl and at the wrists; pale gold bands scattered around as accents on the hem and cuffs. He’d returned the flattery with drive-by snark and left her to his matrula’s mercy. That traitor.

They’d been in there for quite some time, and she hadn’t been allowed to pay for any of it.

Hence, why Aiesha Makasian was walking up the grand stone stairs to the *Prime Signis* of Palaven, looking like the socialite her dead father had always wanted her to be, on the arm of a senator’s son... and yet it was all a farce. She tried not to let the momentary melancholy reach her subovals.

‘*Look at me now, pari. Ha.*’

She topped the stairs on Garrus’ arm, ocean eyes focused forward to the massive doors of the executive building, bearing regal with half forgotten lessons from childhood tutors. Beside her, the normally warm and relaxed form of her C-Sec partner was stiff, his subvocals practically flat. Anyone in a few meter radius would know he was feeling *something*, and purposefully hiding it.

“*Va-...*” she started, but caught herself calling him by his last name yet again. Aiesha cleared her throat and tried once more, chastising herself for the beginner’s blunder. “Garrus... sweetheart?”

The stone grey torin tensed, head angling toward her, "...something wrong?"
“Breathe,” she reminded him.

The peach plated tarin could feel more than see his shoulders relax a fraction, but it was very clearly by intent and not even remotely genuine. Her gaze swept over the crowd lining the causeway, well wishers and reporters come to see the political elite celebrate their newest members. For all they knew, Aiesha was a picture perfect coreworlder with good clan upbringing. That crafted mirage was temporarily broken when she elbowed her fellow officer between camera flashes after he returned to being tense a whole ten seconds later.

“Garrus...”

“Damn, sorry. Can't help it. I don't... it's too open here.”

“It's arguably the safest building on the planet, at a high security event, in the middle of our people’s capitol city.”

“I can see the glints from scopes... there, see? That balcony to the-”

“Of course I see them, Vakarian. Really though, what are the chances of that scope belonging to someone who means you ill?”

Garrus shrugged a shoulder, physically acquiescing the point though his demeanor still spoke of worry. Aeisha forced herself to keep a neutral bearing as they moved forward, regardless of her mild concern at his behavior. The mountainous torin was wound up with worry, but over what? He had been like this long before they'd been exposed to the open sight lines of the causeway...

'Not worry for himself perhaps? His patrem then... or possibly the filian? Why, I wonder?'

Ocean eyes flicked to the fluttering orange silks of the sibling. The tarin was subtly packing, -and getting away with it-, as they walked toward the Signis. It narrowed down the thin female’s tier and position significantly. Aiesha amended her growing mental dossier on the other female.

“The security here is... mostly... phenomenal. I'm sure you can see that.”
“Sure.”

An exceptional non-answer. Makasian refrained from sighing, opting to click her tongue in mild reproach instead.

“At least stop squeezing my arm so hard?”

The mountainous torin's subvocals rolled, a quiet rumble of apology as his grip lessened to something more reasonable.

“Better. Now tell me who you're worried about and why.”

“That's... a long conversation.”

“Simplify it to target and hostile ID, you can elaborate later.”

“Alright... mari, herself. Pari, his contenders.”

'So not the filian... or perhaps the lack of worry for her might be it's own indication.'

Aiesha's talons clicked on the marble flooring as they stepped inside, her peach and gold ribboned sandals leaving trim claws on display. The room was massive, banners of every recognized colony draping the walls from floor to ceiling.

“Your matrula's issue is herself? Is she one to over consume or...?”

“Health issues,” he murmured, “would look bad for pari if she spaced out at this. Hate that it's true, but it is.”

“‘Spaced out’?” she inquired lightly, but the only reply was another half-shrug.
“Mari… mm. Remind me later. Not the time.”

“Of course. Later.”

The line of arriving attendees, largely Turian, streamed forward down the hallway, taking the guard-lined path past the room's centerpiece. The massive statue was of the very first Primarch after the Unification Wars. The figure was dressed in a theatric imitation of archaic garb, painstakingly carved in glossy white stone, forever set to looking impartially outward. The grand staircase behind it stretched three quarters of the room, and rose upward toward seven elaborate archways, open to the balcony that overlooked the senate's amphitheater. Either side of the balcony could be taken onward, through to another hallway on the far side, one filled with honored relics on angular pedestals.

The entire building was opulence and military grandeur, with carefully hidden security measures.

As expected from previous visits to the building, there were hidden turrets at every corner, folded into the floor or hidden in the walls, deployable en masse at the press of a button should any force attempt to storm the building. Suspicious lines in the stonework hid secret pathways which led to other places. There were at least two that lead to safe rooms, Aiesha could see the unlit but tell-tale biometrics panels that restricted access.

It was… decidedly odd visiting from a guest’s perspective, having always come in the past as a Blackwatch Operative visiting her higher ups. She half expected the place to be… different. Somehow. Yet it wasn’t.

Her ruminations were interrupted by Vakarian renewing his grip on her arm. She squeezed back, hoping to silently prompt him to relax. He... didn't notice.

“Arm .”

“Sorry. Sorry.”

Aiesha returned the apology with a reassuring hum as they made it to the event hall, a massive expanse as thoroughly decorated and defensible as the rest of the building. The lavish space was edged on either side by long tables in a elaborately arranged remake of every mess hall ever, albeit with only the outside having seating space.
Appropriate for the attendees, regardless.

Each Senator had of served years upon years in the military to be here, and very likely continued to serve in relevant posts elsewhere the rest of the time. It was fact that only the best leaders made it this high in tier, and their mates, plus ones, family, and various retinue were all assumed to be on similarly impressive paths. Uniformity was a virtue, and meeting expectations a requirement.

Thus, as an organized group they moved to the right side of the room, sliding onto the bench around the unassuming middle area where Vakarian’s parents had chosen to sit, herself coming last in the line of five. Garrus’ *matrula* was the first to break the silence.

“Oh look at the new dinnerware, it’s lovely! I wonder when they bought new sets?”

From two seats down, past the tarin’s mate, a yellow eyed male leaned over to smile at the avah, humming agreement. It took all of thirty seconds for the conversation to be dominated by talk of cutlery, the Senator silently listening to the engagement with an air of ‘pretending to be interested’, while Garrus gave his best impersonation of the statue from the main hall. The sibling, in a continued show of long suffering, sat between them and completely ignored the two, spending her time messaging with someone… another guest across the room that she waved at and gestured to between bursts of typing. The tarin’s missing date, she presumed.

Aeisha observed the scene for a several minutes before deciding that the behavior between *patrem* and *pahir* was decidedly tense, but also the status quo. More importantly, it was none of her business. Digging into family matters wasn't required on her reports to Pallin, and certainly not on her occasional details to HQ about Sparatus, and she respected her partner enough not to dig into his private life without due cause. An ongoing disagreement of sorts with his *patrem* fell under that umbrella, easily.

“I admit, the deeper shaped *furca* from my *amiala’s* set are my favorite. These newer kinds are aesthetically, pleasing -certainly-, but they’re just so shallow. Much more work to eat soups, and I adore a good bisque.”

The conversation continued holding on to the topic of dinnerware, so she turned to looking outward rather than try to talk shop with experts when she had no particular knowledge of *furca* styles.

Everyone was early, it seemed. All the benches were filled with at least a half an hour to go before the opening speech. Scattered throughout the tables there were six cluster Primarchs in attendance,
including Palaven's. Most long running senators as well, retired or otherwise, and a few often-seen faces from Turian politics... including Councilor Sparatus himself.

Aeisha made a mental note to avoid the Councilor entirely. She didn’t want to complicate her life as 'that ex-Blackwatch neighbor girl from C-Sec... who was involved in that one incident... who uses the gym at the same hours I do...', by also adding ‘the girlfriend of a Hierarchy Senator’s pahir’ to the list. There were really only so many ‘coincidences’ to be smiled at and smoothed over before she could expect to have her own watcher as well, and Aiesha had no desire to be on ST&R’s watch list. The tarin lived in... concern that she’d made that list already.

Quiet, pre-event chatter rose on the air all around, conversations on everything from separatists rumors to celebrity scandals. She sat and listened, but didn’t pick up much of interest before the room was quieting down and a speaker was rising up from their table to share words.

“Members of the Hierarchy, it is an honor to be here with you this day…”

The speech was a traditional one, with a few minimal adjustments to make it applicable to the occasion. Even so, the delivery plus a unique welcome to the first-time senators took the better part of an hour.

Aiesha expected more lip service throughout the night, most likely of the increasingly emotional and nationalist variety as milder alcohols were downed and soldiers became ever more passionate while tipsy. She supposed the pageantry and high moods were fair, as joining the twenty second tier was quite an honor. A senator once, you kept that tier for the rest of your days. Your clan never lost that status boost, and your family never lost the benefits.

The only ranks higher were Primarchs of the twenty third, or the one and only twenty fourth.

When the opening words finally ended the three brand new senators were called out to subvocal thrums of approval and well wishing. Immediately after, the buffet table opened up for edibles. Catering staff bustled over the grand spread, opening containers and removing lids, adding last minute touches and lighting candles. The scent of roasted meats hit the air, and she tried not to inhale for fear of making her stomach rumble.

She had high hopes that a good meal would help with how brittle Garrus seemed to be feeling. He was normally so hot headed and cocky… the difference was mildly disconcerting.
The beautiful agent-turned-detective looked to see if any of the others in their group were ready for food… but it appeared not.

She knew a good leader always took care of those under them first, and the social presumption was that the first comers to a meal were lower on the totem pole in some undefined way. The desire to not be at the table too soon warred with hunger, pride and consideration versus need.

Aiesha hadn't the slightest clue how humble or prideful her partner's branch of the Vakarian family was, so rather than embarrass anyone she simply sat in wait until one of the parents made a move. As it turned out, Castis Vakarian seemed to have a small excess of pride. The newly minted senator waited calmly for a fair portion of the room to serve themselves before rumbling a quiet tone of hunger. No few looks came their way for the presumption of waiting, but the older male was unbothered. Incredibly unbothered.

Senator Vakarian wasn’t the only one who waited a good long while, either.

Spirits bless the caterers, for there were thin mass effect fields and heat lamps preserving the freshness of the meal for the room of prideful high-tiers.

The multiple-times-undercover operative made use of the wait to case the room a bit more, though the purpose was something closer to conversation starters and less about habitual intelligence gathering. It wouldn’t do to look like her and Garrus barely spoke… perhaps for a single evening it could be dismissed, but the idea of not delivering a good act chafed slightly.

She was a professional, after all… and there must be something besides CSI and rifles that Garrus liked to talk about. The lovely tarin turned to her partner and attempted to figure out what.

"So… Garrus. Plans for next weekend?"

Chapter End Notes

03/02/2010 - Dalatrass Narra of Mannovai Undergoes Surgery

“Dalatrass Narra of the colony Mannovai underwent surgery to remove a stomach polyp today. The surgery lasted two hours, and the salarian matriarch is expected to return to her duties late tomorrow night. One of her personal doctors, Jiahe Urc, confirmed that
the polyp was benign and only noticeable due to a slight inflammation that had been causing the Dalatrass pain. Before the operation, Narra signed a letter transferring power to Vice-Dalatrass Husaru, since she would be under general anesthesia for the duration of the surgery.”

A/N: With the end of the AI news story I was scrolling through the archives and stumbled upon the above tidbit. It seems fairly bland at first glance, but a second look gives us a whole host of data about Salarians. They have second in commands, stomachs, and the word 'benign' hints at the existence of it's opposite 'cancerous'. I'm also amused that it was deemed necessary for a less than two day leave to have documents for temporary transfer of power made. Salarian politics must move /quick/.

A/N/N: Just to rehash some mind canon on the TCD and languages in general: I'm imagining that the Turian alphabet is glyph based, easy strokes that could be written with talons. Since much of their language is dual audio, I also assume the written version is a wild ride to read, where grammar is more about which words are emphasizing others rather than the article and preposition riddled grammar that is English. I also write that Turians have an ancient language 'Cartan', which I got from 'Whenever the Fancy Takes Me', author of Apocalypse Ascension (an excellent read), a modern language 'Palaveni', both of which technically include many of the core closed dialect words, and subvocals. There is also the Turian Trade tongue, and the Galactic Trade Language. While Cartan is for historians, and blips of formal phrasing (IE: the kariffratrus oath is said in Cartan), most Turians just speak Trade Tongue, and a swathe of Palaveni, then those who interact with other cultures sometimes pick up some of the GTL... but of course translators take whatever mishmash they speak, and churn out the coded version they pass on to their listen's translators. Right well, all that said, I believe the greater spirits, many of which who used to be called 'titans', all have their own unique glyphs straight from Cartan. Trebia, their star, is the Titan of Judgement and Honor, and is considered a great spirit. (But not a particularly nice one.) Aiesha's tunic pin Sigil of Trebia sits on her right shoulder at an angle, and looks like so: (One day, I might just break down and make up a Turian alphabet...)

A/N: Wow that was a lot of description and mental monologue for one chapter... It gets more exciting here shortly, I promise.

Fanfic Recommendation: For the Hierarchy (81365 words) by Tuffet37 (You want some left field to mix it up? This is a good one. :D )
When it runs on fumes

Chapter Summary

Garrus loses control of his life, Phase 2.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Mahir– (Plural: mahirin) female or crestless progeny. Equivalent to 'daughter'. May refer to a female, a short crested male, or a male effeminate in nature. (Credit: MizDirected, plus some Author-chan remixing.)

Pahir– (Plural: pahirin) male or crested progeny. Equivalent to 'son'. May refer to a male, a long crested female, or a female that is masculine in nature. (Credit: MizDirected, plus some Author-chan remixing.)

Signis – The executive office of each colony in the Turian Hierarchy. A building where the Primarch or designated ranking officer of that cluster can operate from. Generally, it is one of the strongest, most fortified buildings in any given area. Most are ancient, long-standing structures with storied histories. (Canon, with a bit of extrapolation.)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Patrem/matrula – TCD. The formal equivalent of 'father' and 'mother', rather than the less formal 'pari' and 'mari'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Avah - TCD. The female leader of a traditional Turian Clan. An 'Avah' is the head of the whole clan or it's main branch if the clan is particularly big. A clan may be split up into different branches under the same name if it is legally/socially desirable to do so, and each will have an 'avah' (lowercase 'a') responsible for their branch clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with a little author-chan remix in there to make it more complicated.)

Miel - A sweet dipping sauce for meats. (Credit: AceQueenKing)

Mimmit - A Soft pita-pocket, usually filled with edible leaf vegetables and creamy sauce. (Mindcanon)

Sal - A popular spice used in Turian colonial cooking. (Credit: AceQueenKing)

Aspera - A difficult to raise fish from Palaven, with a heady, enticing smell when cooked. Generally a very expensive meal, but popular for the savory flavor and thick meat. Less flakey, the filet minion of fish. Occasionally served with a line of the brightly colored scaling of the tail still attached. (Mindcanon)

Uklatia - A common Turian table wine that pairs well with many things. (Credit: CDN forums.)
A/N: Last call on credits and lexicon entries for 'Avah' and 'avah'. I think you all get the gist. :P

A/N/N: Well fuck... I was just going to post one (1) chapter tonight, and then save the next as a draft and post in a day or two... whoops. >_< My hand went straight for the 'post now' button instead... and I am not sure how to unpost without just deleting it. Um. Yay two new chapters! >_>

Chapter Soundtrack:

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the group of five eventually moved toward the end of the buffet line for edibles, Senator Vakarian was at the rear, as was proper. Just ahead of Aeisha, Mrs. Vakarian began laughing in a cheerful trill at something her mahir had said too quietly to hear. They hit the beginning of the line and picked up clean top-plates, and she leaned to the side a bit to see around them in a subtle attempt to get a better look at the spread of unveiled food now on display.

As expected, it appeared to be a mouthwatering spread of tender roasts and fragrant seafood, edged by a few vegetables for color and breads for framing. The miel sauce caught her eye, a more purple hue than the common brown, likely meant to make a cut of meat appear more raw than it was. A facade to appeal to appetite, perhaps, but it smelled divine. There were miniature mimmet pockets as well, stuffed with tiny cuts of rich red meat, and aspera filets from the coast, drizzled in thickened sal.

They made it most of the way through the line with her date’s plate displaying nothing but a few finger foods on it courtesy of Mrs. Vakarian’s insistence he try this-or-that. She considered feeling guilty that her own was a colorful display with a bit of everything. A single mimmet was preemptively secreted away into her mouth, making the very professional, very polite tarin have to resist moaning inappropriately as they neared the drink table.

‘Being guilty would be an utter disservice to the chefs,’ she decided firmly.

The peach plated tarin was just starting to enjoy herself, when the game decided to change. Beside her, Garrus swore under his breath; subvocals letting out the very first half-note of panic before dropping to a dead silence.

“What is it?” Aeisha asked as conversationally as possible around a second bite of mimmet. She swallowed more quickly than the food deserved, and turned to focus on him. The mountainous torin had visibly paled, the thinner hide of his neck tilting toward a sickly, yellowed color.
He’d been doing so much better since the speeches had finished, but whatever he had seen just now had set him off even worse than before. Ocean eyes scanned the room slowly, searching for a potential source. She hummed as a likely target came into view, dark carmine plates framed in pure white formals and heading straight for them.

If her partner had been stiff before? He was made of stone now.

“I should, uh...“

“Garrus... calm."

He might have done so, if not for his filian deciding that precisely now was the perfect time to turn around and consider another few bits from the buffet for her own plate. She took one look at Garrus, eyes narrowing, and turned a whip fast look around the room.

Not a moment later, her subvocal flattened dangerously.


“I didn’t. I don’t...”

Viviene was next to join the party as they shifted with the line, coming flush with the wine table. The avah smiled brightly as she stole one of her suggestions from her pahir’s plate.

“Solana dear, don’t be so hard on him.”

The tarin’s gaze shifted, her head following behind the turn of her eyes as she refocused on her matrula in deceptively calm shift of attention.

“Mari, you did not.”
The avah’s charming smile grew deeper as she caught the young Spectre’s attention with an elegant toast of her stone-and-crystal wine glass.

Garrus was… not breathing. Makasian looked from the elder torin to the younger, then to the smartly dressed Turian crossing the room. Immediately she’d recognized him as the same one from all those months ago in Garrus’ apartment, when he’d gone missing on a case. A few stray facts aligned, and suddenly an array of details clicked into place.

Instinct advised her to politely dip from the situation. It did seem to be a family matter…

“I think I see someone…” she began, but was cut off and held in place by an impressive grip on her arm.

“You are *not* leaving me,” her partner whispered harshly, somewhere between desperation and demand.

Well… she did get daily kava delivery out of this… *regardless* of if it went well… a little awkwardness was worth the reward. Probably. Supportively, Aiesha stood there and watched the skycar wreck begin to unfold.

The Spectre greeted Vivienne first, as was customary. Followed by her daughter, and a date who had just arrived at her side from his initial place with his own family during the opening speech. The tall torin turned to greet her as well, turning to Vakarian last of all.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he nearly purred.

It… didn’t help.

“Nihlus. I…”

The torin on her arm appeared tongue tied and vaguely panicked. Not seeing a way around it, the undercover Blackwatch agent stepped in. “Spectre, how nice to see you again.”

The mountainous sniper’s head whipped around to look at her.
“Again?!”

She smiled mildly, “I must have forgotten to mention it.”

“Come on Blue,” Nihlus looked a bit dismayed. “It isn’t bad that I’m here, is it? I... I can leave?”

Garrus dropped his date’s arm, floating a half step closer to the newcomer on autopilot.

“No, no… Not bad. Never bad. Just... unexpected. How did you...?”

“I invited him and your other friend dear,” Vivienne explained as she gestured aside at the other Council Agent in question with the edge of her dinner plate. “Although, the Arterius name would have gotten him in without my interference if he’d so wished...”

Garrus turned slowly, as if making time to beg the spirit’s mercy… his falling expression answering the question of the results. Aiesha leaned back slightly to see around his carapace, and surely enough, the Citadel Council’s golden child was in polite talks with Sparatus and his bondmate.

She tuned back into the conversation in time to catch Garrus humming at his matrula with a rather pathetic, betrayed tone. Something more was going on here than she knew. If the two were friends, why were they worried about Spectre Kryik being here? Never mind how coldly furious Solana looked.

Garrus was stressed about their presence, and not hiding it well. The Council Agent himself had relaxed a bare smidgen at the effusive welcome, but seemed decidedly unsure of himself.

‘Curiouser and curiouser.’

“Mari, when… when exactly did you invite them?”

The branch avah hummed, gaze shifting away to peruse the wine selection.
“Months ago, darling.”

Garrus gave the Spectre a look, making the other torin shrink back a little with a poor attempt at a winsome smile.

“....surprise?”

The stewing sibling finally deigned to speak, her words nearly a growl in her throat.

“Pari is going to end you.”

Their matrula tsked, clicking her tongue as she picked out a light yellow uklatia before the line shifted again, leaving them at the very end of the buffet. “Well, he does need to meet them-”

Solana cut in, “No, he does not. Ever. What in the spirit’s names were you thinking mari?”

As the argument went back and forth, Aiesha double checked the status of the other parties in question. While Senator Vakarian appeared to be past the line and done, talking to another politician, the other Spectre looked to be nodding farewell to Mrs. Sparatus and heading their way.

This was about to get… messy, perhaps, was the right word. The ‘whys’ were still unclear, but the ‘what’ of Garrus’ renewed nerves was crystal. There was bad blood of some sort between their patrem and the two Spectres. A disagreement that Mrs. Vakarian didn’t care to allow to continue undiscussed.

Something that Solana vehemently did not agree on.

The ‘retired’ Blackwatch agent lamented that her previous missions had nothing to do with any of the individuals involved, and thus she had no intel to gain perspective from. Aiesha remained perplexed as to the nature of the conflict, considering that a working relationship between high tier individuals and Spectres would seem… per the norm, really. Only the best were tagged for the ST&R pre-selection program, and a patron of sorts was one of many ways to get a little help making it there.
The two tarin went back and forth, Solana’s date looking mildly concerned as she became increasingly more passionate about the reasons why their father should never know that Garrus was spending time with Spectres. Her eyes met the baffled, violet gaze of the younger tarin’s date. The shorter male spared her a quick flash of confused, slightly awkward smile that she returned as the conversation beside them fanned down to a quiet lull, heavy with displeasure.

Just when Aiesha thought the two tarin might be ready to accept reality and work with what was rather than debate the necessity of it, disaster struck again. Senator Vakarian stepped into their circle, the seasoned investigator eyeing the unknown torin with a keen interest.

“Senator Vakarian, congratulations,” the Spectre greeted in flawless Cartan, his right hand closing to a fist and tapping his opposing shoulder in a crisp salute. “Pleased to meet you. Nihlus Kryik, a friend of your pahir’s.”

He omitted the rank, but she could tell that the name was recognized.

“Spectre Kryik?” Senator Vakarian asked lightly, subvocals calm and looking every bit the consummate politician.

“The same, sir.”

“I was unaware my pahir associated with Spectres.”

The rumbling torin’s words were deceptively mild. She could hear the edge of disapproval, but it wasn’t quite voiced. An air of judgement hung around the Senator, hinting that Kryik wasn’t passing some unknowable muster. The long limbed torin took it in stride, a friendly smile his only reply.

Suddenly it clicked. The Spectres’ arrival had been timed. Too late for the opening speech, but a meeting amid the crowds of his own dinner of honor, as a shield for this… troubled dynamic. No warning until introductions were already happening, even. All parties involved had been neatly put in place by the tarin who supposedly had issues retaining focus, currently sipping at the gilded rim of her wine glass, eyes sparkling.

Aiesha almost wanted to slow clap. Manipulating Detectives, Senators, and Spectres all in one go? Masterful.
“I…” Garrus began hesitantly.

With flawless timing, Saren Arterius stepped up to the group, pitch black formal wear making his plates seem even paler, an unknown torin with orange eyes at his side.

“There you are, avah Vakarian,” he said smoothly as he arrived at her side, silver-grey crest inclining in greeting toward the group at large.

“Senator Vakarian,” the unknown male drawled slowly, his _Cartan_ not as pure as the others but refined enough to be passable. “Congratulations on your appointment. It was well earned.”

The well wishing was joined by a smooth hum of subvocal congratulations from his silver-grey companion. The Senator visibly bristled, chin dipping slightly to cover his throat. The distrust was kept out of subvocals, but recognition and hostility couldn’t have been more clear.

“Spectre Arterius.”

‘... There was an impressive amount of not-hate loaded into those six syllables.’

“I see you have met my first protégé. This is my second, Avitus Rix,” he gestured with a graceful flare of talons that showed off his natural weapons, but also exposed the thin hide of his wrist while introducing the lower tiered party first. All of it purposefully done. “Might you introduce the rest of your family?”

Begrudgingly, and after a too-long pause, the former C-Sec Sergeant gestured to the eldest tarin. “My mate, Vivienne. My _mahir_ Solana, with her date, Macen Barro. My _pahir_, Garrus, and his date, Aeisha Makasian… though it seems your protégé knows my _pahir_. I might guess that you do also?”

“Correct,” Saren confirmed with a slight nod, eyes shifting to her. “Though I have met his partner as well. Detective.”

“Spectre,” she replied smoothly.

Electric eyes turned to her ‘date’, searching him over at a glance.
“Garrus, I trust you have been well?”

Aiesha stopped herself from blinking rapidly. He *should* have said 'Detective', or at the very least 'Vakarian'. The distinct use of first name in warm tones instead was... telling. Bold. Omitting rank would have been appropriate for those you knew, but a first name spoken with warm subvocals implied... so much more.

“I’m fine, Saren.” Garrus replied in a dazed voice, looking wholly uncomfortable.

The Spectre gave him a look as if to say, ‘*really.*’

“Just... wasn’t expecting you.”

Nihlus took a step closer, stealing an appetizer from the nervous torin’s plate. Innocent yet entirely presumptuous. Familiar.

Aiesha got the sense that the Senator almost broke then, only calmed by his mate’s cheek ridge come to rest on his shoulder in a soothing move just as well timed as everything else.

Charged silence reigned for a frozen moment before the branch avah broke the tension. She spoke with grace, steering the conversation along safer topics for the better part of ten minutes. As Viviene carried on, even Garrus seemed to drop a bit of rigidity from his shoulders, coughing a laugh as the brunt of one of his mari’s jokes. The peach toned tarin considered the nearby wine table as the conversation continued. Oddly enough, the avah had turned the moment around with charming wit and a bit of guile... making the young Detective truly unsure what Vakarian had meant about her mental health. The vivacious tarin seemed to possess a very sound mind.

As the conversation wound down, Spectre Arterius offered a gracious out to the semi-hostile male.

“I’m sure there are others you must attend to, Senator?”

“You are not wrong.”
Seeing that the conversation was drawing to a close, Kryik added his two credits with a wide smile.

“It was lovely to see you again Ms Vakarian.” That raised a few browplates but everyone was polite enough to leave the comment alone this close to the finish line. The green eyed torin’s purpose for moving to address the friendlier party soon became clear. His next words were a request of sorts. “Would you mind terribly if we borrowed your pahir for a little while?”

“Of course not. See you in a while, mmm? Enjoy the evening.”

The green eyed Spectre nodded with a polite tilt of crest, stepping back and looking to see if Garrus followed. He was the picture of Turian high society, despite his colonial markings; the medals on his chest gleaming in the ballroom light.

Briefly bushing temples with his mari, Garrus made to follow the two Spectres as they wandered off into the crowd. Something aggressive in the way he walked.

The ‘retired’ Blackwatch agent wondered if she should be keeping track of the number of times Castis Vakarian’s jaw had tightened over the past ten minutes at the subtle words of familiarity or endearment between the Spectres and his family. The count was surely in the teens. Aiesha looked around the dispersing circle and caught sight of Senator Vakarian and his mate shuffling themselves away from the group and into an alcove, beginning to speak in lowered voices with suppressed subvocals.

‘Hmmm… that doesn’t bode well.’

Deciding that this would be the perfect time to make her escape as well, she made to turn toward the restrooms... only to be stopped by the remaining Vakarian sibling, a deceptively strong vicegrip on the other arm. “Oh no you don’t,” the sharp eyed tarin rumbled in her ear. “You are not leaving me alone either.”

The peach toned faux-date smiled thinly, wondering not for the first time why she had agreed to come at all. A month’s worth of morning kava didn’t seem like enough anymore... perhaps she’d request two.

“... As you wish.”
The fiery tarin took her, -and her poor date-, by the arms, and led the three of them toward the nearest balcony with purpose.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Did Macen Barro and Avitus Rix just pass by one another without having a chance to speak so much as a single word to each other? Why yes. Yes they did. :3

Fanfic Recommendation: The Inquiry (2929 words) by Marie_Fanwriter (The inquest after The Battle of the Citadel involves Spectre Rix being called in for questioning about his former mentor… but also, read that and tell me ‘VV’ isn’t the the best fucking thing you’ve heard all week. Not as dark as it sounds, part of a series, some Macen included!)
Chapter Summary

Garrus loses control of his life, Phase 3.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Tectumque - TCD. Shorthand: ‘tectum’. Any semi-private area where a Turian can find personal space, generally a small room or alcove. (See codex entry for further details. Originally Latin for ‘shelter’.)

Pahir– (Plural: pahirin) male or crested progeny. Equivalent to 'son'. May refer to a male, a long crested female, or a female that is masculine in nature. (Credit: MizDirected, plus some Author-chan remixing.)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Patrem/matrula – TCD. The formal equivalent of 'father' and 'mother', rather than the less formal 'pari' and 'mari'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Caris - TCD for 'Beloved', 'Precious', or ' Cherished'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Derra - TCD. Affectionate term for one’s bondmate, usually for females or someone who is effeminate. (Credit: MizDirected)

Karifratrus - A Turian oath of brotherhood/sisterhood, not describing blood relations, but verbal promises as close as family that last a lifetime. The prefix ‘kari’ is amended to relationships that are built or born from this bond. (Credit: MizDirected)

A/N: Last call for Mahir/Pahir and Matrula/Patrem lexicon entries. :)

Chapter Soundtrack: Spark by Digital Daggers

There's a hollow in my chest, 
Where the pride is striping, 
All I'm trying to forget, 
Wish it would reside again.

There's a weight on my soul, 
I can feel it sinking in, 
It's a love I cannot hold, 
It's a love I cannot win.

I need a quick fix, 
Tell me you can cure this,
Come into my arms and make everything alright.

Chase you deep into the unknown,
In my dark, in my dark, you're the spark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His karifraten was unacceptably quiet, and thus, Saren decided they needed somewhere to talk. The Spectre felt he could not solve a problem without first being able to ask questions about it… unless scorched earth tactics were acceptable.

In this case, he did not wish to employ them.

The silver-grey torin strode through the dinner crowd as if he owned the place, an old trick he had learned from his brother on making people get out of your way. A crowd observed confidence, a few moved, more saw others parting way for you, assumed there was a reason you were made way for without thinking about it, and then did the same.

It pleased him that he could get away with it in a room full of Primarchs and Senators. While their assumptions were not precisely wrong, -as he could and would destroy any of them if galactic stability required-, it was still a bit of a stretch that such high tier individuals made way for him…

‘...and yet, the trick still works, brother. ‘Walk like they are meant to move for you, and they will.’ ’

A fair handful of social intricacies had always eluded him, but respect for the bold was straightforward enough. Desolas had rarely needed to coach him on the facets of respect, in general.

‘But what to do about this… agitation that Garrus is displaying?’

The stoic Spectre’s current target was the lavatory, where if memory served correctly there would be a handful of tectum. A quiet place for tempers to cool after a senate, private conversations to be had, or friends to meet for sex when they were exhausted from politicking.

It did not take long for the four torin to reach the restrooms. As expected, the formal hall offered several of the ensuites he had in mind; little areas with couches and kava tables, cool drinks and pacing space. As they entered the main chamber he made a half formed gesture toward Rix; intending to ask the torin to wait outside for a moment so Nihlus and he could speak with Garrus in private. The pale torin beat him to it though, stepping aside to sit down in an alcove, arms crossed and leaning back. Within five seconds the older male was eyes-closed and slouched as if sleeping… only the live biometric data streaming to his optics revealing the truth.

Saren paused, then hummed a quiet tone of appreciation before striding into one of the rooms.

Footsteps followed him inside. As the door slid shut he turned around to find Garrus had begun locking it with what appeared to be a personal encryption code: a delightfully complex looking piece that he immediately wanted a copy of. Though… now was perhaps not the time to ask. When the room was secure the other torin spun around, subvocals erupting like an over boiled pot. Anger and pain in every line of his body, seven feet of Turian stared him down.

For all the emotion in his demeanor, the sniper did not yet speak, looking overwhelmed. Thinking to give him time to calm down, Saren began to scan the room for listening devices or anomalies. There were two, both of which he destroyed before turning back to the smoldering detective.
“The room is clear,” he announced as a tentative breach of the silence. It only made his oath-brother’s hackles rise. Two steps forward were taken, a hand flung out in a wild gesture.

“But your heads obviously aren’t!”

“Pardon?”

Garrus reeled away, a palm pressed to his eyes. “What possessed you to just waltz up to my patrem, today of all days?”

“Garrus-” Saren tried.

“No. I might have expected this from Nihlus, but you, Saren? You know what these people are like. How much fallout this could cause. Why would you do this?”

The unsaid ’to me’ hung in the air with the weight of perceived betrayal. With honest, aching hurt.

Saren stood his ground before the mountainous torin’s anger, even though his stomach had begun to sink; expression calm as he tried to find the correct words to smooth things over.

The stoic Spectre had received a personal invitation to attend from avah Vakarian, and had thought it to be an excellent place to test Rix’s skill set. He was more than aware that Senator Vakarian’s experiences as a leader in C-Sec’s Investigations Bureau had included more than a few contested claims over whom had the right to certain evidence and crime scene access. Yet, surely there was hope of also smoothing over the not so distant past if the torin’s mate was willing to arbitrate?

"Your progenitor is part of why we came..."

"Pari is... he’s... ten times the detective I am. Just a few questions, a look, a stray thread... He’ll figure out everything~"

Garrus broke off, emotions choking him into wordlessness again. Saren opened his mouth to speak, but found himself uncertain where to start, or what precisely to say. He had planned the interaction with care, could the other torin not see that? The courier delivered letter had made it clear that Viviene Vakarian was aware of the complications, but was looking to improve the situation for her pahir’s sake

Saren had felt the desire to... be the other half of that bridge. He had though the brief meeting went well...

Nihlus came in from the side, a hand settling tentatively on Garrus’ shoulder as the two of them continued to stare each other down: glacial steel to electric glow.

“Blue...” the younger Spectre began, but the low, apologetic tone cut off when he saw the roiling anger of Garrus’ expression turned on him, looking every bit the intimidating apex predator that he was. Saren could immediately tell it was not a face the torin had ever seen, or expected to be on the receiving end of.

Light brown throat bobbed nervously as Nihlus swallowed the rest of the words. Garrus recoiled suddenly from the space, pulling away with his subvocals now even more a mess; turned sharp with regret and choppy from the pain.

“Spirits and Titans, tell me, what were you two thinking? You know he hates Spectres, we’ve talked about it at length! You think it’s a good idea to just... just show up tonight, at a ceremony to honor his promotion, and then casually throw our relationship in his face? ‘Yes, hello, we’re your pahir’s
best friends. We just happen to be the thing you hate the most in all of time and space! Also, your bondmate is subverting you by consorting with us. By the way, congratulations!’ ”

Their sniper made a sound of deeply distressed aggravation; planting a palm against the wall and leaning into it for support.

Saren blinked, ever more uncertain where to start. Was not their coming to the ceremony to honor the newly made Senator a peace offering? They had introduced themselves honestly, as Spectres, and lightly, as ‘friends’... which honestly was a pale version of the truth. He could not have been more vague without outright lying. Not to mention that it had also been avah Vakarian’s choice to attempt subversion of her mate’s will. How could the blame for such be any fault of theirs?

The stoic Spectre was considering voicing these things, which he though to be so obvious, for lack of anywhere else to start when his karifraten rose from the wall, starting to pace the small space with his shoulders in a rigid line.

“Months. It’s been months since I’ve seen either of you. You barely have time to message, but suddenly you can just... show up on Palaven?”

The rage had simmered down, more of the hurt showing through. Garrus seemed to feel... neglected. Saren’s gaze lowered to the floor. It was not entirely an unfair position, but it was also a truth that would never change. They were Spectres, their concerns were many. The detective himself had a host of responsibilities. All sides of the equation were constantly busy.

Garrus’ agitated pacing stopped, and he turned to face the Spectres, expression somewhere between crestfallen and disbelieving.

“You didn't even tell me you were coming. Why?? With fair warning I c-could have-” his voice broke again over the words.

Nihlus backpedaled, thighs hitting the lounge in the corner where he fell in a slump. The green eyed agent looked wretched, mandibles pulled tight to his face, subvocals on the brink of keening. Saren swallowed lightly, growing more distressed himself, trying to quickly figure out what to do before this spiraled any further.

The yelling and the distress was all very… much.

He had not anticipated such a response, nor prepared a counter for it. Neither angering nor hurting Garrus had been his intent. A pleasant surprise visit. A brief meeting with his family. A well meaning gesture...

The silver-grey torin had expected happiness, or relief, perhaps some anxiety, but not this.

He glanced to Nihlus, who usually had a natural grace for social situations and an easy smile to soothe those in distress, but it was obvious that the younger male was unable to summon his usual mien. As much in distress as Garrus himself. They were all...

Nothing was going according to plan.

‘I... I will fix this.’

Saren started brainstorming as Garrus' frustrated pacing began again, one hand pawing at the location where his visor should have been, the habit of reaching for it in times of crisis an ingrained habit within his sniper’s psyche. The tool was...
Comfort. He needed to comfort their sniper... but how?

For some reason, his mind came back with ‘what would Garrus do?’ Logical. His karifraten was a natural. The other male would generally approach... his target... slowly, attempt some form of touch, increase the magnitude of the touch as was comfortable, and hum soothingly. Small gifts were a frequent tactic. Bits of food. A blanket. Warm drinks.

These were things he could do, more or less, though food and drink were already available with ease.

'No matter, the physical contact side of it is the most critical maneuver.'

The question now was the kind of touch and appropriate magnitude. Which, for Garrus, was likely the most intimate and intense level they had shared to date, or as much of it as he could handle.

'That would be...'

His greybox immediately offered an ordered list of memories relevant to the location in his natural mind that flared with activity at the thought. His throat flushed accordingly.

'Not... that. Perhaps an exchange of lesser actions...'

Saren huffed, realizing he was about to share reverie to calm the other torin, like stressed teenagers in an action vid. Ridiculous, but...

'I will fix this.'

Action decided, he crossed the small space to stand in the taller torin’s path. Vakarian came up on him, stuttering to a stop in confusion only to be walked backwards. Caught between the Spectre and the wall.

“Saren? What are y-”

The Vakarian scion was stopped by mouthplates on his own. The surprised *mrmph* noise could have been anything, but Saren was committed to the attempt and did not pull away. Distantly, he could hear Nihlus make a strangled sound of disbelief.

While Garrus did nothing more than take an uncertain hold of his upper arms, Saren’s engaged to the best of his ability; one hand on the back of stone-grey spinal plates, pulling down to improve the angle. His other grip was bracing their positions by holding on to lean, cloth covered hip crest.

Slowly, the Detective began to relax into him, shoulders releasing tension as reverie hit his bloodstream. Garrus’ hands rose from their uncertain perch, fumbling for his shoulders. The initial noise of surprise mellowed and stretched, transforming into a wavering keen and a soft moan.

Saren kept up the attempt, wanting to be sure he was thorough in calming Garrus down, and perhaps a bit for the way the return reverie was smoothing out his own stress levels. The grip on his shoulders shifted again; one hand to his lower back, the other to the base of one of his zygomatic horns, cupping his cheekridge. He allowed it.

‘Good… that is it… relax, Garrus.’

After a good few minutes of gentle give and take between tongues he let up, needing… space. Breath, empty of another’s smell. The thought made him scent the air, and he blinked at how
decidedly good the sniper smelled. Shaking off the strange preoccupation, electric eyes rose to meet a clouded darker blue.

He coughed to clear his throat, and attempted to hum a soothing tone, a bit belatedly.

A disbelieving chuff escaped from the officer, shaking his head even as his face tilted toward the ceiling, brows turning up.

“You...”

“Hnn?”

“Why did you...?”

“I was attempting to duplicate your methods for calming... others.”

Garrus snorted without otherwise moving. Saren began to consider how to escape the hold on his back without causing further distress. Without warning, there was a tall, carmine form jostling their position. The mountainous sniper’s neck reversed out of his throat-baring recline, but not fast enough to avoid Nihlus’ tongue, coming in to lick his way up the muscle.

“Ahh- Nih-” was all Garrus got out before said tongue turned to delving his mouth, slipping between the points of his mouthplates. Saren watched the half second of resistance fall apart, their tongues coiling together as low moans rose into the air.

His throat felt warm.

A second hand joined the one on his back, prompting the biotic to half-turn to look that way. It was a trap, of course. Nihlus turned for him next, a wet lick drawing along his mandible the only warning before the flavor of rapidly high-spiraling reverie and Nihlus’ own taste hit his tongue. He made a quiet sound of complaint, but refrained from pulling away, seeing as Garrus’ subvocals were finally tapering down from stressed to peaceable.

He supposed the biological cheat for stress reduction was… convenient, at least. He shrugged his shoulders though, trying to slip away. This was getting to be too much. He backed off a half step, breath slightly uneven, and moved back to a more reasonable but personable distance. Now, while tempers were cool, was the time to layout his reasoning.

“It was not our intention to anger or distress you, Garrus. The topic of our relationship as karifraten has to be broached at some point, even if we never reveal more than that. It is better if we are known as friends for some time beforehand. If anything should happen to me there would be no hiding the legal proceedings. Further, you are involved with our work too often. I am certain your patrem would learn of us, one way or another. Best that it is done on a good night, to establish a connection between pleasant evenings and our presence, and with luck our attendance will be seen as a sign of respect rather than intrusion.”

“You... you put some thought into this.”

Saren nodded once, slowly. “Of course. The outcome is important.”

Garrus released a soft sigh. “My relationship with pari has always been... we just... really don’t get along. Your coming here fanned the flames, even if it was the smallest gust possible. Mari will have calmed him down some but… he’s not going to let it go. He never lets any damn thing go...”

The forlorn turn of voice inspired Saren to approach again, closely enough to set gentle fingertips on
his sniper’s mandible.

“I fully expected success to be a trial and error process requiring repeated attempts at peacemaking. I have faith that honest effort will win out against discordance, in time.”

Blue painted mandibles fluttered weakly, the edge of hope threading through subvocals as Nihlus nosed at the other torin’s temple, sweetly concerned. Garrus closed his eyes, holding still between the points of contact.

“I’m sorry I yelled.”

Nihlus’ voice rolled out in an adoring, deep bass. “S’ok Blue.”

Stony grey crest shook slightly in a negative, “It isn’t. It’s been months since I’ve seen you both, and a lot of stress hit me at once, and…”

“You are forgiven,” Saren cut in smoothly.

The mountainous torin’s eyes opened, a faint smile edging in on his weary expression.

“The Citadel’s a lot less interesting without you two around.”

“The absence of your presence on our recent mission roster was noticed as well. Even Tio’fore inquired about your well being in passing.”

“That base crashing mission’s coming up soon,” Nihlus interjected with an encouraging try at a grin. “Just hang on a little longer, yeah? We’ll have a bunch of time, before and after hitting the base…” Green eyes shifted to him. “… and maybe Saren could bring Rix?”

The electric eyed agent huffed, withdrawing again and crossing his arms. “To a politically sensitive raid outside of Council Space on a major nexus of smuggling and slave trade?”

“It’s a big place, and I need someone to carry the explosives. I seem to remember that when I was in training…”

Saren narrowed his eyes at his protégé, the younger male simply cutting off with a smirk.

“Trying out Saren’s total reprisal style for yourself, Palvi?”

“Sure, why not? These fuckers deserve it.”

“Language, Nihlus.”

The subvocal hum of apology from his protégé was rather lacking in sincerity, but the quiet snicker from Garrus made it easier to let it go.

"Come, both of you. There is a buffet table to be perused, and countless opportunities among the crowd."

"Vivienne …” Castis began in weighted tone.
She took his hand, ignoring the troubled rumble edging his subvocals and pulling them towards a nearby alcove. “Not here, love.”

“What was—”

“Patience~” she sung in a light voice, her fingers gripping his with a hint of demand.

The newly appointed Senator clenched his jaw to keep from growling, allowing himself to be lead to an unoccupied nook. His bondmate spun about when they arrived, purposefully facing him away from the room at large, her own expression decidedly cheerful. She leaned in to press her crest to his own, hands settling on his keel ridge. The affection of it took the edge off his aggravation. He exhaled, holding his peace until he felt the tightness in his shoulders loosen, words drifting out only loud enough to be heard by the two of them.

“You knew?”

“Of course.”

“You planned it.”

“Correct.”

“Derra, I love you.”

“I hear a but in there.”

“You may honestly be the death of me.”

“I won’t be.”

“Our pahir and Spectres?” Castis tried to keep the vehemence out of his voice, he truly did, but he felt very strongly on the matter. Years of bad experiences making for emotions that weren’t easily repressed.

“Garrus and his Spectes.” She hummed warmly, correcting him. “Breathe, love.”

He let out a breath. “What do you mean his?”

“This really should wait until later, caris. I don’t suppose...?” The tight pull of his mandibles inwards was enough for her to know that no, later was not an option.

“Consider this, hmmm? You raised him to honor justice, to serve others, to be clever and cautious, did you not?”

“I tried.”

The soft look in Viv’s eyes made him close his own. He had tried very hard to teach his offspring all that they needed to know of life. To mold them into exemplary individuals before they’d left his reach, stepping onto the transport to basic training at fifteen.

“Yes, you did, love. You did your very best, by all accounts. Our pahir is just as hard working and intelligent as we could have hoped for.”

“Mmmn… too smart for his own good, sometimes.”
“Sounds like someone else I know.” She smiled at him, a coy, adoring sort of grin. He told his soft heart to shush, now wasn’t the time to be distracted by their bond.

“Vivienne, I won’t have him consorting with that type. He saw more of the dark side of people during his years with the Hastatim than I ever wanted him to. He’s got decades of detective work ahead of him, and that wears on the spirit like nothing else. They can’t be good for him, never mind the atrocities and backroom politics that Spectres are involved in.”

“But what good could it do, for C-Sec and the Council’s black-ops, to have a direct line of friendly communication? How many of those stories you told me are because none of your people knew any of theirs?”

“I don't like it.”

She leaned back from his near-hiss, finger passing over his crest before smoothing out the already flat lines of his tunic.

“I could give you a thousand arguments about this caris, but truly, it is a topic for home, is it not? Let’s enjoy the evening, and discuss it later. Tonight should be about you. I’m so proud of you.”

His bondmate smiled at him again, and the big, beautiful expression pulled hard on his heart.

He let the matter drop... for now.

Chapter End Notes

[Author’s Codex: Tectum]
Tectumque, or the shorthand ‘tectum’, can be anything from a well supplied ensuite to a quiet nook in a garden; any private or semi-private space where a Turian can find spontaneous personal space. Uses range from a safe place to cry without setting others off with one’s keening subvocals, to a convenient spot for intercourse. A culturally significant term, common enough that those who work with Turians often learn it by exposure. Tectumque are scattered throughout any structure of Turian design, even places like malls and dance clubs, usually near entry ways or restrooms. Other species are often finding Turians in odd spaces for lack of built-in tectumque, such as closets, crawl spaces, and maintenance rooms.

02/27/2010 - Transworld 1 Opens Its Doors on the Planet Kosh
“Transworld 1 opened its doors for the first time today, inducting it into official records as the tallest building in the known galaxy. Built on the planet of Kosh in the Attican Traverse, Transworld 1 has its 1002 stories devoted to shopping malls, office space, three hotels, a zoo and aquarium, and of course parking. Situated on a world where the gravity is only 70% of galactic standard, the building uses mass effect fields to lighten the load in key areas. This extravagance is paid for by a marked increase in rent — office space in Transworld 1 comes at a pricey 61,000 credits per square meter per year.”

A/N: 1002 stories. Good gods, that is a lot of floors. Can you imagine the elevator ride???
Fanfic Recommendation: **Disconnect** (13959 words) by **SE_Saignee** (If you like criminal investigations, snark, drell, or CSI proceed to click the link above. It’s /fantastic/.)
Neither damning nor defending

Chapter Summary

Dancing, seeking, and hiding as the Senatorial Election ball continues.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Astrega - The fifth largest city on Palaven, largely consisting of the lowest property value on world. Astrega is across Natanus Bay from the cliffs that edge the capitol city’s eastern side, but unlike it’s political sister city, Astrega’s main economy is based around industry, shipping, and Hierarchy resource storage. Thus, the metropolis consists of sprawling districts of space ports, warehouses, and fabrication factories.

Ungentira - A large, warm blooded predator native to the high mountains of Palaven. approximately the size of a Labrador. It is neither mammal or reptile, but has aspects of both, featuring a heavy, plated hide along its back, and a rich, luxurious pelt along their underside. They are ferocious predators, frequently taking on prey three or four times their size. Claws on all four feet and large fangs are their primary weapons, but they also have a poison spike at the end of their tail used for defense. They are known for climbing partway up trees and stretching to leave territorial claw marks in the bark to intimidate foes with their perceived size. (Credit: MizDirected)

Season of Laetitius (Cycle of Riches) - Named because it is the time of year when crops and prey animals flourished, providing food enough for all. The harvest season. (Credit: MizDirected)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Derra - TCD. Affectionate term for one’s bondmate, usually for females or someone who is effeminate. (Credit: MizDirected)

Chapter Soundtrack: Light of Nibel by Gareth Coker (feat. Aeralie Brighton)

A/N: A nice big chapter, thanks to all of the idea bouncing, muse poking, editing, and some flat out scene crafting by Marie_Fanwriter. Seriously, if you like my stuff, go read theirs. (Some fan-freaking-tastic Garrus/Adrien to be found.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the horizon, Nanus was just beginning to set, Menae trailing behind almost as if pulled along by
her brother. It caught his eye for a moment, the frequent beauty of colorful twilight and twin moons always did, but the low bass rumble of displeasure from Sol brought him back to the present.

Macen felt the grip on his arm release as his date turned her sights on Ms. Makasian... Officer Makasian? …Detective maybe? What was the right title for her not only outside of work but also at a formal social event? He might be Palaven born, but Astrega’s dockyards weren’t exactly Cipritine district one.

“You. Details. Now.”

“Details of what, precisely?” the other tarin returned politely to the nearly hissed words. He clicked his tongue, thinking that was probably his queue to try and arbitrate. The colonization specialist cleared his throat, making both tarin turn to look at him simultaneously.

He smiled winsomely, hands in his pockets.

“Not that I’m unhappy to be on a balcony at moonset with two beautiful tarin such as yourselves, but Sol—”

“The point. Get to it.”

“Aheh… hear me out, okay? You’re doing that thing.”

“What thing.”

“That thing we talked about? With the being too aggressive?’

Solana’s mandibles flattened to her face as she squinted at the far distance, thinking. Without missing a beat, she turned back to Makasian, head tilted. “Am I being too aggressive?”

“I would say so.”

Her shoulders dropped. “I didn’t mean to… but I need to know what you know.”

The cream plated tarin nodded graciously at the not-quite-apology. “As I said, about what precisely?”

Macen scratched at his temple, shifting off to the side now that the conversation had tilted into something more amicable. While Solana semi-interrogated her fraten’s date, he himself took up a lean on the balcony railing, just inside of the near-invisible security field.

In the distance, Nanus had mostly disappeared, leaving Menae’s pale face amid an ocean of black and purple. Foggy clouds misted between buildings, giving the nighttime city scape a dark, ethereal feeling.

‘How does anyone focus on politics with this view sitting right here… spirits, it’s beautiful out tonight.’

Macen set his chin in a palm, steadying his head just behind the dip of his mandibles. He needed to get back inside and rub elbows with the right people to encourage grant funding for his team’s latest project, and yet… this view.

Somewhere behind him Solana let out an aggravated bleat, making him half-turn back to ensure everything was alright. It didn’t look like the inquest had gotten too aggressive again, but whatever information Sol had picked up from Ms. Makasian hadn’t been what she’d wanted to hear. With a
concerned look pulling on his maplewood hued plates, Macen returned from the railing to check in.

“Everything okay?”

“I am... going to kill him.”

“Him who?”

“Garrus!”

“... can I ask why? I mean, I’ve got a lighter if you can find some wood for a pyre, but I thought you liked your-”

“Macennnnnn.”

The teasing smile he was hiding escaped. Macen wrapped an arm around Solana’s back, nosing at her temple affectionately.

“What? I’m just being supportive.”

Her less-than-gentle headbutt against his shoulder hurt a bit, but she settled there, subvocals distressed. Behind the tarin in his arms the other female’s browridges turned up a bit, sympathetically.

“... I didn’t mean to upset her.”

“Can I ask what you said?”

At this, Solana pulled back, face full of more worry and less fury. “My brother is involved with Spectres.”

“He’s C-Sec, isn’t he? That seems normal.”

“Involved with Spectres.”

Amaranth colored eyes blinked twice before he got it. “Oh! You mean he’s fu-ahhh- sleeping with them. Is it Rix, the trainee? He was cute.”

“No...”

“Kryik then.”

“And.”

“And what?”

“Kryik and...”

“And... Arterius?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Go him. Those are some fine looki-”

“Macen!”
“Yes?”

“Not. Helping.”

He clicked his tongue again, passing a palm over Sol’s crest and back along her spinal plates. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Her shoulders fell, subvocals admitting what she didn’t want to say aloud; that no, there wasn’t much anyone could do besides Garrus himself.

“How about this? Let’s return Ms… Detective?... Makasian to her date, and then we can steal some dessert and kava from the buffet table and find a quiet corner to talk.”

“Okay yeah... thanks, Macen.”

The colonization specialist smiled again, one of his big broad smiles that usually cheered people up. It worked, just a little, drawing a grateful half-smile from Sol.

“Shall we then?”

When both females had given agreeing nods, he wandered back toward the main hall, slipping inside to peruse the crowd.

The Spectres were still nowhere to be seen. Although he supposed that was for the best, it gave Sol a bit more time to calm down about it. She was like a wild ungan tira when upset, and with a short fuse to go along with it.

A survey of the main hall revealed that the center floor had been cleared of mingling groups to make way for dancing. Macen felt the itch to join like a sense of restlessness in his feet. He loved dancing.

“Hmmm…”

Caterers were just disappearing into the stonework with the remains of dinner, much to his dismay, but the buffet table had been restocked with appetizers and salty treats for dessert. Even better, the bar had opened, though it was overly crowded as people went for their first harder drinks of the night.

“Drinks first?” he offered, turning to face his off-again-on-again lover and lab partner.

Sol shook her head, “I want to check in with mari first, be right back.”

“Yeah, alright.” The colonization specialist glanced past her, seeing Senator and avah Vakarian tucked into an alcove, talking quietly. He watched Sol drift that way, then settled his gaze out over the room where eclectic pairs of two were squaring up. It looked like the beginning to ‘autumn hunt’, the harvest dance for the season of Laetitius. Appropriate for the occasion. Probably symbolic of the ‘wealth’ gained by the Hierarchy with the oaths of the new senators.

After a moment the urge to join in became too strong to resist, and he turned his persistently cheerful expression on the tarin still next to him… only to notice just how sad she looked. Amaranth eyes flicked out, then back. Makasian was watching the line up with a mournful gaze, subvocals gently suppressed with what sounded like way too much practice.

Macen cleared his throat, continuing with plan A. It was what he wanted anyway, and well… he couldn’t just leave her like this. “Don’t suppose you’d want to dance while we wait?”
The detective’s face turned toward him, but her focus seemed glued to the proceedings, “Why?”

“Pass the time?” he offered casually, “Been awhile since I’ve gone to one of these shindigs. I’m guessing you too? Besides, dancing is fun.”

The torin knew he’d hit the mark when her talons twitched, as if stopping herself from reaching out for the idea. He nudged the thought toward her just a little more. “Couldn’t hurt, could it? I can teach you if you don’t know how.”

“... I do.”

“Well then?”

Her shoulders straightened, mandibles flicking with tentative interest. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to make the most of it...”

“That’s the spirit!” he laughed, taking her hand and starting excitedly for an open spot.

A shift in music drew the room’s focus, the unintrusive strings of the background song peaking to an attention grabbing crescendo, then cutting off as the low drums of the hunt came in to give pacing to the coming movements.

Macen tugged on Detective Makasian’s hand with just the right arc to send her swirling around in front of him and backpedaling into place on the far side. The lovely tarin gave him a suspicious look as she gracefully came to a standstill, almost as if his motives were suspect, though a small smile had begun to tug on her mandibles.

More drums joined the first, with deep toned string instruments taking up a powerful sound like the first few lunging steps of a hunting group fanning out to track their quarry.

As one, the rows of Turian elite stepped closer… closer… and passed by, gliding as they spun about in their various tunics and robes. The first move of the hunt a ‘near miss’. As the dance flowed to the second, then third, then forth moves the smile on Makasian’s face grew to match his, and he mentally congratulated himself on the achievement. By the time the song mellowed to it’s end, each pair finally touching each other more than a mere brush of limbs, the two were arm in arm and breathing a little fast.

“Didn’t hurt, did it?” he asked with a wink.

“No… no, it didn’t. Thank you, Mr. Barro.”

“Just Macen is fine. Mind if I go make sure Sol hasn’t assaulted her fraten ?”

The peach plated tarin huffed a laugh as they stepped away from the dance floor to make room for others. “Please do. I am somewhat concerned for my partner’s well being also, truth be told. She was not pleased with him.”

Macen rumbled agreement, and was about to step away on his next mission, leaving the pretty Detective right where she was… until he noticed her boss’s boss’s boss leaning against a table edge not three meters away.

With the vague thought that if schmoozing with his funders was what he was after, then socializing with her ‘funders’ could only be good for Makasian as well, the colonization specialist tugged his former dancing partner toward the Turian Councilor sipping wine just behind them.
“Ahhh… Macen, I-”

“Councilor! How good to see you again.”

“Doctor Barro. Enjoying the festivities?”

He smiled, ignoring how the tarin in his half-held grip tensed. She was probably just nervous about impressions. “I am indeed. Though… might I leave Detective Makasian here with you? I’ve seen someone I want to catch a word with, and I’d hate to leave such a lovely tarin on her own while there’s dancing going on…”

Sparatus chuckled quietly, turning to set his wine down and offer a palm. “No one wishes to be alone at a ball Doctor, and you’ve caught me while my mate is otherwise occupied. I would enjoy a dance as well.”

Macen nudged the tarin toward the other male, and began to back away with a thankful trill. “Much appreciated, Councilor!”

He waved farewell at Makasian and slipped away to find Sol, weaving through the crowds toward the buffet table while he searched.

‘Not here… not by her parents… not out dancing… I hope she isn’t actually maiming her brother. Where’d you go Sol?’

 oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo oo

“Officer Makasian, a surprise to see you here.”

Aiesha forced her expression into the closest approximation of the smile it had more honestly held not two minutes ago. She lowered her gaze, a play at the demure tarin she wasn’t, in order to make a sideways glance toward where her dance partner had just been. Macen was gone.

‘Spirits preserve me, if I see that torin again…”

Ten minutes of true enjoyment, a taste of the life her disparaging clan had denied her, spoiled by ending up in the arms of the one person she had wanted to avoid tonight at all costs. Shoving the displeasure and melancholy down deep, the peach toned tarin ran with it. She knew the only thing more memorable than a dance would be her running from said dance.

“Councilor. It’s good to see you well. Is everything alright with your bondmate? I had heard the monsoon season this year was particularly chilly, and it spread something of a flu through travellers…”

The ash plated politician led them toward a new open spot a little ways down, nearer to where the orchestra was playing mellow strings and soft chimes between songs to let the dancers rest. “Adamina is fine, Detective. She simply desired to dance with her patrem before he needed to leave for the evening, they are… a good twenty people down from us, but thank you for asking.”

“Of course.”
Aiesha was ready to pull out the next blandest thing she could think of, likely more about the weather, when -bless the spirits- the break ended and another classic dance intro cued the floor for the next sequence of starting moves. The Councilor released her and they took positions for a ‘Diluvian Rainfall’, something more modern but still popular.

She swayed with the music, feet moving in the familiar patterns of the dance. It had been a good long while since her last formal event, but not so long as to make the flow of limbs and steps unfamiliar. The fluid motions of this particular number were something she’d learned in a class of other Blackwatch trainees; somber faces and watchful eyes trying to memorize each other and find hidden lessons in the coursework. There had been five, and she’d scored poorly for only noticing three.

Aiesha had made a point of knowing all manner of dances after that, so her mind could always be free to focus on the social interplay instead, as she was now; delicate ankles kicking up and flicking like water droplets hanging heavy from a leaf. Entirely on autopilot from her attention.

“You’re a natural,” the Councilor complimented.

“You’re quite good yourself, sir.”

“You’re quite good yourself, sir.”

“As you say.”

The tempo shifted to something slower as the metaphorical water of the song sunk into the ground. His grip on her ribs tightened, ever so slightly.

“Makasian.”

“Makasian.”

“Yes?”

“I have a great deal of patience for dealing with the subtler side of politics when the prize is equal footing for the Turian people or the greater good of all, but these pointless little games tire me. I can stand them less with every passing year.”

Well. What exactly did one say to… that? It was confession and accusation in one, and to respond to either was telling. The ‘former’ Blackwatch agent kept her expression bland as she replied very carefully.

“A relatable position,” she offered, saying exactly nothing. His mandibles flicked once in annoyance as he turned them, letting her go long enough for their forearms to align vertically, and their feet to take them in a circle. A seed just beginning to take root.

“I understand your reasoning for partaking in the gym at the same hour as I, however your presence here is too much.”

Makasian swallowed lightly at the vinegar in his voice. Eloquence and deflection were just making him angry. It was time for a different tactic… a little bit of truth, perhaps?

“I can explain.”

“I can explain.”

“Please do.”

“I’m here with my Detective partner from C-Sec. He needed a date because his patrem is one of the elect, and it looked better for him to have a plus one. Your being here as well, my hand to Nanus, is
entirely coincidental.”

The Councilor’s gaze smoothed over slightly as she emphasized the words with quiet, forthright subvocals. It didn’t eliminate the possibility that she was lying, but it certainly reduced it greatly. They stepped apart, passing by and moving away as the dance required; new growth spreading from the sprout.

When they came back together, his voice was just barely loud enough for her to hear.

“Perhaps you would rather be on my staff,” he offered. “It would be simpler than this tiresome game of watching from a distance while pretending otherwise.”

“Sir?” she asked, a little stunned and stumbling through the next few paces. He carried the dance, hiding her sudden gracelessness.

“I’m offering you a position, Detective. Say yes.”

Garrus walked out into the grand hall just ahead of the other two, feeling calmer for the reverie floating in his veins, but dreading the return regardless.

‘Shame there isn’t an exit door in the bathrooms… those balconies might do…’

He eyed the half dozen marble balconies and their welcoming array of plants with longing. Even if he didn’t try and jump off, the peace and quiet out there was so much more appealing than the party itself.

A quick glance around revealed that they’d been gone too long. Dinner was cleared and dancing had begun. Looking back towards his partners he sighed.

“I’ll uh… see you later.”

“Of course,” came Saren’s even reply, subvocals once more reduced to unrevealing stoicism.

“We won’t leave without saying goodbye,” Nihlus chimed in, his smile warm, “unless you happen to leave with your date first. Wouldn’t blame you at that, she’s quite a looker.”

He felt a little pathetic, but still replied, “Promise, Palvi?”

Green eyes reassured him. “Promise.”

With one last look backwards the sniper managed to start walking. Scanning the room revealed his parents standing near an alcove, and his sister on the dance floor with Barro. She appeared to be laughing at something he’d said as they made each other look good.

He smiled a little, glad someone was enjoying themselves tonight. The plucky torin in Sol’s arms spun away as he watched, adding an unsanctioned flare to the dance before sliding back into place. He shook his head, impressed with the fancy footwork.

Glacial blue eyes glanced back toward his parents, deciding if showing up for his lecture now or later
was the better bet. After a moment, he went with ‘now’, in hopes that the occasion would keep it short.

As Garrus moved closer to his family his steps grew a little shorter, prolonging the inevitable. He was considering turning back when his patrem noticed him. A tight pull of mandibles hinting that the anger hadn’t quite left the older male just yet.

He swallowed, steeling himself as he stepped up beside his mari. “I can explain?”

Castis scoffed. “I’m sure you can.”

“Castis…” Vivienne cut in.

“-and you will, later. For now we shall enjoy the rest of the evening, but later? You can explain to me why you’re consorting with Spectres.” His father spat the word, making his stomach sink. Garrus didn’t expect the conversation to go well.

“Pari, I-” Vivienne elbowed him in the ribs, effectively cutting him off. He conceded to the demand for delay, humming softly in reproach. “Right. Tomorrow.”

His patrem’s gaze shifted from him to his own mate, eyes softening. “Shall we dance, derra?”

“A wonderful idea, lets.” They reached for each other’s hands and begun leaving the space. Garrus’ father turned a final sharp glance at him as they left, as if to say ‘stay out of trouble, or else’.

He was about to make a beeline for the nearest balcony, to assess his chances of using it as a good spot to escape from, when Solana’s hand came around his bicep. Not for the first time, he wondered if she’d had different tensile augments than he had. Her fingers were like manacles. Thin, impossibly strong manacles.

“Oh no you don’t.”

He sighed, “Pari is going to ream me out tomorrow, can’t you wait?”

“No,” she scoffed. “I will not.”

Ironically, she pulled him towards the very same balcony he’d been shooting for. The sniper scanned the room before getting to the doors, catching a glimpse of Nihlus dancing… which wouldn’t have been so odd save for the fact he was dancing with Saren. It surprised him enough to force Solana to stop so he could do a double take.

He had assumed that Saren could do formal dance, but seeing it was... something else.

“Garrus, if I have to drag you out of here. So help me…”

His head whipped back around and he started walking again. “Sorry.” He was much larger than his sister, but he had no doubt that she could and would carry through with her threat… though their size difference meant it probably wouldn’t be in a socially appropriate way.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. No dragging necessary.”

Once they stepped out onto the open balcony he took a breath of the quickly cooling air. It was crisp out now, half the day’s heat already gone. Nanus had long since set, and Menae was alone in lighting the sky; her silvery light holding steady on the wide variety of Palaveni life that required their moon’s gentler rays to thrive.
Looking down, he caught Solana watching him with sharp, glacial steel eyes the same color as his. He scrubbed a palm over the back of his neck, not knowing where to start. An apology, maybe?

“I’m sorry Sol, I honestly didn’t know they were going to be here.”

She stared him down for a moment then sighed and let go, stepping away to the edge of the balcony, the long lines of her buttercup yellow sleeves fluttering in the breeze. “I know… it was mari’s doing.”

Garrus joined her by the edge, taking up a lean on the railing that evened their small height difference. Rather than look at her he turned to gaze out at the far ground, appreciating the view. The shadows of the buildings blended together in the twilight, only coming into stark relief with the light of passing skycars.

“Don’t be too hard on her.”

“It’s hard not to be. Sometimes she knows exactly what she’s doing… but other times? She just acts. Doesn’t think it through well enough, not like she used to.”

“…I’m worried about her too,” he murmured, placing his hand over Sol’s on the railing where it had tightened.

She tilted her head towards him without actually turning it, mandibles flicking in amusement. “This doesn’t mean you’re off the hook.”

Garrus ducked his head, “ugh… don’t I know it.”

The forlorn reaction made her laugh, just a little. He considered that a small win. “You brought this on yourself, you big dumb sniper. Did you think pari would never find out?”

“No. I’m actually a little surprised it took as long as it did.”

“Hmph. Probably everything going on with the Senate and… maybe a little bit because of mari.”

She wasn’t wrong. He exhaled slowly, not knowing what else to say. Even if he had the words, it wasn’t as if they could change what was. They sat there in silence for a good fifteen minutes, just breathing and being. It helped.

“We should… probably go back in. Mingle and such.”

Garrus gestured half heartedly toward the brightly lit archway that delineated soothing night and glittering party. He didn’t really want to go, but he’d left Maka-... Aiesha to fend for herself long enough. “On second thought, drinks first?”

“That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve said all night,” Solana laughed and gripped his hand, pulling him back towards the doors.

Garrus didn’t argue beyond a perfunctory grumble. At the bar they managed to find Solana’s date. Barro had just flagged down the bartender, and the siblings took advantage of their good timing by chiming in with drink orders of their own.

“There you are, Sol!” the maplewood plated torin greeted the sudden arrival with a broad smile. “I was looking for you.”

“Sorry for bailing, Macen.” Solana replied, nuzzling his mandible in apology. “Didn’t get up to too
much trouble without me?”

He grinned, all charm. “Trouble? Me?”

She laughed, pulling away to cuff him on the shoulder lightly. He winced. Garrus looked between
the two of them, secretly pleased that at least one of them seemed to have found a partner appropriate
for their family.

The bartender returned, welcomed by a chorus of thanks as they laid out the drinks in no particular
order. Taking a slow sip of Quarian brandy as he surveyed the room, attempting to locate his own
date, almost snorting the beverage when he saw her… dancing with Councilor Sparatus.

“Uh... huh. Barro?”

“Hm?”

“Why is my partner dancing with Councilor Sparatus?”

“The better question is ‘why aren’t you dancing with your Spectres’?”

Garrus rounded on the other torin, upset until he saw the teasing expression on the shorter male’s
face. He’d never actually met Barro before, but from Solana’s description and the sparkle in his eyes,
he could tell it hadn’t been maliciously intended.

“It’s... complicated.”

“So... is the third one still free?”

“Macen!” Solana admonished.

“What?” he laughed. “Can’t blame a torin for trying.”

Garrus cocked his head in question, “You hm...” he tried to find the right words. How to ask if they
were dating to see if they made a good hunting pair, or for the fun of good sex with friends... “Not
exclusive?”

His sister laughed, “No. The only thing Macen will ever be bonded to is his work.”

“Not true,” the colonization specialist pouted. “I would bond a Prothean at first sight. A Zha too, for
that matter. Those aren't technically in my field.”

Garrus raised a browridge as the other male continued playing it up by leaning forward, the back of
his hand perpendicular to one side his mouth as he theatrically whispered, “I could never be good
enough for your sister. She's too fine a breed for me.”

Solana pushed him, hard enough to nearly dislodge him from the bar stool, neck flushing in
embarrassment. “I know what you're after, you ass, and I am not sucking up to Telifraz so you can
go play in the mud. Flattery will get you nowhere!”

Garrus started laughing despite himself, pleased to see someone getting under his filian’s skin in
ways he never managed. It was oddly satisfying. Sol looked up at him, a smile pulling on her
mandibles as she resisted it.

“Do you honestly think I could put up with him for a lifetime? Hah...”

Her expression flickered for a moment, eyes focusing on something behind his shoulder. She looked
back up at him, then at her date with a noticeably thinner smile.

"If you two can excuse me for a second, I see someone I should say hello to."

"Sure thing, my lovely, wonderful, much appreciated, glamorous friend who will eventually suck up to Tellifraz just to get me to shut up."

Sol snorted at Barro, and wandered off without replying.

"So! Just us males now, and a nice long drink list."

Garrus chuckled. "That there is."

Chapter End Notes

04/01/2010 - Planet DC1938 Explodes After Core Fusion

“DC1938, a small garden world circling the red supergiant SM2183 Rua, exploded today in a rare phenomenon called core fusion. The planet's uranium core collapsed in on itself, igniting a thermonuclear explosion large enough to rupture the planet into several pieces. The shock wave and loss of atmosphere has reportedly killed more than five billion native inhabitants. There is one known survivor: an infant rocketed from the planet in an FTL escape pod picked up by the human cruiser MSV Kent. The inhabitants of the planet, previously unknown to the galaxy, were a spacefaring race who used crystalline matrices for their computing needs. The infant has been taken to medical facilities in the local cluster, where he is breathing gases in a ratio similar to the atmosphere of his home planet: 65% nitrogen, 20% oxygen, and 15% krypton.”

A/N: ^ Bioware writers are just as geeky as we are. XD

A/N/N: Yes, I do switch between TCD and English words for family members. Intentional, for flavor.

A/N/N: I've finally had to break down and find names for Sparatus and his bondmate. They have three kids too, and I'm all about meaningful names, so it took a bit of research to choose. Eventually, I decided on Aequum Sparatus as his name. It's Latin for 'fair', since Sparatus is always poking and prodding Shepard about the consequences of their actions on the rest of the galaxy. I also mindcanon that Turians are often the voice of the little people in the galactic scene. Asari are all about cultural absorption and smoothing things over, and Salarians are about loyalty to their imprinted Dalatrass' will and discovery, but Turians? They understand passion, and preservation of true history. They care about justice. It isn't perfect, since they will put unity over freedom and cohesion over individuality, but it's the best the galaxy will get until Humanity pokes it's nose in things. So... Sparatus cares about things being /fair/. His bondmate is 'Adamina', which means 'of the red earth'. She's a plain, but exceptionally graceful tarin with vivid crimson plates and a grounded sense of calm that he depends on. She has a beautiful smile. Their three kids, you shall meet another day. ;)

[Wiki Codex Entry: The Zha and Zha'til]

The zha'til were a synthetic race that existed at the time of the Protheans. They originated when a race known as the zha implanted themselves with symbiotic AI technology to enhance their intelligence in order to survive as their homeworld became
inhospitable. When the Reapers arrived, they subjugated the AIs, known as zha'til, who then seized control of the bodies of their masters and altered their genetic material at the deepest level, transforming the zha into synthetic monsters and their offspring into slaves. The zha'til proceeded to multiply into "mechanical swarms" that "blotted out the sky". With no other recourse, the Protheans sent the star of the zha's home system into supernova, destroying the zha'til entirely.

Fanfic Recommendation: Crossroads (1312 words) by s1ranksinner (Saren/Nihlus - Not happy times, but bittersweet with an edge of hope.)
Like a ruby glittering among sapphires

Chapter Summary

More dancing, more intrigue, more drama, more wine... what's not to like?

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Signis – The executive office of each colony in the Turian Hierarchy. A building where the Primarch or designated ranking officer of that cluster can operate from. Generally, it is one of the strongest, most fortified buildings in any given area. Most are ancient, long-standing structures with storied histories. (Canon, with a bit of extrapolation.)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

Madlis - A traditional Turian clan compound, estate, or house. Generally speaking, it refers to one of Palaven's massive family homes, but may be used in smaller context to refer to the metaphorical home or heart of a clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with exposition from author-chan.)

Familia Notas – The bodily markings of Turians, usually centered around the face but sometimes flowing out over fringe or torso, identifying various details about the individual. Generally speaking, 'Colony Markings' indicate the colonial origins of a clan, as well as personal and family participation in various historical events, and other miscellaneous details. Color, style, and composition vary, though most follow recognizable, traditional patterns. Came to popular use again after the Unification wars approximately 2700 years ago. (Credit: Canon, Mizdirected, plus a lot of author-chan exposition. Last call on credits and italics.)

Chapter Soundtrack: Feint ft. Laura Brehm - Words

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as they parted ways with Blue, Saren spotted a mark on ST&R’s watchlist for potential political insurgents. Nihlus didn’t have enough time to so much as suggest they check the wine list, or the desert bar, before his partner started maneuvering them closer to his new target.

Vestor Tucletius was a known separatist sympathizer, and rumors cropped up from time to time about him ‘coloring outside the lines’ to get Hierarchy rebels the supplies they needed to keep operating. While the cabinet member of a cluster Primarch had every reason to be here tonight, in truth probably more cause than they did, the latest rumors from ST&R’s intelligence division painted the politician in a pretty damning light.

The Uni Wars might have been almost twenty seven hundred years ago, but some would never stop trying to break away. It was as if the separatists had forgotten the unsung tens-of-thousands that died
during those dark times... or they were willing to see it happen again, if it meant freedom from Hierarchy rule. Problem being, Turians united were usually a force for good, -guardians and organized peacekeepers-, but divided his people’s warlike tendencies tilted toward territorialism and insularity. History was clear on that.

Nihlus himself rarely let it slide when he saw counter-Hierarchy activity, regardless of the fact that he’d been run over roughshod during his service years, and even being from an edge world. War was hell, period. He knew Saren kept the Hierarchy’s interests close to heart as well, to honor his fallen brother’s dedication to their people. It was a lucky thing those secondary priorities were non-conflicting with their primary oaths of loyalty: The Council had no plans to allow for the danger of a fractured Turian state.

So when Tucletius spun by, laughing merrily on the arm of another Primarch’s son, he could practically see Saren’s attention flip from whatever mental laps he was doing about Garrus, to instead focusing on the suspicious activity. Just like the switch on a light panel; on, then off. Their forward path was re-aimed to a circuitous and unobtrusive approach with textbook precision.

The carmine Spectre chuckled fondly and advised Rix to go get drinks while he tried to steer Saren back onto a more pleasurable track. He feared for the night’s potential enjoyments with his former mentor on the trail of intrigue. For someone so bad at people, the laconic torin was *ridiculously* good at spotting and pulling apart social machinations.

“You know… we could could always look into Tucletius’ activities in real depth later. Now might not be-”

The plan to distract Saren suddenly went awry; terribly, *wonderfully* awry.

In a move he suspected was precisely meant to distract him from being distracting, his silver-grey partner pulled him onto the dance floor near the laughing, smiling pair of suspect socialites and started dancing with him.

Nihlus went along with it, but before he could even begin to try and finish his first attempt at dissuasion they were arm-in-arm and there was a thick-fingered hand settled on his waist... The tall agent’s arguments fell apart, and his thoughts scattered. He tried not to let it show, amid the crowd of elegantly dressed politicians and socialites, just how ridiculously over the moon he was feeling from the sudden closeness, the biotic’s radiating warmth, but it was a smidge difficult even for him.

He mentally growled at himself, ‘damn it, kryik. this isn’t part of the plan. get over yourself and focus, you sap.’

Saren slid away on the next transition in the song, twice as practiced and attractively graceful in moving through the current seasonal dance. His long, sharp crest was tilted slightly with an aural canal cocked as the other torin obviously listened in to the fragments of nearby conversation.

‘okay well, maybe not ‘obviously’ but fuck i can sure tell. i swear, he *never* stops working...’

Nihlus had a hard time being aggravated about it however, as the dance led them together again and muscular arms wrapped around him, gloved talons pressed to his lower back. He felt his throat flush with heat. Saren didn’t let people this close to him if he could help it... The rare moments of contact, or that spectacular night where he’d gotten to bite and lick at silver-grey horns while Garrus ground them together... those were *rare*. Those were-

“Nihlus, focus.”
“Wha-huh? I am focused.”

The flat look he received was particularly unimpressed with what he qualified as ‘focus’. He grinned charmingly, attempting to use the opening to further his leisurely agenda.

“What? I am very focused… on having a good time.”

“Then *multitask,*” the stolid torin snarked at him, bringing an even wider grin to carmine mandibles. Apparently Saren felt expressive tonight… or maybe it was the mild rush of reverie still swimming in his blood. Nihlus was pleased with the result either way.

“Fine, fine, Spectres are never off duty and all that… but I want *at least* two dances after we’re done snooping.”

The shorter male raised a browridge as if the desire to dance with him was a nonsensical one, but shrugged and gave a quiet trill of agreement. Nihlus hummed in satisfaction as a reply, willing to play ball if it meant a reward after the fact.

They spun closer to Tucletius on the next opportunity, flowing like leaves on the wind, listening for subtle plots while looking to all the room as if they were merely lost in each other’s orbit.

Even though Kryik technically had no authority over him, when the amicable torin dismissed Avitus with the casual advise to go ‘get two drinks and find a pretty tarin to give the other to’ he had taken Arterius’ silence as agreement, and left them to see about that first one.

He hadn't actually meant to *do* the second, but the Vakarian sibling in the corner glaring down an unknown party-goer by a side door drew his curiosity. The tall female’s mandibles were flat to her face with displeasure. Avitus glanced over the barefaced, orangey hued male beside her, but didn't recognize him even with a second look.

The former mercenary continued on to the wine table and grabbed two of the first kind he saw, choosing a new path to meander along that would make it look like he was wandering past them by chance.

Avitus would be the first to admit that he wasn't the most subtle person in the world, but he *had* worked with Ko for years. He could do sneaky when it was required. It helped that his mentor’s recent focus had been on the political and social side of being a Spectre. It seemed to be at the front of his mind lately, tonight in particular.

With summoned nonchalance he came at the arguing pair from an angle, hearing tuned to listen in.

“You think no one saw-”

“They saw grown adults keeping their private matters to *themselves.*”

‘*Hmm, she sounds pissed...*’ Avitus’ gaze swept the room at large without seeing anything in particular, trying to pull off that classic ‘not paying attention to his target’ inattentiveness.

“*Oh?* But… ah... I would juuust bet the clan and Avah Vakarian wouldn’t like that at all. I could
Suddenly, the male’s voice cut off with an alarmed bleat, making the Spectre trainee’s head whip around... but the both of them were just gone. Startled, he moved closer with more speed, finding the side door only just sliding to a close, pointing to where they’d gone. Avitus made to awkwardly reopen it with an elbow, slipping through with both hands still occupied by wine.

On the other side and three steps down the turn of another hallway, Solana Vakarian had the light orange male pinned to the wall, a knife to his throat. The buttercup yellow of her sleeves pooled at shoulder height as willowy arms held the average sized male to the wall with minimal difficulty.

“We’ve played these games before, Chav. If you think you can blackmail me into-”

Solana froze as the door swished open and closed for him. Steel blue eyes turned to take the pale torin in like nothing so much as a stone-cold predator assessing potential danger. Avitus flicked a mandible at her, raising a wine glass in peace offering.

“Don’t mind me. Thought you might be thirsty when you’re done.”

The tiniest disbelieving smirk tilted her mandibles from cold rage to something warmer. The ferocious tarin turned back to ‘Chav’, danger back in every line of her frame. She was actually pretty damn scary for such a thin slip of a Turian, then again, the torin she had dead-to-rights looked unperturbed by the circumstance. If anything, there was a sparkle of amusement in his eyes.

“Sol, sweetheart, really? You think you can shut me up with a blade and a few firm words? Che. Your Spectre friend isn't particularly impressive either, but nice try.”

“Ah, I’m n-” he tried, feeling the impulse to correct the mistaken impression that he was an independent agent of the Council already. Avitus wasn't particularly comfortable with the fact that he was probably going to end up with the title, never mind the discomfort of claiming it illegitimately. Unfortunately, the Vakarian scion didn’t take kindly to the male’s words, and took that opportunity to sucker punch him in the gut. “ -ot actually… oh damn, that looked unpleasant.”

The grey plated Vakarian tarin acted as if he hadn’t spoken.

“Chav, let me make the situation perfectly clear for you. Listen. To the words. Coming out. Of my mouth. If you want to play games with me? Fine. Let's go, shithead. You want to drag Garrus into this? No. Do not. If you fuck with my fraten I will leave you bleeding out in a ditch somewhere. Are we clear?”

The light orange male chuffed mockingly. “You… erg… you can't just disappear me, Sol. How many people know about our history? Mmmnph… they’ll come find you, and then we’re both dead. Very boring. Also? Ow. Uncalled for. Mnnng. Spirits, that hurts.”

“Good. And fuck your ‘people’. Leave Garrus alone, or else your next date will be with a blood watered shrubbery. I won’t back down on this one. I’ve told you before that family is where I draw the line in these games you like to play.”

With an annoyed look the male gathered himself to a stand using the wall. Avitus took a sip of his wine, trying to guess at what kind of history Vakarian shared with the torin to make him so confident of his safety. His own curiosity made him chuckle; apparently Saren’s coaching in knife edged politics was having some small effect, even if he hadn’t taken to the bulk of it.

“Is your Avah not ‘family’ to you, Sol? I bet she’d be interested in hearing that too. Along with your brother’s choice of mate.”
“He’s not mated,” she insisted with a frigid glare.

“Oh? I wonder what his medical records say...” the bareface sneered.

“The same, because he's not mated.”

“As you say. Well then. It's been fun, but I still have people to talk to tonight, things to do… che. See you around Sol.”

Avitus watched the male circle the Vakarian scion carefully as she watched him go with a razor blade glare. ‘Chav’ glanced at him in passing before returning to the party. Not three seconds after the door had closed, Solana turned to slump against the wall, a palm dragging down her face. He walked closer, offering out the second wine glass.

“Long day?”

The willowy tarin snorted with an edge of amusement, and stood up straighter to take the mild alcohol.

“You have no... well, okay, you have some idea.”

“My life would probably be easier if I didn't,” he offered with a shrug. It wasn't exactly his business, but... Arterius would likely want the details. Maybe he could use it as a distraction the next time ‘jungle’ and ‘training’ came up in the same sentence.

“You and me both, Rix. So, care to tell me why you made it your business?’

“Would you believe ‘idle curiosity’?”

“Sure, but I’d like to hear it straight if you have ulterior motives. I’m about out of patience for today.” The tarin sniffed at the wine, apparently deciding he didn't intend to poison her or something, and took one long swig, then another. Avitus offered a subvocal roll of disinterest in ‘ulterior motives’. Not exactly his style.

The willowy tarin leaned back into the wall with the wine held to her keel, black talons curled delicately around the decorative stone and glass cup. She sighed like the wind tumbling off a cliff, letting the silence hang for a moment before offering a brief explanation.

“Old flame, amazing chemistry, but not... mnn... healthy, exactly. I wanted to move on, he let me go, but sometimes he just shows up out of spirits damned nowhere to play games with my missions, cause trouble in my life, or to insist on lunch together...”

“Sounds like that's been goin’ on a while?” he returned, finding his own slouch against the wall.

“...known him since we were about seven. He’s a... or ‘was’, I should say, a Vakarian. We’re paternal cousins about twenty times removed.”

“No familia notas?”

“Cabal.”

“Ah.” Avitus took another sip of his wine.

Garrus’ sister swirled hers instead, watching the vibrant yellow whirlpool thoughtfully. “Not going to go tell the guards that I held another guest at knife point?”
The Spectre trainee shrugged irreverently. “He seemed like a jerk.”

Solana started laughing into the still air, the vibration making her wine’s pattern slosh apart. “Well, you aren’t exactly wrong…”

Garrus tried his best to look both stoic and happy for the cameras as his patrem’s immediate clan followed him out at the end of the night. Mari, Sol, Aiesha, himself, Barro, their grandparents, the avah of their clan branch, Avah Vakarian herself, and their next highest tier clanmate, General Morzai Vakarian, strode together in unison from the Signis.

The confident, positive expression on his face was as plastic as a child's teething ring. Messy and misshapen, but mostly recognizable. He hoped.

Garrus hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye to Saren or Nihlus, he had a lecture from hell on the way, he’d long since decided that he hated formal wear, Aiesha was by turns radiant among high society or looking sick to her stomach, and Mari seemed exhausted, her expression more dreamy than confident…

Aiesha squeezed his hand in the hidden space between them. He renewed his failing smile. Just a little further to the skycars. Just a little further.

He slid into the passenger seat of the sleek, high tech vehicle, and managed to wait until the doors closed to put his face in his palms.

Arm wrapped around him from behind, giving a quick squeeze and smelling like home, like Sol. She didn’t say anything else as their transport took them away from the capitol building and headed south, toward the clan madlis, but he hummed wordless appreciation back to her.

Taking a moment for himself, the mountainous sniper sent off messages to his Spectres, explaining his sudden disappearance. Pari hadn’t exactly given him time to go around saying farewells. One moment he’d been looking at the drink menu, the next they were being gathered to go. He sent off the short messages with a sigh,

Garrus looked up after that, wondering who was navigating… Barro was, apparently. It was he, Solana, and their dates, alone in the vehicle.

“Thanks for driving, Barro. You shouldn’t have to…” he felt a little rude for having a guest be responsible for it.

“Oh don’t worry about it, I enjoy piloting, though I rarely get to fly myself these days. All my field time is with big groups, and I'm usually too busy to charm the pilots into letting me take a night shift. Skycars are about the closest I get anymore… shame that. But hey? If you appreciate it, thank me by calling me Macen. I sort of hate my last name, -long story-, so that would be perfect.”

Garrus blinked at the cheerful ramble, one mandible flicking in the ghost of a smile.

“Sure. Ah… Garrus then?”

“Sounds good to me, friend.”
The upbeat torin chattered at him like that all the way back home, managing to get into and make interesting the latest climate change trends on Palaven. He’d never heard someone talk about the weather in idle small talk with such passion or detail. Whatever magic that made Macen tick seemed to spread though, and conversation in the cabin lightened to a multiperson chat about the incredibly stormy monsoon season this year.

By the time they landed on Vakarian land outside the city, he felt much improved. The small group setting had done a lot for his calm, and the four walked across the skybridge from the landing pad toward the glittering, expansive madlis while still discussing cloud formations.

A shame the good mood couldn't last.

Just as the four settled in at a table in the fall-blooming garden, beers in hand and jackets folded over chair backs, one of the clan’s staff came out to get him.

“Garrus? Your father wants to visit with you in his office,” the maroon plated male called out on his way by, cleaning supplies in hand.

The detective swallowed his mouthful of pale ale, setting the bottle back down and staring at it. His filian’s hand settled on his forearm, two long fingers gentle and bracing.

“I should go… better to get there sooner rather than later. He always has more to say if I give him time to think. Sol, can you make sure Aiesha gets set up in the guest wing if I don't make it back?”

“Yes, of course, but Garrus…”

He shook his head, pushing away from the table, mandibles tightening to his jawline. “Thank you all, for coming and for… being supportive. I… thanks.”

The tall sniper walked away from the suddenly quieter table, leaving their good cheer behind. Hopefully it returned in full force once he was gone. They all deserved a good end to the night.

Chapter End Notes

Citadel Council Finishes Six-Day War Game Simulation
“Terminus Systems denizens are enraged tonight as the Citadel Council finished a six-day series of war games simulating an invasion of their space. Officially, the exercises were defensive in nature, but six turian and three asari dreadnoughts rehearsed positioning and bombardment. "This is more than saber-rattling", said Dick Ackerman, prime minister of the colony world Arvuna. "This was an attack rehearsal. It was timed to coincide with the invasion of Garvug. Terminus citizens are now on notice, and they are being called on to declare their allegiance or be counted as cowards". Council press secretary Irana Tinos reassured the Systems that these exercises are the duty of any military, and that this event was planned months before the incident on Garvug.”

A/N: A canon press secretary! Hello, Irana Tinos. Asari, I think? Or maybe Volus. Definitely not a Turian, and very doubtful it would be a Human, Elcor, or Hanar. Hmm. Also! Terminus world big enough to have a prime minister! Woah! We always hear about the pirates and the slavers, and the sesspot that is Omega, but… that's apparently not all!
A/N/N: Bigger, slower chapters, more intrigue, more drama, more Turian culture... how are you guys liking this stuff? Is it awful compared to episodic fluff? To Badassery in the field or awkward curry nights in Garrus' tiny apartment? Drop me a line on how you like the current plot. I want to know how it matches up. :3

A/N/N/N: For all my wonderful new readers, and rereaders! You will be happy to know that (or not realize till now, but benefit from:) the beginning chapters are getting a revamp. The fabulous Marie_Fanwriter is helping me go back through EDaH's beginnings to clean up style changes, plot holes, logic loops, and all sorts of mess. The first chapter is already up, and it's about a thousand words longer. This is being done slowly and in chronological order, as to not interfere with current updates, and will not a requirement to understand current plot. (If something does change the 'future', I will absolutely put it in an author's note for you all.) When a chapter gets an update, that will be noted at the top with the date of it's last revision, so if you want to read the new bonus content, you can tell if something's new at a glance. Huzzah! :D

Fanfic Recommendation: **We're Not Done Yet** (1212 words) by the_wrote (FShep/Garrus - Short and sad and sweet.)
The room smelled of cloves

Chapter Summary

A bit of comedy, a bit of drama, the show goes on...

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Hastatim – Hierarchy rebel suppression forces. (Canon)

Madlis - A traditional Turian clan compound, estate, or house. Generally speaking, it refers to one of Palaven’s massive family homes, but may be used in smaller context to refer to the metaphorical home or heart of a clan. (Credit: Recidiva, with exposition from author-chan.)

Karifratrus - A Turian oath of brotherhood/sisterhood, not describing blood relations, but verbal promises as close as family that last a lifetime. The prefix ‘kari’ is amended to relationships that are built or born from this bond. (Credit: MizDirected)

Vikarus - The dual long blades used by the Vakarian clan warriors in ancient times.

A/N: This chapter was handcrafted from the tears of baby thresher maws by myself and Marie_Fanwriter, and they did the hard part of inq darting the momma threshers, catching the baby threshers, and poking them with a stick to capture the tears. I basically just made lunch and mopped the floor afterward. An incredibly huge thank you to Marie for all their help. <33333

Chapter Soundtrack: Inova - Disowned

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nihilus groaned as he lifted the shovel full of dirt, tossing the soil to the way side as if it weighed several hundred pounds. The manual digging tool came back down into the shallow grave, stabbing the ground like a hot knife through butter thanks to the oscillating mass effect field along the edge. Really, the work wasn’t hard, but his crisp white suit was now a lost cause. The assassination that had preceded the digging hadn’t helped matters either.

If there was anything the knife-loving Spectre hated about fancy parties, it was when they ended in cobalt spatters and grass stains instead of orgies and food comas.

With a deep sigh he took up the long tool again, tossing piles of soil for several more minutes before climbing out and offering the shovel to Rix.

“Your turn.”
"Mmh."

They switched places, one person at a time digging the small, hidden grave to be. It was a shame crematoriums were well populated with the priesthood at basically all hours of the day, making it a challenge to use one with any stealth. Better this digging than to try and cart the body all the way back to the ship to space it though. Spaceports were another well populated place, and customs always loved giving Spectres a hard time. If the body was IDed...

The only other option that had come to mind was tossing the stupid fucker’s corpse into the sea off Cipritine’s eastern cliffs… but to drop someone’s body in deep waters, leaving their departing soul for the spirits of the deep to find? Nah, too fucked up for his tastes.

So digging it was. A grave was no way to dispose of a Turian, but it would do.

Nihlus plopped down on the corpse’s carapace, inspecting a small bit of ripped seam on his sleeve.

“This rebel fucker owes me a new suit. He tore mine up in the fight.”

Rix snorted while digging at easily twice the speed Nihlus had been. The other torin seemed to be at the very end of the ‘eight stages of done with today’ scale, and in the mood to get the job done.

“Wish ya luck getting credits out of him now, Kryik. He’s dead.”

Nihlus chuckled darkly, the separatist’s credit chit already in his pocket.

“Why, so he is… so he is.”

The pale trainee was unimpressed with his mysteriousness, still focused on making the grave deeper with all possible speed. He wouldn’t complain about the older male’s get-it-done attitude, -less dirt in his own plates was always a good day-, but the more careless shovelfuls were landing on the bioluminescent flowers of nearby moonblooms. The flying dirt made the night-flowering foliage rattle with falling gravel bits.

“Oi. Careful where you’re flinging that stuff Rix. Going to mess up their flowers.”

“We’re burying a separatist in one of the Vakarian’s gardens, for reasons that Arterius won’t explain, and you’re worried about the plants?”

“Viv loves her garden okay? These plants are her babies.”

Rix glanced up at him sideways from the growing hole, flashing a raised brow at him without stopping the constant pace of labor. Nihlus plopped his chin in a palm, wondering what the sidelong look was for. “...What?”

“Who’s Viv?”

“Oh, Viviene, Garrus’ mari.”

“You’re seriously on a first name, ex that, nickname basis with her?”

“Yeah? So?”

“But the patrem hates your guts?”

“Not my fault. I didn’t do shit to anyone he knows. Probably.”

“…Right.”
Rix straightened up and thrust the shovel at him. They swapped again, thankfully almost finished. Nihlus dug for a good while then groaned effusively, stabbing the tool into the freshly dug earth and resting his foot on the top of the blade. It was almost like he was going to push it down deep for another shovelful, but that mirage only lasted a second before the mildly ruffled torin all-out leaned onto the garden tool.

“I haaaate thiiiiiiis.”

“Hate... what?” the Spectre-to-be asked while keeping watch like he hadn’t been.

The lanky Spectre thought about it for a moment before answering simply, “Ehhhh… work?”

“Work?” the pale torin deadpanned, sitting down on the grave’s edge and wiping the sweat from his neck with a dirty sleeve.

“Yup. Work. Mostly because I was promised a night of fine dining and wine, and instead...”

“Notta whole lotta work going on how I see it,” Rix drawled in a loose colony accent, one that only make Nihlus like him more just for how much like home the other torin sounded. He hadn’t been out to visit pari’s pyre site on Tri in a while, but hey… technically the house was still his, what was left of it. Maybe Blue and he could… but nah. Better to keep those two times in his life very separate.

Nihlus checked back in after his moment’s distraction, gesturing down at his clothes as if the smudges of grass on his knees and the cobalt splotches down his sleeve explained everything.

“What? I’m tired, dirty as fuck, and tipsy. I want sex, a shower, and sleep in that order. Also? Saren was the one wearing black, he should be out here shoveling too, damn it.”

“Nothin’ for it Kryik. Tier privilege, get used to it.”

“We’re barely members of the Hierarchy anymore! How does tier even matter.”

“I’m just jokin’ with you. He did seem kinda intent to check in on Vakarian Jr though.”

“Mmn... yeah. We were supposed to see Garrus again before the event ended, you know? Didn’t work out, and he hates when things don’t go according to plan. Which, I’m sure you’ve noticed by now. Fuck, seriously though, I want to go cuddle with Blue instead of this. I hate digging graves...”

“You’ll be there soon. S’long as you quit yer whining and dig.”

The carmine plated torin sighed again, over exaggerated and forlorn, but went back to digging as suggested... at about a quarter speed.

“Come on, Kryik. You want to be here all night? Keep diggin’.”

“I am diggin’.”

“Uh huh.”

Something in the other torin’s subvocals tipped him off, and he looked up from slowly making more hole to see Rix lean over to pick up a handful of dirt. The ex-merc rolled the brownish grit between his fingers with consideration. It was light stuff, the perfect consistency to settle on things but wet enough to smear instead of brush away.

Nihlus stopped digging entirely, taking a step back with narrowed eyes. The other torin gripped the soil, making a ball of it that he tossed once in his palm before looking up. “Why’d you quit diggin’?”
“Riiix...”

“Come on, friend. Keep going.”

“Put the dirt down.”

Orange eyes glittering darkly, Rix raised the handful of soil a little higher, a vague threat to match the ghost of a smirk. Nihlus saw his arm move, about to throw, and ducked.

That first wad of dirt missed him entirely. The second… did not.

Garrus left the others back on the patio and headed down the warm wooden halls of the southern wing. A few minutes walk put him out into the primary courtyard which he used as a shortcut to get across the grounds, then he was stepping inside again to the crisp architecture of the oldest part of the compound; the original Vakarian clan home the rest had expanded from. Here, the fortress-like halls of the madlis’ west wing were austere stone, filled with relics of wartime and well-aged defenses. It was where his patrem’s private office was; where all the highest tier Vakarian lived and worked.

Garrus preferred the softer edges of the southern wing himself.

The door panel to his father’s office was a cheerful, glowing green, but he tapped the entry request anyway. The portal made a double beep at him, sliding open to reveal a stark, well organized sitting room with a few homey touches that were his mari’s doing. Thick leather cubitura and glass tables before a vidsceen showing bland nature scenes. To the left, his patrem stood beside the doorway to the computer room, arms crossed and expression neutral.

Garrus wasn’t fooled by the calm exterior.

“Pahir. Come have a seat. Let's talk.”

The tall sniper crossed the room at an even pace. Half of him wanted the dissection of his life choices, subsequent reaming out, and fresh set of demands laid on him now. To just... get this over with. The rest of him wanted to turn tail and run, go back to his rooms and hide. No more input, no more being pulled in multiple directions, no more spirit’s damned fake smiles… he just wanted to get away and breathe for a while.

Measured steps toward the lone guest chair were the best middle ground that Garrus could find.

His path crossed Castis’ waiting spot as he moved into the main office space, a barely-there rumbling of discontent escaping from his father’s chest.

‘I've really done it this time. Spirits.’

The older torin he looked so much like was one of the most adept Turians he knew at obfuscating feelings and suppressing subvocals without sounding like he was hiding something. Always watchful and insightful. The perfect detective that he’d wanted to be when he grew up… or... was it the detective he was told he was going to be, so he learned how...?

For a long time now, Garrus hadn’t known which it was. He still didn’t know.
However, the simple fact that the displeased emotion was **audible** probably meant a whole host of things. An entirely new, previously unknown level of furious with him most likely. Head held high and crest straight, he ignored it. The sniper’s own subvocals were a flat, non-reflective pool.

Sitting down at the black stone desk, Garrus breathed in, took a hold of his very best calm, and waited. A half minute passed before he heard footsteps as the elder male walked by him, but instead of going to the opposite chair? His patrem sat on the edge of the desk, hands loose in his lap and body angled just so. Picture perfect suspect interrogation technique, set to ‘low pressure’ mode.

It would have been funny if he wasn’t the one in the chair.

The position was so reminiscent of the Detective vids Garrus had watched as a fledgling, and the lessons they’d gone through back in those early days that it hurt. It **cut**.

He was being **worked over** like some **criminal**.

Anger in his heart, the sniper sat and waited, unresponsive. The offence of the technique had his emotions roiling beneath the surface, but he was adamantine: he would not be the first to break this bleeding silence. His pari might well be considered one of C-Sec’s historied best, but Garrus? Garrus had been **trained** by that same torin.

The minutes ticked by, but he keep on staring ahead into the middle distance, waiting… waiting...

“Are you going to defend yourself?” Castis inquired eventually, bringing a small sense of satisfaction to his pride. His father’s pose remained just as still as his, eyes watchful, but being the first to speak? One point to him, pari zero.

“From?” the younger torin returned the question, deciding to give a little after the other male had broken first. Two pairs of glacial blue eyes met, neither telling.

Light grey mandibles flickered in amusement. “Very good, Garrus.”

“… what?” His subvocals slipped, a hint of confusion buzzing into the air at the unexpected praise.

“There was a day not long ago when you’d have given in first.” There was the vaguest edge of pride in that statement, and it surprised the blue-eyed scion. Castis pushed off the desk, walking around to take a real seat on the other side.

This? This was more familiar.

They’d been in this exact situation a hundred times before. This was where the ‘assessment’ part came in. His pari liked having all the details first, before tearing his choices apart.

Elbows found a brace on the desktop, talons clasped in a steeple. Once the elder torin was settled he spoke in an even tone, calling for a report like he would give anyone else that worked for him, stated in simple orders, “Tell me about your relationship with the Spectres.”

“Where should I start?” Garrus asked carefully.

“The beginning.”

“Why? Will it change the outcome?”

His patrem tapped his talons on the black stone of the desk, giving the question due consideration before replying, “Potentially.”
“Alright,” he hummed with reluctance. The clan member in him reconciled with the fact that he had to give the elder torin something. “I met Saren during a large scale bank robbery on the Citadel. I was the first officer on scene, working to clear civilians from the hostile zone. He happened to be nearby when the block-wide evacuation call went out. Together, we cleared the building, got a lot of civilians out of there, and caught the ring leader.”

Castis nodded a few times, absorbed the information, and then gestured for him to continue. “...and Spectre Kryik?”

Garrus leaned back in his chair, considering how to best phrase it. “Saren introduced us. There was a case they needed help on and I... consulted.”

“Consulted?”

“Yes.”

“For a Spectre?” The sniper could hear the disbelief in his father’s dual-toned voice.

“Yes, why is that so surprising?” The sniper had to force himself not to lean forward, not to emphasize the reply with angry subvocals. He mostly succeeded.

‘Why the hell is it so implausible? I’m good at what I do. I am.’

Garrus had heard positive feedback enough times from various people at work to believe it, enough times to be sick of the other torin’s never ending criticism. Castis merely waved him off, a tilt to his mandibles that Garrus couldn’t decipher.

“What did you consult on... if you can tell me? How did it lead to more?” He bristled at the pause, a clear dig at classified ops. As if he hadn’t spent years as a hastatim on classified missions. Like there was something wrong with tight operational security. Garrus gave himself a few breaths to calm down before he spoke.

“There was an instance with a bomb. They needed someone who could sift through technical material remotely, at an obscene hour. I happened to be in the office still… it worked out well. Everyone lived. They offered to buy me lunch as thanks, and I accepted. We continued to meet on occasion and it grew from there.”

The mountainous sniper exhaled, leaning back in his chair. If that wasn’t a fair, honest, un-incriminating delivery of events, he didn’t know what was. Castis nodded, seeming to accept the information as fact. The darker grey torin didn’t appear any more upset than he had been. If anything he was more relaxed. A good sign. The sniper dared hope this wouldn’t be as bad as he’d feared… there’d been no shaming or physical attacks, pari was listening.

“Continue. How did you go from consulting on a single case to being... friends?”

“Executor Pallin has a tendency to assign me to... mmn... difficult cases. When I’m on patrol shifts between them? Dispatch likes to tag me when they have odd calls or abnormal problems to deal with. Occasionally, those things involve Spectres.”

The newly minted Senator made a noise that encouraged him to expand, so he gave an example. “Once there was a skycar chase through multiple wards. Dispatch sent out an ABP about an unknown vehicle chasing down another, no explanation. It turned out that it was Saren and Nihlus chasing down a suspect. A crafty one at that; used lasers to sheer off the top of their skycar, and then pulled some stunt driving that sent Nihlus flying out of the vehicle. I caught him mid-air in a patrol car, saved his life.” Garrus half smiled at the memory before clamping down on the response.
“How does that translate into friendship?”

“It… it just did? We kept running into each other, and got along well.”

Castis watched him silently, the very air holding still as he waited for a verdict, or a dressing down, or even just a dismissal. Something.

“I feel as though I am missing part of the story. If these Spectres were only casual acquaintances with you, then your mari wouldn’t have needed to force an introduction in a public setting. She could have just told me at home, or at the least, forewarned me. Her actions were calculated. Why?”

‘Shit.’

“Mari likes Nihlus. He’s a good soul. She probably wanted you to like them, to give them a fair chance.” There might have been too much emphasis on those last words. The younger detective really didn’t think he was asking too much with the insinuation.

His patrem’s mandibles flicked twice in wordless acknowledgement that the message had been heard, at the very least.

“I’m still not understanding, pahir. Why did I need this… revelation… to come as timed as it did? Why does it matter so much to you if these Spectres are well received?”

Garrus looked away, breaking slightly from nerves at the way his father’s voice sounded in that sentence. Some of the anger was dripping back in, but also a sliver of hurt under the displeasure. The sniper was surprised that he’d succeeded in upsetting his patrem. He had… actually never done that before.


…but upset? Not once. Garrus hadn’t thought it was possible. Castis was always calm and collected.

The conversation had been going so well… he just... needed to keep it going.

The mountainous detective’s gaze strayed away from the torin in front of him seeking inspiration, catching on the holographic fireplace blowing artificially-made heat out of the nearby hearth. The flames looked real behind the tempered glass, the high tech unit beautifully designed, but he knew the truth: the fire was illusion, the heat made by machines.

Garrus swallowed and looked away, focus sliding upward.

His eyes traced the crossed blades mounted above the top ledge; the long straight lines of the twin vikarus, his clan’s ancient claim to fame from thousands of years ago. Those antiques had been there for as long as he could remember.

The torin sitting across from him was one of tradition, just as much as those blades were.

“Pari, I... “ he paused, turning back to look across the desk again. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but they are my best friends. They’re… like clan to me. I won’t break from them just because you tell me to. They deserve better than that.”

Castis scoffed, hands finally dropping from the steeple to smooth across the surface of the desk. It was a motion that Garrus recognized, one he’d been taught to do to keep his hands from clenching into fists. His gizzard sunk.
“You’ll do as I say.”

“But—”

“Be quiet, Garrus. I’m trying to decide what to do about this unfortunate connection. It isn’t good for you, and doesn’t reflect well on the clan.”

Garrus’ jaw clenched, then relaxed, then clenched again. Nothing. Nothing he had said was actually getting through to his father. The invitation to talk had only been a ruse for information.

He took a breath, stretched his neck left then right, and settled back in his chair, defiant.

“I’m not going to just do as you say, pari. I won’t. I can’t.”

“Can’t.” The elder torin repeated, the word as sharp as the blades on the wall. “What do you mean can’t?”

The sniper bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood. Shaking his head slightly and looking away again, unwilling to meet his patrem’s eyes… he hadn’t meant to give away any more information, but it seems he had. Garrus swallowed, saying nothing.

“Speak.” Castis demanded almost immediately, voice raising in volume. His father’s subvocals rolled out in a low bass tone of warning.

Garrus straightened his shoulders as he met his progenitor’s eyes, glacial steel to glacial stone squaring off, narrow and stubborn.

Except… steel was stronger than stone.

“…do you really want to know?” the sniper asked in a harsh whisper. It was his own warning that the answer wasn’t something his father could un-know once heard.

Castis just stared at him, waiting.

“I swore karifratus with Saren.”


Garrus’ hands clenched the metal arms of his chair. He waited for the eventual reprimand, the fresh orders, disgust or dismissal… The soldier in him knew something was coming, the pahir in him braced for the damage. It was an aching minute of wordless, brittle staring before anything happened.

Hands pushed against desk, and the older torin stood with painful slowness, as if his very bones were too heavy to lift. His patrem broke the stalemate, turning away from him to head for the doorway. Garrus thought he was just going to leave, but after a few halting steps the other male stopped. The sniper turned to see him leaning with one hand on the door frame. Talons clenched against the metal, hard enough for the blood to leave his hand.

Castis took a long time to decide on what to do next, and Garrus waited, trapped in the windowless office, half turned and trying not to breathe too loudly. There wasn’t even a vent big enough for him to crawl through to escape this.

Whatever would happen… would happen.

The newly elected senator eventually moved, a fist slamming sideways into the door panel. The
portal slid shut, fingers flicked, and the display turned red. His patrem turned, mandibles drawn tight against his jaw.

“Stand up,” the other male ground out, a brutal growl from low in his throat.

Garrus complied, rising from the chair and stepping around it to face him. He might’ve attempted an apology then, but instead swallowed his words when they made eye contact again.

There was nothing he could say to that face.

Apparently there was nothing Castis could say either, instead he lunged with all the speed of a well trained Turian soldier and punched Garrus clean across his face, sending him staggering back.

“Wha-” he began, only to be cut off by another assault.

“You ungrateful … foolish… disrespectful… selfish…” the damning litany cut off, words apparently not enough to express his disgust. “You taint the pristine lines of our clan for what? Some fantasy? Some part of you that needs to get back at me for denying you a chance to become a Spectre yourself? You not only dishonor me, but the entire clan for some… some… some failed, barefaced science project?”

His head snapped up, mandibles loose and jaw dropped in shock. The physical violence was nothing new, but that—those words—how could—

“Pari.” he started, voice edging on fury.

“What?” the other male spat back. “You’re surprised that I would insult him? I thought I taught you better than this, pahir. Apparently you missed everything I ever said about judging character!”

Garrus pulled back, arms up to ward off further strikes, his voice getting louder with each word until he was nearly yelling. “Your lessons stuck just fine. Saren is a good torin! He makes me better for knowing him!!”

Castis choked on a dark laugh, as though that were beyond the realm of possibility. “What do I need to do to get it through that thick skull of yours, Garrus? Spectres are not your friends. They are not worthy of any clan, let alone this one.”

He snarled at his own father, every moment where people had treated Saren differently coming to the forefront of his mind. Every sideways look and sneer. His karifratren never seemed bothered by it, but spirits it… it…

“Take it back.”

“Does it make you angry that I’ve insulted him?” Castis scoffed, tossing his chin in challenge. “You’re the insult, Garrus. You, without even thinking to consult your elders, invite one of the worst Turians in the entire Hierarchy into this clan. Him and his low born, colony harlot. This doesn’t even come close to—”

Garrus cut him off this time, lunging at his patrem with all the anger he’d been holding back for years. “SHUT UP!”

His father had been expecting him, so the charge merely made the older torin stumble a few paces instead of hitting the floor. Garrus was strong, stronger than Castis was, but his patrem had decades more experience and a slightly cooler head. Momentum was used to send him flying past, crashing to the floor.
The furious sniper wasn’t done though, teeth bared he pounced again. This time he came in colder, forsaking the satisfaction of a blind charge in favor of ramming his shoulder into the unplated hide of the older male’s waist. Castis fell back, grabbing at Garrus as he went, pulling them both down to the chilled stone flooring.

A distinct ripping sound preceded the thump as they hit the ground, the younger on top of the older. The sniper was quick to gain a better position, kneeling over the new Senator, one hand grabbing the loose fabric of his tunic as Garrus wound up his arm to throw a punch... but he stopped dead at the expression of distilled horror on his father’s face.

The blue haze of anger faded by a half measure, replaced by confusion as his talons loosening in the shirt fabric. A moment ago Castis had been actively fighting with him. Now…?

Now his eyes were locked lower than his face, to the soft hide inside his cowl on the right side of his neck. Right at the exact spot where...

‘Oh fuck.’

Castis was shaking. Slack jawed and eyes wide.

“I…” he began, climbing off of the other male. Garrus moved out of his reach, backing away until his carapace made contact with the locked door. His palm came up to press to the print of Nihlus’ teeth in his hide. It wasn’t actually a bondmark… but it certainly would look like it. “Listen, there’s mor-”

The second it was covered, the spell was broken.

Sitting up from the position he’d fallen in like a livewire, Castis’ subvocals went utterly dead. “Get out.”

“Wait, I can exp-”

The older torin cut him off, looking anywhere but at him. “Get out, before I throw you out.” When he didn’t immediately start moving his patrem roared a tortured sounding, “NOW!”

The younger torin swallowed the shambles of retort trying to form in his mind. Using the wall as a crutch he straightened up, palming behind himself with a free hand until the door slid open. He was backpedaling shakily when Castis’ bitter voice hit him with the force of a charging Krogan.

“You get out of that oath or you’re out of this clan.”

Garrus turned, and ran.

Chapter End Notes

[Codex Entry - Palaven ecology and architecture] (Excerpt from the game codex.)

"When the turians were introduced to the galactic community, an asari diplomat poetically described their homeworld, Palaven, as “a silver world of fortresses and fire.” Because Palaven's weak magnetic field is a poor shield from its sun, most of the planet's animal life developed metallic carapaces as defenses against solar radiation. Its photosynthetic life is similarly impressive, shutting down vulnerable metabolic processes during daylight hours and repairing cellular damage at night. The visible fortifications of
Turian cities reflect their martial society, but since joining the galactic community, internal conflicts have become honor-bound affairs with few casualties among noncombatants."

04/12/2010 - Chao Hsu and Valerie LeBarre Married on Luna

“Earth's most famous political family welcomed a new member today as the wedding of Chao Hsu and Valerie LeBarre kicked off on Luna. A record two million spectators turned out in Cape Canaveral to watch the bride and groom launch to the moon, where an exclusive guest list of 1,500 witnessed the couple recite their own vows in iambic pentameter and exchange tungsten carbide rings. LeBarre's stunning ring is a flawless 16-carat marquise-cut diamond flanked by rare emeralds, and is estimated to be worth just over three million credits. The bride mixed traditions by changing from a European white wedding gown into a red Chinese cheongsam for the reception, where the happy couple danced to "Forever Eyes" by Shasta Miles. The spectacular evening's finale saw the newlyweds ride off to the honeymoon suite on a white horse brought to Luna just for the occasion.”

A/N: The moral of this news blurb is this: Before you murder author-chan, please remember that there is a happy ending? (...and that morale does not actually improve with beatings. n_n;;;;)

Fanfic Recommendation: The Many Relationships of Garrus Vakarian - Full Version (92153 words) by Marie_Fanwriter (As you'd expect from a fic that's nearing the 100k mark, this story spans a lot of time, and goes a lot of places. Check the tags!!! It gets spicy. Also, I just realized that I missed the fic req for chapter 192. If you are reading when this is current, a new req has been added there, heads up. )
To search the ashes for still burning embers

Chapter Summary

Sometimes we are reduced to rubble by people that would swear they love us.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Karifratrus - A Turian oath of brotherhood/sisterhood, not describing blood relations, but verbal promises as close as family that last a lifetime. The prefix 'kari' is amended to relationships that are built or born from this bond. (Credit: MizDirected)

Fraten/Filian - TCD. The equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. (Credit: MizDirected)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I feel like he isn’t coming back,” Macen sighed, talons clicking against the glass topped table beside him.

Solana made a quiet, strangled noise of frustration.

The colonization specialist took a final draw on his beer to finish it off. His grey-plated friend was quiet, glaring wordlessly into the middle distance. Amaranthe eyes flicked to Garrus’ date for help improving the mood, but the lovely tarin was doing something quite similar though involving even more ‘thousand yard stare’.

Machen scratched lightly at his neck, clicking his tongue and trying -not for the first time- to steer the evening back onto track for a good night.

“So… who’s ready to find something horizontal to flop on?”

He could hear the distant calls of nocturnal birds, cooing and chirping as they when about their morning.

“Right! Bed it is, glad we all agree.”

It took some nudging, some tugging, and a bit of subvocal encouragement, but he got the two tarin up out of their chairs and wandering in the direction of the main hallway.

Now if only he knew where the guest rooms actually where…

“Ah, Sol… which way…?”

His grumpy coworker sighed, finally coming out of her own head enough to direct them through the right twists and turns. Their path took the trio into a more visually grand area of the the madlis , filled with more guest-nonspecific decor and greater protections on the displayed relics. Most of them
seemed behind plexiglass or too close to the vaulted ceilings to reach.

Macen watched it all pass by trying to think of another way to turn the night around. He really didn’t want to crash on some impersonal guest bed by himself tonight…

“Hey Sol, can I sleep with you?”

She snorted a laugh, “Are you asking to sleep with me or to sleep with me, Macen? I can never tell with you and your flirty subvocals.”

The short, soft-brown shaded male grinned, pleased to have made at least of one his companions laugh a little.

“Oh either really. How about you Makasian? Up for some fun? I think tonight would be vastly improved by a few rounds in bed.”

The lovely tarin blinked and looked over from her nebulous stare, laughing lightly. “Do you flirt with every other breath intentionally, or is it just habit?”

Macen hummed consideringly as the three turned a corner, a talon tapping his chin.

“You know? I’m not entirely certain.”

The decorative aquamarine lamp Garrus threw across the seating area in his private rooms nearly shattered into a thousand jagged shards against the far wall, only saved from demise by a sudden, luminous blue glow. For a moment he panicked, thinking the biotic field was him, that somehow the eezo locked in his bones was leaking out… but the elegant form in black and silver slipping inside from the balcony cleared up that sudden terror.

“Saren…” he exhaled, the anger draining out of him alongside the spike of fear.

The lamp floated back to it’s birchwood side table on command by a fluttering of black gloved fingers, settling down with a very slight clink. They met in the middle of the room, just beyond the view inside from the second floor balcony doors.

Electric eyes flitted between his features, a clothed hand coming out to stroke down the side of his face with the barest of touches. “Was that because of our appearance at the event?”

Garrus shook his head as the fingers fell away, missing them already even though the near-brush of his cracked face was painful. “No.”

“That is good,” Saren gestured vaguely toward the lamp. “Then why...?”

The shorter torin trailed off, eyes roving over the pained look on his face. The pause lasted a long time, suspended between them as Garrus dug around for something to say… something besides the words of hate and ultimatum echoing on repeat in his mind.

“Garrus?”

“I uh…” The exhausted detective shook his head, opening and closing his mouth a few times before
a sort of explanation began to come out in fragmented sentences and halting words. “Argument with my patrem. He demanded I… and you're already… and… just don't care … haha… ha…”

His laughter wasn’t from humor, but he reigned himself in when tones of worry began threading their way into Saren’s subvocals. Garrus inhaled and exhaled slowly several times, grabbing for control of the shock-like feeling turning him over. The final breath still came out shaken as he ran his hands over his crest.

“I’m… sorry.”

Looking uncertain but determined, Saren stepped closer and hugged him. It was stiff and gentle, but the silver-grey male leaned back and peered up at him with such interest in seeing if it had helped. Garrus’ spine felt like frozen steel.

How could his father demand he break this oath?

Throw away this easy friendship, forsake this honest, undemanding...

‘Why??’

His karifraten was one of his closest friends, one of the best, most noble people he knew...

‘Why?!?’

“Garrus.” Saren’s deep rumble broke him out of his own head for the second time, the particularly long horns of his crest tilting as the other male looked up at him with growing concern.

“…yes?”

A firmer hand settled on his shoulder, squeezing as the Spectre stepped away.

“Breathe. Sit. I will make tea, and you can look for the right words to explain. Speak when you have them, I will wait.” The silver-grey torin moved to the little kitchenette he’d made as a teenager to keep from having to walk all the way to the caman and risk being forced to be social.

The mountainous sniper more or less stumbled over to the uncomfortable couch the staff had replaced his cubitura with, and collapsed into it gratefully. Saren Arterius was... in his childhood rooms, making him tea.

He stared hollowly across the room as the Spectre searched the area for mugs, and came up with a pair of glazed pottery bowls, tapered on one side to pour into the mouth with ease. The other torin filled them with steaming, temperature-perfect water from the spout, sniffing each of the three unlabeled containers of dried tea blends before choosing one that apparently passed muster.

It was the work of only a few minutes, but Garrus was better for the silence, his mind clearing as he watched the mundane task be completed with the stolid agent’s usual efficiency.

When finished, Saren crossed the small space and placed a cream coloured tea bowl down onto the kava table before him, a gloved finger underneath the base so it touched down near silently. Next the agent turned on the little aquamarine lamp, illuminating the room with a warmer glow than Menae’s pale, fading light.

Glacial blue eyes closed then, blocking out all the world in favor of the darkness behind his eyelids. The next thing the sniper felt was the couch giving as Saren sat down beside him, not touching but close enough to feel the other male’s warmth. The biotic ran hotter than he did on a normal day, but
it felt like being near by a bonfire compared to the chill of his own hide right now.

‘Warm…’

His *karifraten* waited with seemingly endless patience, the only sounds in the room were the moments that ceramic met mouthplate, the faint beating of their hearts, and the steady susurrus of their breathing that his aural augments picked out in the over-hanging quietude.

Garrus attempted to speak a few times, never getting farther than the first few words before stopping. He probably would’ve remained like that had the other torin not eventually picked up his mug and placed the warm beverage in his hands. He held back a groan at the simple pleasure of cupping a warm drink between his fingers, finally turning to look at his calm-restoring company. Saren focus was distant, somewhere on the dimming horizon outside the balcony.

“Desolas would… do this when I was young,” the other male began in a low voice. “I was not good at interacting with others, even before my biotics began to show. It helped immensely at times. I relied on it. On him.”

The thought of ‘*that’s what family is for* ’ nearly slipped past his mouthplates, but Garrus swallowed back the suddenly bitter idea and tried a different track.

“Sounds like he was a good *fraten.*”

Saren nodded, falling silent again in favor of tilting back another sip of tea. The sniper watched him, a hundred thoughts spinning in his head, but one came more clearly forward than others.

‘*What would it do to him to lose another brother?*’

There was no cost he could think of too steep, no punishment too harsh, where he could accept being a part of making the answer to that question into reality. Garrus swallowed hard, sitting up a little and searching for something else to say. Talking about what was at the front of his mind wasn’t working, but maybe other things, -less painful things-, could be spoken.

“I’m... ahh... glad you’re here. Really.”

“We did promise not to leave without saying goodbye.”

The detective hummed in agreement, still grateful and surprised that so much extra effort had been given to follow through. Slipping past the *madlis’* security systems and guards couldn’t have been easy… and speaking of, he suddenly found himself wondering where their missing third was.

“You did, and I’m sorry I didn’t find you. Pari, he…” Garrus cut off, subvocals wavering in his distress. He took a deep breath, shoving the thoughts back down again. “Where’s Nihlus?”

“With Avitus, completing a task for me.” The sniper’s subvocals rolled in muted curiosity, asking for more information. Saren obliged with a dismissing toss of his wrist and another sip of tea. “A known separatist was at the event this evening. Do not worry, they have been dealt with.”

Garrus nodded, both mildly surprised that Council agents would make taking out separatists a priority, but also satisfied to know the threat had been dealt with. He’d given too much to the Hierarchy’s cause to stand idle when secessionist sympathizers or activists became known. That Saren and Nihlus were under orders to do the same, apparently... It was a relief to a concern Garrus hadn’t known he’d had.

“He’s coming later then?”
“He should be here soon, if you prefer to wait and speak to him…”

“No.” Garrus said more sharply than he’d meant to. “It’s just been a long day. I want to talk to you about it. Actually… hm… better you than him.”

Saren’s head tilted in a clearly questioning way, but the torin didn’t voice anything, calmly waiting for him to continue. The sniper took a drink of his lukewarm tea, gathering himself up to speak.

“Pari was... is ... furious with me.” He scrubbed a palm back over the back of his neck, wishing he was on his cubitura on the Citadel instead of here. This old room of his was nearly foreign to him now. “I told… I... ahghh ,” a frustrated sound escaped Garrus’ throat, the hand not holding his tea sliding down to fall into his lap, fist clenching and relaxing in agitation.

“...what did you tell him?” Saren prompted after a moment.

The sniper licked the back of his fangs, deciding to just get it out.

“About the oath. Our karifratrus oath.”

“Ah.”

“Ah?” the detective asked back, watching the other torin’s still placid face. “That’s all you have to say? ‘Ah’?”

Saren merely hummed in agreement.

“Though I suppose that is not the only thing your patrem found out about today?”

Garrus looked down to the torn fabric flapping from his shoulder before quickly refocusing elsewhere. His hand coming back up, this time to palm the incomplete circle of teeth punctures that matched Nihlus’ fangs. That his father thought matched Saren’s...

‘Spirits, what a mess.’

“We… we fought. It was an accident.”

Garrus winced at his own lackluster explanation, given immediately after he’d dished out crap for his karifraten’s own short answer. Saren only hummed again, this time with more comforting undertones.

“That explains this.” Gloved talons came in again to touch where his father had decked him. The detective flinched at the mild prick of pain the contact caused, and the hand moved away from his face again. Electric eyes watched him as he blinked away the pain and forced himself not to sway closer and just… wrap around around him, set his head on top of Saren’s. That silver-grey crest was just about the perfect height.

“Is there anything I can do for you Garrus?”

“Ah, well…” he thought about it briefly, breath catching on how fucked everything was, and he turned again again, head hanging, “probably, not. No.”

“You will tell me if that changes. I wish to see the situation improved, whatever that requires.”

The sniper swallowed, on the verge of keening at the simple but blunt statement of support. So very Saren. So very unlike his pari… more like his mari, if anything. Even Sol scolded him to try and do
what everyone expected of him. Mari was… the one who told him to elope. To dream. To always do what was right. To follow his heart.

The next words out of his mouth were more even for all that they sounded like surrender, but as he spoke something was hardening in his heart. Something stubborn and very done with the choices being made for him.

“There’s nothing anyone can really do. He doesn’t care what I want out of life. He doesn’t… he just doesn’t care.”

“Elaborate?”

“Pari wouldn’t even listen to a full explanation. He’d decided that he didn’t like our oath before we even started talking about it. The clan elders and our Avah wouldn’t like if they knew, but I… I won’t go back on my word like some spineless Asari maiden. They can’t make me.”

“They can apply a great deal of pressure on you. They can take much away.”

Spirits, could they ever. His marks, his name, the right to come home… Garrus’ voice wavered, half choked when he found words again. “Fuck them. I won’t go back on my word, and I won’t stay away from Nihlus.”

The Spectre shook his head ever so slightly, expression unreadable, not even chastising him for the expletive. “If there comes a time where you must choose, Garrus, you must choose them.”

“No…”

“You must,” he reiterated, “Nihlus and I… we are not…” Saren stumbled over his words in a very unusual way for the laconic, ever-composed agent. “I know what it is to be alone. I do not wish that on you. Neither would Nihlus. We are Spectres, and our lives will likely be very short. When we are gone? You will need clan.”

“Saren…” he breathed, mandibles trembling. “Don’t make me choose.”

“I am not asking you to, the choice is made for us.”

“No!” he shouted, not caring if anyone heard. The pottery in his hands shattered from the sudden, untenable pressure put on it.

Saren pulled back from the noise out of instinct, blinking up at his sudden outburst. Garrus almost whined at the loss of proximity but instead pushed out a growl, choosing to express his anger with the world over letting the pain of this get to him. He stood up, throwing the broken remains away from him. They hit the wall like the lamp had not, breaking further and clattering to the stone floor.

Garrus stalked for the open space beside the seating area, and started pacing.

The room’s furniture had seemed pushed too far aside when he had innitally entered the suite, but the Spectre had ignored the way his mind noted the incongruous layout. Picking out irregularities
was as habitual as breathing to him, so the stoic male made nothing of it at first.

Now the reasoning was revealed. The open space beside the seating was the perfect distance for twelve steps, a quarter turn and three short steps, then back another twelve before he needed to turn again.

Rinse and repeat, as Garrus paced in agitation.

Saren left him to it, uncertain of the best course of action. He doubted reverie would work again. These complications seemed too distressing for such simple, chemical comforts to be welcome... and truly, there was little he could do to realistically change the heart of these matters.

He would always be a biotic, something his people were overly superstitious about. Hypocritical even, as Asari received little to no stigma. He was barefaced by choice, first and foremost oaths to the galaxy as a whole; no single nation or colony holding loyalty over that.

Nihlus, was something of a pariah also. Popular with the media, but he would always be a low-born colony rankbanger. His protégé had risen high from nothing, and that filled Saren with pride… but society did not like one rising too many ranks in one generation. These things were meant to happen slowly, with patience and dedication. If the child of a low tier sped up through the ranks, surely their parent’s talents had been missed, and whose fault was that? A ridiculous notion in a society meant to be perfectly meritocratic, but such things were rarely impeccable in practice.

There was little to be done about their suitability for a scion of a major clan. They had risen as high as they could go as outsiders working for a foreign government.

Saren looked over at his oath brother, stalking across the floor and growling angrily while very audibly shoving down weak, distressed sounding tones in his harmonics. The tall sniper was not seeing anything around him, only focused on keeping in his emotions and taking the next step. The Spectre’s mind raced through all the things that Desolas used to do to calm him down. His lists felt empty, none of it was quite enough. Saren himself never felt such tumultuously powerful emotions as his sniper was displaying.

He swallowed, eyes following the other Turian’s every move as his mind spun for answers.

Utterly lacking a solution, Saren sought to understand the problem more completely. Circumstances what they were, Garrus was… overcome with emotion. He listened, carefully, trying to sort out the other male’s feelings by sound alone. Hurt? … no, hurt wasn’t a strong enough word. Personal expectation and hope denied. The harmonics were more... betrayed.

The patrem’s reaction was the source then, most likely. Saren considered it further, piecing together what he knew. Garrus mentioned sharing the existence of their oath with the senator. The two had fought. What would one who despised Spectres think of such a thing? They would want it gone. That was logical.

Then most likely the elder torin had demanded his pahir break the karifratrus. For an honorbound torin of Senator Vakarian’s standing, his hatred of Spectres would have to be intense to demand such a thing. It was nearly unheard of… and no wonder the mountainous torin pacing nearby was so distraught over it. The revealed mark was probably on the table for dissolution as well, easily done with cosmetic surgery for the visible scar.

Still, his sniper felt betrayed by his patrem, and was under some sort of duress to break their oath… none of which had been a part of Saren’s intent. The Arterius madlis, and all it’s grounds, were a gift to the Vakarian clan on his death, with the small caveat that Garrus would take care of Nihlus after
he was gone.

Where had the disconnect between intent and dissent occurred?

“Garrus…” he attempted, but when the taller male flinched at the call he did not try further.

Saren continued to sit and watch, unable to speak up in his own favor while knowing full well what Garrus would have to do to please his clan. Perhaps he could instigate some sort of behavior to create a rift, to make the break easier? Either way, he needed to calm the other torin down. This state of agitated stalk and wild harmonics was untenable.

Insight struck without warning and the stoic male paused, just now seeing the way Garrus occasionally pawed at the teeth marks on his neck. The sniper’s expression would turn tortured for a few moments, subvocals desperate as thoughts seemed to bring him back around to the marks before his hand would rise to hold a palm to the scarring. Then, he would breathe easier for a few steps before the tension rose again and his hand fell away.

Nihlus. They first needed Nihlus to soothe this before any more reasoning could be done.

His Omnitool was out and the haptic interface open within a split second. Saren was halfway through typing a message when he heard a small thump from the direction of the balcony. Letting out the breath he did not realize he was holding, the Spectre relaxed a fraction and closed his tool.

The door opened slowly, a mostly-white arm preceding the rest of a dirt covered torin. “Ughhh. Saren, next time you’re the one dealing w-” the younger male cut off, focus locked onto Garrus. “-is everything alright?”

Saren gave him a look.

“Help.”

“Yeah… yeah okay. Just… hold on.”

Nihlus took a half step backwards, whispering something to whoever else was on the balcony, likely Rix. The conversation went back and forth in low tones for a moment, before his first protégé stepped in alone and closed the door.

Garrus had stopped pacing. Until this moment, Saren had not known that seeing someone else in pain could make him physically hurt, but that was exactly how he felt when Garrus fell to his knees with an anguished keen. Nihlus ran to the crying torin, dropping to his own knees, arms encircling broad shoulders that shook from the force of his wailing subvocals. The sniper fell into him, hyperventilating as he wept.

“Hey, hey, hey, Blue… it’s okay, it’s okay. I’m here.” Nihlus looked up, confusion and anger sparking in his expression as his eyes landed on the dried blood near the sniper’s maxillary plating. Verdant green irises darkened, turning to lock eyes with Saren. “What happened? Who did this? How did-”

Saren did not know what to say, precisely, to sum up the mess, or if he should say anything at all. Garrus had specifically said he wanted to talk to him instead of Nihlus. He flicked his crest aside negatively as a request to dismiss the angry slew of questions.

“Later.”

Nihlus did not look pleased about the delay. “Yeah… yeah okay.”
A gloveless red-brown palm settled on their sniper’s spinal plating at the neck, squeezing lightly, as the younger male made nonsense hums of comfort that rolled gently out into the air. It only made the Vakarian scion lose more of his control. If anything, the quaking of Garrus’ shoulders became increasingly pronounced. “Breathe Blue. Just breathe. I’m right here, Saren’s here, and whatever it is? We’ll figure it out.”

Stone-grey fringe shook rapidly in a negative, although the tall male’s distress stopped getting worse.

Nihlus held firmly onto Garrus’ neck as their third number wept, legs caging him in and cowl catching his tears. A short eternity of shuddering and pain filled, spine-chilling noises passed as Saren stood beside them and watched, trying to memorize his protégé’s tactics for future use. It bothered him that had the tears started earlier he would not have been any use.

It bothered him further that Garrus was in such a state at all.

Eventually, the sniper’s wretched breaths slowed as the minutes passed by like steadily flowing lava; heavy and molten until it met the ocean and crawled to a stop. Soon enough the jagged pitch of his sniper’s keens smoothed out, harmonics calming until they merely hitched slightly instead of the wild, wet keens from moments ago. Nihlus continued to soothe with slow nuzzles and quiet murmurs, patient and gentle until the talons on his back loosened.

“Therrrrre we go. Yeah, that’s it. Now let me see those beautiful blue eyes of yours...” Saren watched Garrus swallow heavily in his protégé’s arms, taking a moment to manage looking up as requested. Nihlus smiled broadly if not happily, and drew a hand back over the detective’s crest blades.

“Oh Blue. You’ve got some awful purple-eye going on. What made this happen? Tell me about it?”

Garrus shrugged, the tension not leaving his shoulders. Nihlus nodded as if being speechless with upset was completely normal, and began tugging their sniper to his feet. The tall male came reluctantly, but cooperated with a little encouragement. Saren moved to follow them as Nihlus tugged and coerced their sniper toward the bedroom, but stopped a few paces back, unsure of what he should be doing.

“I think you’ve had a damn long day, how about calling it quits and going to bed?”

The keen returned slightly, fluttering into the air with a strange sort of under current to the flang in their sniper’s voice. Something akin to missing opportunity… It took Saren a moment to piece the concept together. His karifraten did not want to miss out on time with them, crest giving another determinedly negative shake.

“Come on, ya need some sleep. You’re no good to anyone like this, especially yourself.”

“Not… alone...” came the choked request.

“Of course not alone. We’ll stay,” his protégé looked back at him with something between inquiry and insistence. “Right?”

The initial plan had been to visit for a short time and then leave, but oath to be broken soon or not, he did not wish to leave Garrus such a state. Departing now was too cruel to consider.

Saren agreed with a slight nod, moving around to tap the panel on what he presumed was the bedroom door. It swished open with a slight creek, revealing a nest-bed shaped like half an egg shell. Far too small for three adults...
“Almost there, Blue, keep goin’. We’ll bunker down and get some rest, and tomorrow we’ll work on whatever it is, ‘kay?”

Saren swallowed lightly, reconciling how his night was about to be spent. Most likely kept awake because of being crowded, involving a fair bit of ceiling-watching, and hours spent perusing the ebooks on his greybox.

At least the ceiling was a new one. New cracks to count. New panels to look for misalignments in.

Nihlus deposited the other male onto the edge of the bed before shedding his ruined clothes and starting to tug Garrus out of his own formal wear. His protégé did so with a kind of reverence, all calming touches and smooth motions. Green eyes turned to find him in the near-darkness.

“Can you look for a medkit? Someone hit him pretty solidly. His maxillary plate is cracked…”

The biotic nodded again and left for the bathroom, expecting there would be something usable in there as he did not recall seeing one in the kitchenette. The ensuite was compact, not much larger than the one in the detective’s Citadel apartment. A variety of grey tile accented the space, underlining a Hierarchy standard medical aid kit attached to the wall by the door. Opening it, he checked that the supplies were still usable before returning to the bedroom.

Nihlus was sitting on the bed beside Garrus, gingerly pressing his crest against the distressed torin’s. Only because of his aural augmentations did he hear the whispered words, “I’ll be right back. Let Saren check that, alright?” There was slight increase in breathing pace that followed it, and a quiet vaguely affirmative noise as reply.

Pulling away, the younger Spectre came toward him, briefly putting a hand on his shoulder and giving a light squeeze before carrying past to the bathroom. Saren turned to watch him go, disquieted to be in charge of Garrus again. What if...

The lanky knife-wielder stopped at the door, holding onto the frame for a moment before stepping inside and starting the shower. He didn’t close the door.

Saren turned forward again, moving to take the spot where Nihlus had been and placing the medical kit onto the nightstand. As he settled in, the sniper’s breathing slowed back down, a hand finding purchase in his shirt. He reached to give the back of that hand a quick squeeze before reaching for medical supplies.

“I am... here.”

It was quick work to seal over the crack on his detective’s facial plating. A bit of medi-gel and an anti-inflammatory was all that was really needed. Still dripping, Nihlus came back to look over things while buffing himself down with a towel.

“How’s he doin’?”

“...unwell.”

The other Spectre merely grunted with affirmative bent, sliding in on the far side and motioning for him to do the same. Saren did so, blinking in surprise when muscular arms came around him, pulling him flush to the sniper’s broad chest. He exhaled slowly, and shifted to test the maneuverability.

Where he shifted, Garrus let him move without restriction, instead turning with him or letting him slip away as he wished. Accepting it as sufficient, Saren found himself a comfortable position and tried to relax.
Being engulfed in the much larger torin’s arms was not… unpleasant. He stared at the wall for a good long while, thoughts starting to drift. At one point he might have dozed for some minutes before a near soundless hiss rose on the air, worried and still angry.

“He’s asleep,” Nihlus whispered into the still air, the edge of desire-to-maim threading into his subvocals. Saren’s own rolled out in reply with understanding that the other male was feeling protective, but also asking for calm. There was no one to kill to solve these problems. His protégé’s second voice came back, blandly acknowledging his own without necessarily agreeing. “Now can you tell me what happened?”

“It is difficult to explain,” Saren offered quietly. He began shifting in place very slowly, turning until he faced Garrus, chin tucking into the sniper’s cowl so he could peer over his shoulder to see Nihlus. It gave him a moment to choose the correct words; it would do no good to upset his protégé further.

As if reading his mind, the knife-loving torin flicked his mandibles into an unhappy smile. “I’ll be fine. I’m calm. Just tell me.”

“Very well. Garrus’ patrem seems to have given him an ultimatum. I believe it is our oath and your mark or his clan.”

Although his face and body remained carefully relaxed and neutral, something subtle in the other torin’s manner tilted toward dangerous. Something remorseless, and something angry. It was reminiscent of that same stubborn foolishness that Garrus had displayed when he had insisted that the sniper make the more long-sighted choice.

In attempt to dissuade Nihlus from the same line of thought, the stoic Spectre reiterated the same words he had given to his karifraten.

“There is no choice. He must choose clan.”

“... fucking no. Fuck. Spirits damn it.”

“Nihlus…”

“What.”

“A string of expletives solves nothing.”

The other torin chuffed but fell silent for several minutes, subvocals revealing his deeper consideration. It was nearly a full five minutes before the carmine plated torin spoke again, Saren waiting patiently for something more useful than ‘no’ in various inflammatory forms.

Nihlus did not disappoint, cool headed and analytical in his eventual response. “How did his pari know about your oath? I’ll give him that my mark is visible, but there’s nothing to incriminate you.”

“I believe Garrus told him.”

“…”

“I expect he had reason to believe it was necessary.”

“Right. So what happened next?”

“They fought, I am not sure who hit whom first, but I assume that is how his collar was ripped. Garrus was here when I came in the balcony, he was… throwing a lamp at a wall. We spoke. I was
“Unable to calm him down.”

“You did fine,” Nihlus reassured him, a hand sneaking under one of their sniper’s arms to settle very forwardly on his waist… or more likely, just settling where he could reach. Saren closed his eyes, too tired to fight the touch or inaccurate reassurance.

“Perhaps.”

“Let’s just... get some sleep, deal with this in the morning.”

“That would be best.”

“Right then, g’night you.”

“Goodnight Nihlus.”

Chapter End Notes

04/13/2010 - Thessia's Erana University Under Fire After Student Suspensions

“Thessia’s prestigious Erana University is under fire tonight after suspending 17 students for holding a human-history-themed costume party. The students say no ill will was intended, but university officials believe otherwise. The office of the president released a statement, saying “Video of the incident puts the lie to the claim that this was not a racist affair. With all the human historical figures to draw from, these students chose to dress up as Adolf Hitler, Elizabeth Bathory, Caligula, and Pol Pot. They ate a cake shaped like a suicide bomber. Human students were neither invited nor welcomed at this party mocking their species”. More than 100 students did not show up to class this morning to protest the suspension, while others are planning an asari-history-themed party in retaliation.”

A/N/N: Written in large part by the glamorous Marie_Fanwriter, who seems to have mastered the art of dropping the literary drama like DJs drop the bass. I just tossed confetti and sparkle dust overtop really. :3

A/N: If you need me I'll be a melted puddled of sad under the kava table. /waves

Fanfic Recommendation: The Memorable Night (8303 words) by showmeyourtardis (FemShep/Garrus meet in a bar, have fun sex repeatedly, start thinking a little too mushy for a one night stand. You know the plot, but the smut is still so much fun…)
The scales can't stay balanced

Chapter Summary

Messages received and given, the world turning of it's own accord, running fast and running far.

Trebia sets on a new world order in the minds of a few.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Pahir – Turian closed dialect for 'son'. (Credit: Mizdirected)

Rankbanger – The practice of entering the Hierarchy military with the sole goal of rapidly rising through the ranks for the pay increase, generally to provide for family left at home, debts, etc. Someone who seeks promotion regardless of their worthiness. (Derogatory) (Credit: whoever wrote 'Disasters Like You Are One In A Million' on the kinkmeme forums.)

Beta Read by:
The one, the only, the FABULOUS Marie Fanwriter!!!
//confetti-airhorns-sparkles fall from ceiling-laser lights//
(No but seriously, the difference between authory activities like 'plot crafting' and 'getting over writer's block' with and without a good beta is HUGE. I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have someone reading over everything, giving input, adding scenes, and fixing grammar.)

Chapter Soundtrack: Lusine - Arterial

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of a message ping woke him from a deep, abiding sleep. Of Garrus’ two bedmates, the smaller one in his arms perked up to glare without heat in the general direction of his visor; the other, lankier form curled around his back murmured in annoyance and burrowed further into the back of his neck.

Rather than leave the thing to go off every few minutes, the awoken sniper reached over Saren’s crest to grab his visor from the bedside table. Garrus slid it into place over his eye and pressed the small side button to activate augmented reality mode. The interface began to respond to his hand motion as if it were a cursor, letting him tap the empty air where the message alert would have been had the glowing blue notification been a physical object. The icon spun and enlarged, opening his email box, then the new message. It revealed several curt sentences… no, that wasn’t right… it revealed several curt orders detailing further demands and uncompromising deadlines.
His mari’s advice from not that long ago echoed in his mind as he stared it down, devious whispers that felt like sunshine on the pain and brittleness the message’s finality caused.

‘It’s a big galaxy out there, hmm? You don’t have to play Palaven’s power games.’

Garrus stared at the words from his patrem a good long time, breathing in the cool morning air and letting the world wash over him without really taking it in.

Both his partners were fast asleep again by the time he replied, pecking away one handed at the tetchy, VR keyboard, to spell out a short and simple reply. When it was done, Garrus lowered his arm to wrap around Saren’s shoulders, and went back to sleep.

“Looks like our ride is here,” Macen trilled beside her, essentially bouncing on his toes with good cheer.

Solana rolled her eyes but looked up at the board, rechecking the arrival listings on the far left panel. Their ship was slowly flickering a status update in blue.

Ostensibly, it was the H.S.V. Judolenko, a Turian armed passenger transport for traveling through dangerous waters to safe points, bound for a prospective new colony site. In actuality, the Judolenko had the other half of their four person cell, and would be dropping them off with a smaller transport craft in the middle of nowhere.

For... reasons.

“So it is...” She trailed off, glancing at Garrus out of the corner of her eye. Her tall fraten had been exceptionally laconic all day, wordlessly joining them for a quiet breakfast and an even quieter ride to the skyport.

Solana loudly cracked her neck and turned to face the two detectives, a hand settling on her hip. “Well, it was nice to meet you in person Makasian. Thanks for coming. Garrus would have been in the varren house without your help.”

The graceful tarin nodded in reply, smiling in a way that was somewhere between awkwardness and mild amusement. “Of course.”

Sol gave her a noncommittal tsk, before turning to said brother and punching him in the arm, lovingly.

“You need to convince this one to actually date you. She’s twice as pretty as all the others, and - spirits bless- she’s smart. Buy her trinkets and leave her feathers like a courting male or something. I hear tarin like that.”

As expected, Garrus choked on nothing at the suggestion that he treat his fellow detective like a female general in an old noir vid. He glared after recovering, though it had little heat. Solana smirked, pleased to have gotten some sort of rise out of him, and tapped a talon twice in the air toward the status boards where the arrival update on his own transport was just flicking over to ‘now landing’.
The dinky, civilian, Asari ship taking the two detectives back to the Citadel went past the windows in the distance, all excessive curves and flowing purple paint job. She was sure Garrus hadn’t checked the operating craft before booking his flight, or he’d never have willingly stepped foot on such a monstrosity.

The willowy tarin’s smirk turned soft around the edges, a sense of nostalgia tugging on her mandibles. It wasn’t that long ago when they would all stick around as long as possible after family get togethers. This time had been more of a social event, but still; morning after, and they were both running fast from…

Solana renewed her smirk to full strength and blew her fraten a mocking Asari-style kiss as one last dig that he was riding on some florid blip of an alien vessel while she was getting on a proper warship.

“See you around brother. Remember: feathers.”

“Seriously, Sol…”

She snagged her luggage from the ground and reactivated the antigrav mechanism, waving dismissively and making for the correct departure line, Macen in tow.

The oakwood plated male kept pace with her longer legs, hands in his longcoat’s pockets. “So, ready for the op after all that rich, high-tier food? It just left me in the mood for napping... for a week.”

“Ha. Doubly so. I aim to eat it every day by the time I’m fifty. Watch me rankbang my way there with my mind and two clips. Possibly a little of your brains too,” she gave him a confident flick of mandibles before looking down at a message ping on her Omni-tool. It was yet another pointless reconfirmation message from one of their team. She chuffed in annoyance. “But definitely not Ferenix’s; that torin is a tank first, a meat shield second, and maybe an explosives expert on a good day. Bolstae can carry the medi-gel or something.”

Macen snorted at her affectionate meanness, shaking his head as they boarded the transport.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Castis awoke to the reassuring smell of his mate where his nose was pressed to her shoulder. The large torin sighed at the sound of the alarm pinging into his ear, and carefully shifted away to get up and begin getting ready for the day.

The newly minted Senator stood from the bed, padding quietly into the bathroom in the pre-dawn stillness. The lights came on as soon as he walked in, pleasant music queueing up as the holo frame on the wall scrolled the morning news.

The stolid torin pulled up his Omni-tool interface and regarded the message he’d crafted a few hours ago. The one he’d decided to sleep on, ensure he was doing right by not only his clan but by his son as well. A mild adjustment was made to the language choice, the words weren’t softened, but perhaps eased enough to make Garrus understand reason.

How he wished he could discuss this situation with Vivienne...

‘She always used to know what to do...’
Instead he hit the send key and began perusing the stories the VI had pinned as important according to his pre-set interest parameters while drawing out a cloth and salt scrub to clean with. It was an unremarkable twenty minutes until Vivienne joined him, sauntering into the bathroom to tap her forehead to his temple before starting her own routine. The two got ready for the day side-by-side, moving around each other without issue thanks to long practice.

Eight letters from his new constituents in, Castis was just about finished with his morning routine when the stillness of the morning was broken. Viv’s pleasing hum stopped for a moment before beginning anew as she restarted her usual pattern from the very beginning. She wandered to him, tapping her crest to his temple, fetching a new cloth from the drawer, and set about cleaning with a vague smile on her mandibles.

His shoulders fell as she turned away, mandibles slipping loose in dismay, but he pushed the feeling away and let her carry on with the unnecessary act. At least she was happy while doing it… that was what mattered.

Selfishly, he drew his last few self-cleaning processes out to spend the extra time nearby.

Vivienne caught him watching her in the mirror at one point, and she smiled at his reflection, winking saucily. He perked up at the present-seeming act, finishing up as she wandered away to get dressed.

Just as Castis set the crest-rasper back on the bathroom counter top his Omni-tool pinged with a new message. One that gave off the ‘personal’ tone rather than the chime of one of his political contacts. The blue-eyed senator might have ignored it in favor of savoring the morning a little more, if not for the ongoing… situation with his only pahir.

The message from Garrus opened up, a mere three words that sent him reeling sideways to lean against the wall for support. The meaning stole the breath from his lungs, future spreading out before him in unconceivable patterns. In the other room a trill of startlement rose on the air, his mate’s voice calling out in concern.

“Castis? Is everything alright?”

“I… I’ll be right out.”

The text did not change no matter how long he stared at it, the luminous screen framing a possibility he’d never even considered. One he didn’t know how to handle alone.

FROM:1886039//ID.code:trueshot
TO: 9695224//ID.code:forwardresolve

Go fuck yourself.

END MSSG
03/04/2010 - Earth Nations in Suspense as Systems Alliance Hears Ford v. Huerta

“The nations of Earth are in suspense tonight as the Systems Alliance hears Ford v. Huerta, the first case of a human leader using reconstructive data storage to prolong his brain functions and stay physically capable to perform his duties. Speaker of the House Lisa Ford has led the charge against Huerta, saying that the last year of his term was illegitimate. A stroke left the President legally dead and in cryocool for an hour and a half before his brain functions were fully transferred to a computer. The amount of memory degradation was never fully revealed. According to the United North American States' line of succession, if Huerta was considered dead, then power would transfer to the Vice President and Speaker Ford would have held the position of Vice President for the last year.”

A/N: Brain dead presidents, even in the 22nd century.

A/N/N: Yes, Macen Barro is being written as a Blackwatch operative who works on 'colonization matters'. Why? Because literally every other Pathfinder has an incredible, daunting dossier. There is no way that Macen isn't more than he appears... but underestimation is the tool of the clever, isn't it?

'Colonization Specialist' isn't inaccurate, per say...

A/N/N/N: Holy shit Garrus. (Even I'm kind of blown away at him right now. Woah...)

Fanfic Recommendations:
Roommates (1589 words) by Mordinette (FemShep/Garrus, in which a drunken sniper brings home a new roommate without telling Shepard first, and gets in trouble, sort of.)
Interlude: Sometimes miracles come in pairs (but the same can be said of disasters).

Chapter Summary

It's David Anderson's Bday, and he just wants to take a nice vacation with his loved ones. Maybe crack some dad jokes, eat a steak or five, and have a beer while watching the sunset on the ocean... Surely a hardworking N7 deserves that much reward? (Hint: Heroes aren't allowed to have vacations.)

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello duckies! Thanks for the patience on this chapter. I'm so sorry that it took two weeks! Gah! There is a bunch of good news though: For one, this chapter is a whopping 12k words, so prepare for a good long sit in full view of the Shepard siblings getting up to vacation hi-jinks. Popcorn optional. Second, the chapter two edit is going up within a day or two (You'll know it's live when the A/N at the beginning has an 'Edited on XX/XX/XXXX' line.) The old chapter edits are longer, cleaner, and will sometimes have entirely new story content. Third: I'm about to go on vacation for a week, so I will have a ton of writing time! WOOooo!

A/N/N: Three cheers for the fantabulous, glamorous, oh so magnanimous Marie_Fanwriter for their betaiing, scene building, and repeated prodding to write-write-write. :D Also a shout out to Spicy_Gnome as well! Those two helped me hash out some of the trilogy's nonsense military promotions, which DO NOT MATCH the damn codex even. Much time spent, but I think we've got several people's ranks pinned down from enlistment to ME1 era. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The awkwardness of going on a trip with her adoptive mother’s work friends was only mitigated by the fact that Jane already knew two of them, and had heard plenty of things about the others. The young soldier had still made Hannah strong-arm her into coming to David Anderson’s thirty-fourth birthday celebration, but a solid half of the complaints had been empty to start with. Why the dark skinned N7 liked ocean views so much, she didn't know, but the massive eco-tourism liner they were booked on had a very nice gym to exercise in when Jane worked up the fucks necessary to go.

Rock walls, gravity chambers, FPS combat simulators that could be tweaked for higher difficulty settings... the works.

She would never admit to just how much she was looking forward to a ocean cruise, but the long hours lately made the crimson haired girl very ready for a break. Some downtime reading fiction without doing weighted push ups over the datapad? Sunbathing the afternoon away? The occasional game of gravball with Johnny boy?

Fucking exciting.
Just... a little.

Though Jane was determined to take advantage of the gym between bouts of buffet lunch and spa treatments. Definitely. She just... needed to finish packing... pretty soon here...

A bottle of sunscreen was grabbed on habit, but she pursed her lips and tossed it in the trash, looking for more useful things to stuff in the drab green duffel bag that was coming with her.

Something else the First Lieutenant was absolutely bringing were her study materials, because apparently you had to be a serious bookworm or have eidetic memory to be worthy of higher commissioned ranks. The written tests were extensive, and Jane only had four months left before the next selection considerations for N-school came up. There were interviews and paperwork required just to visit the Vila Militar in Rio de Janeiro, nevermind to be accepted or invited back, and she was determined to make that cut.

Sitting for the N1 entry exams at an exceptionally early point in her military career was the goal, but even knowing the odds were in her favor there was no guarantee the brass would send the invitation for an ‘assessment’ interview.

In her favor, Jane had her mother’s reputation, her own work ethic, and the bonus of the gods damned Batarians being shifty again. There was also the… ‘creative’ logistics improvements the grouchy teen had made while idling on a post late last year. Jane had been bored as fuck and stuck facing the thing she’d dreamed up improvements on. Uneventful guard duty for a half day, every damn day, but the changes she cooked up resulted in some clever overhauls that saved a good chunk of resources each day.

The change had pushed the base's minor mining income just a bit higher, putting the outpost in the green on the credit balance each month. Jane's superior officers had really liked that, appreciating the extracurricular ‘ingenuity’. She'd take it, keeping quiet about any favoritism or daydreaming, and just act confident that The Vila was in her near future. Jane wanted to be an N1 before the year was out.

That was the dream.

A pair of old, ripped up leggings joined the sunscreen in the trash, along with some long-forgotten cosmetics. She didn’t have time or energy for anything beyond the occasional dye job and the black around her eyes, anyways. Chapstick? Maybe. If she felt fancy that day.

Beauty products were all well and good, but not if she wanted to be the youngest N1 in history… even though no one would ever know that little tidbit.

The records from Mindoir hadn’t been recovered from the colony-wide fires. David had assumed that she was sixteen that day on the water tower, and she’d never corrected him. At the time, there'd been smoke in her lungs and a brittleness to her very being. Jane had been too tired to even care.

When the social workers had asked about her birthday, she’d mumbled the month and day, and before she knew it, there was an Ident Card given to her that read: Jane Shepard - 4/11/2154.

Which worked just fine for the green eyed teen. She certainly felt… older.

A knock against the door frame caused her to look up from tossing loose tops into the duffel. Her ‘younger’ brother John standing in the doorway with his usual calm expression tilted slightly toward uncertainty. Sometimes reading him was an art form, but it looked like... bad news?

“Hey sis.”
The green eyed teen’s head cocked to the side as she waited for her sibling to continue.

When he didn’t begin fast enough, she groused at him, “What.”

John appeared entirely unphased by her mullish demeanor. He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe to her bedroom with a sigh, arms crossed loosely as he nodded toward the office. “Mom just got a call, and headed straight for her kit while still on the line.”

She clicked her tongue and stopped packing for the moment, the gears in her head spinning out a deduction. “She’s got a mission… the trip is cancelled?”

Her adoptive brother shrugged, unintentionally showing off the muscle gain that late puberty and top-notch gene therapy had just started to give him. Jane exhaled through her nose, considering the half-filled vacation luggage for a moment, before continuing to fill it.

Three shirts and a cute skirt later, a glance over at John confirmed that he was entirely wrapped up in his own thoughts, staring at the far wall with an unfocused gaze.

“Hey, Johnny boy, you packed yet?”

He made a vaguely affirmative grunt, and she scoffed. The goody-goody had probably done it last night instead of an hour before they were due to head for the docks.

Some rustling through the closet produced an acceptable swimsuit. Digging through the drawers on her old desk offered up a few circumspect weapons, and the peach lip balm that she’d favored in high school. The lime-eyed soldier stashed the first and last in her luggage, and tossed the second.

It was all of fifteen minutes before Hannah joined them, her demeanor already hardening into an N7 Operative instead of ‘mom’.

“You’re going on the trip without me,” she said by way of greeting as she leaned into the room.

Jane blinked, not having expected that one.

“But…”

“No ‘buts’. You’ve been working too hard, and John’s on his way to boot camp when summer’s over. This is a rare opportunity to spend time together that you won’t often have as your careers progress. Both of you are going, having a good time, and taking lots of holos to show me later.”

Both of the younger Shepards piped in with the only thing you could really tell an N7 when they ordered on you vacation, “Yes, mom.”

The blonde-haired woman smiled faintly, a hint of warmth sneaking into her voice. “Good. David’s present from us is on the kitchen counter, don’t forget it. I love you both, have fun, and for God’s sake? Behave.”

“Yes, mom.”

The special forces agent huffed at them and turned on a heel to leave the siblings to finish preparing. Jane smirked at her brother once the coast was clear. “Welp, looks like there’s no one to protect you from being destroyed at grav-ball over and over for the next two weeks.”

The teenaged male rolled his eyes. “We aren’t playing grav-ball every day. There’s a ton of stuff to do on a cruise.”
“Sure, sure… you say that now, but when mom’s friends are all being boring? We’ll see who comes
to bother whom to entertain him. I may even refrain from tossing someone overboard after the fifth
time.”

His flat look was entirely nonplussed. “Your ‘obfuscating’ pronouns could use some work there,
sis.”

Jane zipped up the slightly-holey duffle she’d gotten in basic, tossing it over her left shoulder and
slipping past him to move down the hallway.

“Over and over,” she called back without looking.

From behind, all the snarky girl could hear was his dark muttering, something about the wisdom of
threatening a person who could pick you with their mind. Crimson lips quirked in a grin as she
completely ignored him.

David Anderson was standing in the dockside parking lot, leaning against the sleek door of his
skycar when he received a vidcall request. Seeing it was Hannah, he accepted the call just as Jane’s
fiery red hair came into view from the drop-off lanes. John’s tall, gangly form was recognizable
beside her, but no blonde was with them. He had the gist of the circumstances figured out before
Hannah’s image even populated on the screen.

“Anderson,” the stoic woman greeted in her usual crisp voice.

“Shepard.”

“I’m being deployed, sir. Apologies.”

Sighing, he nodded to himself. It was just as he’d feared. “I was looking forward to that week of you
not calling me ‘sir’ that I was promised.”

“Sorry, sir. It will have to wait for next year. The kids are still on their way though. Keep them in
line for me.”

David smiled softly at the mild satisfaction in her voice. She’d always been so damn stubborn about
formalities, even back in living hell that was N-school.

“Those troublemakers? Well... I’ll see what I can do. Good luck out there.”

“Thank you. Enjoy the trip. Shepard out.”

The dark toned soldier turned around at the sound of approaching footsteps, two of his other closest
friends approaching from the direction of the nearby drink vendor, their ‘pre-game’ margaritas
already in hand.

“Trouble, David?” inquired Kahlee with a swirl of the neon green straw in her drink.

“Just a little,” he murmured in reply, “Hannah’s had something come up.”

The blonde tsked, expression dropping a touch from it’s usual cheer as she rubbed a hand on his
back to console him. “I’m sorry to hear that. Karaoke won’t be the same without her.”

He nodded sideways in agreement, brows popping in a ‘what can you do?’ sort of expression. From behind a blue mountain of frozen margarita, their third number made her own drink tilt off toward his four o’clock. “Ahh, but look, aren’t those her little ones? I seem to remember some wallet photos with bright red hair, and those big blue eyes… not so little anymore, it seems.”

David turned to look at where Jane and John were approaching from the public transportation drop off, luggage in hand.

“That’s right. You haven’t met Hannah’s strays before, have you?” he smiled teasingly at the two young people as they stepped up to the group of older soldiers, the dark haired boy giving an awkward wave. “Karin, this is John and Jane Shepard. You two, this is Karin Chakwas, an old friend of mine.”

Jane’s sigh of sunbathing bliss reoccurred for the fifteenth time that hour. With the cutting edge radiation shielding in her dermal augments she could afford to lounge in Sol’s light for hours. It was a divine way spend a productive afternoon, eyes closed and running through mental drills.

The somewhat productive pastime was interrupted by the sound of footsteps heading straight for her quiet corner of weather deck. Familiar, expected footfalls.

“You finished baking yet? I don't see a timer but you've been laying there for…”

The sound of her brother checking their never-met grandfather's pocket watch was unmistakable, a much beloved heirloom he’d been given for Christmas last year. Even amused by his habits and the attempt to snark at her, she still interrupted him. “Three hours, forty two minutes, and seventeen seconds.”

John scoffed at her blasé precision, “…retina implants are basically cheating.”

The crimson haired First Lieutenant replied with all the fucks she had to give, “Mmmn.”

The chair beside her squeaked as he settled in. Overhead, seagulls playfully raced the luxury cruise liner, sometimes being brave enough to dive to the deck in search of crumbs. She didn't mind them so much, their bickering and feather falls were just too aesthetic of oceanic lounging.

What she did mind was John’s incessant presence at the edge of her perception when there wasn’t anything he actually needed. Though he was probably going to try and goad her into entertaining him. Working up to it, maybe.

In about ten…

Nine…

Eight…

“You haven't even been to the rock wall today. At this rate, I’ll shoot right past you in N-school. Lazy.”
“No, you won’t,” Jane replied pleasantly, eyes still closed as she basked in the afternoon sun.

“…”

The young soldier could practically feel her brother’s mild annoyance that she hadn’t risen to his prodding. He idled about as well as an engineer at a tech convention, even if nothing ever seemed to rile him up. It was as though he was always waiting for orders, or barring that, seeing what he could get away with.

Eventually the other chair squeaked again as he stood, a new track of conversation pulled from thin air. “I thought you were going to spend the ‘forced’ vacation studying?”

A slow, self satisfied smirk pulled at her ruby lips and kohl-rimmed eye corners. “I am.”

“… optics?”

“Mmmn.”

“Damnit.”

Jane laughed lightly, deigning to lazily stretch a leg out to the side to kick her mother’s other ’stray’ in a Shepard family love tap.

“Ow,” he complained, poorly hiding amusement. “What was that for?”

“On mom’s behalf. You know she hates swearing.”

John snorted, footfalls wandering toward the nearby safety railing that overlooked endless, deep blue waves. “You curse all the time and she doesn’t kick you.”

“Damn straight.”

“How are you a First Lt. again?”

The sun-soaked young woman hummed in consideration for a moment before offering a theory. “I have a nice smile.”

“No you don’t. You smile like a shark.”

“Rude,” she deadpanned.

John sighed, finally giving up on her as he wandered away to go bother someone else. She settled back into the top-deck lounge chair, and happily continued to ‘bake’.

There were rumors that the practical exams for N1 included time in a Palaven-simulated environment… and with a little help from her dermal augs after they’d been challenged with Earth-maximum sustained radiation?

Jane planned to just go skipping right through those daisies.
David wasn’t exactly sure what the point of putting cucumbers on your eyelids was, but the murmuring, half asleep quality of Kahlee’s voice as they made use of the ship’s luxury spa was worth the strangeness.

“Ssso then, I tell them that if they won’t approve clearance for the new techss, the report was nooooot getting done on time.”

The N7 hummed in understanding. Not having necessary personnel for the job usually meant it wasn’t getting done, though he still had no idea about which report or project was in question. Kahlee wasn’t far enough gone to give out meaningful details about classified ops in front of a couple of civilians, at least… not yet, but he dutifully listened to the slightly slurred recounting of her HR troubles nonetheless.

“I bet they didn’t like that.”

“Ha! No. But if they are going to give me a hard time about run of the mill paperwork expediting, then I’m going to give them a hard time right back. A scientist has standards, you know.”

He chuckled, ignoring the peculiar feeling of ‘rejuvenating’ mud being applied to his legs and arms.

“Mhmn. As they should.”

Kahlee’s voice fell quiet after that, with the occasional hum of enjoyment as the spa staff mudded, cleaned, oiled, and massaged them both. The career soldier wasn’t sure what to make of the pampering, but he’d admit the rubbing part felt pretty damn good.

He’d promised to try the ship’s spa with Kahlee, and so he was. No one could say David Anderson wasn’t a man of his word.

The entire day had been spent at the mercy of their hosts, from a hot shave first thing that morning to the pedicure his friend had scheduled in the mid afternoon. It was a different kind of relaxation than the Alliance man was used to. Nonetheless, he was enjoying the overt pampering. No less than Kahlee was herself, even if she was more vocal about it… moaning in bliss once again as the therapist found a spot.

Perhaps next time they had free time he’d invite her to one of those Turian-style bathhouses he’d heard so much about. The Turian officer paired with him on the last joint exercise between the Hierarchy and the Alliance had been rather adamant that there was nothing better in the galaxy than a good soak and plate scrub. The military bachelor had even dug up the address of a location on the Citadel that welcomed aliens, in hopes that he’d try it. Cacitus had been a good sort. Easy to chat with.

They'd had a surprising amount in common, at least.

When the fluff and buff was came to its inevitable end, the staff released them both with a pair of sample gift bags and pleasant farewells. The opaque glass doors opened to let them out of the dim sanctuary. David squinted against the sunshine from the bay windows along the wall, barely able to see the ocean outside for the glare as his eyes adjusted.

“Well, what did you think?”

David considered it for a moment, nodding agreeably as they started off down the hall.

“I do feel refreshed. Think I about feel asleep during that massage. Though now-” His stomach choose that moment to rumble with perfect comedic timing. Kahlee’s bright laughter filled the corridor as she leaned into him, blonde hair giving off an enticing smell as she held her own stomach
against the escaping giggles.

“Ohhh, hahaha~ hehe... David! What am I going to do with you?”

He laughed right along with her, deeper baritone filling the hall. “Haha. Feed me, if you have any mercy.”

His brilliant friend shoved him aside teasingly, and made to walk forward at a quicker pace. “None, ab-so-lute-ly none. I’m headed for the third floor buffet and it’s all mine.”

The N7 put a hand to his chest, staggering dramatically. But I’ll starve!”

“Mmmmmm… I suppose you can have a bread roll,” Kahlee offered magnanimously, elbowing the elevator call button as she fought a smile.

“I hear they have steak. Unlimited steak. Surely one could be spared...?”

“Nope. Breadroll.”

Ooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Miss, Kari- uh... m’am? Doctor Chakwas?”

Karin turned from the self-serve bar of frozen alcoholic slushies to meet the beautiful, clear blue eyes of Hannah’s son. The boy was on the cusp of becoming a man, broad and muscular in the way that only serious effort at the gym could cause. Obviously aided by gene mods, but still. He was very nearly standing at attention, just lacking the salute as he stood by her side.

The Alliance doctor caught herself looking him up and down for injuries out of sheer habit. When her gaze made it back to his face, the dark haired teen was cherry red in the cheeks. She quirked a single silvery brow at him, very slowly.

John began to sputter, and took a half step back.

Breaking out in merry chuckles, the doctor set her souvenir cup under a ‘frozen appletini’ font, and cut the young man a break. “Karin will do, or my title if you prefer a bit of formality, hmm? My apologies for embarrassing you, John. I’m afraid you’ve caught an idiosyncrasy of mine. I seem to check the general wellness of everyone I see at a glance. Habit, yes? Particularly soldiers of course, and something about you is already quite... soldierly. From your mother perhaps?”

With a secret smile she watched his demeanor relax at the friendly prattling, just as most patients were wont to do.

“Hopefully so, um. Karin. I don't mind, actually I came to ask for some...” The young man trailed off, stalling as he ran fingers through his short cropped hair. “Mmm... input?”

They silver haired woman nodded in encouragement as she tapped the button on her latest drink choice with a manicured nail. “Input you say? And what is the nature of said input?”

“Uhhh... medical? You see I-”

“Ah! Medical. Yes, of course, but perhaps not here...” She gestured to the light crowd all around
them while her cup filled. “This is no place for such talk. Let’s adjourn to one of the walking paths, shall we?”

“We… can do that. I didn't mean to interrupt your day though. I just wanted to ask a few questions, informally.”

Karin retrieved her frozen appletini, took the polite young man’s arm by linking their elbows, and steered them both toward the elevators.

“And I am happy to oblige you. I expect I’ll be rather done with not practicing medicine by the time this little vacation is over. The chance to discuss medical matters, even informal ones, will be a treat.”

“Oh, uh, sure.”

Karin stopped before the shiny doors of the lifts, letting her captive go in favor of finding out what the cruise liners thought an appletini was supposed to taste like. The last alcoholic beverage she’d tried from the self-serve bar had advertised as a spiked punch, made of watermelon and a citrusy blend. It had promised both and delivered neither.

“Mmm… oh, now this one is much better. Distinctly apple!”

“That’s… good?”

She chortled as John shuffled his feet, looking like he was beginning to regret coming to ask his questions.

‘Well that won't do.’ Karin considered, considering the young man. ‘I did promise David the rest of the day alone with his sweetheart, and this place is rather dull while alone.’

Karin relinked their arms as the elevator doors slid open, determined to trade solid ‘medical input’ for company.

“Quite right, John. Let's pick a good place to chat, and you can fire away with questions, mmm? It looks like…” the Alliance doctor trailed off as she glanced over the helpful array of destinations printed by each floor’s buttons. There were twenty seven decks to choose from, though most were primarily cabins. “Ah, there's a walking trail around the mid-air pools on deck twelve, hmm… the arboretum on deck twenty-two… or there is the ocean renewal machinery on twenty-seven I have yet to see. Any preference?”

“Twenty-seven I guess?”

“Ocean renewal it is then,” she replied, patting his shoulder as she freed a hand to send them on their way. “Now, how about giving me a little starting information on what sort of input you're looking for?”

The teen cleared his throat before starting. “David mentioned a friend of his last year in passing, one of the few Alliance doctors certified in working with biotic amps… and I thought that might be you?”

“You would be correct, though I’m hardly the only one he knows. A growing field, to be sure.”

The elevator doors gave off a pleasant ping and slid apart again, letting them out onto a most interesting level, far below the ocean’s surface. The exterior wall was floor-to-ceiling glass looking out into lamp-lit blue, meanwhile the other side of the generously wide path was a constant flow of oceanic restoration equipment. It hummed and whirred, testing the water that ran through clear pipes,
modifying nutrients, particulates, and adding pollution counteracting agents before sending the stream out the back of the boat.

The deck looked to be half a klick long, all shiney machinery and decorative walking path.

Karin headed for the nearest information placard even as she prompted her uncertain companion to continue. “This is a question related to biotics then? Are you one, might I ask? Hannah hadn’t mentioned it, but you know how she is. Rather tight lipped by habit and all.”

John followed beside her, nodding in agreement. “Yeah, mom is, and yeah, I am. So is Jane, actually, but she can’t spark an aura even on a good day. Not enough eezo to do anything fun with, just enough to test positive. Though I’m… not exactly a strong biotic myself. Haven't been able to create more than six hundred newtons in one go.”

“Not to worry dear,” she replied in a mothering tone, a habit she’d gained over the years from dealing with traumatized marines being asked to make medical decisions while still drenched in post battle adrenaline. “Biotics are all about fine motor control. You can do quite a lot with very little when you get creative. You know... the best human biotic I’ve worked with can barely manage a pull?”

“Oh yes. She’s terrible at them. Simply awful. But… she can make a barrier like you wouldn't believe. Her aura can stretch out into a massive, rock-solid dome big enough to tuck a small cruiser under. Hmph. In constant high demand, that one.” The silver haired doctor took a sip of her drink, tongue clicking at the delightful tartness. She glanced over the young man when he remained silent.

As predicted, there was a hint of the stars in his eyes.

“Can she… shield a cruiser in flight?”

Karin smiled at his understated excitement with the thought, wandering toward the next information placard about the restoration equipment. “As I understand it? She can, so long as the ship is moving at sub-light speeds.”

John veritably bounced along beside her as she walked. “That’s incredible. Really incredible.”

“It is. So tell me, was there a reason you asked about biotics beyond the fascinating premise of them?”

“Oh. Yeah, I uh… I got my own amp recently. The doctor advi-”

“Tell me which class it is.”

Clear blue eyes blinked at her sudden interruption, answering with a slow and uncertain cadence. “Ahh… well, I…”

Karin immediately regretting asking so sharply. “Please? If you would. There's been a great deal of trouble with a particular series, and if yours hasn't healed to the nerves fully yet…”

“Oh. It’s an L3n series. Supposed to be pretty safe… Jane’s an L3x if that matters. Not that she can do anything with it, but the doc wanted to put in the baseline defunct amp in case she suddenly showed more potential.”

Her shoulders loosened immediately. Of course Hannah had only approved of the more reliable
varieties for her children. The young soldiers with L2a and L2t amps specifically were... something a fresh hell for the Alliance medical community. The L2 series in general was a mess of complications compared to the L1. She rather... missed the old kind. Far too many young people, crippled for life. Hopefully this new series proved as stable as the initial research claimed.

“Marvelous, John. I'm relieved to hear you didn't select one of the more powerful amps. I've seen quite a few issues with them.”

The blue-eyed boy took a lean against the railing by the next placard, heavy brows furrowing in consideration. “Really? Like what? The neurologist we saw tried to recommend more powerful amps for both of us, but mom refused, full stop. Now that I think about it... it was pretty unusual for her. She’s always willing to hear people out, but it was like…” he trailed off, shrugging.

“Like she had already made up her mind?”

He snapped his fingers at her, “Yes, exactly that.”

Karin nodded, patting his arm and carrying on down the walking path. “It’s very likely she did a little extracurricular research with her clearance, and was determined that your implant be one of the safer choices. My advice is to be thankful for her prudence.”

“Well, if it really is more about control than power? I'll trade a little less oomph for fewer side effects any day. A weapon that’s unreliable is practically worthless, right?”

She chuckled, glancing at him sidelong. “Got that one from David, didn't you?”

“Uh... yeah. Sounds like him, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yes, it really does. Wise words, though, wise words...”

It was her turn to trail off, wondering who was arranging for neurologists to push the newer, more powerful, less tested amps. Scientific advancement was all well and good, but the ward of brain damaged young adults at the Alliance facility in London was proof that going too fast and cutting corners had unacceptable costs.

‘Thank God Hannah had more sense than to trust...’ Karin sighed, heavily. ‘-than to trust the people she should have been able to with her children’s futures.’

“... Karin?”

“Ah! Apologies again, I was wrapped up in my thoughts, but nevermind that. So, what input were you after in relation to your amp?”

The laconic teen waited as a jogger passed them going the other way, eyes subtly tracking their reflection in the glass as they went on by. “Mmm... I was wondering if you had any advice on taking care of yourself when you have them. If there was anything mom drilled into our heads about a soldier's life, it was that taking care of yourself was high on the list. I read all the documentation the neurologist had on the basics of living with element zero nodes in my nerves, and what to do if you overload your amp or push yourself too far, but... it was all triage information. Obvious caloric details. Nothing about the day-to-day.”

The silver haired medic’s eyebrows rose as the corners of her mouth flattened into an expression of being honestly impressed. Self-care was, by and large, regarded by her usual marines to be an ‘if I have to.’ activity.
Hannah’s youngest had the sense to seek out healthful routines to support his unique abilities? She suddenly... expected great things of him. Surely, he would make N7 as his mother did, if that was the young man’s goal.

“Well now. You’ve impressed me, John. A soldier that takes care of themself as well as they take care of their other equipment, or better, is a soldier that could go far in officer school… or N-school.”

“N-school. Definitely,” came the immediate reply, course clearly set in mind.

They rounded the back arc of the lower-level walking path, curving to head along the far side of the ship’s length. “I had thought so… well then, are you interested in the succinct version, or would you like my full lecture on self-care with all the extra bits for biotics thrown in?”

“Give me the good stuff, doc.”

Karin laughed heartily, and obliged. ‘Oh, I’m going to like this one,’ she decided.

The first sign of anything amiss was the chime in David’s ear as he sat in the dining room. enjoying a pleasant dinner with Kahlee. It preceded an automated message:

‘Signal to the Alliance Command Network has been lost. Please reestablish connection.’

He tapped his jaw, just below the subdermal implant, out of habit. Nothing happened. So he placed his knife and fork down on the sides of his plate still half full of steak and potatoes, and pulled up his Omni-tool interface. While it flickered to life, the dark skinned male took in the room at a glance.

Nothing stood out.

The N7 surreptitiously leaned back in the elegant silver chair, expression calm as he opened the haptic interface, as if merely checking a message notification. In between the second or two it took to unlock the screen and access the communication programs his deep brown eyes cased the floor, from the well dressed servers to the elegant band playing unobtrusive violin music on the half stage. Not a thing seemed to be amiss.

The extranet was down.

The Alliance uplink was down.

His cutting edge N-Operative signal was… functional, just barely. One bar.

With a light elbow nudge to Kahlee, who had been thoroughly wrapped up in enjoying a parfait, David slid his tool into her view and smiled without humor. Her bright blue eyes dropped down, flicked sideways a few times as she parsed the information there, and then back up.

She smiled at him beatifically before picking up a napkin to pat her lips as she glanced at her own device’s dead connection state. “Is that the time already? We’re going to be late for the shuffleboard activity at this rate. Shall we?”

They were both already standing by the time Kahlee finished the misleading invitation, and he
nodded, thankful of her quick mind immediately grasping the disparity of the situation. David took her hand and strolling leisurely towards the nearest doorway. It happened to lead outside, to a viewing deck overlooking the ocean on the port side of the ship.

No sooner had the doors closed then he started testing anti-jammer programs. It was a fine thing that the highly encrypted spec ops channel was still up, but it was for local communication only, used for covert communication on missions.

Usually the local frequency used in N-standard equipment was unable to talk to the outside world. He’d need to pull-off some pretty extravagant programming to make it work for long range communications, which was certainly not something he could do in a few minutes.

Not for the first time that week he wished Hannah were here, though the latest reason was far more serious. She was a lot quicker with tech that he was. Just getting a message through to Karin or either of the Shepard siblings would be a tricky premise.

“The buffet area’s windows are ending in twenty meters or so, David. There’s a maintenance door just past that.”

“Can you get us in? I’m trying to contact the others.”

She scoffed at him, mildly amused. “I design theoretical AI for a living. You think an electric door lock can stop me?”

A wry grin pulled at his mouth absently, fingers fluttering as the N7 sent out his best attempt at a warning to Karin and the kids. There was no reason for every com buoy in range of Earth to drop-off. Something was very wrong on their end.

“Not likely, n-”

“ATTENTION ALL PASSENGERS!”

As one they looked up, the ship-wide intercom activating to release an exultant, manic sounding voice.

“THE RIGHT HAND OF THE DECEIVER IS AMONG YOU!”

“Oh good god, really?” was all he heard Kahlee mutter before the announcement continued in ever more zealous ranting.

“DEVISIA CORPORATION HAS PERPETRATED COUNTLESS WOES ON OUR WORLD AND AMONG THE STARS! HERE, NOW, THIS VERY SHIP! IT IS A TESTAMENT TO THEIR LIES! THE CLOCKWORK VISCERA OF THIS VESSEL SUCKS THE OCEAN’S LIFE BLOOD AND SPILLS OUT CHEMICAL RIDDEN, MACHINE INFESTED POISON! AND WHO ORCHESTRATED IT? WHO DARES DEFILE OUR WORLD? WHITIKER! THE RIGHT HAND OF THE DECEIVER IS HERE! WE KNOW YOUR TRUE FACE! WE KNOW YOUR AGENDA! WE WILL FIND YOU, AND KILL YOU, AND SINK THIS MONSTROUS TESTAMENT TO YOUR MASTER! THERE IS-”

Somehow, the speaker just kept going. As did they, finding and slipping inside of the maintenance hatch.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
The sky was just beginning to set when Jane finally opened her eyes. One thing about Earth was that it had the very best sunsets. Of course… that was only on account of the pollution in the atmosphere, but the way the vermillion and amber hues reflected off the blue-almost-black waves almost made that little fact dismissable.

Unfortunately the gentle bliss of the moment was ruined by a sudden, blaring announcement on the PR system. Between the crash of the waves and the hefty breeze, it took her a moment to catch the sound of it, but when she did the crimson haired soldier’s expression rapidly began to morph into displeasure.

“FOR THAT SHALL BE HOW WE KNOW HIM! THE BRINGER OF-”

Busy leveling a venomous glare at the nearest speaker, Jane nearly missed the ping from her Omni-tool. When the girl reluctantly looked down to bring up the interface, she noticed that the sender’s information was… blank. The email was very nearly ignored outright, except for the filename on the attachment, which stopped her just short of closing the haptic screen down and focusing on the intercom’s harping. It was: ‘HpyBday2Me’.

‘Fucking odd… but okay… ’

Limey-green eyes narrowed at the filename but she picked up her lounge chair and took it to the storage locker, stepping into the wooden chest and closing the lid behind her. Bikini starting to ride up her ass, she ignored it in favor of pulling up her antivirus software. The First Lieutenant was an infiltrator, to be sure, but she was more of the shooty-stabby variety; not nearly as good at tech as some of her peers. The young soldier was far from inept though, and she had her mother’s custom cyber warfare suite to pull from.

When the safeguarding programs were ready, Jane pulled up the message, prepared to delete the thing if it didn’t have answers directly related to the incessant screeching coming from the nearby speaker.

FROM:0000000//ID.code:kan&9ajn2
TO: 7845120//LOCAL
[blank]
Attachment: HpyBday2Me.note

END MSSG

[Open file: HpyBday2Me.txt]


Jane skimmed the message rapidly, snorted at the cheeky file name tied to such dry details, then proceeded to close her Omni-tool and peak out of the storage chest. Coast clear, the jaded teen slipped out and started making headway toward the seventh floor.

The interior corridor she stepped into was filled with panicked tourists, frantic and scared by the booming voice coming over the ship’s loudspeakers. Some were pushing for the outside, others were screaming at equally confused looking staff, and others still were zipping down the hall with their
luggage, headed... somewhere.

‘This trip is about to get a hell of a lot more interesting...’

Their Omni-tools pinged at the same time as the ship-wide intercom continued to spew colorful nonsense. John opened the file post haste, absorbed the details, and looked up to catch Karin’s eyes. The poised, middle-aged woman had a raised brow, but retained an otherwise placid expression.

“Bother. Well, I suppose that puts a hold on the rest of our chat for the time being.”

“Yes. Let’s head up... elevators might not be the best idea.”

“Quite right,” the doctor agreed and set a hand to his shoulder, pointing off toward a nearby door marked with ‘staff only’ in large red letters. “How does taking the scenic route sound?”

He nodded and headed towards the doors, uncaring whether or not they were under surveillance. Someone was on this boat with clear intent to the murder the five thousand some odd people aboard by sinking the ship. John didn’t care why they wanted to do that... he was going to stop them.

The two walked through the staff hall at a fast clip. Unlike the sparsely populated showcase path of ocean cleaning machinery, the back halls were a maze of tight spaces. The undecorated, branching corridors were scattered with clusters of nervous people arguing, making for open air, and trying to connect vidcalls to no avail.

The two trespassers were summarily ignored as they moved through the space, hunting for a way upward.

It didn’t take him long to find a potential path forward. A service ladder nearby led up, from one stark white level to the next, going to deck five before it stopped. He stepped away from the top rungs, checked that the doc was behind him, and started hunting for a path to make it up the last two floors. It took John half the ship’s length to find another ladder shaft, but he did, the next set connecting another five levels together.

“Karin, new ladder!” he called out.

“I see it. Lead on, I’m right behind you.”

They climbed amid the rising shouts and growing cacophony of an increasingly panicked staff, and the still going litany from the intercom. The youngest Shepard and his mother’s friend weren’t the only people heading upward either. The crew was starting to make for the outer decks, likely for the rowboats hung up there. Just in case. He couldn’t blame them.

By the time they found the designated location, combat was already in progress. Three figures in power armor were firing sporadically at the doorway of a conference room with submachine guns. They seemed... wary of pushing in.

He assumed David and possibly his sister were on the other side, unarmed and unarmored. The thought made his blood turn to ice in his veins. Dark brows dropped into a glare as he pulled back into cover around the corner and turned to his only back up.
“Karin. Did you bring a sidearm, or any other weapon, with your clearance? I couldn’t bring anything through customs. There’s-”

“Just hold on a moment. I understand where you’re coming from, really I do, but John? You’ve not even been to basic yet, dear boy. You can’t-”

“Basic has nothing on mom, and I won’t-” He started to argue, vehemently, but the silver haired doctor cut him off in return.

“Now listen! If they’ve got David pinned, what precisely do you think you’re going to do? He’s an N7, John. What we need to do is assist him, and the best way to do that is to get communications back online so that all of us, and the security staff, can coordinate. That jammer was the enemy’s very first move for a reason.”

The blue eyed ex-slave took a breath and rolled his neck out a little, staring the doctor down. She had a lot more military experience than he did, but was any of it combat experience? Conflict resolution experience? Or was it all medical desk work?

“Promise me you know what you’re doing. That you have field experience to back that assessment up.”

Rather than get upset with him like he expected, Karin smiled at him like he’d done something right, and nodded. “Oh yes, I do promise. When you’re friends with people in special forces, you tend to get dragged into their messes. This will not be my first mass-hostage situation, or second… or third, even. Trust me, communications are critical.”

John nodded, dragging himself away from the shoot out and around the corner, eyes searching the walls as he thought about where the jammer might be. Without realizing it, he began muttering as they backtracked. “…they’d need somewhere to plug it in, unless it came with a phenomenal power source for such a strong signal… not as reliable though… battery is better… Have to confirm no QEC… bridge or engineering…”

“Pardon?”

“The jammer. We need to find it without getting ourselves waylaid.”

“Ah, yes. The bridge could be a location for the jamming device, but also well guarded. Though… engineering is another likelihood, and also where a sabotage of the ship’s buoyancy generators or propulsion systems would be most likely to occur.”

Their eyes met as the two headed back to the staff corridors, mild hazel to anger-lit blue.

“…engineering?”

Karin nodded to him, “Agreed.”

David looked up just in time to watch as Jane slid from the air duct above the last standing hostile in power armor.
Internally he panicked a little, the ballsy young woman dropping toward the well equipped, albeit poorly trained, enemy with no apparent gear of her own. The girl was, quite literally, wearing nothing but a black bikini and a smattering of blood.

Doing anything about his almost-daughter’s presence, however, would only draw attention to her, so he held his peace and continued to listen to the hostile that was… it sounded like crying about their dead comrades while they screamed eco-terrorist drivel at him.

“Can’t believe or see! Your choices are caus-huh-w-uRK!”

His first impression, that the shaggy haired teen was unarmed, proved to be false. With a tug at the power armor’s latches from behind, Jane released the seal of the helm just enough to loop a garotte around the terrorist’s neck, and pull it taut through the crack. The man inside choked, flailed, and briefly shot up the bulkhead to the side before a forward lurch from the girl on his back sent him crashing to the deck.

The young First Lieutenant reversed her lurch, and slit the hostile’s throat with the aid of gravity. The metal wire slid free of one cloth-tied palm, and she landed in a crouch looking like a red haired version of her mother: picture perfect assassination completed with precision form.

David leaned back out of cover, eyebrow raised. Jane cleared her throat, and straightened up, not much more bloody than she’d been a minute ago.

“Ahem. Hello… sir. Er… David… No… Sir?”

He blinked slowly.

“Arg… I know you outrank me by a metric fuck ton, but we are sort of on vacation, so which address is correct under the circumstances?”

Scrubbing a palm over his face he groused at her. “Active combat, Shepard. It’ll be sir or Anderson, technically. Though I don’t much care right now. That was a damn fool move.”

She shrugged. “It… worked?”

David sighed and stood, moving forward to collect the dead man’s submachine gun. The inaccurate weapon wasn’t his preference, but it would do.

“It sure did!” Kahlee chimed in from the shelter of the enclosed kitchenette space behind him. The dark skinned N7 turned around to give her a look, muscular arms crossing in front of his sunset-print hawaiian shirt. She merely winked and left cover to dig out one of the other two weapons they’d acquired by default. “Hey, whatever it was, it worked, and now just look at this gear we have… Nicely done Jane! He can write you up later.”

“Cool with me. Anyone seen John?”

“Who’s John?”

Hannah’s daughter turned to look at the sharply dressed, effeminate form that leaned cautiously out from the other side of the kitchenette door.

“Who’s he?” Jane countered, a thumb jutting out towards the unknown man.

Their third smoothed hands down over a mauve-colored silk jacket front, stepping around debris delicately. “‘They’ if you please. Chelsea Whitiker, CEO of Divisia Dynamics. A pleasure to make
your acquaintance you lovely, deadly person you. And oh my that hair of yours. What an aesthetic!

David could practically see the inner-snarky-teenager rising into Jane’s sneering expression, and decided to head off potential offensiveness at the pass. “I’ll take the other mostly functional armor set. Jane, take what you want from the damaged one in the hallway, but be quick about it. They know we’re here, we need to move position.”

Thankfully the girl’s training took over, resulting in a sufficiently crisp, “Yes sir,”

“A fantastic idea!” offered Chelsea, “I’d really prefer to get away from all this blood...”

“Mmmhm. Sounds like a plan... a shame I didn’t get to finish my parfait though, I’m starting to get peckish.”

The distinct feeling of herding cats settled on David shoulders as he pulled armor from the corpse, donning it with an expression both wry and grim.

“... when were you going to tell me you’re a crack shot?”

The silver haired doctor chuckled as gunfire zipped past their cover, calmly checking her thermal clip before holding up a finger to ask him to wait. Her sanded foot tapped on the deck to with a distinct rhythm.

One… two… three…

One… two… three…

Without warning Karin spun out of cover only as far as needed, took two quick shots, and ducked back down with plenty of time to spare before return fire came.

One… two… three…

One… two… three…

John suddenly realized she was counting the burst shots from the terrorist’s guns, waiting for their reloading periods to overlap between the two hostiles they were facing, and then...

Bam, bam. Two became one.

“Oh, I’m not a crack shot, really. Just halfways decent. Do me a favor? Throw another couple of those datapads we found, mmm? Distract the last one while I figure out what to do without any rounds left... “

“Thermal empty?”

“Quite. Though if we give it enough time, they do sometimes get an extra shot as the internal sink loses heat to the air...”

“That could take awhile.”
“You’re correct, though our next best option is to retreat.”

John squinted at the back wall of the engineering corridor they’d gotten to, not liking the idea of retreat. The drive cores and energy generators on cruise liners, as he’d been sort of horrified to find out, were unguarded.

If they backed off now, there could be no good end to the problems that resulted… and he still had no idea what was happening with the rest of their group.

His fist clenched, displeasure rising enough to cause the ghost of sparks to run down his arm. John paused at seeing them, perking up. ‘Clips. We at least need more clips…’

The dark haired teen tossed two datapads out toward their remaining aggressor, and two more at Karin’s feet.

“I have an idea, doc. Distract them for me?”

She gave him a flat look. “You’re not bum rushing them.”

“No, not that.”

The hazel eyed woman pursed her lips but nodded, turning while still in cover to aim one of their stolen, trashy magazine datapads down the hall and over their cover. As the first one went sailing John dropped to his stomach and leaned out to find a target.

The inexperienced and over-geared enemy started to lower their firearm towards him, but the second datapad made them raise up to shoot at it just as his pull caught on the dead one’s body. He tugged, hard, making the corpse’s armor shreek against the deck plating as it was biotically dragged to them.

The blue eyed boy fell back into cover, panting like he’d just run several kilometers. On the other side of the T-shaped confluence, Karin tugged the body further into her cover, and began rifling through his gear. Without warning, a sidearm slid into his line of sight. He turned to the doctor in surprise, chest heaving.

“No careless shot taking, mm?”

“Of course… I don’t exactly enjoy being full of holes.”

She smirked wryly at him, and patted her newly liberated submachine gun. “Shall we see about retaking the rest of engineering? If you’d care to wait a moment while I deter the final gentleman down the hall, I believe at least one of these ridiculous power armor suits should fit you well enough to be functional.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Hah! I intend to hide behind you, dear boy. Now, let’s get to it.”

‘Signal to the Alliance Command Network has been reestablished.’

The polite tone of his com’s VI was a blessing in his ears as David was interrupted from trying to
plan their next move with next to no intel on the situation. Hands flying through an emergency message to Australia's coast guard, his vidchat program was already ringing Karin as he typed. The call rang twice, then answered.

“My, that was quick. Hello David.”

“Karin, sitrep.”

“John and I are unharmed, and have disabled the jamming device they were using. Engineering has been more or less cleared of whoever is attacking us.”

The mild mannered soldier allowed himself a relieved breath at her placid smile, John’s serious face looking back at him over her shoulder. “Good.”

“Indeed… and how are things on your end?”

“The rest of ours accounted for, plus their target, a small group of civilians, along with a few of the ship's security staff, and a pair of sea marshals.”

“My, what a group.”

David nodded, eyebrows popping in another ‘what can you do?’ expression. “We need to regroup. If you’re down in engineering, you should come to us, so we can continue to move upward toward the source. Think you can make it to the fourteenth floor, near the prow? We’re in the ‘teen hang-out club’.”

He could tell from her expression that Karin was suppressing laughter at his expense, instead nodding cordially. “Of course.”

“Anderson out.”

“Tata for now.”

Dismissing the eternal quandry of Karin Chakwas’ many idiosyncrasies, the dark skinned N7 worked his way around the room while sending out several other emergency notifications, and glancing over the near-immediate replies from the coast guard.

“Shepard.”

Jane took a guilty step back from a smirking Turian, fists clenched and eyes flashing angrily. The odd sight of a… female? Probably female, Turian, amid a cruise ship largely populated by humans and Asari was strange, but not an immediate concern.

“Yes sir?”

David still glanced between them a few times as he continued speaking. “Coms are up again. I just got off the line with John and Karin. They’re headed our way. When they get here, I’m leaving you with the two of them to defend this position while Kahlee and I retake control of the ship. Understood?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Good.” He nodded back and moved off, not noticing the way the Turian was still eyeing Shepard’s hips hungrily... though he did hear a snippet of conversation between them as he headed for where Kahlee was bunkered down.
“-really fantastic. Your eyes too, are just so... vivid! So... how do Humans relieve tension in high stress situations?”

Jane not-quite-hissed a caustic reply that he didn’t exactly have time to deal with.

“Go. Away.”

Stumbling in through the front doors, Hannah dropped her duffle and kicked off her combat boots, uncaring of where anything ended up. She’d handle it later. Right now all the exhausted woman wanted was a nice cold beer and an icepack for her face… or maybe just a second beer to press against her eye until the first was finished. She was black and blue all up the side of her head, left eye thankfully no longer swollen shut by a small margin.

The N7 operative waited for the automatic lights to come on and crossed to the chill unit. A fresh six-pack of pale ale sat waiting on the top shelf like the gift of good planning it really was, light yellow fluid looking beautiful even in the unflattering glow from the unit’s internal LEDs.

The beer was cracked open with a soft fssssstop sound, and she leaned back against the island countertop for a first blissful sip. Hannah stayed right there, unthinking and zoned out, until a third of the frothy beverage was gone.

When some small portion of her wits had been restored, she glanced around the kitchen and began considering a late-late dinner, or perhaps a very early breakfast-before-bed, and noticed David’s gift still sitting on the ledge.

A patience gathering inhale preceded a fond, still-exhausted exhale. “I can trust those two with my life, but they’d lose their heads if they weren’t screwed on tight.”

A few minutes, half a beer, and a mild sense of calm engendered by the sound of cricket song happened before she managed to force herself up again, only going so far as to gingerly sit down at the kitchen table. Hannah relaxed back in the real oakwood chair and pulled up her Omni-tool. It had been pinging incessantly since the shuttle had delivered her back to Earth, but since it hadn’t been the priority notification tone, she’d ignored it.

Unprofessional, perhaps, but the normally stoic operative had been -and still mostly was- tired to her bones.

A few seconds into reading the messages Hannah Shepard realised that her mild self indulgence may have been a mistake. A normal message from Anderson sat in her inbox, innocent until read.

FROM:8823578//ID.code:faithingoodhumor
TO: 5253568//LOCAL

Shepard,
Shame you weren’t able to make it. Things got a little exciting. Kids are fine, but when you get this? Check the news.

-D.A.

END MSSG

“Exciting, he says. *Exciting.* Anderson…” a small noise of aggravation escaped the N7’s self control, and she carefully placed the bottle down on the table before her augmented grip strength broke it. Hannah hit the button sequence to call her oldest friend, face schooled into an icy mask.

He didn’t answer.

A dark blonde eyebrow twitched with her displeasure, teeth scraping together in her mouth as she ground them together. For good measure she tried again, but the line was still busy. Instead of trying a third time, Hannah chose to attempt her *second* oldest friend’s number. Steven was polite enough to pick up on the first ring.

“Hackett here,” the imperturbable man answered as he picked up the line, not even looking at the screen and clearly still awake at the odd hour, which was entirely normal for him.

Hannah carefully arranged her words, countenance every inch of politeness as she watched him through the videcall interface. “Steven, sorry to bother you so... late, but I don’t suppos-”

He cut in, still typing away on another monitor, “I’ve got a shuttle enroute to your location already, Shepard.”

“...wonderful, sir. Thank you.”

“ETA twelve minutes or so. I’ll send along what we’ve got so far, though I warn you it isn’t much.” The Major finally glanced down at the screen, taking in her appearance. “Enough time to get some ice on that shiner at least.”

Hannah chuckled, the honest concern in his eyes breaking her facade for an instant as she rubbed a bandaged hand under the bruising. “You should see the other guy.”

The busy officer chuckled, but didn’t reply.

“Anything specific I should prep for?”

“Hm... no. Situation is taken care of, just the cleanup work now.”

“Alright. Thank you, sir.”

“Good luck Shepard. Hackett out.”

Hannah closed out her Omni-tool, grabbed her ale, and headed toward the armory in her bedroom while sipping on the last of it. The weathered soldier had just enough time to finish the drink and grab fresh thermal clips from storage, never mind the ice for her eye. She wasn’t about to head into an unknown situation without a full kit.

Her footsteps were near silent as she padded down the hallway.
Clips, medi-gel packs, and a few replacement accessories made everything she needed. The orangey glow from the streetlights outside lit her return to the kitchen. The blonde only stopped long enough to grab David’s gift and put the beer bottle in the recycler before heading to the front door. Sore feet went back into blood spattered boots, and she stepped back outside into the warm evening air.

It wasn’t two minutes more before the shuttle settled down out on the curb. She walked to it calmly, stepped inside, and settled in for the half hour ride out to somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

The ship’s hallways were much clearer than before, both in the employee only area of the ship and within the main corridors. John assumed it was because everyone was clamoring for lifeboats rather than remain onboard a ship full of terrorists with guns. Granted, he’d yet to see a single civilian casualty, but he couldn’t blame the tourists for not wanting to stick around.

The dark haired young man and the doctor following him made it to the ‘teen hang-out club’ in good time, only having to shoot their way through two more sets of mostly useless hostiles.

Beside the bulkhead, the entry panel wasn’t even glowing.

“Shorted out?” he ventured, glancing back the way the came, brows furrowed.

“That would be my guess, yes. Let’s knock, shall we?”

Karin proceeded to do just that, making two crisp knocks against the metal. The pair didn’t have to wait long. The door shifted ajar, David’s cautious gaze coming through a small gap.

“It’s them.”

More sets of hands came around the door’s edges to pull it open for them. John ushered Karin in ahead of him, glancing back and forth along the corridor for watchers. Finding none, he stepped inside as well, immediately finding himself face to face with the narrowed lime-green eyes of his adoptive sister.

“Hey Jane,” he smiled, relieved to see her whole.

She blinked at him. “You’re not dead.”

“No?”

“Super.” She swept in to give him a rare one-armed hug, and then immediately retreated to a safe distance. Her usual resting bitch face broke into something else for a split second as she pulled away, but then it was gone.

The young man blinked, wiping distractedly at the stray flecks of drying blood his sister had left behind on his power armor.

“I’d say so,” added David, coming in to clasp his shoulder. “Good work getting that jammer offline. The coast guard is on it’s way because of your’s and Karin’s efforts.”

“It was mostly her, actually.” John admitted. “She shoots like no one I’ve ever seen before.”
The dark skinned man chuckled, flashing the doctor a warm smile. “You wouldn’t be the first to notice. Glad you both made it though. How’s that armor you’ve got on working for you?”

It was their medic’s turn to chuckle, thwacking the chest plating of his stolen armor with the back of her hand. “I certainly hope the Alliance makes this one into a vanguard. He’s cautious enough to live a while, but ballsy enough to get the job done. I spent the last few groups of enemies checking my emails and thinking about what to have for dinner.” As if sensing it was an appropriate time, John’s stomach grumbled. Making the doctor chuckle.

The firm hand on his shoulder re-clasped it as the older man beamed before stepping away. Ignoring the rumble of the biotic’s stomach out of necessity. “Good. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. You two and Jane will be staying here with the civilians in back. Now, the person in the purple silk jacket...”

As a group, their heads turned to see where he had gestured, toward the sharply dressed individual lounging in a chair, legs crossed and reading a datapad as though he was still on holiday and not being hunted by eco-terroristes.

“Hmmm…” hummed Karin in consideration. “That jacket’s... mauve, I do believe.”

“Mauve…” he corrected, agreeably. “Well, that’s Chelsea Whitiker.”


“More like ‘Fashion’s Greatest Misdemeanor’...” his sister muttered, not actually under her breath.

“Shepard.”

Everyone knew which of them Anderson was talking to without it needing to be said.

“...Sorry sir.”

The N7 gave her a look, but continued on. “Try and keep them safe if at all possible, but prioritize lives if you have to make a choice. Relocate if any of the terrorists find this spot. Jane, I want you to see about turning more of this furniture into potential cover. John, see if you can’t reassure the civilians. Chakwas is in charge once I leave, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood.”

“Me? Oh very well.”

The older male nodded at the group, then turned on heel to find Kahlee.

John watched him go, glacing to the clumps of worried looking teenagers and -for some reason- loudly whispering cruise goers tucked into the back of the room, past what looked like a small art gallery, a coffee bar, and a dance floor. He started that way, still trying to figure out what ‘reassure the civilians’ meant exactly.

‘Maybe... a short synopsis of the situation would work?’ he mused.
Armed with the weaponry and armor of their enemies, her dark skinned friend had wanted to stomp his way up to the bridge, but Kahlee had proposed another idea: Why not just walk right upstairs, calm as you please?

They were wearing the uniform, so to speak.

David had liked her plan, and away they went, hoping that none of the deck-by-deck search parties happened upon the club area and thought to look for the target of their search.

Another area of concern was engineering, but without more people it was difficult to protect every possible target. Efficiency would be cutting off the snake’s head.

The disguised pair came up on another group after only a single floor, nodding cordially as they passed by on their way toward the elevators. The terrorists didn’t seem to suspect a thing.

“So far so good,” her best friend murmured.

“Mmmhm,” she hummed brightly. “Told you it was a good idea.”

They hit the highest floor the elevator could take them to, deck three, and popped out enroute for the nearest stairs. Skipping deck two altogether was helpful, but the moment they came out on the top level, the situation turned precarious.

“What DO you mEAN you have not foUND HIM!”

“H-h-he- um… h-he,” stuttered a mousy looking man, no more ferocious for the power armor they were wearing. “-is um, hiding. On one of the lower decks? and... uh-”

The man who looked to be in charge of the operation stomped his feet like a petulant child.

“DAMNIT! Whitiker will nOT escape ME!”

“We could j-just blow the boat and leave…” the smaller man suggested in a meek voice.

“NO! I knOW that one will escape. He will FLEE like the coward he iS! We must see him deAD BEFORE we move forward with our gloRIOUSs plan!”

There were only five terrorists on the bridge. Kahlee saw her partner’s cautious steps turn more surefooted the moment the leader’s defense proved to be underwhelming. While the wild-haired lunatic continued to rant at the underling, David approached the group with a smooth, unassuming gait.

“You there!” the wild-voiced leader shouted, pointed an accusatory finger in her friend’s direction. “TELL me we have foUND HIM??”

Without pause, the answer was delivered in the form of a disabling strike to the elbow of the probably-crazy man’s weapon arm, and a series of submachine rounds sent point-blank up into the armpit joint of his power armor. Enemy internals shredded, the N7 spun to deck the closest underling in the face, and went after the next, full-tilt.

Kahlee caught one hostile off guard as David first moved, sending them falling into equipment with an armor-assisted shove, her own weapon aimed at the last of the five. The final hostile was already panicked at the rapid, unexpected assault, and tried to run. They didn’t make it far.
Bridge cleared, the blonde woman slid into the captain’s chair and started making for landfall. Her hands flew across the haptic interface, as she sped read the console’s read out and determined the safest course. Meanwhile, her companion’s voice came on the ship-wide announcement system in an even, matter-of-fact tone.

“Attention passengers. This is Captain David Anderson, of the Systems Alliance Military. The terrorist leader has been eliminated. Please remain calm, and sit tight while the rest of the ship is cleared of enemy forces. All remaining hostiles, you have one opportunity -and only one- to surrender peacefully. Drop your weapons, proceed to the open air deck at the ship’s prow on level five, and get on the ground. Failure to comply will not go well for you. Anderson out.”

Kahlee snickered quietly, finishing up reaiming the ship at the closest piece of land she could find, one of the Solomon Islands it turned out. She wasn’t exactly proficient at steering a cruise ship, but the controls were notably user friendly. Unlike David at the moment. “I will be very surprised, after Karin’s mess down stairs, and their diminished forces remaining, if any of these fools have fight left in them.”

Outside the expansive windows, tale-tell blue and white shuttlecraft were already zooming in on the horizon, headed right their way.

“Can you hail those shuttles for me? I’m going to go check up on our people, and go supervise the -potential- surrender on deck five.”

“I’d be happy to. Seal up the door behind you?”

“Will do.”

“Stay safe!” she beamed at him.

He nodded, heading back out of the bridge. The bright eyed scientist turned back to the control panel and tapped into it’s communication’s system in record time.

“This is First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders, please respond.”

“Lt., this is Corporal Josh Malone. I read you coming from the occupied vessel, is that right?”

“Sure is. Few of us were onboard vacationing when the… hm… situation occurred. We’ve regaining control of the ship now, but some backup would surely be appreciated. I’m sealed in on the bridge, there’s a hold out of our people on the fourteenth floor, and an unhappy N7 clearing each level. Should be some a number of hostiles surrendering on the top deck, as well.”

A whistle came over the line. “Sounds like bad luck for your terrorists. I’ll pass the word.”

“You aren’t wrong, Corporal, and thank you. There should be landing space for those shuttles near the aft section, by the way. Just watch out for friendlies moving around.”

“Copy that. See you soon, m’am.”

It was the middle of the night again when Hannah stepped off her transport shuttle from North
America and onto the deck of the cruise ship in full N7 battle armor. She very tired, in a fair bit of pain, and the time shift was not helping matters. Someone would pay dearly for these circumstances.... so long as they weren’t already dead.

Cool blue eyes took in the scene as she moved forward in a mildly paced power walk, giftwrapped box under one arm. The coast guard was already aboard the ship, clearly having retaken control. Not that she wasn’t armed and prepared for the circumstance otherwise, or for that to change suddenly, but if the night ended without a firefight that would be… acceptable. Very acceptable.

A quick glance around the main deck showed her a line of hostiles, on their knees awaiting transport to the nearest holding facility. They were all zip tied at the wrists, armor removed and weapons piled far away. No less than twelve silent, unhappy-to-be-awake guards were on the deck, each armed to the teeth.

Hannah moved past them. It didn’t take long for her to find the officer in charge, chevrons marking the sandy haired male as a Navy Captain. The man looked up at her approach, a tight expression on his face. “Commander Shepard, I presume?”

“Captain, sitrep.” she snapped back.

Without missing a beat he dropped into an explanation, telling the special forces operative exactly what had transpired and reassuring that the ship was secure. His eyes only strayed to the ribboned box under her arm once, to his credit. When tall Captain finished, she nodded in acceptance of his account. “Anything else, ma’am?”

“I’d like to speak with Captain Anderson, can you have someone take me to him?”

“No need!”

She looked up to see the man in question waving at her, walking forward with a slight limp in his step. Hannah felt an unseen tension in her shoulders relax as she dismissed the Coast Guard officer in favor of giving her friend a once over.

“Shepard! Glad you could make it after all,” he greeted warmly, clasping a hand over her armored shoulder.

“I hear the ship’s secure, s- ...David,” she said his name as if it tasted of pure lemon juice. The other operative’s smile widened noticeably, but he didn’t mention the slip.

“It is,” he agreed with a nod towards the line of enemies. “Let’s go check in on your strays, hm? I’ll admit… I wasn’t as good about keeping them out of trouble as I thought I’d be.”

Hannah followed him a half pace behind, expression neutral as she asked, “Are they alive?”

“Of course.”

“Are either of them maimed?”

He paused, considering the question before deciding on an answer.”“Not... that I know of.”

“…good enough.” She nodded crisply and exhaled through her nose, choosing to remain silent for a few minutes until they reached the elevator and stepped inside of the semi-private. Once there, she shoved the giftbox at him. “This is for you.”

“What for?” he asked confused, but still accepted the offered package.
“Your birthday. The children forgot it at home,” the blonde answered, assuming an at-ease stance as the lift descended. “They’ll have a nice long lecture about personal responsibility for it later. After I’ve hugged them.”

When the doors opened to the mezzanine level, David was still chuckling.

Chapter End Notes

03/11/2010 - Petitioner's Witness Testifies in Ford v. Huerta
“Expert witnesses were introduced today in the Systems Alliance trial of Ford v. Huerta, starting with the petitioner's side. Dr. Samuel Wachhaus testified today that President Huerta was brain-dead for too long to make a full recovery. Questioned on Huerta's apparent cognitive health afterward, Wachhaus testified that the VI ran Huerta's artificial memory so successfully that it took over his brain functions so that "there was no Huerta anymore. This is not a person with a VI memory, it's a VI with a partially-organic operating system". The respondent's experts will begin testimony tomorrow.”

A/N: What was Kahlee Sanders doing between the mess with Dr. Qian/Saren, and when she joined the Ascension program in 2178? Supposedly she spent 10 years working on classified projects for the Systems Alliance, and then 3 years as a civilian consultant. My question is, what the hell did she have on the Systems Alliance that was mild enough to not be worth killing her, but good enough to cut her loose after she went over the heads of her superior officers to make a run for it with Dr. Qian’s data, nearly losing it to both the Citadel Council and the Blue Suns? Humanity would have been in deep shit had that AI research gotten into the wrong hands. Nevermind that the research itself was on a Reaper artifact that she was within range of for who knows how long. What a mess… anyway, I also discovered that there is some unique Citadel DLC dialogue in ME3 where Shepard and Traynor find a personal effects bag with a loofah and an ‘adjustable massage wand’ in David’s apartment, with K. Sanders on the side. I think that’s close enough canon to put them at least on the ‘foolishly dated’ scale, possibly even jumping to full out romance.

A/N/N: I had always presumed that Karin Chakwas was just your typical motherly type that knew everyone and always felt familiar, but when trying to decide whether to include her for this trip (in lieu of David and Karin being obvious friends, and David being Shepard’s close mentor) I went back and rewatched the ME1 interactions for Shepard and Karin to see if it would give me a hint whether they’d known each other or not before serving on the Normandy. The result? She is as casual with Shepard as she is with David, referring to you without title right off the bat, and if you go through all the dialogue options with her, it involves a lot of ‘what can you tell me about this’ that has an air of Karin already being a trusted source of knowledge. At no point are we ‘introduced’ to Karin like we are to Nihlus. Now, if anyone else has any conflicting data, by all means -drop me a line-, but until I hear otherwise, EDaH is going to assume that Karin and Shepard are familiar with each other pre-ME1.

Fanfic Recommendation: Love, Shepard (3013 words) by vaguelyremarkable
And to rule over the skies

Chapter Summary

Nihlus is a playful jerk, Saren decides on things, Avitus doesn't know what to make of generosity without agenda, Garrus tries to be gracious, and Aiesha actually laughs for once.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Whew, sorry this chappie took like two+ weeks, dear ducks. Author-chan is sorry for the delay! Anyhoo, the chapter 2 rewrite is up, no major content changes, but a couple thousand extra words to smooth out the edges. :D And now, welcome to a new arc!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halfway.

His second protégé was barely halfway to completing special forces training, and already the mercenaries, pirates, and paramilitary organizations of his sector were running rampant through shipping lanes and colonial settlements alike.

Saren stared down the ever-growing list of issues in the Skyllian Verge with a narrow, displeased gaze. Without the majority of his focus on the troubled area it was slowly spiraling down into the same mess it had been in after the Relay 314 Incident. Far worse than it had when he trained Nihlus, with no real explanation why.

Years of work, regresssing because he wasn’t there to police it. To guide and cull it. His glare fell away with a sigh, weariness dragging on armored shoulders like massive, intangible weights.

How quickly his life’s work was being undone.

ST&R’s watcher programs skimmed the public data feeds every minute of every day, while the Intelligence Division dug through the turn out. Along with brokered info, floating rumors, and observation post statistics, the VI’s and their attendant number crunchers were coming up with fresh red flag incidents in the Verge by the day... posted on the free-for-all intel boards for any Spectre to handle if they could spare the time.
It chafed, that it was happening at all, and that every single agent had a live view and even a VI created preview of his sector destabilizing into chaos. If it were not for the worthy cause of training a new agent, he would be somewhere near furious at the situation... but it was for that cause, and it made the chaos palpable. Barely.

If only Nihlus had not been reassigned to the denser, more critical sector that the carmine plated torin now looked after... if only... but no, his protégé’s skills had been desperately needed by the four Spectre group that policed the Eagle Nebula. Interior Council Space took priority to all else, especially the somewhat lost cause that was the border between the Hegemony and the Systems Alliance.

When the silver-grey torin had originally taken the sector on, his ability to stabilize the region more or less on his own had thrown the Council for quite a loop. With the occasional bit of help from other agents what had once been a rapidly boiling Cold War Zone was held steady at lukewarm. His focus on Rix’s training was undoing that balance, the uncontrolled elements growing strong again, and yet... Saren was beginning to think that his newest trainee was not only going to survive his apprenticeship, but that the pale torn might also be suited to staying on in the area permanently.

Avitus did well in the lawless, interstitial places of the Verge. He knew how mercenaries thought, how desperate people worked, and used that to every advantage. He was creative, versatile, and hardworking. The pale torin could stay in-sector after taking his oaths, and do well, someone to help him cultivate stability in the region.

Someone to hold onto it when he had finally taken one bullet too many.

It was with those thoughts bolstering him that Saren turned from the growing list of unchecked problems, and headed for the ST&R breakroom.

“Spirits of the Deep, Rix,” came Nihlus' colony accented voice, always worse after talking to Riaz or Avitus for any length of time. “Is that pauldron held together by chewing gum or what?”

The former mercenary scoffed, sounding vaguely offended. “I have no idea what ‘chooing guhm’ is. It’s standard armor polymer, Kryik. Works just fine.”

Green eyes caught sight of him entering, a boxy kava mug lifted from the table and pointed in his general direction.
“Saren! His armor is made of happy thoughts and pottery glue. Can’t we get him something better?”

Rix grunted, shifting in his seat. “I’ve had the base pieces of this set since I was seventeen. It’s held up really well, alright?”

Electric eyes scanned the shoulder piece that Nihlus tapped his mug on. The ceramic was cracked clear through, a neat joint of bonding agent holding it together.

Despite his trainee’s mulish subvocals, and the well maintained state of the armor in general, Nihlus had a point. The set was many times repaired, an imperfect fit, and technologically dated.

“...yes. New armor would be prudent.”

“Hold on, now-“

“You may keep this set if you wish, but it is not sufficient any longer.”

“I don’t have the money to-“

He cut the orange eyed male off with a curt slash of his gloved hand. “Unimportant. You require a certain standard of gear to do your future duty.”

As expected, the implication of future Spectrehood silenced Avitus’ protests. The older soldier looked up at him, appearing startled by the presumption. Nihlus merely barked a laugh into the conversation break. “Hah! No more chewing gum armor for you. You’re movin’ up in the world, Rix.”

“Sir, I… really, actually, don’t have the credits for new armor. You know how expensive my treatments are…”

Saren raised his chin, crest dipping as he looked into the far ground, considering. “You will have increased means as time progresses because of better mission pay, bounties, and the gear claimed
from live targets, but while in training… you are not accruing?”

Subvocals tilting in awkwardness, the orange eyed male seemed to stall for a moment, then replied. “Holding steady because you let me use that cutting edge medbay of yours. Otherwise I wouldn’t even be able to keep up.”

The stoic torin flicked his head aside in acknowledgement, mentally problem solving the funding shortage.

“The Council cannot fully fund us because their own resource accrual is limited to sales taxes, trade terrifs, and the minimal currency flow from each member race… but they do occasionally grant special dispensation funds when needed. I will apply on your behalf, and cover the rest myself.”

Avitus palmed his crest, subvocals very uncertain. “Arterius… I don’t want to owe…”

“You will not. It will be a gift.”

“… half-decent armor is expensive.”

Saren allowed himself a scoff as he casually borrowed Nihlus’ kava, sniffing it to check for contaminates before taking a sip and then returning it. His first protégé buzzed at him in overexaggerated complaint that he fully ignored.

“We are not acquiring you half decent armor, Trainee Rix. You will need a kit worthy of the dangers to come. Made for you, specific to your weaknesses and strengths.”

Kava cup cradled to the keel ridge of his armor, Nihlus perked up from pretending to be bothered by the drink theft, harmonics interested. “Does this mean we’re going shopping?”

A throat clearing behind her was the first sign Aiesha had that there was company in her office. With only a slight flinch she turned around slowly, purposefully ignoring her instincts to spin quickly toward the unknown entity.
It was Vakarian, shifting from foot to foot, hands holding something behind his back. The peach
toned tarin gestured him inside, letting none of the self-recrimination for being caught off guard show
on her face.

“Hello. Ready to get to work on the Stately-Brasillisa case?”

“I ah…” the mountainous torin cleared his throat before continuing on in a rushed, obviously
rehearsed speech. “Actually, I wanted to thank you for covering my six at the election dinner. It took
a lot of stress off my shoulders. You didn't have to go, but you did, and I’m sure some of it went
better than it could have because you were there. Also, I apologize for not being a good host that
night, and being a pretty awful date overall. I hope you enjoyed yourself a little bit, at least. Anyway,
this is ah… a thank you gift.”

Aiesha blinked, hands coming out to take the proffered item automatically.

“...Oh. Thank you. May I…?” She gestured to the threaded twine on the gift box, talon moving to
slice it at his agreeable nod.

“I checked the extra-net for gift ideas since I didn't know what you would like, and it came down to
this or wine…”

The lid came off with ease as Aiesha set the package on her desk, lifting away to reveal the tale-tell
metal threaded glass of a spirit candle. The lovely detective pulled the gift from it’s wrapping, turning
it about in the light. The green tinted jar was laced with copper in the fluid spirals of Gihira, the spirit
of change, flight, and positivity.

While she marveled at the soft, floral scent the delightfully quaint jar-candle gave off, her partner
continued to ramble, awkwardness returning in full force as the tall sniper ran out of his apparent
script.

“I… also wanted to make sure that… that you aren't leaving the force next month because of… me.”

Agent Makasian chuffed lightly in reproach, as if that were a ridiculous notion, ready to say as much
to be certain the matter was clear. “In no way is my… career change… your fault, Vakarian.
Eventful dinners or no, you’ve been an exemplary partner.”

She could see the edge of tension lessen in his shoulders at a glance, her gaze returning to the gift to
inspect the delicate bundle of charms tied to it. Glyphs and tokens in worn-metal brass.

“Good. That’s… good. Was worried I’d, heh… chased you off? Something like that.”

A particular shape on the bundle of tokens caught her eye as he spoke, drawing attention and giving
rise to confusion… then growing amusement. Aiesha looked up at her soon-to-be former partner
with a hint of wry grin. “Question.”

Stone-grey crest turned as he eyed her through his visor, one hand palming the back of his neck.
“Sure?”

The ocean-eyed tarin’s smile bloomed into something wide and real as she held up the thoughtful
gift, tapping a talon beside the charms. “Is this a feather on my candle…?”

The startled, panicked look on Vakarian’s face was perhaps even better than the candle itself. Her
laughter trilled out like bell chimes, loud enough that the front desk staff heard the sound, and
wondered who it could possibly belong to.
“I-I didn't mean, I ah, that is, you're very... but I’m...” His protests died in a miserable groan.

“Perhaps next time, you... aha... mmmm... should stick to the wine?”

“Spirits, damn it.”

Chapter End Notes

03/12/2010 - Defendant's Witness Asserts President Huerta Made Full Recovery

“Expert witness Dr. Lin Shiyin testified in the Systems Alliance trial of Ford v. Huerta today. He claimed that the former president made a full recovery from a temporarily brain-dead state. Stumbling a little when grilled on Huerta's timeline of cognition, Lin nevertheless made the case for Huerta being in full control once his motor functions and memory were assigned synthetic analogues. "To believe that he is now a different person, a synthetic, is to draw a line where no line is needed", he argued. "A new man did not appear on the table when the first open-heart surgery was performed. His life was merely extended beyond what was thought possible at the time".”

A/N: Okay okay okay okay wait... so... grey boxes... saving brains... that's cutting edge but basically legally acceptable in ME era? HUH! Crazy. I would have thought greyboxes and other tech that blurs the line between organic and artificial minds would be illegal as hell, just to keep 'People good, AI bad' as a nice, clear cut issue. Then again... ME Humans kinda just do whatever they want, don't they?

[Author's Codex - Gihira]
[Also known as The South Wind, Gihira is the Turian spirit of change, flight, and positivity. Their gender changes according to record, as does their appearance and origin. What is generally consensus is that Gihira was a titan who didn't care to deal with the others of their kind, favoring mortal company instead. It's common for pilots, people moving to a new home, and mental wellness centers to have a shrine to them. ]

Fanfic Recommendation: and sink to human shape (5020 words) by QuickYoke
Like an ocean frozen in a moment

Chapter Summary

If there was ever one unspoken rule about ST&R, it’s that Spectres take care of their own.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I hope you all had a great Thanksgiving if you celebrate it. :D

A/N/N: Has anyone else ever thought about what Saren would look like in skinny jeans? For some damnable reason I can’t get the idea out of my head. Like dark-dark-blue skinny jeans, and probably a leather jacket. ( -and nothing else. *cough* )

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Arterius.”

Pausing the test fire of a recent modification to his main weapon, the silver-grey torin tapped the safety on and laid the heavy pistol down on the shooting gallery’s counter before turning to acknowledge the unassuming figure that had addressed him.

“Kimbarum. You need something?”

The other Spectre shook his head, instead offering out a datapad. “Heard you were in the market for new armor, had a recommendation.”

Saren took the proffered tablet, eyes glancing down the short bit of information and memorizing it instantly, then handed the datapad back. “You are partially mistaken, but the gesture is appreciated. My trainee has proven to be sufficiently difficult to kill... while wearing substandard armor.”

The mild mannered Salarian blinked once, then had the rest of the conversation extrapolated from the obvious hint. He clicked the datapad’s screen off, and tucked it away.

“Preemptive congratulations on training another student. It would be a good thing if our number rose.... New species discovered yesterday, pre-flight but sentient. Too close to Nimue’s Perch, need watchers... none available.”

The stolid torin’s mandibles fluttered at the news, then stilled. Shooka Kimbarum wasn’t one to waste words… so what did the information reveal that the other male wanted him to know?

“Thank you, and yes, I must agree. As the galaxy’s known species expand, so too should the infrastructure supporting stable relations between them.”

The quiet, Seveni colored Spectre ducked a nod, and turned away to leave.

Saren picked up his weapon, removed the safety, and returned to test firing sequences to get a feel
for their stress on the new heatsink mod, half his mind still tuned to ferreting out what all had just been shared.

A cutting edge armorer, a new species in Nimue’s Perch, his second protégé, and issues with sufficient personnel count. A curious disparity of topics, but he had a feeling that the threads of connection were there.

The end of the desert was a lie.

Jaw clenched and eyes narrowed, the Wanderer stepped from fading sand to banded stone, and waited for something to happen. A congratulations maybe. A welcome party. Hell, he’d even settle for a glass of water…

Nothing. There was nothing and no one waiting for him on the sprawling plain of dark grey that looked more like frozen ocean than proper ground. The only movement was the tug of wind on the unimpressive shrubbery that cropped up in sporadic batches.

There was no one to guide him either. Nor paths or foot trails, no roads or signs. The stormy, windy desert simply trailed off into flat, unending stone as far as he could see.

The torin’s fists curled in on themselves. His lavender crest rose, spiking into the air as his chin dropped. He felt cheated. This was… the edge of the desert was supposed to be… something.

‘A self made goal, to keep moving. To get out of those dizzying winds…’

A lie.

Boiling with frustration he roared to the sky, chest forward and talons flared.

“Oi… What’s with all the noise?”

The Wanderer spun, pupils contracting as he turned back toward the sands to face the voice… but the sands were gone. He shifted weight onto his rear leg, tense and trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Where there had just been a desert -the same spirit’s damned desert he’d fought and hiked his way out of- now the stone plains stretched out in every direction.

Left, right, everywhere.

His sharp blue eyes narrowed, head turning as he looked at the newcomer sideways. “Who are you, and where did the desert go?”

The source of the voice groaned, palming it’s amber skull plating. Whoever the entity was, they were Krogan.

“Oh no, nevermind, not doing this again,” they said, turning and walking off in an apparently random direction. The Wanderer followed, intent on getting some answers.

“Not doing what again, exactly?”
“Talking to a newly arrived,” was the bored reply as the… male? No… female? He never could tell with their species, but regardless they continued stomping away.

“You’re talking to me right now, and I want to know what this place is. What those things in the desert were.”

The Krogan stopped and turned to look back at him with mild aggravation, dusty blue clothes flapping in the light breeze that still smelled of sand.

“Sweet, unmerciful Kalros, do you have any idea how many times I’ve had this conversation? With the same questions? Bah. I should have known better than to ask what had you yowling like a fledgling for no apparent reason.”

The Wanderer chuffed, arms crossing as he came to a stop, glaring imperiously at the probably-female. “No, I don’t know how many times you’ve had this conversation, and it makes no difference on the fact that I still want to know where it is. Also, I’m a general. Implying that I’m a fledgling really just means that you can’t read the chevrons…” he paused, mind feeling fuzzy around the edges, “-on... my... armor.”

With an unimpressed bark of laughter the Krogan turned back around and continued walking, leaving him in the dust. He pushed himself to follow again, browridges furrowed in confusion. The torin dug deep, trying to remember more than just his rank.

Growing as he tried to remember why he couldn’t remember.

“Don’t hurt yourself back there, fledgling.”

He huffed, annoyed. “I want answers.”

“If you’re fresh out of the desert but not remembering straight you probably went through some trauma. Give it some time. Preferably off in another direction.”

The torin let the threads of stubborn, immobile thought go in favor of catching up to the only other fully formed being he’d seen since arriving.

“If you won’t tell me where we are, will you tell me where we’re going?”

“We’re not going anywhere. I was on my way to the forest to meet up with an old friend of mine.”

He cast a look at the empty, stone warped horizon. “I would say that we can’t be anywhere near your friend, but distance doesn’t seem to work here. Rock formations and the like shifted closer or further in the desert every other time I blinked.”

“A Turian that catches on quickly? Didn’t know they taught your kind how to think for themselves.”

The Wanderer squinted at the female, taking the insult as just another tactic to drive away the inconvenience he was being treated as. Instead of falling for it he considered the plains in front of them and ignored the slight in favor of digging for intel.

“Mmm… so... how far is it to the forest?”
“No.”
“But it-”
“No.”

The forlorn, almost childish complaint in Kryik’s subvocals was both highly amusing and slightly embarrassing. The torin was special forces, veteran special forces at this point, and yet he somehow whined at the exact pitch of a five year old who didn’t want to go to bed yet.

Avitus stepped out of the skycar and moved to follow his mentor and predecessor as they continued to… he wanted to call it ‘negotiate’ the limitations of their shopping trip.

Apparently visiting a day spa was a hard pass for Arterius.

“Okay, so we visit this armor shop, we get the new guy some better chops, and then we just eat lunch and go home? Come on. That’s no shopping trip.”

The laconic torin chuffed quietly at the complaining, tugging at the dark cloth of his hood to resettle it further forward. “Purchase of goods will occur, so long as the armorer can make what we need in a reasonable amount of time and credits.”

Without regard for social standard, or the wandering eyes of anyone front of him, Kryik dropped his crest back, putting his throat on full display as he groaned in disagreement. Arterius ignored the antics placidly. Avitus drifted slightly further back from the two.

“That’s booooooring. How about we get him a new weapon and some fun grenade mods to go with his new kit? And Garrote wire. He’s all…” A red-brown hand spun at the wrist as Kryik searched for words. “…scrappy. I bet he’d make good use of a few clever toys.”

That didn’t sound good. He didn’t want to owe Arterius even more credits. “I don-”

Said torin hummed in consideration, before giving tentative subharmonic approval. “I will consider it. Armorer then lunch first.”

“Excellllllent.”

“...I’m not *scrappy*,” Avitus mumbled, shoulders drooping in defeat.

Kryik turned back to him, all smiles. “What was that, Rix?”

“...nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

04/15/2010 - System Alliance Finds in Favor of President Huerta in 5-4 Decision
“The controversial Earth court case of Ford v. Huerta came to a close today with a 5-4 decision supporting the end of the President's term. Chief Justice Ling announced, “This
is not the first time human beings have technically died only to be brought back with proper medical attention. That the window of resuscitation has lengthened is no reason to support a partisan attack on the legitimacy of the President. The legal definition of death must be expanded beyond brain death to include cellular death as well.

Following the decision, protesters erupted into violence on the Washington, D.C., Mall and in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park. The crowds chanting "Down with the zombie!" were quickly suppressed as riot police cleared the capitols with microwaves and stunners. More protests are reportedly planned for the weekend.”

A/N: Hooooold up... we microwave our problems now? Good grief...

A/N/N: Okay, so on one hand, not two weeks for a chapter! On the other, short chapter. It's that holiday business getting all in my way and stuff. Anyhoo duckies, stay tuned for shopping shenanigans! :D

Fanfic Recommendation: Borrowed Time (1198 words) by BardofHeartDive
To breathe in and out at the same time

Chapter Summary

Shopping, teasing, and put-upon people.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:
Torini - TCD. Plural for multiple torin. (Credit: Mizdirected.)

A/N: Bum bum bum! New chapter! :D I've discovered that I don't exactly know how to write a shopping montage! XD If anyone has examples of shopping trips in fiction that were fun to read, leave a comment with a link or a copy-paste of a blurb? Hehe.

The shop front looked about as exciting as a janitorial supply store, with the exception of high quality holo-screens that mimicked plexiglass while proving to be thick, solid wall on closer inspection. There was no blaring sign in neon above the door, nor adverts for popular brands plastered to every available space. Just a lone Turian lifesign at the back, and well organized display shelving of various sample armors.

Saren’s opinion of Kimbarum’s recommendation rose slightly.

Eyes narrowed, for surely such a perfectly subtle and unassuming store must be some kind of trap, the electric eyed Spectre moved through the entrance and approached the Turian in the back. From behind the too-low counter came the rough baritone of a middle aged tarin, black in plate and marked with neon blue familia notas. The tarin did not stand to greet them, staying leaned back in a folding chair, arms crossed.

“Good morning, torini. How can I be of service?”

Saren came to a stop leaning on one hip and crossing his own arms to match. “You are Iphegenia Monensis, I presume. The store owner.”

“Aye, I am,” she replied in a curious but placid drawl.

“My newest protégé requires an armor set. What do you have to offer?”

The electric eyed Spectre watched the female glance over his own armor then Nihlus’ without comment. Her perusal of Avitus’ kit, however, devolved from a once-over into a frowning-thrice-over. After a moment, she met his gaze directly, one eyebrow raised.

“I’m assuming you mean the orange eyed one wearing a trash heap with a paint job?”
Beside him Nihlus failed to suppress a snicker, then immediately rumbled a subvocal apology at their third number, whose own harmonics were mildly embarrassed but accepting.

The stolid torin made a vaguely affirming hum, “The same.”

The thicker tarin finally rolled out of her slouching sit, coming around the counter and heading off toward a wall of AR mirrors and hovering scanners. “Alright then, let’s get a basic fitting while we talk details.”

Obligingly, Rix moved to stand in the center circle of the set up, half the little drones moving to take scans and recreate his current gear into a glowing holo projection over a mirror image. Monensis immediately started making swipe gestures on the reflective surface, removing the orange overlay of detected armor almost entirely.

His second protégé’s expression fell when the armorer tossed everything but his shin-plating and gloves into the digital garbage can.

“I’ll warn you right off, I don’t do junk work. I can make a functional set into a custom fit out of a default design from any major vendor, and install any legal mods you want, but if you’re after something cheap you’re in the wrong place.”

“Mmm.”

The mirror image of Avitus’ shuffling form began to glow with the wireframes of various armors as the tarin started unabashedly playing with base armor settings from the system’s default designs and compositions.

“So to start with, what’s the budget?”

“No more than five thousand credits per base piece, full set. We require anti-biotic measures, ablative layering, the standard features for zero-g, tech shielding, and enough processing power to run a class three VI. A medical mesh and the usual automated medi-gel and biofoam dispensing system for frequent combat as well. Other functionality is negotiable, based on pricing. You may not exceed one hundred and fifty thousand credits total.”

He could see the moment when the deep voiced female realized that whoever they were, they were not cheap fools come to buy pretty plastic to die in.

“One fifty? That’s doable. Alright protégé, tell me about your combat style.”

“Ah, well… I shoot things.”

“With?”

“… a rifle?”

“More comfortable at long range or short range?”

“Medium, I guess?”

“What sort of enemy do you not want to fight the most?”

“Well armed ones?”
The dark plated female put a hand on her hip, mountain-born genetic stock showing in the thickness of her form, and mild aggravation leaking into her otherwise polite tone at the slew of non-answers. “Tell me about a recent exchange or something. I at least need personalized details on your mobility requirements to get started.”

"Uhhh..." Avitus stalled, clearly scrambling to think of something that wasn't classified.

Having found himself a lean against a nearby set of shelves, Nihlus felt it pertinent to add his own two credits to the interrogation. “He climbs shit, and he’s scrappy.”

“Climbing and scrappy. That’s more like it. Tell me more.”

Saren attempted not to let the mild amusement reach his subvocals at how oddly miserable Avitus looked in the fitting mirror.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Sparatus, do you have a moment?”

The Turian councilor looked away from the petit tarin sitting on the cubitura across from him, glancing up at the door where his Asari counterpart was leaning very slightly into his office, a datapad in hand.

“Tevos. What can I do for you?”

The Matriarch stepped inside at the implied leave, nodding politely at his guest. “I apologize for interrupting your meeting, but I wanted to know if you were certain about this…?”

His fellow Councilor held out the datapad, turned for him to see. On it was the requisition request for Spectre discrepancy funds from Spectre Arterius, a hundred thousand credits granted from his portion of the budget toward the grant request for Spectre-grade arms and armaments for the new recruit. Aequum nodded, looking up again after parsing the information. It was odd that the nais had come to inquire about the choice personally… but the moment he caught the gleam in their eye, he knew what the interruption was really about.

“Yes, I am certain about it,” he offered confidently, leaning away and turning back toward his guest to try and end the conversation. “Was there anything e-”

“But Sparatus… that’s your entire discrepancy allotment for the month.”

Tevos smiled as he glowered back up at the nais. They wanted to gloat at him about the ‘favoritism’ as a part of the ongoing debate between them over perfect social equality and allowance in regulation for nuance and feelings.

It was a debate he was still sure the smiling Asari would lose. Arterius wasn’t a nuance. He was a worthy exception for logical reasons, training a new generation of tough-to-kill Turian Spectres. Those funds were the first steps in an absolutely necessary change to the way non-Asari ST&R agents were seen.
“Tevos…”

The aggravation in his voice only made the nais’ smile widen, though they let off with some small grace, turning to leave with the airs of someone who’d maybe not won the war, but had claimed victory in the latest battle.

“I see, of course. Well, I’m headed home for the evening. See you tomorrow, Councilor.”

The dark plated torin chuffed a non-reply as Tevos sauntered out, unwilling to get into it with them at the moment. As the office door slid shut, he turned back to the tarin across from him, her deceptively pretty face and demure manner not fooling him for an instant.

“Apoologies for the interruption, Makasian. Where were we?”

The ocean eyed female made a subvocal hum of dismissal of his light apology. “I believe you were working up to requesting that I move out of your apartment building, and I was attempting to find a way to tell you that I did not choose to move there, nor do I believe that attempting to move of my own volition would go over well with my handlers in Blackwatch. It’s also very likely they would just replace my presence with another agent.”

“Even if you are on my day time staff?”

“Even so. If I may be blatant with you sir?”

“Go ahead.”

The peach plated tarin cleared her throat, taking a sip of the tea he’d served them before continuing, looking somehow abashed and confident at the same time. “Your career shows a healthful balance of watching out for the Hierarchy’s interests while also being fair minded toward other species. You’ve been very successful in ensuring Turian political power in the galactic forum while also being reasonable enough to keep from angering either the Republics or the Union to any notable extent. It’s a balancing act that your predecessors weren’t as skilled with, and their lack of skill cost us many things. From armament restrictions, to limitations on the extent of legal law enforcement. Important things. Thus, it’s in the Hierarchy’s best interest to keep you in power for a good long while. I believe the senate has been rigged to ensure that you will continue to receive majority vote to remain our Councilor, so long as you continue as you are. Ensuring your wellbeing at all times, as unobtrusively as possible, is of great importance to Turiankind. HQ won’t leave the matter to chance.”

Aequum exhaled, considering the matter for a long moment before replying. A rigged vote? He’d never ask for that, and yet... between his mate’s gentle hearted support and his own hard work he’d written more of Turian morality into galactic law than any other Councilor before him. The galaxy needed cooperation, -the success of the Turian-Volus relations were proof of what different races could bring into being for each other-, but to see some of the gaps and disparities in galactic policy… the first time he’d seen a glaring, could-make-for-war error in the legalities, his gizzard had frozen in his gut.

The galaxy needed it’s caretakers to care about it, as a whole and as individual factions, and that was -very strangely- an aspect of the politics that the previous Turian Councilors had seemed to miss.

“I can see the… bigger picture details you’re alluding to. I’ll think on it some more, and we can revisit the issue in two weeks after you move into your new office. Are the facilities sufficient, by the way? I had meant to ask.”
Makasian’s mandibles tilted in a wry smile. “As long as I have leave to be forthright, allow me to say that the office itself is spacious, that I rather like the view, and that the welcome basket of Palaveni fruits was lovely, but if an emergency access point between my office and your doesn’t exist yet, that it will by the time I’ve settled in.”

His crest flicked in an accepting nod even as a sigh escaped him.

Chapter End Notes

4/22/2010 - Casias Upsets Reyes for Mixed Martial Arts Light Heavyweight Title
“Light heavyweight sensation Zarren "The Varren" Casias scored an upset victory over light heavyweight champion Luis "Laser" Reyes in mixed martial arts action last night. "Fight Night at Earth's Pontiac Silverdome" was delayed by hooligans in the stands, as human and turian fans threw drinks and chairs at one another, and over 30 people were ejected. The five-round match only lasted two, with Luis receiving cuts over both eyes early in the first round that may have hampered his vision. Allowed to continue, a desperate clinch by Reyes brought the match to the ground, where both fighters slipped in the blood and Casias brought things to an end with a triangle choke. Casias is the second turian to win the light heavyweight title, and his victory puts non-humans as title-holders for all nine weight classes.”

A/N: I'll just leave this little tidbit riiiiight here. I mean, a zillion people have the first or last name Reyes. What're the odds they know each other? Or are the same person? (Who am I kidding, it's Mass Effect. Everyone knows everyone. Obviously. *CoughTevosandAriaCough* Fic plot, anyone? )

A/N/N: Iphegenia Monensis is being borrowed with permission from Spicy_Gnome! Former Cabal trainer and all around tech lover, her nick name is 'Genie' and she's a very jaded gal. Good heart, if also a bit grumpy and strict. She's going to hook Avitus up with some shiny digs, so he doesn't get chucked between now and Andromeda. (Because he has a Pathfinder to get to know and then he is going to hook up with said Pathfinder... eventually. What do you mean, 'is it going to be a slow burn?' Duckies, how could you even ask such a thing? A long, torturous slow burn? Me?! I'd never... //distant evil cackling/) Thanks for lending her, Spicey!

Fanfic Recommendation: Kiss (922 words) by Mordinette (A short and sweet req! Also, you know, everything ever published by Mordinette...)
How is it that we're so in touch?

Chapter Summary

Avitus wonders if a colony kid turned merc could ever really fill a Spectre's boots. Meanwhile, a colony kid who was nearly a merc fights a great battle for junk food. Elsewhere, the world turns.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Whablamz, new chapter! Many thanks to Marie_fanwriter and Spicy_Gnome for their additions and beta read through! This chapter was so much less flavorful before their tidbits.

Chapter Soundtrack: Major Lazer - Be Together (feat. Wild Belle) (Vanic Remix)

He was a dreamer at heart
Chasing the stars, chasing the stars
Rain spread to the sun

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avitus scrubbed a palm over his crest, gloved fingers trailing over the short-rasped side horns as his hand fell away. He was alone for the moment, sitting in a restaurant booth and distantly captivated by the sheer number of zeros on the receipt for the custom armor that had just been put on order for him. He glanced down down at his substandard gear, noticing not for the first time that he didn't look the part. Not when he stood beside Kryik in his dashing black and red. Or Arterius' stone white. Hell, even their Vakarian friend's standard issue C-Sec was probably better than his beaten-to-shit fifteen year old set.

Orange eyes returned to the pad and he swallowed his discomfort to read the specs again.

Armor with built in jump jets, and a triple-layer cubic diamond matrix weave below top-of-the-line Asari made ablative ceramics. Armor with a quadruple redundancy shield of experimental make overtop of a standard tech shield, all painted in a stunning silver sheen to boot.

Throat slightly pale, the former merc just continued staring at the incredible specs and expensive pricing. It was more money than he'd made in the better part of a decade, working as a specialist. Even with the slightly better paycheck of a Spectre, it would take him years of scrounging to afford this kind of tech.

Arterius had handed the datapad with the paperwork to him as they'd left, with a mild reminder that it was 'a gift'.

'I've seen some people sold for less than that. Hell, I've taken up a few bounties myself for a spirits damned fraction of it.'
The pale torin leaned back in his seat, carapace hitting fake leather material with a faint thud. Avitus’ mind stuttered in cycles between excitement, awe, horror, and disbelieving blankness as he waiting for the others to return.

Kryik had offered to order food, and their mentor had requested ‘something with bread’ before heading for the restroom. His gaze skimmed the room to see if either were coming back yet, if only to break himself out of the mental loops, but Saren was nowhere to be seen and their third number was still up at the counter fighting with the ordering kiosk. It seemed he wanted something called ‘fries’, but the automated system detected that he was Turian and insisted he order from the dextro menu.

The poor cafe VI didn’t know what to do about GI enzyme augs, and an oddly discerning Spectre. Avitus empathized. He really didn’t know what to make of the latter either.

At the counter, his carmine colored cohort began talking to the machine and getting odd looks for it too. “Come. On. You. Piece. Of. Varren. Shit! Stop rerouting me to...oh ho! Is that an ‘ordering for a friend’ option? Why yes. Yes I’m ordering for a friend… a levo friend… who likes potatoes… and glorious amounts of salt... ugh. Damn thing. Cooperate with me… fuck, why can’t I just talk to a person?”

Shaking his head, Avitus looked away from Kryik’s antics just in time to catch silver-grey plating exiting the lavatory and heading his way. He set the damnable orange-glow tablet aside, and turned to feigning nonchalance as his younger mentor returned. The stolid torin slid into the booth seat across from him, electric eyes roving over the cafe’s occupants and exits with deceptively passing interest before refocusing on him.

“Rix.”

His subvocals answered for him, a noncommittal sound of acknowledgement.

“Nihlus wishes to continue shopping for further armaments; particularly accessory devices for tech short cuts or assassinations, I believe. Is there anything that you are interested in looking at in particular?”

The ‘No thank you, dear spirits, please stop spending credits on me.’ that wanted to come out stalled in his throat.

There were a number of things in his kit and personal effects that he’d staved off replacing in favor of living with less pain. There were even more gadgets and gear that he’d always wanted to try out, but had never considered sparing the funds for.

Almost guiltily, uncertain if it was greed or need driving him, the pale torin offered a sheepish, mumbled, “A few things, but…” he paused a moment, stalling for the sake of it before finishing lamely, “...accounts and all that.”

The expected dismissive wave from Arterius was both balm and bane to his working class sensibilities, and though he tried not to show it, something in his subvocals must have given him away. Electric eyes returned from their amused perusal of Kryik’s battle for alien food back to him a quick flick, followed by a contemplative look.

“Rix… Avitus.”

The halting attempt at soothing familiarity was… off sounding, coming out in Saren’s cultured tongue, but the slightest hint of reassuring subvocals set him more at ease. “...yessir?”
“Let us not circle the mark any further. You have insecurities regarding credits, to the point that being given tools for your future endeavours, investments as such, still causes you discomfort when the items are quality and priced thusly. Is this accurate?”

“It might be,” came his quiet drawl in reluctant reply.

Saren set his armored elbows on the table, fingers lacing as he paused before speaking. “Can you tell me why?”

Avitus moved to answer, but the phrasing eluded him. He cleared his throat to stall, covering the false cough out of habit as he tried to explain the issue without making it sound like a matter of pride.

“It’s just… I’ve… “ The ex-merc stalled again, then tried to force it. “I don’t know if I’m just going to screw up, and make all this… this… generosity a waste. What if I get myself killed in the first month on my own? How long do I have to live and fight to make all these credits a worthwhile expenditure? How many successful missions will even out the cost? I don’t…”

The datapad came out again, clicked on and held up to show.

“I don’t know if I’m *worth this much*.”

Saren remained placid as Avitus swallowed back the sudden burst of emotions and dropped the tablet onto the surface between them, the heel of either hand coming to brace against his foreplate fringe. The weight of expectations was just… very heavy. He’d never planned on being an actual Spectre. The plan had been to play along, and then *leave*. Fail out and go on about his merry way...

“You are.”

Avitus looked up in surprise to meet the contained-lightning irises of his mentor as the torin studied him without speaking further. The other diners existed in a distant murmur around them as the silence stretched while he processed that simply stated certainty.

“I... am?”

“Yes.”

“...oh.”

The former mercenary exhaled, not certain how or where to find fault with that. Maybe… maybe if Saren Arterius told you that you were worthwhile… then you were? It wasn’t as if the Council’s top agent was known for having poor judgement of others...

“Also, do not get yourself killed in the first month. I would be… annoyed.”

“Ha,” he laughed weakly, chagrined. “Right. I’ll… I’ll work on that, hoss.”

Kryik chose that moment to melt into the booth beside him, long limbs taking up more than a fair share of space. “Alright, food’s on the way. Where are we headed after lunch? Got something in mind?”

Saren’s eyes slid to him; assessment, inquiry, and... *test*, all in one. The top agent of their generation asked him without words if the assessment of his value was wrong. Avitus straightened up in the booth, cracking his neck and offering the first idea that came to mind.
“Ahh… well, if I’m going to get the most use out of those jump jets… something to cover me during an emergency repositioning would be swell. Smoke bombs, you reckon?”

The sounds of bird song and skyrays chiming throughout the garden below made for the usual morning backdrop as Benezia opened a curious and unexpected communication from one S. Arterius. The flowing orange of the nais’ hooded gown shifted in the sunlight as they resettled on the cushioned lounger while the heavily encrypted message downloaded.

It took nearly three minutes, so extensive was the security and large the file. It required a voice print to open.

The correspondence contained three things.

First, a formal request to bring his newest protégé to train with the T’soni commandos for further education on biotic tactics and counter tactics.

Benezia found a knowing smile pulling at the corner of their mouth, tugging at the lavender painted skin as the nais considered the request. A favor was still owed to the laconic Spectre for cooperation so long ago, and such a request would be fair recompense between them.

The second item was a schematic for a shield generator unlike anything Benezia had seen before. Defense technology was a specialty of theirs, given the sizable investments of T’soni capitol in that industry. The guilesome Matriarch knew enough to be impressed with the design. There was a note on the scan data containing the contact information for the retailer. It was likely patented, but the source might be willing to sell… perhaps with royalties…

Such a small kindness on Saren’s part, sharing newly discovered advancements, knowing their newer investments tended toward the cutting edge. Benezia wondered what it meant about the Spectre’s intent… he was such a hard person to pin down. Cunning and uninvolved by turns.

The quiet shuffle of steps and the chime of a bell-edged skirt alerted them to the approach of another. A cup of sweet smelling fallflower tea was set on the white side table by Shiala, one of her students.

Benezia turned to smile at the thoughtful Maiden. “Thank you.”

The graceful warrior nodded to the side, smiling back. “I saw you up here, and thought you might enjoy something warm. The weather is turning cool on us a bit early this year.”

The older nais picked up the delicate crystal cup, taking a sip and humming at the bright flavors before setting it back down and looking out at the verdant gardens.

“Would you do me the kindness of telling the commandos that we’ll be having guests? Spectre Arterius would like our assistance in training his new protégé.”

“Of course. I was on my way to the gravity chamber sometime this afternoon anyways. Do you need anything else ma’am?”

At the negative head shake given in reply Shiala swept a bow and left the balcony as unobtrusively as they had entered it.
Benezia returned to musing over Saren’s behavior as the other Asari left. They had begun the slow dance of cultivating the infamous agent on a whim, because the Turian’s presence had somehow filled the room without him needing to say a word. Efforts had continued with more care and a deeper interest when the young male had proven to be blindingly intelligent. Now? Benezia would hazard a guess that they were in fact the one being cultivated instead…

An amused grin bloomed on the nais’ expression, but it tilted curiously as deep grey eyes finally drifted over the last item in the communication.

The largest data packet in the message opened to showcase several obscure, seemingly unrelated star charts. They looked to be copies of Saren’s personal records… scans from places he traveled to or by in his spectre work. At first the elegant Matriarch thought it was yet another gift, and an immeasurably valuable one at that, uncharted worlds with colonial viability being worth their weight in iron.

The text script that came with the maps tilted their original assumption on it’s head, however.

[Matriarch Benezia, over the years I have found scraps of technology scattered across the galaxy that are ancient, advanced, and malevolent. They do not match any known species in the Citadel Archives. Several locations have been set with biological weapons; traps left behind, built to wait until disturbed and then triggered to cause exponential damage. These sites are extremely dangerous, if also something of a technological opportunity. I would like to explore the records at the Library of the Republics on Thessia as a part of my research to discover what left these monoliths and fragments behind, and why. I understand that it is something like a sacred place to your people, and that only Asari are allowed. Are exceptions made? -S. Arterius. ]

Chin resting between first knuckle and thumb, the treasure of the T’soni family considered the implications of the impetuous, near-impossible request; the cooling tea at her side forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

07/05/2010 - Meteor Strike Delays Construction of Susskind Supercollider

“A meteor strike has delayed the construction of the Susskind Supercollider, a particle accelerator being constructed in Trikalon's orbit. The Susskind is a type of collider called a fermion and is a centuries-old asari venture now funded, named, and built by humans. It's believed a fermion hasn't been constructed since the time of the Protheans. Formerly scheduled to come online in September (Earth Standard), the new damage will prolong construction until 2186. When completed, the Susskind collider will be 13,508 kilometers in circumference and will encircle Trikalon completely. The Susskind is the largest artificial satellite ever to have human workers and will be the galaxy's largest building in terms of square meters, surpassing the volus' hotel-filled Mall of Quanaha.”

A/N: Seriously, the amount of interesting things in ^ that CDN post is impressive. What the absolute fuck is a fermion? TIME TO GOOGLE IT! Also, a mall. A HOTEL filled mall. Is the galaxy's largest building, and it belongs to the VOLUS? Why did we not visit this place in game?!?! Opportunity lost! Also some very suspicious dates mixed in there. And... why is it handed over to Humans to finish? This is some craziness. The Systems Alliance doesn't have money to properly defend their colonies, but we can work on a giant super collider? Why. (Side note... It takes an amazing amount of pressure to make Element Zero. Like, galactic-scale pressure wave... would a feli-
whatsit be able to /make/ eezo maybe?) - (Update: I think I found the historical event this whole thing refers to HERE.)

Fanfic Recommendation: Mass Effect Kink Meme Fill - It’s not a Fucking Drinking Song (1,174 words) by Anon (Garrus can sing.)
I have trouble finding the wrong way

Chapter Summary

Saren gets a message. Garrus has a long day. Nihlus has a great day. Avitus gets saddled with the FNG tasks.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Torini - Turian Closed Dialect. Plural forms of Torin/Tarin (Credit: MizDirected)
Patrem - Turian Closed Dialect. Formal word for 'father', versus the informal 'pari'. (Credit: MizDirected)
Notas - Galactic Trade Language. A modernized shorthand for 'Familia Notas', the colony markings of Turians.

A/N: Happy Holidays everyone, and welcome to the next arc! A big, green-and-red thank you to Marie_Fanwriter for their beta editing! Some colorful advice and phrasing twists make all the difference some days, I swear. Also, you can thank them for inspiring a good hunk of the lemon. :3

A/N/N: NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW~NSFW

Chapter Soundtrack: Starset - Satellite (TRAILS Remix)

Darkening skies, coming this way
Falling behind, into nothing

But if you lead, I will follow
A thousand miles away
I will be your Apollo
Shine...

My satellite, are you here tonight?
Shine your light and set me free
Take the darkness out of me
Shine on me

Blinded I wait, the end is forming
You are my fate, give me warning

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Having finished perusing the latest heavy pistol mods, none of which interested him, Saren took up vigil near the door. His protégés were still busy talking shop with the storekeeper about various explosive compounds and a unique garrote wire that had a trimolecular heat blade sheathe spiraled
around it. Nihlus was enamoured with the garrote, and trying to talk the price down, perhaps out of
some odd enjoyment for haggling. Avitus was deliberating between mods for bouncing betty
grenades and proximity mines.

It was good to see the older torin had finally let go of his monetary reservations. Saren approved of
the change.

While the scarred Hanar at the counter dealt with the other torini, Saren opened his communication
program and began to review awaiting low-priority messages. He had noticed them waiting earlier
when sending out the final draft of his message to T’soni, but had not paused to handle them at the
time. There were only two items of any real note: a question about an old mission from Councilor
Valern, which he needed to access data on his grey box to answer, and a short message from an
intelligence contact.

The silver-grey torin opened the second mail with reluctant interest.

FROM:2548622//ID.code: cantthrottletherighteous
TO: 1886039//LOCAL
<C.K.: You should come visit.>
END MSSG

The laconic Spectre resisted the strong urge to roll his eyes skyward and ask the spirits for patience.
Kuril could stand to be far less full of himself -the assumptive message was just one more example of
that- but the bland plated torin never called on him unless they had solid intel to offer; generally
for unimaginative favors or self aggrandizing power games.

“It’s a deal!” came a crow of triumph from his former student, and yet when Saren looked toward the
counter at the sudden noise the shopkeeper appeared equally satisfied. The stoic biotic turned back to
his message program and sent off a quick reply to the colonial prison guard, then started forward to
see what sort of swindling had been done and equipment acquired.

Garrus stepped out of Palin’s office, mandibles tight to his jawline and shoulders stiff. The general
reason for his mood was probably apparent to anyone who’d watched him get marched into
the Executor’s Office by a scowling Pallin. By the sympathetic looks he received from his
coworkers, that meant... just about everyone on the main floor of C-Sec’s Investigation Bureau had
heard.

What had he done? Saved three lives and apprehended the perp. What was the result? Three lives
still saved, a criminal behind bars... and a verbal lashing about procedure that could have competed
for harshness with one of his patrem’s lectures. So what if he’d gone around the back way on a
whim? It wasn't against regs, it was just not on orders.

Why should it matter if it had made all the difference in catching the criminal?

The mountainous sniper ignored the looks as best he could, straight faced as he retreated to his office.
As soon as Garrus made it to relative safety he locked the door behind him, sat down at his desk, and
focused very intently on not screaming. Talons clenched down against the desk edge hard enough to make the metal creak. He startled slightly at the protesting sound, and let go to take a long, steadying breath.

He just couldn’t get the two faced image out of his head of the proud Executor shaking his hand for the cameras then turning around and dressing him down for every little thing. Did he do good work... or not?

Garrus was frustrated with the system, and equally frustrated with himself. Maybe there was something wrong with him that the established procedures chafed so much. Between the fight with his patrem, his apparent inability to follow his clan’s plans, and the fact he was constantly in trouble at work… he just didn’t know.

‘I wish I could just... fit in. But I don’t,’ he growled to himself. 'Not at home. Not here.’

Air fled from his lungs as Garrus exhaled, anger crumbling into weariness. Before depression could replace it the stone-plate torin reached over to his terminal to clock himself out, stood slowly, and left. He was no good to anyone like this anyways.

Inspired by the deep desire to just stop thinking about it for five minutes, the detective took all the right turns to land his hind quarters on a cushioned stool in a quiet bar, a bottle of Palaven Dark Ale in his talons.

The first four didn’t do much, quality augs versus a minimally alcoholic beverage, but by six Garrus had that light buzz he’d been after. Not enough to be unable to shoot straight, just enough to feel warm and fuzzy.

Concerns faded amid beer and light jazz, letting him relax in the seat and consider the day’s events more distantly.

Distant was so much better.

When Saren had declared that they would await the completion of Rix’s new armor at his apartment, Nihlus had assumed there would be a secondary reason. Usually the laconic male had the next eight steps, at least, planned in advance to maximize efficiency.

Instead of immediately being asked to review all active security in the rarely-visited crash pad, or given intel to read and provide another viewpoint on, the new recruit got the task list: Check for signs of forced entry and bugs, then settle in with the next book on Saren’s list of must-reads. Some strategy text by a Salarian spy in ancient times that he’d been told to read back in training as well.

Which he had... sort of... skimmed. Half of.

It’d been to damn dry to stand. Nihlus had picked up a vid series based on it instead, and called it good enough.

With nothing to do he took up residence on the stiff, slightly dusty couch and started a session of Galaxy of Fantasy on his Omni-tool while Saren kept busy messaging someone back and forth on his own ‘tool.
An hour of that and he was starting to get bored. There wasn't much going on online, and the apartment was dreadfully quiet. He managed another half an hour by piping music into his private coms, but after that the need to move started to get to the lanky male. Rather than sit there any longer, Nihlus threw out a random question as an opening topic. “Hey, anyone remember how long the armor smith said this would take?”

Saren looked up at him from the lone recliner in the bare-bones living room of grey and black, an eye ridge raising slowly. “Is your memory troubling you, Nihlus? Smith Iphegenia gave us an estimate aloud.”

He tossed his crest flippantly, gesturing a hand at nothing in particular. “Nope, just wasn’t payin’ attention at the time.”

The quiet biotic huffed, switching which leg was crossed over the other knee before answering. “Seven to eleven more hours. Why?”

“Ehhh… was thinking about visiting Blue. Maybe planning an op I need him for.”

“The orange fog one?” Saren asked placidly, to which he nodded, recognizing the code word for a ‘If you get caught we are pretending you went rogue, sorry.’

Going over the line between Council Space and into the Terminus Systems was almost always an orange fog operation. It sucked, but it was better than letting the criminal element do as they pleased on the other side of a glass wall, visiting this side just to sell off illicit goods or steal as they pleased. It was also better than outright war.

“That’s the one.”

His former mentor glanced down at the message program he’d been typing on, fingers paused mid-sentence by the look of it. “…do you require assistance? We could come as well if needed.”

It would take an Asari mind delve or a close friend to hear the reluctance in Saren’s harmonics, so subtle was the divide between doing whatever it was he had planned and coming along. Nihlus smiled lopsidedly and waved him off. “Naaaaah, it’s just a bunch of two-bit pirates that we’re going to stalk and shank.”

After a moment the silver-grey male nodded and returned to typing the rest of his message. “Very well. Give Garrus my regards, if you will.”

The carmine plated torin took that as his cue to pop up and stretch. “Sure, I can do that. I’ll message you when we’re back on station?”

“Yes. Check-ins when you are on a secure connection would also not go amiss.”

He resisted the urge to tease Saren about the vaguely protective behavior -which was basically equivalent to a teary eyed farewell from his unemotive partner- and headed for the door. “Will see what I can do. Later Saren, later Scrappy.”

The annoyed cant of Avitus’ mandibles as the pale torin continued to read made him grin on the way out.
Mind and body somewhat more relaxed, Garrus resisted the urge to lean against the elevator wall as it rose toward his floor. The slow-moving lift took it’s sweet time but eventually the speakers chimed and the doors slid open.

Palm squeezing at the back of his neck, the weary detective padded down the hall, beginning to lose the battle against gravity, he leaned against the apartment’s door frame. Forearm braced horizontally above the keypad, the tired torin tapped in the sixteen digit code of the month to get inside, thankfully getting it right on the first try. It was only the third time he’d used this one, and saving it on his visor always felt like cheating. The locking mechanism made a happy little ping and the door slid open in a quiet, pneumatic hiss.

The portal had to wait a moment, splayed wide as he gathered the strength to move. It wasn’t the first time Garrus had needed that moment. The near-ritual of his tired lean was written in the scuffs on the wall where his gauntlet or foreplate would rest against the metal. Absently, he made a mental note to buff it out at some point. Later. Much later.

The sniper raised a knuckle to the bridge of his nose, digging into the slightly flexible plating to try and release the stubborn dregs of tension that held on with a headache’s subtle pounding.

“I’m home,” he offered to no one in particular, feeling lonesome while contemplating sleeping on either cubitura or bed. The will to make it all the way to the bedroom was fleeting at best...

“So you are,” came a flanging voice from the kitchen.

Glacial-blue eyes shot open at the words, just now noticing how the lights in his apartment were already on. Despite budding recognition of the voice, Garrus still jerked in surprise. His hand halfway to the hip where his sidearm sat against the mag-lock before the motion stalled out. He turned to look at the origin of the unexpected snark, spirits rising.

“… Nihlus?”

The Spectre stepped out of the kitchen, plates color shifting from carmine to rich brown as he left the brighter lighting. The lanky male looked relaxed, wearing nothing but a pair of undersuit bottoms and one of Garrus’ threadbare civilian shirts. “Hey you, eaten yet? I brought dinner.”

The detective took an unconscious step forward before he’d even realized it, the movement carrying on through the next few paces it took to reach the lanky Spectre. Pliant limbs welcomed him as he pressed himself to the other torin, feeling like his entire being was reaching for Nihlus. The Spectre smelled shower-fresh, and faintly of Garrus’ own body scrub.

Tawny brown throat tightened as the sniper swallowed, reminded again of how bad he had it for this torin. Just the sight and smell of him made breathing easier.

Thin, strong arms squeezed him back around the middle. “Blue? You okay?”

“Mmm? Mmmn… just fine,” he murmured quietly, too focused on the lightness of being he was experiencing to really pay attention to the shorter torin’s words. “…you?”

“Had a pretty great day, actually. Wanted to end it having a great night with you. Ya know, if you’re not too bushed from w-”

“Spirits, yes.”
The sniper backed the other male into the kitchen, hands lifting hips onto the counter beside the sink, the thoughtful dinner on the breakfast bar behind him going entirely ignored for the moment. The move made Nihlus taller than him, to the point that he had to look up. The angle was perfect, letting Garrus moor himself between lanky thighs and nip at mandible edges as he started discarding cobalt armor chunks onto kitchen floor.

Minutes drained away, lost in the taste of mahogany hide under his tongue, and the gentle scratch of talons on each new scrap of unarmored hide. Half his standard issue gear on the floor, Garrus temporarily gave up on the rest of it in favor of seeking Nihlus’ mouth, and sliding his tongue inside.

The subvocal roll of lust that vibrated out of his Spectre’s chest was all liquid encouragement and neediness, luxuriously submissive. Garrus was dizzy with reverie in minutes, pulling away only enough to pant for air and meet bright green eyes. Nihlus grinned, glowing, and took the opportunity to drag his borrowed shirt off and toss it away to reveal dark red and brown topography, his dense musculature graced with the flowing white lines of extended notas.

Still in it’s sheathe, the Garrus’ phallus gave a solid twitch in appreciation of the view.

The detective lifted his chin, offering neck hide to Nihlus’ mercy, while hands resumed their rapid removal of armor. Predictably the lanky male went right for it, fangs dragging over their shared mark as he growled possessively. The sound of it went down Garrus’ spine like a slow moving magma flow.

When he made it down to greaves and undersuit bottom the blue eyed torin tried to pull back to remove the last pieces, only for Nihlus’ length to descend against his stomach, warm and slick, irresistible pheromones hitting the air like a siren's call.

Both of them froze, groaning and clinging to each other. Neither managed to fully remove their pants before hands were tugging at mesh and pulling at hips. Garrus descended as well, sliding free of his sheath in a rush of fluid.

His Spectre made a sound suspiciously close to a whimper. “F-fuck… Blue… fuck me. Spirits, please just…”

Garrus had no verbal reply for that plea, only subvocal rolls in lust-washed tones, and the head of his cock pressed to the Spectre’s loose rear plating. He thrust forward, sliding home with a soft moan and a full body shudder. Nihlus’ head dropped back, crest tips audibly scraping the wall as the rich voiced male called out unabashedly. The mountainous detective held them there for a moment before he started moving. Their bodies were made for the single-thrust entry, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t a tight fit. It didn’t help that he was proportioned well enough, and that Nihlus was a thin one.

The entry felt incredible, his lover’s body wrapped around Garrus’ length, the slight muscles of his cloaca fluttering with the intrusion. The detective swallowed back the saliva crowding his tongue, groaning blissfully as the other male began to move on him with a small, tentative rocking motion that was soon discarded in favor of bracing himself as Garrus took over the roll of their hips with slow, heavy thrusts.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh~ Yess, ohhh yess… that’s it…” Nihlus’ voice poured from his throat, low bass and encouraging. The sniper took it as a good sign, pinning carmine hips to the counter edge with one hand, the other taking ahold of the torin’s longer, thinner phallus and stroking it in time to the movement of their hips.

The sniper’s eyes drifted down to the gorgeous length in his hand, it’s mahogany hide stretched thin and tinted closer to maroon from blood-flush. The blue light of the heating unit’s display caught in
the gloss of lubricant, zigzagging neon blue ribbons down the flare of the head. “Beautiful…”

Nihlus’ hazy gaze roamed to his, then down to where his focus was, a flattered subvocal purr rising as the other torin’s head rolled loose on his shoulders, returning to a throat baring backward tilt. “I know… ahhh… haaaa~ …you are, but… mmm… but what am I?”

Garrus gave in to the urge to smile at the immature, ridiculous come back. It pulled on his mandibles as he leaned in to take advantage of the hide on display, mouthplates making a journey of gentle nips and soft lapping motions up and down the side of his Spectre’s neck. Said torin’s hands found his shoulders, talons pressing into shoulder muscle with every soft bite.

“Nnnnnnhh… aaaahhhh… spirits, you’re going to… nnnnnh… drive me insane like this…”

The tall sniper murmured agreement, hips keeping up the languid slow-fuck while he worried at the tender neck hide over his mark on the Spectre’s neck with mouthplates and tongue.

When he could hear the rising tide of oncoming orgasm in Nihlus’ subvocals, and feel the tightness of locking-up core muscles around his shaft, Garrus opened his jaw and laid fang to mark with care, matching up teeth to the slight divots of scarring that were always fading fast from the other torin’s hide. When his lover’s talons finally bit into his shoulders, body tumbling over the edge of climax with a tortured sounding cry, he bit down hard and fast.

The pleasure and pain combination did it for Nihlus, as it always did, hauling the Spectre to a second peak just as he was falling from the first, making carmine limbs tremble and cling.

Eyes slammed shut and head spinning dizzily, Garrus spilled himself into the other torin; the weight of his stress and worry and loneliness evaporating from him like so much dawn-mist at noon. He let go of the hide between his teeth, licking at the trickles of cobalt blood as they trailed from the ten tiny pricks running for the channel of Nihlus’ inner cowl edge.

The flow slowed then stopped, their breathing rates taking a few more moments to follow. In the suddenly quieter air of the kitchen he released the length in his grip to let it ascend at its own pace, and pulled the other male in, folding the lanky Spectre into his arms and relaxing into the bliss of the moment.

The afterglow was almost palpable, restoring the detective’s desire to eat a real dinner -whatever it was that Palvi had brought for him- and maybe make it to his bed at some point.

“Ahhhh… you wreck me, Blue. That was so good.”

“Ha. Glad you enjoyed it… is that pizza I smell?”

Nihlus laughed, thighs tightening around his waist in a smooth tease. “It might be. Forgot to eat again? You feel… a little thin.”

Garrus shrugged, lifting the other torin by the ass and depositing him on the breakfast bar, unconcerned with the mess he was spreading around the kitchen. A slightly cold slice of pizza was stolen from the carry-out container, making it’s way to his mouth. His marked snorted, grabbing his own and folding it in half before tearing into it.

They devoured the entire pie, and half of a second one, while lounging against the counters and joined at the hips. Nihlus left one arm braced on his shoulder as they ate in peaceable silence.

Once one type of appetite was sated, Garrus carried Nihlus over to the stasis unit to tuck the leftovers away on the shelf not occupied by several unassuming bags filled with Batarian teeth, and then
turned them for the bedroom. The warm, loose limbed Spectre made it a little difficult to walk by nibbling on the thin hide behind his right mandible, but they made it to the bed without falling down. He counted that as a win.

When they finally laid down his body called out for rest, but the sweet sensation of tongue and teeth inspired Garrus to ignore the need in favor of pinning Nihlus to the mattress and taking him again. The clack of lubricant slick plates coming together filled the room. He sent the younger male over the edge twice more; once by railing him into the mattress, and again by rolling him sideways and dragging against a new set of nerves with the gentle curve of his cock exacerbated by a slight, intentional curl.

Nihlus took it all, the hard and the soft, with pleas for more and panting breaths.

When they finally collapsed back to the mattress, spent beyond capacity, the tall sniper fell asleep in seconds. He slept soundly, falling deep into the peaceful dark.

Chapter End Notes

01/29/2010 - Cerberus Human Experimentation Lab Discovered on Trident

“Federal investigators on the planet Trident have uncovered a Cerberus cell. Authorities seized the human-survivalist group's laboratory, finding two dozen prisoners who claim that Cerberus subjected them to biotic-suppressing drugs with potentially brain damaging side effects. The captives were briefly questioned before being released back to their families. Only one Cerberus operative was captured during the rescue operation. Six others were killed and two reportedly committed suicide rather than face arrest.”

A/N: ^ 'Human survivalist group'. Oh, is that what they're calling terrorism now? Pfffft. Right.

A/N/N: Nihlus J Kryik, that was not 'mission planning'. XD

Fanfiction Recomendation: Christmas Tree (3255 words) by Marie_Fanwriter (Femshep/Garrus. Everyone needs a vacation from the hustle and bustle of saving the universe once in a while. Sometimes? It also happens to coincide with Christmas time on Earth. )
I wished I'd remained anonymous

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

A/N: NSFWNSFWNSFWNSFW!

"What I am giving you is nothing that belongs to me. [...] It is just yourself, you running through me and throwing off sparks, your eyes blazing with fear, blazing with hope. I am giving you your own fire. All I do is breathe very gently on your midnight embers and handfuls of stars fly out."

— Hélène Cixous, The Book of Promethea

A/N/N: Beta read and polished by Marie_Fanwriter (Because I am awful at writing aggressiveness, and they have such a knack for it! I also make typos... so many typos...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus woke on his stomach, face buried in pillows, warm hands passing up and down his sides. A heavy weight sat low on his hips, a slick length pressing into the centerline of his rear plating. Still sleep fogged, the sniper merely laid there and hummed enjoyment at the attention, uncomplaining when knees spread his legs further apart.

The soothing slide of rough palms flowed down to knead at the muscle of his glutes, thumbs straying inward and lower with every rhythmic press. A relaxed sigh escaped him, earning a fond, mildly devious sounding chuckle from the torin behind him.

“G’morning, Blue.”

Garrus gave him a lazy rumble in reply, shivers running up his spine when wandering carmine thumbs began tugging at his rear plating, loosening it. The slick length he’d noticed before returned to center attention, being run back and forth along the groove his plating made.

“MMmmmmm…”

Subvocal agreement with that sentiment rose on the air, the soft hide of Nihlus’ flared tip pressing to the entrance of his cloaca. The sleepily aroused detective arced into it, shifting both knees up enough to brace himself, and then tilting his hips upward in invitation.

The Spectre’s phallus sunk in, bottoming out and filling him completely. Garrus pressed his face into the sheets, groaning at the sensation. His green eyed lover wasn’t particularly thick, neither ribbed nor heavily scaled, but the sheer length of him was… perfect.

Enjoying the effortless pleasure, Garrus stretched out below the other torin, arms above his head and
chest pressed to the fluff beneath him. The position braced his frame just enough that the slow, rocking thrust of their hips didn’t shift them much.

The whole experience was gentle, unhurried, and comfortably heightened by the lingering dregs of sleep. His favorite kind of sex really, and something that the outgoing torin inside of him rarely had the patience for unless he was pinned and held still for it. This morning however, the languid drag of slickened shaft against hazy nerves was proof that for as many bedroom tricks as Nihlus had shared with him, Garrus had taught a few in return.

It took forever for either of them to come this way, moments turning into minutes and minutes into ages. The lights in his bedroom were automatically rising with the beginning of the Citadel’s day cycle when he finally spilled come onto the sheets below him, thick white ropes flowing out of him in an uneven stream. Garrus moaned like a small earthquake, wracked by full body shudders. He was filled in turn by the lanky male riding him not a few minutes later, spending the interim between their orgasms floating on the pleasing rush of endorphins.

They melted back down onto the bed when done, carmine plates and mahogany limbs draped over him like overwarm chocolate. Neither torin was sweating or breathing particularly hard, but both were dizzy and blissed on the lazy morning sex.

Smiling muzzily into the sheets, Garrus mumbled the first thing that floated up from the haze. “Missed you.”

“Mmmph… good… missed you too.”

After several minutes of boneless lounging the lanky knife-wielder rose up behind him, still buried in his cloaca. Hands returned to either side of the sniper’s waist, kneading at the most narrow part where hide was soft and thin. The heady sensation drew another groan from him. At that, Nihlus took up the rocking motion again, less of a coordinated effort toward another climax and more like the slow pull of a bow on a violin; designed to draw out music from the instrument.

Garrus exhaled with a mellow croon, unable to be silent when the pressure and drag on his nerves felt so fulfilling and enjoyable.

A murmur passed by his aural canals, missed by even his augmented hearing. It had sounded like a lust-warped trail of probably-words, but was come and gone to quick to catch.

“Mmmmmn?” the detective tried, a best-effort in asking for a repeat.

Nihlus laughed in liquid-low bass, changing their angle and not helping his focus any before reiterating himself. “I asked if I can have you for a few days.”

The sniper humed, purposefully misinterpreting the obvious request-for-backup harmonics in the other torin’s voice, instead replying as if the question had been about an entirely different kind of ‘having’. To be fair, it was the kind more on his mind at that moment. “Mmn. Sure. I’ll probably be unable to walk by the end of it, but that sounds nice.”

The amused chuff above him was worth the tease. “Pffft. You’re not as funny as you think you are, Blue.”

“You love it,” Garrus shot back with ease, sighing again as pleasure fizzed and warmed the nerves going up and down his hind quarters with the steady grind of hips.

“... I do,” came simple admission and the rich silence that followed. The mountainous torin relaxed into it, letting the truth just be. They loved -each other and Saren- and it only sort of worked because
life had them in such disparate places. It was good enough though. They all had their duties, and
though he had unofficially shirked a large chunk of his with a few simple words in the right inbox, everything else was still going well enough.

After the peaceful bloom of emotions had time to wax and wane, Nihlus cleared his throat. “So, it’s uh… the mission that is… it’s outside of Council Space. If we get caught…”

“Off with our heads?” the sniper teased.

The agreeing chuckle at his blasé reply settled the mood again, the hands on his waist wandering for his shoulders.

“Pretty much. I plan to be careful, and if we get caught I’ll take all the heat, but if you somehow get identified… should probably vilify me, tell them ‘everything’, and make up some crap about blackmail.”

Garrus’ subvocals rumbled dismissively as he continued enjoying the length rocking into him. He had no intention of slandering the other torin. Hiding out on a moon in the middle of nowhere for a decade, maybe, but lying about him? No. “How many of these have you done, and how close have you come to getting caught?”

“Honestly, I do this shit all the time. Eagle Nebula, you know? Best gateway between the ‘free nations’ of the Terminus and the rest of us.”

The detective chuffed air from his nose, equally dismissive of the claim ‘free nations’ as most Hierarchy citizens. The developed Terminus worlds were all a toss up between razor-edged wealth and war torn mega-cities. They were ‘free’ alright. Free to constantly tear each other apart.

“I think we’ll be fine then, you know what you’re doing.”

Nihlus’ subvocals dropped in mischievous, dark edged amusement as the Spectre leaned over him, tongue coming out to trace along the the side of one horn. “Mnn… glad you think so.”

The lascivious reply came with a pointed thrust of hips that drove the long phallus inside of him particularly deep. Garrus couldn’t help the sound it tore from him.

There were supplies to be purchased, pre-op details to go over, and surely a hundred other small tasks to take care of, but for now the mountainous detective stretched out under his Spectre and took the pleasure he was given just as Nihlus had taken it from him the night before.

By the time they actually got to work, both torin would be very unwound and ready to deploy.

Avitus stared at his reflection. The torin in the holo-mirror turned when he turned, and shifted when he shifted… and yet, the other-Avitus looked so unlike himself that his mind refused believe his eyes.

The reflection he could see didn’t match how he was supposed to look.

Orange eyes and black familia notas were the same, pale grey faceplates and stature looked right, but the rest…
“Hold still a moment, left shoulder needs adjusted.”

“...yes, ma’am.”

The stocky armorer passed in front of the sensors, disturbing the holorender into a fizzy swirl of colors. She came to a stop on his far side, unabashedly flipping the armor clasps around his pectoral plates, then the matching set near the side of his carapace. The pauldron came loose and the charcoal plated tarin made off with it to a workbench behind the counter, leaving him to stand there on the fitting platform. 

The unsettled torin continued to stare down his image, trying to fully take in the stranger in the mirror wearing pristine whites and sharp greys.

The angular dip of the chest piece tapered down to an impressively flexible waist guard. Each gauntlet was heavily plated on top, and lightly so on the bottom. The leg pieces did the same, proving extra protection on the outside and around his spurs, blending into dark grey mesh near the inside of his thighs and the back of his knees. The whole set couldn’t exactly be called ‘heavy’ or ‘light’, or even ‘medium’.

Flexibility where he’d need it to move, protection where it would do the most good. A truly customized set of armaments.

The armorer returned, replacing the missing pauldron and fastening it before moving to circle him to eye the rest of it. After a moment she nodded, then stepped back into Avitus’ space to steal his Omni-tool arm and activate the shielding. A low-toned hum began in his chest piece where the VI and power core were housed. Avitus watched as the light blue lines of his reflection’s armor shifted into orange, the automated helm sliding over his head and locking into place. The HUD was a soothing light-orange of gauges, status numbers, and local area scans.

Beeps and chimes came out of the UI for several minutes while the tarin tested things. After some unknown checklist was completed, the stocky female stepped back and turned for her chair behind the front counter.

“That should do it. The software module on your ‘tool should have a user’s manual that I suggest you read before you take my work into combat. The multi-layered shielding will function a good deal differently than your old set.”

He nodded in agreement when she paused, about to thank her when the tarin continued on, tone lax and almost teasing in a dry sort of way as she spoke over her shoulder.

“Might consider a combat sim or two, just to get used to the new timing and the helm’s heads up display… and if you take a good hit in combat and crack something? Don’t try and fix it unless you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m ah… not a bad hand at armor repair.”

The tarin tossed her short crest to the side, plopping down in her seat. “Read the manual’s description of the diamond matrix then. If it’s something you can do yourself, then go for it. You’ll be the ones paying the bill for me to restore it if you screw a patch job though, just keep that in mind.”

Avitus smiled lopsidedly, finally turning away from the him-not-him reflection in the sharp new armor. “I’ll be keep’in that in mind, ma’am.”

The charcoal plated female hummed politely and waved him off. He moved for the door, stepping outside and looking around for Saren. The other torin was just across the causeway, calmly people-
watching by all appearances. Avitus headed that way and came up beside him, eyeing the flow of foot traffic.

“Seen something interesting, hoss?”

“No.” The placid male replied, electric eyes flicking towards him for a moment before returning to their initial purvey of the surroundings. “How does the new equipment suit?”

The older male twisted at the waist both ways, shifting his balance to either foot and nodding. “Good, real good. Strange. It sits on me differently, but it’s…”

“A custom fit?”

“Yeah, well… yeah. That’s the long and short of it.”

His mentor nodded once, smoothly turning and heading down the walkway. “Good. Let us test it in one of C-Sec’s training sims before we leave the station.”

“We headin’ somewhere?”

“Yes. A contact reached out to me with intel on offer.”

Avitus caught a glimpse of himself in the polish of a window, his orange gaze lingering on it a moment before returning forward. “Alright, sounds good to me.”

Artificial sun on his back and the flicker of terminal light on his face, Venari eyed the numbers on screen and tried not to let the statistics get to him. C-Sec’s efforts on station had taken petty theft down, making them all look good in the short term, but the hard truth was that the excess patrols needed to cut down on credit-chit snatchers and muggers had come at the cost of boots on the trails of murderers and domestic abuse cases. Particularly those in the poorer districts near the dial-side of the station.

The general public might feel safer about going out on the town after the newscasters delivered the latest statistics with big smiles, but his forces saw the writing on the wall. The Executor could tell that it wore on their spirits, or… whatever it was that the non-Turian agents thought existed at the core of themselves and in the world around them.

The only bright side to the whole mess was that the good press had earned them a jump in charitable donations, and a grant from the Council to add a few more uniforms to the force. He intended to pour those resources straight into C-Sec’s Investigations and CSI branches. The funding would translate to around ten new DIs to chase leads, and seven new techs for the labs.

Navy-blue eyes rose to the ceiling as the high ranked torin considered the matter further. The lab techs would be easy. Assign each one to a senior member to learn the particulars of C-Sec’s labs and be coached on police regs at crime scenes, and then he could turn them loose. Scientists were low maintenance, generally speaking. He just had to give them a mystery and a lab, then let them do what they did best.

The new Detective Investigators he wanted, however…
It took a certain sort of mind to solve the kinds of crime they’d be dealing with. Recruits, whether they were Turians finishing off their civil service requirements or young commandos looking for experience, would all need a diverse skillset, able to not only get information out of suspects, but have the compassion to handle shell shocked victims and jittery witnesses.

There was also an instinctual side to hunting prey by their trail alone, and a score of other talents they’d need to do the job well that were just… very difficult to train in any short amount of time.

Venari began to mentally review who he could pull to do one-on-one training for new blood, considering who could teach certain things to a small group effectively. Some might have the head for it already, as STG drop outs often did, and those he might be able to give to a partner and just let them pick things up by doing...

Of course, near the top of that partner list was his simultaneous dream agent and worst nightmare, Vakarian the younger.

Garrus was soon to be in need of a co-detective with Aiesha leaving, and was honestly a one-torin DI team all on his own. The torin could chase leads, handle witnesses, find evidence, even run labs… the young male could do it all, and solved almost every case he was sent on.

The hot headed detective was also guaranteed to break ten regulations while doing it.

The Executor groaned, palming his forecrest and mentally crossing the undependable torin from the trainer list. He wanted ten more Vakarians, yes, but not if they were all going to dance around procedure like it was suggestion rather than law.

As if summoned from the aether, a ping sounded at the door to his office and Venari knew with absolute certainty who it was before he even hit the door-opening panel on his desk. Garrus Vakarian walked in wearing civilian casuals, looking to be in a determinedly good mood by the sound of his subvocals.

The slate grey torin saluted with a fist over his keel.

The navy-eyed Executor squinted at him, instantly suspicious. “Vakarian.”

“Good afternoon, sir. Letting you know that I’ll be out for a few days. The paperwork is with personnel resources.”

“I see... out where?”

“Classified.” The cocksure detective replied without missing a beat, as though he’d anticipated the question. Almost as if Vakarian had come in here just to rub it in. The career cop in him flinched at the divided loyalty. ‘Classified’ meant ST&R, and ST&R meant that his detective was flying off again to go play vigilante on some spirits forsaken rock, rather than getting work done here, where he was needed most.

The Executor set his elbow ridges on the desk, palms clasped as he stared the Vakarian scion down for several wordless seconds.

“You should turn it down, Vakarian. You know you should.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Sir.”

The crispness in the younger torin’s voice revealed the lie, subvocal agitation unneeded to double-verify. Venari’s left palm slapped the metal surface before him an instant after the disrespectful crock
of varren shit was spoken.

“Vakarian!”

Garrus didn’t even flinch, tone carefully controlled as he replied with an offensively blasé, “... what?”

“You may have official leave to do as you please with your Spectre friends off this station, but while you’re still on it, in my damn office, you will not lie to my face! Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir.”

“Good. Now answer me properly.”

Vakarian gestured with an open hand toward an unknown point in the distance, defiance written in every line of his being even if his tone was sufficiently polite. “Even if I agreed with you, and for the record I don’t, it wouldn’t be acceptable to turn down a Council Spectre’s request for aid. What they do matters, on a large scale.”

“You just want to go play where there are no rules, fledgling. We both know it.”

The cobalt-marked male looked back at him, a devil-may-care sort of tone leaking into his subvocals and a flat, unimpressed look on his face. The young sniper didn’t deny it, and didn’t see what was wrong with it either. Idiocy. The hotheaded male clearly needed to learn a few things...

Suddenly inspired, and feeling mildly vengeful, Venari’s game plan switched tracks to something new.

“Fine. Go let loose with Arterius and his ilk, but get back here as soon as possible. I have a new batch of recruits coming in, and they’re going to be yours.”

Vakarian’s previously nonplussed stare weakened with a confused double blink. “New… recruits?”

The ghost of a sharp grin pulled at the Executor’s mandibles. “That’s right. We’ve just gotten funding and approval for a few more uniforms. I want you to teach them your tricks before you get yourself killed fighting pirates or whatever it is you do, out in the middle of nowhere.”

“If you say so, sir.”

“I do, now come back alive from your escapades, Vakarian. At least one more time. I want you to train your replacement for when you get yourself killed.”

“... understood.”

Venari watched the uncertain male salute again and take a few steps backward before turning to leave. The young scion was a thorn in his side, yes, but just maybe, if the fool had to deal with his own batch of hotheads that didn’t listen and wouldn’t fall in line, it would help teach Vakarian about why his irresponsible choices and poor attitude grated.

It might be fighting fire with fire, and would possibly result in ten more unwilling-to-follow-procedure DIs working for him, but the Executor made a mental note to be sure and select candidates that didn’t have the protection of a clan or friends in high places keeping him from tearing them a new one when they pulled a Garrus for the first time. If he could get the skills without the bad behavior, it might all work out perfectly...
The sudden plan would either be a solid step to fixing a major problem agent in his Investigations Bureau, or it would leave him with eleven people to consider firing.

Time would tell.

Chapter End Notes

01/30/2010 - Victims Describe Cerberus "Torture Den"
“More details this hour regarding the human-survivalist cell on Trident. Victims told federal investigators of a "torture den" where Cerberus doctors drugged and forced captives to perform biotic actions to exhaustion. "The pain in my head was unbelievable," said a female survivor who asked to remain anonymous. "I couldn't even feel my feet. I thought I had a stroke. A man died of a cerebral hemorrhage, and I would've gone next if they hadn't rescued us when they did."

A/N: I had zero plans to give Garrus students. Venari had other ideas, my ducks. 'Author' is such a misnomer. More like... keyboard expressionist? Minion to the character's whims? Slave to the muse? Haha.

Fanfic Recomendation: KFawkes Tumblr/Ao3 Masterlist
Even if the day won't come, I'll be around

Chapter Summary

Avitus wonders about Saren's choices, Saren prepares for the worst, and Aiesha has a strange day.

Chapter Notes

Lexicon:

Sal - A Turian spice commonly used in larger amounts on the colonies. Turians from Palaven often find it too strong to use much of. (Credit: AceQueenKing)

A/N: Hello duckies! I wanted to let you all know that I've signed up to participate in the Spectre Requisitions 2018 Rare Pair Exchange, of which is due on March 1st; and alllso V Day is coming up, which is what we in the massage therapy industry call Valentine's Day. (Seriously, before, during, and after that day there are so many couples, sisters, besties, spiteful singles, determined singles, and content singles getting massages for various reasons that it's insaaaaane. The spa manager is begging people to take more hours for more or less all of February, sooo... I'm going to be suUUuuUuuuper slow on updates for a month ish. I will try not to just fuck off for four weeks, but if I do, you know why. <3

A/N/N: A big thank you to Danceswithturians for the beta read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Avitus watched the silver-grey form of his mentor and sponsor prep medbay, laying out several medications and a spare change of clothes. The orange eyed trainee lingered in the open doorway, considering whether he should just ask about it or if the wise thing to do would be to leave it right well alone. It was hard to tell with his mentor sometimes. The other torin was a hard read.

It seemed that Saren was real sure that he'd be hurt while trying to get the intel on Maitrum though. Sure enough to prepare for it like this.

The questions on Avitus' mind were 'who exactly was the contact' and 'what was the danger'? The high sec colony was a hardline, Turian run prison facility and the tiny community that operated it, all out in the middle of some serious nowhere.

Even more, the younger torin usually made a point to introduce intelligence sources, linking him into his own network one meeting at a time. The change of pattern from his very pedantic mentor was a mite bit worrisome.

The debriefing and plan he’d been given as they left the Citadel had the ex-merc visiting the local watering hole for gossip and rumor. Practically a miniature shore leave instead of meeting a new contact.
Between all of that and the prepping of medbay, a sense of uncertainty hung in Avitus’ gizzard, setting him on a low-key edge. When a vial of generalized antiviral panacea was set down beside the rest of the layout, he finally found himself concerned and curious enough to make a go of it. “So uh… planning to get shot at, hoss?”

The pale torin congratulated himself on the smooth, casual opener.

“No, that is unlikely,” came Saren’s mild reply, a fresh tube of biofoam for internal injuries being added to the medi-bot’s supply cartridges. When no other information was forthcoming, the ex-merc cleared his throat and tried again, shoulder leaning against the door frame in a pantomime of unconcerned body language.

“Anythin’ else going to happen? Looks like you’re gearin’ up for some pretty painful negotiations.”

The bulkier male nodded sideways at him, pulling out an armband for fluid IV from the low cabinets and setting it in easy reach of the medical bed. “Yes, this contact usually wishes to trade rough intercourse for their data. I expect minor abrasions, a small amount of blood loss, and general fatigue, though worse has happened, thus I prepare accordingly.”

Avitus couldn't help the tiny, worried flutter of his mandibles as he absorbed that. Fucking for favors wasn’t exactly uncommon, but he hadn’t expected Saren -laconic, bakes tiny cakes, listens to classical music Saren- to be the sort of torin to trade in that currency. The infamous male always seemed sort of... untouchable.

The room was silent save for the clinks and swishes of prep work. The Spectre-in-training didn’t exactly know what to say to the revelation, and his mentor seemed… bored with the whole thing. Which made sense, the more he thought about it. Give Saren a game of wit and words, or an ancient puzzle, and the electric eyed male would become sharp eyed and engaged in the proceedings. Trading fulfillment of base desires for valuable intel probably seemed like a good, if dull, exchange. Scratching at the hide beside his neck’s spinal plates, Avitus murmured a bland acknowledgement and turned for the mess hall for lack of anything else to add.

The pale torin plopped down at the kitchen table with a glass of water, still mulling it over.

Saren had introduced him to a wide variety of useful monsters and dangerous information sellers. Some required pretty dark favors for their data. Others were just destitute and willing to sell out anyone for creds. The other torin wasn’t one to spare him from something like a quick trade of sex for intel. It was an easy way to get the goods, with only mild risk of attack. 'Low risk and high reward', regardless of any expense of personal comfort or pride, was exactly the sort of trade Saren would make himself or expect his colleagues to. The silver-grey torin had also already proven that he would neither cause nor protect him from pain. Yet something about this mission... Avitus wasn’t exactly unhappy about missing out on claw-happy bedroom time, -he right liked his hide where it was thanks-, but it gave him some trepidation about just how bad a state his mentor was going to come back in.

Avitus tapped a talon on the side of his water glass, making the surface ripple inside the ceramic square. ‘‘Though worse has happened’ he says… hm. Don’t like the sound of it.’

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
With a rigid posture and an even gaze, Muriel T'Acero continued to stare wordlessly at Aiesha. The bemused operative gazed placidly back, not certain why the head of the Citadel Council's Private Security Force was staring at her and not speaking.

For lack of explanation, she decided to simply sit there and return the passive scrutiny. Aiesha had assumed this briefing was going to be about her new position as the 'personal secretary' of Counselor Sparatus, however the Asari across the desk had neither spoken since giving the command to enter, nor offered any sort of pleasantries usually offered to a guest by either Asari standards or Turian.

The lack of courtesy was not endearing.

Outside of the office windows the Presidium's artificial sunlight shone down. Genetically engineered plants rustled in the generated breeze just behind the unspeaking nais. Aiesha let her gaze unfocus, eyes not leaving the departmental head, but also allowing her peripheral vision to take in the scenic view. It was rather peaceful to watch at least.

Finally the silence broke with an unimpressed huff, causing Aiesha to raise a single browridge in question. The Matriarch across the desk merely went to note something down on a datapad, and gestured for her to leave.

Confused but preferring to be gracious regardless of the treatment, the peach-plated tarin stood from her guest chair and turned to go, nodding a polite farewell before quitting the room. T'Acero's doors closed behind her, sliding shut with a pneumatic hiss.

Aiesha glanced back at them as she left, mildly annoyed at the waste of time and rude behavior. 'Really... was that, whatever it was, necessary?'

The lovely tarin chuffed, feet aiming for the nearest rapid-transit station. Thankfully there was no line in queue for a ride.

Deciding not to dwell on the mystery of how strange older Asari could be, she instead moved on to planning out the rest of her day. Now that the surprise meeting of unknown length and purpose was done, that would be much easier to do. She could grab some lunch, then return to her new office and get to work on reviewing the Councilor's expansive notes on how he had his day, week, and month organized.

It seemed the respected male had not been kidding about making her a secretary. Aiesha resisted the
urge to wince at the idea. Years of combat training, deep cover missions, grueling testing, innovations in shield tech, dedicated service... and now she was to be a glorified stylus jockey for, possibly, the rest of her life.

The lovely tarin tried not to despair, instead determinedly ruminating on where to go for that lunch she was hungering for. That was one perk of the job, she supposed. The Presidium had an unholy number of restaurants from an absurd variety of cuisines.

Perhaps she could try them all, one by one.

The chime of an incoming call came through her aural implant, alerting Aeisha to a live contact request. She pulled up her Omni-tool while shifting to the side of the causeways as to not impede other foot traffic. The request was a vidcall from Councilor Sparatus.

Mildly paranoid about drawing attention to herself by talking to a major political figure in an entirely unsecure place, the lovely tarin speed walked further down the lane before answering, entering an apartment complex at random and heading for the elevators to requisition it’s semi-privacy.

When the line was opened her new boss came on the tiny screen in profile, turned aside and typing into another terminal. By habit, the ‘retired’ blackwatch agent watched what she could see of his keystrokes while quietly waiting to be acknowledged.

‘… if he …ys the cause is… on ano...er note… once a da... but no… back to me ...hen…’

The older male eventually finished the section and turned toward the camera, crossing his arms below the line of his keel. “Makasian.”

“Yes, sir?” she replied while setting the elevator to hard stop between floors with a bit of easy hacking.

“Why did my head of security just email me saying that you were a complete airhead and unfit for duty?”

Ocean blue eyes blinked once, slowly, as she processed the nuance of the revelation. “I’m sure I don’t know.”
Aequum Sparatus gestured his black talons at the camera, subvocals light and politely curious like the politician he was. “Did you do anything that might have given Muriel that impression?”

“I must have, though if your next question is to ask ‘what exactly?’, I couldn’t tell you sir. My presence was requested at her office today for a meeting. I arrived, she invited me in, didn’t speak a word after that, then indicated I should leave. That was all the interaction we had.”

The Turian Councilor groaned, his façade breaking as the simple rendition was given. Aiesha hummed inquisitively back, curious to know if her boss had any further information on the strange behavior. The older male made a dismissive gesture as he leaned back in his chair. “I know what happened now. Don’t worry about it. Do me a favor?”

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Bring me lunch?”

The lovely tarin nodded sideways, not exactly thrilled to be asked but reasonable enough to comply. Besides, the Councilor did need to eat, and better she acquire and scan that food than some random errand runner that worked in the tower. “Certainly sir, I was on my way to collect lunch as well. Anything you would like in particular?”

The dark plated male tossed his crest lightly, as if he’d been proven pridefully right on something. “Hmph. Muriel is just going to have to get used to you.”

“...sir?” she offered, uncertain of what food had to do with the head of CCP-Sec.

“Nevermind. I’ll send you the addresses of my favorite spots and the menu items I prefer at each. Pick your preference, or one at random, and bring enough for dinner later. That will be all.”

“Understood.”

The line cut as the Counselor closed the vidcall. Aiesha reversed her immediate control of the elevator, left herself a backdoor in the code, closed up two security holes in it’s remote access protocols, and left the building to return to the flow of traffic headed in the direction of the nearest
rapid-transit station. Her steps were slow as she mulled over the details of the conversation.

Surely there had been more going on, history of some sort that she hadn’t been privy to, because the bulk of today’s events made very little sense. The former officer scowled about it as she called and boarded a skycar, displeased not to be in the know.

Approximately twenty minutes later that displeasure was set aside when Aiesha came to realize that one of her boss’ favorite foods, the choice cuisine of one of the most powerful Turians in the galaxy, was a salty Quarian vegetable dish for children. She guessed that it would take approximately fifteen servings of it off the kid’s menu to be certain the fully grown male would get enough calories for two meals.

A big, juicy steak fit for a hardworking Turian? No. A hearty bone marrow stew with lots of protein and perhaps a few bones left in for texture? No. A colonial style pita with excess *salt* and flavorful peppers? No again. The Counselor wanted *vegetables*. Quarian vegetables. Soft, spicy greens and mushrooms. The mental image was so absurd that the normally inexpressive tarin had to stifle a giggle before going up to the counter to make her order.

The burgundy plated order taker looked up and grinned at her knowingly when the stoic agent calmly requested the ridiculous quantity at the end of her list, but thankfully said nothing further on the matter.

Out of curiosity, she ordered sixteen.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Can Saren have sex for a mission? Yes. Does Saren want or enjoy sex? No. Does Saren sometimes find himself disastrously interested in that nebulous *something* with Garrus and/or Nihlus? Willing to participate in those odd, hedonistic practices to grasp it? ...yes, and it’s very traumatic and enticing for him. Hehehehe.

Fanfic Recommendation: Small Mercies (1495 words) by theherocomplex (Femshep and Garrus, being precious and snarky together.)
Birds flying high, you know how I feel

Chapter Summary

Garrus and Nihlus crack dirty jokes and scope out a pirate base.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Iiiiii'm baaaaaaacccck~

Sorry for the atrociously long wait for an update. Life got ahead of me, and I had to catch back up to all it's bs. In other news, I've quit my second job, freeing up one day a week pretty much entirely. Bye bye money, hello free time! I'm also quitting mythic raiding in World of Warcraft at the end of this raid tier. Sad to say goodbye to my guild and the lovely challenge of the hardest content in the game, but also? I'm just so done with not writing! I can't tell you how many scenes flashed before my eyes during the interstitial moments this past six weeks or so. I kept wanting to just... sit and write! So many of them were for events not yet come too. It made me realize that EDaH too was going forward without me, and I was falling behind on it, and that's just not something I was okay with. So. Give me some time to find a new balance and get back into it, but you can expect the frequent chapters to gradually return. n_n

A/N: Much appreciation for Marie_Fanwriter for their contributions to this chapter, and beta edits!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus messed with the zoom and ladar on his helm’s UI, trying to get a better look at the installation below. Beside him, Garrus was using his trusty visor to do something similar, though scanning the depths of the facility in finer detail with his custom equipment.

Milky white sands that matched an opaque sky stretched out in all directions from their perch, making the landscape a foggy, cream toned haze that slowly limited visibility down to almost nothing right at the horizon. Rough boulders dotted the desert below, haphazard remains of a meteor that had impacted the planet long before they’d come to visit. At the center of the ancient crater was a uniquely adapted mercenary base, well defended by tech and heavily patrolled. It’s drones, holofences, security cameras, mechs… all of the equipment looked top of the line and specially built to accommodate the cloudy desert’s dust and visibility.

Nihlus glared mildly at the set up. What should have been a high stakes ‘drop-in, jam coms, wreck-face’ operation had made a hard left turn for ‘most difficult infiltration of his career’ with a failure consequence of having more defense tech turned on the two of them then they could possibly handle. The Anti-Aircraft cannons also insured that if he called the Widmanstat in for air-to-ground fire support, he’d only get about ninety seconds of it before the shields and armor plating failed and he had a hull full of holes instead of a way home.

The carmine plated Spectre was damn glad he’d brought Garrus, but was kicking himself for not
having called on Saren and Rix, or Riaz and Ankhleas. Or, fuck, all of the above.

While he internally bitched about the circumstances, his partner in anti-crime continued getting them a nice layout to work from. The process of mapping the facility was slow, but the tiny amount of radiation his detective’s visor put off in order to properly catalog the facility would alert exactly no one to their presence, whereas his ship’s high grade scanners might’ve deep scanned the place in ten seconds, but would have set off alarms without question.

Alarms meant high alert, weapons active, hunts for intruders, and worst of all: data defense protocols or possibly self-destruction of servers, the intel inside of which was the entire purpose of a landfall instead of orbital bombardment. Nihlus was somewhat on the fence about how much he wanted that data, now that he’d seen the facility.

The pair had left the Widmanstat out in space, tucked-in behind the moons of another planet. Stand-by jammers had been rigged to all nearby com buoys, and they had ridden escape pods across half a solar system to bypass the local security grid. A lot of effort for the potential eezo mine of transaction records, shipping manifests, and contact information the pirates should have stashed away somewhere.

Nihlus tilted his neck left, then right, enjoying the satisfying pop the apex of each stretch caused.

They were behind enemy lines, by all appearances completely undetected, and lacking backup or the possibility to resupply without giving themselves away. The operation was on a time table, based on ration count and thermal clips, where the only chance for more was giving themselves away with a supply drop pod or pushing forward and taking what the enemy had failed to secure.

A slight, unamused smirk and a narrowing of eyes was his eventual decided response to the challenge. Nihlus Kryik wasn’t a torin to back down from anything, and pirates with fancy missile drones weren’t enough to change that.

Outside of the compound’s walls a loose circle of Armored Personnel Carriers were parked facing outwards, mounted cannons reflecting the hazy day light. Camera, missile, and tazer drones flew in patterns just above the APCs, whirring about in repeating geometric paths. The wall behind that line of defense was two stories tall, with an energized wireframe fence leading up to a causeway with a dozen forms on patrol. Behind that, partially unseen because of the angle, were more ground patrols making laps of the inner courtyards.

He’d given Garrus direct input access to his armor’s systems, rather than having to approve all data the other torin sent him bit by bit. Occasionally a mapping notification would pop up on his helm’s overlay. He explored the 3D map as his sniper built it up, filling in his understanding of the facility’s defenses.


Two hundred and seventeen organic vital signs.

They all had to die today.

‘So many…’

Nihlus inhaled deeply, holding it in for a moment before letting the breath go. Murder in the name of galactic stability was a worthy cause, and the mercenary pirates below had forfeited their own right to peace when they’d started taking that same peace from others.

Briefly, his gaze left the facility to look out at the hazy desert skyline, taking in it’s unique aesthetic.
On the horizon the twin suns had begun to make their descent, framed by a halo glow in the murky atmosphere. The first was on the edge of the world; the other an hour or so behind it. Without moons to reflect their light, the night would be a thick, heavy darkness to work in. Both a benefit and a hindrance for his purposes. They’d have to think twice about removing their helms for any reason. Even with Turian and augmented night vision they would have a hard time navigating between buildings without some extra guidance from radar. Not to mention the desert air was already a little below what was comfortable, due to the distance of the suns. On the other talon, most sentient beings tended to slow down in the deep dark. It wouldn’t affect the drones, but Nihlus expected the pirates to be much easier to catch unawares.

Two new items cropped up on his HUD from Blue. Yet another hidden AA cannon, built into a warehouse on the east side, and a data server with a suspiciously high rate of power consumption in a sub-level basement. He perked up, looking at the intel closely.

If anywhere was going to have the data he wanted -the data to make this all worthwhile- it was going to be there.

Nihlus hummed into the open coms, setting his chin on a balled fist. “Pretty sure Saren will toss us off the top of the Council tower if we don’t raid that server. You see that power draw? For fuck’s sake, how many exabytes do pirates need?”

The reply was a laugh, understated from mission focus but real. “Not easily accessible though, and it may upload itself somewhere else and fry the hardware if tampered with.”

Nihlus’ subvocals called back in agreement. There was no telling what security features where on a network like that. “I’m thinking about a spot of preemptive vent crawling before we make any bigger moves. Disable some of this security.”

The torin beside him chuffed audibly into his mic. “Palvi, it’s always vent crawling time with you.”

“Hey, sometimes it’s ‘splosives time or stabbin' time.”

“Mmm.”

Nihlus grinned lopsidedly at the skeptical reply, glancing up at another new map point. A second AA cannon in a silo off to the west. Inconvenient. If shit hit the fan and he had to call the Widmanstat down for evac, he’d realllly rather not have it full of holes afterward. Why did they need so many-

‘Oh, that’s right. Because of people like me. Bother.’

Those AA towers needed to go down, the server core running the drones needed some viral lovin’, and last but certainly not least, that data server needed a friendly visit.

Three things that needed hacking, but there were only two people to do it, and he wasn’t too proud to say that Garrus was by-and-far the better hacker. He wanted the other torin on the highest priority target. “I think we may both be doing some vent crawling today, Blue.”

“You don’t say,” came the wry, distracted reply from the detective, still focused on his scans.

“Hah. I do say. You’re the better hacker, and I’m the better fucker. I think we want you after that server.”

“The better fucker...?” Garrus’ bemused subvocals played right into his joke, and the carmine plated Spectre dropped his punch line while lounging sideways on the white, creamy sands of their scouting
“What? I’m good at fucking, fucking things up, and handling things that have gone fucking sideways. My area of expertise, really.”

While Nihlus was busy smirking inside his helm, the other torin spared some concentration from scanning to kick him playfully in the shin. He barely felt it through their armor, but it was the thought that counted.

“Ow. That was mean. Are you saying I’m not a good fuck?”

“Spirits, Nihlus. I love you, but shut up.”

Shutting up but grinning broadly, he flopped on his back, hands tucking underneath his neck as he looked at base schematics with the background of hazy atmo, otherwise useless until Blue’s efforts got them more data to work with.

Off on the horizon the first sun had disappeared, and the second was half gone. As the night began to arrive the wind picked up from the southwest, the mild temperature change from sundown causing a pressure shift. Nihlus idly ran a weather simulation to get a gist of the effects, and found it to be messy but not impossible to work in. Even more fog, temperature a little cooler as the night went on, and a chance of shifting ammonia levels from ‘barely tolerable’ to ‘tolerable for a few minutes at best’.

He huffed and sent the results back over to Garrus through data coms.

Sniping was never going to have been their first tool. Medium range, maybe. Relativistic speeds did a lot for controlled trajectory, but a little interference also went a long way on a sniper’s bullet. Plus, visibility beyond a few meters was going to be down to scanning tech, and any sniper would tell you that not seeing the target’s subtle body language in the scope was a sizable roadblock to a marksperson.

“Wind’s kicking up Blue. Think you can suck that server dry while I get the AA guns offline?”

Garrus tossed his crest in agreement as he typed something into his omni-tool, subvocals teasing. “Is this the part where I make a joke about being great at ‘sucking things dry’?”

Nihlus snickered. “Sure. Sundown in ten or so… light’ll be gone shortly after. You about ready?”

The C-Sec detective paused to look over at him, cocksure confidence in the tilt of his helm and the tone of his voice. “I’m always ready. Give me fifteen and I’ll have the rest of the scans in too.”

“Perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Woohoo, chapter posted! Go me! /pats self on back.
A/N/N: For now, I'm not going to go into the extra time needed to post rec fics, chapter soundtracks, CDN news, etc. All of that stuff took extra time to organize, and I don't want to take away from pure writing time right now. It's very possible that I'll drag them in as I get back on the writing ball, one thing at a time. I felt like it added a lot to immersion, but also, I never could tell how many people actually listened/read/etc so I
don't know if it was a waste of time or not. Anyhoo, it's great to be back! Please let me know if I make any continuity mess ups or plot holes. n_n
The pride of lesser souls

Chapter Summary

Saren puts himself in a compromising position for the potential reward of it. Where another might be shamed, he's rather... bored.

Chapter Notes

Me: I'm going to write more!
Life: Hahahah no.
Me: But I like writing! I have words that need to-
Life: Pfffts. No.
Me: But-
Life: Nope.
Me: I could quit all my other hobbies, and get someone to-
Me: I just want-
Life: Think again.
Me: ARGHGH!
Life: That's the spirit. But still no.

A summery of my life lately.

[Mass Effect Wiki Entry: Maitrum Prison Facility]
A small hot rock with few resources, Maitrum is used by the turian armed forces for its maximum security prison and interrogation centers. The temperatures are high enough to prevent any escape without an environmental suit, but low enough that construction of additional buildings will not be hindered. Over 500,000 prisoners are detained on Maitrum, only a handful of which have ever managed even a temporary escape. A small supply economy and prefab-habitats support the prison staff, who usually work only for two-year tours of duty before they are rotated out to less stressful positions.

*****Notice: This chapter is graphic, squicky, nsfw, and not a pleasant read.******

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quiet steps walked the length of the dreary walkway, echoing through the long hall of reinforced windows and brushed metal floors. Maitrum’s dreary, sterile corridors were neither new nor luxurious. The place was made for one purpose, and one purpose only: a location to confine the criminals that couldn’t be rehabilitated by work camps, peer influence, or chemical realignment.

A boring hell for the unwanted, one last stop before the Hierarchy gave up and euthanized them.
Saren's cloak flapped with the breeze of his passing as he turned the corner where the causeway came to a T section, heading left from memory to reach his contact’s home. Cyrion Kuril was housed in one of the nicer parts of the penal colony’s support city, in a small but clean prefab near the main bathhouse. It wasn’t much of a step up, but it said something about the torin’s position in the warden ranks. He was respected here. In control. Something Cyrion enjoyed far too much.

At the end of the branching path was the door the Spectre was looking for, which slid aside to the same old access code. Saren glanced around at the somewhat classy furnishings between tired walls, noting the addition of a larger vidscreen in the kitchen area. A new kava machine as well. Fancy designs and art pieces from core worlds… or really good knock offs.

Saren took up a lean against the sink, letting his optics scan the area in detail for traps, hidden objects, and inconsistencies. He found them, scattered around the home like mouse traps. Carefully placed data drives and oddly ajar wall paintings. It was as if Warden Kyril had arranged his living space like the scene of a movie, everything in place for mind games and dramatic reveals.

The Council Agent chuffed, the puff of air escaping in a quiet and unimpressed way. This entire set up was mildly ridiculous. He’d expect the same behavior of Nihlus, except that his protégé would go to such efforts to gift him a new gun or a strange cookbook lifted illegally from a pre-spaceflight species. The mere pantomime of intrigue here, for the sake of what could only be ego, was rather a thorough waste of time.

Uninterested in playing games and inspecting the anomalies further, which were bound to be largely or completely red herrings, the stoic male kept up his placid lean and passed the time by reading an ebook on the intricacies of Asari culture. Something he had downloaded in preparation for visiting Matriarch T’soni, and a pleasingly useful expenditure of time rather than being idle.

Half an hour passed before the other Turian showed up, fifteen minutes late to the meeting time and location that he had specified. Saren suppressed his subvocal opinion on it in favor of nodding politely as Cyrion locked the door behind him and walked closer, carelessly tossing a vivid yellow shopping bag on a side table.

“Kuril.”

“Spectre Arterius! What a delight to have you. Can you I get you something to drink?”

He glanced at, and optically scanned, the obnoxiously colored bag. The contents were clothing of some sort. The other torin had left him waiting in favor of shopping for casuals. If he knew Kuril, and by this point he was fairly confident of such, the late arrival and attention catching bag where all a part of some internally imagined game.

Saren drugged up his most interested façade and nodded. “A palaven sunrise, if you have the components.”

The warden’s eyes narrowed as he smiled, the hide at the corner of his eyes pulling as the muscles beneath his faceplates shifted with the movement of mandibles. The expression came across as anything but friendly.

Saren watched the prison keeper turn away to make their drinks. He was fairly certain the warden’s usually gregarious behavior was as false as the pretense of shopping, though the purpose of it eluded him. Possibly because he could not care less.

Still, he managed something that might pass for a smile when Kuril returned with drinks in hand, though he let more of fang show than needed. A razor edged un-smile. As expected, the other torin’s
subvocals proceeded to tilt toward sexual interest. The warden had always seemed to like a hint of danger, and Saren was willing to play at it to move things along. As a second opening volley, he flared his talons a bit to take the drink that was handed over. Sharpened edges caught the light in another small reminder of the inherent danger of being in the same room as him. The mild threat was just as well received, a faint blue flush tinting the other male’s throat.

Saren began to hope the dance of ‘mutual’ interest would pass quickly this time.

Expression returning to neutral, the laconic torin brought the proffered glass of red-orange and vivid yellow alcohols to his mouth, going just slow enough for his olfactory augments to take a whiff and run a simplistic toxicology report. Kuril took his own first sip as well, eyes flitting down to the liquid’s surface and subvocals intrigued. “So... I’d heard things have been nasty out in the ‘Verge lately?”

Electric blue eyes narrowed, tracking the warden’s languid shift to go sit at the circular kitchen table. “Oh?” Saren offered blandly, his retinal display showing no toxins in the test result. He took a polite sip.

“Mmhmm,” replied the warden, sitting down and taking another draw of his own green-hued cocktail, an inviting hand gesturing at the other chair. “We’ve had a few new inmates arrive from that area, and everything they give up during interrogation sounds… disconcerting.”

Saren took the proffered seat, distracted from his attempt to speed-seduce the guard and instead considering what to say and not say. His absence in the Skyllian Verge was distressing… and none of the other male’s business. “News that escapes from that area of space is always ill, and usually exaggerated.”

“Hmm… you’re not wrong…”

A scoff nearly escaped him at the casually dismissive statement. ‘Wrong’ was a state Saren strove to never be in. He had too much personal experience with what miscalculation could cost. “Of course not. And how do things fair in your area of space?”

The smirk that tugged at Cyrion’s left mandible made it perfectly clear that he saw the light request for the intel on offer, and the shift of one leg over the other knee into an even more casual slouch sent the return message of ‘not yet’ without preamble. Saren carefully didn’t let his irritation show.

“Oh, much ado, actually. I’ve been promoted twice since we last spoke, Nineteenth tier now.”

The Spectre let his subvocals do the talking here, while they could. Two jumps in tier in less than a year was no small accomplishment. Honest congratulations were in order, even if the recipient was a troublesome entity.

Said entity nodded graciously at the praise, a mild preen in his undertones. “Thank you, thank you. It was a surprise, but a pleasant one. I’ve still every intent of starting up the facility I’ve talked about, it’s simply that the higher tier gives my voice more merit in the aural canals of those who could make it a reality.”

Saren tilted his head, recalling the warden’s occasional mentions of a private prison facility for the edge worlds of the galaxy. “The modular space station, was it? Using low-key extortion to force greater funding for felon detainment and rehabilitation.”

Kuril’s eyes glittered with pleasure, the other torin throwing back a larger swallow of drink before replying. “That’s the one. An unjur system, built to enact justice on a larger scale. We can drag the
other species toward accountability if we must.”

Saren hummed, slowly rolling the rim of his palaven sunrise back and forth in his fingertips. On one talon, the other races gave far less contributions to galactic peacekeeping than the Hierarchy. On the other, the empire was allowed a much greater number of warships and fleets according to the Treaty of Farixen specifically to enact said peacekeeping.

The problem of criminal elements on edgeworlds was constant though, and the Hierarchy couldn’t handle it all no matter much funding was given. But a private facility to handle the worst of the worst? Remove the greatest issues and stressors from the system?

The idea had merit.

A dangerous potential for corruption, but merit.

Saren tilted his glass at the warden, and took another small sip before setting it down. “May the spirits hear your wish, and grant you a true course.”

Cyrion barked a laugh, swirling his drink and lifting it in a return toast before downing the rest. “Leave it to you to pull out old timey well wishing and make it sound good.”

Saren blinked, slowly, and then nodded in acceptance. It hardly mattered what oddities the other torin thought of him, so long as the warden would hand over the data, sooner rather than later. “As you say.”

At that, the well built prison guard stood and slowly rounded the table with a predatory air. The Spectre kept the relief from his subvocals, pushing forward his sense of anticipation -to finish up and leave with the data in hand- and interest -in getting on with the proceedings. His subvocals conveyed the not untrue sentiments.

Kuril’s fingertips settled his empty glass on the tabletop nearby, other hand coming in to hold Saren’s closer shoulder. “I do say so, Spectre.”

In a practiced move, the electric eyed torin tilted his head to show throat at the same time as he dropped his mandible to flash fang, sending a mixed signal of both invitation and warning. The warden fell for it like lustful teenager, talons flexing on Saren’s shoulder armor.

As they stared each other down he heard, rather than saw, Kuril casually flick the tumblers off the side of the table one after another, the durable poly-glass bouncing across the floor without breaking. It was split second later that the other torin’s rough grip pulled him up onto the surface, and his natural and augmented reactions to being assaulted tried to trigger. He began to manually suppress them with his optical interface while the warden’s fingers took to the latches of his armor with familiarity, unclasping Saren’s cloak and letting fall in a spread on the table top. Flicking open the catches on armor and peeling away undersuit while rumbling aggressively, intent clear.

*Adrenaline boost… unqueue.*

*Cortisol balancing system… unqueue.*

*Cognition enhancers… unqueue.*

*Stim Series 001… unqueue.*

*Stim Series 002… unqueue.*
On it went until he’d self-managed his augments into a non-typical response, and dosed himself a little to stay calm.

Saren was in the middle of considering whether to check his email or stay focused on seduction technique when he was roughly shoved over onto his stomach, legs automatically spreading and feet stretching to balance him on the slightly-too-high table edge. The snarl of annoyance at being torin-handled escaped him before he could wrench it into something more welcoming, but thankfully it only made Kuril growl back at him, aggressive and clearly aroused.

Considering the positive response to negative feedback, the Spectre bucked slightly, not enough to throw Cyrion off, but sufficient to challenge the warden’s sense of control. Hips pressed forward, pinning him to the table. Both of their subvocals rolled out, warning edged. Saren managed to choke back his ire after a moment, cutting the dangerous sound off. The other torin seemed to take that as the submission that he wanted, tones tilting down into pleased, lustful approval.

Saren felt the warmth and slickness of a phallus descend against his rear pelvic plating. His dry, closed plating.

There was a sense of relief that rose from hearing the lust-lost groan that tumbled out of Kuril then. Now that the other torin’s cock was out, he would most likely handle the rest of the encounter himself. The laconic Spectre looked forward to bracing himself, and halfways checking out while the warden got what he wanted for the intel. Only halfways though. Saren did not trust even so predictable a contact to not have ulterior motives.

Talons raked at his sides while he opened a communication from Valern’s aide. The stoic agent ignored the light sting and kept himself relaxed while Kuril slicked his rear plating with natural lubricant from his own length. Those same hands came in to begin tugging the plates apart, pulling him open to receive regardless of biology’s inclination. Saren read through the short request, and then set it to ‘unread’ so he could handle typing a somewhat long reply later on, when he had a proper keyboard and not tetchy thought-to-text programs or aggravatingly clunky AR keyboards to work with. His hands were busy holding a table’s far side at the moment, so the communiqué would have to wait.

Saren ran through the short list of new messages in his inbox while Cyrion worked up to penetrating him. When that was sorted, the Spectre turned to a news feed that covered galactic happenings while the warden took his time.

The eventual feeling of being filled was vaguely uncomfortable, sharply painful, and somewhat pleasant all at once; the nerve endings along his cloaca enjoying the stimulation while the walls themselves were sure they had no business accommodating anything of size. Saren ignored his body in general, activating a few clotting boosters and going back to the news while the other male took his pleasure. Considering that Kuril was not currently yanking his crest around by the sensitive zygomatic horns off his cheekridges, and that the drip of blood from the claws having at his hide was very mild, he considered the experience to be thus far less-bad than it could have been.

As the walls of his cloaca began to get used to the stretch, and the mild buzz of pain faded into a indistinct sensation, the plain physical enjoyment of the act rose.

Saren strained against it, not welcoming the feeling.

The resistance caused his internal muscles to clench, and the result was a long, blissful sounding moan from Cyrion. Without further warning, the Spectre was again rolled sideways. The trusts into his body became more forceful, the angle hitting nothing enjoyable while chafing slightly. A hand held his upper leg to Kuril’s chest to brace him there, sharp talons digging deep into the meat of
silver-grey hide between the protection of plates. More small rivulets of blood ran down the channel of nearby scales, pooling in the nooks of hide and scute before spilling over to drip onto the table.

The warden made a show of himself, head tossed back, growling and panting as he chased pleasure. Saren pretended to stare while watching a vid clip at the top of one article.

Eventually the other male finished off with dramatic gasping and euphoric sounding harmonics. Saren managed a pleased croon... soon he could walk out with new leads, paid for in nothing more than a little bit of blood and discomfort.

That perceived price jumped a bit when Kuril got overly familiar and leaned in to leave a bite mark on his arm just below the shoulder. Saren shook him off and growled back about it in a very clear ‘try that again and lose your face.’ The prison guard chuckled breathlessly, smirked, and pulled out of him.

He suppressed a wince at the feeling of raw nerves.

Kuril stepped away from the table, come dripping down his legs, to go digging in the pockets of his discarded clothing. Saren gave himself a generous minute to breathe through a sense of dizziness, then worked on getting an arm steady to push up with. He was halfway to a sit when an OSD was tossed unceremoniously onto the table beside him.

“It’s been a pleasure, as always, Spectre,” the grey plated warden offered, subvocals sly and satisfied.

The silver-grey torin grunted a bland affirmative, and gingerly sat up on the table, hand sliding over the data drive possessively as Kuril wandered away.

Saren watched the warden go, then stood to re-armor and discovered the source of the dizziness. A bit more blood loss than anticipated was all. Armor was reacquired one piece at a time, the news feed on pause while he gathered himself.

When he was put together again, cloak in place if hanging heavy from fluid weight, the Spectre made for the door with a slight limp suppressed as best he could. A glance into the bedroom area revealed Kuril collapsed in a satisfied sprawl on the bed, the strong smell of blood and sex suffusing the living unit.

Not wanting to prolong the encounter further, Saren left without another word, OSD tucked safely away.

Chapter End Notes

HA! Fuck you Life, I got a chapter up!
Chapter Summary

Nihlus is vent crawling for justice (again), Garrus is 'calibrating' a security system, Saren is making it to safe waters, and Avitus is licking the back of his teeth.

Chapter Notes

My muse remains dead in the water, though I have managed another little bit. Fighting the good fight for these good bois. n_n

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone had heard the joke that Turians didn’t sweat, usually as a crack about their ingrained sense of calm under fire. Some of the more gullible of the squishier species even seemed to believe it. The unusual lack of sweating when overheated did give some credence to the myth… but Nihlus really begged to differ. Sweat was pouring down his neck, misting up the one-way mirror of his helm’s face panel, and steeping him in a general sense of liquidy discomfort.

‘Ugh... ughhhhh . Gross.’

The chilly ambient temperature of the planet meant that indoor heating was probably a major concern for power drain, and whoever had built the base must have thought to take advantage of the local geography’s thermal vents rather than expend energy on artificial sources of heat. The same vents that were causing the milky, foggy atmosphere outside and playing havoc on visibility made for cheap thermoregulation, plus a tidy little back up power source.

‘Blue is probably digging this set up. Efficient, technical, and creative. Hell, Saren would probably like it too. Should save some of these scans for him…’

Mental note made without stopping, the carmine spectre hung a left at the next duct fork, taking care to slip through the passage in silent grace to avoid detection by noise. Conveniently, the entire operation’s air ducts all joined at a central point to take advantage of the largest vent. Inconveniently, the airways branched off and crisscrossed to such a degree that any sound in one would echo and rebound audibly in a large area.

‘And yet, no laser grids. No duct cleaning bots with security subroutines. Nothing more than a few sectional grates... That's weird isn't it? Yeah it is…’

At the next confluence of ducts Nihlus paused to check the base scans from Garrus, memorizing his next few turns and slipping ever ever forward.

It was almost as if the base had been handcrafted for him, an extensive private highway for espionage prepared to help him pull off this five star infiltration… if only it wasn’t so damn roasting already, and bound to be a few degrees warmer at the center of it all.
He swallowed in trepidation of the upcoming heat, only to realize that his throat was dry enough for it to be uncomfortable. Two more scratchy swallowing attempts, and knife-loving torin started contemplating the merits of licking his fogged over screen for some small relief.

‘I’m gunna chug my canteen as soon as I find a safe spot that isn’t a zillion degrees. If it hasn’t flash boiled away that is. Mmmrf. Seriously, who decided that their ground-to-air canons needed to be kept nice and toasty? Not the living quarters? The kitchens?’

Another trail of sweat ran down the hide below his mandible. It joined the other drops, which were forming a humid pool in Nihlus’ helm below his chin that the armor’s environmental systems were very distressed and bleeping about. The fog over his helm’s display was a constant annoyance as he went, every breath he released making it worse.

He couldn’t see for shit in the crisscross of ductwork, relegated to moving by fuzzy scan display and touch.

Just before the worst of the heat a new alert popped up off to the left side, a digital text message from his armor’s VI overlaying the fogged over camera feed from outside.

[WARNING: Hydration levels falling. Seek fluid intake.]

The green eyed torin had to clamp down on miserable subvocals, not wanting to give away his position through the echo-prone halls with stray vibrations, even if that one was less likely. He was starting to debate taking the time to reroute for a different entry vector. A path with security measures that may or may not exist… versus easy-bake-kryik.

A soft hum came through coms while he waffled on it. “Mmnn…”

The line fell silent. He waited a few seconds for Garrus to say more, but when nothing was forthcoming he took the opportunity to shift back a little ways and check in. It would give him time to deliberate, anyway. “Blue? How ya doing?”

“Have I ever mentioned that I hate Quarian engineering?” came over the line in a frustrated tone. Nihlus couldn’t resist snickering. “Heh… I don’t think so. Work with it a lot?”

The sniper grunted softly, pausing as he focused on something before replying, “No. Hardly ever. This system is a monument to their insanity though. It’s like a desperate, genius Vorcha built an animatronic Varren, just to eat it. Then an enterprising Volus took the remains and sold it to a junker, who made it into a statue, where it sat for thirty years, before an Asari bought it for their collection of ‘cultural preservation’ where it sat for another hundred years before it was sold in an auction where the buyer discovered that it had gained sentience but couldn’t move properly, so they attempted to repair it and were only partially successful, but now it’s alive and ambulatory.”

Nihlus bit his tongue to hold back, but the laughter pushed forward. Garrus sounded sooooo disgruntled. The spectre kept it quiet though, wheezing almost silently in the vents. “Heee… hehee… that’s… that’s some description, Blue.”

“Mmrrph.”

“I’m guessin’ the mainframe is of Quarian design? Just tell me it isn’t actually sentient or able to walk…”

Garrus chuffed on the line, then his tongue clicked in satisfaction at some small, unknown success. “It’s not quite sentient yet, but if they took off the VI shackles and gave it more memory it might get
there in a decade or two. And yeah… the system is definitely Quarian made. The design is brilliant, it’s just…”

Another click of tongue sounded while Nihlus idled in the vents, waiting for Garrus to finish the thought. A brief silence was followed by another frustrated noise, and then a frustrated growl. The carmined plated torin gave it another minute before verbally prodding the other torin for the rest of the sentence. “It’s juuust…?”

“I hate Quarian engineering!” was all that came back.

Nihlus shook his head, grinning, and started toward the convection nexus. “I’ll keep that in mind, but I have full faith that you can show it who’s boss.”

“Nihlus I… Mmn.”

“Mmn?”

“I may not be able to get everything off of this machine. Whoever made the security system is a psychopath, and an artist.” The spectre didn’t miss the light waver of shame in Garrus’ subvocals.

Nihlus quirked a fond smile at the other torin’s drive for perfectionism. It was as amazing as it was sad. How great it made him... but the need for it had been scared into his mind by parental demands and expectations that no kid deserved. “Do your best, yeah? The fact of the matter is that we’ll get way more from you doing it than I would have gotten. Ya see how many medals of honor I’ve got? Sure doesn’t change how shitty I am at hacking.”

The only return was a hum, but it carried a milder tone than before.

Assuming that his sniper’s sense of capability had been assuaged, the lanky torin turned his sights on the heat waves in the vents ahead, and started forward through the proverbial fire.

Whoever decided that the base of the AA guns needed to be right fucking next to the core of the thermal vent system was going to get a round to the head as soon as he found them.

The smell of blood was faint but unmistakable when the airlock door slid open. Avitus forced himself not to move, remaining on his mentor’s couch in the same half-slouch he’d been in since getting back from the local bars with no intel of note, an e-book on survival skills set to page one forty three on the datapad in front of him.

Saren came through, looking weary but pleased, and nodded cordially before gliding down the causeway toward the back of the ship. The former mercenary rumbled back a carefully neutral greeting, uncertain if concern would be welcome, and returned to reading… well, looking in the general direction of his book.

The scent of sex, blood, and alcohol wafted by with the flutter of the other torin’s customary black cloak.

He heard the water reclamation system activate -sure sign of a shower running- followed by activity from medbay. The medibot didn’t start making emergency sounds though, if it was being activated at
Avitus scrubbed a palm back over his crest, leaning out into the hallway to peer back toward the clean room Saren was surely in. The prodigical agent didn’t exactly invite any sort of personal inquiry. Saren wasn’t entirely unapproachable, really, just… private. So what amount of concern would be alright, and what would earn him a flat look then dismissal?

Tongue rolling along the back of his fangs, the spectre-in-training considered it. Thought about the pros and cons of sticking his fringe where it wasn’t welcome, versus not showing a good -but stoic-teacher the compassion he deserved.

Avitus was somewhere near decided on making kava and using a drink offer as a reliably safe ‘in’ when opportunity passed on by, and Saren came back out with a mug of something steamy, wearing only loose casuals.

The oranged eyed male gave the spectre a solid once-over, but then put his eyes on the ebook he still hadn’t gained another page on. It was... a little hard not to stare at Saren’s out of armor appearance. Suddenly the infamous agent looked a lot younger, smaller, and oddly normal. Without the extra height of combat boots, or the bulk of metal plating, Arterius was all long, thin horns and high cheek ridges, muscular build or no.

“You ahhh… get that intel, hoss?”

“I did. It is a collection of eyewitness reports featuring illicit activity throughout the Skyllian Verge, and it’s common trading ports elsewhere. Would you care to take a first look to begin organizing it?” the biotic offered as he took the singular chair by the couch, subvocals leaking relief as he sat down.

One pale browridge rose in mild disbelief. “You’re trusting the newbie with data so hot it’s probably worth a small moon?”

Saren chuffed, setting an OSD on the low table before leaning back in his chair more gingerly than the ex-merc liked to see, and taking a sip of whatever was in his cup. “First look, Avitus. I will review it as well, but there is undoubtedly some intelligence on the list that is more critical, and time sensitive, than other files.”

The older male nodded agreeably, ignoring the unspoken ‘and I am too tired to start in on it immediately as it deserves’ that the clarification implied. Instead, he reached out for the OSD to spare his mentor the extra effort right after… whatever had happened.

“Wellll now, that sounds more like it. I’m not half bad at sorting bits and bytes, actually. I’ll let you know if something catches my attention.”

Electric eyes slid closed, warm mug curled close to the keel over a plain, soft looking shirt. A low subvocal rumble of appreciation was all that came back in reply.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Did anyone spot the Subnautica reference? :D
In the security of a safe house tucked deep in a craggy fissure of a desolate moon, Idera sat in a disgruntled slouch she’d never take up in the company of anyone. Before the mean old tarin lay the remains of an unproductive interrogation, the target having had nothing to give up after all. All the leads on her current target had wound up in dead ends.


A low growl rolled from her, eyes narrowed and arms crossed. The leader of a sentient trafficking ring was out there, somewhere, but remained just out of reach. All intelligence on the matter had lead absolutely nowhere, save for busting up a few of the underlings’ immediate trades. Nothing else had come of the effort… and the hunter in her didn’t care for losing the scent of bloodied prey in the slightest.

It was in this mood that the ping of a priority vidcall caught her, the tarin sat up straight before answering it with an unfriendly grunt. Had the caller been any other colleague than Arterius, they might have been offended. As it stood, the miniature image of the aloof youngling nodded cordially in reply, his latest apprentice standing at attention behind him.

“Spectre O’kara. I have a favor to ask.”

Feeling less than generous, but lacking any other outlet for the aggravation of failure, Idera wordlessly gave a small toss of fringe as a sign to continue.

On screen, the other Turian’s chin rose slightly as he spoke, starting in on a proposal that sounded more akin to amusement than trouble. “I have received a... robust... data packet from an intelligence contact of mine. There are a few matters amid the lot which I believe should be seen to immediately. None of which are in your usual sector, I am afraid, but two of which are in mine, and I am otherwise preoccupied.”

Voice rasping, Idera offered a gram of interest. “Go on.”
“A key political figure that I believe to be integral to local stability has a bounty on their head. It
would be beneficial for the galaxy to see that the entity who set said bounty was removed from the
field, and the politician left standing, preferably unscathed.”

Idera chuffed, large mandible pulling in a wry, black grin. “I have hope that the second issue is more
interesting than a reverse bounty, Arterius.”

Electric eyes blinked in return, nonplussed. “That would depend on your personal opinion, but
perhaps so. The first, and possibly second, of three launch codes for one of STG’s planet glassing
warheads has fallen into the hands of a criminally inclined syndicate. I have my doubts that the Asari
family in question would use their code, or willingly transfer it, because of the prestige and sway it
represents, however…”

Vague disgust for political games -especially the republic’s combined stulti- rolled out in her
subvocals, making Idera’s opinion on the STG security breach very clear... If, that is, the damn fools
hadn’t intentionally traded the partial codes for political clout in their power games.

“Less interesting, Arterius, but you’re correct on the priority level. I assume the favor you’re asking is
for me to take care of these things in the ‘Verge for you’?”

Her fellow Spectre hummed in bland agreement, staring back through the camera as he waited on a
decision. Idera gave it a moment before nodding, standing from her chair with one arm lifted to keep
the screen level. She snagged the crest of the corpse from the interrogation in her free hand, dragging
the dead Turian by his head towards a crematorium for just such occasions.

“I suppose I can go take care of your garden while you’re on vacation. Just remember that you owe
me one.”

The ghost of a smile pulled on Saren’s faceplates as he expressed an appreciative platitude in placid
subvocals. In the background, the protégé’s gaze strayed toward the signs of forcible intelligence
gathering behind her.

“I shall do so, O’kara. The relevant data will be waiting for you in the ST&R offices on the Citadel.
Farewell.”

Without further ado the call closed and the holo interface collapsed, it’s orangey glow fading from
her weathered plates. Useless, lead-lacking refuse tossed in the crematorium, Idera headed straight
for the tiny base’s docking bay. Her old prey's scent was weak, but at least there was something new
to hunt.

Garrus shredded into the code of the Quarian data hive like a torin possessed. The setup was
engaging him in a way that none had managed since he was a fledgling youth, new to code logic and
stumbling through the opening routines of locked doors in the Vakarian madlis. The stale air of the
frigid, silent server room was pretty damn uncomfortable to breathe, but he’d barely noticed it since
starting.
Garrus’ home grown worms and security cracking programs were biting into the suspiciously advanced server VI with cautious attacks, gaining ground on the security one byte at a time. While his omni-tool ran hacking software programs he was busy distracting the abomination’s logic core and memory capacity with a whole slew of busy-work programs to keep it engaged elsewhere. The detective was hounding his prey like clans of old, except he and his tech were chaser, flanker, and ambusher all in one.

A bead of sweat ran down tawny brown neck hide as he as he flipped back and forth between screens, struggling to keep ahead of the genius-tier Quarian systems. Nihlus hadn’t been kidding when he’d said the operation here was well funded. The exterior security they’d snuck past was just the beginning to a long chain of defenses… and well, he’d warned the rakish torin that there was a good chance they wouldn’t walk away from this with all the data the server had to offer.

The honest truth was that he was only heartbeats ahead of the passive scanning and digital trip wires that would identify a foreign presence in the server and instantly activate anti-tampering measures. It wouldn't be game over, even then, but without complete clearance the data theft would be less like a download and more like walking the knife’s edge against a system lock out and chancing near zero data retrieval.

Garrus caught a digital glimpse of a passive scanning program around the proverbial corner, swore quietly, and laid low for a minute before continuing. Most modern computers with vital information had a lockdown-backup-suicide sequence, or some sort of a time-based lock out. This server, rather than being nearly so sensible, instead had its own cyber warfare suite, unremovable storage drives, and a pair of turrets to be activated in the instance of intrusion detection that were mounted to the wall on either side of it.

Steely blue eyes couldn’t resist a flick to the right and left to check that -yes- the spirit’s damned turrets were still there, offline and menacing. He had an overload ready to go to keep the two machines busy for a little while if he was noticed, but it didn't help the feeling of insecurity at kneeling by the server, very much inside their kill box. The tall C-Sec officer had thought about trying to get at this data from other access locations in the base, but the security set up required direct access to pull down certain files, and the other access points were in populated areas with constant foot traffic. He was stuck with hacking at the source... the pair looming turrets constantly at the edge of his vision.

After again checking that the two physical defenses were still offline, Garrus’ focus returned to the task at hand, unleashing a flanking distraction with spare processing power from his visor, and setting a ping-and-dash application to tap on the server’s metaphorical walls and make it take a look in useless places before skittering off to poke from somewhere else. Just enough bothering to make the pseudo-sentient system busy elsewhere, but not so much that the presence of someone, somewhere, trying to gain clearance was obvious.

In a moment of good luck, his main worm application found a cozy tunnel with root access for any one attempt to add his bit of own code to the thing's intruder subroutines, putting Garrus another step ahead of the security system. He wasn’t halfway through a first, scattered guess at how best to use the in when his com activated with Nihlus’ smooth voice, sounding winded but pleased.

‘Hey Blue, I’ve got some good news.’

A smirk pulled at Garrus’ left mandible, his cognition and reaction just a little slow from the sheer amount of applications he was shepherdng around the security system. ‘You’ve won the lotto and plan to retire to a beach somewhere?’

‘No, no, no, that’s like a hundred years off. I’m too young to retire.’
Garrus snorted in feigned disbelief. The return scoff on the other side tried hard to fake offence. ‘Oi! Do you want the good news or not?’

‘Sure.’

‘Sure he says. Ugh. Don’t tell me -ow fuck, hot... whew, okay, where was I? Ah yeah, don’t tell me you’re turning all ‘no-fun, no-words’ like Saren?’

The tall detective rolled his eyes. ‘You going to share that good news or not, Spectre?’

On the line, Nihlus chuffed hard enough for his mic to pick it up, though the release of air was quickly followed by less than even breathing that was... distracting the detective from his task something fierce. Even through the haze of security system recalibration, his plates twitched in interest.

‘Fffffffuck!’

Garrus paused for a half second, now more concerned.

‘Nihlus...?’ he tried, subvocals pressing down on a bit of worry that tried to leak through.

‘Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine... just a bit warm where I’m at. Those thermal vents, you know? Just got back through the center confluence... disabled that first AA tower though.’

‘You’re sounding a little rough there, Palvi.’

‘Just a dry throat. Single-handed heroism is thirsty work.’

Garrus snorted again, very slowly modifying a little scrap of code he had on hand to -hopefully- speed rewrite some identification code and suddenly recognize all accounts as admin.

His verbal reply, when it came, was on point if a bit delayed. ‘Is that your way of asking me out for a drink? I suppose, if you’re buying.’

‘I suppose he says. Vakarian, why do you think I’m doing the buying? I never do the buying. Have you seen this crest? I’m too beautiful to buy myself drinks.’

The tall detective nearly fudged his entire gambit there, on the count of omitting a simple ‘;’ character where one definitely needed to be for the rewrite to function whatsoever. ‘Shit. Nihlus, I will buy you all the drinks you want, but I’ve got to focus here.’

‘Focus away, oh stoic programmer. Sorry for the interruption to your regularly scheduled maths. En route to the other AA tower.’

‘Sorry, not trying to snap at you.’

‘No snapping assumed, Blue. Do your thing so we can giftwrap it for the people back in Intel.’

‘... You mean dump a copy on those poor people you keep locked up in the tower basement, and then giftwrap a gilded OSD version for Saren.’

‘He might even do that talon flutter thing he does when he’s delighted and wants to get his hands on something.’

‘Shameless.’
'Guilty, heh. On my way to that tower.'

'Spirit’s luck.'

'You too.'

Garrus shook his head, honest smile fading from his faceplates as he returned to really focusing on overcoming the data server-cum-homunculus. He ran a quick error checker over the spontaneously edited code, came up with an all clear on the debug list, and sent it off to expand the security crack into a cavern.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The good news is that I already have another 400 words of the next chapter. The bad news is that I'm super busy for another monthish. #TheStruggleIsReal

A/N: I hate that the 'proper' past tense form of sneak is supposedly sneaked. It sounds wrong, dammit. I have to type snuck. I have to.
The sleek, chrome exterior of the Daedalus peeled through the skies of Thessia like a graceful bird of prey, not so much subject to the wind as descending where and how it pleased. Cutting edge stabilizers helped, certainly, but so did masterful piloting. Saren let the autopilot take his home among the stars down through descent, but took manual control at the end to circle the T'Soni estates in a cautious loop. From the once over he gathered a gist of the layout before setting down on the landing pad with the slightest of bumps.

Beside his command chair Avitus swayed as if expecting a rougher landing by habit. Knowing the class of ship the ex-merc had spent most of his formative years on, the reaction didn’t surprise Saren in the least... though he still raised a browridge at his second pretégé before standing up.

Said torin smiled crookedly at the look and shrugged, stepping toward the nearby airlock without attempting to explain himself. Not the most confident reaction ever, but self assurance was something Saren had been cultivating in the older male since day one. It would do. The Spectre moved toward the main door after Avitus, humming a low key approval at the mildly confident behavior.

The uncommon expression of pleasure provoked a mildly confused, but friendly return trill from the pale torin. He gave a brisk nod to finish the brief communication before situating himself in the airlock and setting it to run.

The fans, invisible lasers, and faint scan grid filled the air with a quiet buzz for the brief period the airlock needed to transition them from the sterile inside to the more questionable exterior. The doors parted as soon as the system finished, machine symphony abruptly interrupted by the sounds of running water and various animal song. Saren stepped out into the sunshine, drawn to the sounds of the natural world on Thessia. If not the familiar chirps and cries of his own home, it was still appreciably alive.

A barefoot maiden with solid musculature and piercing eyes waved in welcome from the edge of the landing pad, the blue of their pebbly skin matching the background sky.
“Spectre Arterius, Trainee Rix, welcome to Thessia,” they paused patiently as the two torin moved closer, face relaxed in a polite smile. “My name is Shiala. Matriarch Benezia has been anticipating your arrival. Follow me, if you would?”

Saren turned his habitual crest toss of affirmation into a brief nod, a more Asari-normal sign of agreement. Beside him Avitus hummed his own reply, his tones loud enough to be audible to most non-Turians. Shiala sketched a small bow and turned for the estate, chic white sundress floating behind them as they led the way.

“We’ve prepared a set of connecting suites for you in the east tower, Spectre. There’s a lovely view of the air gardens, training grounds, and also the sunrise during this season.” The Asari tossed a smile over their shoulder as they turned, stepping onto a glass-like pathway, the suspended structure resembling melted, rippled ribbon that glimmering in the morning light. “I feel the need to warn you both that they aren’t the most modern or comfortable suites we have to offer, but they are warm and breezy even at night. Something I hope suits your preferences? If not, I would be happy to see other rooms prepared.”

Saren found himself shaking his head without thinking it through further, such was the siren call of having warm wind and plant smells outside the window… and some of Thessia’s famous sunsets. “Those rooms sound adequate, thank you.”

The long causeway took a meandering path through various landing pads, the edges swirling up into glassy planters and lamp posts, unlit in the broad daylight but promising a spectacle of light and reflection once dusk fell. The Spectre made a glance at his older protégé, appreciation for the artistry on his tongue, but found that the scenery seemed lost on Avitus, who was more closely watching Maiden Shiala’s back-side than the impressive blown glass walkways.

He sighed. At the very least, the pale torin was not behaving like Nihlus at his worst, and actively seducing their guide. Not that such habits had not paid off on occasion, and... it was always amusing to watch his other protégé skillfully ensnare people…

Saren found himself oddly lonesome amid perfectly acceptable company, and in the middle of important matters nonetheless; missing Nihlus’ ridiculous sense of humor and easy presence. He inspected the strange twist of emotions for a moment, then set it aside and continued listening to the hospitable small talk from the Asari.

“As I understand it, Trainee Rix, you are to be working with the commandos in the morning? Their routines usually start at 0600 sharp, and unfortunately, breakfast in the gardens doesn’t begin until 0900. Perhaps you can catch brunch after? Or lunch… depending on how long your participation runs.”

Saren caught a hint of forlorn subvocals in the other torin’s passive undertones. Having long since noticed that Avitus was never one to skip a meal, he resolved to order extra breakfast in stasis tomorrow to provide an appropriate first meal the day after. It would be simple enough to continue that pattern every day after, but there was still the matter of what to do for tomorrow morning…

The Spectre considered returning to his ship early enough to cook something, or perhaps stealing down to one of the cafe-like kitchens on the estate, in order to enable Avitus’ normal metabolic habits, not to mention his own. He was still distracted in plotting the transport and preservation of baked goods when their escort stopped them before an elevator with no apparent sides. Below was a wide pond filled with massively finned fish, zipping around the clear waters with low-grade biotic bursts and reddish sparks.

The silver-grey torin stepped onto the elevator, but turned around at the sound of a suppressed
giggle. Shiala was covering their mouth with a hand, eyes bright. Nearby, a nervous looking Avitus shuffled between feet, clearly wanting nothing to do with the open air platform. It occurred to Saren that the other torin probably couldn’t feel the faint, protective shields that buzzed at the edge of his senses, keeping any would-be falls from happening.

In a moment of mercy, the Spectre reached out to tap a knuckle against the invisible wall, sending faint blue ripples outward from the point of contact. The subsequent shoulder drop of relief was comical enough that a faint smile tugged at Saren’s left mandible. He turned away to hide it, rolling a buzz of impatience at the other torin. Avitus joined them in getting on, chuckling sheepishly.

“Fifth level please,” asked Shiala politely of the elevator, lips twitching as they tried to politely suppress amusement. The platform swished upward in a graceful acceleration of speed.

Unlike most public lifts, with extensive safety protocols on speed made to cater to even the most delicate of constitutions, the T’soni estate’s elevators ran at a more normal pace. Perhaps just a touch slower than a Turian-made one would.

As the floor rose the view of the grounds improved, showing more winding walkways of glass drizzled in topiary and flower beds, spotted with delicate light posts and fluttering birds. Gravity unbound, mid-air ponds cascaded down tier after tier until the waterfalls tumbled into the lake that surrounded most of the property. Saren was vaguely annoyed by his own stray thought that Nihlus, if he were here, would be likely to charm permission out of someone to ride one of the bigger waterfalls down... or do it in secret at night. As if the artistry on display was merely a lost opportunity for a water park.

The Spectre huffed and stepped from the elevator as it crested the fifth floor of the castle-like super structure. Shiala made to take the lead again, padding across the marble floors and into a foyer that branched left and right. The left hand hall went off into shady stonework, while the right opened into a solarium where the head of the T’soni dynasty sat in repose, just as graceful in arrangement and poise as their home; a spread of multicultural refreshments laid on the low table between couches.

Saren stepped around their guide and into view as their arrival was announced. “Our guests are here, Matriarch. May I present Spectre Saren Arterius of the eighteenth tier, agent of the Citadel Council, holder of the Hierarchy’s Golden Shield, and the Feather of Mazon.”

Here, the stoic male in question struggled not to snort. Medals of honor and numbers of rank meant little to him anymore. Once, perhaps, but no longer.

“ -and his protégé, Spectre Candidate Avitus Rix, of the seventh tier.”

The electric eyed torin made a respectful turn of his crest before taking a seat, wanting to be done with the initial, pointless pomp. “Matriarch Benezia, we are pleased to be invited here.”

Here, the stoic male in question struggled not to snort. Medals of honor and numbers of rank meant little to him anymore. Once, perhaps, but no longer.

“ -and his protégé, Spectre Candidate Avitus Rix, of the seventh tier.”

The electric eyed torin made a respectful turn of his crest before taking a seat, wanting to be done with the initial, pointless pomp. “Matriarch Benezia, we are pleased to be invited here.”

The ancient Asari inclined their head in return, swooping yellow veil falling aside with the bend of their neck. “Spectre Arterius, Trainee Rix, the greater pleasure must surely be mine. You’ve come to visit me with curiosities of interest and someone to challenge my warriors.”

Avitus coughed in a small sputter before sheepishly muttering, “Maybe more like ‘amuse’ your warriors, if you pardon Matriarch. I’m not much against biotics in the field.”

Saren blinked, very slowly, the situation with the disciple of raisaris they had fought on Korlus coming immediately to mind. ‘That is ‘not much’ in Avitus’ estimation? I would... not agree...’

Benezia smiled beatifically at his apprentice, then offered a reassurance that even Saren found
vaguely ominous. “Oh, but you will be.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: UhhhhHHHHHHhh... have fun Avitus! :D
Chapter Summary

Garrus and Nihlus still getting up to shit.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Betaed by Marie_Fanwriter for all the many typos, grammar blips, and character voice. :D
Released 09/19/2018.
Updated on 11/18/2018. Additional content and yet another proof read run. (How many spelling errors can I make in one chapter? Infinite amounts, apparently. XD )

Lexicon:
Buratrum - The Turian version of Hell. (Credit: Mizdirected.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garrus blew out a long, tired breath as he slid down the side of the server console, exhausted down to his bones. Beneath his keel the turin’s heart still raced from riding the edge of data loss while outwitting the security suite. It was over now though... and he’d out maneuvered a near-AI security machine in pulling it off. The thought brought the tilt of a weary smile to his mandibles. Sol would be interrogating him for details if she knew.

Behind his carapace, the machine finished powering off with the recognizable sound of fans spooling down. The room became almost eerily quiet without the consistent hum of the system’s power draw. Garrus’ data mining expedition had been essentially one hundred percent successful. The VI’s records and manifests were stuffed onto OSDs and tucked away in the sturdy storage of his gifted chrome armor. Even the guard turrets had been deactivated for the time being.

The detective took a brief opportunity to rest, even knowing full-well that he needed to leave before techs showed up to troubleshoot the ‘unexpected system malfunction’ of a shutdown mainframe. He did need to get out of there, but his mental focus was so completely fried that Garrus doubted he could safely navigate moving to a new, secure position just yet. It was an odd feeling, being jubilant at success but also fatigued into a complete lack of excitement.

Eventually, knowing that Nihlus was waiting for an update - and that every minute sitting still increased the odds of him getting caught- finally got the tired sniper up. Garrus shook his head a few times, pushing himself to refocus on the reality in front of him rather than being in the narrow thought-stream he’d been zoned into while cracking the server. The mental efforts weren’t entirely successful, but he managed to retrace his steps to the exit door. Luck was with him in his frazzled state, the hallways on the other side remained empty in all directions. Garrus spared a stray thought to thank the spirits for the small boon, and quietly stalked out of the server room while still deciding on his next move. He needed somewhere safe to lay low when techs came this way to poke about, and to touch base with Nihlus. Possibly somewhere to hold position until his partner decided on their
The distant sound of leisurely bootsteps on metal floor from off to the left sent him the opposite way at the next split, turning right at the confluence and bee-lining for a convenient storage closet. Getting inside was easy; the door was a cheap pre-fab model that was opened by pressing the 2, 4, and 9 keys all at once and holding. It flipped over to maintenance mode and slid right open.

Unfortunately... he wasn’t the only one who thought it was a nice hiding place.

“Hey! We’re using this-” a short, crestless tarin in -partial- green armor exclaimed, turning from the Human female she’d been... doing explicit things to that clearly involved less armor and more tongue. Garrus’ heart, which had just settled down to normal pace a moment ago, peaked again and shunted adrenaline into his bloodstream.

“Who the fuck is-” was all the dark skinned Human got out before Garrus was rushing forward and taking advantage of their confused state. He mentally kicked himself for not paying attention to his visor’s unobtrusive vital sign indicators while going in, making to snap the tarin’s neck since she was in easy reach.

The rapid twist didn’t do its job. The angle wasn’t quite right, but Garrus did get a good hold. Good enough to start choking the smaller Turian, at least. Conveniently, her side arm was still in it’s hip holster and he used it to shoot the other pirate twice in the chest before she could scream for help.

A half minute of struggling later and the first hostile grew weak enough for him to make a second attempt at breaking their neck. This time it worked. He let the corpse drop in favor of sealing the door and getting his back to a wall.

‘Spirits, can I get a minute of downtime, please…’

Graciously, the spirits gave him a whole forty seven seconds, before -in the distance- a gentle whoomp preceded a reverberating crash. Garrus’ hand was already reaching to his neck to activate their com channel when it crackled to life on it’s own, his marked’s voice coming through in a scratchy sounding whisper.

“Hey Blue... can I bother you for a sec?”

“I think the explosion did that for you,” he drawled in reply, forcing calm into his voice. Nihlus laughed sheepishly.

“Yeah, I bet it did. Sorry I couldn’t warn ya. You might want to hurry up with that server if you can? This ol’ idiot here zigged when I shoulda zagged, and now well... they know we’re here.”

“Good thing I’m already done then.”

The reply on coms was a cheerful whistle and a pleased roll of subvocals, followed by another vibrating whoomp that Garrus heard through the mic a split second before it reached his storage room hideout. A lopsided grin pulled at his mandibles as he ran fingers through this crest blades, unsurprised that the semi-clean infiltration run had turned into one involving explosions.

“Alright. What’s the plan, Palvi?”

“Ah well, the AA towers are down so... what d’ya say to making a run for it and using the Widmanstat’s canons to blow -”

Gun fire went off, there were two grunts, and then Nihlus came back on the line.
"-sorry, use the canons to blow this place to Buratrum?"

The flutter of the detective’s heart this time was no shock of adrenaline, just pure gun-junkie excitement. “I like the sound of that. I’m down the hall from the server. Are we meeting up to evac, or u-”

A scream of pain interrupted his planning, each of Nihlus’ vocal chords communicating intense distress. Garrus’ heart decided that freezing solid for a split second was it’s next trick of the day.

“Nihlus, what’s your status? Nih-”

“Ffffuck me. Shit. Oww. Shit,” the intermittent cursing continued, broken up by panting. The sniper listened intently, trying to figure out how critical the situation was. When no answer to his status question came, Garrus repeated it.

“Mpph. ‘Mmmfine. Evac south. The ship should be dropping down shortly, a half klick out. Get going, and I’ll catch up.’ The answer was all deflection and no substance. Worrying rather than reassuring, and Garrus’ hackles rose at the instructions. He had no desire to book it toward safety while Nihlus was -in all likelihood- walking wounded. “That doesn’t sound like a good idea, what if-”

“Owfuckme... Mmph, go on Blue. I’ll meet you there.”

“But-” He tried again, a hand extending into thin air toward the origin of the earlier explosions.

Nihlus grunted in denial, and closed the line on him.

Garrus palmed his forecrest over the slick metal of his helm, training telling him to make sure he was prepared for a rapid retreat through enemy lines, and then to get going. Follow orders. Seeking the comfort of the known pattern in the face of Nihlus’ unknown state, the detective looked down at his kit… finding that it was fully stocked, and all clips loaded were fully cool.

He had no critical preparing to do. So...

Stalling, Garrus pulled the Omni-tools and credit chits from the two dead. He almost wanted to dig through their belongings to further hold off, but knew that was a stupid call.

Jaw tense, Garrus unsealed the door and -checking for vitals this time- slipped out into the still empty corridor. Someone chose that moment to activate the base’s emergency alarms, which flickered along the ceiling in line of red flashes.

’As if that’s necessary after all the noise earlier...’ he thought, deprecatingly.

With practically comedic timing another whoomp sounded, followed by far away shouting, and a scream of existential grade terror.

The shouting, at least, gave him a starting point on where to get his feet moving away from. Garrus turned and started a jog through the twists and turns toward the closest edge of the compound. It wasn’t until he exited the building that the full scale of what had been unleashed with their discovery became apparent. The muted sounds and regular alarm tones dropped away in favor of active chaos. There was smoke on the air, the sound of mech armor creaking and turrets firing off in multiple directions. Guard stations around the perimeter were filling with confused and pissed off pirates. Somewhere a Krogan was bellowing, probably proceeding a charge.

Garrus tried to take another step away from the door and toward the visible perimeter wall -really he
did- but his heart had other plans. He stumbled slightly, then stopped, spinning around and heading for a section of building that looked climbable.

It wasn’t the best way up, but with effort it was the fastest. Crate to metal ledge, to piping, to conduit, up, over and up again; until he was on top of the building that had housed the server. Right elbow complaining something fierce, Garrus blitzed his way across the roof and slid into cover overlooking the mess that Nihlus had made. His rifle was out and his vision focused through the scope in between one breath and the next.

A horde of LOKI and YMIR mechs, pirates, and turrets were trying to take down… each other?

Garrus’ crest popped back up over his gun, steel blue eyes trying to take in the situation and figure out what in the spirits’ names was going on.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I meaaaan... Nihlus is pretty sneaky, but he *was* mentored by Saren. Sometimes things go wrong, and he's been trained to make them go very very wrong to get the job done. If need be. Besides! That distant explosion whoomp is so satisfying to imagine. :3
Whispering Gardens

Chapter Summary

Saren is having a lovely afternoon until a few stray words make his blood run cold.

... Meanwhile, Avitus is being tortured by ‘well meaning’ commandos.

Chapter Notes

Posted - 11/18/18
A/N: Well triple fuck me, I typed up this chapter, came back later to edit… and it was gone! I was really distressed and upset. It took me extra long to get back on the horse, so to speak, that's why it's been so long this time. Anyway, thank you all for your continued patience. On a positive note: I have got a fuck-ton of writing ready to go now, so expect several batches of updates to come out in the near future. n_-

A/N: Current chapters are betaed in various amounts by the wonderful authors of my Mass Effect writer’s group: white_aster, Marie_Fanwriter, and Some_Writer. A big thank you to them for all of their input during the writing process, for tactical help when words go missing, and patching ideas when the plot has holes. Another big thank you to my fantastic S.O., and other dear friends that give me input on EDaH. <3

Chapter Soundtrack: Arc North X Rival X Laura Brehm - End Of Time

When I think i'm leaving this behind
Until the end of time
It tries to bring me back to those times
When I think of outcomes
Across the memories
I can travel far
And still I end up where I was
But the stars still light the way
And I can't bring myself to turn my back

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was colder than Saren would have liked, with the breeze floating in through the many tilted windows of the solarium. His hands stayed warm around the latest mug of tisane, but it had not seemed polite to wear his mantle and cloak to their daily conversations. The result being that the rest of him was just slightly cooler than he would prefer, biotic metabolism or no, until the midday heat warmed the room sufficiently.

On a white leather lounger beside his own matching armchair, the T’Soni Matriarch leaned forward to select a tiny cake from the platter of refreshments on the low table. Critical, electric eyes glanced over the spread, once again resisting the impolite desire to express his judgement.
He could make petit fours that would put those simple things to shame.

Saren forced himself to look away, making a note to send Benezia a baked gift for the next applicable holiday. ‘Perhaps the Asari version of a name day, if they have such a thing?’

The laconic torin squinted at the surface of his drink, trying to remember if such a thing existed. Intracultural lessons from long ago failed him, so he initiated an extranet search via neural interface. The Matriarch’s soft hum pulled him from his focus though—a sign they were about to start another conversation track.

“I suppose you won’t be here all that much longer, considering how well your protégé’s training is going,” were their next words, offered wistfully.

His gaze next traveled out past the brightly lit windows, the elegant metalwork of the frame glinting in the sunshine. Outside, and a ways down, his second protégé was indeed doing well, spur-deep in day four of intense anti-biotic training. As the ancient nais had said, he was improving in leaps and bounds, much to his mentor’s pleasure. Avitus struggled to be exceptional at many things, but apparently avoidance of damage was a true skill of his.

Saren remembered training Nihlus alone, teaching the younger male to handle any kind of biotic assault… from one attacker. Himself. The result was that the other torin could handle heavy singular assault exceptionally well… but that had not been enough. Not a month after they had separated to tend to their own sectors, Nihlus had been up against five commandos at once, and nearly died.

Creativity had saved his protégé, and on-mission lessons since then had polished out that skill set where training had not. A failure, on his part as a teacher. Saren would not make that mistake again; as was proven by the sound of accented cursing and feminine cackling that drifted through the windows.

The wind also brought the off-sweet smell of levo flowers the bloomed frequently over the grounds, not to mention the faint hint of ozone from the heavy biotic use occurring in the training grounds below. A whole slew of cargo crates chose that moment to rise in the air, high enough that they nearly disappeared above the window’s generous field of view. The various boxes floated almost innocently in a circle of glowing, spinning cubes before launching toward a target below.

Avitus let loose with a yelp. There was gunfire for some reason. Flashes of blue light on the edges of nearby architecture.

The stray shouts and various second hand effects of training had been sources of faint amusement each day as the Spectre and Matriarch wandered from conversation topic to topic. Their talks wandered across as many points of interest as there were relays amid the stars; matters of galactic scale importance, their individual investments, hobbies, personal interests, and the odd bit of domestic Asari politics. Though nothing had yet been approached concerning the unknown technology sites, Saren was prepared to wait Benezia out. Asari were not known for rushing—essentially anything at all, but perhaps now that it was clear he would not wait forever...

Casually, hopefully, he offered a reply to Benezia’s comment concerning his length of stay that could lead toward moving things along on that front, “I suppose. Though that was only one of several reasons for my visit.”

A flash of white teeth behind their delicate veil was his reward, the gentle nudge appearing to amuse the elder T’Soni more than anything. “Of course. You also wanted to discuss the… how did you put it in your message? ‘Scraps of technology. Ancient, advanced, and… malevolent’, yes?”
Saren carefully did not react strongly. His silver-grey crest tilted aside as rumbled agreement in quiet subvocal tones, which he had been pleased to discover early on that Benezia had the aural augments to hear them, and the experience to decipher the basics. It was something that had helped their communication greatly, considering his laconic nature.

A second tiny cake followed the first, tucked under the nais’ veil in an oddly graceful nibble considering the barrier. “I know of them, as do many of the Republic’s eldest Matriarchs.”

Of all possible responses that could have been given, the resulting one... had not been expected. The first four words gave Saren pause, but the later eight froze the very blood in his veins with their implications.

Placidly, Benezia continued, “They come up on long range scanners with very similar micro-radiation frequencies as the Inusannon. Were you aware of that? More experienced archeologists have learned to visit new sites with care, lest they be such a place.”

Surely unaware of the dread rising in him, the nais paused in elaborating to pour a fresh cup of tisane and recline back into the patio lounger. Converse to the Matriarch’s calm, Saren remained perfectly still by dint of self control while also losing focus to contingency thoughts of how to handle a theoretical mass infection of foreign political leaders.

He was not a torin prone to pleading for the spirit’s unlikely aid, but the stray thought of ‘Please, spirits, not on their homeworld too...’ drifted through his mind uninvited.

A few moments passed with nothing in them, then the T’Soni Matriarch hummed in consideration and continued, as if carrying the conversation alone was perfectly normal. Saren tried to wrench his focus under control, trepidation rising at how deeply the rest of the conversation could prove damning for the guiding pillars of the Asari Republics. Contrary to popular belief, he may choose expedience more often than not, but simply removing any Matriarchs that had been touched as Desolas had... Well, it would not be easy in any sense of the word, and cleansing such an infection would destabilize... much.

As a slew of worst-case-scenarios played out in his mind, a blue fingernail tapped against the glass of a teacup. Benezia’s head tilted curiously at the edge of his vision, their calm gaze on the flight of Thessian birds riding the summer thermals outside. The creatures kept well away from the noise and danger of the training grounds, playfully soaring in circles and watching for fish in the waters below. “What interests you about them so, Spectre Arterius?”

A direct question. Something Saren could not simply sit and listen to. He needed a reply, somewhere between honesty and caution.

The silver-grey torin shifted in his seat, stalling for words as he tread with care. “I have had multiple encounters with this technology, and it’s ability to... gather people to a cause. I-” There was no good way to say this. He forced it out anyway, needing to know. “I must ask, have you or any of your family come into contact with one of the ruins yourself? Those in your employ or disciple?”

Rather than take offence to the pointed question, Benezia turned to smile softly at him. The cloth of their veil drifted before their face in the aromatic breeze that continued to come up off the gardens.

Delicate blue fingers, long and graceful like icicles, settled on Saren’s wrist over the dull grey of his gauntlet. “I appreciate your concern, truly. Neither myself, nor any of the T’Soni archaeology teams have, no. Though not for lack of trying. Coordinates for such ruins are very valuable. Worth things that credits simply cannot buy.”
Electric eyes met a royal blue set for a moment, then shifted away. “I understand. Knowledge of that nature is a currency all it’s own. Though, I would not recommend… going to one of the sites yourself.” Saren saw an opening in that moment, and though some part of him railed -vehemently- at the thought, he took it. He needed to take it. “I could be convinced to escort some of your people to a site I found some time ago…”

‘For a price’ sat in the air, without needing to be said. It hung there, right alongside their shared memory of his message and the forbidden fruit that was access to the Library of the Republics.

The ancient nais hummed again in that considering way, and declined immediately answering with more grace than he had managed. “Your visit is proving to be very enjoyable, Spectre, I hope it isn’t over too quickly. Would a break for lunch interest you? Your trainee might appreciate the excuse to escape Captain Moinelli’s domain as well.”

Distantly, Avitus screamed like a fledgeling, then shouting something about fire, cheating, and shoving someone into the nearby lakes. Benezia’s smile stretched, the timing really was too perfect.

Just like that, the brittle mood in the solarium thawed slightly, tilting back toward something less precarious. Saren, with no shame whatsoever, grasped for it. Old terrors aside, he had never expected research into the monoliths to turn into the potential for hundreds of high level assassinations.

A pause for lunch, and time to think, sounded… acceptable.

“I believe Avitus will thank you for the consideration.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'm curious, what do you think an Asari household is like? I obviously imagine their lifespan, breeding style, psychology, and society leads them toward dynastic great-houses. Almost like a republic of peaceable shogunates. Er... sort of? Maybe like noble houses, without a real middle or lower caste? Maidens just go on out there, party, fuck up, learn a lot, and eventually come home to take up their familial duties or some such. Anyway, I'd love to hear more concept ideas. n_n
Nihlus panted as he ducked down into the safety of makeshift cover. It was nothing more than a pile of rock and rubble, probably from the pirates expanding their tunnels. The heap was large enough to hide him in one of it’s nooks, and thick enough that if someone happened to figure out where he’d gone, it wouldn't immediately disintegrate under fire. Not exactly secure on all sides, but it would do.

‘If the pirates here -at a keystone base- are tunneling to expand infrastructure…’ He mused, chuffing at the mess of implications that raised. Not that he had the time or focus to mull on it now. He resolved to think about the deeper meanings of probable base expansion later, when he wasn’t actively bleeding.

A grimace tugged on his mandibles as the Spectre dared to look down at said bleeding, pulling the pressure of his hand from the lower left of his abdomen. The black leather palm of his glove came away coated in congealing blood; a shiny liquid cobalt in the pale morning sunlight coming through the atmospheric murk. Nihlus swallowed around a dry throat and sighed, returning pressure to the wound. He decided to take a moment -as long as no one found him- to just breathe and wait for his healing augs to kick in.

In the wake of being gut shot -after the initial adrenaline had fallen away- he’d gotten nervous about being wounded and getting cornered. The Spectre had opted for a little extra chaos and popped open a security panel to shunt a virus in their systems; a prepackaged drop-and-go from the R&D labs back on the Citadel that could scramble friend-or-foe subroutines for almost every standard mech or turret on a network.

Without a way to know if it had worked, he’d made to leave the area, but had just run into more trouble in the form of a squad of confused and pissed off pirates. One of whom was biotic.

Hence why he was now outside, in shitty cover, far from the better evac routes.
Around him, stray bullets began to ping the back of the rock pile, the building he’d just left, and the
dirt off to his right. None of the gunfire seemed aimed directly at him though, and that was very
encouraging. Nihlus took a few controlled breaths to fight down the pain, then dared to inch upward
for a better view of the the massive courtyard directly behind his rubble-shelter. Just barely cresting a
hunk of basalt, green eyes scanned the nearby activity through the glass of his visor.

It was chaos out there; of bullets, glitchy mechs, and ravening pirates. Drones zipping aroung like a
kicked insect hive, spattering bullets at random.

From what he gathered of those without helms -shouting at each other and into their comms- the
pirates themselves were just discovering his trickery, and were somewhere between furious and
panicked about it. The yelling brought a smirk to Nihlus’ mandibles, regardless of his current injury.
Fucking with people was just so satisfying.

‘Looks like whatever quack built their servers didn’t get their hands on the physical
defense hardware at least,’ he thought, pleased as punch, having partially expected his viral gambit
to utterly fail.

Nihlus shifted gingerly back down the concurve cranny of rock and mud. There was no guarantee
the system wouldn’t reboot to functionality at any given moment, so it was best to take stock and
pick a route out of here.

Pain levels? Dropping, but high.

His sense of self preservation had to argue with the small, sharp pains and gut-swirling nausea to not
simply pull off his helm for fresh air and then immediately purge his stomach. Not that the air here
was fresh, exactly, but his gizzard was sure that a purge would make him feel better. It might, but a
stray bullet to the skull would absolutely do the opposite.

Rate of blood loss? Slow trickle.

Not enough to make him worry... yet. If they got another few holes in him, he could be in real
trouble though.

The shotgun blast had been close enough to drop his shields and dig dozens of tiny holes in him in
just one hit. It had left his armor, suit, and the hide of his lower left abdomen a shallow but pain-
ridden disaster zone, and shallow didn't count for much as he was naturally lanky. Worse, the spray
pattern of the micro-shavings had shredded so much of his undersuit that it was interfering with the
medi-gel dispersal system.

The Spectre licked the back of his teeth, tasting copper. More movement was going to fucking suck -
it was currently sucking- but he figured it would be better to get out of the area rather than try and
stick it out. The odds of the network virus lasting long enough for the pirates and mechs to kill each
other off wasn’t exactly great. He’d take ‘distracted masses’ over ‘small but focused group’ hunting
him any day, especially while injured.

Nihlus gave an experimental side-twist at the waist. His vision swam like heat waves, the pain level
spiking at the test like bits of molten fragments scattered across his hide. The torin’s breath turned
shallow for a few pants as he settled straight again. Anything that pulled on his core muscles fucking
hurt. At least the bleeding had slowed.

A pair of LOKI stumbled past his hiding spot, and he pressed back into the divot of rubble as best he
could, afraid the VIs had thrown off his sabotage… but they carried on past, spouting fritzy-electric
gurgles and moving irregularly. He looked on as the mechs crashed into each other, stumbled apart,
and then walked headlong into a wall. Nihlus let out a breathy chuckle in relief, watching the malfunctioning droids bounce off the metal before trying again, repeatedly.

Somewhere to the north, a voice screamed in what had to be mortal horror. Mini-gun fire kicked up from the same direction, hitting something metal like a rapid, echoing drum beat. He couldn’t see that far in the haze, but it sounded fairly far off.

The wounded Spectre made a mental note to find the programmer who had come up with the specialty virus in the research labs, and offer them a good time. Possibly give them a fruit basket. Whichever suited their tastes, really. It was currently saving his ass.

The nearest section of cover between him and the edge of the compound wasn’t exactly close. Not to mention, it was only some storage sheds next to a water tower, a solid hundred meters off from his rubble pile. He eyed it skeptically.

Nihlus had an idea of how long it would take him to sprint that distance while injured, but every extra second in the open was an opportunity for something to bust through his shields again, and he really didn’t want any more holes. Better then, to dose himself and run like hell, probably tearing something along the way. He didn’t need his body’s warning signs or limitations right now. If anything, they were counterproductive to the game plan.

The wounded agent pulled up his omni-tool and dispensed a conservative dose of stims to take that edge off. He hissed as the chemicals hit his blood stream; a sharp, electric-heat sensation spreading from just under his omni-tool where it had administered the cocktail. The mix wasn’t anything special -just what he had prepped in the medical module- but a quick shunt of drugs and the nauseating feeling in his gut ebbed away until he felt significantly less like vomiting. ‘Ohhh, yeah. That’s the good stuff.’

While the boost kicked in and his clotting factors continued to plug up the leaks, Nihlus chanced leaning forward again for a better look at the threats closest to him. While the two LOKI from before were still comedically attempting to walk through a wall, a bloody YMIR was was letting loose way too close by for comfort. The lumbering mech suit was on auto-pilot and shuffling sideways like nothing so much as an oversized crustacean; busily unleashing unholy hell on an innocent pile of crates with missile fire and EMP morters. The courtyard proper itself was scattered with LOKIs having a shoot out through the thermal fog, against a series of automated ground-mount turrets and a few stray pirates.

The coast wasn’t really getting any clearer, but he needed to get out while the gettin’ was good.

Something of an opening took several minutes to come while he hunkered down behind the rocky debris... but come it did, and with a little bonus. The YMIR mech turned and thundered into the open space almost exactly between his location and the ongoing battle, it’s rocket launchers primed threateningly. It proceeded to declare scheduled maintenance, and sunk down on it’s legs to begin shutdown protocols, turning it into excellent bonus cover.

The Spectre huffed a laugh, wincing only slightly at the motion. ‘That’s as good an opening as I think I’ll get... time to go.’

Nihlus’ luck, such as it was today, had a little more to give. The Widmanstat flew overhead right as he took off sprinting, making enough of a spectacle to draw the attention of the few organic defenders and functioning mechs that might have spotted his forward surge.

Not a few rifles fired uselessly at his ship’s underbelly as it passed by. The wily Spectre took full advantage of the moment to get the fuck out of dodge. With the extra distractions he chose to bypass
his first destination entirely in favor of a further, juicier bit of cover.

The two LOKI bouncing off the wall actually noticed him as he went, probably due to proximity and rapid movement. The confused units stopped trying to move through solid matter, and instead aimed their rifles to fire at him-

-but both of their heads exploded, simultaneously.

With a bark of laughter that really cost him in pain -and was totally worth it- Nihlus hit the button on the underside of his helm that connected him to comms. “Vakarian! I am going to find a lake to toss you in.”

Unrepentant subvocals accompanied non-existent contrition, “Love you too.”

“No wonder -mmf- your boss hates you. Explicit directions? Psht, what are those? A Salarian lunch special?” Nihlus teased his lover as he zipped around the downed mechs, halfway to the promise of safety.

“Hmmm… doesn’t sound very tasty.”

“A lake. A big lake. With fish big enough to eat you!”

“They’d have to be pretty sizable fish…”

Another rifle report sounded off, then another, far behind the Spectre. Nothing hit his shields, so he ignored it and sped around the final corner into hiding. The taste of copper grew stronger.

“You did not just humble-brag about your XXL shoulders to me while being an insubordinate ass.”

“I could have been talking about my height. Or my gun.”

Nihlus groaned off of comms, putting pressure back on his throbbing side and leaning against the stoop of the maintenance entry he’d ducked into. The boost in heart rate from sprinting had sent the drugs and stims flowing fast, making him feel better, albeit a dizzy and overstimulated.

“I’m going to stop… mmnff… stop us here, before I fall directly into the trap of weird, dirty flirting while trying to evac from a pirate base .”

“Suit yourself, Spectre.” He could hear the entertainment in Garrus’ voice, the jerk. Nihlus grinned, eyeing the perimeter fence that loomed just ahead. A partially enclosed lift sat waiting for riders a short ways down the wall, in range of another sprint.

He swallowed again, throat still uncomfortably dry from vent crawling, and gave it another twenty seconds of breathing and putting pressure on his side before he’d go for it.

A screech of metal accompanied a small explosion in the distance, followed by a brief pause in gunfire filled with untranslatable Batarian cursing over crackling loud speakers. Then, the din of chaos resumed.

He was peeking around the stoop’s edge and getting ready to run for it when Garrus’ voice came back on the channel, deliberately light in tone. “You know… I’ve got good sight lines up here even with the hazy environment, and an easy escape route. I even got that mech in place for you… Why didn’t you want me covering your six again?”

“Well…” Nihlus’ browridges lowered as he thought about it. Garrus’ words weren’t accusing, no...
but on the edge there was just a hint of hurt. The Spectre’s browridges furrowed as he identified the sound and thought about it, wanting to fix whatever had caused it.

It wasn’t that he doubted the other torin’s capability or anything, he’d just… wanted his marked out of the hot zone. Even though Blue was in his prime during active combat. The sniper was arguably even more like Saren than he was; a master class wrecking ball of lethal skill sets.

The thing was, infiltration and stealth ops were dangerous, but he’d felt this place was within their means to get in, steal data, get out, and blow up from orbit. He had planned for a stealth strike, not a full scale battle. Nihlus knew from experience that these missions got real dirty, real fast when an alarm was raised, and-

Then it clicked. He was feeling protective. He was in love, obviously, and it had made him stupid.

Nihlus lightly head-desked against the nearest wall a few times. It didn’t help his remaining nausea any, but he felt somewhat better for the self-flagellation, and pushed himself into a jog headed for the lift. "That is, I..."

While his fighting instincts were happy to ride to war with the other male, they weren’t the only contender. His Garrus was a fantastic torin to have on your six. Sharp aim, effective at multiple ranges, with a focused mien through a steady stream of snark, even when there were enemies everywhere.

But Nihlus also wanted to keep him safe.

He associated Blue with warm hugs and a secure place to sleep. The clink of beer bottles between slices of pizza and late night rounds of sex and video games. The violence out here was anathema to the life he thought Garrus deserved to have.

Having come up with nothing more clever to say than a breathy “um”, Nihlus dropped that into comms as he made it to the tiny lift platform. A black gauntlet hit the activation button, and he pressed into the covered side to stay out of sight. He cleared his throat as it took him upward; scrambling for an explanation that mixed honesty and reason, trying to phrase his perspective with good word choice. He didn’t want to hurt the other torin even more.

What came out on his next attempt to communicate wasn’t much better, but there were actual nouns and stuff in it, so that counted for something. “Well… You’re really good at lots of things…and I mean that in a good way. It’s hot. Totally hot. But um...”

Nihlus was feeling okay with the idea of another shotgun blast at this point. Between blood loss, pain, and a dizzying stim cocktail his normal charisma had fully abandoned him in his time of need.

Garrus was good people, and he deserved to live in peace. The mountainous torin also longed to fight for what he believed in; to fight for his principles and the greater good. Nihlus wanted the other torin to have both peace and fulfillment, but the conflicting desires didn’t -and couldn’t- mix.

Which... unreflected on prior to this... had resulted in a seriously questionable decision to send skilled support away from where it was needed.

As his ride neared the top level, the Spectre pushed off from the wall with a grimace, ready with a knife and pistol to take out any defenders… but two bodies with matching headshots were all that awaited him. He chuffed, humming in self depreciation as he scanned the top of the wall in either direction. Not far from his location was a choice section for getting down with a singular person-shaped heat signature on the way there. Nihlus started another attempt at putting words together as he
made for that section. A few shots came his way from the free-for-all inside the base as he thought, but nothing even remotely hit.

Subvocals sheepish, the lanky torin finally got out a more substantial explanation. “I uh… yeah. You’re right. Thanks for ignoring my dumb ass. Cover fire was excellent to have.”

There was a blip of com silence, then Garrus came on, subvocals vibrating with affection and… gratefulness? The mountainous detective sounded ridiculously pleased with the small admission. “Hey, no worries. We all make the wrong call sometimes, a- watch out, two o’clock.”

“…got her, thanks,” the Spectre quipped, summarily shoving the attacker off the side of the walkway. The solo pirate barely registered on his list of problems, really.

“No problem. Glad you think I’m hot.”

“Heh.”

There were no other attackers on the way to his target zone, but that was where his lucky breaks ended. The base alarm had locked down the external lift. Thankfully, the wily torin had a trick up his sleeve: rappelling wire.

The omni-tool extension was something he more commonly used to make controlled falls down air shafts rather than to escape perimeter defenses, but it would work just fine. Nihlus attached the end to a sturdy looking bar, and dropped over the side while still holding on to the edge to test the strength of the anchor. A few bounces and it seemed stable, so down he went, wire spooling out of his gauntlet until he touched down. A quick button press cut the connection, abandoning the easily replaced wire length.

Nihlus coughed, and the scent of blood spiked as wet spatter decorated his mouthplates. In response, the environmental VI spun up his air filters to clear the scent, his heads up display reminding him to seek medical attention. The Spectre ignored the advice for now, and pushed himself into a jog around the perimeter.

He reached up to tap into their channel again, staying close to the wall and heading for the southern side of the base. “Blue? I’m clear. Might want to pull out of there.”

“Already on it, saw you go over.” There was a not-insignificant amount of cheerful confidence in the other torin’s voice. Nihlus chuffed at him, shaking his head in amusement.

“Well if you’re so on the ball, lunch better be waiting for me when we get back to the ship.” He wasn’t even slightly hungry, but that wasn’t the point.

“Mnn… ration bars?” Garrus offered offhand, comms crackling slightly with partially-filtered gunfire, too distant to be fully captured and transmitted.

“Hell no.”

“Cooking isn’t exactly my strong suit, Palvi.”

Nihlus resisted a light laugh, clutching his mandibles against it. He really needed to stop laughing at anything today. The diaphragm movement that came with it was going to tear whatever else hadn’t been torn yet, he was sure. Upon reaching the southern corner of the perimeter defense, he peered around the corner before taking it. No enemy contacts in sight, and a straight shot to the ship over mostly open terrain.
Just a little ways down the wall, crouched in the murky shade and watchful, was a familiar form with a lancer rifle held ready, sniper rifle returned to his back.

Unspoken, they met halfway between their starting points, and took off from the base wall. For several minutes he focused solely on keeping up with Garrus as they closed in on the welcome outline of his ship.

Of course, the sniper could only keep his mouth shut for so long. “What about canned soup? I think I can handle heating up some stew or something.”

“Not even, Blue. What kind of cheap date do you take me for?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: “His Garrus was a fantastic torin to have on your six. Sharp aim, effective at multiple ranges, with a focused mien through a steady stream of snark, even when there were enemies everywhere.”

Enemies everywhere.
I’m hilarious.
Emulsify

Chapter Summary

Nihlus and Garrus make it back to the ship, sans only a *little* bit of blood.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Released on 12/20/18. Betaed by Some_Writer and White_Aster!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nihlus' left boot was the first thing into the Widmanstat's open airlock, slamming down a smidgen too hard from his uneven gait. Next came the knee on that side, which wobbled precariously but held as he took that final step into safety. Right on his heels, Garrus was sniping and suppressing the few pirates who'd decided to chase them from the walls. He was using an assault rifle for both even -that lancer he loved so much- effectively keeping pursuit from closing on them as they made it to relative safety.

The Spectre was sure he would appreciate the cover fire later. More immediately, he really wanted to sit down. He was built for sprinting, from a species of sprinters, but over a long distance? Even augmented, his calves were bitching.

That wobbly knee joined in the revolt shortly after he cleared the threshold, giving out on the next step. He fell shoulder first into the frame of the inner airlock door, sliding to the ground with a small grunt of pain. Said grunt became a hum of mild relief as Nihlus made it all the way down, taking pressure off his lower half.

'Ah yes, down... down is nice.'

The carmine-plated torin gathered a bit more energy and turned, finding a firmer seat in a maneuver that left him on his ass by the door controls. Unfortunately, that made the shotgun wound on his left side pulse with heat and pain to remind him to knock it off with that whole 'moving' thing. He mentally groused at his body to shut up, watching as Garrus dropped to a knee by the entry to reduce his profile; the steady rate of AR fire never faltering.

Distracting himself with the fine figure his marked cut while gunning down pirates, Nihlus reached up and back to activate the locking mechanism of the open portal. With a pneumatic hiss it became a helpfully closed portal, leaving them both in a muted version of the world. Slivers of metal continued to impact the side of his ship at relativistic speeds, clinking harmlessly off the Widmanstat’s reinforced hull. The many little ‘plink’s’ the bullet shavings made as the interplanetary combat grade armor ignored them was almost cheerful sounding.

Garrus’ rifle lowered, shoulders dropping in clear relief. Nihlus hummed in agreement of that sentiment, relieved to be out of sight lines. Still, it would be better to get all the way inside and glass this fuckin’ place from orbit… but he was feeling a little bit dizzy.
Never one to give up without a fight, the carmine-plated torin reached up to try and get further in faster by cancelling the usual decontamination cycle. The way the world tilted made it a bit hard to operate door controls, especially from below and faced away, but he was getting there. Keystrokes went in... and error beeps came out. He chuffed, and tried again... aaaand again....

Sterilizing mist was beginning to waft down from the ceiling when the lanky agent managed to successfully enter the manual override to skip decon. Nihlus' tired arm fell to lay in his blood-slick lap as the inner airlock hissed open.

Garrus regained his feet at the same moment, turning to focus on him with a worried trill. He waved the other torin off, hand gesturing vaguely in the direction of the command depression through the inner door.

"Mmmnnn s'fine. Just tired. Go blow 'em to pieces."

The sniper chuffed, shouldering his rifle and shaking out a hand cramp or something as he turned for the command depression’s Combat Information Center with merely a grumble of malcontent. "Just tired? I think the words you're looking for are 'Just low on blood'."

Nihlus buzzed at him as he passed, subvocals vibrating in exaggerated and largely false displeasure. "Rude, snarky, and insubordinate? Is this why Pallin likes you so much?"

Garrus hummed noncommittally, a tone that instead spoke volumes on that matter, though it didn't sound as worried as before. A little amused under the concern even, which the lanky torin counted as a win.

Not a minute after Blue had disappeared deeper inside, the ship's sublight thrusters activated at a fraction of their potential for a gentle take off that tilted the Widmanstat enough to make him slump over sideways. Conveniently, right into the airlock doorway where he could see Garrus' oversized form crowding up the command depression with his bulk. Nihlus grinned, setting the side of his head on a palm even as a trickle of blue fluid ran across the metal floor in front of his keel. He ignored it, lounging insouciantly as the other torin guided the take off and began calculating firing solutions.

On the plus side, the ship's VI did most of the work for him. On the down side, that left Garrus free to peer across the room, and whatever the sniper saw sent his mandibles fluttering.

"Palvi... you have any medi-gel? You're ah... leaking all over the floor?" The slightly loopy Spectre snickered as he started digging for said gel. His augs would have him clotted in short order, but a little surface sealant couldn't hurt.

"Mmmnn, 'prolly, somewhere around here..."

He patted armor pockets at random, pretending to try and remember where he'd stuffed one. He had to resist the urge to cackle as Garrus groaned in exasperation. "You know, if there's one thing to be really, really sure you have and know where it is in your kit..."

Spirits, he was mean to laugh, but the other torin was just too adorable when worrying to pieces over little 'ol him... but also, ow. Moving kinda stung.

Nihlus eventually pulled out an orange dispenser with a cheerful 'ahah!' and started to root around for the clasps on his armor. That was right about the time that the cannons figured themselves out, making the ship jerk slightly as they fired.

Fwump, Fwump, Fwump.
The Spectre sighed happily at the presumed crater-izing of the base. Those fuckwits deserved it after putting bullet shavings in his side, and for being pirates, of course. After a moment spent eyeing the scanner read outs, his marked certified the presumption, declaring the strike successful with a satisfied sounding flange. Nihlus hadn’t bothered attempting to decipher the holo displays backwards anyways, so he appreciated the call out. He’d instead been busy swiping medi-gel over the mess the shotgun blast had made. His underarmor was trashed, full of holes and half-glued to his hide by drying blood.

With the holes in him more or less plugged, it was time to start working on getting somewhere comfier than the airlock. It proved to be more difficult to get up than it had been to go down, but he made it upright with the smallest of staggers and started shuffling toward the CIC with every intent to curl up in Garrus’ lap until they docked on the Citadel again.

Of course, the detective had other ideas.

"Ohhh no, no you don't, you're going to med bay," declared the sniper as he clambered out of the comfy looking depression.

Nihlus' shuffle stuttered to a stop, just short of the promised comfiness. "But-"

"No," came firm insistence and a gentle push on his back.

The steadying pressure just made him want to curl up in a warm lap even more, prompting a second attempt at convincing Garrus. He dropped his head back to moan in complaint, crest scraping his black armor on the way down and making a small but unholy shriek. "Noooo, dun wanna. 'm tiiiiired."

His sniper chuffed, unconvinced, and began essentially herding him toward the left hand stairwell. "Nice accent. You sound like Spectre Tió'fore... but she'd also demand you go to med bay. So would Saren. Or Agent Tithe. Or-"

"Why are you all such a buncha bullies to me..." he fired off, also wondering why Garrus was in such a hurry when he was already pretty stable.

"You're gut shot, Nihlus," came the succinct answer to everything.

"A confederation of bullies, no wait... a cohort of bullies," he insisted with a wince as they took the first steps upward. Garrus nodded agreeably, patiently tugging and pushing him onward.

Not for the first time, he regretted putting his medical ward on the second deck -regardless of the fact that he'd probably would have had to take several sets of stairs, ramps, or ladders to get back to the ship from wherever he'd been injured. Hell, the terrain from the pirate base's fortifications to the airlock had been a harder run.

Didn't change the fact that his adrenaline had faded and... stairs were hard.

“Yes, an entire rebel cadre of bullies. Keep going.”

"Mnn... I want food," he distracted himself, conversationally.

"Maybe when there aren't holes in your stomach," came the immediate, bone-dry retort.

Nihlus couldn’t find another comeback for that, except complaint-filled subvocals that buzzed at the general unfairness of it all. Post mission recovery should include cage dancers, naps, and fried meat, damnit... not spirits-damned med bay.
Port 23 is exhausted of xenon. Cannot synthesize anesthetic. Please administer external sedative or replace supply canister xe5202, then press continue when ready.]

Garrus sat and watched with a sort of morbid fascination as the jury rigged auto-doc on the Widmanstat began treatment on Nihlus. It wasn’t the injury that got him though, he’d seen worse, but for how perfectly relaxed the other torin was while gut-shot and awake. He was being worked over by cleansing sprays, scalpels, and ultrasound nodes, yet the rest of him could have been lounging on a hammock at the beach, for all that he seemed to notice.

The machine had automatically tried to put him under general anesthesia, only for it to error out with that message about xenon. Nihlus hadn’t even commented on the error message, just gingerly tagged himself in the side with a hypo of local analgesic, and leaned over to press continue. Garrus found himself quietly horrified at the conscious surgery occurring before him. He didn’t know how to express it though, so he simply sat nearby and… watched the proceedings.

“Whatcha starin’ for, Garrus? I thought you were gunna make me lunch.”

“There’s a small problem,” the detective started slowly, mandibles tilting into a weak and uncertain grin.

“Oh?” the other torin replied, a little pale around the throat as the machine carried on digging out extremely tiny bits of shotgun round.

“Your ah… your stomach has a hole in it.”

“Pfff, naaaaaah, that’s my, uuhhh… pancreas. It’ll be fine.”

“Pretty sure you need that.” Garrus hadn’t received extensive medical training, but he knew enough to know that a pancreas was a little more important than Nihlus was writing it off as. The ability to break food down into nutrients was kind of an important one.

“Meh, it’ll probably be working by the time I actually eat.” Nihlus smiled winsomely at him, though the effect was ruined by the sheen of sweat breaking out on rich brown hide. In a species that didn’t really sweat much...

Garrus sighed, palming a hand over his crest, worry finally leaking into his subvocals as he let the teasing attitude drop. “Nihlus… why isn’t your medical robot stocked properly? What if it was antibiotics or something critical that it couldn’t synthesize?”

“That’s what you’re stressing about?” came the amused, slightly loopy reply.

“Yes? What if—”

“Blue—” the lanky Spectre cut him off with an amused huff, “My medical robot might be a few
centuries old, but it works and it’s well stocked. I have the xenon in there, the valve is just shut off so that I don’t get tranqed when I need patching up.”

“So you’re... choosing to be awake for major surgery?”

“Aw, come on, it’s just a few shards of metal.”

“It was a shotgun blast. Point blank. In the torso.” The sniper tried to smooth over how his voice sounded, he really did, but being gut-shot was not a little thing. If the wrong artery got clipped…

He left off when Nihlus looked away, shoulders drawing up defensively. Garrus’ brows furrowed as he mentally backpedaled. He wasn’t saying something as an attack against… Nihlus’ choices… just…

Before he could gather anything, the other torin started talking in a soft, dull voice... one he hadn’t heard from the other male in a long time. Not since they’d last talked about the deceased of clan Kryik. “I… don’t like being forced asleep. Or being unable to wake up. I just… don’t like it.”

The medical robot pinged into the filtered air of the medbay, it’s readout showing live updates of it’s progress on cleaning away the omni-gel and blood.

“Ah.” The sniper sat there, trying to figure out what to say. Nothing especially good came to mind. “That’s…” Unhealthy. Relatable. Probably has a story behind it. Worrisome. “...fine. You do you, and all that.”

Green eyes came back around to look at him, posture turning into one that held tentative trust in his willingness to let it go.

Garrus exhaled, pushing down his worry and a misplaced sense of shame. He needed to convey just how much respect he had for the right to self determination after growing up in a clan that had none for his. The mountainous sniper drew up a reassuring smile as he shifted his chair closer to the head of the bed. When the detective was in range, he reached out to take Nihlus’ hand from where it lay on carmine keel ridge.

“So... what do you want for lunch?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Best part of the holiday season is that I can hide in a quiet place and do things that recharge the muse.
In advance of visiting the past

Chapter Summary

Saren and Benezia come to an accord, both committing just a *hint* of treason to get there.

Meanwhile, Avitus is becoming an A-rank dodger, and Garrus is being a worrier.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy New Year everyone! Welcome to 2019. EDaH is 28 months old, and still kicking! My personal goal is to add another 100k words this year. Not exactly an over achieving goal, but certainly a realistic one. To kick off, I've got 2500 ish words hot off the google doc for you, beta read by Some_Writer!

(Posted 1/3/19, starting from 517,945 words.)

Lexicon:
Amarceru - A bitter, mud-like tea popular with Turians. Also with Quarians, generally diluted. (Credit: MizDirected) (Note: think like a smoked root tea, but made like traditional macha.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saren had expected Benezia to play many a social game while deciding if it was worth the favors and debts to get him into the Library of the Republics. Perhaps some of their conversations were merely to stall while arranging such things. Mayhaps they were wasting time to make it seem as if they were trying, or deliberating, when in fact the request was impossible.

The Spectre had laid out the details, and was prepared to move forward with any number of outcomes and complications... but he was rather thrown by the offer that eventually came.

“Meld with me?”

He carried through with the motion of setting his tisane down by will alone. “Pardon?”

The Matriarch hummed thoughtfully, almost curled into the back support of her white lounger. Royal blue eyes were resting unfocused on the contents of their own drink, troubled. “After much ado, I have been... granted access... to the relevant archives for myself, while supervised, with no others. For one visit.”

Saren’s mind welcomed the different track, unsure how to appropriately refuse the… offer. He immediately began pulling apart the pieces of information instead. “That seems odd. I intend no offense, and perhaps this is a cultural difference, but why would a leader such as yourself have restrictions on access to a knowledge database of your people?”
Benezia’s shimmering, lime-colored dress caught the sunshine as their legs shifted beneath the fabric. He would almost have called the movement a fidget, and an out of character one at that. “Such would be the question, wouldn’t it? I have been to the Library many times, but the catalogue lists my search as a clearance level above mine, in a section I’ve neither been to, nor heard of.”

The silver-grey torin trilled quietly to express mild disbelief. Matriarch T’soni was one of the oldest, most powerful Asari alive today. It would be as if a Primarch of a core world had been given limited access to Palaven’s knowledge resources, only the notion was even more ludicrous within an e-democracy where the leadership were all theoretically equals.

“I was not aware there was such a… tier? Within the Republics.”

Royal blue eyes drifted closed in graceful disappointment. “There is not. Or… perhaps more accurately, there should not be.”

Saren picked up his tisane again, tipping some back to give the Matriarch a moment. It seemed as if he was not the only one facing a startling and unexpected paradigm shift because of these matters.

With the warmth of the drink to bolster him, the normally laconic torin broached the initial topic once again. “And… your solution to these matters involves melding?”

A negative shake of their tentacled head preempted elaboration. “The matters as a whole, no. I suspect that will require a significant amount of… outreach, shall we say. Rather, a melding would provide a work around to the access limitation. If I fully understand what you are looking for, then I can search effectively, and bring back to you the knowledge that you seek.”

“Would not a thorough description suffice?”

The ancient nais smiled sideways at him, one hand gesturing outward. “Do words ever do justice to the full context of an idea? Compared to the colors and textures of pure thought?”

Saren suppressed his own shift of discomfort. “If the concept is simple enough.” The knowing look he received in lieu of a reply was mildly annoying. “Though I will admit that the matter I am looking into is not so.”

Benezia took a moment to brush unseen dust from the fabric of their gown before reclining back into the lounger they favored. “Mere words… I would think it to be mediocre payment for escort to an archeological site of untold value, but perhaps that is a cultural difference. I cannot deliver you to the knowledge you seek, I can only retrieve it for you in some form. The shape of that form… well now, that is of your choosing, Spectre.”

Electric blue eyes closed, then opened again, decision quickly made. “The ruins I have to offer are not much, and getting your people into a restricted area on my homeworld will require some… creativity. Words will do, Matriarch.”

And his headspace was no place for anyone besides himself.

Avitus awoke in his temporary bed to the smell of fried meat. One orangey eye popped open to scope out possible sources, and was met with the visage of his mentor. Saren also happened to be
holding a plate, the contents of which he couldn’t really see from this angle.

But he’d reckon there was meat on it.

“Good morning, Avitus. Hungry?”

Before his stomach could answer for him, the pale torin sat up and scooched backward to make room. “That sure smells good. Have a seat. What’s the occasion?”

The breakfast of fragrant proteins and fruit slices was set in his lap, utensils tucked onto the side. Saren situated his black mantle and took the offered spot. “Our host has left to do a favor for me. I am without company today, and find my own thoughts more circular than useful. I thought perhaps I could join your training session instead of being left to my own devices.”

Avitus picked up the provided wooden furka, twirling it between his fingers before taking a bite. He couldn’t exactly say no, all things considered, but having Saren come after him on top of Captain Moinelli and their pack of rabid commandos sounded like more pain and suffering than he really wanted to sign up for.

“I, uhh… I don’t know about that. See, I’m already riding hard in our training sessions as is. I don’t know if I’d be much sport for you as well.”

The Spectre’s multi-pronged browridge rose with amusement. “Then perhaps a reverse change to the odds would be more amenable to you.”

He thought about that for point four seconds before nodding, subvocals rumbling his curiosity. “You’re saying me ‘n you against the T’Soni guard?”

“I am. Surely there are things I can learn from training against such an august group of biotic warriors,” Saren demurred.

Avitus, on the other talon, had no interest in an amicable exchange of tactics. “Right, so, there’s this long range type named Kessi. That one has it in for Turians, I think. Or me, specifically, but they always…”

It was a morning full of intel sharing and ‘op’ planning, where he got to aim the galaxy’s most infamous Spectre at targets of his own choosing.

If the morning was good, the afternoon was fantastic. Commandos with hundreds of years of experience still found themselves outmaneuvered and overpowered by Saren’s preternatural skills, thanks to a good dose of underestimation and a little bit of advance intel from himself. It was nearly dinner before anyone landed more than a glancing hit on his mentor.

The next day Saren was back in talks with the T’Soni Matriarch, and Kessi had it out for him, but the revenge sure had been sweet while it lasted.

He even learned a few things.

“…”

“I am coming with you.”
Saren was developing the opinion that Benezia enjoyed disquieting him with one liners. “That seems unnecessary, and dangerous.”

The Matriarch shook their veiled head, picking through the plate of tiny sandwiches that Shiala had brought today. They seemed to be hunting specifically for ones with a pink hued fish salad in them.

“On the contrary, I feel it is necessary to compare what I’ve seen in the records at the Library to the site you have to show. Also, it would please me to go. I feel I must.”

“That attitude does not seem…” he struggled for a moment to fill in the blank with something accurate but inoffensive.


“...Yes.”

“Do you know how my great-great-grandmother rose to power, Saren?”

He huffed, unable to resist amid mild frustration. “I was not versed in Asari politics at that time. More accurately, I was yet unborn.”

The Matriarch tsked at his mild snark, but reclined with another fishy sandwichette and a smile. “I was being rhetorical to make a point. That being, the T’Soni dynasty has stood as one of the guiding pillars of my people, despite fierce competition, because we value our Maidens.”

Saren’s crest tilted in curiosity. It was not a topic for polite conversation, generally speaking. Turian youth were given stringent guide rails, and broad personal freedoms to compensate. Salarian young were heavily assessed, then placed accordingly. Asari Maidens were instead encouraged to… well.

“So your family cares for the young of your disciples, and I assume that this results in... more surviving adult voters that hold loyalty to you?”

“Just so.”

“That seems like an obvious and easily replicated tactic.”

Benezia pulled aside the gauzy fall of their veil to take a nibble. “One would think.”

Saren hummed, then nudged the original issue. “This is supposed to explain why you wish to risk yourself visiting the site in person?”

“It does. I do not wish to ask our archaeology teams to investigate such a place when I would not. My forebears would be ashamed.”

The urge to groan at the opinionated Matriarch was very strong. Saren repressed it by a small margin. “You could stay on the ship?”

He was graced with another one of Benezia’s looks at that notion.

Mandibles clasped to his jawline, the silver-grey torin finally drew the line. “Very well, but you will not be part of the initial entry team. I insist upon re-verifying the safety of the ruins myself.”

It should all be as defunct as ever. Deep scans of the area had come back with nothing suspicious, not to mention that the Hierarchy’s scientists had scavenged and quarantined everything of note that had survived the artillery strike, but…

He would not leave it to chance.
Garrus stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep despite various forms of exhaustion.

Nihlus had dropped off shortly after the autodoc finished removing bullet shavings from his hide. The Spectre was now sound asleep, vitals reading normal and holding there, so he’d gone down the hall to flop on the other torin’s lavish bed.

Despite the comfortable accommodations, a better part of the day cycle passed and unconsciousness still wouldn’t come. Resigned to his insomnia, the mountainous torin wandered off to try and be useful.

He checked up on the ship’s heading, performed some tasks on Nihlus’ routine maintenance list hung up in engineering, and ran system checks on the main guns since they’d been fired.

Without anything else pertinent to do, the detective ended up slumped against the bed in medbay, reading an article on a new assault rifle design. Conveniently, the anti-microbial foam mattress of the thing was at just the right height to prop an elbow on if he sat on the floor. The cleaning robots bleeped at him in agitation as they tried to keep the space sterile, but Garrus ignored the little machines and lost himself in weapon schematics.

He did fall asleep eventually, he must have, because at some point he was roused by the feeling of fingers threading through his crest in slow, soothing strokes.

Garrus fell asleep again, without really waking.

It had taken some time to convince Matriarch Benezia to ‘allow’ him to sweep the remaining ruins alone before anyone else followed. Somewhere along the way the ancient nais had decided that it was proper to be willing to take risks not only for T’Soni people, but for him as well.

Saren, needless to say, begged to differ. He was no Maiden, nor disciple.

The fond look he got when he stated as such was... rather annoying. It seemed Benezia had decided he was more than simply worthy of being ‘cultivated’. The silver-grey torin argued patiently in favor of his own plan for another day while travel arrangements were made.

Mercifully, the ancient nais eventually capitulated to reason. “Very well, very well,” they agreed while passively examining indigo nails at the end of each delicate digit. “I will wait for your all-clear, Spectre. Now, tell me more about this ‘creativity’ you intend to secure access?”

The Spectre took another pull on his amarcero, focusing on the rich, savory taste of it, before beginning to lay out his intended subterfuge.

“The first and third locations where I have discovered traces of the malevolent technology are now fully destroyed. The second, however, lay buried under an old religious site known as... Temple
Palaven.” He winced internally at how difficult it was to even speak the name of that place, even still.

“Temple Palaven? I know I’ve read of a happenstance there some years ago…” The Matriarch trailed off expectantly, eyes on him and shining with interest.

Saren drank his tea, silently.

Unfortunately it was rather difficult to out-patience an Asari, and he had used up much of his sway in these matters arguing for the safer entry arrangements. As a second option, the Spectre changed tracks somewhat.

“Technically speaking, the site is off limits to anyone without clearance from the Primarch of Palaven. In theory, an agent of ST&R has the right to brute force their way in with Spectre authority, knowing that it will likely cause a diplomatic fiasco.”

“And we are doing?” came the nais’ curious lilt.

“Option three. Many Turians lost a clan member to the events surrounding the outbreak. It is a pyre site.” Though the ‘fire’ had been unconventional, it was the place that his squad and Desolas’ remains were burned, their spirits released. Few would deny access to a clan-mate to such a place, even into a restricted zone.

Saren presumed that none would dare bar him.

“I see. Your brother and peers, of course. My sincere condolences. One never fully heals from such a loss, no matter what the priestesses might say.”

He waved the kind words away, moving to refresh his nearly empty cup. “They died bravely.” Most. Some, terribly. “More importantly, the smaller your team, and the quicker they can work, the better. It is not beyond reason to assume that word will travel quickly, and while I doubt any authority sent would immediately ask us to leave, they would stay to ‘observe’.”

Benezia drew one delicate knuckle back and forth against their chin, gaze distant. “Their observations would be that it was not a spiritual visit, and then they would kindly ask us to take our leave?”

“Precisely.”

“Not unfairly so.”

“And true,” he conceded, taking another sip and allowing himself to revel in the savory fragrance of the warm drink.

Shouts from a disgruntled Avitus rose from the training field below. Something about cheating and water barrels. The young torin was doing so well, too, outbursts becoming less and less frequent.

His companion began to scope the table for their preferred sandwich again. “Am I to play at being a consort of yours then? Or a teacher?”

Saren tossed his crest in a negative. “Hardly. I need only call you friend to deserve your company while visiting their pyre sites, and everyone knows that Matriarchs travel with a retinue.”

Benezia offered him another smile, more impish and less regal than others past. “That’s so much less fun though.”
His only response was a sidelong *look*.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Garrus is such a worrier.

A/N: I'm looking at doing another interlude chapter here pretty soon. If you've got ideas for who should be next (whether that's because something interesting happens to them at around now in the timeline, or just because you wanna see them) well lay it on me!

A/N: No one can convince me that Saren couldn't take Benezia’s commandos in a fight. If Shepard can do it with two squad mates, most of which are rookies at best, Saren could do it with Avitus. I don’t think this reflects negatively on the commandos, rather, that the people at the center of events in ME1 are truly prodigical fighters and tacticians.

P.S.: Fuck the new NSFW restriction on Tumblr. I am so salty. That is all.
Years have passed since Temple Palaven was destroyed, but Saren has relived a few very specific hours and days so many times that he needs no map to navigate where they took place.

A/N: Hello all! Thank you for you patience! Here's a new chapter that I sincerely hope lives up to the picture it was meant to paint.

Lexicon:
Tapetum lucidum - The tapetum lucidum is a biologic reflector system that is a common feature in the eyes of vertebrates. It normally functions to provide the light-sensitive retinal cells with a second opportunity for photon-photoreceptor stimulation, thereby enhancing visual sensitivity at low light levels. (The cause of reflective shine in cat’s eyes. Credit: Real world)

[Author’s Codex: KDP pills]
A tablet to be taken by mouth, preferably three hours before exposure to radiation or as soon as possible. This medicine is non-chirality, and a standard in all first aid kits. It contains a blend of bioavailable minerals, antioxidants, and enzymes that are formulated to be tolerable to most sentient life forms while also performing three critical protective activities against radiation exposure while on an environmentally hazardous world, or during drive core malfunction. 1. Prevention by providing as many key minerals as possible, so that irradiated substances breathed or consumed pass through the body unused. 2. Absorption of free radicals and radioactive waveforms into compounds that will later be discarded without harm. 3. Healing boost during and after exposure to counteract the destabilizing effect of radiation on DNA and live tissues. (Credit: Me and pseudoscience)

Chapter Soundtrack: Puscifer - The Humbling River

Nature, nurture, heaven and home
Sum of all, and by them driven
To conquer every mountain shown
But I've never crossed the river

Braved the forests, braved the stone
Braved the icy winds and fire
Braved and beat them on my own
Yet I'm helpless by the river

Pay no mind to the battles you've won
It'll take a lot more than rage and muscle
Open your heart and hands, my son
Or you'll never make it o'er the river
It'll take a lot more than words and guns
A whole lot more than riches and muscle
The hands of the many must join as one
And together we'll cross the river

Clearance to enter Palaven airspace was granted without any suspicious delay from traffic control. Saren continued to sit in his pilot’s seat, arms crossed and expression flat as autopilot took the *Daedalus* down into the cloudy skies of a Palavenian winter. His external cameras showed nothing but wispy murk as their altitude dropped.

Beside his chair, Benezia stood like a particularly well painted statue, draped in a dramatic black gown. The only indication that the nais was a living being and not sculpture was the barely perceptible sound of their heartbeat at the edge of his augmented hearing.

Frowning to himself, Saren found he missed the Matriarch’s pastels. Their current sombre attire was an appropriate guise for visiting a pyre site... but it did not suit Benezia. The T’Soni leader was the very soul of genteel grace and soft smiles. Abyssal black gown and stark headdresses suited them about as well as bright yellow armor would have sat on him. Terribly, that is.

The silver-grey agent attempted to think of a way to voice his musings without sounding flirtatious, but nothing really came to mind. Instead, he remained silent as they approached landfall.

Behind the command seat, Saren could also hear the last minute preparations of the Matrons that had accompanied them. Benezia’s scientists were each decked in black as well, whispering back and forth as they made adjustments to each other’s complex attire. Their belled skirts contained a not-insignificant amount of equipment, so completely covered by anti-grav nodes that the fabric itself would pull their gear along while entirely out of sight.

A mild curse from one of the entourage, followed by suspicious clanking, make the muscular agent click his mandibles against his jaw in mild agitation. Saren had assumed the group would have boarded ready, nevermind still preparing as they landed. If they were not, and they missed their chance, well... that would be no fault of his, he decided mentally, mostly in an effort to disperse his own agitation. Unsurprisingly, the effort did nothing.

His ship cleared the cloud bank in the next instant, revealing the watery deluge that Palaven’s monsoon season was known for. From horizon to horizon, the natural world drowned while skies poured. Saren’s gaze flicked to the monitor that had auto-populated local weather and forecast data. Humid as a swamp and a median thirty four degrees over the supercontinent. It was higher than other species preferred, but not intolerable.

The monsoons had one immediate positive side. This much cloud cover would protect the aliens onboard from Trebia’s rays. The ambient radiation of Palaven’s surface would only require a pre-exposure dose of potassium iodide, enzymes, and the various preventatives found in KDP pills.

A rustle, an outburst of furious whispering, and an unknown scuffing sound behind his chair tempted the Spectre into turning around to give the scientists a good long *stare*. Perhaps it would impress upon them how little time they had left.

Out of the corner of his eye, Saren caught Benezia’s lips quirking upward, a crack in their stone facade. Rather than potentially feed whatever was amusing the Matriarch, he decided to remain
silent. There was no telling what exactly was going through the ancient nais’ head, save for that they had taken a shine to throwing him off with teasing, and he neither wanted, nor needed, any of that today.

As the rustling behind them quieted down, the highest of Temple Palaven’s crumbled spires came into view, rain water sluicing down the stone in thick sheets. Wind whipped the local flora about, shifting direction often enough that only long and flexible or low-laying foliage survived in the cover-less plain. There was mud, everywhere, slowly consuming the stone ruins. As if the elements were erasing the history of this place, inches at a time.

No, he really did not want to be fussed at today, and he lacked the grace to even pretend to trade wits should Benezia attempt to tease him. Saren was cold down to his bones, calm and ready for this visit. Mentally prepared to face ghosts with indifference. He did not want levity, nor mockery, nor anything else that might shift that centering.

Just… just for this to be done. Spirits, just for…

Perhaps, he was not as steady as he could be.

The Daedalus set down on an appropriate patch of weed-eaten stone, and the autopilot announced a successful touchdown in cheerful green font. The silver-grey torin stood, moving to stand beside the airlock while surveying the other occupants on his crowded vessel. It was now or never for the flock of scientists. Surprisingly, his inspection found only poised, sombre faced Asari, waiting in near-perfect semicircle behind the command chair.

He nodded slowly in approval, then turned to Benezia as the nais drifted up beside him. “Shall we?”

Black glossed lips tilted upward at Saren as they took his arm in the manner of a delicate courtier. “If you are prepared.”

Rather than acknowledge or resist either gesture, Saren used his free hand to tap the open key on the airlock door. They had to pack in closely to fit eight people in a space meant comfortably for half as many, but the scientist’s slight forms helped.

The inner door closed, and the airlock began it's cycle. When it finished, Saren stepped out into the weather. His body was fully armored, customary black cloak wrapped around his shoulders, but the helm and hood from them were not in use. He wanted to smell the wind, and feel the rain on his plates. Not because of the place they were going, but simply because Palaven smelled like home. It was... comforting. Revitalizing, even.

A deep inhale brought that first breath into the Spectre’s lungs, thick with the scent of growing things. His second expectation, of rain, failed to happen entirely.

Confused at a lack of wetness he looked upward to be met by the sight of a faint blue dome. It was thin and unobtrusive, and he had not felt even a flicker of aura from the nais on his arm whenever the barrier had been activated. Matriarchs were known to be exceptionally skilled biotics with few exceptions, yes, but such a degree of subtlety and control was… impressive. Observing Benezia’s technique distracted him for a half a minute, but crumbling stone ruins pulled his mind back to the present much the same as their memory dragged him to the past at night.

Determined, he led the way from ivy-covered plaza turned landing zone, moving toward the burned outline where artillery fire had reduced the main building to rubble.

The walls of Temple Palaven were more or less gone. Of the engraved flooring and it’s geometric
patterns, only pebbles remained. Saren continued across the open ground that was once the entry to a sacred place, focused very deliberately on not thinking.

He pulled up short when they reached the former main hall, gaze locked on the wet dirt where the Arca Monolith had last stood. There was nothing there now. No bodies, no circuitry, no sacrifices. Nothing but scorch marks.

‘Matrem... I don’t like this. These people, they don’t look right.’

Nothing.

‘There will never be another Turian lost to war if you do this. The General has promised…’

Nothing at all.

‘Wait! He’ll go- what are you? My son! Let me see my-’

Nothing remained.

Benezia’s soft voice helped him mentally turn away from the painful teases of recollection. “Saren... there doesn’t appear to be much left.”

He chuffed and pulled from the Asari’s hold, flexing his talons against a tingling numbness in his digits. Saren moved between a pair of boulders, trying to subtly roll the tension from his shoulders as he searched for a telltale square of metal that did not belong. He had not brought T’Soni and their scientists here for mere sightseeing, after all.

What lay below was his real offering.

Electric eyes scanned until he found the bulkhead that closed off the unscannable catacombs beneath the temple. The sprawling depths had survived the emergency artillery strike, protected by dirt and stone and very solid structure for such an ancient place. In the aftermath of the bombing they had been searched, cleared, and then sealed off by Palaven Command. The long halls were essentially picked clean as best he knew, but untouched ruins had not been their agreement, simply intact ones.

‘Ah, Saren. You’re just in time to help me review the troops.’

The half-forgotten words echoed in his head, unbidden. It had stricken him at the time, with how unhinged his brother had sounded. Saren had handled it poorly at the time, covering fear and uncertainty with dry sarcasm and half-hearted jokes. It had not been a full hour between that first hint of how far gone Desolas was, and the moment he had sent his brother to the spirits. Not enough time, or opportunity, to figure out a better way until the only path forward had been a clean slate.

If ever he was willing to blindly hope for something, it was that mental damage did not follow one beyond this life.

‘The sniveling civilian rulers here will fall, and then all our rivals, one by one...’

Saren forcefully ignored the echoes and put in the same entry code to the door that had worked during the clean up, half expecting he would need to hack in after all this time. Luck was in his favor though, or perhaps just poor security routines. The steel bulwark slid open to reveal a ramp that also did not match the surrounding stone. Faintly pleased, he turned around to look at the retinue of Asari.

“Wait here,” he ordered firmly. “As agreed, I will ensure it is relatively safe before any of you may enter. If anyone other than myself exits, contain them until I return. Do not allow allow physical
contact. Use lethal force if necessary. If I return with... circuitry running through my limbs, in a daze, or acting abnormally, ensure that I am put in containment, and again, do not allow physical contact. If-

Words caught in the Spectre’s throat, but he pushed forward. “If infection is clear, you will end me and incinerate the body.”

Ignoring Benezia’s startled expression, Saren turned and marched down the ramp, bringing up his omni-tool to scan for abnormalities now that he was on the inside of the strange dead zone. He wandered through the dank corridors mostly by scan overlay, optics glinting like the reflective retina he was born with, but even brighter for the machine-perfect curve of his artificial tapetum lucidum.

The Spectre paused briefly at the entry to the deeper levels. Artillery damage this far down was minimal, leaving the wall carvings intact. The unreadable glyphs ran from floor to ceiling, endless words that Harper had once pounded his fist against. Saren still dreamed of the obnoxious human and how he had gestured wildly at the glyphs, flat voice desperate and cracking, begging everyone around him to believe in far fetched stories. He had ranted about the nature of the infected, an impossible threat, and dire warnings. Such dire warnings.

‘They’ll put monoliths in your city squares, and forcibly transform your entire...’

Saren shook the memories away and moved on, ever more chilled despite his armor reading normal temperatures. He descended to the next level, surveyed, then descended again. The silver-grey torin gave each floor due care, glancing into every barren rooms that led off from the main hall.

Eventually he finished, taking in the last room. Just another cavernous hall with no describable features except for open space and basic stonework. The catacombs remained empty, as logic had insisted they would be... despite paranoid worries of how they might not have been.

He tried to feel satisfied, at least enough to grant Benezia’s people entrance.

“No new threats. As expected.” He declared aloud into the musty air, voice gravely and low.

Somewhere nearby, condensation dripped in sporadic plinks, hitting the ground with enough force to make an echo.

“...hopefully T’Soni will still find something of use.”

He turned, heading for daylight on feet that moved but had no feeling.

“

If infection is clear, you will end me and incinerate the body.”

Saren’s voice was ordinarily cultured and thoughtful. Since the Daedalus had begun it’s approach to the Trebia system, his tones had become increasingly flat. Those last few words however, had been heated. A clear demand.

The Spectre descended from view, and Benezia spent several minutes giving the request due consideration. Eventually, they nodded in acceptance as the thought had time to settle. Saren would not want to live without control of himself, nor as a subject trapped behind glass. It was easy to
understand why someone of his nature would abhor either result.

If he returned without himself, the nais would see him put to rest, out of respect for the sanctity of one’s own mind if nothing else.

Unfortunately, it was taking the laconic agent some time to return. Enough that the Matriarch went from mentally preparing for interference to arrive soon, to worrying that something was wrong. The science team at the nais’ back kept a silent vigil, though Benezia could practically feel their desire to escape the weather and dive into the archaeological opportunity before them. Uncaring, the rain continued to fall around them in thick sheets. Benezia remained still and tried not to fret.

The sound of boots preceded Saren returning. He strode up the ramp without preamble, shoulders tight and hands not quite in fists.

Benezia peered at him, assessing the Spectre’s bearing. The glow of his eyes had the same intense, intelligent quality as before. His silvery plates remained whole. He seemed well enough, physically at least. The Matriarch allowed a soft sigh to fall from their lips, smiling faintly at the Spectre as he approached, despite his closed off expression. “Welcome back. All is well, I trust?”

Saren tossed his crest in a stiff Turian nod. His verbal addition, when it came, was as desolate as the land around them. “All clear.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For anyone out there that finds radiation poisoning to be a fascinating subject, the following are the chemicals Saren talks about in the chapter. While to us they are emergent sciences for counteracting radiation damage, I would assume that in ME era, such things are no more astounding than tylenol.

KI (potassium iodide) blocks radioactive iodine from entering the thyroid. When a person takes KI, the stable iodine in the medicine gets absorbed by the thyroid. Because KI contains so much stable iodine, the thyroid gland becomes “full” and cannot absorb any more iodine—either stable or radioactive—for the next 24 hours.

Dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO) is a controversial sulfur compound that has been shown to actively detoxify the body and protect against the harmful effects of radiation. Animal studies show that DMSO protects DNA from breakage due to radiation exposure and guards against cell destruction. A Japanese study showed that even low doses of DMSO provide protection against radiation damage at a cellular level and can facilitate DNA repair. More research into DMSO is needed, but so far the results are promising.

Papain is a natural enzyme found in papaya fruit and known for its ability to reduce toxins. Studies show that it helped exposed mice survive lethal radiation doses. Early research also suggests that papain reduces skin reactions and other side effects following radiation therapy.

A/N: Anyone else ever experience, and suppress, anxiety so extreme that your fingers go numb?
Remarkable, like forgotten stonework

Chapter Summary

Saren delivers on his promise to Benezia.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello all! Firstly, I would like to thank all the people who read and reread EDaH, and take the time to leave comments when they find grammar errors, misspellings, etc. Even just better phrasing! That's beta work my friends, and I do occasionally go through the comments section and fix everything you all point out. So thank you! I appreciate beta work, con crit, and even just keyboard-smash comments.

Updated 4/26/19

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scientists zipped past him with an eagerness that he tried not to be offended by. Of course they were excited for the rare fragments of history to be found below. They were presented with a once-in-an-Asari-lifetime opportunity. Still, the notion of looking forward to anything in this place seemed... somehow profane.

Saren sighed, eyes shuttering as he moved away from the ramp and sought a hedge of fallen pillar that had often served as a seat during the clean up, whenever someone had needed a break from trawling through the immense amount of rubble. Benezia glided over alongside him, coming to stand wordlessly by his side. Unexpected. He had assumed the Matriarch would be the first down into the lower levels.

The silver-grey torin still sat down, then waited placidly for Benezia to speak their mind. The nais was one to measure their words before offering them, so he watched the tree line idly, and waited.

Eventually Saren’s elbowridges ended up propped on his knees, fingers laced in front of him. Several minutes of rain and quiet passed by before the Spectre found himself to be tired of silence. “I am surprised that you remain above ground, Matriarch.”

“I am trying to decide whether my interests would be better served by staying here.” He could hear the gentleness in their voice. Soft consideration for his wellbeing clung to every syllable of Benezia’s words. It struck him as incredibly strange, that anyone would assume he required gentleness.

Not that it was… unappreciated, here and now. In this place.

A faint smile tugged on his left mandible. He schooled it away, and made a shooing motion toward the ramp with flicking talons. “You will have time to be meddlesome later, T’Soni. Now is your chance to direct a science team through the ruins, while the window of opportunity provided by our subterfuge remains.”
Benezia’s hand settled on his shoulder, squeezing briefly before withdrawing. Saren found that he appreciated the gesture, but felt it would be better for everyone if the Matriarch joined the others so they could be done more quickly. Better to leave this place than try and speak of it’s ghosts.

‘A small irony’, thought the Spectre as Benezia lingered, ‘considering my title. One would think I should be well acquainted with such things. Perhaps the agents of ST&R are poorly named after all.’

Rainfall began to spatter his silver-grey crest as the whisper-thin barrier eventually shifted away. In his peripheral vision, Saren could see the nais make it to the ramp’s horizontal doorway. The environmental field that stretched across the bulkhead fizzed as they passed down through it, their black-clad form descending into the ruins. When no one else remained within his perception, Saren released an expansive sigh and turned to let his gaze wander around the drenched landscape.

The stoic torin remained more or less dry within his armor, though the monsoon downpour was exceptionally strong at times and whipped about by the wind. Water pooled on the inside of his cowl, caught by the circular rim, though it spilled out at the low point above his keel. The worst of it was the black fabric of his cloak; water-resistant or no, it became plastered to his shoulders.

Regardless, Saren found he did not mind the weather. At the very least, it made the air smell rain-cleaned. The sound of it was pleasant as well.

His wandering gaze eventually came around to the hill where the survivors had once retreated to, just before the artillery strike. The sight drew another heavy sigh from him. It was there he had sworn vengeance on Harper, the malicious aliens who made the monoliths, aliens in general... anyone with a small amount of fault at all, really. It had helped to fill the brother-shaped void that had just begun to tear at him.

Anger and denial had fueled Saren through those next few days, nevermind the usual stages of grief. It had helped him remain productive. As for that void... well, it had not truly started yawning until weeks later, and it had not yawning stopped since.

It quieted when he was sufficiently distracted however.

Electric eyes glanced upward, checking the skies for oncoming craft. Thus far, nothing.

‘Good.’ he thought simply, and returned to looking around for unrelated distractions, even while sitting dead center in the ruins where it had all happened. His options were few, but the local wildlife were conveniently up to things even in this rain.

From off in the foliage, one of the local creatures started honking.

Herk herk hooonk... herk.

In response, a higher pitched honk sounded some ways off to the north.

Herk hiiink herk.

The wind whipped by, carrying the sound and snapping his cloak a few times before settling down. The local fauna quieted down when the gusts kicked up, but did not seem inclined to start up their conversation again when it calmed. It seemed they would brave the weaker winter storms to mate and socialize, but opt out if there were signs that the weather was taking a turn for the worse.

Saren still listened to see if they would change their minds, occasionally scanning the upper horizon for unwelcome visitors. His ship’s VI would alert him far in advance of a visual, but it gave him
something to do. One more distraction.

The Spectre considered further options, and came up with -in no particular order- checking his emails, finding a documentary to watch, re-reading through old intel looking for missed nuance, and emailing acquaintances.

A glance at the entrance to the catacombs revealed no return activity whatsoever.

He proceeded to go down the list.

A queue of low priority messages disappeared in under a half hour. A quick extranet search found a short documentary on the honking creatures, which he watched without absorbing much. Two pieces of old intel saw careful review before he opted to message those he cared to talk to between reports, on the assumption that they would not immediately see the communication, and would need time to notice and respond.

Nihlus got back to him while he was still halfway through writing to Garrus, replying to his admittedly bland greeting with three paragraphs, in code, about his current meal, a gun he wanted, and repairs the Widmanstat could use.

Avitus seemed to think he was after a status update on his training, which suited Saren just fine. The report was amusing even, hinting at colorful rivalries between Benezia’s star assault commando and the pale torin’s own developing counter-biotic skills.

Garrus did not reply, but considering the detective's hyper-focus on casework at times, that was no real surprise.

Another report saw review, then another exchange with Nihlus -more about the weapon he was after- and then a follow up with his trainee about an idea for an armor upgrade. Saren’s left mandible tugged upward, pleased that the other torin was even hinting at wanting something purchased for him. He was beginning a reply when the inevitable ping from his ship’s VI sounded in his aural implant.

[Alert, incoming aircraft on direct vector. Heading south by southeast. Estimated time until arrival is thirteen minutes and forty three seconds.]

Saren hummed, closing his preoccupations and refocusing on the world around him once more.

“Scan for ID.”

[Affirmative. Scanning… ID confirmed. HSV000954678, a shuttle class, put into service four years ago.]

“Scan for capabilities and occupants,” he requested next.

[No recognized weapons systems. Class II standard energy shielding. Hull composition appears to be a high grade, ablative matrix. Occupants estimated at… one.]

Electric eyes narrowed. ‘A single interloper?’

He had expected a… somewhat larger group to come grandstand and attempt to deter his presence. The laconic torin knew he was not on the best of terms with Palaven Command. Not their most disliked Spectre, for that was definitively O’kara, but neither a favored agent. His bare face, bereft of any claim of loyalty since the day he was born, made it clear where his priorities were.
Nihlus had once asked about it while inebriated, why he remained unmarked, without even his clan paint. Saren had given his default answer ‘The greater good, even above Palaven’s needs.’ it had resulted in that… look, in the other torin’s eyes. The hungry one. Saren shoved the thought away, and stood to head below.

Either more time than he had assumed had passed, or the T’Soni science team worked very quickly, because the Spectre did not find them until he was many floors down, not far from the lowest reaches. Benezia was nowhere to be seen however, so he approached the nearest researcher.

The lavender skinned nais appeared to more than slightly dusty, which was very visible on the black gown they wore. Unsurprising in the underground conditions, he supposed. They were scanning a length of wall, section by section, as he approached.

“Where is your Matriarch? I need to speak with them. Our presence has been noticed.”

The scientist made a noise of displeasure, and gestured toward a doorway further along the hall without stopping their efforts. “Benezia was in there last I checked, Spectre.”

He nodded politely, but doubted the nais noticed. As they had said, the T’Soni leader was inside the indicated room, ruminating on an obscure diagram with sclera gone black, one knuckle was set delicately against their blue chin.

“Matriarch.”

“Tell me, did Palaven ever have a third moon?” Benezia asked quizzically, sounding rather preoccupied.

“I would not be the most expert source to ask, but no, not that I have heard of. More immediately, there is a shuttle approaching.”

Benezia made the same noise as the lavender scientist had, painted lips pursing in displeasure. With visible reluctance the nais blinked several times and turned away from the carving.

Their eyes shifted back to normal as they took him by the arm, and began to stroll toward the doorway. “Do you believe we can get away with just the two of us, touring the surface landmarks? I would prefer not to interrupt my people just yet.”

Saren allowed himself to be led, humming thoughtfully. “It depends, but I believe so. There appears to only be a single occupant in the shuttle, and they may simply be checking that my landing clearance truly came from myself and not a mimicry.”

“Well then, let us be charming and piteous, and hopefully they will leave us be after a meager inquiry,” Benezia declared with an optimistic smile.

They beat the shuttle to the topside ruins by a half minute, at most. Saren opted to tug Benezia toward a stretch of rubble just off from the foundation of the main temple. It was where Desolas had organized their science team’s study of the monolith. They had been looking for any hint on how to recreate the meta-Turian’ physical transformation, without the mental… side effects.

The whispers of the past tried sneaking up on him again here, but he shoved them down with some success. He needed to appear to be remembering and honoring the lost, but appearance and fact did not need to match. It would be better if they did not, under the given circumstances. He remembered the lost frequently enough anyway.
The silver shuttle’s landing thrusters let off a final burst as the craft touched down, it’s engine going idle as he and Beneda turned to face it. The craft appeared to be of classically angular design, with fairly high end fittings.

It would be not remiss of the Primarch to ride such a craft. Saren steeled himself for the possibility, strongly hoping otherwise.

With a smooth hiss the main door opened, and a very familiar gaze met his own head on. He swallowed, but allowed no other outward reaction.

Lieutenant Abrudas -now general, if the chevrons on her armor were to be believed- stepped out into the rain and stalked toward them. Without breaking eye contact, Saren turned his head slightly to address Beneda. He needed to send her away from... whatever this was going to be. “Would you excuse us, Matriarch.”

The T’Soni leader looked at him, then at Abrudas, then at him again, before nodding graciously and walking off in a graceful glide. The rain barrier went away once more, and water began pelting Saren in the face just as the other Turian came to a stop in front of him.

He could not do it without a visible aura, or half so unobtrusively, but the Spectre let his own biotics out and created a glowing dome for them. His old lieutenant did not so much as flinch at his abilities.

“...Arterius.”

He suppressed a flinch, not wanting to hear his clan name out of her throat. It... belonged to his brother more than it had ever been his own. “General Abrudas. Congratulations on your advancement, however belated it may be.”

“...Oh?” he offered, unsure of what opinion he could or should have on that. On the positive side, Abrudas was not assaulting him with fists as they had the last time they had been face to face. That was... good.

“Why are you here.”

His demons twisted, briefly, to hear the blunt female’s typical not-question way of asking something. “Visiting. Remembering. Wandering and thinking.”

All true, technically.

Abrudas clicked at him, apparently taking the answer at face value. He had no illusions that should she discover the lie by omission, he would be fending her off with barriers. Not that those were foolproof against a soldier of her skill, but it was not as if he could bring himself to fight back. Perhaps others, but not her. His almost-sister.

“Don’t stay long…” she trailed off, eyes catching on something in the ruins behind him but sliding past quickly. The laconic torin did not consider pressing the matter, assuming she had her own ghosts to avoid here. “...there’s a perfectly good memorial at the Pillars for him. For all of them.”

“I will try to be gone before nightfall, at the latest.” A convenient truth. It was only mid-afternoon
now, and few could blame him if he ‘lost track’ of the day cycle in this weather. "Though I may visit there as well."

General Abrudas squinted at him as if suspicious. She was familiar enough with his frames of logic to notice that something he had said was not a full truth, but likely could not pinpoint his angle well enough to be sure of what, exactly. “I’ll let them know. Do what you need to, but don’t come back here.”

Saren narrowed his eyes in return. He had every right to be here. “Is that an official communication?”

“No. It’s advice. The official line is ‘don’t come back here without advance notice, please.’ Unofficially, they don’t want anyone here, ever.”

He nodded, acknowledging all three messages, but no more than that. With one last hard look at him, the tall female about-faced and returned to her shuttle. Saren watched the ship as it’s engines ramped back up before taking off. It rose, reoriented, and sped off in the general direction of Cipritine.

Abrudas had offered no apology for breaking his jaw last they met, nor for interrupting a grieving time that should have been private. She had never been wired for apology, just honesty. Saren found that he did not mind, he never had really, and in fact missed that level of bluntness.

Of all the deterrents that Palaven Command could have sent, they had managed to send both the most effective and unexpected option possible. Apparently there were at least a few competent generals in the group of ‘people with even more notches running around, arguing like fledglings’ that his old lieutenant had described. Their choice of ambassador was one that he did not send away in pieces or tears, after all.

With timing that must be a gift of old age or practice, Benezia returned to his side just as the shuttle was clearing the tree line. “That did not seem to go too poorly? From a distance, at least.”

The silver-grey torin hummed without inflection, and offered his arm out the the nais. “Allow me to escort you back to your scientists.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: To clarify, I mindcanon Turians generally accept that a (good) bonding makes both families into one clan. A bond between two big name clans won't interfere with either distinct sociopolitical group, but in the small scale? Your wife's dad is your dad now too. Your mate's cousin is your cousin. Your bonded's sister is sister to your siblings too. So Desolas' almost-mate is Saren's almost-sister. ( T___T )

Depending on local traditions, they may call a sister gained from a bonding as just plain old 'sister/filian' or 'rites-filian'. Sometimes a person starts as rites-filian, and if they get along well it becomes just filian, but if they're unliked, it may remain as rites-filian. *Usually* though, the lengths you'd be expected to go to for your birth mother - like say, sitting patiently while she natters at you about your future- extend to a rites-mari. The flip side is that you don't just bond whoever without making sure both families get along too... because it's wrong to bond other people to new inlaws with sudden familiar expectations without getting their input first. Peer group input is a big deal in Turian
culture, you know? So this is how I think it would work, in a very general sense. :P
The flush of Garrus’ throat held his attention captive, a spattered flush of navy across tawny brown hide that stretched from jawline to cowl. Nihlus crooned, one hand grasping the other male’s keel - both to hold himself up and to hold his partner down- while his other fisted around the sniper’s considerable length. Lubricant slid between his palm and the shaft, thoroughly coating his fingers as he stroked in perfect timing with the rock of their hips.

Garrus groaned, head turned aside and breathing ragged. The powerful sound wavered between sexual need and frustrated complaint. Nihlus could feel the deep bass rumble where vibrated the frame. It only succeeded in bringing a smirk to his face, though.

He’d been teasing, taunting, pleasuring, and then oh-so-slowly riding the mountainous torin for the better part of two hours. Every time lust looked like it was overcoming Garrus’ patience, the Spectre would distract him with only enough satisfying pleasure to keep the game going.

At one point the sniper had rolled them, and almost ended it by biting him and grinding against his ass in just the right way…

But Nihlus had escaped the hold and turned the tide again, reassuming control by securing Garrus’ hands above his head with the detective's own cuffs, then proceeding with more of Operation Slow Fuck.

Another groan rolled out of the larger male, stomach muscles rippling and hips rolling hard as he physically demanded more sensation. “Nihlusss…”

“Mmmm... mmmm?” was his distracted reply, eyes still fascinated with that navy tinged expanse of throat.

“Nihhhlusss…”
He chuckled, squeezing the cock in his hand affectionately but otherwise ignoring the request. That wasn’t the right answer apparently, as Blue bucked his hips even harder. Nihlus shifted, spine rolling and calves flexing as he worked to keep his balance while beset by the pleasure the movements caused.

"Ah-hhaaaaaaa~"

That buck wasn’t the only protest against his mild-paced dictatorship. The legs around Nihlus' waist tightened inexorably, pulling him in deep. The compression of his tip against the back of the detective's cloaca set his head spinning. Tightness, warmth, slickness, pressure… a cocktail of sensation he was having trouble not getting punch drunk on.

The grip around his hips loosened and the agent pulled back, but the leeway was a trap, hooked ankles dragging him back in. Going to play-glare at the sniper was his next mistake: another glance of flushed throat hide, bared to him in trust and mottled beautifully with blood flow.

Nihlus slammed his eyes shut and tried failingly to slow their pace. His partner must have sensed weakness, because thick thighs just made for running in heavy armor resisted him with all due force, the muscles flexing and fighting to turn every thrust into a drive.

That tantalizing thought in mind, the Spectre made his final mistake.

Looking down.

Garrus’ legs were bent at the knee and wound around him. Tawny brown hide and grey scaling set against his own rich reds and browns. His own hand had a firm grip on the centerpiece between those bowed limbs, it's tip leaking precome.

It was Nihlus’ turn to groan with an edge of torture, head spinning with lust.

'should have kept my eyes shut…'

Ever more control of their hips was wrested from him in between shifts and rolls that bloomed with pleasure in his groin and ran up his back in heat waves.

Without his input, the movement of Nihlus’ hand as he stroked Garrus' length increased in speed to match the quicker pace the detective was demanding.

Distantly, as the rise to climax turned his thoughts into a pleasured haze, Nihlus admitted to himself that control had never really been his strong suit.

Garrus came first, gasping and straining, wrists turning pale where he pulled on his bindings. Nihlus found himself panting, mouth wet and pupils blown as he watched, taking in the sight. He didn’t take long to follow, climax draining him of seed and scattering his senses.

It must have taken his balance as well, because next he knew the Spectre was slumped unevenly over Garrus’s chest, taking harsh breaths and staring blearily at the wall by the bathroom door.

“Mmmmmmmnnn” he offered, unsure of how long it had been, but wanting Blue to know he did not mind the results of the power grab. The tall sniper replied in a mumble, something that included ‘spirits’, at least two asari swears, and a long groan. Nihlus nodded against the grey plating under his cheekridge, sighing blissfully.

He would have fallen asleep there if his pillow hadn’t grunted at him some time later, saying something that he missed entirely. “Mmmwat?”
"I said my fingers are going numb."

Nihlus opened his eyes, and blinked at the wall ahead of him a few times, trying to figure out what Garrus was talking about.

It took him a second or ten.

"Ohhhhh, sorry… one secon- mmnnnnn…"

He’d intended to reach up and undo the magnetic cuffs, but moving had reminded his body of where his cock was buried. The enjoyment of having his length still half hard and surrounded by slick heat was very immediate. He was faced with the issue of reaching those bindings without wanting to withdraw to do it.

Position wasn’t the only problem. Green eyes narrowed at the slight glow of the device’s ends where he’d snapped them around both of Garrus’ wrists. He knew how to get out of cuffs when he was the one bound… but didn’t know how they were supposed to come off. Or how to do it without ruining the device.

“So… uhhh…” he started, awkwardly clearing his throat before continuing, "There's a keycode or something, right?"

Garrus started laughing at him, a rumbling amusement that vibrated all the way up, making Nihlus’ vision wiggle with the slight movements. He elbowed the larger male in the thigh, pushing up onto hands and knees while Detective Hilarious got himself under control. “Alright, alright, now if you actually want sensation in your fingers…”

Garrus continued chuckling between the words of his reply, “Only been on the inside of cuffs before, Palvi?”

Nihlus tried to keep a straight face as he shuffled a little higher, getting in better range of the problematic bindings. Though his subvocals gave him away, flanging in amusement. “What, me? In cuffs? Never. What kind of troublemaker do you take me for, officer?”

Garrus’ snort said all that needed to be said.

Guided step-by-step, the stretched out Spectre learned how to open C-Sec’s standard mag-restraints. Garrus rubbed his wrists as they came free, smiling up at Nihlus. Newly released hands then found dark brown neck hide, dragging him right back down to share reverie.

As their tongues slid together, playing over the sharp edges of teeth and languidly teasing hard palates, the lanky knife-lover found himself growing hard again. He couldn’t even help a little roll of hips to ease the renewed need for friction.

The results -a soft moan and a squeeze from the sniper’s inner walls- were very encouraging.

It looked like the second half of that nap was going to wait a bit.

The sun had set an hour past, and Saren felt his mood sink with the light.
It was not the darkness itself that was depressing, so much as that the lack of light changed the way his optics saw the world. Infrared, night vision, electromagnetic array, or thermal imaging became his options for functional sight when light levels were low.

While the latter two were very useful in bursts on missions, they also tended to give him a headache if used for longer than a few minutes. IR was a bit better… though none of them were optimal for navigation. Certainly a pain to use in combat.

Night vision was the best choice, but the software enhanced light processing turned his sight into a grayscale palette of muted tones and pooling shadows. It made the world less interesting, more…

distant.

The chromatic visuals usually inspired the Spectre to reminisce, but here and now reflections of the past were particularly unwelcome.

Saren felt nostalgia creeping up on him like a poison, and quickly decided that a distraction was in order. He stood and turned toward the entrance to the catacombs, ostensibly descending to check on Benezia’s team.

Half of them seemed to be done, milling by the entrance and discussing their data finds in excited murmurs. Several more were trailing behind their peers a few hallways in, comparing architecture and glyphs from lower levels with those higher up.

The T’Soni Matriarch took a while for Saren to find, tucked away in front of that same diagram, though their pupils were not so dramatically dilated as before.

Saren stepped up beside the nais, humming to announce his presence. “It is late. Is there any more to gain from this place that you could not find in the extensive holos your science team undoubtedly took?” He tried not to let any hint of his growing anxiety to leave reach his tone or expression, but felt certain that some of it was leaking through his control. Weariness pulled on his cowl, heavy and uncaring.

“I believe there is, truth be told. It's as though I haven't smelled all the varieties of flowers or run my fingers over enough patterns of bark to really feel the forest that is this place. Not yet.”

The silver-grey torin stared flatly at the diagram that held Benezia's attention so, his gaze nonplussed.

"To… feel… the forest.’’

"Yes," the Matriarch responded in a murmur, long nails not quite touching the stone wall. "but there are other forests with similar trees, if we can find them. I am done enough."  

With that, Benezia turned away from the carvings and heading toward the exit, their disciples gathering to them like nothing so much as baby birds. Saren followed wordlessly, putting one foot in front of the other until he was standing topside.

The silver-grey torin rose through the protective energy field at the surface, and took a head count. All scientists accounted for, he started sealing the metal bulwark of the underground entrance behind them. It closed with a hiss, sloughing rain water aside and thudding into place.

Long strides carried him through the downpour, boots pointed unerringly at his ship. The Daedalus welcomed the black-clad group back inside with decon fog and varied status updates from the VI. Saren caught himself parsing each notification as 'unimportant’, ‘not critical’, or ‘somewhat critical’ rather than absorbing the actual contents of any notice.

He wanted to sigh at himself for the unprofessionalism.
While the group waited for decon, the Spectre’s rain-slick armor and cloak began making a puddle beneath him. The group of completely dry Asari politely pretended not to notice. When they made inside, anything he went near was going to get damp, but at least his ship was built for away missions. The cleaning drones would take care of it… he just needed to not pay attention to his own mess long enough for them to get to it first.

When the inner airlock opened, the exhausted torin immediately sat down at the pilot’s console, not waiting for the others to settle in before sending out a take-off request to Palaven’s traffic control. Electric eyes flicked over status readouts while that processed; needlessly checking the weather forecast and news feed even. Saren was so willfully engaged in not 'checking out' that when a set of manicured fingers touched his right shoulder -very lightly- the torin could not help a startled flinch.

If Benezia saw the faint flicker of automatic biotics, hastily subdued, they said nothing about it. "Shall we return to Thessia and see how your apprentice fairs?"

The silver-grey torin flicked his crest affirmatively, entering multiple cues and coordinates in the ship's navigation systems to cover for the next several steps of travel. Take-off clearance came through with a chime, and the nav-data all came back valid, so he activated the ascent thrusters and made to leave atmo.

The Daedalus took off through Palaven’s winter monsoon with engineered grace, bow aimed for the local Mass Relay. T’Soni’s scientists clustered together around their leader, just behind his chair; voices gradually raising from professional hush to maiden-like exuberance. Perhaps it was leaving the rain behind, or possibly just the excitement of discovery, but their combined chatter was becoming altogether too... loud.

Saren opted to pilot them to and through the Relay, then left the autopilot in control as he stood. Console locked against tampering, the Spectre gave Benezia a polite nod and made for his bedroom. It would be quiet -or at least quieter- and private.

His cloak went in the cleaner that was inset in his bathroom wall, and a fresh towel was taken to pat down the worst of his armor’s general wetness; most especially the dips and nooks where fluid pooled. Mostly dry, the light grey pieces were set back in their spots in his armor drawer.

The Spectre slowly laid down on his bed, spread out across the extension meant for certain others, sure that he would not be able to rest properly for days. There was so much to process that he did not want to think about. Events long gone that it would do no good to think on and change no history, if he did. Still, whimsical what-ifs and might-haves spun, right along side the more insidious should-haves.

Strangely, Saren drifted off within minutes, though what he dreamed was... not what one might call 'pleasant'.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Of course Nihlus only knew how to break out of cuffs. Of course.
Nihlus stepped out into the bland hallway of Garrus’ apartment building and let the door shut behind him. The quiet swish was a familiar sound to both the beginning and end of his little escapes.

Though admittedly, he really missed Saren being less busy and around to join them, even if those visits involved significantly less sex.

The carmine plated torin sighed, turning for the elevators.

Regardless of missing persons, it’d been hilarious to watch a naked, post-coitus Garrus coo over the new gun he’d picked up -like it was a newborn baby- stealing the rifle away to ‘customize’ it. Nihlus let him, lounging on the cubitura and browsing vid streams long past when he should have left.

The vibe of Blue’s dinky apartment was relaxing in a way the Spectre couldn’t explain but deeply enjoyed. He’d soaked it up while there, and now carried the feeling with him as he headed for the rapid-transit station to hitch a ride toward the Spectre Offices.

Traffic was garbage this time of day, but he’d delayed long enough as is. Better to leave now, at the end of the weekend, and not be around to tempt Blue into taking a day off work…

...which would make Nihlus stay on-station for one more day…

...which usually had them staying up all hours of the night, not wanting to part yet…

...which led to waking up late the next day, tired and tempted to just call in…

Rinse and repeat.

The smell of Garrus still clinging to his clothes, Nihlus picked up a routine mission to plant spyware
in some random colony’s mainframe. It was a quick little sixteen hours out from the Citadel, and
perfect for getting off station... away from his tall, stacked, visor wearing addiction. He headed for
the docks and tried to focus more on the proverbial itch of his trigger finger, and less on sharp, steel-
blue eyes.

The Widmanstat didn’t have his detective on board, but it had a jury-rigged hot tub, high-res VR
porn, and nearly infinite fruit smoothies.

He’d just have to make due.

Motes of pollen caught the late afternoon light, tufts the size of his thumb floating about as nature
used the last lingering coolness of winter’s rains to propagate. Trebia’s white shine bore down on the
grain fields behind the local temple, giving an ethereal glow to the long silver-gold grasses that rose
higher than his crest.

Distantly, he could hear fledglings enjoying the weather as much or more so than the plants; their
shrieks of glee and play-growls echoing around the valley and bouncing off the complex’s high, light
grey walls.

Adults were calling out too, friendly shouts from workers repairing a fallen section of stone and
thoughtful conversations between clergy as they went about tending to the vegetable gardens.

Massive clouds spanned the horizon, big enough to hint at rain after dark, but far enough away not to
worry anyone just yet. Sunshine lit the fluffy peaks in glittering chrome while the reflection of silver-
gold fields turned their bellies yellow and orange.

Saren found himself wandering through said fields, the talons of one hand stretched out into the
grasses, making the strands catch, gather, and spring free only to sway in his wake.

Someone far away said his name, but it was heard and lost too quickly to guess their direction, so he
kept walking.

Another shout from the builders went out, and he was on just enough of a hill to see some of their
going’s-on between the blades of grass. Winter weather had washed a whole segment of external wall
away, and it seemed they feared the loss would just repeat the following year. The team of builders
were throwing out ideas to each other on how best to rebuild to prevent that. They wanted the temple
to be safe.

Saren left them to their project, peaceful curiosity drawing him forward to see what else was
happening in the valley.

Hunters ran by him, three crestless eating up the ground between them and the open pass to the next
valley over, an older male on a speeder following along. Their mood seemed high, the jokes of
hunting partners and flirting rose from the party as they ran onward toward some unknown quarry.

His name was called again, slipping in between laughter and exuberant cries, and lost amid them as
well.

Saren stopped to listen, but did not hear it again. What he did hear was his brother’s voice, talking in
confident tones off to the right. Feeling no sense of urgency, he turned that way, soil and stems crunching underfoot as he moved against the grain of the planting rows.

Desolas came into view, dressed to the nines but wearing no armor, only chevrons of rank that blurred when glanced at. He was speaking to a priestess, talons motioning at the broken wall. Saren looked back at the construction crew… only now noticing that they were no strangers, but rather his squad; mostly barefaced torin and tarin, working hard at whatever task their beloved general set them to.

Someone called his name.

Saren squinted, looking from familiar faces to temple walls, from his fraten to the distant speeder that followed the hunting party. It did not quite make sense… his squad had never been here. This valley held only farm fields and a remote temple with a local library that contained a conspicuously large selection of ebooks on biotics, more than a few private training rooms, and no real surveillance tech.

And that speeder… Nihlus had talked about wanting it. The new model had just come out, and his brother was…

His mind halted there, unwanted lucidity seeping in and threatening to ruin the peace. The laconic torin rejected the awareness of his adult self in favor of a pre-teen’s perception of boredom. He remembered visiting this place, being annoyed that his height had not increased much when his crest finished coming in. The grass made him feel short. He liked the open skyline here, and the generous food portions, but did not care for the romantic tilt to some of the priestesses’ subvocals when they addressed his brother.

He was thirteen, almost but not quite an adult, bored and wandering the temple grounds. Pale silver-grey limbs were tired from long hours of solo biotic practice in one of the training rooms. He could do techniques more powerful than any of the ebooks had, but that did not matter. He needed to be able to do subtle things. Pull enemy rifles out of aim with no aura, and jump higher than his legs wanted to go, but without the tale tell ring of biotic energy at his feet.

This was a place of peace, and secrets. He was bored here, but content.

Saren circled the perimeter, close enough to hear the murmur of Desolas’ voice but far enough away not to catch the words themselves.

Someone called his name, and he ignored them.

On the far side of the modest temple complex a class of historians-in-training were following a priest in lilac robes as he droned on about chronicling nuance in historic events without writing in personal bias. The young torin carried on past the outdoor lecture, disinterested in the topic, more curious about the bubbling of a spring somewhere nearby.

It was easy to find, a natural font that came up through a crack in a large boulder. The spring spilled down the side of the rock, hedged in by fluorescent, spiky moss. A pool formed at the base, flowing outward in a series of short, fat waterfalls. The end of the line was a wide pond with leafy, scaled plants in shades of copper and drooping stalks that bloomed crimson in beautiful counterpoint to the sea of silver-gold beyond the little oasis.

Saren climbed the boulder at the source, sitting down atop it and bending one knee to rest his chin on as he looked out over the fields.

Someone called his name.
He ignored them.

A looming presence began to rise, directly in his blind spot. It was insubstantial and cold. Saren ignored it too, in favor of watching Desolas chat with a flustered, tan-plated priest. His fraten’s charm always made him easy friends, and convinced the strangest of people to go along with whatever scheme the affable general had come up with this time.

Saren felt a long-lost pang of childish malcontent that his brother was so good at people -at being genuine with them- while he himself was decidedly… not. It made his mandibles tilt in a small smile, even the subjectively negative emotion filling him with fondness.

Despite his mood the unseen shade began to drain the light from the clouds. They roiled, growing darker and making the signs of a storm come faster than they should have.

He snorted openly at his own subconscious, finding it overdramatic. Saren dismissed whatever premise his mind had come up with, preferring to watch his squad reinforce the base of a new wall. Someone had drudged up a holo plan of a water break meant for coastal areas, casting out the schematic in hard light so the workers merely had to lay light grey brick and bonding agent where the orange hologram acted as placeholder.

The someone called his name again, and he growled quietly, more interested in the sun-warm stone beneath him and the people scattered around the twilight grounds.

Regardless of his contentment, the looming presence grew, and grew. Saren’s awareness of it creeping up his spinal plates like the feeling of being watched, only a hundred times stronger. He ignored the intrusion with a will, certain this dream would end with terror -as ever- but wanting to bask in the echoes of sunshine for as long as mentally possible.

His pessimistic assumptions were not wrong. Light, not unlike an artillery strike, began to tear up the land beyond the horizon. The clergy panicked. His squad fell into a defensive formation in their muddy clothes, his own place in the phalanx left open and starkly empty. Desolas began shouting orders, ever unshaken in the face of trouble.

The world rent apart around him, but Saren was so inured to it while semi-lucid that he simply watched it happen from behind his natural ice-blue eyes, resisting the desire to jump in and help his fraten organize a defense…

There was no defense against this assault, he was sure.

He watched light erase the hills with stoic calm until the moment his brothers gaze locked with his, brimming with fear as the destruction came ever closer. ‘Move’, his brother, his general, his only clan, shouted at him.

Saren was halfway off the boulder when he awoke, Benezia calling his name, a choked gasp stuck halfway down his throat.

“Saren. Saren, please wake-”

“I am… awake,” he ground out, sitting up and hiding his face in a palm. “Why are you in my quarters? How are you in my quarters?”

“Well it certainly wasn’t easy, but considering we’ve been orbiting Thessia for half a day, I thought it was perhaps past time to… check on you.” He felt the mattress dip as the Matriarch sat beside him, though they were wise enough not to initiate contact. He had no desire to be touched.
“That does not explain how you got in,” the silver-grey torin replied critically, though less agitated upon realizing he had greatly overslept.

“It just so happens that I had an entire science team at my disposal with which to hack your door.” He could practically hear the tentative smile in Benezia’s voice as they joked at him.

“...ah.”

“I also have a second apology to make.”

Saren let his hand drop as he looked over at the nais, the imprint of silver-gold fields on the back of his eyelids fading as he focused on the here and now. “You did not technically make a first one.”

“I suppose not. I apologize for intruding on your space Saren, and I apologize on behalf of my lead organic chemist for using your kitchen to make us all breakfast and lunch. It was delicious, if that makes it any better. Your stock of levo ingredients was rather impressive for such a small vessel.”

The Spectre huffed, waving a hand to dismiss all of their apologies. He had brought the circumstances of their intrusion upon himself... and was fully aware of the fact that he had kept the powerful T’Soni Matriarch waiting for him to finish napping. “I am glad your chemist found the appropriate supplies. Thank you for your patience.”

Benezia merely nodded placidly, as gracious as ever.

Saren looked away, gaze landing on an unassuming section of wall. “If you will excuse me for a few more minutes, I need a moment, then I will come bring us down to the surface.”

“Of course, take your time,” the nais offered, standing and gliding from the room.

He would not, but the thought was appreciated.

Although…

Electric eyes slid shut, grey box interface brought up to see if any of his dream had been caught by the hardware.

Some had. There were a few chunks of data, filled with data gaps and slightly scrambled, that he might be able to piece together later on. Something of a treasure, considering he had not had a grey box with which to take recordings back then.

Saren rolled from his bed, stalking toward the bathroom to rinse the sweat from his hide.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Some of the imagery in this chapter was inspired by the amazing art of Anjian. (https://anjian.tumblr.com/post/104749621108/remembrance-day-and-detail)

A/N: Someone please tell me if I over did the allegory and visuals in the dream sequence... and I ALWAYS want to know if I'm managing character voice correctly. Benezia is especially hard.
Absorption might be theft

Chapter Summary

While the Spectres are out and about, the Council live their lives... until interrupted, of course.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chappie was absolutely shredded in beta by the marvelous white_aster. Much appreciation to the people of my writer's group for the science nerding we did to figure out a little more about cross-species communication between Councilors.

A/N/N: Mention of a glaive in this chapter.
(https://www.deviantart.com/hybryda/art/3D-Moon-Silence-Glaive-591936457) It's this one, with a little more blade, a little less staff, and ribbons on the tail end. The other weapon, a short sword, is a long, thin rhomboid not much bigger than a sizable knife.

***** Caution: non-specific mentions of possible triggers, violence, and brutal politics.*****

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The dull metal edge of Tevos’ glaive slid down Valern’s polish-slick arm guard, metal scraping against metal and leaving a trail of sparks that fell between the combatants like a small meteor shower. A few of those sparks touched down on textured grey skin, pricking the surface with pinpoints of heat for just an instant before winking out.

“A point to me,” his opponent chimed merrily.

Valern ignored the faint heat, turning aside from the contact before the blade could drag any further. He needed to stay in close range or his opponent would take every advantage of having a much longer weapon, so he side stepped instead of withdrawing and pressed forward.

A few feints and near-misses followed the first hit, both sides generally too elusive in fighting style to allow frequent hits, be it from blade, hilt, or limb.

Eventually his arm guard had to catch another sparking hit. Valern grunted as he shifted with the force of his colleague’s blow, turning and redirecting the motion, using it to make a stab toward Tevos’ unprotected ribs. His guard arm tingled from the solid hit; a heavier strike near his elbow. Valern accepted the price of the opening, and carried his own boxy short sword up and in-

The Asari Councilor spun away from the strike with relative grace, the ribbons on the butt of their weapon flowing after them like silken streamers, confounding visual attempts to follow their movement.
“Oh! Almost, that was close. Perhaps if that glorified knife were longer…?” Tevos teased as they shifted to maximum range, weapon twirling between their hands. It seemed like ages of wasted time and an extreme excess of movement to his Salarian mind. He huffed, determined to even the score, and set about in a flurry of feints to try and tease open their guard. After a very intense minute, he landed a single, solid -gratifying- strike to their hip. Unfortunately the other politician immediately proceeded to gain enough range to settle into a new starting pose that looked suspiciously open on one side.

Rather than walk right into that trap, he circled the mat and considered the options. Tevos turned with him, doing a decent but imperfect job of hiding a slight limp. “I do believe that one was your point.”

He hummed, both eyelids blinking as the Salarian considered the necessity of halting the spar in favor of calling a medic.

“Something on your mind, Councilor?” came Tevos’ pleasant lilt, sweat dripping down the side of their face. He huffed, assuming the nais was perfectly fine if they had the wit to play coy.

Rather than misdirect by critiquing their nonexistent economy of motion -especially considering that was a hallmark of Tevos annoyingly effective fighting style- Valern brought up a wholly separate topic that had been on his mind.

“There is nothing either you or Sparatus can offer to get my agreement on proposal 245.15b, and-” Here, he lunged, saw the defensive strike coming down toward him, contemplated several possible reactions, and chose the safest. Namely, retreat. “-your continued attempts to wheedle for it are doomed to failure. Why? Because the effects would be exponential rather than additive, and thus of far greater worth to the Republics after a certain point.”

Valern lunged again, precisely when Tevos’ mind would be the most distracted thinking up a response. The cunning Salarian carried through into a roll that brought him under their initial block, rising up inside Tevos’ guard; exactly where he needed to be for an upward torso slash. Tevos caught it on their glaive’s shaft, turning their weapon to deflect his.

Again, the Asari retreated in a flourish of movement. “That point is nearly fourteen hundred years in the future. It could certainly be renegotiated before then, Valern. Be reasonable.”

The Salarian Councilor opted out of responding, uninterested in repeating himself. Instead, he re-engaged and attempted a new tactic for getting the bothersome glaive out of his way. Kicking the bottom of Tevos’ weapon aside, he brought in an under-powered pommel strike toward their shoulder joint, aiming to incapacitate.

Spinning through yet another excessive dodge, the sweating Matron flung ribbons in his face faster than should be possible. Biotic aura swept down their eezo-lined glaive, altering it’s mass to allow the trick. Valern dodged erratically and focused on not letting his gaze fall prey to the eye-catching display of colors. It seemed that the Asari was happy to semi-cheat, if he was going to.

They did that in many things… and he would admit to finding it very respectable, particularly from a non-Salarian.

Tevos kept coming as he dodged, rolling the weapon over their shoulder and trying to sneak in past the wall of his arm guard or the fluid deflection of his short sword. “Is your reluctance really all about the exchange rates in 245-15b? That seems like such a small detail.”

He stalled with more attacks instead of answering that, smartly sidestepping the nais’ over-head cut
and catching their fashionable athletic ensemble across the sleeve. His boxy practice blade -neither lit
with energy, nor keen- was unable to slice the fabric open, though it would have if sharp.

“My point,” Valern called out as he backpedaled to breathe a little.

“So it is,” they replied graciously, “but what of my question?”

Valern had no intention of admitting that his staunch refusal of the latest proposal was at least fifty
percent a personal show of power to affect happenings back on Sur’kesh. It was also in part due to
Tevos’ blasé attitude on that agent-

Pearly white teeth flashed at him again in another friendly smile as the nais swept for his legs. “I
don’t suppose this has anything to do with Saren’s mission to that agricultural research colony a few
months back?”

The Salarian Councilor was a consummate politician, and so not a single emotion touched his face.
Nor did his body language give away how accurately the Matron had read him as he leapt over the
glaive’s oncoming shaft.

After a moment though, his words did that regardless.

“Ashes, Tevos. There was nothing left of their thirty year research project except for ashes. Why?
Because Saren favors scorched earth tactics the same way Sparatus rags on about the socio-economic
effects of literally everythin-”

“-potentially deadly zoonotic pathogens were involved,” the nais interrupts in a breathless rush while
coming at him in a rapid blade-butt-blade triple strike. “Ones that can survive in a vacuum, might I
add.”

“Thirty Years,” Valern hissed back, still vaguely incensed that no one had listened to him on
anything related to the matter. Not his wariness with putting the research colony in Saren’s
admittedly troubled sector, and not his advice on using two smaller colonies doing concurrent studies
so issues that crippled one station wouldn’t bother the other. Most especially, no one consulted him
on which Spectre should be asked to handle the containment failure.

And that wasn’t the only issue lately. There was also-

“Surely if you can forgive Nihlus for the forest fire incident...” His Asari colleague trailed off at the
sight of his scowl, likely assuming -correctly- that he had not forgiven anyone for any. such. thing.

Their weekly sparring session -usually a three Councilor staple but their third was on a date this
evening- quickly devolved into something more of an... outpouring of frustrations... than the doctor-
advised aerobic exercise it usually was.

Valern made his strikes hard and fast without sacrificing too much caution; he was no great fighter
but a deft enough hand with short blades considering his desk job. He had taken begun taking causal
classes after an assassination attempt; his first, back when he was four years of age and just old
enough to be in someone’s way.

Tevos flowed around the mats with grace that was perhaps less impressive than the vids of
competitions fought and medals won in the fitness of their Maiden years. Still, the nais’ movements
rippled and spun, liquid strikes that were smooth from muscle memory and half-subconscious in
inspiration.

An element zero infused weapon allowed gravitational cheating that Valern had to counter with rapid
Salarian cognition and perfect recall. Only slower, Asari-normal response times, and all the usual physics, kept the match fairly even.

Their respective assistants stood by, waiting for the -decidedly Turian- cathartic sparring to finish. Valern’s young secretary was absorbed in reading something on his visor, uninterested in anything except the logistical data of galactic commerce. Meanwhile Tevos’ assistant spent their time observing, cunning eyes flitting back and forth between Councilors as they soaked up minutia like an especially patient sponge.

After a good bit of sparring, where the only sounds in the room were strike and counterstrike, Tevos reopened conversation with a breathless, “Has anyone ever told you that you may be prone to holding a grudge?”

Valern backed off, belly expanding and contracting rapidly from increased oxygen needs as he considered the question-criticism. ‘Grudge’ was one of those words where Sur’keshi had half a dozen distinct versions to describe aspects of it, and universal translators inevitably made a mess of meaning while trying to pick the right one. “Clarify what you mean by grudge.”

“Well…” the nais began slowly, beginning to shift leftward as they circled toward his flank. He moved to match it, keeping Tevos in view. “...the Humans have this lovely saying I heard recently. They call it ‘forgive and forget’, to forgive a mistake and let the history of it rest.”

Valern sniffed, unimpressed. “I’m Salarian, Tevos. I can’t forget.”

His colleague merely sighed at him, smiling fondly as they stopped in place and rested the butt of their glaive on the floor. “It’s a… hmmm… a more metaphorical variety of ‘forget’.”

Before Valern could finish considering the implications of his second and third potential replies, the door to their exercise room opened with a pneumatic hiss. Sparatus stalked in like rolling thunder clouds, his newest secretary right at his heels. “We have a situation.”

Tevos and Valern shared a look. The level of problem that would drag their fellow Councilor away from his beloved Adamina on date night was… well. The faded carmine plates of his face told the story of a distinct displeasure.

The Salarian Councilor sheathed his practice blade and blinked both eyelids at Sparatus, awaiting more useful details. Tevos, ever the diplomatic one, handed off the glaive to their secretary and approached, asking an opening question for everyone’s benefit. “What happened?”

“The culling of an Asari colony run with Salarian child slaves by a Turian Spectre.”

Sparatus did not sound pleased, his subvocal flange was loud in a way that he associated with his Turian counterpart being particularly disgruntled. Valern stepped forward to join his colleagues, bringing his fingertips together and tapping the points of his first digits thoughtfully.

“Was it O’kara, Kryik, Arterius, Maerun, or Trinix? No, wait… it was Kryik, of course. Why? His childhood trauma showed through in excessive response to the mistreatment of younglings... correct?”

Sparatus’ eyes closed, arms crossing under his keel.

The look Valern gave Tevos -how ironic that one of the topics of their discussion immediately turns into the source of sudden problems? made the Matron’s left eye twitch twice before they schooled their expression to calm.
He blinked both eyelids at them, sarcastically.

Tevos lifted their chin in defensive challenge.

He *squinted* back at them.

Sparatus’ look-alike Turian was in fact Tevos’ favored agent. Or at least that was his interpretation. The unprofessional leeway that Kryik received from them indicated... well. Even though Spectre Kryik was technically Turian, Valern felt his Asari counterpart was the responsible party for that particular agent’s screw ups.

He continued squinting, pointedly.

With a soft sigh Tevos clasped their hands together in front of them, though they lacked a certain amount of poise wearing sweat-drenched sport clothes. “What details do you have for us, Aequum? I can’t imagine that they aren’t horrific, but... I will need to know.”

Went unsaid was the thought, ‘for when the Republic’s Matriarchs came calling, *politely* demanding answers.’

The Turian Councilor’s aide stepped forward, humming for their attention.

Aiesha held up a datapad displaying info-graphics and images while she rattled off the salient points. “Two days ago Spectre Nihlus Kryik accepted a mission to infiltrate an Asari agriculture and research colony called Misi’obore, and insert monitoring software into several target computer systems. He arrived on site yesterday at approximately eight hundred hours galactic standard time. During this mission, he instead executed approximately one hundred and fifty Thessian nationals, aged around one hundred to six hundred. His initial communique alluded to said nationals being guilty of no fewer than seven distinct Sapient Rights violations, including slavery, use of control chips, and mass homicide. Spectre Kryik estimated that there were over three hundred... counts. Victims, of the violations.”

Who, what, when, where, and why. Only the unsavory complexities ‘how’ were left unspecified.

Since Tevos had earlier asked the first obvious question, Valern decided to be gracious and ask the second. “Has the media found out yet?”

“No sir, not that I’m aware of,” the tarin denied confidently.

Tevos hummed, and it sounded distinctly unconvinced. “Damage control is in order, regardless. I assume Nihlus’ full report is on it’s way, but if you could please ask him to add any and all proof of crimes done?”

Aiesha’s peach-toned crest tilted in a Turian nod. “Of course.”

Valern butted in again, “Were any of the criminals spared? Those too young, or with plausible deniability?”

Sparatus tilted his head in a clear ‘no’.

"Ah." Well... it did simplify things at least. If no one else was alive to argue, that left only one story, uncontested. When dealing with events that could provide kindling to any number of groups that pushed anti-collaborative, separatist, or xenophobic agenda, a single story -theirs- was the one that upheld galactic peace.
With that thought in mind, the Salarian Councilor turned and headed for the door. “I am in need of a bath and fresh clothing while you plan out how to spin this. I will meet you both in the tower.”

With that brisk excuse to reconvene later, Valern quit the room and headed for his work-residence in the Presidium Tower. Not that he used the suite much, but the generously sized bathtub and clean wardrobe there were calling his name.

One could not handle delicate galactic politics in athletic shorts, after all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Consider, some species of frogs can hear with their lungs, speak through substrate, and communicate in ultrasound. As my first Earth-native species for coming up with theoretical xenobiology for Salarians, it really does present a few interesting ideas... meanwhile, digging deep in canon provides a stray quote from Allers that they relate more to high pitched voices, and... that's about it. Right, anyway... I don't think Valern pays much attention to Sparatus' subvocals unless they're really obvious, and Tevos' non-verbal communication abilities appeal more to him as a quiet person. So, ya know, there's some dynamic for you. :3

A/N: Aequum is Councilor Sparatus’ first name. Adamina Sparatus is his bond mate. My best attempt for the Salarian Councilor’s name is “Sur’kesh Hiesset Talat II Inoste Valern” (Salarian names are Homeword-Nation-City-District-Clan-Given Name) His homeworld most likely being Sur’kesh, Hiesset is one of my three main genetic nationalities (the green to purple hued smarties), Talat is the capital of Sur’kesh, II is a made-up district of Talat, Inoste is the only Salarian clan name I can find anywhere and I assume those are pretty big, and given name is Valern.) Tevos is the Asari Councilor’s first name, and I have decided that culturally they don’t use their dynastic family names while working in a position devoted to galactic welfare, since that would be a conflict of interest. #copout
Chapter Summary

An old friend of Nihlus' has a rough day. Nihlus has a rough day. A random Asari has a rough day.

Basically, everybody has a rough day.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know that music reqs are something that a few of you really enjoy, and so I've been trying to include what's on the playlist when I'm going at the first draft. This time, I was jamming to Hidden Citizens - Run Run Rebel ft. ESSA. (https://youtu.be/mTuTsqCo4uE)

Evil trickles down, secrets screaming loud
It's buried in the ground, but It's meant to come out
Venom in your veins always finds a way
...
You're the tumor, the trouble, the dust that never settles
But I'm the waiting pistol
Hungry for skin on metal

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hood pulled low over her faceplate, and deeply exhausted, Adiah’Si emerged from the murky entrance of a mining tunnel. Her steps were quiet, hearing perked for any would-be followers. She had every reason to be alert and wary, because the complex crisscross of Dolo station’s mineral transport system was one of very few things between the Quarian information broker and an unwanted date with STG.

Her last week had gone, one might say, poorly.

Cloaking device fried and unable to connect with the local com buoy without throwing up a location flag, stealth was the only option left to the teal-eyed Quarian. Well... stealth, and being well liked around Zada Ban’s various city-stations.

It was much easier to stay under the radar if most of the locals had no desire to sell you out, after all.

Adiah was young, and outcast from the flotilla, but she wasn't stupid. She'd laid the foundations for friendships and server back ups almost the same day she began info trading. It had been a lucrative business too, and a relatively safe one if she kept to certain types of secrets. Particular levels of info theft. A few informative gifts given to the right people...

Until recently.
Several days ago a Salarian under an optical cloak had broken into her apartment, the faintest hint of their afterimage startling her as Adiah returned home from an ordinary shopping trip. The range of colors her species could see - slightly further into both sides of the spectrum thanks to evolution in a desert- had been her first and only warning.

Even the rookie mistake on the agent's part hadn't been enough to help her escape the intruder though.

The teal-eyed female was still trying to figure out how they'd managed to get in so fast, when there were two airlocks and a dozen security measures between her safe space and the rest of the station. Or… 'had been' might be more accurate. There had been two airlocks and a dozen security measures. Now, there was just a lot of fragged metal and fried electronics, casualties in her initial failed attempt to run for it.

She'd been restrained in moments and they'd started right in on interrogation. They asked a lot of questions about intel that, ironically enough, she didn't actually have.

Oh, they didn't like that answer. Or believe it.

'Maybe I haff been framed, or… or somezing? There iz no reason for STG to be after me. I must be taking ze fall for someone else's indeescretion.' she thought for the tenth time, checking the upcoming sight angles before deeming it empty and speed-walking through the next junction of tunnels.

Adiah's brain helpfully replayed the memory of large black eyes, blank and cold as they had gone through a list of questions; rarely blinking as they drilled her on happenings she’d had no part of. Something about a lost shipment, a sketchy sounding deal with a Terminus warlord, and a prototype lunar colony?

The hunted Quarian used the agent’s own questions to assemble pieces of pieces, assumptions made of guesses, and inferences made of probabilities because she was an information expert, but not a criminal mastermind! Where they’d gotten the idea that she was in on… whatever it was...

The situation weighed on her shoulders, heavy and bleak. Adiah’Si made it into the next tunnel section and sunk back against the relative safety of the shadowed entry. Data archives, taken. Intel network, cut off.

Home, and all it’s sterilized safety, gone.

With a frustrated tearing motion, an angry straw plunk, and an induction port opening, she began sucking on a curry-like ration pouch. Thoughts continued to spin, fear and weariness shifting back and forth with anger and frustration. The Quarian woman was desperate to think of a plan to fix any of this. Or at least run far enough to hide from it.

She didn't have much to work with though. Her suit, new and stylish in tones of jade, now sported no few emergency patch jobs. Her high end omni-tool was fully functional, but she couldn't risk connecting to any public networks with it. The odds they could track her position were too high. The device could make rocket drones, overload, and hack… but combat wasn't something the info broker knew beyond the basics. Besides those two things in her favor, she had... some food pouches and a bit of jewelry.

As she sucked on the straw, Adiah's bottom lip trembled, overwhelming emotion trying to escape. Her career was ruined because of… of some misunderstanding.

It wasn't fair.
She swallowed the sorrowful noises her body wanted to make, and forced herself to keep eating and assessing.

Most of her current info-webs and contacts had become like mist at dawn, disappearing when word got around that she had some of the galaxy's biggest players asking questions about her whereabouts. There were off-world archives she could recover later, but they would be terribly outdated by then. The world of information trading moved fast. Intelligence networks were practically living things.

Maybe a few closer-to-friends contacts in the business might talk to her again, after things settled?

Life in shambles, the normally cheerful Quarian curled a hand against the upper glass of her mask as she finished off the curry-esc pouch. The gesture didn’t work the same with a barrier between her palm and forehead, but her sterile home was now unreachable. She was suit-bound for the first time in years.

That final, greatest theft of basic comfort was like a mantle of heavy metals hanging on her slight shoulders.

Rather than give in to the massive desire to lay down and sleep for a week, Adiah stood, tucked away the empty food pouch, and headed down the next tunnel. Keeping on the move until she found a place to hole up was in order. The past few days had taught her that stopping anywhere had the potential of letting STG catch up, and she sincerely doubted they’d underestimate Quarian leg strength and the power of desperation yet again.

If only she wasn't running out of favors to call in.

Adiah’s first stop over after she’d escaped the agent in her home had been the back door of a very specific dextro restaurant. She’d bet on the better nature of a local contact -a Turian with a colorful past and delightful grandkids- hoping for food and sleep.

The retired Blackwatch programmer-turned-chef had fed her, shoved a handful of nutrient pouches into her hands, and told the frazzled Quarian to rest in the store room, but only for a few hours. Adiah’Si had woken to neither bindings nor company, and left out the back, grateful.

Old favors paid off that time, but not the next. One traitor was dead now, killed by the same agents they’d tattled to.

After that, an empathetic Asari contact pointed her to a warehouse, in which there was a mysterious shipping crate that supposedly never left. Inside was a bed, drinking water sealed in cans, and a donation box. Nothing more. In lieu of credits she didn't have access to many of, the teal-eyed Quarian dropped in an OSD with a local secret or two, and promptly fell asleep.

Three days after that, a two person STG squad caught up to her while she was sneaking out to find food.

Adiah’Si had fled. Only a lucky break with a shipping crate being moved -in the right place at the right time- allowed her to pull one over on the bosh'tets. They’d lost line of sight as she clung to the side of the crate being moved. It had flown through the air on a grav-crane, depositing her outside.

Yesterday had seen two failed attempts to speak with people who could sneak her off station. Suspicious looking Salarians had already been lurking around both places. At the first, a homeless male was asleep on a bench, his musculature too large and body too filled out for someone used to the free rations available for the poor. A janitor was at the second location, by all appearances bored out of his mind as he cleaned the nooks that cleaning bots had trouble with... but his omni-tool was a
nicker model than any low level staff would ever buy.

She’d turned around at both places, unwilling to risk it.

This morning had been a terrifying near-miss. She didn’t even want to think about it. The original agent was there, and he’d proven to be a deft hand with throwing knives.

Surviving day-to-day was taking it out of her, and-

and…

Her footsteps paused and teal eyes brightened, their glow illuminating the glass of her faceplate.

Knives.

Knives.

They brought to mind a certain Turian she hadn't seen in a while, but one who might have the pull to get her out of this alive. He would listen to her side of the story, and wouldn't let them kill her for something she didn't do...

...unless this whole mess was a lot bigger than she understood.

It was still a better plan than anything else she had. Adiah’Si turned left at the next junction of transport tunnels, heading for the least savory markets on Dolo Station. First order of business was an unidentified omni-tool. She already had an extranet address for him, she just needed to get out a message.

Nihlus twisted back and forth in the swivel chair at his desk, holding an ice pack to his jaw in favor of taking meds for the ache of cracked bones. The monitor bank mounted on the wall in front of him held a variety of read-outs, from the Widmanstat’s systems to news feeds; a few paused video games and a half-read history book on familia notas. Though one screen in particular held his current focus at the moment: A live vid feed into the Council Chambers, with all his super important bosses present.

Tevos was at the head of the table, looking poised and on top of the problem, but experience showed him the flashes of anger, upset, and sorrow that leaked through their guise. In between apologies on behalf of other people, the Asari Councilor was pouring focus into something on their datapad. Probably some sort of compensation package for his rescuees, if the Spectre had to guess. A gaggle of ex-slave, destitute, uneducated orphans were down in the guest rooms as they made for the Citadel, and he counted on the politically dangerous Councilor being a real soft touch for their sorry state.

The Republics were probably going to be footing the bill, and this cluster fuck was either going to be big news or total hush-hush, so he predicted high levels of cooperation.

Ol’ Sparatus was in his usual spot on Tevos’ left. He looked uhhh… none too pleased. The Turian Councilor wasn’t saying much as aides and politicians went back and forth about the situation Nihlus had uncovered, but the occasional savage comment got injected whenever anyone tried to make
excuses. With Tevos already taking care of those hurt, Sparatus’ goal seemed to be figuring out how a slave-centric colonial economy in Citadel Space had slipped by all the people who should have noticed it.

Subvocals never came through digital mediums quite right, but the ones that were making it through to Nihlus sounded like the older torin was deciding between… how had that one vid put it… ‘fried or extra crispy?’ sounded about right.

Funny enough, the most emotion out of any of the Councilors was actually coming from Valern. It was way out of the norm, but kinda understandable considering the situation. The fucked up Matrons in control of the colony had realized that while Salarian adults didn’t need to rest for long, the kids had even more energy and had basically never even heard of sleep. Why keep less effective adults when you could cull them and spend resources like food and living space on powerhouse kids instead? You didn’t even need control chips to keep them in line.

So basically, Valern was furious, Sparatus seemed to be contemplating archaic court martial traditions, and Tevos probably had no intention of reigning either of them in.

Nihlus considered his own opinion on the matter, now that he’d calmed down somewhat.

In the aftermath, the lanky Spectre had put away his anger, and tucked away how emotionally drained he felt, and gathered the ex-slaves together. He'd set them up as best he could downstairs. Salarian kids from toddler to teens, spread from the conference room, through the guest rooms, all along the hallway, the edges of his CIC, and around the upper balcony. He'd put out all the basic comforts he could scrounge, given firm instructions of where not to go, then explained that they were going to the Citadel where they’d all be taken good care of.

One little guy had worked up the courage to actually ask him a question, rather than meekly waiting for orders. ‘And… and it’s okay to sleep there? Anytime you’re tired? You won’t get…’

He’d spent his short, hard-wrought life thinking that being caught resting was to invite death.

Nihlus blew out a breath through his nasal plates, pushing the squeaky, scared-to-be-hopeful voice out of his mind. It was a real damn shame he’d already killed everyone responsible. Real shame. He’d like to kill them all again, a little more personally the second time around.

Truthfully, the Spectre was sour about the whole damn mission, start to finish. It was supposed to have been a routine insertion of ST&R spyware into a fairly new colony that just didn’t have enough tech industry or outside contact for anything else to slip in. Routine cyber security infiltration was a simple enough programmer gig that even his utterly mediocre hacking skills were plenty good enough. He’d just wanted an easy run, but instead...

Nihlus pulled the cold pack away from his jawline, gingerly stretching his mandible on that side. It twinged angrily, and he quickly returned the ice to where it was needed, then checked back in to the conversation on screen. It took a few seconds to catch up the goings on. The Council had two unknown Asari on holo-call. One was sporting an ‘appropriately mortified’ expression, while the other was so stone-faced they probably only made facial expressions when shot. Neither were speaking at the moment, just getting dressed down by a hissing, softly spoken Salarian Councilor.

Nihlus heard a telltale swish from offscreen, meaning the meeting room doors had opened. Valern finished his sentence, then turned a black gaze on the newcomer. From the edge of the monitor a nais approached the dias, hands fidgeting like they didn’t know where to put them. Tevos greeted them as one of the Asari Republics’ minor colonial administrators. The frazzled Asari seemed entirely lost as to why they’d been called, quickly explaining that they’d only been on the Citadel as a layover point
Valern’s sharp hisses suddenly found another target, the whole sordid story being retold again in cutting detail. Tevos’ face looked almost apologetic for a moment before they returned to typing away on their datapad.

Nihlus tuned out while the politics raged on, leaning back in his swivel chair. He didn’t really care how many galactic leaders got a full view of him beaten up and slouched in his seat, he was fuckin’ exhausted. He was a good killer, sure, but assassinating that many rough-around-the-edges Asari running an edgeworld built on slaves, with their long damn lives at stake? It had been something of a tall order. He’d had to, eh... cheat, a little bit. And fight, a lot. And dodge, a lot.

On the top right screen a notification flicked out from the side of the display, happening at nearly the same time as an omni-tool message chimed in his aural canal. He reached over to tap the notification on screen, as that was the minimum effort to find out what the message was.

The carmine plated torin had expected another brief missive from Saren, or possibly a subtle prod from Tevos to stop slouching on vid feed. Instead, the message that popped up on the screen beside the vid feed registered as some sort of... barely encrypted maintenance request? It’s sender was listed as a sanitation worker on Dolo Station, and the words read like the blandest report of septic issues ever made.

Except, some of it was... off. Double spaces at strange spots in the text. Misspellings. References to engine parts that had no place in a waste reclamation system. Things he’d never have noticed if Saren hadn’t drilled grammar, suspicion, and pattern finding into him years ago.

Tired green eyes peered at the words, certain this was either some masterfully subtle covert message or a weird mix up written by a slightly illiterate sanitation worker.

"Nihlus?" came the Tevos’ voice, in that specific tone that said it wasn’t the first time his name had been called.

The Spectre shook himself a little, and set the mystery message aside to focus on the vid feed.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s been a long day. What did you say?”

On screen the entire room was looking toward his camera. Nihlus tried to summon chagrin into his expression and subvocals, but he was seventy percent tired and thirty percent angry, and had zero actual fucks left.

“That’s quite alright, Nihlus. Administrator Shigiri was saying that their superiors on Thessia are asking for more information about the method of... dispensation. They want to know if any of the colonists could be alive for questioning. Perhaps hidden survivors, or...?” Tevos trailed off.

Tempted as he was to say something pithy like ‘I rescued all the colonists but unfortunately all the monsters are dead,’ he didn’t want to sass the crowd on the other side of the vid feed too much. Tempers were running hot enough, and Valern or Sparatus’ anger could turn on him easily enough, if only transiently.

The carmine-plated agent once again tested how much taking the ice pack away hurt. The cold felt good on his abused jaw, but it did make it a little hard to talk. The ache was... better. His nanites were as effective as they were illegal.

“Surviving enemy forces aren’t likely. I synthesized an Asari specific neurotoxin in one of their medical centers, and released it into the air systems. Only off-station personnel or someone in a
hazard suit would still be alive, and I didn’t pick up anyone else on scans. I suppose one of them could be a toxin-hardened Commando who hid somewhere shielded at just the right time, but eh…” He shrugged. The odds weren’t zero, but they also weren’t much higher than that.

The minor Colonial Admin gaped at the screen, not unlike a fish. “You synthesized an… on the fly… untested… and just let it-!”

Nihlus shrugged one shoulder, the motion lifting his whole cowl in a tilt. “Yeah. One of the prefabs had an aquarium full of tropical fish with a nice baseline in their spikes. Should be a picture of the tank in the report? I purified it down, and used their medical lab’s microfab to copy the molecular pattern and made a good sized batch. It’s already degenerated by now though, won’t be more than trace amounts left in the bodies.”

Sparatus flipped through the report on a large screen as Nihlus spoke, locating the tank in question. It was filled with beautiful, horned fish in shades of extreme teal and neon green. The Salarian Councilor smiled unkindly; a tight, tiny quirk to one side of his lips. He seemed to recognize the breed.

The Colonial Admin blanched to a sickly, sky-blue color, “Those a-are… I- I... see.”

Nihlus smiled at them in an attempt to be friendly, but almost regretted the motion for the pain it caused. He still held it for a moment. The poor Asari admin hadn’t signed up for the job of dealing with this kind of fall out, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their vacation was probably ruined. He could relate to that sort of bad luck. “I kinda think they got what was coming to them, don’t you?”

Eyes wide like saucers, the Administrator asked -very politely- to be excused.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Nihlus was trying to smile nicely at that poor admin, but really, he's bloody and smiling wrong from the cracked jaw. It looked less friendly and more unhinged, lol.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](mailto) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!