Another Realm V: Einherjar

by Katkiller_V

Summary

The assassin escaped us on Redcliffe, but the war goes on. Armed with new strategies, new allies, and new plans, the hunt will continue. But before it can truly resume, there are a few loose ends to tie up. In particular, my own past has been a mystery for far too long, and what few clues I have point to the throne-world of Lady Warlord Yan T'Ravt...

Notes

Another Realm V: Einherjar

For those new readers just opening this story, please be aware that this is the fifth story in a series. While it will hopefully be possible for you to simply dive in, I would recommend reading the earlier stories in the series before this one. At least AR III: Ronin and AR IV: Vengeance are likely required to get a good idea of what's going on.
Chapters will be taking on a slightly different approach after the prologue. Each will have a very long section from Cieran Kean's point of view, followed by a shorter section from Voya'chi vas Xentha's. Interludes will be from Trena T'Laria's perspective. Most if not all chapters will also have news segments on the bottom.

This series was originally (and still is), primarily posted on FF.net. I am going to endeavor to keep it updated here as well to ensure that as many people as possible can read it if they so chose. Thanks to a few faithful readers, it also has a tv tropes page, which can be found here: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/AnotherRealm. Feel free to check it out if you're interested.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Here's to hoping that you all continue to enjoy this series,

Katkiller V
A clatter of armor and a tired, almost whistling groan made me crack one eye open as my meditation was fucked up by the new arrival.

It took my brain a few moments to disentangle itself from the memories it had been lost in, but when it did my irritation grew from a glower into a full-on glare. "Vakarian."

Garrus Vakarian, aka Archangel, leaned slowly back in the chair he'd appropriated at our table. His massive sniper rifle was extended and leaning against his side, dark blue armor pitted with impact marks. Though his full helmet concealed his expression, I could still tell he was grinning at me. "Sorry, did I disturb something? Praying to the Asari goddess? Thinking about naked Batarian women?"

I couldn't help but snort. "Stop sailing in my waters Turian, remember it's my job to be the sarcastic asshole."

"Must have missed that memo." He shook his head, glancing to where Voya was slumped over on the table's other booth. "Surprised you're still alive after the hanger."

"Same." I grunted back, the moment of levity already passing away. "Lost too many there."

"Same." He replied, his voice lowering. "Never seen a Krogan move like that before."

"Yeah." I let out a slow breath between my teeth, raising a hand up to run it through my oily hair. I needed a bloody shower. And sleep. And a naked... my head shook a little. I needed a lot of things, none of which I was going to get in the next couple of hours. "Surprised you came back."

"Shouldn't be." Garrus shrugged with a quiet clatter of armor. "We'll die with everyone else if Ganar gets his claws on the environmental controls."

I snorted. "Fair point."

He seemed to eye me through his visor, then turned to glance at the heart of the club. "What's the plan?"

My left shoulder rolled. "Take as many of them with us as we can."

There was a dry chuckle. "That much I assumed."

"We're covering the upper levels, focusing on the entrance to the VIP zone." I waved a hand in its
direction. "The others are on sentry duty right now. It's the only obvious route that Krom or anyone else can take to flank us. Setup some token mechs in there to make it less obvious that we'll be waiting for him."

The Turian nodded slightly. "He won't try the lowers?"

"Cresting Wave has kill-zones setup at three of the doors and they sealed the rest of them." I shrugged again, "Besides, I don't think Ganar would let Krom get that far away from him at this point. He'd probably make a run for Doru and the docks if Ganar tried to send him anywhere near them."

Garrus considered that for a few breaths before exhaling loudly enough for his helmet speakers to emit the noise. "We'll setup on level four. Good sniping angles to support you and the main floor. Only five of us left, but we'll do what we can."

I eyed him for a few breaths, then shook my head tiredly. "And it would let you shoot us in the back if the opportunity came up?"

"You think that I would?"

"Yes." I retorted bluntly. "Right now we've got the frenemies thing going, which I'll admit is kind of a Terminus tradition, but you don't exactly like me."

"No." He admitted, his tone equally as blunt. "But right now you're the far lesser evil. If, by some miracle, we pull this off, you've got my word that I won't shoot you. Today, anyway."

My lips pursed slightly as I considered that, then I nodded and sighed as I realized that that was going to be as good as I was going to get. Athame's azure, considering the crap I'd thrown in his face the last time we'd spoken in person, it was better than I could have expected. Assuming that he wasn't lying at that moment of course. Garrus was a practical kind of man in his own way, especially after nearly two years on this bloody station. His conscience might twinge a little when he pulled the trigger but at the end of the day he'd still do it.

"How long do we have?"

Grunting at the question, I glanced at my omni-tool. There weren't any flash-updates, and given that no one had come running to wake us up... "Hour, probably less. You'll know when it's time."

The Turian nodded and rose with a tired sounding grunt. "I'll get my people setup."

Raising a hand, I gave him a moderately mocking salute with two of my fingers as he departed.

Voya waited a few breaths before stretching her arms up and above her head, revealing the heavy pistol she'd concealed beneath the table while 'sleeping'. When she spoke her voice was tired, but alert. "Hypocritical asshole."

"No argument." That had been one of the many things I'd called him to his face, but it had probably been the one that had infuriated him the most. "You all right?"

Glowing eyes narrowed to slits behind her visor. "We're about to die." She left off the 'you-fucking-idiot' but her tone said it for her.

"You're free to try and make a run for it after Krom is dead, if you want." I offered calmly.

"Don't make me shoot you." Her voice lowered to a growl. "You know that I would."
I snorted. "I know. Come on, we should go make sure the others are still alive up there. See if we can get setup."

Voya let out a quiet grunt, sliding out and standing as I did. She took a few extra breaths to holster her weapon and stretch, her petite frame arching slightly as she groaned. "You sure? You could keep talking and then I could shoot you in the leg. It would make me feel better about our imminent deaths."

My eyes rolled as we turned, heading towards the nearest bridge that would carry us across the main floor and over towards where the other survivors from this debacle were waiting. "If you did you'd have to patch me up afterwords, or get someone else to do it. And then you wouldn't have anytime to find a private room to-"

There was a low snarling sound before an armored boot lashed out at my leg. I avoided getting my knee kicked in sideways thanks to an awkward hop to the side, but accepted the punch she tossed into my side. "I told you to never bring that up in public!"

Grinning to myself, I held my hands up in surrender. "I know I know, can't tease you one last time?"

"No." She growled, visibly considering making good on her threat to shoot me before turning away. Tossing her head once to make her disdain perfectly clear, she strutted angrily away. Which was perfectly fine with me. She fought better when she was pissed off, and if we were going to have any chance of surviving this we'd need to fight at something beyond merely 'better'.

The thought made me frown, then firmly shake my head as I realized where that mental current had gone. I couldn't think in terms of things like survival... that ship had sailed. We weren't walking out of this, it was stupid to even think like that.

We'd have to fight at our best to make sure we took Krom out before Ganar. The man was a sadistic fuck and a complete asshole, and coming from me that definitely meant something, but he wasn't unskilled at fighting. Nor was he stupid. There were better than even odds that not only did he know we'd be trying to ambush him, but that he'd have some fucked up counter-play in mind.

Which I was also perfectly fine with. I had a few things hidden inside my own harbor, things that Vakarian being here could help with.

I hoped.

"Hoped a lot of things, this last year Cie." I reminded myself quietly, glancing down at where Nyreen was holding court. There were fewer officers now, and even as I watched a pair of junior Talons were bringing their commander her helmet and rifle. An Asari wearing the armor the Cresting Wave clapped hands with the Turian before turning away and heading for the lower levels.

As if she could sense me watching, Nyreen turned, staring up at me. After a long moment she gave me a tight nod before returning her attention to her subordinates. Barked orders began to fill the air, gang members who'd been sleeping and catching what rest they could began rousing themselves and bustling into purposeful motion. The few members of Aria's guard who'd survived the initial attack quickly joined them, directing the commotion as best they could.

I let out a slow exhale, then nodded firmly. Yanking my helmet off of its strap on my belt, I pulled it up and over my head. The HUD flickered over the visor slits as it synced with the rest of my armor and weapons.

"Cie, you there?" Voya's voice echoed from the speakers behind my ears, all traces of her annoyance
with me gone. "Something just tripped the initial perimeter alarm in the VIP zone. The mechs are active."

"Confirmed." I grunted back, the flashing alarm making itself readily apparent in the corner of my vision. "Set them to plan three until losses hit forty percent, then go to plan zero."

"On it." She replied promptly, "You joining us?"

"Yeah." My legs were already moving, accelerating to a quick trot as I headed to where I could see her and the others. "Let's get this over with."

Next up is the first saga – Xenthan Honor

Chapter End Notes

Very short prologue here, mostly to make sure that the spoilers are as small as possible. This chapter takes place immediately after the prologue for AR:IV Vengeance, so feel free to go back and re-read that if you need a quick refresher. For those curious, the events in both that prologue and this one will be taking place in the latter portions of the fifth (and last) saga of this story.

Thanks to Greater Good Ireland for the story image, which also now graces the Tropes page. Additional thanks to the Blocked Writer, who has the unenviable task of keeping me on track as he beta's everything.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I glowered at my sort-of-friend as she corrected my 'formal' trench-coat for the millionth time in the last five minutes.

"Shyeel," Reaching up, I grabbed her hands before she could continue fiddling with the heavy thing. "How straight my coat is isn't going to be relative to whether or not T'Ravt decides to kill me."

The branded Asari scowled up at me, twisting her wrists loose in a single deft motion. "It's the principal of the thing. If you're about to die don't you at least want to leave a good looking corpse behind?"

"No." I replied bluntly. "I want to leave a bloody and spectacular mess behind."

Voya snorted from where she was sitting on a bench, while Illyan merely rolled her eyes from where she was standing by the door. The four of us were in a small, plain ante-chamber of T'Ravt's palace in Celthani, waiting for Ayle to get back and drag us before the Lady Warlord herself. Who, in the true fashion of annoyed authority figures everywhere, was making us wait for no other reason than she could.

The first thirty minutes had been tolerable, but after the first hour, we'd started to get annoyed. We were now well into the second and all of us were a little on edge from being cooped up in this stupid room.

"She's not going to kill us anyway." Voya spoke through her rebreather, the half-mask covering the Terminus Quarian's nose and mouth. Wide, glowing eyes narrowed as she inspected a few locks of her long, bristle-like hair before her hands got to work tying it back once again. "Our arrival wasn't exactly kept quiet. And she'd be contradicting herself after publicly stating that it was Krom who killed Mascal."

"Assuming she doesn't just invent another reason to kill us." Shyeel muttered, apparently content to remain pessimistic about this entire affair.

My lips twisted a little. That thought had occurred to me as well, but there really wasn't anything that I or anyone else could do about it. If the Lady Warlord decided to kill me, she'd kill me. Period. But since reiterating that particular point wouldn't help anything, I turned away from my friends and idled over to the archway-style window, staring down at the city beneath us.
Celthani, as a city, was... well, pretty damned impressive for a den of mercenaries, pirates, slavers, and assorted other upstanding citizens of the Terminus. A massively broad, massively deep valley had been worn into a mountain range by several rivers just barely visible here and there amidst the city's sprawl. Excepting those stretches of water, it looked like every square meter of the valley had been built upon. It hadn't been, not quite anyway; there were parks and gardens that we'd seen on our flight in, but from this angle you couldn't see them. Just endless buildings and lights before the mountains rose from the soil to encircle the capital of the Warlord's little empire.

Huge factories dominated the eastern portion of the city, their hulking frames looming over blocky apartment complexes. Both were surrounded by a constant swarm of shuttles and cargo lifters picking up whatever they were producing, or else probably carrying workers to and from their places of employment. Elsewhere I could find obvious evidence of more militaristic structures, with GARDIAN towers and other obviously defensive buildings rising from the urban sprawl around them.

And not all of the city was above ground either. On the far side of the valley I could see lights beginning to flash to life in similar windows cut into the other mountains, turning them from natural features into glistening pyramids of light.

"Pretty. Almost wouldn't think it's a city in the deep Terminus." Illyan spoke, her deep voice low as she moved to stand next to my shoulder. A broad blue hand rose to cover a yawn before she negligently continued, "How much of it you think is under the mountains?"

"Half of the city." Voya promptly replied from where she was sitting, "Roughly."

I grunted, mentally comparing the place to Nos Astra and to Capital City on Redcliffe. From an aesthetic point of view, it had the impressive mountains, but the largely Turian construction didn't come anything close to matching the graceful Asari skyscrapers. But on the same token, I couldn't even imagine trying to take the city. We'd flown over a mountain hollowed out and turned into a massive ground-to-space battery with it's own eezo-barriers, anti-air defenses, and garrison army.

By itself it made Fortress Seven on Redcliffe look like a fucking sand castle, and it was one of thirty that surrounded the bloody city. And that wasn't even counting the smaller forts located in wider rings beyond them.

"T'Ravt get it more or less like this, or has she bulked it up?" I asked, turning away from the window to look at her.

The petite Quarian shrugged, her own coat shifting a little with the motion. "More or less as it is, she's focused more on the cities she controls on the western coast. As far as Celthani goes, she lets the population do as they want provided order is kept and tithes are paid."

"What about this place?" Shyeel asked, waving an arm at the room around us. "Dramatic palaces built into a mountainside aren't exactly what I'd imagine a Turian warlord building."

"No, they ruled from a fortress by the Chethan river." Voya's voice lowered to a low growl, "On the borders of the Old District. It let them... supervise us. T'Ravt built this place as soon as she officially took over and loosened the restrictions on us."

The Asari Reyja'krem shared a quick glance with me, then carefully asked her next question. "What's she using the old place for?"

"It's her..." The Quarian shifted her head back and forth, making her stiff hair rustle a little as she searched for the right word. "Let's go with academy. Her Talon teams and officers train there."
"We'll probably see it if we're heading to your part of the ocean." Illyan rumbled, shifting away from the window and towards a small mirror in the wall. She idly picked at her own coat, smoothing out one of the sleeves before nodding at herself. "You sure they'll let us in?"

A three-fingered hand rose to tap the necklace hanging on the outside of her coat, the shards of Krogan crests clicking together as she touched them. "So long as I'm with you all, there won't be any problems. Trophy-takers are allowed to come and go as we wish, with guests. Provided that all of you behave."

I grunted again. I still wasn't quite clear on just what 'trophy takers' were in relation to anything else in Terminus Quarian culture, though that wasn't from a lack of asking about it. Voya might have been willing to tell me a lot of things, many of them exceedingly private to her, but talking about her people's culture was one thing she'd consistently avoided. Nor could I remember the few other members of her race that I'd met saying much of anything about it either.

History she could prattle on all day about, but anything about their modern culture that didn't revolve around her disgust towards her flotilla cousins was apparently taboo.

"Will we be able to get a hotel there?" I asked, shaking my head a little and focusing on the more important matters at hand. "I'd rather not have to shuttle back and forth between here and the Blades compound."

Voya shrugged before repeating, "It won't be a problem."

Illyan glanced over her shoulder, her expression making it clear that she didn't believe that for a moment. Thankfully the door slid open before any sniping could start between them, Ayle ul Massa striding confidently into the room with her own formal coat billowing slightly around her legs as she did. Her posture was studiously neutral as her four dark eyes flickered around to make sure we were all still present.

And for once she wasn't limping, though I did notice that she was wearing a glove made of the same navy-colored leather as her coat over her prosthetic right hand. I'd missed that when she'd greeted us at the shuttle pad, probably because I'd been too busy gawking at the bloody city.

"Cieran." Her low voice was even, her tone brusque. "The Lady Warlord is ready for us."

Exhaling, I swallowed the urge to tell her that we should make her wait for us for two hours and see how she liked it... but as self-gratifying as it would have been, T'Ravt wouldn't find it particularly amusing. So instead I simply nodded, rounded everyone else up with a quick glance, and followed the Batarian woman out of the room.

"She in a good mood?" I asked once we were in the hallway, the light of the setting sun dim through the vertical shafts above us. More conventional lighting was flickering on even as we moved, much as it had begun to outside. "Or are you and Nynsi going to need a new partner already?"

Ayle tilted her head a little to the right, betraying some of her annoyance even if she kept her tone even. "Perhaps if you had shown more inventiveness in dispatching the General, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"Drowning him inside his own aircar was fairly inventive." I defended myself. "And the fucker deserved it."

"I am not denying that." She replied, dark eyes flicking briefly in my direction. "But you cannot deny that your alibi was poorly and spontaneously conceived."
I twitched my left shoulder in chagrined acceptance of that fact. "It was an opportunity with a limited amount of availability."

Air whistled between her teeth as she sighed. "To answer your original question, yes, she is in a tolerable mood. I would anticipate surviving, provided that you mind your manners and prevent Voya and Illyan from speaking."

"Hey!" The latter protested. "I can hold myself appropriately enough."

I snorted and shook my head, "Your idea of appropriate needs some work Illyan. You three can stay outside."

"Three?" Shyeel asked, her voice low.

"Yes." I glanced back at her, "Make sure they don't burn the place down or insult anyone important."

The scarred Asari glanced between our companions somewhat dubiously. "First you nearly insult me, now you throw me to the riptide. Why are we almost-friends again?"

"Hey!" Illyan protested again. "Stop acting like I'm anything like Voya."

Voya merely narrowed her eyes, pointedly slipping a hand inside her coat where she probably had at least one knife. "Care to rephrase any of that, Cieran?"

"No." I replied bluntly, turning my head back to the front just in time to dodge a Turian servant whose own attention was focused on balancing the boxes he was carrying. "Behave."

There was a jostling sound, as if someone had just stopped someone else from drawing a weapon. For her part, Ayle simply let out another hissing sigh and closed her lower eyes. "By the sacred pillars. Cieran, if I didn't know you all personally..."

"Part of our charm." I shrugged.

"Charm." She repeated, her head shaking slightly. "Not the word I would use. Nor I think, the one T'Ravt would."

"Sederis would." Ayle actually stopped moving and just stared at me. I shifted my posture to show that I knew just what that said about me. And us. "We'll work on it."

"You are not the one I'm worried about." The Reyja'krem shook her head, her legs slowly shifting back into motion. "Despite your sometimes abrasive exterior, you do know when to adopt highborn mannerisms. Your companions are the ones I am more concerned with."

"We can always just loom in the background." Shyeel pointed out.

"No, you can't." Ayle retorted as the five of us turned from one grand corridor and into another that seemed to lead deeper into the mountain. "Whether you like it or not you're now the elite hunting team of our organization, and by the Pillars you will comport yourselves appropriately."

"You sound like Shaaryak." Illyan rumbled unhappily. "Kept saying the same thing."

"Good." The Batarian woman all but growled before she turned back to me, shifting the topic to business. "Cie, did you send the message I requested?"

"Yeah." I let out a whistling sigh between my teeth. "Jacqueline said we can fuck off. Not quite what
I expected in reply, but it was worth a try at least."

Ayle grunted, her posture shifting to show both acceptance and disappointment in turn. "Damn. It would have been ideal to have her back with us. Your team could have used her, in particular."

Which was entirely true. What was also true was that Jack was sick of being used, by anyone, and had said as much. At length even. It was probably thanks to Shepard's influence, but honestly I hadn't thought I'd worded it that badly, nor had I implied anything. Neither had Ghai who'd looked it over after I'd gotten the surprisingly vitriolic response. Not that I'd honestly expected her to accept joining back up, but we'd sort of been friendly with one another at one time. And I had been the one to send Shepard to save her...

I shook my head tiredly. Jack's mind was a dangerous place to go looking for rationality, and I needed to keep my brain focused on more important things.

"How's the initial recruiting wave going?" I asked.

"We cut it at one thousand." She replied, "At least for my branch. Shaaryak believes she has room for two on Illium at the moment. She'll keep them in hotels in Khar'shan Minor until the base there is finished."

Three fucking thousand people. Athame's fucking ass...

Shyeel let out a quiet curse of her own behind us. "Can you manage that many?"

"Of course I can." Ayle all but growled. "I was a military officer, remember? And Shaaryak is more than capable, in her own way. If the compound was actually finished we could fit as many as five here."

"How are you two organizing them?" I asked, honestly a little curious. I mean, it was her branch of the unit to do what she wished with, but I liked knowing things. And it distracted me from just where we were walking and what kind of conversation was probably going to follow.

"The same as T'Ravt's first rate units." The Batarian woman replied. "We'll start with three regiments and move up to eight. Five here, three on Illium. I intend to hold at those numbers for at least a year if you and Shaaryak have no objections."

My left shoulder twitched in acceptance. "What's the training plan?"

"Primarily team building and officer allotment." Her head shook slightly. "The initial wave is virtually all veterans from Redcliffe, from both sides of the fighting. I'm less worried about traditional training and more concerned about old grudges emerging from the sands at the worst possible times."

Voya grunted as she interjected herself into the conversation. "Do you have a species break down?"

"Primarily Batarian, Turian, and Asari, as we expected. I believe I have a meeting with the Old District's elders tomorrow to go over recruiting within the walls. Will you be available to advise?"

"Cie?"

I nodded. "Should be."

"Good." Ayle murmured, nodding towards a side-hall as we approached it. "We're nearly there, so if you call could be quiet and keep your backs and necks straight. Cieran, if you could be so kind?"
I grimaced but nodded. Closing my eyes, I exhaled heavily once as I got into the right frame of mind. A few steps later and I had it, my posture shifting from that of a slightly slouched, tired, but still polite Batarian to that of a supremely arrogant Highborn warrior who'd shoot anyone stupid enough to get in my way. Of course, since I only had the one set of eyes it wasn't a perfect comparison, but I was able to mimic it well enough to get my point across.

Behind me, I heard someone suck in a deep breath before Illyan muttered. "By the goddess but it creeps me out how you can do that boss. Like you never left Shaaryak's side."

My right shoulder shifted once in reply. Ayle's reaction was pointedly different, her lips twitching at the edges as her lower eyes flicked up and down me. Her own tones radiated a fierce, almost lustful approval, "Much better."

"Enjoy the view later." I shook my head as we turned another corner, the next hall proving to be short and leading to a simple, unadorned doorway. We took a few steps before guards abruptly appeared from alcoves so well hidden that it looked like they'd just appeared from behind active camouflage. All eight were Turian, and clad in heavy armor painted in T'Ravt's usual off-white tones. But rather than yellow trim, theirs was a deep black, and the logo on their left shoulders was that of a Turian combat knife.

A Talon team then.

"Silver Blades." The leader took a slight step forwards, her armored hand rising to tell us to halt.

We did so. As proud as I might have been of my own skills, and those of my friends, I had no desire to pick a fight with T'Ravt's elite commandos. Especially when none of us were wearing anything but our formal coats. Sure they were armored and had barriers inlaid, but they were still a far cry from proper armor.

I bowed my head politely, and a shade deferentially. "Answering the Lady Warlord's summons."

The Turian nodded her helmet to me, and then to Ayle. "You're expected. The Commanders may enter, the remainder will wait outside. Your weapons will be left with your cadre."

Not terribly surprised by the request, I carefully pulled my pistol from my belt, keeping it collapsed, before handing it to Illyan while Ayle turned hers over to Voya in the same fashion. The commandos motioned for our friends to back away before moving forwards and efficiently frisking the both of us.

Only once they were sure that we didn't have any more weapons on us were we allowed to proceed.

T'Ravt was waiting for us inside. Today, the Lady Warlord was dressed in layers of white silk that covered everything but her hands, neck, and head. The effect was almost Roman, but she was wearing far more than a single layer. She wore the color well, the contrast between the rippled cloth and her dark skin striking, the comparison drawing even more attention to the subtle scarring on her left cheek and again on her upper lip. She was seated at the end of a long conference table made of some kind of marbled stone, but even from a distance I could see the circuitry delicately worked into it.

"Lady Warlord." Ayle and I spoke more or less in unison, both bowing our heads deeply to the left as the door closed behind us.

"Honored Reyja'krem." She replied evenly, her voice as smooth as ever. "Or should I now refer to you as Commander ul Massa and Commander Kean?"

"As the Warlord wishes." Ayle replied politely.
There was a low, humming sound as her eyes narrowed. "Perhaps as Commander ul Massa, and as Murderer? Or perhaps oath breaker?"

I kept my expression neutral, just. "Do you desire restitution for Redcliffe? Or perhaps you wish to recollect your exact words from the conversation prior to my actions?"

Her eyes narrowed further, until they were little more than slits. "Those are both provocative questions Kean. Sit, both of you."

Bowing our heads again, I stepped forward and politely drew Ayle's chair out for her. My occasional lover brushed her living left hand against mine as she sat, a covert display of reassurance. I'll admit it helped more than a little as I took the spot on her left, leaving T'Ravt to turn slightly to face us both.

The Lady Warlord regard us in turn, her expression a perfect mask, her posture shifting from languid Asari sensuality to that of a prim Highborn. A little reminder that she could play that game as well. "The fact that I did not explicitly state to leave Mascal alive is the only reason you are still breathing Kean. Do you have any idea how large of a political storm you have put into motion?"

"Only slightly." I admitted. "Likely a mild hurricane?"

"Mild is a poor adjective." She replied. "A sizable portion of the planet's public is in mourning for Mascal, and you have created more than a little competition for yourself when it comes to hunting Krom. I've spent nearly all of the last month presenting fabricated evidence to my governors to assure them that I did not order his death."

My lips twisted a little as my body shifted to show disgust. "Mourning? Seriously?"

"He was the local hero of the Blue Sun war." T'Ravt reminded me somewhat primly. "And he was very adroit at building his own legend here, particularly in the smaller cities that resent my dominance of this world."

"Lovely." I muttered quietly. "Is Naka still alive?"

"Naka?" She blinked and then nodded in recognition. "Ah, the Terminus Quarian pilot. Yes, he and the other saboteurs have been responsible for most of the evidence planted." That was something. I kind of liked the guy, and I'd honestly expected her to have had him killed for helping me dispatch the general turned governor. "But he and his conspirators are not who I wish to discuss. You killed a man I all but stated needed to remain alive."

"I killed a man who was, in all probability, conspiring with your enemies." I replied, making sure to tilt my head to show my respect for her as I said it. "You implied that you desired him alive, but you also implied that you would be killing him yourself the moment you had evidence."

A single blue finger tapped the surface of the table. "Perhaps, but he was mine, and I deal with such things in my own fashion. You infringed upon my territory, and gambled with my honor and reputation without my approval."

Ayle stirred for the first time since sitting, her voice solemn. "If you wished Cieran dead, you would have already had him killed. Can we assume that you desire a different form of restitution?"

"In a manner of speaking." T'Ravt nodded ever so slightly, her head tilting to the right to display some of her submerged anger. "I am aware that Kean acted without your knowledge or approval, and so will not take any actions against the Silver Blades as a whole."

The Batarian woman nodded, settling back in her chair. Her body language betrayed her intense
relief for a few breaths before she concealed it once again. I couldn't really blame her, if T'Ravt had
decided to evict us from the compound we were still in the process of moving into all of the plans
that she and Nynsi had come up with would have been rendered worthless. Or, at the very least,
horrendously complicated by the fact that we'd have to shift all of our operations to Illium.

"Kean." The Lady Warlord turned her formidable gaze back to me. "First, you will be held
responsible for the salaries of everyone currently involved in concealing the truth. An invoice will be
sent."

I nodded tightly. It would cost me, but I still had a small fortune scattered through my various
accounts. "Understood."

"Second." She continued as if I hadn't spoken, "In our prior discussion I indicated there was one
person on this planet I would not tolerate you eliminating. That number has risen to five."

It became a struggle not to reveal my own thoughts at that comment. I largely managed to keep my
expression neutral, head shifted a hair to the left, but I still felt my eyes narrow at her despite my best
efforts. "Will I be told who they are?"

"You will know them." Which was spectacularly unhelpful, and from her condescending posture she
knew it and was enjoying being vague. "Suffice to say that if any of them are harmed while you are
here, and if there is even a chance that you were involved, you will not be leaving this world."

My lips pressed together, but I forced myself to nod again. "Understood ma'am. Anything else?"

"Yes. I will also be copied on any and all intelligence reports that you send to Jona Sederis." Ayle
got very, very still, a tell that I only barely managed to avoid myself. I couldn't particularly blame
her, she was a warrior, not a politician or a spy. "I see that ul Massa is also involved in whatever
information you are concealing."

The Batarian woman shifted as she gave me a chagrined expression. Shifting my right hand beneath
the table I brushed her arm in reassurance, letting her know I wasn't angry, before exhaling. "Copies
of any messages will be sent."

The Warlord narrowed her eyes again. "With or without context?"

"Without." I replied, shaking my head slightly. "Truthfully the information has already spread more
than I'm comfortable with."

T'Ravt tapped a finger onto the table again. "And if I insist?"

"I will insist that you tell me just who I am not allowed to kill and why." My head tilted down as I set
my proverbial feet, not about to budge. My friends had deserved to know, and I'd needed to trade the
information to Sederis for her support. But Aethyta had already fucked with crap thanks to the
information, and I had no idea what T'Ravt would do with the knowledge. Even if it was
increasingly irrelevant, I didn't know her well enough to risk it. "And even then I will still likely not
tell you."

Cold anger briefly appeared before she concealed it. "Kean."

"Lady." I sighed and shook my head. "Please."

My pleading tone made her blink slightly in surprise, her own voice turning questioning. "Why?"

"Because it's dangerous knowledge, and largely unbelievable." Ayle replied on my behalf. "If we
believe it to be relevant to you, personally, I will inform you myself. Otherwise I would expect you to begin having a basic grasp simply by reading what messages Cieran and Sederis exchange."

She considered that for a few breaths, then nodded once. "Your word?"

"Given." The Reyja'krem bowed her head politely. After a moment, I did as well and murmured my own quiet word.

The Lady Warlord looked, if not happy, at least mollified enough not to press the issue for now. With a slight wave of a hand she dismissed us from her presence, and we wasted little time in fleeing the room with as much dignity as we could manage.

Bypassing the elite guards, and our companions as they rose from the small benches they'd been sitting on, we strode back into the main corridor and headed back in the direction of the shuttle pads.

"Ayle." I exhaled once we were past the guards, electing to ignore Illyan when she asked how it had gone. "It's already relevant to her, it's her fucking sister who's involved."

"Just because they are siblings does not mean that their actions are relevant to one another." She replied, her tone an equally low mutter. "And none of the information you were given directly concerns her."

"Besides the potential reaper invasion."

"Besides that." She agreed, "But as you said, the situation has changed. That war could now be years to decades away."

"Or it could happen sooner." I retaliated.

"In which case forewarning would be of no use." Ayle shook her head. "If we have any signs that such a thing is imminent, or if more of the Matriarch's puppets elect to attack us here, I will tell her only the minimum required. And I will run what I will say by your first."

Letting out a tight breath between my teeth, I mulled over that for a few steps. We could give her an abbreviated version, one that focused on the mental crap she'd done to me and the others. How she was, likely, attempting to influence Shepard via Korolev. Assuming that Korolev was actually her puppet and hadn't managed to cut her strings yet... the girl had seemed like a naïve idiot but I couldn't imagine Shepard letting someone useless stick around on her ground team.

In either case, the potential future knowledge could be kept in the deeps where it belonged. And if T'Ravt worked out any of that on her own it could be hand-waved as us no longer thinking it was relevant given the changes that had already occurred. She likely wouldn't be happy, but it would be a decent enough of an excuse.

Sure it was, and I'd give up hunting Krom, find Shepard, and beg her forgiveness for being an asshole.

"Damnit." I muttered. "Athame's fucking ass but I hate this shit."

"I know." Ayle sighed, reaching a hand up to rest it on my shoulder as the pair of us stopped in the middle of the hallway. "But we had to give her something, although..."

"She didn't exactly keelhaul me." I agreed with a slight frown. "I expected worse."

"What are you two talking about?" Voya growled, abruptly reminding me that the three of them had
been trailing us. "What happened?"

"He owes her money, agreed to not kill several people, and needs to forward information to her." The Batarian woman replied on my behalf, both of us turning to face our friends.

Illyan grunted, handing me my gun back. "We going to get details for any of those boss?"

"The first is just covering operating costs." I shook my head as I holstered the weapon again. "And we don't know the details on the second, she still enjoys being vague and cryptic."

Voya shook her head. "Are they on planet?"

"Yes." I nodded slightly, "Five of them in total. I'll apparently know them."

The Quarian narrowed her eyes, her tone becoming disgusted. "Keelah, that could mean anything. What a bitch."

"Agreed." Shyeel crossed her arms. "Could be she knows something about your past Cie."

"That, or there are people on planet who've done something for Krom." I told her my other prevailing theories. "Or were involved in that mess on Illium, the one that got me exiled in the first place."

Illyan shuddered visibly. "Athame's ass, the fucking hotel. Just had to remind me about what happened there boss. The shit you and Rane told me..."

"Yeah." Reaching up, I ran my hand through my hair. "If that was an SIU team that got exiled or fled to cover crap up, or mercs hired for the job, they could have ended up here."

"Any of those could explain her relative tolerance towards your actions on Redcliffe." Ayle mused. "Somewhat, at least."

A hand cut through the air impatiently as Voya shook her head. "We shouldn't discuss this here. I know a bar where we can have some privacy, assuming that it's still there."

Ayle grunted, and the five of us got moving again. "I'll need to return to the compound to make sure that everything is running smoothly. How long do you think you'll be Cie?"

I rolled a shoulder. "I don't want to spend too long on this, maybe a week depending on if we turn up any information. Less if the landmarks I remember aren't there, or if we can't find that accountant Sederis's people tipped us off about."

"Assuming that he is still alive and on planet." My fellow Reyja'krem shook her head slightly. "If you need any additional firepower..."

"I'll give you a call, promise." I bowed my head politely to her. "Though hopefully we won't need it. Or will we?"

Voya knew me well enough to know that the question was directed to her, and she accelerated a bit to move up onto my right side. "We shouldn't, not in Celthani. If we have to go to some of the... wilder cities, then support might be ideal."

"You think that's possible?" I asked quietly.

"Of course it's possible." She rolled her glowing eyes, "But it's probably not likely, if you were brought here as a slave, and if those memories Ghai found are of the city, you probably never left."
The fingers of my left hand twitched at the reminder of that particular theory. It was one that both she and Illyan thought was likely, and that Rane had even supported. Thinking logically, it made sense in its own way. It would certainly explain my, typically violent, reaction to the practice. And if my... owner had been a Batarian, and if I'd been taken when I was very young, that could also explain why preferred their company and found their women more attractive than most members of my own species. Nevermind the fact that I’d learned both of their main languages in under a year.

"Yeah, well, if we do leave I'll be sure to contact you." I repeated myself, shaking my shoulders a bit in discomfort. "For now, I think Voya's idea for a bar is appropriate."

"Boss." Illyan rumbled in warning.

"If I try to have more than one you can stop me." I sighed.

Ayle let out a quiet snicker of amusement, "I see you are taking your duty to your Tarath'shan seriously, T'Donna."

"Someone's got to take care of him." She replied, "If I didn't he'd end up face down in the surf inside of a week."

Turning my chest, I glowered at her as we moved. "Illyan."

The big Asari gave me a broad grin. "Yes boss?"

"I don't need you taking Trena's side," I growled at her. "I don't care if she thinks you need to watch my every move."

Ayle grunted at the mention of scales. "How did she take being left behind?"

"I'll forward you the messages." My glower faded as I remembered them. "Some of the curses were rather original."

Her lips curled a little. "I'll assume they're amusing, if nothing else. But regarding T'Donna, do remember that it's her job to watch over your well-being Cie."

A muscle in my cheek twitched. "I'm aware, and I am not happy about that. How the fuck did you not know she was lying about having my approval?"

There was a tiny shrug. "Of course I knew that she was, but she honestly desired to make the oath. Stop dishonoring her by acting petulantly Cie."

My fingers curled slightly, then relaxed only as I closed my eyes and counted to twenty in Khellish. "Voya... please get me to a bar."

The Quarian snickered as we exited the corridor, wind whipping at our coats as we headed towards the waiting shuttles.

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**Silent Witness**

Home was just like I remembered it.

A wide space separated it from the remainder of the city around the district, a wide killing field kept free of construction. Originally it was intended to keep us trapped inside, but in more modern times it was more to keep everyone else out. Beyond the open space was a three story, reddish colored wall.
Atop it, guards and combat mechs constantly patrolled back and forth, more than a few of both noticing us and stopping their routes in case the four of us were about to try to storm the walls.

Although that would probably be less suicidal than some of the crap we did on Redcliffe, come to think of it.

Though the wall patrol was an active deterrent, the real one was the decorations hanging from the ramparts. Corpses from several species dangled from ropes, words painted against the walls beside them telling their crimes. 'Slaver' and 'Trespasser' were the most common, though here and there 'Murderer' was also thrown in. There were fewer than usual though... maybe outsiders had finally started to get the message.

"Lovely place." Shyeel murmured as we left Celthani proper and began to approach the gates. The massive doors where open, given that it was mid-afternoon, to let what foot traffic there was move in and out of the district. "The rotting bodies go well with the rust."

"It's paint." I corrected her, "The walls are built from stone."

"Way to miss my point Voya." The scarred Asari exhaled. "Cie?"

"She said we'll be fine." He reminded her disinterestedly as he adjusted the backpack holding his armor. His small green eyes were more focused on the guards fanning out towards us from the gate rather than at the bodies. "Voya?"

Letting out a slow exhale, I carefully reached up and removed my re-breathing mask. Attaching it to my belt, I shook my head a bit to loosen up my hair, and resisted the urge to lick my lips in irritation. Keelah but this particular tradition had always annoyed me. "We'll be fine. Don't say anything unless I indicate otherwise."

The guards, eight of them in total, met us about thirty meters out from the gate. All were in locally made heavy armor, and all of them had their weapons drawn. They didn't say anything at first, simply spreading out in a loose semicircle that made it clear that we were to stop as one of them moved to directly block my path.

He was tall, only a little shorter than Cie, but his height wasn't what I was focused on. Instead I pointedly let my eyes drop to his chest, where his own accomplishments hung from a simple necklace. Three Turian claws, a single shard from a Krogan crest, and what might have been an Asari finger bone.

Sniffing disdainfully, I strode forwards until I was right in front of him, pointedly fingering my own necklace with its twenty plus Krogan crests. It took me a moment to recall the proper phrase, but I managed without too long of a delay. "A huntress returns to her home after years afield. Let the gates open so that she might rest in peace."

The male in front of me shifted once, then reached up and removed his helmet. His own stiff white hair spilled down, slightly crumpled from his headgear, but his sideburns were long and straight. Lidded eyes took in my own trophies, his lips curling in decisive approval. "A mighty huntress indeed, if claimed from kills rather than taken from rotted corpses."

I let my own eyes narrow, my upper lip pull back to show him my teeth. "Imply that I have forsaken my calling again, and your hair will be woven around these plates. It would go well with the color."

The small grin became wider as he bowed his head. "Spoken like a true huntress. Might I have your name?"
"Voya'chi vas Xentha." I replied before vaguely waving an arm behind me. "And alien guests. I need them added to the lists so they can come and go."

His eyes flicked to them, but he held one hand up to ask for patience. His omni-tool spun to life as he looked up my name, eventually grunting when he found it. "You've been gone quite a while, Chi."

I narrowed my eyes. "Yes."

"No explanation?" A finger made the crests on my neck clack quietly against one another, reminding him of just who he was fucking talking to. He glanced down at them, then grunted and shut the wrist computer down. "Very well. Your guests will be added to the approved list, but you will be held responsible for their actions."

"Obviously." I turned my nose up at him despite the differences in our heights. "And any who harass them will be responsible for what they receive. My commanding officer could use a few more trophies, though I doubt any of our people would be worth his time."

The guard gave Cie a skeptical glance, in particular glancing at the pair of crest shards on his own necklace. I glanced back as well, his expression was carefully neutral but I knew him well enough to see his wariness at our sudden attention. "A mere pair of Krogan?"

"Hardly." My arms crossed as I turned back to the guard. "Blood Pack Berserkers, simple Krogan aren't worth his time."

His skepticism only grew at that declaration. "And who do you claim him to be?"

"Cieran Kean, Commander of the Silver Blades and Reyja'krem of the Pillars of Strength." Even though I couldn't see him I could imagine Cieran's fingers twitching in discomfort at the full titles. The thought made me grin, the ass deserved it after the shit he'd implied at the palace.

One of the other guards grunted quietly, her voice intrigued. "I recognize him, from the Badass Weekly issue about Redcliffe. The cover had him and that priest meditating during an artillery barrage."

I did my best not to grin about that. Cie had all but thrown a fit when he'd found out that Chang had sold them that photo. "The same."

The guard leader glanced at the woman who'd spoken. "He has a reputation?"

"An honorable one." She assured him. "Supposedly he rescued one of our people from slavery. That you?"

I licked my lips irritably. I didn't care what Ghai said about needed to accept those memories, I'd just as soon avoid remembering that at all. It always made it... harder to stay in control. "And he helped me kill those responsible. They will behave provided they are treated respectfully in turn."

The man in front of me took a few moments to process that before nodding solemnly, stepping aside as he voiced the traditional reply he could have just fucking said to start with. "Then return to your home, honored huntress. Let our walls protect you while you rest."

I bowed my head in return, then waved for the others to follow as I walked towards the gate. The guards all shifted out of our way, but I could hear them following in our wake in order to return to their posts.

Cie's long human legs quickly brought him up on my left side, his voice low and moderately
annoyed. "What the fuck was that about?"

"Tradition." I replied irritably. "Establishing our credentials as dangerous hunters. They can't just let anyone in, and it helps to weed out flotilla trash trying to sneak around."

Not that that ever really happened, but paranoia was a bit of a cultural trait.

"All right..." He drawled as we moved through the opening in the thick wall, "but why focus on me?"

I rolled my eyes. Honestly, he was my only real friend, the big idiot didn't count, but he was a giant moron sometimes. "Because you are the most dangerous of us, and me being around you enhances my image. Obviously."

From his expression he didn't think it was obvious at all, but then again he was only a human, and a male besides. Some faults had to be accounted for and accepted without violence. Which was rather regrettable, but some things had to be given up for friendship. And besides, there was something far more important for me to focus on right now.

For the first time in four years, I was home.

The hive of the Old District stretched out from and above us, the multistory buildings built in the ancient style. Countless arched bridges and ramps connected the upper stories, aircars proceeding slowly and only down predetermined paths that bounced up and down to avoid them. The smell of cooking food tickled my nose, and wrinkled Cieran's, the open-air restaurants and cafes that we preferred filling the air with advertisements for their products.

But most important were the people. My people. Wearing actual clothing rather than suits or armor, their manes long and free. Some decorated it with color, others left it white. People were sitting at tables on the side of the street as they ate and talked with one another, walking home from stores or work, or gawking at me and the three aliens entering through the gate. After all, it wasn't everyday that a trophy-taker returned home, especially not with strange companions following her.

"Interesting." My friend murmured quietly as he looked around. If he was bothered by being stared at, he didn't show it. Then again he was from Illium, and was probably used to being the only human in sight at any given time. Neither the big idiot nor Shyeel looked nearly as comfortable, and both of them shifted a little closer to us as murmurs joined the stares. "Where's the bar?"

I consulted my memories. The one I had in mind had been popular with trophy takers, primarily for the privacy they offered us. It was probably still there. "Level three... this way."

We set off at a slow pace, mostly because I was trying to find familiar landmarks and streets rather than because those streets were crowded. After two blocks I managed to regain my confidence, and we picked up a bit of speed as we headed up one of the countless ramps up to the next level.

"You're getting quite a bit of attention." Cieran noted a few minutes later.

I licked my lips to cover a grimace. It had taken me a little while to realize that he and the Asari weren't getting looked at nearly as much as I was. Plenty of men, and a few women, were taking noticing my mane and my trophies, along with my other assets. And they were making sure that I noticed the attention, we weren't exactly a subtle people when it came to one another.

Outsiders? Say nothing, reveal nothing, and keep them at a distance.

With one another? Keelah, but I'd forgotten just how chatty my own people were.
"I'm a trophy-taker." I replied quietly. Four years ago I'd enjoyed the attention, the status, the... perks that came with such a role. But now... now it made me twitch and want to reach for my gun and blades to make sure they were still there. I didn't draw them, Cie and the big idiot would have stopped me, but they were also preventing anyone from trying to approach. Even as I watched a young male visibly shrank back when Cieran turned one of his more potent glares at at him, and Illyan was all but looming over me like an enormous bodyguard.

"We don't exactly have athletes or actors like humans and Asari." I murmured.

"You're a celebrity you mean." He responded. "They know you by name?"

"No, there's only one of us for every area of the district." And I intended to avoid my own as much as possible. Keelah, that was a reunion I had no desire to participate in. Especially with Cie and the big idiot present, they'd never let me live it down. "And only the old hunters have their names spread across all of it."

Cie grunted quietly, politely side-stepping around an elder who had stopped to frown at us as we passed. Behind us, Illyan rumbled a question of her own. "You ever going to tell us just what a trophy-taker is?"

"No." I replied promptly. "It's not something you need to know."

The big idiot let out a low, harrumphing sound. "Well you are one, aren't you?"

I scoffed. "Your point being? That I should tell you everything about my people? Perhaps I'll act like a lonely, whiny flotilla princess and tell you every little thing about how we live."

"It would be the grateful thing to do you little-"

"Illyan. Voya." Cieran cut us off before we could really get going. The ass. "Not while I don't have a drink in my hands."

"Agreed." Shyeel sighed. "Get us to the bar, then you two can try and murder each other while Cie and I do all of the work as bloody usual."

Cie effortlessly caught my elbow before I could turn around and throw it into the annoying Asari's gut, his voice far too amused for my liking. "Sounds like a plan to me."

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**Nos Astra News Tonight**

In local news, the newly formed Silver Blades mercenary corporation has had its founding charter approved by the Board of Directors, resolving the final legal requirement before construction begins on a new compound on the borders of the River District and Khar'shan Minor. Largely funded by Nynsi Shaaryak, the highborn businesswoman, the base will eventually be expanded to hold as many as three thousand mercenaries while also employing supporting personnel.

After the break, we will discuss if this new group has any chance of taking the Blue Sun's former niche in the Terminus systems, and Matriarch T'Shian will analyze the apparent agreement between the Eclipse and the new group.

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**Next up is chapter two: The Egyptian**
And so we've arrived on Xentha, met with T'Ravt, and seen a bit of Xentha. The next chapter will have a meeting that quite a few people have been asking about, so hopefully I'll do it justice. I'll admit to feeling out of practice with writing already, despite having only taken a single week off. It might just be the usual mental hurdle I have when starting a new story, hopefully I'll be able to shake it off relatively quickly.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
After getting our drinks, and finding one of the few hotels in the district that allowed aliens to stay, we'd gone out and followed the only real lead that we had.

Nish'Tulim vas Xentha, once the manager of the Cove's largest slaving market, had proven to be a tired old man once we tracked him down in the local database. A minor bribe had given us his old access codes, which Voya had easily used to infiltrate the modern systems from our hotel terminal. From there, it had been a simple search through the transaction records.

Well, not quite simple. None of them called the slaves by their names, instead referencing them by the chip ID codes they were implanted with. Since I obviously didn't currently have one, that left us searching by more generic criteria. Species, sex, body-mass, that kind of thing. Still, letting it run all night had eventually yielded twelve possible results.

Subsequent extranet searches while we ate breakfast had narrowed it down to three buyers, alongside three slaves whose vague ads described a young human male roughly similar to me. Or at least, a teenaged version of me. Of them, one was a dead end. A midcaste Batarian, he and his entourage had vanished not three months after making the purchase.

Of those, one was a casino manager in the Cove, and was still alive. He'd reported his purchase as an escapee a year or so after the sell-date. Since the Cove wasn't far from the Old District, and since Voya had to get back by mid-afternoon to let Ayle into the city, she and Shyeel had gone to interrogate him. And probably kill him once they were done, the man apparently also ran a slave brothel.

My only comment had been to remind Shyeel that they were on a schedule, and to not let Voya indulge too long.

Which left Illyan and I heading to the Heights, pursuing the other lead, a deceased human businessman named Yeltin. Three years after purchasing his own slave, his mansion and burned down with him and his entire family inside. Considering that they were all dead, all we could really do was investigate the neighborhood around his old home and see if the locals remembered anything.

"So... I'm thinking this is a waste of time boss." Illyan admitted as we departed yet another store whose owners had known nothing relevant. "I don't remember the whole spy investigative thing being quite this boring."
"That's because you never really did any of the actual work." I reminded her tiredly, pulling at my armored coat a bit to left it over a puddle of water. "Why do you think scales and I hated it so bloody much?"

"I dunno." She admitted, her shrug making the coat laying over-top of her armor shift with the motion. "You never really mentioned what you got up to back then."

"The old fish wanted it kept confidential. And there wasn't anything to say even if we did want to talk about it." My lips pursed a little as I remembered just how dull those stake-outs had been. "And consider yourself lucky. We did that shit for months, you and I will only be doing this for today and tomorrow."

I could hear the frown in her voice as she considered that. "That doesn't sound like enough time boss, not at the rate we're going."

"Probably isn't." I agreed. "But if we get a lead on Krom, or that bitch Zero-One, I want to be within sprinting distance of a shuttle so we can pursue them. And besides, with how much time has already passed..."

She sighed as my voice trailed off. "Yeah, I guess that's fair. Four years since you woke up, the goddess alone knows how many that bitch had you for...

"Yeah." My chest heaved as I let out a sigh of my own, our feet slowing as we approached a small diner. "I'd settle for a security cam picture or something, just to know."

A broad hand reached across to rest on my shoulder, the armor creaking a little as she gave it a reassuring squeeze. Well, with the armor on it was reassuring, if I hadn't been wearing it it probably would have been crushing. "I hear you boss. So, what do we know so far?"

I blinked, then frowned at her through my visor. "Haven't you been paying attention at all?"

There was a telling pause before she hesitantly offered, "Yes?"

Counting to six in Khellish, I forced my voice to remain relatively even. "We're looking for a human information broker who might know something about the rich brat who might have owned me, or someone who looked like me anyway. Do you at least remember that Turian telling us their name?"

"Atee-something?"


"I was close. That counts right?" My arms crossed my chest as I stared up at her. "Guess not. So we're looking for him?"

"Her." I corrected irritably. "And yes, that's who we're looking for right now. What the fuck have you even been doing for the last three hours?"

"Daydreaming?" She offered, almost questionably.

"Goddess..." My voice trailed off in a groan. "Some bodyguard you are."

"If I was thinking about taking you to bed, isn't that a bodyguard type thing to do?"

I stared at her for a long moment, then firmly rose my left arm and pointed at the diner's entryway. "Just... get to work."
"Boss..."

"Now." I growled.

Illyan heaved a melodramatic sigh, but obediently turned and opened up the door. Exhaling heavily, I turned and followed her into the place. It wasn't much to look at, consisting of a single bar with maybe a dozen booths scattered along the wall, but it was moderately busy despite it being in the middle of the afternoon. Even better, most of the people present were Batarian rather than Turian. Not that I had anything against Turians, but I found them damnably hard to read.

A quick glance confirmed that all of the battered looking booths were occupied, so we headed to the bar. The man behind it, an aged lowborn with one milky-white eye, glowered at me then at Illyan as she moved up to the bar.

"What do you want Asari?" His voice was a low, ruined growl that matched his wrinkled and battered appearance.

"Information." She supplied, the mirth she'd had in her voice subsumed into a neutral rumble. "We're looking for a local broker, named Nejem."

"Never heard of her." Milky upper-eyes flicked to me. "Get out of my place, I don't serve two-eyes here."

The big Asari stared at him for several long moments, apparently in thought, then glanced back at me. I examined the old man's stance, then shook my head and flicked my hands in rapid-fire Khellish signing.

She grunted, and turned to the patrons, who had largely gone silent after we'd entered. Sure enough, they were all Batarian, and looked to all be lowborn and not particularly well-off ones at that. "Any of you know where she is?"

Silence, heads tilting in disdain as men and women returned to their meals.

"Five hundred credits." I offered quietly, speaking the lower-ranking's tongue. "For the information."

To me it was practically change, but if Xentha's lower classes lived anything like Omega's then I was offering them a veritable fortune. Dark eyes flicked in my direction, postures shifting to something like disbelief, but for several long breaths there wasn't any response beyond that. I was about to signal Illyan to move on when a young woman dressed in rags quietly stood from where she'd been eating alone. "Chit or transfer?"

"Chit." Bringing my hand to one of my coat's pockets, I drew the appropriate denomination and showed it to her.

Her tongue appeared as she licked her lips, head shifting from the right to the left as she bowed slightly. "The human whore operates out of an old machine shop, the intersection of one hundred and eleventh and Basharin."

"Illyan?" I asked quietly.

There was a nod, and then her omni-tool was flashing to life as she checked the address against our map. "It's in this area boss, matches what we've heard."

Which meant she had been paying attention this morning, and that she'd just been trying to get a rise out of me earlier. "Girl, do you know anything else about her?"
"She has several other furred freaks who service her." Illyan's hands started to curl into fists, relaxing only when I flicked a remonstrative gesture in her direction. "And she has many contacts with the Turian business owners. She knows many things."

"How long has she been here?" I asked.

Her lips pursed a little, "I do not know. The payment?"

I tossed it to her. She caught it haphazardly, risked a single worried glance around her, and then fled the diner as quickly as her weak legs could carry her. Two males stood up almost at once, hands on cheap weapons on their belts, and moved to follow her.

Illyan shifted into their path at once, her arms crossed high on her chest. "Don't even think about it."

The idiots did, beginning to draw their weapons as one of them started to snarl something at her. Despite her massive size, Illyan lacked none of the quickness and grace that every Asari seemed to have. If anything her long reach exacerbated that strength, as I could well attest thanks to far too many sparring matches with her.

Idiot number one saw his gun wrist seized in a massive paw, the weapon roughly slammed into his partner's gut before she forced the trigger finger to pull down. People in the diner shouted in surprise as the weapon went off, though none were nearly as loud as the man who had just had a round put into his liver. He went down hard, screaming wildly as he clutched at himself.

My own hand calmly drew my massive hand cannon as her other fist slammed into her captive target's throat, turning his own voice into little more than a croaking gurgle as he dropped, hands reaching for his neck as if that would help him breathe.

"Fucking bi-" Was all the bartender had time to snarl before I negligently put a round through his blind eye. The shotgun he'd pulled out from the bar went off into the ceiling as his corpse tumbled back, silence abruptly falling as the remaining customers proved to be more intelligent.

"Oops." Illyan's helmet was canted down as she stared at her two victims, both dying in their own hideously painful ways. "Crap, didn't mean to kill them boss."

I twitched my right shoulder. "Hardly a loss. Let's go."

We departed, never quite turning our back on anyone. Outside, the young woman was gone, not in sight in either direction. Considering that I didn't see a body, I elected to be optimistic for once and believe that she'd gotten away with her little fortune. After all, she'd had the good sense to run and that boded well for her chances.

"I don't think Ghai would have approved of that boss." My companion offered once we were outside and moving again, following the map on her omni-tool. The supposed location of the broker wasn't that far away. Thank Athame for small favors, I supposed.

As usual, the locals largely scattered in front of us. Like on Omega our armor and weapons were all the indications we needed to show that we were both wealthy and dangerous. I absentmindedly shifted my posture to that of a furious stalk just to make it clear to stay back, though Illyan's looming presence likely helped as much if not more.

"Why not?" I asked as we moved past a small knot of Batarians, their heads bowing in submission as they mistook me for an angry highborn. Which I technically was, though I wasn't advertising my humanity. As the diner's patrons had made clear, the were more conservative than traditional, and the last thing we needed was some asshole trying to message the SIU. "I didn't order you to kill them in
a moment of rage or something. They were idiots who started to draw on you, and the gunshot was luck."

She seemed to mull on that, her head lolling back and forth. "Well... yeah, that's true. But I do need to work on my strength, really didn't mean to kill the second guy."

"You know you're own strength just fine." I countered. "You're just not used to fighting people without armor around their necks like sensible people."

"Like paranoid lunatics who live in their armor you mean."

"Isn't that what I said?" I asked guilelessly.

My friend snorted, bumping a fist against my shoulder plating as we walked. I took that as a slight win. As much as she might protest it, Illyan was about as cut out for fighting and killing as I had been four, maybe three years ago. She had her moments, and Redcliffe had hardened her in a hurry, but she hadn't quite reached the point where she could just kill someone out of hand like I or Voya could. Well, she could, she'd had to kill more than a few people on that goddess-damned planet in cold blood, but it was proving to be the kind of thing that haunted her.

And killing a pair of idiots whose weapons probably couldn't have breached her coat, much less her armor, would definitely fall into the latter category. Bearing that in mind, I kept the banter going. "And don't think that I didn't notice your comment about Nejem being in this district."

"I don't know what you're talking about boss."

A muscle in my cheek twitched once. "That blatant contradiction crap is annoying enough when Voya does it, you don't need to keep imitating her."

Illyan let out a superior sniff that was actually a rather good impersonation of the petite Quarian, though she didn't quite manage to get her voice into the higher pitch when she spoke. "I do no such thing."

It was my turn to smack my fist against her armor, but I snorted as I did it. "You want me to tell her that you're doing this?"

"By the goddess no, she'd try to kill me and you'd probably let her." I didn't bother denying that. Not that Voya actually would go so far as to kill her, but she'd entirely enjoy making Illyan's life extremely uncomfortable, and that was always amusing to see. "We need to take the next right by the way."

Glancing at the street sign, I nodded as we turned onto Basharin street. It proved to be slightly less run-down than the street we'd just departed, and more of an obvious thoroughfare. The number of citizens out and about increased enough that we had to move closer together. People still tried to stay clear of us, but with the addition of decrepit ground cars hauling goods to and from the local shops, their ability to maneuver was limited.

Our banter faded as we focused more on where we were and where we were going, and my eyes flicked around almost constantly as I tried to track the people around us. I caught at least three pickpockets trying to close the distance on us, our obvious wealth making us standout in a different fashion. As we had evidently left the Batarian neighborhoods in favor of Human and Turian dominated territory, my alien body language meant far less and they only backed off when I casually shifted my coast back to expose my right hand as it rested on my holstered weapon.

Now and then Illyan made her own subtle, or less than subtle, shifts to threaten away other
opportunists on her side. It became more of a relief to reach our apparent destination, a dilapidated machine shop that saw my pace slowing as I frowned at it. It was little more than a plain, single-story box, with a personnel door on the left and a vehicle door on the right. The sign out front read '111th Street Repairshop'.

"Boss?" The only member of my cadre had taken several steps before realizing that I'd stopped, turning around in evident confusion.

I stared hard at the building. Even though I couldn't see it, I knew that there would be another doorway in the back. That inside it would prove to contain a small living area tucked away in the left corner. That there should be a refrigerator right around there.

I knew all of that, but I didn't fucking know how. There was no memory attached to the building, despite my brain's insistence that there should be. A spike of pain slammed through my skull as I instinctively tried to figure out how the fuck I knew about a random shop on Xentha.

Fucking Matriarch, Athame crush her and drag her into the depths.

My lips curled in rage as my hands shook several times, stilling only when I forced them into fists and pressed them against my waist. It was a stupid pose but it let me keep control as I laboriously worked my way through a calming technique that Ghai had taught me during our melds, forcing my mental waters to still.

"Boss?" Illyan asked again, my eyes opening to find her right in front of me. "You know this place?"

"Maybe." I growled, evidently not as calmed as I thought.

Even with her helmet I could practically see her lips pursing in worry. "We might be on the right course then."

"Maybe." I repeated, equally as unhappy about that fact. As much as I wanted to know... shit, this wasn't what I'd expected. Seriously, what were the fucking odds that the information broker I was looking for just happened to be at a location I recognized?

Low. Astronomically low really. Celthani was anything but a small city, there had to be thousands, tens of thousands of buildings not including the hollowed out mountains. Unless Athame truly existed and was enjoying fucking with me, this wasn't a coincidence.

My eyes narrowed as I followed the wake that the logic created. "Shit. We shouldn't have worn the coats. Or the logos."

Illyan cocked her head, then seemed to glance at the building. "Um... why not?"

Using short, terse sentences, I laid out my thoughts. She mulled over them for a few moments, then exhaled. "I dunno boss. I mean, you're right, beyond coincidence, but it's a big galaxy. You really think whoever this broker is is also dredging for information about you? Or is waiting for you to show up?"

I winced slightly. It sounded even more conceited when she said it aloud like that. "No. Well... shit. I know the galaxy doesn't revolve around me. Maybe they're looking for the Matriarch or the other experiments."

"Maybe." She repeated a little uncertainly. "Well, if there's anyone home they've definitely seen us boss. We staying or going in?"
"At this point..." I shook my head. "Let's see who's home. Keep your eyes open and watch my back, don't worry about being obvious about it."

"Got it boss." Taking me rather literally, she reached behind her back and pulled her rifle free, letting it expand in her hands. "Shit, shouldn't we message Voya and Shyeel?"

Grunting, I mentally kicked myself, then took a quick moment to fire off our location and that we had a lead. Adding a note to summon Ayle and the Blades if we didn't send regular updates, I shut my omni-tool off and let out a tight exhale through my teeth.

Then we crossed the street and went inside.

The interior twinged a few more reactions out of my subconscious, though I honestly couldn't say if they were from my past or if the place just reminded me of Trena's old shop. Though looking back on it, it was probably more of the latter than the former. It had a very similar setup to my first place of employment, with a pair of desks and terminals at either side of the main work area. Tools and spare parts were scattered around the periphery, two human men grunting as they worked on an aircar that had most of its paneling removed.

Neither of them so much as glanced in our direction, which was interesting, though not as interesting as the woman who walked out from the side-room that was right were my instincts had said it would be.

She was of average height, average build, and her black hair cut in a simple bob cut on the sides, but also had a long, heavy braid dangling nearly to her waist. Her clothing was plain, a simple gray shirt with long sleeves and equally drab pants, though both clung to her frame just enough to make it clear that she had some curves. But it was her face, her expression that really took me aback. What looked like naturally tanned skin matched full lips that curled as she approached us, her green eyes crinkling in good cheer that seemed entirely unfeigned.

"Good afternoon." Her words came out in a lilting, rolling language that my translator shifted to Illium-Thessian for me. "Were you bringing in something for us to repair for you? Weapons and armor aren't our specialty but we'd be more than willing to take a look."

I found myself blinking a few times at her... peppiness. A cheerful pollyanna hadn't even on my list of possible encounters when we'd walked in. "Uh, no. We're looking for Atefah Nejem."

"That would be me." She gave me another sunny smile. "If you aren't looking to subcontract repair work, I can only assume that you're looking to buy information Master Kean."

The casual name drop at least helped me shake off the bizarre vibe I was getting off of her. "If you know my name, then you know the answer to that question."

Behind me, Illyan shifted her position slightly, moving to my right as her own focus seemed locked on the two men who'd been working. A quick flick of my eyes confirmed that they'd both shifted around to the other side of the car, where they'd have a convenient bit of cover if a storm broke out. Shifting my gaze around from there, I didn't notice anything else directly threatening until I glanced upwards and realized that the ceiling didn't match the rest of the place. It was tiled, and looked brand new in contrast with the worn, lived-in look of the rest of the shop.

If the Arabic woman noticed me looking around through my helmet, she didn't show it. "I cannot imagine that you would be visiting this little corner of Celthani for another reason. Although, what information might I know that you couldn't find out elsewhere?"
Grunting, I took a casual step towards her, and she just as casually shifted to her left, as if merely giving me space. "You just happen to be working out of this building?"

Her sunny smile faded a few watts. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Who do you work for?" I spoke over her, taking another step. She took another one away from me, again making it look casually polite.

"If I did work for anyone, do you honestly expect me to tell you?" Nejem countered, her arms crossing as she tilted her head forwards and to the right in a direct challenge. The grin was gone now, replaced with an almost grim expression that went well with the Batarian challenge. "Rumor had you as more intelligent than that, Master Kean."

I opened my mouth to counter, but she raised a single hand to stop me as she started to frown. "No, you are smarter than that. You were testing my self control and trying to make me overconfident, weren't you? Maybe even seeing if I was actually in charge by watching to see if I looked at my guards."

My arms rose to cross my chest in quiet creaks of armor as I kept my own chin at the neutral position. When I spoke again, I shifted languages to Highborn, "You know the body language well."

"Thank you." She surprised me yet again by switching to the same tongue, and speaking it flawlessly. "I wouldn't be a very good broker if I couldn't read or understand the most common race in the Terminus, now could I?"

"No." I agreed, still thinking furiously. The comment, small as it was, at least revealed that she wasn't a local, and had been sent her for one reason or another. The most obvious conclusions were that she was AIS or one of the Broker's agents. Probably the former, given that she was working with other humans, and the Broker struck me as the type to rely more on local agents.

Then again, maybe she'd simply been brought in to replace a lost operative...

Another glance at her probable bodyguards confirmed that they at least looked like locals, for whatever that was worth. One had full mutton chops, the other a beard as ferocious as Dietrichs's, and both had let their hair grow down to their shoulders. If nothing else it meant that they weren't so stupid as to be obvious.

Half-closing my eyes, I shook my head sharply as I kicked the paranoid musings back into the sea. Who she worked for was, at the moment, irrelevant. She'd made it clear that she wasn't so stupid as to reveal it, and we only had a limited amount of time to investigate what was now an actual lead.

"All right." I exhaled quietly, and forced myself to relax a little. "I don't really have the time or inclination to play word games, so let's be blunt with one another."

Nejem gave me a little smile, returning her body to a natural human position as her language reverted to what I thought might be Arabic. "I can work with blunt. Are you hunting for information about yourself, or about Anad Krom?"

"Primarily the former, but if you have any on the latter I'd be interested in hearing it." I replied politely.

"Regrettably I don't have all that much on him. It's highly likely that he was a former slave purchased by an unknown party from the Cove's markets, but..." She shook her head. "As I'm sure you've discovered, their record keeping leaves much to be desired."
I couldn't help but snort. "No shit. Did you find actual evidence or just someone who might have been him?"

She raised a small hand and wiggled a finger at me, "Payment before hard data, Master Kean."

My eyes rolled inside my helmet, but I nodded. "How much for the data on Krom, and on myself?"

Nejem cocked her head a little, as though thinking it over. Then a tiny little grin appeared, making her eyes curl again. "Dinner."

I blinked. "What?"

"I've never had dinner with a celebrity before." Her smile grew wider. "Just you and me. You can even pick the location if you're worried I might be trying to entrap you."

"Boss..." Illyan rumbled, her tone displeased. "She's just going to interrogate the fuck out of you."

The information broker shrugged, still smiling, and not denying it in the slightest.

Exhaling, I briefly wished that I could rub furiously at my face with my hands. "What's wrong with credits?"

"I make enough from sales and blackmail, plus my salary." She offered another tiny tease. "And besides, you can always interrogate me right back. You have a reputation for curiosity."

I hadn't known that I did, though it was an accurate one. And... shit. Irrelevant or not I did want to know just who was looking into me and Krom. If my guess was right, and she was AIS, I was going to have some choice words with Shepard. Not that she owed me answers, but it was the principle of the bloody thing.

"Fine." I sighed. "One dinner at a place of my choosing for the information."

Her smile returned to its full sunny brightness and she almost bounced excitedly. "Done and done. Yourself or Krom first?"

"Krom."

She nodded firmly, the grin fading as her eyes went a bit distant. After a few breaths, she nodded again and began reciting words as if reading them. "A human matching his probable height and build was bought by an Asari matching Zero-One's appearance in early 78. I've been trying to locate the sellers but have not had any luck so far."

I found myself frowning a little. "Graybox?"

"Eidetic memory." Nejem corrected me before continuing. "We were able to locate the ship she traveled to and from here on, it departed for Illium after the purchase. Correlating public ticket sales confirm that they continued on to Thessia aboard a public cruise vessel from there."

Huh... that was interesting. Zero-One had been the one to buy Krom for the Matriarch to experiment on? Is that why she'd stuck with him, helped him go rogue? It was definitely possible... especially if she'd learned things about that old bitch that she didn't like.

Illyan evidently had the same thoughts. "Shit. We're going to have to take her alive, aren't we boss?"

"Probably." Which would be annoying. Alive was so much more difficult than dead, which was why Ayle had never bothered taking capture contracts. "And myself?"
Green eyes blinked at me as she evidently dragged her mental ship out of her memories. "What do you already know?"

"Three potential me's, I guess." I twitched a shoulder in a shrug. "One of them was purchased by a human businessman in this district, his house burned down under mysterious circumstances. And this place... is familiar for some reason."

"Andrei Yeltin." She confirmed. Her mouth opened as if to continue before she seemed to wince and hesitate. "I don't know why you find this place familiar. To be honest it was abandoned and conveniently located."

"No information on prior owners?" I asked.

Black hair swished a little as she shook her head. "A middle-aged Batarian machinist, she was killed in a gang war between a human and a Batarian group six years ago. The locals say she was skilled but exceedingly private."

I mused on that for a few breaths. "Ranking? Caste?"

"Midcaste, unknown."

Possibly a friend of mine? A mentor? Employer? All of the above? "All right, Yeltin?"

"Young, rich, and the fact that he was human is an insult to our species." She shook her head. "He was scum, even by Terminus standards, and went through slaves at a rather rapid rate. As far as the one who matches a younger you... We... well, we don't have confirmation that it was you, but... there are signs."

Exhaling a tight, whistling breath between my teeth, I nodded. "Like?"

"It took a few months, but was able to track down some of his former neighbors. They were able to confirm that he purchased a mechanically adept human slave not long before his death. A slave who had obedience problems, and who also seemed to consider himself Batarian rather than human."

My lips pressed together tightly. Cold anger tried to rise in my chest, and I found myself again half-closing my eyes as I used logic to combat the rage. One, the man was already dead, and it was entirely possible that it had been done by my hand. Which was something to feel satisfied, rather than furious, about. Two, if I was going to be angry, it would be when I found out more information, and it wouldn't be directed at Nejem. It was hardly the spy's fault, after all. If anything I should be fucking thanking her for spending weeks and months chasing down leads that I would never have had the time to.

A strong hand fell briefly on my shoulder, Illyan reminding me that she was there. I nodded slightly, and quietly spoke to them both. "Thank you."

"I have more." Nejem spoke, her voice somber. "We found the seller."

The fingers on my left hand twitched sharply. "Who?"

"The Howling Wolves. A long-term local gang, and the only human-centric one in his part of the city." She shook her head a little. "I attempted to question their leadership by proxy, but..."

Illyan grunted. "They shot at you?"

"They agreed to a meeting, then ambushed us. Probably to try and claim our weapons, and the store.
One of my guards died, and the others were wounded." The human woman confirmed quietly, "We fought off one nighttime raid since then, and have to pay runners to bring us food to avoid being jumped."

This time I turned openly to glance at the two men who now weren't bothering to hide how much attention they were paying. Mutton-chops seemed to grunt and raised his right arm half-way up before wincing. Slight as it was, the motion rolled his sleeve down enough to reveal medigel patches wrapped around his bicep.

"So they're local then." Illyan stated more than asked. "You know where their bosses usually are?"

"Besheren and One-Twenty Fifth." Nejem replied promptly. "But there are quiet a few of them, and nearly all of the human population supports them rabidly."

The big Asari mulled on that before her visor shifted to glance down at me. "What do you think boss? Call in the Blades, or just Voya and Shyeel?"

"Voya." I stated quietly, "Call her and tell them to meet us nearby."

"Got it boss." She murmured, dutifully stepping back and working her omni-tool.

I started to turn away, only to pause as I remembered Nejem's payment. "Your extranet address? I'll setup something for that interrogation."

"Dinner." She corrected, not looking terribly surprised at my plan of action. "They'll try to ambush you once they notice you're entering their territory."

"Saves us the problem of finding them." I mused, the cold anger finally breaching the surface as I stopped caring about controlling it. "I'll pay for the interrogation for information on their weapons and what tactics you noticed last time."

"It's... oh fine." She sighed, before quickly laying out what she'd observed last time. Both of her guards spoke up as well, and within the next twenty minutes I managed to come up with a plan. It wasn't much of a plan, but at least it was simple, and in my experience the simpler your intended actions the more likely they were to actually survive contact with the enemy.

And it was really hard to get simpler than 'kill anyone who gets in our way'.

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**Silent Witness**

Our air-car whirred down just outside of the Old District, and I let out a tired yawn as I stepped out of the vehicle.

"Seriously?" The big idiot rumbled irritably, "You're tired after that shit?"

"Of course I am." Reaching up to my helmet, I pulled the armored mask off and took a deep breath of real air. "It was boring. Honestly Cie, you said they were actually competent."

"How was I supposed to know that Nejem's guards killed all of the skilled ones?" He grumbled as he exited the vehicle, waving his omni-tool in it's direction. The taxi beeped almost apologetically as it's VI was reset, canceling the overpriced transaction that we couldn't be bothered to expose our account numbers to pay for. "And their tactics were above average for a gang, they just couldn't hit anything."
"That's what happens when your weapons are held together with adhesive and omni-gel." Shyeel muttered, quietly accepting Cie's hand as he helped haul her out of the car. "But at least that wrinkled ass knew something."

"Something." The human shook his head before reaching up to remove his own helmet. His hair was heavily matted from wearing the thing all day, and I couldn't help but snort a little. "Oh shut it Voya, not like yours is any better."

I glowered at him, quickly reaching up to check. Everything felt all right, but when I tried to shake my head a bit I felt something tug sharply on my scalp.

"Caught in your neck guard." Shyeel reported, the scarred Asari stepping closer. I pursed my lips a little, but allowed her to fix it for me. I wasn't quite as comfortable with her almost touching me as I was with Cie, or the big idiot, but I kept myself from flinching and she politely stepped away once she'd fixed it for me. "Thank you."

There was a deep snort as Illyan shook her head. "Boss, did you hear that? She thanked Shy." I started to growl, only for the smaller Asari to snap at her before I could. "By the fucking goddess, use my full name or I'll help Voya strangle you."

"Strangle her?" I shook my head, hearing my hair rustling properly as I did. "Why would I be that merciful?"

"You wouldn't." The big idiot snorted, "Because I'd smack both of your heads together before you could even try anything."

Planting my hands on my waist, I sneered up at her. "As if you'd see us coming."

"Please, you're a lot of things but subtle isn't one of them." Her head shook as she removed her own helmet, turning to follow Cie as he started walking across the kill-zone. "Besides, shouldn't we be focusing on what we found out today?"

"Cieran is probably a former slave." Shyeel murmured as she fell in on my left, "And equally probably burned his owner to death. The gang bosses don't remember that far back because they've sold too many slaves, which is also why Voya is leaving bloody footprints behind her."

I glanced over my shoulder. Huh. So I was.

"So knowing that," Illyan asked, "What's our plan for tomorrow boss?"

"Ask T'Ravt for her tax records." He shrugged a shoulder in a tiny motion, not looking back at us as we followed him. "She demands cuts from the markets, and tithes from business owners. Plus he owned one of her weapon's plants, she might have investigated his death. Any data at all might reveal how the fuck I ended up in the Matriarch's hands."

"That would be something." The scarred Asari spoke up again, "But it wouldn't tell you about who you were before that point."

"We're a few years too late to follow that current, Shyeel." Cie let out one of those irritating Batarian sounds he was so fond of. "So let's focus on what we can find out."

Blue lips curled downwards, and she gave me a quick glance. I shrugged a little in response to the wordless question. He was disappointed, but I didn't see any of the signs that he was about to break down in either sudden anger or an attack of some kind. Killing the gang who'd probably sold him
into slavery had likely helped with both, letting him work out some aggression against people who most decidedly deserved it.

Not quite the management techniques that Ghai T'Laria would approve of, but I thought it had gone rather well. And she didn't need to know the details anyway.

Yawning, I glanced at the guards as we passed through the gate, none of them doing more than giving us a cursory glance. I drew most of the attention, probably because I was covered in red blood.

"None worth taking?" One of them asked, her voice amused.

"No." I sighed. "Just trash. A disappointing day."

"Always tomorrow." She called after me. I waved a hand slightly, a polite gesture in response to the attempt.

Ugh. But tomorrow would be more data mining, and that was tedious at the best of times. Doing so in T'Ravt's palace or her academy, whichever had the records, would probably be even more aggravating than normal. She'd have her own programmers looking over our shoulders constantly, assuming they let us touch the databases at all.

Maybe I'd be able to make a few excuses and do something else. Probably not hunting slavers, T'Ravt rarely allowed that unless they were so stupid as to try and breach the District or sell one of us. I could always walk the district, reacquaint myself with my own home, so long as I avoided-

Two arms wrapped around my waist, and a young man let out a breathy laugh. "Got you!"

Twisting on reflex, I drove the palm of my left hand into his fingers as I hurled my weight against his grip. He let out a pained sound, holding on for a fraction of a second before letting me go. I half-stumbled, whirling as my other hand went for a knife. Behind me, I heard the others let out shouts of surprise and consternation, followed by rustling and clacking as their own weapons were drawn.

My blade was half out of its sheath before my opponent regathered himself and hit me in a flying tackle, giggling as he did so. I wasn't properly braced for the impact, and went down had with his weight on top of me, arms grabbing for mine to try and stop me from drawing the weapon.

Heaving my legs up and between us, I was about to fling him loose when he let out a yelp of genuine pain and was abruptly hauled upwards.

Blinking rapidly, I glanced up to see Illyan holding him off the ground up by the scruff of his mane, his face twisted in pain as his limbs flailed as he tried free himself. "Ow! Fuck! Fuck! Voya! Help!"

"Haro." The name came out by reflex, and I abruptly felt fucking exhausted. Of all the people I hadn't wanted to see, he was about at the top of the list for a wide variety of reasons. Not least of which was because the stupid little bosh'tet thought hugging me was a good idea.

"Keep him up there." I growled, scooting away from him before gathering myself and rising. "Little keshin deserves some pain."

"Voyyyyyaaa!" He whined, eyes still scrunched closed as his legs kicked some more.

"You... know him?" Cieran cautiously lowered his gun, his body shifting to show confusion. "He's a kid."
"I'm twenty!" Haro tried to make that sound tough, only to squeak in pain as the big idiot hefted him a bit higher off the ground. "Put me down alien! You're going to rip it all out!"

Illyan snorted, ignored my glare and set him down on his feet. His triumphant expression lasted until she wrapped an arm as thick as his leg around his neck and proceeded to keep him from doing much besides struggling to breathe.

I sniffed disdainfully. It wasn't what I'd ordered her to do, but at least he was suffering. While he flailed some more, I took in his appearance.

He'd grown a bit over the last three years, finally reaching my height, though he remained lacking in muscle. He was wearing armor, which was unusually sensible of him, though it was battered and very mismatched. Either he'd been buying it piecemeal or stealing it one bit at a time. But at least the short barreled shotgun on his left hip looked functional and well cared for, and he had a knife riding on the other side of his belt.

But what really drew my attention was the braid around his neck. From a distance it probably looked like a frayed necklace, but up close the white strands made the material it was made from obvious. As his struggles continued, I saw smaller objects dangling from it, clicking against his chest plate with his motions.

"Canines." Shyeel murmured, her own eyes narrowed. "And the necklace is made from hair. Quarian hair."

"Yes." I agreed, half closing my eyes as I exhaled. "You killed them, then?"

Haro stopped struggling, opening his bright eyes to give me an apologetic look. I nodded to Illyan, and she relaxed her bulging muscles enough for him to communicate. "I wanted to wait for you to free yourself, but after the first year... they were trying to get off planet."

I pursed my lips, then shook my head with a disappointed sigh. I'd so very much wanted to be the one to kill them, to pay them back for what had happened to me on Omega. Not that I could really begrudge him for being the one to handle it, he'd had nearly as valid reasons after all, but...

I sighed again.

"Voya." Cieran spoke again, his expression still blank. "You know him?"

"You didn't tell them about me?" He pouted. "Really? That hurts."

"Good." I growled, ire again focused on him. "By the ancestral guardians, stalking us? Grabbing me like that? You're lucky we didn't shoot you."

Haro tried to puff his chest up. "I've got armor. See?"

Illyan snorted over his shoulder. "Kid, our guns are rated to drop rampaging Krogan. Your armor would disintegrate."

Glowing eyes blinked a few times, and he seemed to swallow as he processed that thought. "Oh."

Cieran let out a long groan, then reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Voya, who the fuck is this?"

I licked my lips, then sighed as I ran through a dozen ways to escape this situation before realizing that I didn't have any chance of doing so. So instead of fleeing, I shook my head and waved a hand
between the two of them. "Cieran, Illyan, Shyeel, this is Haro'chi vas Xenthal. My brother."

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**Badass Weekly – The News Channel**

*Hiran, what do you think about the new PMC’s popping up? The Silver Blades in particular.*

*Where do you even start Dave? They’re the only group that got off of Redcliffe intact, and you’ve got one Spirits blessed lineup leading them. I don’t know if Shaaryak is a fighter but she’s definitely got the money to bankroll them, and on the fighting side.. I mean, what’s there to say? Cieran Kean, Ayle ul Massa, Shyeel T’Voth, three Reyja'krem with multi-million bounties from the Hegemony.*

*And if half the stories they’re telling about Redcliffe are true, I wouldn’t want to fight any of think we’re looking at the new Blue Suns?*

*Could be Dave, could be. Give them a year or two and the Eclipse could see a new rival operating right in their own territory.*

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**Next up is chapter three: The Wind**

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**Chapter End Notes**

And so we might people, find out information, and meet another person. Next chapter will begin to reveal some answers about both Voya and Cieran.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it’s as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I watched as Haro's gray skin began to turn an interesting color as his sister strangled him, curses tumbling from her lips as she snarled and banged his head against our hotel room's floor a few times for good measure.

Seeing that Illyan was too busy cackling, and that I wasn't about to help the kid, Shyeel heaved a sigh and slid off of her bed. Padding across the floor she grabbed Voya by her hair and hauled her off the young man, and barely avoided a wild punch as the other alien woman protested being touched in such a fashion.

She wasn't quite fast enough to dodge the second punch, folding over slightly at the impact to her stomach. Growling, the scarred Asari snapped an arm out to block a third punch. Before Voya could try and recover, she hauled hard to force the Quarian to stumble forwards as her own body dropped into a crouch. Recognizing that she was about to be thrown, Voya tried to dig her heels in only to be shoved from behind by her gasping brother.

"I had no idea she was so... open." Illyan snickered from her bed, grinning as the person in question was flung into the wall just above the other bed. There was a pained gasp as she dropped onto the cushion, which grew when Shyeel bounded onto it after her and wasted no time in seizing both of her wrists and hauling them behind her back. "Too bad we didn't know her back then, right boss?"

I snorted, leaning back in the room's only chair, "Personally I thought the story about her trying to break into that cafe was more amusing."

"That was pretty good." Blue lips curled, "Goddess, having to run through the streets with just-"

"I am going to kill all of you." Voya snarled as she tried to rise, only to grunt as Shyeel kept her pinned down on the bed. "Get off of me!"

"No." She growled back, putting more pressure on the Quarian's wrists until Voya stopped struggling as her face twisted in pain. "Not until you've calmed down a bit."

"Aww, is my sister-" Haro started, moving to grin at his sister.

"And you." He shut up as Shyeel turned her glare at him. "Stop antagonizing her before I tape your mouth shut."
He swallowed, tried to recover his cocky grin, faltered when biotic light began to flicker around the Asari's forearms, and glanced away before nodding. It was an empty threat, apart from hurling herself around with her biotics Shyeel's damaged nervous system couldn't manage much more than a light show without causing her agony, but the kid didn't know that. She was supposed to have been better by now, but the wounds she'd suffered on Redcliffe had been a rather large setback for her.

I gave them a few breaths to calm down a bit, then spoke up again. "All right, if we go back to the original topic will you be able to control yourselves?"

"Yes." Voya muttered, twisting her arms a bit. "Let me up, I promise I won't kill the little keshin."

"Good." My eyes flicked to her apparent brother. "Haro, as amusing as the stories were, lay off for now."

"Fiiiine." The young man drawled, shifting back to hop onto the room's only dresser. His odd legs kicked once as he got settled in. "Keelah Voya, you always find the most serious people to hang around with. Never any fun."

"And you still have the brains of a ten year old." His sister growled as Shyeel got off of her, though the Asari remained seated close enough to restrain her again if it proved necessary. "Our parents did a crap job of raising you."

"Being alive is kind of a perquisite for being able to raise someone." He shrugged, some of the almost Erana-esque good cheer fading into something close to serious. It wasn't quite natural on his features, and I found myself frowning. "And I still don't blame you for accepting the calling."

I knew Voya well enough to see the minute flash of pain in her eyes before she covered it.

"They're dead then?" I asked quietly.

"Since I was... three?" Haro shrugged again, "Voya was ten. Did her best for seven or eight years before the calling hit her, then she was either on duty or out on hunts. Sent me most of the money, and our cousins helped take care of me until..."

His hand rose and fingered his macabre necklace.

I glanced at Voya, who's lips twitched to show her dainty canines before she spoke. "They wanted my position in Chi, but the role is held until death or you hit the age of retirement. So they arranged for a supposed target to be located on Omega and made sure Haro passed the information to me."

The story became obvious from there. "And the gang was contracted to ambush you?"

"Yes." Her head shook once, hair rustling quietly.

"Your own fucking family," Illyan all but growled, "They're the ones who set you up?"

"It's not an uncommon strategy... though the fratricidal part of is rarer. Normally just being related is enough to help them out, but I was giving all of my additional income to Haro." Voya twitched a shoulder. "Plus the chance to become a trophy-taker doesn't come up very often, and there's a lot of benefits for being one."

"Like?" I asked.

She pursed her lips, visibly debated answering or evading again, then sighed and shook her head. "About what you'd expect."
"Fame, fortune, and sex?" I guessed.

Haro snorted. "They're also allowed to attended T'Ravt's big ball things, are automatically made officers with shorter contracts if they join her, and they don't have to answer to anyone if they kill civilians in her territory so long as they aren't... critical."

I tried to imagine Voya attending a party like that, having to wear a dress and act like a high-class female. Once my brain finished trying to drown itself with the sheer impossibility of such a thing, I shook my skull a bit to get things back in order. "I'm guessing that's whose hair and teeth you're wearing?"

The young man nodded, reaching up to finger them. "They weren't careful enough about covering everything up. I found the details in a back-up of the comm-logs. I wanted to leave them for you, sister, but there was a picture of you on the Omega news coverage when the war started. They panicked and bought tickets off world. I made them a farewell breakfast including poison."

"Poison?" Voya sounded disappointed.

"Old man Ghret gave me it." His lips curled in a smirk that made him look far more like his sister. "Took them hours to pass on."

I saw Illyan visibly shudder as Shyeel sighed and shook her head. For her part Voya looked thrilled and very, very pleased with her sibling.

"Good." She all but purred. "You're forgiven for telling those ridiculous stories."

Snorting, I spoke up before Haro could respond beyond a grin of his own. "Any other family still alive?"

Stiff hair rustled as Haro shook his head. "Not blood family, and she never had many friends. I don't know if you noticed, human, but she's kind of hard to get along with."

Voya's pleased expression became a glare while the rest of us chuckled and shook our heads.

"We noticed." I replied drily. "And the name is Kean, not human."

He glanced at Voya, who narrowed her eyes. "He's the one who freed me, and he and his lover helped me kill those responsible on Omega."

"Hey." Illyan protested. "I was there too."

"You were?" Glowing eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I don't remember an oversized sex-obsessed fish."

"Sex obsessed?" Haro perked up at the words.

"Not sleeping with you kid." The massive Asari rolled her eyes, "Don't even think about it."

"I totally am now." He gave her a grin that was probably supposed to be suave but was honestly more comical than anything else. "I mean, you're huge for an Asari, or a girl at all, but you're still pretty attractive."

Illyan groaned. "By the goddess that was terrible. Boss, please say you've got something we could do somewhere else? Somewhere far away from him?"

Shaking my head bemusedly, I waved a hand at Voya. "She needs to come with if we're going to be
going records hunting."

"Will she?" Shyeel asked. "T'Ravt has all but made it clear that she already knows what you're looking for and is moving to protect members of her organization that might have been involved."

I grimaced a little at the reminder. The Lady Warlord had probably worked out everything we were still struggling to figure out long before the Redcliffe campaign had even begun. But just because she knew the information didn't mean that she would share it, especially considering that she wasn't exactly happy with me right now.

And... shit. Thinking about people who knew more than I did about my own bloody past also brought up Nejem's actions and words, as well as the topics that she'd avoided or danced around. She might have done her best to seem open and up front, but at the very least she hadn't told me everything that she knew. Her explanation about the building they'd been in had been simple but very incomplete for one. Another issue had been how she'd quickly continued the conversation and pointed us at the Hunting Wolves. That might have been nothing more than getting me away from her before I could ask more pointed questions, especially if she and her guards had recognized that there wasn't anything that the gang could tell them.

Or if she'd outright lied and had gotten information out of them, and then just killed the members who knew anything after that.

"You think the Warlord would just give us the information?" Illyan asked with a frown.

"I think it couldn't hurt to ask." The other Asari rolled a shoulder. "You two could go ask tonight. If she doesn't hand anything over we all could head over tomorrow to go through the records."

"Leaving you with these two?" I lifted my eyebrows a bit as I glanced at the two Quarians.

Voya's mouth twisted. "We don't need to-"

"Voya." Illyan all but growled, her eyes narrowed. "He's family. You owe him a bloody explanation as to what you've been doing for three years, and he owes you the same."

The Quarian glared at her for a long moment, then flicked her gaze to me in a silent appeal. I pursed my lips for a few moments, then shook my head. "We're only going to be in town for a few days Voya."

Her expression darkened. "He's an annoying little hithek."

"Yeah, I'm starting to understand that." I rolled my eyes when Haro stuck his forked tongue out at her in response, "But Illyan's got a point, he's your brother and the two of you need to catch up before we leave again."

"But..." When I simply crossed my arms, she let out a mewling, growling sound and shook her head harshly to make her hair rustle. "Fine."

Haro beamed at her. "I knew you that you lov-"

"Finish that sentence and I will shave you and tell the guards you're a flotilla brat that snuck in." His sister all but snarled. Her brother snapped his mouth shut before glancing away with a hurt pout that couldn't have looked more fake if he'd tried.

Sighing, I glanced at Shyeel, "You sure you can keep them from killing each other?"
"Reasonably." My fellow Reyja'krem rolled her shoulder in another shrug, "I can always knock their skulls together if they get out of hand. They're thick enough, they probably won't suffer any long-term damage."

Illyan snorted, her serious moment evidently having passed. "Would we even notice if they did?"

"I would!" Haro protested. "I want to remember sleeping with such a beautiful creature."

"Creature." She repeated with a groan. "Kid, you really need to work on your lines."

He gave her another grin. "Are you offering to teach me? I know just how I can repay you."

The giant Asari brought both of her hands up to rub tiredly at her face. "Boss, can we please leave? I'm starting to agree with Voya's opinion on her brother and it's making me feel unclean."

That drew a quiet chuckle as I rose from my chair, Illyan quickly hopping off of the bed and grabbing her helmet and weapons. I did the same, wishing Shyeel the best of luck and reminding Voya that cleaning blood out of carpeting was a massive pain in the ass. She'd replied predictably, simply shrugging and saying that she'd just have to strangle him as soon as Shyeel wasn't looking.

Just to prove that they were related, Haro had responded promptly and violently.

"I don't think Shyeel's happy with you boss." Illyan commented after we'd departed, leaving said Asari to try and deal with the mess I'd caused.

"The cursing as the door closed kind of gave that away." I shrugged, reaching around to make sure that my hair was still tucked beneath my neck-guard. Once I was sure that it was, I twirled my helmet once in my hands before pulling it up and over my head. "She'll live. Probably. And you can always take her to bed and cheer her up."

There was a deep snort as she pulled her own headgear on. "Been your cadre for less than a month and you already want to whore me out?"

I could only roll my eyes in reply. "Really? You know I didn't mean it like that."

"I know boss." An armored hand clapped me on a shoulder as we kept moving down the hallway, heading for the elevators. "But honestly, I haven't been with her in a while."

"Why not?" I asked, more to pass the time than for any real intrigue.

"Neither of us have really felt like it." Her armor creaked as she shrugged.

My eyes blinked a few times as I glanced at her. "You feeling all right? Passing on Haro I get, but Shyeel?"

"I'm not that obsessed with sex Cie." She defended herself as our pace slowed, one of her hands reached out to tap the button to summon a lift.

"Really?" I drawled skeptically. "I seem to remember a couple of weeks on Omega when you didn't-" "I remember, I remember." Illyan quickly cut my off, an embarrassed shift making her rock back and forth. "Just... guess I grew up a bit in between then and now."

All of my momentary amusement drained out of me, and I shifted my attention away from her. Apologizing would probably get me hit, and-or yelled at, but it was still my fault she'd come with at
all. If I hadn't asked her to join us, she'd have stayed safe in Sederis' mansion, been able to be with her sister. Instead, she'd come with, gotten involved in shit like Redcliffe...

"I'm sorry." I offered quietly.

Sure enough a hand promptly whacked across my helmet, staggering me more than a little. "Cieran Kean. Stop that blaming yourself shit right now or I'll message Ghai and tell her you're manic depressive."

"She wouldn't believe that." I pointed out as the elevator doors finally opened with a quiet chime, and the pair of us clambered in.

"Mmm." Illyan rumbled the single tone as we began to descend. "Good point. I'll tell her you blew up a warehouse full of slaves because someone said Krom was inside."

I huffed out an amused breath. "We need him alive, not dead."

My companion chuckled, and proceeded to start coming up with even more improbable things to tell Ghai or Trena to get them angry with me. It kept us chatting, and me pleasantly distracted, as we made the short trip from the hotel to the nearest gate. Though we both made sure not to look too distracted as we walked through the Old District. While word had started to spread that we were tolerated guests, it wasn't exactly a small city. According to Voya it had a population up near a million, better than a seventh of the total Terminus Quarian numbers all crammed into the hive-like region. So while the gate's guards might have known about us, to everyone else we were still aliens and thus very much unwelcome.

That we were clearly departing rather than entering, and heavily armed and armored, saved us from anything worse than glares and mutters as we left. I took that as a win, I really didn't feel like killing any more people today.

Reaching the nearest taxi lot, we clambered into one of the aircars. While Illyan overrode the controls as per our usual policy, I fired off a simple alert to T'Ravt's palace that we were en route.

"I'm sorry Commander," A polite Turian replied almost at once, "The Lady Warlord is currently offworld."

"Offworld?" I frowned. "Is there war news I haven't heard about?"

"Nothing major has occurred, it is a routine trip." He continued placidly. "I can forward a message for you, but I'm afraid your trip to the palace will be wasted. May I ask what you require?"

Well... fucking lovely. "I need access to the tithe and taxation records, and any news articles in her archives. Specifically those for a deceased human named Andrei Yeltin."

A long pause followed before he spoke again, "That is... an unusual request for a mercenary commander. Please stand by while I forward it through the appropriate channels."

"Fine." I muttered, but I did it into a blank channel.

"We're just going to sit here, aren't we?" Illyan asked.

"No point in lifting off if we're just going to land again." I sighed, settling in for a long wait. I'd barely stretched out my legs before my helmet radio crackled with a too-powerful signal, making me flinch before sibilant tones echoed behind my ears.
"You certainly didn't waste anytime, Kean." The Lady Warlord mused. "Already found the connection to Andrei's death, have you?"

"Yes." I spoke the word through slightly clenched teeth. "Do I have to keep digging on my own are do you just want to tell me?"

"That would not be nearly so amusing, and regardless, I gave my word that I would not simply tell you." Her shrug was practically visible. "I will tell you that you are following the correct wake."

That was something, I supposed, though it didn't do much to assuage the irritation. "So can we go through the records?"

"The back-ups for data that old is located beneath the Academy, you will be given access to a terminal to perform your searches." She paused for a moment, and her voice lost some of its melody in exchange for a hard edge. "I remind you of your orders."

"Five people who we can't kill." I repeated dutifully, if irritably. "I remember."

"Good. Then I wish your search well, Commander Kean."

The link cut after that simple statement, leaving us to get to it. Illyan managed to look-up the Academy's location after a quick search, the aircar lifting off in a smooth climb. We weren't airborne for very long, spending a few minutes spiraling around the Old District's outer walls before descending towards something like a ziggurat.

It was a far cry from the elegant glamor of T'Ravt's mountainside complex, but the former palace of Warlord Hakar was pretty fucking impressive in it's own right. The lighting probably helped, the sunset's glow throwing the entire structure into sharp relief.

The core of the structure was at least six stories tall, and each corner was topped off by a heavy GARDIAN battery. The raised section had to be several acres across by itself, more than large enough to make the, likely large, buildings spread across it's top look rather small and ordinary by comparison.

"Shit boss..." Illyan breathed as our vehicle automatically steered itself towards a small landing pad. "Look at the wall on the District side."

Frowning, I leaned forwards a bit so that I could. It didn't take me long to realize what she meant. The wall on that side was slightly curved, and extended out from the main structure a few hundred yards in either direction. Those walls were likewise arced, mirroring the curve of the Old District's walls in the distance, though the Academy's abruptly curled back the other way, stretching to the river that boarded it's other side. The open areas inside the curtain walls looked like they were setup as live-fire training zones, with buildings, hills, and what even looked like a small, transplanted forest to fight in.

But it was the curvature that I focused on.

"There used to be a double layer of walls." I shook my head slightly. "With a kill-zone in between them. Want to bet that there were slave processing stations in the kill zone?"

"No." Illyan sighed quietly. "Athame's ass, I don't want to know what kind of crap went on between those walls boss."

"Me either." I admitted quietly. "Nearly three centuries of being trapped in there... no wonder they're culture is so..."
"Brutal?" She offered. "It's a goddess-dammed miracle they don't kill aliens on sight boss."

"Bet they did, at one point in time." Exhaling, I shook my head a bit. "Suddenly I get why they tolerate T'Ravt though."

Illyan grunted. "Yeah... she tore apart half of their cage, and gave them the other half so that they could still have their privacy. It's a wonder they don't act like those stupid cults some Matriarchs like to start-up."

"They fight in her army and don't seem to kill her people. I think that's as close to worshipping her as they're capable of getting after all the crap Halak and his predecessors did to them."

"Good point." My companion murmured as our vehicle made its final approach.

A few breaths later and we were gliding to a halt on top of the thing, our rented vehicle idling as we hauled our armored forms out of it. We'd apparently landed in the middle of a small taxi outpost, with several other cars waiting patiently to be used. It was surrounded by a simple fence, and two guards were hastily rising to their feet near an open gate.

I flicked my eyes between the pair of them. A Turian and a Batarian, usual off-white armor, though there were a few black bands on their shoulder pads. Trainees probably.

"This facility is off limits to civilians." The Batarian informed me. She sounded young, and was trying too hard to sound gruff. Worse, her attempt to shift her head to the right was extremely tentative and shallow. "Depart at once."

Illyan stepped in front of me, then took another few strides to loom over the girl while managing a half decent challenge as she dipped her helmet forwards and to the right. "Reyja'krem Cieran Kean. He's expected."

"Reyja'krem Kean? What..." There was a very un-Batarian squeak as the trainee took a very quick step back. Her partner started to reach for their weapon, but stopped when the massive Asari shifted her attention to him. "You need t-to step ba-"

"The Lady Warlord said we'd be given a terminal to execute searches in your database." Illyan took another step forwards as she interrupted her, all but driving the two of them back and through the gate. "Where is it?"

"I don't... you need to st-stop."

"The Reyja'krem isn't a patient human." I could hear the barely controlled mirth in her voice, though from the way the guards were still backpedaling they were too confused and shocked to notice. "Where is our goddess-dammed terminal!?"

"I..."

"Find it!" Illyan all but roared as she strode through the gateway after them, and I had to bite my tongue to avoid laughing. "Now!"

"Ma'am!" The girl saluted by reflex, then all but fled through the gate and into a tiny building nearby. Her Turian partner hesitated, clearly knowing they shouldn't abandon their post, but also clearly knowing that they had no fucking idea what was going on.

"Kid." I took some pity on him, and waved my hand at the gate as I negligently walked through it. "Return to your post and I won't mention this to anyone."
"Sir." He proved to be a he, and offered us a quick Turian salute before darting around and back to his position.

Keeping half an eye on him via the camera mounted in the back of my helmet, I followed Illyan a few more meters before we stopped to wait for the girl to come back. After a few breaths I quietly chuckled. "You enjoyed that a bit."

Illyan snickered quietly. "Course I did boss. Trena taught me that little trick while we were home. Practiced on Eclipse recruits."

"She would." I found myself smiling a little. "You still got lucky though."

"That she's a Batarian and that you're you?" She asked. "Yeah, but if she hadn't been I'd have just made something up. Not sure if you've noticed, but I'm pretty good at being threatening boss."

Rolling my eyes, I kept smiling inside my helmet until a new thought occurred to me. "Illyan, why did Trena decide to walk you through bluffing your way past guards?"

The big Asari went still. "Um... I might have mentioned my plan to take the oath to you a couple of days before Ayle walked me through it."

Fingers on my left hand twitched. "You told scales before you told me?"

She shifted back and forth a little awkwardly before contritely offering. "Oops?"

"Oops." I repeated tonelessly.

Illyan visibly flailed around for something to mollify me before trying, "You're hot when you're angry? ...that didn't help me, did it?"

"No," I informed her. "Seriously, you told Trena but not the person you were actually swearing yourself to?"

"It...I..." She could only groan and fall silent when the guard returned. The young trainee promptly fell into an exceedingly deep bow, her head cranked to the left so far I thought she might break it.

Once I managed to get her to stop stammering apologies, she revealed that she was to guide us to our apparent destination. Following her to another tiny building, we entered and promptly descended down a long staircase into the ziggurat proper. Given the lateness of the hour, we didn't run into more than a handful of either people. Mostly Turians and Batarians, they gave us confused looks, but given that we were being escorted, none of them bothered to ask questions.

Eventually we reached a tiny library, the lights flickering on as we entered. It was simple enough, a dozen consoles along the outskirts, a pair of powered-down holotables, and several racks of dedicated reader tablets.

"Records room seven, you have full access by the Warlord's order." Our escort bowed again. "You can summon any assistance from the intercom."

"Thank you." I replied politely, dipping my own head respectfully to the right. The guard seemed to stumble, murmur something embarrassed sounding, and then fled again.

"Awww... adorable." Illyan cooed. "Think she wants your autograph on her armor?"

Pulling my helmet off, I glowered at her as I set it onto one of the tables. "You really just want me to
"Of course not." She scoffed as her own headgear was tossed onto a chair, her lips curling a bit. "I want you to... *punish* the disobedient member of your cadre."

"If you're seriously trying to get me to sleep with you, when I'm extremely annoyed with what you did isn't the best time." I told her flatly. "Right now all of the punishments I can think of involve Voya and gratuitous amounts of humiliation."

"Oh." Her shoulders sagged a little. "Cieran..."

My right hand rose. "Illyan, I might not have wanted someone sworn to me, but Ayle is right. You did it and I need to respect it, but *seriously.* If you talked with Trena about it you could have talked with me. Athame's ass you might have even been able to convince me if you'd let Ayle walk you through how to argue it."

Her head fell a little as she broke eye contact. Sighing, I walked over to stand in front of her and reached up to gently put my hands on her head. Illyan seemed to freeze for a long breath as I tilted her head down, my own shifting until our foreheads were touching as we both looked at the floor.

"You're a giant idiot sometimes." I told her quietly, "But you're in my cadre now, which means you're *my* giant idiot. Just make sure you bloody talk to me before doing something like taking a bloody oath."

There was a very long pause before she asked, "I'm yours?"

Fingers twitched again. "Illyan. If you relate that comment to sex in anyway I am going to be very, very annoyed with you."

She let out a quiet little laugh. "Yes sir."

My lips twisted as I abruptly stepped away from her. "And don't bloody start with *that* either."

Her dark blue lips were curled in amusement as she looked down at me. "Yes Tarath'shan?"

I glowered at her in response and said nothing.

"Yes boss?" She tried again.

Arms crossed my chest as I stared up at her.

Her smile widened a little, and she bowed her head a bit to left. "Yes, Cie."

"Better." I grunted in approval as I tipped my own head to return her respectful gesture, "Ready to stop being emotional and get to work?"

"I suppose." She sighed, turning to glare at the terminals in question. "You want the news articles or the tax crap?"

"News." I replied at once, "Enjoy your spreadsheets of dry numbers."

Illyan could only groan as she sat down in a chair, muttering something about already regretting crap as she brought the machine online. Smirking to myself a little, I took a chair of my own and settled in to get to work.
"So." My brother leaned back in his chair, ignoring the quiet bustle of the hotel's cafe. "You don't message me. Don't tell your friends about me. I'm hurt, really am."

"Did I ever message you even when I was around?" I countered with a glower, forcing myself to take a single sip from my drink instead of trying to down the stupid thing in a single pull.

"No." He admitted. "I didn't say I was surprised, just hurt."

Glowering at nothing in particular, I glanced aside to where Shyeel was lurking near the small bar. She'd thought alcohol might make this conversation easier, and she was probably right about that. She'd also thought we'd want privacy, and was definitely right. At least we weren't in Chi, so the locals were minding their own business as they ate or drank instead of swarming us with questions and utterly unwanted advice.

"I thought you were dead." I said finally. "You should be dead. If Vea had any sense in her empty, greedy skull she should have slit your throat while you were sleeping."

"Why would she?" Haro asked me with almost obscene amounts of cheerfulness. "I'm just a sex-obsessed adolescent male who lives to have fun, and who has no common sense to speak of. Totally harmless."

"That's a thin fucking visor," I muttered, "They never saw through it?"

He shrugged, taking a small sip from his own drink. "I spent most of my time working, and I'd try to find parties to invite them to whenever I could. Let me get away into the crowd without having to explain myself."

Resting my left hand on the table, I tapped my fingers a few times against it's hard surface before shaking my head. "Do I even want to know what you're doing for a living?"

"Back then I was cooking and cleaning tables at Mashir's place. After I got this," One of his own hands rose to touch his necklace, "They let me join the wall's guard. I have the evening shifts."

Considering that it was evening, I glowered at him. "Tonight?"

"I've got another hour or two." He shrugged with a grin. "Then you'll be rid of me until I track you down again."

I grunted, electing to ignore the second half of that statement. "I'm surprised you didn't accept the calling."

"You're still alive." He pointed out in return. "And I had to show the elders the proof otherwise they would have killed me for poisoning a trophy-taker candidate."

My lips twisted in disgust at the very idea of Vea or Herli taking my position. Family or not they'd both been idiots, though cunning enough in their own petty way.

"What about you?" My brother asked. "I mean, I've heard rumors, found news articles about you being in an elite merc group, but nothing about what happened when... you know."

The finger tapping on the table abruptly stopped. As a general rule I did not think about anything that had happened on Omega in between my arrival and Cieran freeing me. The few times that I did was when he gave me permission to lose myself in feral rage, the memories serving to ignite the fury
inside my chest.

Ghai hadn't approved of that, but there was a lot of shit that she didn't approve of. And since I wasn't about to let her into my head, there'd been little enough she could do for me besides offering someone besides Cieran that I could talk with.

"Do not ever ask me that question again." I all but whispered, both of my hands curling into fists.
"Do you understand me? Never."

Haro swallowed visibly and tried to lean back further in his chair. "I... I understand sister."

He might have said the words but I was already struggling to control myself, to not reach for my knives as his simple inquiry brought back memories I'd shoved into the darkest valleys of my mind. Of being half out of my mind with fevers brought on by allergic reactions, only barely aware of being thrown onto a mattress to be used like a fucking toy rather than like a living being. The flash of pain when my throat had been cut, the cold that had followed as I'd begun to bleed out. Of being so fucking thankful that I was about to die rather than keep living.

Then waking up with a Turian behind me, bandages around my throat, and realizing that I couldn't do so much as whimper as my living hell resumed.

"Voya." A sharp, commanding voice made me jerk as one hand fell onto my shoulder, and the other onto my left wrist. Both of them squeezed hard enough to make me gasp, and I opened my eyes to see Shyeel standing over the table. I'd drawn one of my knives in my left hand, my skin pale from how tightly I was gripping the thing. Further, I was half-out of my chair, and I could feel my muscles tensing as they prepared to hurl my body at the idiot who'd reminded me of everything I'd suffered through.

Across the table from me, Haro had pushed his chair back farther, and was staring at me with extremely wide eyes. His head was twitching reflexively to make his mane rustle as his instincts told him to try and ward off the dangerous predator in front of him, and he was clearly about to flee.

"Voya." The Asari spoke again, her voice quieting. "You're in a cafe, with your brother. Let go of the blade."

I swallowed and tried to focus. Shyeel wasn't Cieran, she hadn't saved me. Wouldn't protect me. No... no that wasn't right. She was... what did she and Cie call each other? Sort-of friends. It was some kind of private joke between them that they refused to explain.

"Let go of me." I heard myself whisper harshly.

"Not until you calm down." She countered softly, keeping her voice even. "Voya. Calm down, and sheathe the weapon."

Calm. Calm. Calm. I knew what the word meant, it meant breathing. Not thinking. Not remembering. That's what Cie told me, when he needed me to come back from the wilds. He told me it was enough, and that it was time to be calm.

Closing my eyes, I forced my brain to focus on just the act of breathing. The simple process of inhalation and exhalation, letting it lull me into an almost meditative state. It took time, as it always did, but I managed to push the pain and rage back where they belonged, away from my waking thoughts.

"I'm calm." I spoke the words as I sagged in my chair, feeling the Asari still holding me. "I'm fine now."
"Prove it." Shyeel countered gently, "Put the blade away."

Right, the knife. Shaking myself a little, I pulled that arm back, letting muscle memory take over the act of sheathing it on my belt once again. She kept a hold of my wrist the entire time, though her grip was loose rather than constricting. Only once it quietly clicked back into place did she let go of me, stepping aside before sitting at the table's only empty chair.

"Keelah sister." Haro all but whispered, his throat working as he swallowed.

"I'm fine." I repeated with a quiet growl, daring him to contradict me as I grabbed my drink. A small sip burned pleasantly in my throat, but I didn't let myself gulp at it. The last thing I needed right now was to lower my inhibitions. "Just... don't."

"Yes sister." He replied obediently. "Will you still be here tomorrow?"

"We will." Shyeel spoke before I could. "And we'll make sure she actually stays in touch this time."

A forked tongue licked his lips, a nervous habit he'd picked up from me, but he bowed his head as she stood. "Thank you."

Giving me a half-concerned, half-fearful glance, my brother fled from the thing that had once been his sister without a goodbye. Another bad habit I'd taught him. I watched him go, feeling beyond fucking exhausted. The companion on my left shook her head tiredly and pulled several credit chits out before dropping them on the table.

Getting the message, I collected my drink and rose, ignoring the myriad stares from the locals as we walked back into the hotel proper. We didn't say anything on our way back to our hotel room, nor for several minutes after we'd closed and locked the door behind us.

"That's why you didn't contact him." Shyeel finally spoke up from where she was sitting on the bed she and the big idiot slept on, while I was laid out on the one Cieran and I shared. "You didn't want him to see you like that."

"No." I growled. "I thought he was dead. I told him as much."

"As lies go that's a rather pathetic one." Her scarred head shook. "How much bloody effort would it have taken to send him a message?"

"If he'd been dead, the message would have gone straight to my fucking cousins." I retorted. "Who would have tried to send him a message?"

"A better excuse but still rather pathetic." She retorted dismissively.

My eyes narrowed as I glared at her. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Honestly." She growled back, hopping nimbly to her feet and staring down at me. "Athame's fucking azure, if you'd told Cieran and Illyan that you had a brother, they'd have dropped everything to get you here to see if he was alive. And if you're cousins had killed him too they'd have helped you torture them to death."

The point made me wince, not least because it was entirely true.

"Let me guess." Shyeel drawled. "You thought you failed as a surrogate parent, and that he'd be better off without his monstrous sister in his life."
I curled my upper lip as I glared up at her. "I'm damaged, Asari. I don't know if you noticed or not but sanity is something that comes and goes for me."

"We're all damaged Voya." She sighed, planting her hands on her hips. "My past isn't pretty or fun to talk about either. Illyan's mother was a useless drug addict who left her with a genetic condition and a younger sister that she's had to raise since she was only fucking thirty. Let's not even get into Cie's bloody issues."

"What's your point?" I muttered.

"My fucking point is that you're not alone. That you've got people who care about your fur covered ass. Shit, I still can't believe that you didn't tell Cieran about Haro." Her head shook. "By the goddess, you two sleep together."

"We..." My glare faltered at the reminder. "It's not like that."

"I know it's not." A hand reached down to gently shove me over a bit. I twitched a little at the contact, but slid over so that she could sit down next to me. "But he tells you everything, doesn't he? Athame's ass he told you about the shit that the Matriarch put into his skull before he told anyone else. Even his old lovers didn't get told that."

I winced again at the reminder. Shit. He hadn't, had he? I'd been the first person he'd willingly told. "I'll... apologize to him."

"And stop keeping secrets from him." Shyeel pressed me.

"I... Keelah, fine." I narrowed my eyes at her a bit. "But I don't see you telling him everything either."

"Because he doesn't care." She pointed out. "You know how he is. As far as he's concerned everyone's past is their own and it's not his place to dive in and make waves. Nothing in my past is so significant as say, a long-lost sibling."

"I get it. I get it." I growled at her. "Keelah, I don't need another person acting like Illyan. I don't need a big sister to take care of me."

Shyeel snorted in agreement. "No, you don't. You could probably use a lover, but not definitely not another sibling."

I choked on my own breath for a moment. "I... what?"

The Asari snickered. "You and Cieran, obviously. When are you finally just going to rip each others clothes off?"

"Never!" I spat. "We don't like each other that way. I don't think he's attractive beyond his mane, and the nicest compliment he's ever given me is that I'm 'weird but not ugly.'"

"Mmhmm." She hummed the noise. "And the two of you always sleeping in the same bed is what?"

I hesitated for a long moment, then shook my head a little. I'd told Jacqueline why, way back when, and the reasoning really hadn't changed. "Because... I needed someone there, and he'd sooner cut his own arms off then touch a woman, or Asari, without her permission. And after Rane died..."

The mirth faded from her branded features, and she sighed. "I can guess what he was like. After that, it just became a habit?"
"More or less." I shrugged a shoulder. There was also the side-problem of our nightmares. Sometimes I didn't quite wake up... all there, and he'd proven that he could get me to calm down after. Those had lessened lately, praise the ancestors, but.. after today, my self-control definitely remained a concern. "And I think having someone there helps with his insomnia."

Shyeel's lips twisted. "I noticed that. Maybe we should..."

Her voice trailed off as my omni-tool chimed with an incoming message. Blinking, I shared a quick glance with her before letting it spin to life. A plain text communication from Illyan blinked to life. I read it, blinked, read it again, then forced myself to remain calm.

"What did it say?" The Asari asked, frowning as I shut the thing down.

"They found what they were looking for." I murmured, shaking my head a little. "And they know who we aren't allowed to kill. Come on, we need to get a few drinks for Cieran. He's going to need them."

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**Alliance News Network**

*Debate of the Withdrawal Bill continues to rage in the Alliance Parliament on Arcturus Station. Despite strident opposition from colonial and military support groups, it seems likely that the measure will be passed within the following month. While the Prime Minister remains personally opposed to the idea, once the bill has passed he will be forced to recall all Alliance military assets currently located beyond the Skyllian Verge.*

*In a rare public statement, Commander Shepard informed our own Diana Allers that such a move is both 'short-sighted' and 'nothing more than political cowardice'. The move drew heavy protest from several political parties, with several members of Parliament crossing party lines to call for the Commander to be censured for violating military regulations by attempting to advance a political agenda.*

*Commander Shepard later clarified that her statements were made from her position as a Council Spectre, not as a Commander in the Alliance Navy. She further elaborated that such a maneuver would massively destabilize the delicate balance in the Attican Traverse. After the break, we will bring in several experts to discuss if the Commander was indeed in her rights as a Spectre to offer commentary on internal Alliance politics.*

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**Next ups is chapter four: The Dinner**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Massive thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter. Seriously, whenever I get that many reviews it seriously does inspire me to get working on the next chapter right away. :)

And for the chapter itself, things keep rolling along. We get some more insight into Voya's past, Haro realizes that she's not quite the same person as she once was, and we
end with a minor little remark indicating that we'll soon have some answers in regards to where Cieran is from. Or at least, where his physical body came from and just what his past self went through. From there we'll move onto the dinner date/interrogation, and an old acquaintance will make a most unwelcome return.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
It was well after midnight by the time Illyan and I got back to the hotel, but not nearly enough time had passed for me to even begin processing everything in the files that we'd found. We hadn't even really looked in depth at them either, a brief glance had been enough to confirm at least a couple of things.

"Thanks." I murmured to Voya, taking the drink she offered as I collapsed into a chair in the hotel's cafe. It was largely empty, to be expected given the time, with only a pair of old Quarians who looked like serious drinkers seated at the bar.

Sipping the plain beer, I exhaled as Illyan sat heavily on my right. Her tablet clattered as she set it onto the table, pushing it across for the other two to read. Both of our friends glanced at the device before Voya took it. For her part, Shyeel flicked her attention back to us.

"What did you find?" She asked quietly.

Shifting my own gaze to Illyan, I jerked my head in a 'handle it' motion. Illyan pursed her lips but nodded. "You want it from the start or the ending?"

"Start." The other Asari grunted.

Illyan let out a long exhale, then started with the simple part. "We found out that Andrei Yeltin muscled out two different Batarian arms dealers on planet, and was setting himself up as one of T'Ravt's major subordinates in the city. His relationship with her was apparently growing, and that's important because in a three week stretch around his death, nine other major figures in T'Ravt's organization were found dead."

Voya's upper lip curled. "Someone was killing her supporters."

"That someone probably being her sister." The only member of my cadre nodded. "T'Ravt's people found evidence indicating that a Nightwind team was responsible for at least two of the kills. Inference says they did the rest too."

Shyeel frowned. "Why kill her supporters instead of going after T'Ravt herself?"

I spoke up after taking another sip from my drink. "She was on Omega, negotiating with the Blue Suns about passage through the Theodosian system. They probably figured they could only stay on
planet for a limited period of time, so did what damage they could before leaving."

My fellow Reyja'krem nodded slightly. "Who else did they get?"

"Two generals, three ship captains, three other businessmen, and a visiting Ha'diq." Illyan listed off, "But Yeltin is the important one. His security systems were backed up offsite, so T'Ravt's team had everything up until the place was set on fire."

When she fell silent, Voya glanced up from her reading. "And?"

"And..." She glanced at me before shaking her head tiredly. "And someone killed the security officer on duty, disabled the alarms, and then let them inside. The video itself was deleted, but we found the notes on it. They got his slave collar off, gave him a weapon, and let him help kill everyone inside before taking him with when they left."

The Quarian frowned. "That someone being Cie?"

"That someone being slave H78-844-11." I corrected her. "But yeah. Description matches what I looked like before I grew my hair out."

Voya nodded, but kept frowning. "You helped them kill your owner, which is entirely understandable. Then they took you with when they left... bringing you to the Matriarch."

"Where she did whatever the fuck it was that she did to me." I agreed, setting my drink aside as I realized that it was already half-gone. "We didn't find any answers to those particular questions and I can't imagine that we will on this planet."

Assuming that we ever did. We'd have to track down the Matriarch for that kind of information, and to be entirely honest I couldn't imagine that ancient crone telling us anything. If she had any sense at all she'd have long destroyed any evidence of what she'd done to me and the others. Which left me trying to work my way through the mental storm that the factual evidence had caused.

I mean, I'd thought I'd largely accepted that my supposed memories were simply implanted, that I'd never actually experienced them, but being outright confronted with hard data had shaken me in a way I hadn't really anticipated. Shit... the people I'd thought of as my parents, my friends, my girlfriends... my freaking dogs that I had memories of loving. None of it had actually happened, and I'd apparently grossly overestimated how mentally prepared I was to face that truth.

"I can understand how the confirmation might be distressing," Shyeel spoke quietly, seeming to pick up on my mental state. "But the information itself isn't exactly surprising."

"No." I exhaled. "It's just... shit. Not at my best right now."

"Especially with the other crap." Illyan brought a hand up to rest it on my armored shoulder. "After the Warlord found out a slave was involved, she ordered a full investigation to see if there was any chance that her sister was trying to disguise agents as slaves."

"And the first thing they noted was that my slave ID was registered as a runaway." My head shook slightly. "From one of her own Colonels in fact."

Shyeel pursed her lips. "When?"

"Twenty-One Sixty." Illyan supplied. "He was brought in by a pirate vessel and sold by its crew, registered as a seven-year old human male child. Fluent in lowborn Batarian, a dependent, but with excellent potential to be raised as a translator servant."
"More likely..." Voya shook her head, stopping herself from stating what it was more likely I would have been used for. "You escaped?"

"Was broken out." I corrected. "The security cameras were hacked, but an eye-witness stated that they saw a Batarian woman, midcaste, departing with an alien child. Happened less than an hour after the sale, but before I was officially taken out of the market."

"She must have a quad then." The Quarian's lips twitched in slight approval. "Not even many trophy-takers risk breaching the markets."

"Had." Illyan murmured, "Odds are that she was the owner of the shop that Nejem is setup in. There's no hard confirmation, but given that he's familiar with the building..."

"And that Nejem and her team are there at all." I muttered

"And that." She agreed. "Figure she got him, disabled the tracking chip, and then they ended up in that district. Opens a machine and repair shop, and teaches him everything she knows."

Shyeel nodded thoughtfully. "She was probably your surrogate parent, and it would certainly explain quite a few things about you. The easy familiarity with Batarians, how quickly you said you learned the languages, and how quickly you adapted to working with modern tech."

"Yeah." I nodded, risking another small pull from my beer. "Probably how the next fifteen or so years went."

To be followed by ending up on the wrong side of a gang war. If Nejem's comments were accurate, and I assumed that they were, it was easy to infer what happened next. The gang, having killed her but captured me, does a quick scan and finds the disabled slave chip. Turn it back on and drag me to the markets for the return-bonus on runaways.

The Colonel who'd bought me had died better than a decade prior, so I'd gone at auction to Yeltin. Where I'd decided to try and murder him and had probably gotten stupidly lucky that a Nightwind team was around to help me in the effort.

"All right." Voya, evidently having reading in favor of directly asking, met my gaze with her own glowing orbs. "But that's not enough to make you drink, and it doesn't explain your claims that you know who we can't kill."

All of the fingers on my left hand twitched, curling into a fist as I have closed my eyes. My other hand reached out for my drink, and I took a much longer sip from it.

Illyan shook her head and let out a massive exhalation. "The ship that brought him in was the Cinder, first all-human pirate ship to make it this far into the Terminus. In order to sell at the markets they had to provide their captain and first officer's names... the latter was Charlotte MacKinnon."

The Quarian blinked. "I know that name. She's the current head of T'Ravt's academy."

"Yeah." Blue lips twisted as Illyan glanced at me, then turned back to the others. "She was questioned and offered a short, official statement. That the child was sold at the Captain's orders to pay for repairs for their ship, and that the boy had had no contact with any Asari in the short time since Relay 314 was opened."

Shyeel's expression drew into a glower. "The Captain?"

"The Cinder was battered in a fight with Warlord Cessa's forces in the Dark Rim three years later." I
supplied. "Tried to flee to FTL and the force tore the frigate apart. MacKinnon had already jumped ship and been hired in the Lady Warlord's organization as a flight instructor."

The Asari blinked a few times. "That doesn't sound like something that would be in taxation records."

"No," I stated simply. "But it was in the briefing report collected for the Lady Warlord after Yeltin's death. File history says it was archived on her personal systems, but restored to the general database two weeks ago. She wanted me to find it."

More blinking. "Why? It's not like she owes you, especially after Mascal."

"I have no fucking idea." I sighed. "I really fucking don't. Maybe she's trying to tell me something without actually saying it outright, or maybe she's just amusing herself with little games because she can."

"Question." Voya interjected before any useless speculation could gather the wind. "If MacKinnon is one of the five we can't kill, who are the other four? Other crew who were involved in your sale?"

Illyan reached out to tap a file on the tablet, grunting as she spoke. "Her family. Her, two human sons, one Asari daughter, and a bondmate. Five in total."

I glanced at the file again, before pointedly glancing away from the pictures. The two boys were in their teens, one late, one middle. Both attending the Academy in the hopes of becoming officers in the Warlord's army, like their deceased father had apparently been. Her current bondmate had her old position as a flight instructor, and their Asari daughter was only four years old.

I couldn't imagine a situation where I'd want to kill a fucking four year old, but I supposed that T'Ravt was simply being thorough.

Silence had fallen at the table, as Voya and Shyeel stared at the tiny pictures of the people in question.

"Cie..." The Quarian's voice was weak when she managed to look at me again. "They... Keelah."

My lips pulled in a wan, very forced smile. The Asari were, largely irrelevant, I didn't know either of them. Nor did I actually know any of the three humans present, but... I knew who they looked like.

"You inherited her glare." Shyeel managed finally, her own mouth set in a thin line. "And quite a few other things. They look... less so. Differing fathers, most likely."

"Most likely." I agreed quietly.

"Keelah." Voya repeated, but her tones were shifting from disbelief towards anger. "Her own... how are we going to do it?"

"Voya." Illyan tried to interject, "T'Ravt said-"

"I don't care." The Quarian growled, "She either did it herself or let it happen, either way we need to kill-"

"No." I spoke the word softly.

Glowing eyes blinked rapidly. "Cie, she-"

Sighing, I held up my right hand for quiet. Voya obediently clicked her mouth shut before pursing
her lips as she leaned back. Bowing my head a little in thanks, I exhaled before speaking. "I gave my word to T'Ravt that I agreed to her conditions. We aren't killing her. Or torturing, maiming, or anything else that you're about to suggest."

"Why not?" She demanded.

My left shoulder rose and fell. "First, we'd have to kill T'Ravt's people in order to get to her, and I think she'd take that poorly. Second, if we're going to end up dead avenging something that happened to me, I'd rather it be us killing Krom. Athame's ass, I don't even remember anything that MacKinnon may or may not have done to me."

From her expression, Voya didn't care for either of those reasons. "But-"

"No, Voya." I fought to keep myself from snapping at her. "Not right now, at any rate. After we deal with Krom we can consider what the fuck we can do about her."

Shyeel nodded slightly as I spoke, a tiny gesture that still conveyed approval. "What is the new plan then? Confrontation?"

I shook my head once. "The new plan is for me to interrogate Nejem at lunch tomorrow, and then to leave this bloody city. Even if there's no news on Krom... shit, right now I just need shit to work on. Voya, I owe you at least a week or two of vacation so you can stay."

The Quarian shifted a little. "I... would appreciate that."

I frowned a little at her hesitant response, for the first time noticing that her brother wasn't around. Glancing at Shyeel, I watched as the Asari simply rolled a shoulder in a shrug. "I'll stay as well. Safer to work in pairs, after all."

Which wasn't what I'd wordlessly asked, but it was a true statement regardless. "Fair point."

"Seriously?" Illyan all but growled, her attention firmly on the other two. "He outright says he's not going to confront her, and you two are all accepting?"

Voya rolled her eyes. "He said we can't kill or torture her, so what's the point?"

"I'd rather Cie's mental ship be stable before such a meeting." Shyeel agreed, waving a hand at me as I threw back what was left of my drink. "It obviously isn't. If we went there right now he'd probably try to kill her, and that's a fight with our host that we seriously cannot afford."

I shrugged, not entirely denying it. It would entirely depend on her overall level of culpability, and whether or not I ever actually remembered anything from my prior existence. Intellectually I might have known that the woman was, probably, my birth parent, but there was no... connection was the right word I supposed. She might have been blood but that didn't mean she was family.

Half of my family was currently seated around me, and the rest were back home on Illium.

"That's..." The larger Asari exhaled and shook her head. "Probably true."

The conversation largely died down after that. My friends let me have one more drink, speaking quietly about our plans for the next day. Mostly about how we were going to handle the meeting with Nejem, who was going to be in what position for backup, that kind of thing. It didn't take us long to work out the details, and then we were heading back up to our room.

Getting out of my armor didn't take terribly long, and I promptly collapsed onto the bed. I was tired
and mentally drained enough that I started to doze almost at once, which was a pleasant change of pace from the usual staring at the ceiling routine. I briefly woke up when Illyan laid down next to me, her strong arms hauling me against her side as if I was just a body pillow.

I think that I asked her where Voya was, or maybe it was telling her to stop manhandling me. From the way she laughed I'd managed to mangle both statements into something unintelligible.

"If you're asking about Voya, she and Shyeel went to get a few drinks of their own while they go over the data." Her deep voice echoed in my skull, probably because my head had ended up just below her throat. "Figured you might want someone to stay with you."

That was true, though I wasn't about to admit it. Instead I simple grunted and tried to get comfortable. "I'm fine you know."

One of her hands reached up and idly smacked me on the back of the head. "Cieran Kean. You're not bloody fine and don't try and convince me otherwise."

"Fine." I repeated, only slightly sullenly.

My skull rose and fell as she sighed. "I still think you should go find out what happened from her."

"Why?" I asked tiredly, shifting my right hand along one of her arms a bit, feeling the ridiculous strength under her scaled skin.

"Because she's your mother." Illyan pointed out. "I mean, mine's a worthless piece of driftwood, and yours might be even worse, but you should at least know."

"MacKinnon might, might," I stressed, "have given birth to me, but my mother was apparently a midcaste Batarian woman who I can't even fucking remember a thing about."

Silence except for her thrumming heart and steady breathing fell for a while, but the combination wasn't as soothing as it might have been before the conversation had started. Eventually my pillow let out a soft sigh, "We don't know her name, either. Something you'll have to ask Nejem."

"I..." My voice trailed off as I thought about it. Did I really want to know more about her? Her name would, almost literally, be the only thing that I would know. Logically I should want to know at least that much, so that I could at least offer her some kind of honor for what she'd done. After all, I'd survived childhood on a fairly rough planet, and she'd evidently pounded basic mechanical theory and Batarian culture into my head hard enough that it had bled through even what the Matriarch had done to me.

So why was I bloody hesitating?

"Cie." A broad hand hesitantly shifted behind me, reaching up to stroke my long hair. "You don't have to be so bloody strong all the time."

"What do you mean?" I mumbled into her shirt.

"I mean you're allowed to break down now and then." She murmured. "Especially when you find out that your birth mother may be alive, may be the one who sold you into bloody slavery, and when you realize that your actual mother is dead and you might never remember anything about her."

The blunt statement made me wince... then break down. I'm not sure if I actually cried or just gasped for air a lot as all the crap finally breached my mental walls. Illyan didn't say anything more than as I did, instead she just shifted her massive arms to hold onto me. At some point she stared humming,
the deep rumble and her comforting warmth combining to let me collapse utterly into darkness.

Late morning, and consciousness, brought only a slight improvement my mood. I felt better, but mostly only because it would be difficult to feel worse. Still... waking up on top of Illyan, with her arms wrapped around me was pleasant enough.

While leaving the warmth of the bed, and my companion, was difficult, the familiar routine of cleaning my armor, declining Illyan's request to shower with me, actually showering, stopping Voya from trying to do something violent to Illyan, and then finishing getting ready for the day did help my mental waters calm themselves further.

I still wasn't great, but I was in control again.

Firing off a quick message to the address that Nejem had given me yielded a prompt response, indicating that she'd be thrilled to change the dinner to a lunch, and that she'd meet me at the taxi station just outside of the the nearby district gate. I'd been careful to imply that we'd need to fly to the restaurant we'd be going to, hopefully causing enough of a delay that whoever she had escorting her to reveal themselves once they realized that the diner that Voya had picked was just down the street. That done with, I'd waited for everyone else to get cleaned, caffeinated, and armored up before going over the plan a final time.

Once that was done with, we'd gotten moving. Sticking together until we exited the Old District, Shyeel had departed first. She'd used all of her available cosmetic crap to partially cover the brand on her face, making it look more like a fresh series of cuts rather than a Batarian rune. She'd also traded in her uniform coat for a cheap black ensemble that we'd bought from a street vendor on the way out, turning her from Reyja'krem Shyeel T'Voth into just another Asari merc.

At least, that was the idea. After all, Illyan wasn't exactly the kind of person who could be unobtrusive, and Voya was hopeless when it came to being inconspicuous, so Shy was really the only option to back me up inside.

"We'll be less than a minute away." Voya informed me as we approached the aircar lot. "And setup to watch the front door."

"Still say we should have called Ayle." Illyan rumbled yet again. "We could really use someone to watch the back of the place."

"I want this over with." I sighed, shaking my head a little as I tried to keep from showing my discomfort. I'd left my helmet off, letting it dangle from a strap on my belt, and I felt naked being out in public with my face exposed. "It would have taken a day, at least, for Ayle to get anyone out here."

"It's not that long of a trip." The Asari protested.

"No, but she'd have to change schedules, free them up from whatever they're doing." I shrugged as our pace slowed. "I'd only trust someone like Dietrich or the Kithans for this, and they're officers with subordinates they need to train."

"Oh." She grunted quietly. "Right, the whole responsibilities thing."

Voya let out a huffing breath. "Keelah, you really are a giant idiot, aren't you?"

"Voya." I warned. "You two lay off the fighting and stay focused, I'd rather not be killed because you two were bickering."
Gray lips turn down in a pout, but she nodded. Illyan grinned and looked like she was about to say something before I flicked a glare up at her. She glanced away before pulling her own headgear off of her belt, the armor hiding her features as it slid on. "We'll behave Cie."

"Good." My chin shifted in a nod. "Right, you two get going and keep your eyes open."

They both nodded to me in return, and then got going. Voya had to skip a bit to keep up with Illyan's much longer strides, eventually slamming her fist into the Asari's back to get her to slow down. Sighing, I could only watch as they moved into the growing foot traffic, tracking them thanks to the Asari's height for a few breaths before turning away.

Reaching up, I made sure that my comm-bead was in my left ear as I walked over to the lot, then settled in to wait.

Perhaps ten minutes later a vehicle whirred down from the sky, landing with a quite whine of its engines. Nejem was far more dressed up than she'd been the last time I'd seen her, though she'd stuck with practicality over fashion. Polished but functional black boots to go with dress pants of the same color, their lines subtly broken by what I assumed to be concealed armor plates. A loose gray shirt left her tanned arms bare, but I could see the slight bulk where an armored vest was likewise concealed.

"Lady Nejem." I greeted her politely in Thessian as she climbed out of the vehicle, noting the plain but functional Predator pistol on her right hip.

"Commander Kean." She replied in her native language, giving me a brilliant smile. "No member of your cadre with today?"

"She is otherwise occupied." I gave her a small smile, noting that she was keeping her posture respectful in the Batarian way. Her head a little to the left, her arms held neutrally, her feet planted evenly. If it, and her grin, were intended to put me at ease, it was surprisingly effective, and I found myself relaxing slightly as I pushed last night's shit into the depths of my brain and focused on the now. "No escorts today?"

"They are otherwise occupied." Her grin didn't fade in the slightest. "But if we are to fence, I would prefer it to be over food."

Considering that I hadn't eaten anything yet, my stomach entirely agreed with that line of reasoning. I bowed my head politely, and held my right arm out. "It's not a long walk."

She blinked once in surprise, but then her lips twitched as she smile grew wider. "Then let us get moving."

We did, the human woman staying a half-step back on my left side. Another tiny indicator that she was more than well-versed in Batarian culture and was actively striving to integrate herself with me for one reason or another. An impression that was reinforced when she remained silent during the short walk, simply smiling pleasantly as we moved.

"Being followed Cie." Voya informed me by radio not long after we departed the lot, her voice quiet in my ear. "Batarian."

That was both faster than I thought, and not the species I'd expected. Not if my guess about her being AIS was right anyway... shit now I had to reconsider that theory. She must have sent them on ahead of her own arrival, or else just had them waiting to follow us whenever we departed. Definitely intelligent of her.
Not visibly giving any sign that I'd heard my friend, I forced myself to remain calm and escort Nejem across the busy street and into the bustling diner that was our destination.

A young Batarian man blinked his eyes at us as we entered, his drab uniform marking him as a staff member. "I'm sorry humans, but reservations are required at the lunch hour unless you wish to sit at the bar."

"We have them." I replied, keeping my tones flat and neutral in the Highborn tongue. "Reyja'krem Kean and guest."

His tan skin flushed in surprise, but Voya's belief that this was a traditionalist establishment proved to be correct. Babbled apologies tumbled out as he ducked his head far to the left, his hands grabbing menu tablets and guiding us to an out of the way table in one of the place's corners. Nearly all of the other tables were occupied by the usual mix of Batarians and Turians, with a sprinkling of other species. Thankfully there were at least three other Asari present, beyond Shyeel, and all of them were at the bar. If nothing else it helped her blend in a bit.

For her part, my disguised friend already had her own food, and only glanced at us as the Turians on either side of her did.

I gave her a wink with my right eye to show that I'd seen her, then pulled up short of our designated table to pull Nejem's chair out for her. She gave me a slightly amused look before sitting, watching as I stepped around to my own seat.

"If you don't mind," I asked her quietly, "I'd rather we order our food before the interrogations begin?"

"I entirely agree." She murmured, already scrolling through her menu. It didn't either of us long to place our orders, and barely a breath seemed to go by before a Batarian waitress was delivering our drinks. An iced Asari tea I hadn't had since I was on Omega, and a fruity something or another for her.

I sipped at mine, enjoying the bitter aftertaste the reminded me of a good Illium Rum, then I leaned back in my chair and let out a long breath as it came time to get to business. "So."

"So." The spy replied, her smile blossoming back to life. "I heard that you visited the Academy last night. Did you encounter anyone interesting?"

"No." I replied evenly. "That was merely a fact-finding run, much as your own mission is."

Nejem made a polite humming sound, her head tilting a little in amusement. "You didn't confront her, then."

"I don't see a reason to." I sighed. "Not right now, anyway. But thank you for confirming that you already know everything about me."

"Not everything." She corrected me. "Just more than you seem to know about yourself, at least your life prior to departing this planet with the Nightwind team."

I swallowed a little at the reminder of the question that I really did need to ask. My mouth started to part to force the words out before I forced myself to slow down and think. I did need to ask, but leading this conversation with that information would probably leave me a wreck, especially if it shook any tiny pieces of memory loose.

Better to end the conversation with that question, where Nejem would be departing and thus not
witness whatever happened.

So instead I took a long sip from my tea, letting the cool liquid refocus my brain, and then shifted the topic back to her. "Why have you been so interested in my past?"

"Not just yours," She reminded me with a bemused little smile. "Krom's as well, remember?"

I did, and that gave me a small opening to ask a simple question. "Not sixteen's?"

Nejem blinked several times, her habitual smile flickering. As tells go, that one was fairly obvious, and from the way her tanned skin started to flush she knew it. The sunny smile faded entirely as her brow furrowed in obvious, furious thought as she gave up on the charade in favor of concentration.

"Anad Krom means Zero Nine." She murmured. "We though it was a comment on his Asari partner's alias. Your own name is a name, not a number, but there was a rumor that he refers to you as Eleven. I'd discounted that... but sixteen implies that are far more people like the pair of you, and that you know far more than I'm aware of."

"It certainly seems that way." I mused over another sip of my tea. "But you see, it leaves me with a bit of a conundrum."

Her lips pressed together. "Because I lied to you about why we were in the shop we appropriated, and sent you after a gang whose most skilled members were already dead?"

"Essentially." I replied evenly. I was about to continue beyond that, only for my earpiece to sound off with another report from Voya.

"Five more Batarian, in armor, just met with their plain-clothes man following you." Her voice was terse. "He and two humans that Illyan says are Nejem's just walked in."

That was... entirely unexpected. One or two people to follow her, to make sure that she was all right, that much I'd expected. A full armored squad with disguised back-ups very much wasn't.

Trying to remain casual, I shifted my position, laying my right arm across the table in front of me in a negligently arrogant pose, while my left dropped to my lap where I could flick my fingers to work my omni-tool. Keeping a tech mine loaded and prepped was dangerous, I had the burn scars to prove it, but I wanted to be ready for anything that might be about to happen.

"You see," I spoke again, hopefully making it look like I'd merely been considering my words. "I can no longer trust anything that you might volunteer to tell me. If you want more information about Krom and myself, you'll have to exchange hard data for it."

Nejem frowned, her fingers folding around each other on the table in an almost nervous fashion. "Who you work for?"

"Who you work for, why you're investigating me, and copies of everything that you've found out about me." I didn't actually expect to get all of that, but it was a starting point.

The spy kept on frowning, and was parting her lips to respond when there was a commotion near the bar. We both flicked our eyes in that direction to see two humans, one of whom I recognized from Nejem's workshop, bearing a Batarian to the ground. The native of Khar'shan swore violently as a weapon was kicked free from his hands, skidding across the tile floor as the buzz of conversation abruptly ceased.

I spared it a quick glance and felt my blood go a bit cold. Needlers were nasty weapons, even by
Terminus standards. Essentially a one-shot pistol that fired hundreds of tiny, usually poisoned, fletchets in a broad spray, they were heavily favored by slavers who needed to make an example of someone by slicing their skin into confetti.

And given that neither Nejem or I had a helmet on... the results wouldn't have been pretty.

"Kean!" One of the men, his pistol shoved against the Batarian's skull, barked in a language I didn't know. My translator shifted it to something almost guttural, and it was hard to understand him even with it. "Call them off or I'll kill your man!"

I blinked at the scene, my mental ship struggling to free itself from the word play I'd been preparing to engage in. "Uh, go ahead? He's not one of mine."

The man jerked his head and stared at me in something like shock. "What?"

"He's not one of mine." I repeated, staring at the struggling man who'd been about to kill me. Except Nejem's people had apparently thought he'd been here to kill her. "My people thought he was with you."

"Obviously not... but if he's not ours, and not one of your new Blades," Nejem asked, her own voice confused. "Why was he following us?"

She'd barely spoken the words before a fucking hurricane tore the diner apart, every single window shattering as gunfire blasted them into pieces.

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**Silent Witness**

The big idiot and I had setup in the warehouse across the street from the diner, making our way up to the second level so that we'd have better lines of sight through the broad windows on the upper floor. It was an ideal lookout location, except for one minor problem.

We were essentially in a loft or balcony that overlooked the main floor just as it looked out at the street below, and the only way up and down was a stairwell at the far side of the building. It was connected to our location via a pair of old catwalks, probably indicating that it had been built as an afterthought rather than with the original structure.

Not that it really mattered, it was the lack of an obvious escape route that was currently the primary problem.

"They're jamming us!" I shouted as tracer rounds whipped over my head, easily tearing through the thin walls of the warehouse. "I can't raise Cieran!"

Illyan let out an oath at that, half-rising to fire her rifle over top of the heavy containers we were hiding behind. She managed a couple of bursts before having to duck as the incoming fire shifted in her direction. "They're advancing!"

It was my turn to swear, jerking my head up enough to get a quick glance. Sure enough two very heavily armored Batarians were advancing across the catwalks, one on either side. Both were holding light-machine guns, but they were using them like fucking professionals. Only one was actually shooting in tight, controlled volleys to keep us pinned down while their partner simply walked. They'd open fire either when the other's weapon started to overheat, or when they got around our cover.

"We need to-" Before I could finish stating that we needed to focus on the one who wasn't shooting,
a blue disc whipped just over our heads and exploded in arcs of lightning. Alarms shrieked in my helmet as all of my shields collapsed, changing the dynamic entirely. "Get out of here!"

"How!?" Illyan demanded, "Window!?!"

It was a long fucking drop but what choice did we have? Any moment now we'd be joining our ancestors when they got around the corner and tore us apart with those heavy guns. "Singularity here!"

The massive Asari grunted, power swirling briefly around her before she shot a hand straight up. I didn't watch the power flicker to life, focusing instead on rising to a low crouch and running for the window overlooking the street. Snapping my left arm up, I activated a tech mine of my own, a tiny orange comet flicking out from the launcher on my belt.

Glass shattered as the incinerate exploded on contact, more than a few of the shards tearing at my coat and armor as I moved.

An arm wrapped around my waist, the big idiot's massive strides easily overtaking my own. Before I could think to protest she simply hauled me off of my feet entirely, grunted in pain as both enemies shifted to full auto as they realized we were fleeing, their volume of fire ensuring that at least a few rounds hit her despite the singularity trying to warp their trajectories.

And then... then we were falling.

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**Citadel Morning View**

"In other news, unrest continues to build in the Batarian Hegemony, despite the government's insistence that the situation remains calm. However, confidential sources equally insist that there is rampant murder amongst the high castes, and that sides are already being drawn up. To elaborate, we bring in General Septimus Oraka of the Turian Hierarchy. General?"

"The problem largely began when the Hegemony seized worlds during the Blue Sun conflict. By their own laws, governors for these worlds must be appointed by the Hegemon."

"Who is the current Hegemon?"

"There isn't one. The High Patriarch continues to offer himself as the only candidate, but the Hegemony's military and warrior caste are leading sects that refuse to accept him. Most of the fighting is occurring between these two groups."

"As a military man, would you say that a civil war is indeed brewing?"

"I would be surprised if one didn't begin within the next standard year."

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Next up is chapter five: The Brawl

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Chapter End Notes
Very short Voya section, sorry but I couldn't resist the double-cliffhanger. :) The next chapter will be a bit longer to make up for it, promise. And sorry for cutting his word games a bit short, but old enemies just have the worst sense of timing.

And wow guys... the number and quality of reviews I'm getting on this story is blowing me away. Literally beyond thrilled every time I see a new one pop up. It's inspiring me to write at a much faster rate than I thought I would be for this fic (We're already halfway through the first saga). At the rate we're going we could be almost finished by the new year, so keep them coming. :) 

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

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The First Saga – Xenthan Honor

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The Brawl

Date: 03-17-2184

Location: Xentha, Terminus

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Operating entirely on reflex, I was on the floor before my brain finished processing the fact that gunfire was shredding the diner's windows and customers with equal amounts of disdain. Nejem, proving that she wasn't exactly a combat operative, ducked in her chair but didn't hurl herself down like I had.

Snarling an oath, I snapped an arm out and grabbed her ankle, hauling hard to drag her down barely a breath before a streaking orange blur whirred overhead. The incinerate was more fire than force, which saved us from a quick and ignominious death, and the heavy table absorbed most of the blast.

"Sitrep!" I shouted as I grabbed my helmet off of my belt, tearing the tassel in my haste to get the extra layer of protection over my skull. "Voya!"

"Being jammed!" Shyeel all but screamed to be heard over the roar of noise. A sound that she contributed to when she rose from behind the bar, her rifle in her hands as she fired back at whoever was trying to kill us. She was joined by the surviving customers, who in the typical Terminus style, were cursing up a violent storm and drawing an eclectic variety of weapons to shoot back with.

They weren't having much luck, there was a lot of fire still incoming, and while they were armed, most weren't wearing armor. More civilians were going down with nearly every breath, and the survivors were rapidly electing to stay down and fire blindly rather than risk exposing themselves.

Swearing again, and keeping one arm on Nejem to make sure she stayed curled in a ball on the floor, I risked jerking my head up to try and see who the fuck was trying to kill us. A round promptly skipped off my helmet's barriers, making me flinch and duck before I could really see anything.

"What's out there?" With my helmet on I didn't have to shout quite so loudly, my microphone booming my voice from the external speakers quite well enough on its own. Not waiting for Shyeel to respond, I let go of the spy in favor of grabbing our table and hauling it over a bit so that we'd have more cover from any more mines that came in.

"Maybe a dozen, all Batarian!" The Asari reported. "Five or six are keeping us pinned, rest are moving the crowd away!"

Which would only keep them busy for a short period of time. The people in here were shooting back because they were being shot at. The people out on the streets would be more likely to clear the area,
maybe watch bemusedly from a distance if they were stupid.

"Options?" I asked, "And a vector!"

"Thirty degrees to your right, set for contact!" She replied promptly, "If they've got anyone in the back we don't have options!"

Right, the back we didn't have anyone watching. Shit.

Growling to myself in furious irritation, I inputted the directions she'd given me into my omni-tool. A breath later the incinerate rocketed out from my launcher, whipping hard to the right and sailing out of a shattered window. It detonated a moment later, a volley of gunfire following as Shyeel barked for the customers to shoot at whoever I'd just softened up for her. They didn't have much luck, judging from the cursing that followed.

"Get these idiots concentrating their shots!" I snapped at her before shifting my attention to Nejem's guards. Both were keeping themselves down, and were still holding onto their prisoner. Which was rather pointless, if I was right about who was attacking us, he wouldn't know anything. He'd either be the most junior, and most expendable agent, or a local paid off for the risky direct approach. "Get rid of that idiot and move to the kitchens, they'll be coming in through the back!"

"What are you-" The man who'd shouted at me started to speak, only to jump when I took the decision out of his hands. He half-jumped when the Batarian's skull exploded from the heavy pistol round, decorating his clothing and armor with blood.

"Move!" I snarled before whipping my attention to Nejem, "You, I need you alive, get behind the bar. And... you!"

An Asari customer that I all but pointed my gun at blinked rapidly, her shotgun held tightly against her chest. She was hunkered next to a booth, the body of her Turian date slumped over where he hadn't been quick enough to get down. "Me?"

"Need a biotic! We're going to kill the assholes about to flank us, then we'll have an escape route!" When she didn't move, I raised my voice further. "Or would you rather sit there and die when an incinerate comes through that window!?"

She seemed to flinch at the very idea, but nodded and quickly and scrambled across the ground. I had to shove the spy to get her moving, and it wasn't until she was sort-of mobile that her escorts finally got their asses in motion as well.

Shifting my own body into a crouch, I lunge-walked after them as quickly as I could while staying as low as possible. I'd barely started moving when another volley of tech mines came in through the window, detonating right above the table we'd been at. It was a quick double-sequence of overloads followed by incinerates that would have let me rather singed, and probably killed Nejem with her minimal protection.

Muttering a quiet thanks to Athame on the off chance she'd been responsible for the near miss, I slowed just long enough to grab the would-be assassin's needler before all but scurrying behind the bar where Shyeel was setting up an impromptu firing line. As always, the sound of even one person who seemed to know what in the goddess's sacred name was going on was enough to get everyone operating together.

"Keep a distance between yourselves!" She shouted over a long burst from her rifle, "Don't bunch up! You lot in the booths, keep up the blind fire, space your shots!"
"What's..." Nejem shook her head repeatedly, seeming to get over whatever initial panic she'd fallen into. "What's the plan?"

"Kill everything between us and escape, then find the rest of my team." I snapped, shoving my right fist and it's attendant pistol grip against her shoulder to keep her down. "You, Asari. Name, and can you manage a precise throw?"

"Iriat." She supplied, blue fingers nervously twitching where they were holding her gun. "And yes."

"Good because they're going to throw grenades through that kitchen door as soon as we open it." That was assuming they were running from the same operational playbook that the group on Omega had, but it seemed like a safe bet. "I want you to fling them back at them before they blow up and kill us all. Then you're on barrier detail. Stay behind us and keep these unarmored idiots alive."

There were a few blinks, then a hesitant nod that was quickly followed by a more confident one. The girl had probably been thinking I was going to force her to do something stupid. "I can do that."

Grunting, I shoved the needler into one of my coat pockets after making sure it was safetied before turning to Nejem's men. "You two focus fire on the first opponent you see, and keep your unarmored skulls down."

"Not our first firefight Kean." The apparent senior of the two grunted, shifting his grip to hold onto his Phalanx heavy pistol with both hands. "Jake, take his left. I'll watch the right."

Opening my mouth, I was about to tell them to get moving when another explosion rocked the building, nearer to the entrance. A torrent of oaths came out from far too many mouths, my own included, to be intelligible.

"Doorway!" Someone shouted, their voice rising to a scream in time with the sound of a shotgun booming in the enclosed space of the diner.

I, along with just about everyone else still alive, promptly rose and swung my weapon in that direction. A massive Batarian in midnight black armor, gleaming omni-plates flaring around his critical areas, had just dispatched the lowborn nearest to the door, and was in the process of reaching for a grenade when we lit him up.

It was a sobering reminder that we weren't on Redcliffe anymore, and just how hard it was to kill someone at least as well equipped as we typically were.

Rounds slammed into his shielding and tech armor, the volume of it seeming to startle him more than anything else. They had probably assumed, not unjustly, that their initial volleys of tech mines and gunfire would have killed more of the locals than they had. He seemed to abruptly change his mind, returning his free hand to his shotgun as he backpedaled to get out of the open. His wild shot clipped at least one customer, the Turian going down with whistling howls of pain.

If he'd gotten moving right away after killing his initial target he might have made it, but his barriers gave out just as he was moving through the shattered remains of the door. Seeing the distinctive sparks flying from his armor, I shifted my aim, steadied my grip and put a round through the x-shaped visor on his helmet.

"You four, covering fire through that doorway!" Shyeel snapped even as his body fell, directing her shout towards a group of Turians on her right. They promptly began to fire a steady stream of rounds from their weapons into the air above the corpse, which would at least drain the shields of anyone else trying to use that route. "Cie!"
"Moving!" I called back, "You three, we-"

Mid-word, and in the process of turning to the path that lead to the kitchen, I had just enough time to see the grenade idly sailing out from the back as the doors swung shut. Thankfully Iriat had remembered to pay attention, and there was a sharp shout as the Asari threw her left hand forwards. A blue blur of biotic power flung the explosive back the way it had come, slamming the swinging doors back open as it was returned to whoever had thrown it.

It detonated mid-air with a dull whump of sound, more than a few of the fragments making it back to us. Iriat let out a yelp and got her arm up to protect her face, her personal barriers flaring and keeping her alive. My own protection easily held, the barriers of both the coat and my armor only mildly ticking down from the blast.

Of course, I was far more interested in the startled oaths in Highborn Batarian that had come just as the grenade had exploded.

Freeing my left hand to manipulate my omni-tool, I stormed forwards in the wake of the blast, hoping more than expecting the others to follow. The kitchen proved to be about what you'd expect a diner's kitchen to look like after a grenade had gone off inside, complete with dead cooks on the ground. There were two SIU agents present, both in light armor, one on either side of the central food prep area, and both were still cursing up a storm and visibly shaken by having their own grenade flung back at them.

I focused on the one on my right, mostly because he was slightly closer to the door. An overload slammed into his upper chest, the mine ripping away what shields he had left. Three rounds quickly followed the arced lightning, hammering their way through his light protection and sending him down.

I'd barely finished pulling the trigger on my third shot, ignoring the heat alarm on my gun, when his partner retaliated in kind. An overload whipped around a dish rack as the Batarian dove for cover behind a counter, my HUD shrieking with new alarms as my shields collapsed. Throwing myself to the ground, I only caught part of an SMG burst as he rose and fired accurately in my direction.

The armor plating in my coat took the brunt of the impact, slowing the armor piercing rounds enough that they didn't get through my own light armor beneath. Splaying the fingers of my left hand apart, I inputted a new command before rolling through a pool of blood to my right. I'd barely managed to do so before more rounds shot through the dishwasher I'd been behind, my enemy realizing that nothing in here would stop his rounds from being lethal a half-breath after I'd come to the same conclusion.

Converting my roll into a motion that brought me to one knee, I quickly triggered an incinerate in retaliation, the orange mine streaking through the air before detonating in a quick blast. The only response I got to that was another flurry of gunfire that sent me skittering farther to the right, and added several holes to the hem of my long coat.

Snarling, I was prepping another mine when the two probable-AIS men finally came through the door, Iriat right behind them. Both held M5's in their hands, the blue laser sights flickering in the air as they swung them into line with a target I couldn't see.

They opened fire with the steady cadence of professionals, carefully aiming each shot instead of just rapidly pulling the trigger. The SIU agent lurched to his feet in obvious panic that our bizarre game of had come to an abrupt end, quickly jerking his gun away from me and towards the larger threats.

He fired even as the intelligence agents hammered their way through armor scorched by my earlier
incinerate, and his own rounds just as well aimed as the ones tearing into his chest. The younger of the two men, Jake I thought the other had called him, stumbled and collapsed as blood sprayed from his unprotected throat.

The other man swore, but joined the Asari in putting two more rounds into the Batarian to make sure he stayed down.

"Get his helmet off." I grunted as I scrambled to get my feet properly underneath of me, "And give it to Nejem. Iriat, back me up while I check the door. If there's no one you're free to sail out."

She nodded, looking more than a little eager at the prospect of flight, which I'd more or less intended. Moving around the now shot-up food prep area, I hopped over the corpse, grimacing as I realized how many grenades the first man I'd killed had on him. If Iriat hadn't been around he'd have probably kept flinging them through the doors until we were very, very dead.

Fuck, the only reason I'd shot him instead of the other man was because he'd been a little closer.

Shaking off those thoughts, I held up a hand for the Asari to slow, and carefully approached the place's back door. Listening was pointless given the amount of gunfire still going on inside the building, so I was stuck carefully shoving the door open with one hand while staying as far back away from it as possible. To my vague surprise it didn't explode, or reveal another agent with a shotgun pointed right at my head.

Risking a quick glance outside, I jerked back with an oath as someone nearly took my head off with a burst of gunfire, at least two of the heavy shots snapping my skull back as they hit my helmet's barriers.

"Hold!" I shouted, stumbling back and into cover in case the shooter didn't. "Athame's ass Voya, it's me!"

"Sorry!" She didn't sound particularly contrite, though given how pained her voice was that was understandable. "Not getting out this way Cie."

Swearing again, I stepped back out in time to see her spin around, firing several controlled rounds back down the alley that the door opened into. Illyan was leaning heavily against the wall as she moved, scraping her armor and coat against it, though she was at least managing to keep up a steady rate of fire on her own. But the little streaks of purple blood running down the back of her coat made me snarl and dart forwards.

"Iriat!" I snapped as I moved up to grab the large Asari's waist. She shifted her arms a bit to let her keep shooting as I took some of her weight, and I felt myself grunt a bit as we got moving a little faster. "What's in the other direction?"

"Dead end!" She reported, a slight tremor in her voice. "Another building is blocking it off."

Shit.

Looking ahead, in the direction that Illyan and Voya had come, the alley continued on a good fifty meters without any obvious side passages we could flee down. What I could see was a pair of figures leaning in and out of cover as they sent their own shots back at us. My companions were overheating their weapons to keep them pinned down enough to let us retreat, but I couldn't imagine trying to rush down that narrow of a passage.

"What's it made of?" I growled as we reached the doorway, pushing Illyna towards it and jerking my gun up to fire off a few covering shots of my own. "Metal? Wood? Concrete?"
There was a long pause before Iriat spoke again, "Stone, looks like."

"Fuck me." I couldn't help but snap out the words, noting somewhere in the depths of my brain that I'd actually spoken them in English. So much for the plan of blasting our way through it. "Voya, your barriers?"

"I'll keep them at bay." She grunted as we both ducked inside. "Get the idiot patched up."

"Iriat, support her." The Asari swallowed but nodded, shifting to fire around Voya as her biotics flared to try and protect them both.

Turning away, I quickly moved over to where Nejem and her guard were helping the massive woman down to the floor. The spy looked ridiculous with the too large Batarian helmet on, but she'd managed to get it fastened enough that it would keeper her skull intact. Setting my gun on the floor, I grabbed medigel packets from a pouch on my belt before checking her over.

"Back mostly." The member of my cadre groaned quietly. "Two assholes with LMG's snuck up on us, dropped our barriers and lit us up. Had to jump from the building."

"I can patch them." Nejem offered, and I promptly tossed her the gel. She seemed to be in control of herself again, though she still seemed to flinch whenever a shotgun went off in the next room. In either case it at least gave her something to do with her hands.

"Thanks." I offered quietly before shifting my attention back to Illyan. "Your legs?"

"Might have sprained something." She admitted. "Or broken something, not really sure."

So we were trapped inside of a diner, with an unknown number of well-equipped, well-trained enemies keeping us pinned down, and one of my friends probably wouldn't be able to move much faster than a walk. Likely not a quick or pain-free walk either.

"Wounds are shallow, not deep." The spy reported as she inspected the damage. "The coat and the armor seemed to work well together."

"Good." I muttered distractedly, trying to work through what the fuck we could do now. The impulse to retreat remained strong, but I couldn't think of a way to pull it off. We weren't on Omega, there wasn't a trapdoor leading to tunnels or anything like that, and the diner didn't have a second story that we could move up to.

Which left us trying to hold out here, but I didn't much care for those odds either. We could probably hold the back door indefinitely given the shooting gallery that the alley provided, but the front's primary defenders were unarmored locals who would start surrendering or breaking sooner rather than later. If I'd been in command of actual soldiers my next instinct would have been to launch a sudden and blunt counter-attack to try and take them off guard, but since I wasn't, that option was out too.

"Stay here, help those two cover the back when you're done. Illyan, stay down and get your breath back." I was in the process of rising, making sure to grab my gun in the process, when Nejem's guard caught my arm.

"We just need to delay them." He asserted, his expression determined. "I hit my panic key when we jumped the first assassin. There was a response, the jamming wasn't up then, so we just need to hold until backup gets here."

I gave him a skeptical tilt of my head, then remembered that he was human and clarified myself
verbally. "And this backup can take out an entire SIU team?"

"Yes."

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head once to show that I didn't believe that for a moment. And in either case, as soon as someone actually hit the SIU outside they'd either rush us to finish us off, or retreat and vanish into the city's crowds to make another attempt later. Not that it mattered, because the odds of us living through the next five or ten minutes weren't looking good.

Turning away from him, I pushed through the doorway and was starting to drop into a crouch when something hammered into my chest. Grunting as my barriers shrieked and collapsed, I hurled myself down before I could see much of anything.

"No luck?" Shyeel asked, poking her own helmet up just enough to fire off two bursts before flinching back down.

"No." I grimaced, crawling over to the bar that was evidently bullet-proof. Probably a safeguard for the staff in case of gang violence. "Any kills?"

"Seven more of us are dead." She reported grimly. "I think we got one of them."

"Shit." Letting a tight breath, I shook my head and risked another quick glance around. Sure enough there were maybe a dozen or so customers still upright, shooting occasionally, but mostly keeping themselves secure. There was maybe half as many of them curled under tables or cowering in other locations, very clearly just hoping to survive the next few minutes. That was honestly fewer than I'd expected.

The street beyond looked like several bombs had gone off in it, so at least some of the locals had had ordnance on them, and holes decorated all the buildings in sight. Even as I looked I could see at least two dark figures rise from behind a shredded landcar and began blasting away, principally at me.

Jerking back down, I mulled over our options for a few more breaths before something kind of like a plan came to mind. "I need you to do something stupid."

Shyeel grunted, not having any problems guessing what idea I had in mind. "You want me to flit out there and try to snipe them?"

"Yeah. One charge should get you through the door, a second can get you to a nearby roof."

Bringing my left hand up, I began inputting commands into my omni-tool. "I'll cover you with mines, should let me try and move up closer to the door too."

Her armored fingers flexed around her rifle. She wasn't stupid, she knew that the secondary reason for her to head out there was to make sure that at least one of us might survive this. And with her ability to jump around with biotics, she was really the only one of us who could move fast enough.

"Fine." Even with her helmet I could tell she was grimacing, her weapon collapsing as she swapped it for her Kishok. "They'll have at least one sharpshooter of their own, I'll have to take them out before I can work on the rest."

"You know where they are?"

"No." She grunted. "Athame willing they're watching the back in case we risk bolting that way."

I thought about the idea of a sniper moving into position to cover the alley and grimaced. Warning Voya wouldn't do any good, we needed someone to shoot down that straightaway to stop them from
"Ready?" I asked.

"No." Shyeel admitted. "Let's get this over with."

Nodding, I sucked in a quick breath and rose my voice. "I need steady volley fire, keep your weapons cold, directed out the three central windows!"

The locals took a few breaths to process what I wanted, but gamely gave it their best attempt once they did. Their fire shifted to an almost rhythmic pattern, which would keep their weapons cold even if it did render their shots predictable. And honestly I wasn't even sure how much they were actually aiming considering that most of them were risking a glance up maybe once every thirty seconds or so, and just blind-firing the rest of the time.

That realization made me pause for a moment, then snap my hand out to grab Shyeel just as she was about to get up.

"Cie?" She asked as I hauled her back down.

"They aren't trying." I cocked my head in the Batarian fashion for confusion. "Why aren't they trying harder?"

Shyeel was silent for a very long moment before letting out a confused murmur of her own. "Athame's ass, they aren't, are they?"

"They should have noticed that the guys out back are dead by now, and rushed in to finish us off." I agreed with a frown. "They've got the armor to do it."

"Think they're trying to lure us out?"

I mulled on that, then shook my head. "No, too convoluted of a plan, they're typically more straightforwards. And if they wanted to get us panicking and running, the building would be on fire or a car would be crashing into it."

The words had barely come out of my mouth before something massive slammed into the far wall of the diner with a titanic roar of noise. We were spared the flying shards of glass given that the windows had long been shot out, but dust and more blunt debris quickly filled the air. The defending citizenry shouted in equal parts surprise and pain, and Shyeel and I both fell back onto our asses.

We didn't stay on the ground, there's a reason 'they fell' is synonymous with death in cultures both human and alien. I'd barely scrambled up to my feet when the first SIU agents arrived. They did so in style, appearing in bursts of biotic light that kicked up the dust that had barely begun to settle. The primitive VI that ran my HUD quickly cycled the vision modes to compensate, but the unarmored civilians probably found it terrifying.

Like most trained operatives they went for the immediate threats, the armed men and women closest to them. Both wielded shotguns with a quick proficiency, killing four locals in as many breaths. The problem for the Batarian biotics was that Shyeel and I weren't amongst the group, and were actually the farthest away at that given moment.

My overload flicked out from my waist as I rose fully from behind the bar, the arced lightning ripping at their protection. If we hadn't been stunned and about to embark on an entirely different plan, we might have been able to kill both of them. Shyeel's Kishok let out a whining crack, a streak of light blowing through the helmet of the vanguard on the right. But my own one-handed gunshot
only winged my target in the shoulder, the off-center shot ricocheting rather than breaching the heavy plating.

Before I could pull the trigger again, and before Shyeel's unwieldy weapon could reload itself, the SIU agent blurred right towards us.

The bow-wave of her sudden appearance slammed us apart, my Asari friend actually being flung through the kitchen doorway while I slammed into one of the locals who'd been in the firing line behind the bar, a young Batarian woman who was coughing her lungs out with the dust.

Shoving her away from both myself and the agent swinging a shotgun in our direction, I flung my left arm up and triggered another mine as I did. The incinerate detonated on contact with his shotgun, blasting the weapon out of his hands and making him stumble even as the flare burned the paint off of my own armor.

Snapping my left hand back and over to grip my gun in both hands, I was about to try and execute them with another headshot when they stormed forwards and slammed a fist into my hands. My heavy cannon skittered to the floor as I snarled in pain, before being given an unexpected boost from the lowborn behind me. I don't know if she realized what was happening or if she was just trying to get my weight off of her, but she shoved me up and to my feet just in time for the SIU agent to introduce his other fist to my helmet.

I snapped my right hand up in a reflexive counter-strike at their throat, the thin armor there only slightly softening the blow and forcing them back and away from me.

The brawl that followed after that didn't win any style points. Not that people fighting hand-to-hand in armor usually did, but the confines of the bar we were behind complicated it further because we had no-side-to-side movement.

My opponent let out a low snarl, the tenor of it striking me as wrong for some reason, then threw a quick jab at my own throat. Catching the blow on a forearm, I charged forwards and slammed my right shoulder in their chest to drive them back. I managed maybe a meter before they dug their feet in, got their other arm around to pop a palm into the bottom of my chin.

Letting out a snarl of my own, I snapped my right arm out and grabbed a tea pot, slamming the metal against their own skull. The curse that followed made me pause in shock, primarily because it revealed her to be a her, and pain was my gift for losing focus as she grabbed a pan of some kind and went to slam it against my own head. I got my arm up again, but the wide blow still sent shivers of pain up and down the limb even with my armor.

Growling in fury, and once again focused, I let her throw the weapon aside and go for another hard punch when I leaned right and inside, letting the blow pass my throat. Both hands shot up, my left grabbing her elbow while my right wrapped around the back of her neck. With the headlock in place, I ducked down as she cursed and started to struggle, then shot up and twisted my entire torso around my legs.

The SIU agent was hauled over and around my body, slamming into the ground as I abruptly let go half-way through the throw. She hit the ground in a clatter of armor and crap that her limbs had caught as they'd hit the counters and shelves. Before she could start to roll, or try and get up, I slammed an armored boot against her helmet. Not wanting to risk anything, I stomped on her helmet again, and then again, and then a fourth time just to make sure that she was good and concussed.

For the record, kicking someone into unconsciousness is fucking exhausting, and I staggered a little as I looked around to try and find my weapon so that I could finish her off before she gathered her
wits.

Before I could, another fucking agent all but tackled me, his entire body sailing clear over the bar as both of his feet slammed into my chest and flung me down again. He'd lost his helmet at some point, and there was a long cut across his face, the blood dribbling down as he snarled and grabbed at my own headgear.

Gathering my wits, I shoved my hands up to try and force his away, the combined motion managing to rip the protection off. Dust and crap promptly assaulted my eyes and lungs, and the muted sounds of gunfire and screams abruptly became excruciatingly loud.

Armored fists shoved my own away, and then fingers were wrapped around my throat as he went to choke me to death.

"Waiting for this!" He snarled, putting more pressure on. "Human pretender! Faithless-"

Knocking my hands down had been a bad move on his part, because it had let me grab the needler from my right pocket. The slaver's weapon whirred like a tiny buzz-saw as I shoved it between his arms and into his face.

The gun was intended to put down slaves messily and viciously. What the flurry of metallic shards did to an unarmored face and skull at point blank range... suffice to say that my hair was more red than brown, and I wasted several breaths spitting blood and other shit out of my mouth after I'd shoved the twitching corpse aside.

Spitting at least let me catch sight of where my gun was resting, and I wasted no time in grabbing it.

"Cie!" Shyeel was shouting. "You alive!"

"Yes!" I snarled, trying to get my breath back, stooping down to grab my helmet with my left hand. Shoving it on, I shook my skull to clear my vision. As blurs became solid outlines, I immediately hurled myself down just before a stream of tracers disintegrated the shelving unit behind me.

A furious below of rage was nearly loud enough to make the dust shake, and I heard the order that followed. "Keep that thing off of me, I will deal with the creature!"

I knew that voice...Athame fuck my fucking life.

"Where is he!" I called, flinching as more rounds neatly kept me suppressed behind the bar.

"Advancing-shit!" Shyeel swore, the slower rhythm of her own rifle abruptly breaking off as if she'd just dived for her own cover. "The door, the door!"

Spinning my omni-tool up again, I sequenced out commands as quickly as I could before shifting my position to let the mines fly out from my waist. The little launcher could manage a mine every two and a half seconds, at the expense of quickly depleting it's small power pack, but at the moment I needed the firepower now.

It took me three overloads to find Balak, his snarl of fury giving away his location when one hit him. Of course the glowing blue discs gave me own spot away just as well, and he evidently had armor piercing rounds because they started to hammer their way through the until-then bullet-proof bar to slam into my recharged barriers.

Flipping strategies, I switched to incinerates and began to fire on the move, walking in a quick crouch down the length of the bar and closer to Balak as I did so.
"Shy!" I snapped when Balak's fire increased, the sounds growing as he closed, and his cursing stopped. He was missing more than he was hitting, but he had to have an LMG or something even heavier because my barriers were still skittering rapidly back down.

"I fucking told you Cieran!" The Asari all but bellowed, making me jerk my head up as she dove out of the kitchen doors. She abruptly blurred forwards, and I snapped up in time to see her small frame slam directly into a towering Batarian who was mid-rush. The force of the biotic charge flung him backwards, his massive gun flying in another direction as she nimbly kicked it out of his hands. "Don't fucking call me that!"

I couldn't help but bark out a laugh even as I vaulted the bar, adrenaline shoving the increasing exhaustion into the sea.

Shyeel was already bringing her rifle around, prepared finish off Balak, when there was a flash of motion. She yowled in sudden agony as a submission net wrapped around her, her trapped body toppling as she began to spasm.

The sight and sound sent me over the edge, rage at her pain, at Illyan's wounds, at all the shit happening saw me sprinting forwards.

Balak was struggling to his feet when I got to him, his towering frame wreathed in heavy armor and tech plating. More gleaming panels appeared around each fist, forming massive gauntlets as I started shooting at him from point-blank range.

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**Silent Witness**

Hissing in fury, I whirled around my opponent lashing with one of my knives at his throat again. I had no idea where my rifle was, the *bosh'tet* had shot it out of my hands when he'd biotically charged down the alley at us.

He ducked his head at the last moment, taking the blow across his heavily armored chin in a flurry of sparks. The Batarian snarled, a deep and rumbling sound, still trying to back away to increase the distance enough for him to bring his shotgun properly into the fight. But this time I'd learned from my prior attempts, and as soon as he lifted his head I shoved my other knife up and into the gap at his neck.

Blood trickled out as he jerked, then fountained out when I yanked the blade clear.

I shuddered in pleasure at the sight, and made a mental note to find something to take when we were finished. His teeth, probably, though it would be difficult to properly extract them. Maybe I could-

"Voya." Illyan growled from where she had a bandage pressed against against Nejem's stomach, holding the bleeding at bay while the Asari that Cie had drafted was tearing medigel packets open. "Stay fucking sane. Cie and Shyeel need help!"

"I know!" I snapped, anger letting me return from the dark valleys. It still took me a few moments, but I worked out a quick plan. Turning around, I narrowed my eyes to glare at the human male present. "The door?"

The spy's bodyguard nodded from where he lay on the ground in a small pool of his own blood. His skin was pale, and he'd used a cord from an appliance as a tourniquet around his right leg. But he kept his gun steady in both hands as he leveled it at the door, and I felt my lips curl away from my canines in approval.
Keelah but I did adore working with professionals.

Sheathing my knives, I cast my eyes around until I found my rifle. My grin twisted into a snarl at the sight of the twisted metal, and I had to jerk my Acolyte off of my belt instead. Stalking towards the doorway, I listened to the continuing sounds of gunfire for a moment, then heard a piercing scream of pain in the high tones of an Asari.

Cursing, I tossed out my cautious plan in favor of simply rushing through the door and whipping my head about to try and find the cause.

The entire front of the diner had been demolished, and was filled with bodies from both sides. What was left of a ground-truck was halfway through one of the walls, which explained the massive crash that had happened earlier. A couple civilians might have still been alive, though I didn't bother checking on the cowards. The screaming was coming from the right, and it didn't take me long to find the cause.

Shyeel was convulsing under a submission net, the device sending neural shocks into her system even through her armor. Cursing, I darted across the rubble, staggering once or twice before reaching her. Dropping my gun, I yanked a knife back out and tore the thing off of her.

"Athame... Athame..." The Asari seemed to reflexively curl on herself, still twitching as she gasped for breath.

Blind rage made me snap my head up, whipping my head around to try and find whoever had fucking used a slaving weapon against one of my friends. On the left, I could see two SIU agents still breathing, but they were entirely focused on someone else, a slim figure in white darting around and firing some kind of pistol at them. Dismissing that fight, I turned to the right and paused as I found the... _duel_ was the only word I could think of.

Cieran, his coat whirling around in a dramatic fashion that that Batarian bitch who'd given it to him would have loved, was bobbing and weaving as a stupendously massive SIU agent threw punches at him with omni-gauntlets. My friend's right hand held his oversized cannon, the weapon thundering rounds into the tech plating while his left was parrying away blows that looked like they would have crushed him.

Now and then a glancing blow would connect and stagger him. Though he seemed to recover quickly enough, I could still tell that he was slowing, exhaustion catching up to him faster than his fresher opponent. Cie's gun was an advantage that he was trying to press, but his opponent was fighting like someone born to combat. Like Cie, he never stopped moving, continuously shifting the distance and the angle, taking the most dangerous shots when he was far enough back for his barriers to activate, and letting the closer rounds skip off of different tech plates rather than letting Cie focus on a single area.

Worse, every time he managed to close in on him, Cie was being forced to use both hands to parry away blows, decreasing his rate of fire further than the heat of his weapon already was. He might be able to get in a lucky shot and end it, but it looked more like it was just a matter of time before the Batarian hit him cleanly.

Both of them were too focused on each other to notice me as I rushed forwards, my Asari pistol whirring as I began to shoot. The Batarian snarled violently as the specialized rounds tore into his barriers, shifting hard into a leftwards roll that spun his and Cieran's positions around to force me to stop shooting.

Cursing, I started to dart to the right, to stay at a distance to harass him, only for the _boshtet_ to
change the scenario. Letting out a bellowing warcry, he hunched his shoulder down and rushed at Cie, who promptly did what he always did whenever Illyan did something similar in sparring matches.

He got the fuck out of the way, hurling himself bodily to the left and rolling to a shooter's pose.

Except his opponent hadn't stopped, and was still sprinting straight at me.

Caught off guard, I swore and fired off a wild round as I tried to dive aside. I mostly made it, but a straight punch still caught me in the side. I had enough time to notice that he had some kind of partial exoskeleton over his arms, something to enhance his strength, before the pain hit.

Keelah but it hurt like nothing I'd felt in a very, very long time.

Several of my bones broke with audible cracks along with my armor plating, and I slammed into the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me. Some instinct told me to start rolling despite the pain, and I narrowly avoided another punch that would have shattered my visor and probably crushed my skull.

I tried to roll up just as Cie had, only to promptly collapse onto my ass as pain tore at my chest. My gun fell from my fingers as the arm refused to respond properly, and it was suddenly all I could do to stay conscious.

The Batarian seemed to grunt in approval of my agony, a rumbling sound through his helmet as he dismissed me and turned back to his original opponent just as an overload mine exploded over him. He lurched back into motion, trying to close the distance with Cieran to take the mines out of the fight, and mostly managed it.

I could only watch as an incinerate bathed the fighters in orange light, Cie again narrowly avoiding another punishing blow before the previous routine returned. The advantage seemed to have shifted, with the hand-cannon now a lethal danger to the Batarian's weakened armor, but now I recognized the desperation in my friend's movements for what it was. He might have been taller than me, but humans were far frailer than my people. Even the slight glancing hits he'd taken had to have broken his armor and left him in agony.

A direct hit to his chest might kill him outright.

Groaning, I tried to gather myself. Pain was transient. I'd been in agony before, worse than this. And by my sacred Ancestor's I wouldn't just sit here reeling like a flotilla princess while Cieran fought for his life.

It took my too long to even reach for the pistol again, and longer still to realize that the reason it wasn't moving was because a foot was standing on it.

"Still alive." A voice I could have called emotionless except for a bit of amused disdain remarked. "Impressive."

Narrowing my eyes, I glared upwards. A slender human male, his tiny eyes concealed by a visor, regarded me without an expression on the rest of his face. He was in plain, white armor, and had a holstered gun on his belt. The only weapon he had drawn was a long, slightly curved sword of all things that he was casually resting on one shoulder. I tried to ask him who the fuck he thought he was, only for the pain to make me whimper instead.

"Relax, alien." He was already turning away, regarding the fighting impassionately. "My orders are to... remain polite."
The human seemed to rock on his feet, centering himself, then blurred away from me. And kicked my gun farther away in the process, the asshole.

That annoyed me, but the annoyance was buried in shock as he entered the fight with nothing but a sword.

This time the Batarian saw the new entrant into the fight coming, and whirled about to face him while bringing one arm up to protect his skull against Cieran's gunfire. The newcomer nimbly dodged the wild punch aimed at him, then seemed to spin and bring his sword down in a two handed strike that took the SIU man at the elbow.

The partial exoskeleton and heavy armor prevent him from losing the limb entirely, but the howl of surprised agony and glittering arc of blood as the sword was drawn back showed the damage. Worse for him, the blow distracted him to the point where Cieran could dart in low, shoving his gun into the back of the Batarian's left leg and putting two rounds right through his knee.

He went down hard, more screams making me grin in ferocious pleasure as he suffered in turn. After that, I expected Cieran to finish him off as such a creature deserved. He'd probably follow it up with thanking the newcomer, then rushing about to make sure we were all right like the over-caring idiot he could be.

What I didn't expect was for him to activate his omni-tool, aiming it like a gun at the fallen Batarian.

Or for him to shove his gun right into the other human's cheek and hold it there in a far more obvious threat.

My last thoughts before I lost consciousness were of annoyance. Keelah, but nothing was ever simple...

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**Citadel Morning View**

*In other news, we at CMV are glad to announce that Emily Wong, former guest host, will be returning to our show in order to promote her new project: An in-depth documentary about the lives of soldiers currently fighting in the Terminus War.*

*Who are they? Why do they fight for Warlords? And just how different is the average being in the Terminus? Stay tuned to answers to these questions and more after the break.*

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**Next up is chapter six: The Masquerade**

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay on this one. It took me a little while, and some encouragement from the Blocked Writer, to really get rolling on this chapter. And holy-crap when it comes to the reviews everyone... I'm literally stupefied at how many these chapters are getting. In an entirely good way that leaves me smiling like an idiot of course. Do keep them coming. :)
Next chapter will feature the usual post-battle aftermath and cataloging of the wounds. After that we'll have just two chapters to go in this saga before an interlude (which will be entirely from Trena's point of view; it will also answer an old question)

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"I suppose I should thank you." I growled, trying to keep my arm relaxed as a medic set my apparently broken left forearm. The Asari was wearing the same navy and silver that I did, though without the heavy coat. As soon as she got the bones back into place, she'd wasted little time in getting a brace around my forearm, her motions quick and efficient. I was thankful for the professionalism; I'd noticed that more than a few of the Batarian recruits were struggling not to stare at me when they should have been keeping all of their eyes outwards.

The man standing on my right simply glanced down at me, a sort of quiet amusement coloring his words. "Do you normally hold a gun into the neck of a man you're thanking?"

"I'm not holding the gun." I pointed out, glancing at the massive suit of power armor looming over the three of us. Their massive cannon was shoved very firmly against the assassin's neck and had been ever since our help had arrived. "The only reason you're still breathing is because you faked the distress call that got our medics and doctors here so quickly."

Very quickly. The dust had barely settled before several shuttles had roared down, letting Dietrich and three other Silver Blades in power armor slam into the ground. Two dozen new recruits in more conventional gear had quickly followed them, then fanned out and secured the area while medics and doctors had quickly gotten to work stabilizing everyone. Or in the case of the two surviving SIU agents, tranquilizing them and securing them as prisoners.

A heavy shuttle had landed last, proving to contain a small medical suite that had promptly swallowed Nejem and Voya. While they were worked on, the medics had insisted we at least move into a secure building so that they could tend to the rest of us. Dietrich had, naturally, chosen the same warehouse that Voya and Illyan had been using. But at least it was quiet and got us all out of the street.

The last was important. Shootouts in Celthani weren't uncommon, and I was hoping that this one would be passed off as just another brawl. I wasn't quite ready to bring the Warlord or her people into this situation, at least not until I'd decided what to do with both groups of wounded prisoners that we currently had.

"The only reason I am tolerating this situation," Kai Leng corrected me placidly, "Is because of my orders."
I regarded him flatly for several breaths, mentally running through what I knew about the man. Disregarding what the Matriarch had put into my head, I knew that he and a Cerberus team had taken on Shepard and damn near killed her and her entire team on Carastes. And less than an hour ago he'd killed five SIU agents entirely on his own before helping me put Balak down.

It was entirely possible, if unlikely, that he could kill me and affect an escape even with the suit of power armor right behind him.

Letting out a tight breath, I nodded slightly and lifted my right hand, telling the man inside the armor to leave. He shifted back and forth, clearly unhappy about it, but dutifully lumbered off before I had to repeat the gesture. I stayed silent even after that, waiting until the medic had finished and dismissed herself before shaking my head tiredly.

"I should have bloody seen it." I muttered, reaching up to run a hand through my hair only to grimace. It was still caked in drying Batarian blood, and I reminded myself that I needed a shower as soon as possible. "I got too focused on thinking they were AIS."

The assassin cocked his head to one side ever so slightly. "That is not an illogical assumption."

My eyes flicked up to his visor as I narrowed them in a mild glare. "I'm not going to get any answers out of you, am I?"

"No." He replied expression and tone not changing. "While your actions are largely practical and sensible, you do have your issues. Feeling the urge to repay favors owed is one of them."

A muscle in my left hand twitched, sending a spike of pain up and down the limb even with the painkillers. It was all the more irritating because it was true. Every instinct I had said that I should have already executed the man now standing placidly nearby, but he had gotten us medical attention, backup, and potentially given us a chance to keep his affair hidden.

Exhaling, I shook my head tiredly. "Can I at least get a why, or do I need to guess?"

Kai Leng responded predictably: with silence.

"All right." I allowed. "What do you want in return?"

"Once the agents are stabilized, we will be departing." He informed me. "It would be preferred if we were not intercepted by the Warlord's forces."

Pursing my lips, I grunted after thinking it over. "Whatever ship you have will be contracted to ferry supplies for the Silver Blades from here to Illium. If anyone challenges you direct them to my channel."

There was a tiny nod before he again fell quiet, apparently content to not offer anything further. Instead he simply settled back, keeping one hand on the hilt of his blade while seeming to watch everything and nothing at the same I wasn't about to take my eyes off of him, I settled back against the wall and mulled over just why Cerberus might be interested in me of all people.

I mean, intelligence reports I could understand, I was starting to build a reputation despite my lack of interest in doing so. But this was a bit beyond a few dry observations… sending a full team to a hostile planet for months just to try and research my past? That was a heavy investment, especially for a group as micromanaged as I assumed that Cerberus was.

So the obvious question was what I'd done to attract such attention.
It wouldn't have anything to do with Redcliffe, or anything I'd done in the war. That was too simple an answer, and too egotistical to seriously contemplate. There were plenty of other men and women who'd done some fairly impressive things in the fighting. If they'd assigned a team to me just for what I'd done they'd need to have a constant swarm of agents trailing Massani around, just for starters.

It had to be something else… something that had directly affected Cerberus.

My lips twisted as I followed that current of thought. "Carastes."

The visor made it hard to tell, but a slight shift to his posture made me think that Kai Leng had just focused his attention on me again.

"Shit." I muttered, recalling the sequence of events that had lead up to me sending Shepard to rescue Jack. In particular some of the things I'd told her. "You got an agent onto the Normandy. What detail was it?"

Yet more silence was his reply, his expression and body language revealing absolutely nothing.

"Right." Reaching up with my right hand, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "What's her name… Brooks. She was probably never encountered by the Republic's Intelligence, or ever assigned to the Teltin facility."

There might have been the tiniest of nods from the assassin, but I could have just imagined it. Either way, it felt like a good set of assumptions. It would definitely have set off every alarm bell the terrorist organization probably had, and that also explained why Kai Leng hadn't killed me. Considering how focused I'd been on Balak, it wouldn't have even been hard for him to cut me down from behind.

But if he'd killed me, they might never figure out the leak that had revealed one of their agents. Well, more than one of their agents, now that I took a while to think about it. My reaction to seeing Kai Leng had been entirely reflexive, and just as obviously an indicator that I knew who he was on sight.

So now the question was what in Athame's fucking name I was going to do about their interest.

"What does the Illusive Man want?" I asked, pitching my voice low so that it wouldn't carry to the guards or to where the medics were working on Shyeel and Illyan.

At first I didn't think that he'd respond, but just before I could sigh and rise, Kai Leng spoke again. "Answers, followed by an arrangement."

Meaning he wanted to know how I knew, and then he wanted to find a way to shut me up. Probably without killing me, not right away at least. Not until he was sure that he'd gotten everything I knew, or at least enough of it to make him not mourn my loss. "I'm not particularly disposed to help him, or his organization."

"Obviously." The operative remarked, his bland tone becoming dry.

I didn't want to help Cerberus learn much of anything if I could help it, but at the same time… I'd had the first ripples of an idea, something that made me want to grin like a madman. I didn't want to aid Cerberus, not in the slightest. I had no loyalty to my own species, nor had I really ever been sympathetic towards the organization to begin with. Plus meeting Jack in person would turn anyone off of their message if that was the kind of thing they did. But this plan… this plan wouldn't really help them. Oh it would assists them at least somewhat, there was probably a massive amount of information to be had that would benefit Cerberus and be detrimental to everyone else.
But the plan would also help me. It might buy me time… and it would be a massive pain in the ass for a certain mind-raiding bitch.

Letting out a slow breath, I kept my voice quiet and casual when I spoke again. "Inform him that he would do well to investigate the affairs of an Asari Matriarch named Cynthi T'Ravt."

I had the tremendous pleasure of seeing Kai Leng surprised in that moment, and I couldn't help but smirk a little as he visibly started. He hadn't expected me to offer anything at all, and his posture became tense as the wheels began to visibly spin inside his head.

"She has a supporting… cult, I suppose is the accurate word."

"Numbers? Goals?" He recovered quickly, I had to give him that much.

"Unknown and unknown." I replied. "But it is likely something to do with the same enemy that Commander Shepard is fixated upon."

"I am aware of her crusade." Leng murmured. "The capabilities of this organization?"

My lips twisted a little as I remembered a specific brawl on Redcliffe. "I have encountered Batarians who have been… programmed, for lack of a better word. They activated on a voice trigger and attempted to kill me. They didn't feel pain, fear, or seem to be mentally present after that point."

He was silent for several more breaths, then nodded slightly. "And she is responsible for the breach in our security? She gave you the information about Agent Brooks and myself?"

"If you mean she shoved it into my brain while she was scouring it clean." I muttered, "Then yes."

Along with the life stories of Miranda Lawson, Jacob Taylor, and a whole bunch of information on Cerberus projects from the second and third games what would definitely inspire them to kill me just to keep things beneath the surface.

Kai Leng cocked his head to one side, his fingers shifting once around the hilt of his blade in a subtle little motion. "You imply that she gave you the information. And that she is your enemy. You want to incite conflict between our organization and her own."

Athame's ass but I hated it when competent people were arranged against me; I much preferred it when they were on my side. Exhaling slowly, I twitched my left shoulder, neither confirming nor denying. "Najem may have information relevant to what I've already said."

She would be able to confirm that I wasn't the only person affected, and that Krom and I had both been dragged off to Thessia. And that I'd mentioned someone named sixteen who'd also been affected, which would eventually lead them to the trail of bodies that the Matriarch had left in her wake. If their investigations pressed hard enough, they might even uncover a few of her agents or cultists or whatever the fuck she had, which would lead to direct conflict between the two groups.

Which, in a perfect galaxy, would leave me unbothered by both groups long enough to deal with Krom.

"Of course, that assumes that you believe me." I added.

"Your personality is not suited to direct lies." He offered almost distractedly, his head shifting slightly. Enough to let me know he was now looking past me, at nothing in particular as he thought, but not so far that I couldn't move without him noticing. "There is likely a great deal you are not saying in order to preserve your own life, but like most reliable mercenaries you are good for your
That was because our words were all we really had. A mercenary who didn’t keep his promises ended up killed by his employers, left to die in a situation of their own making, or reviled and forced to take the worst sorts of contracts in a desperate bid just to make any money at all. Plus…

I shook my head a little, pushing aside a memory of a parent who didn’t exist. "Does that answer your employer's questions?"

"It is a beginning." Was the neutral reply, the assassin going silent as a brute of a man broke off from where he'd been hovering near the medics to approach us.

Dietrich Smith was of height with me, but where I was lean and wiry, he looked like he should have been playing in the Krogan leagues of American-style Football. His dark navy and silver armor looked like it was straining to contain him, and his thick black beard and shoulder length hair only added to appearance that screamed 'thug'.

But when he opened his mouth, his voice proved to be warm and cultured, going well with the grin of dark amusement he affected when he glanced between me and Kai Leng. "It would seem that we need to change all of our security codes already. Ayle is going to be furious."

I snorted. "You know him, Deet?"

"Only by reputation." The big man rumbled. "Seems like things are already complicated Cie."

"You have no idea." Grimacing, I pushed myself up to my feet. I didn't sway over much, but still took a few breaths to settle myself before I spoke again. "Everyone going to make it?"

"Lost two of the civilians we dragged in, plus one of the SIU wounded." He shrugged, looking about as upset as I was about the news. "But yeah. Illyan's on fluids, but her body patched up the worst of it pretty quickly. She'll need a walking boot for that ankle she fucked up, but she'll be fine. Shyeel's a bit twitchy from that net, but I think she's more angry than hurt."

"Can't blame her." I muttered. "Voya? Nejem?"

"Four cracked ribs and a dislocated shoulder for Voya." Deet waved a hand vaguely to the southwest, "Got her arm back in place and injected medigel to speed up the repairs, think the medics sent a runner to the District for some growth hormones and other crap to hurry her recovery along."

"And Analyst Chambers?" Kai Leng asked.

I blinked rapidly. Chambers? How the fuck did I miss that when I'd spoken with her. Twice.

"If you mean your spy girl with the facial implants," I abruptly felt a little less like an idiot, though not nearly enough for my peace of mind. Still should have bloody recognized her. "She took a round right to the gut. Docs are stitching her back together now, but she won't be up for any serious movement for a while."

The Asian man nodded ever so slightly. "Then we will require transportation to our ship."

Dietrich glanced at me, and frowned when I grimaced but nodded. "Do I want to know?"

"I'll tell you later, when we both have drinks in our hands." I promised. "It's going to be one of those conversations."
The big man sighed. "You know, for a while I missed having you around. Less than an hour is making me remember why I was glad you went off to do your own thing."

"Ouch." My right hand rose to cover my chest. "That hurts Deet. It really does."

"Good." He grinned at me. "It was supposed to. I'll send a runner to grab an aircar for these three. What about our other guests?"

"Keep them drugged and haul them to the compound." I felt my lips curl a little. "Then see if Nynsi wants to come and pay them a visit, or if she'd prefer us to ship them to her."

She'd get some kind of use out of him, even if it was just to enjoy listening to him scream while she interrogated him. Normally she didn't enjoy that kind of thing, but for Balak I think that she'd make an exception. And at the very least she'd keep at it long enough to find out exactly what was going on inside of the Hegemony these days. The last I'd heard from her was that her usual contacts were having an increasingly difficult time getting any kind of news out as the nation continued to destabilize.

After that I had no idea what she'd do with him. Nor did I find myself really caring, the asshole deserved whatever it was. Although… it might be better to leave him alive for a while and so that we could use him as a hostage. If his father was still a big shot in the warrior caste it might work.

In either case, that was for Nynsi to worry about. I had more immediate concerns.

"Is she going to be out of surgery soon?" I asked, returning my mind local waters. "The sooner they get off planet the better for us."

"That's not ominous at all." Dietrich shook his head. "Yeah, she's coming out in just a minute or two, why I came over here. I'll send one of the kids to get the dogs their ride."

Grunting, I pushed away from the wall and followed him as he turned to start walking. I kept my head at an angle though, letting me keep half an eye on the assassin trailing along in our wake. "I want to talk with them before we cast them loose."

"The girl's going to be drugged out of her mind." My friend snorted, "But the guy's coherent. Interrogate him all you want."

I rolled my eyes a little as his tone, but otherwise stayed quiet until we reached the man. His civilian level armor was in tatters, and one of his pant legs had been cut away to let the medics patch up the damage, but his eyes were open and alert as we approached.

"So." I waved off Dietrich with a hand, and he wasted little time in heading over to one of the nearby guards. "Who are you, really?"

The man frowned. "You don't know?"

"Not you personally, no." I rolled my shoulder in a tiny motion. "I'm not omniscient."

He grunted. "Guess that's something. You can call me Gen."

"All right Gen," The lack of an actual name didn't bother or surprise me, "I've got good news and bad news for you. The good news is that I owe this asshole," I jerked my right thumb at Kai Leng, "For getting us medical attention and backup here. You'll be getting a ride and a head start to try and evade T'Ravt's people."
Gen sagged a little in obvious relief, "Guess I owe you, Leng. I didn't expect you until tomorrow at the earliest."

I glanced at the other man, but wasn't surprised at all when he offered no reaction or explanation. Turning back to the wounded agent, I continued. "The bad news is that Nejem, or Chambers, still lied to me, and we weren't able to finish our discussion on how I expected to be repaid for that discourtesy."

His mouth turned into a thin line at the reminder, or maybe he'd just been hoping I'd have let that slide considering all the crap that had just happened. "She had a wire, I heard your demands."

"Considering that I already have two of those answers," I held my right hand palm up as my body shifted to a politely reasonable position. Gen flinched, and Leng's lip curled in disgust at the Batarian pose, which bothered me not at all. "I'll settle for everything you found out about me while you were on this planet."

"I'm not sure-"

My posture shifted abruptly into something far more aggressive as I narrowed my eyes and lowered my head. "That wasn't a request, Cerberus."

Kai Leng shifted his attention to me directly.

He didn't do anything else. His sword and light pistol remained on his belt, his balance didn't shift, and his finger didn't even twitch. He just… took notice of me. Intensely.

The atmosphere in the warehouse abruptly felt oppressive, my entire body tensing as my instincts screamed that I was about to be engaged in a fight or flight affair. Grinding my teeth to resist the urge to react further, I simply narrowed my eyes into a glare at the shorter man, tossing in as much disdain as I could offer.

We stood like that for nearly a minute in increasingly heavy silence, and I began to realize that assassin was simply waiting for my tired and battered body to be unable to properly stand. I had no idea what his plan would be once I hit that point, but it probably wouldn't be comfortable for me.

"When I came to this god forsaken planet," Gen spoke quietly, causing both of us to shift our attention slightly. "I had eight people on my team. The only reason I'm leaving with two is because your medics are stitching her intestines back together."

Leng's upper lip twitched. "He would disapprove."

The wounded man gave a reasonably solid glare of his own up at him. "You could probably kill Kean and his escape, but Kelly and I would be dead in the opening seconds. I'll explain it to the Man."

Kai Leng shook his head once, but seemed to relax as he took a slight step back. I waited until he'd settled into a patient pose to relax as well, shifting my right hand away from where it had ended up near my gun.

For his part, Gen very slowly, and carefully, reached into a pocket and pulled out a tiny data drive. "This has everything we've found about you and Krom while we were on planet. Password is Hephaestus, dash, Polúmētis, dash, zero-zero-nine-five-one-one."

"Grandiose much?" I muttered, taking the small thing and wasting little time in slotting it into my omni-tool.
He gave me a small grin as he settled back. "A play on your AIS code name."

I paused in the middle of inputting the command. "What."

His bark of laughter cut off into a wince of pain almost at once, but he still managed to grin as he wheezed. "Blame Shepard, Hephaestus is the code-name she gave you as one of her intelligence agents."

Half closing my eyes, I could only shake my head and finish entering the password. A torrent of disorganized files promptly appeared on the floating panel, flickering as my myriad virus scanners began to attack them. "What is it with you people and mythological references? Is it a cultural trend or something?"

"Or something." The man gave me a wan smile. "Try listening to a Turian attempting to pronounce Quetzalcoatl sometime."

Snorting, I nodded slightly as the scans completed, revealing the drive to contain exactly what it looked to; the disorganized legacy of months of intelligence work. "You need a copy of this?"

"Not unless your medics took Kelly's." Gen replied before pausing and blinking in confusion. "You're letting us keep it?"

"I only wanted a copy." I reminded him as I shut my omni-tool off, "And if you're going to be investigating that Thessian bitch you'll need everything on Krom and myself."

"The who?"

"It will be discussed." Kai Leng interrupted, his voice returning to its dismissive tonelessness. "And correlated with your data."

The Cerberus Agent glanced at him, but nodded slightly. After that, nothing of real import was said. I asked a few more generic questions, mostly to try and see if Gen would survive the trip back to his boss or not. He was at least able to confirm that he wouldn't bleed out on his own, though whether or not Kai Leng would 'assist' in that was left ambiguous by the both of them.

Eventually I gave up on that futile endeavor, and motioned for a pair of Dietrich's power armored subordinates to lumber over and keep watch. My timing was, apparently, impeccable, because I'd scarcely started to limp in Illyan's direction when an armored medic poked his head into the building, calling out that the wounded spy was ready to be moved.

Watching the two Cerberus men leave, I found myself curiously disappointed when Kai Leng didn't offer any parting insults or threats. But there was a slight pause when he reached the doorway, the slim man turning back to glance in my direction. His head seemed to flick up as if looking at the rafters, then back to me before he gave a tiny nod of approval.

"Close the doors." I called out to no one in particular, "And everyone on the second floor can relax."

The dozen plus men and women on the catwalks, who'd had their weapons constantly trained on Leng, settled back in a clatter of metal and the gentle hum of conversation.

"You really that paranoid about him?" Dietrich called as I resumed shuffling in his direction. "I know he's supposed to be an N7 legend, but he fights with a fucking sword."

I snorted. "He almost killed Shepard and her entire fucking team on Carastes, and that was with Jacqueline there. And I'm still pretty sure he could have killed me and gotten out of the building alive
if he really wanted to."

"Have some faith in my guys Cie." He admonished as I settled onto a crate next to Illyan, the Asari promptly almost knocking me over when she leaned her weight into my side. "They might be new as a team but they were all there on Redcliffe."

"I know, and I've got faith in them against anyone up to and including T'Ravt's Talon teams." I replied, trying to resist the urge to rest my head on the Asari's shoulder and fall into a coma for a while. "But Leng is something else."

"If you say so." His head shook, clearly not quite believing me. "How have you been doing?"

My lips pursed a little at the question. "That's another question I need to have a drink in my hand for. It's been a long couple of days."

"Understatement." Illyan rumbled tiredly. "What's our plan now?"

"Dietrich," I waved my bandaged left arm in the man's direction, "Is going to haul you and Voya back to the compound. Shyeel and I are going to stay one more night in the hope that T'Ravt will be around to talk with. Once I get a few questions answered, or avoided, we'll hop a shuttle over as well."

"You sure?" Dietrich's massive brows furrowed together. "I could leave a few of my guys with."

I shook my head, "We'll be staying in the Old District. If there's another SIU group, or Cerberus team, around, they won't get in."

"And the guards wouldn't let anyone else in with us." Illyan agreed.

"Them." I corrected her. "You're in a walking boot and need to sleep."

"I can do that with-"

"Illyan." I interrupted her tiredly. "You can either go and rest on your own, or I can have those two guys in power armor carry you out of here."

"You can't." She protested, looking to Dietrich for help. "They're his people, not in your branch of the unit."

"She's got a point Cie." He rumbled, a small grin on his face. Illyan's triumphant smirk faded rather quickly when he continued, his own grin fading. "But in this case I've got to agree with him big 'un. A bodyguard who can barely limp along won't do him much good, and the Quarians will keep him alive for one night."

"And you can fill him in on what we found out." I murmured.

"I… fine.' She muttered, shaking her head a little. "What are you going to ask T'Ravt about anyway?"

"Everything," I sighed. "Why she didn't tell me upfront, why the mind games, what she owes MacKinnon... all that crap."

Dietrich grunted. "You going to tell her about this? She'll find out sooner or later."

A muscle in my cheek twitched. "I bloody well shouldn't, not after all the crap she didn't tell me."
When his eyebrows shot up, I let out a tight breath and forced myself to calm down. "I'll tell her about Balak, and that we're keeping him to interrogate. But as for the dogs… those assholes were never here. As far as we knew they just the enforcers of a local broker that we let walk for helping out in the fight."

"Might hold up." He nodded slowly. "I'll spread the word. You want an escort to the District at least?"

"Yes." Illyan growled before I could open my mouth, "He does. And no Batarians he could boss around either."

Dietrich barked out a laugh, while I could only sigh and smile slightly.

The grin didn't last long, my mind already whirling as I began to wonder if I'd done the right thing. Had I just pulled off a master stroke, giving the Matriach a far greater threat than me to worry about? Or had I just fucked up on a scale beyond anything that I could even fucking imagine?

Unsurprisingly, it was well into the early hours of the morning before I found even a restless form of sleep.

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**Silent Witness**

"You'll need at least three weeks before you're fit for combat duties again, but for now I'll be content if you avoid reinjuring anything until Cieran arrives." Ayle informed me from where she was standing at the foot of my medical bed, her prosthetic arm gleaming where it protruded from her navy covered uniform. "Can I trust you follow the doctor's orders and remain in bed, or do I need to ask Idas to watch you?"

Narrowing my eyes in a glower, I let out an annoyed breath to make my displeasure known before I spoke. "This is still ridiculous. Don't I have my own room?"

"It's not finished yet." She replied brusquely, "And I'm not letting you use anyone else's, so you'll have to find a way to survive one night in the medical wing."

Across the room, the other being present grunted from her bed. "As much as I hate to agree with Voya on anything, I don't think we need to be observed overnight either."

The Batarian woman simply narrowed her eyes as she split her gaze between us. "I'm sorry, when did either of you get the impression that I was giving you an option?"

"Technically," The big idiot began, "We're in Cieran's-"

"Technically," Ayle growled, all pretense of civility vanishing. "I am the senior commander. If you don't like that, bitch to Cieran for giving me the job. You're both wounded, and you're both staying here."

Licking my lips, I glared at her for a few more moments before glancing away and muttering something that might have sounded affirmative. Across the room I heard Illyan offer something similar, and the Silver Blades Commander let out another irritated sound. "Sacred Pillars but I'd forgotten how annoying you two are when Cie isn't here to bash your heads together."

"Hey." Illyan protested. "I thought you liked me."

"I like you both but only when you're apart." She countered. "Together… the Paragons themselves
wouldn't have the patience to deal with you. Now, can we move on or do I need to drug one of you to have a reasonable conversation with the other?"

Resisting the urge to glare at her, I settled my good arm onto the bed next to me as I accepted the change in topic. "Are the prisoners secure? And where did you put their equipment?"

"The brig was completed, thank the Pillars for small favors." Ayle nodded slightly. "The woman has had her amp removed and is wearing a nullification collar. I intend to let them sit alone until Shaaryak arrives."

"That's... going to be messy." Illyan murmured.

If half the stories about that Balak bosh'tet were true, messy was probably an understatement. Then again, maybe Cie and his old lover would let me help in the interrogation process... worth considering. "Their gear?"

Ayle twitched a shoulder. "Stowed in the mechanical shed already set aside for Cieran. Why?"

"He's..." My voice trailed off before I sighed and shook my head, my dour mood returning at the thoughts of what he was going to have to process. "Going to need some busy work for a while."

Tanned lips pressed together as her head dipped right. "Explain."

"His birth mother is in Celthani." I shook my head, making my hair rustle slightly. "She might have also sold him into slavery as a child, or... we don't really know. It's complicated."

"Complicated." She repeated quietly. "I am beginning to understand his loathing of the word."

"I think we all are." The Asari sighed. "But at least we dealt with those SIU assholes, maybe for good this time."

"Potentially." Ayle allowed, "If half the rumors from the Hegemony about a civil war are true."

A civil war that was very much not in the information that Cie had been given. More changes, more complications, more irritation. There were days, and more often nights, that I very much wished that he'd never told me.

"Anything critical, or can I try and sleep?" I asked, "This isn't a conversation I want to have tonight."

Four black eyes narrowed at me for several moments, but she eventually dipped her head a bit in the Batarian way for a polite apology. After a few murmured words to us both about how to summon the doctor if we needed him, she dimmed the lights and departed.

Settling back into the bed, which was just hard enough to remind me of the dirt bunks on Redcliffe, I tried to relax my mind and let the mild painkillers carry me away.

Unfortunately, I had a massive idiot of a roommate who wasn't helping with that. Between the tossing and turning, the grumbles of pain that accompanied said movement, and the dark mutters about how she shouldn't be here... I lasted all of am minute before I couldn't take it anymore.

"Are you going to stop bitching any time soon?" I growled, heaving myself up to glare at her, "Or should I strangle you with your own IV line so that I can actually sleep?"

The big idiot glowered right back at me, looking as exhausted as I was. But even with that and her wounds, she was still insisting on being irritating. While I could occasionally be amused by her
ridiculous persistence when it came to being annoying, when I was on the receiving end it just made me want to beat the crap out of her until she stopped.

"Yes." I snapped, "Cieran probably isn't going to get any sleep. Yes, he was also right to send you here considering you can barely fucking walk. And yes, he should have just shot that racist asshole but you know how he is about owing people. And yes, Ayle was being a commanding bitch but she's always been like that."

Her blue lips pressed together as she continued to glare at me. Considering that her glare was a pale shadow of Cieran's, I ignored it with the disdain that it deserved and continued. "And even if you were back in Celthani, Cie wouldn't have sex with you, so you can stop moping about that too."

There was a definite wince there, though she tried to hide it. "I'm not trying to fuck him."

I stared flatly at her. "You've always been trying. Practically the first words I ever heard from you were about you trying to join him and Rane in their bed."

"I just..." She flailed around, clearly searching for a tangent to try and drag me down before slumping and giving in. "He's always done right by me, and by Erana."

And she'd slept with people for far, far less than that. I felt my face pull into a frown as I stared at her, noting the hesitance in her voice, and the fact that she hadn't responded in the usual violence-laced banter that we traditionally engaged in. "Keelah, you actually like him, don't you?"

"I..." Her denial faded into nothing, and I could only blink at her, trying to process the notion.

This was Illyan. The giant idiot who slept with anything with a pulse. And she was actually admitting that she liked Cieran? "You've known him longer than I have, but... it always just seemed like the same friendly flirting."

Illyan glanced away from me. "It is. Was. At least until..."

When her voice trailed off again, I found myself nodding slightly as it came into view. "Redcliffe."

She looked down, and actually picked at her blanket like an oversized child. "Trena and Ghai told me that it's a reaction to what happened there. That I don't really want him like that. That it's just a result of losing Jarrick, Callada, Thul... our natural instinct is to share the pain with someone who would understand it."

"To meld, you mean." My hair rustled a little as I shook my head, frowning at her. I had to dig through a few memories of that forsaken place before I recalled that she had gotten rather jealous when Cie had slept with the Batarian Colonel. I'd been too busy staying alive to really tease her about it, but I did remember noticing it. "Even if you somehow got him to sleep with you, I don't think you'd ever get into his brain."

"I don't want to!" She protested, actually starting to rise before wincing and carefully sitting back into her bed. "I just..." A massive arm thudded onto the soft padding around her as she let out a surprisingly girlish sound of disgust. "Athame. Look at me, I'm..."

"A giant idiot?" I supplied.

"Agreeing with you makes me feel like I need a shower." Her voice lowered to a barely audible mutter. "And I'm insulting myself on top of that."

"Good." Rolling my eyes, I flicked them around for something to throw at her. Unfortunately
someone, probably ul Massa, had warned the doctors because I couldn't find anything within an arm's length of my bed. "If you like him, then do something about it."

"Like what?" She turned to frown at me.

"I don't know. You are the one who thinks she loves him." I retaliated. "Press him up against a wall and kiss him I suppose. That's what he always did to Rane. If he does it back, he likes you. If he shoots you, don't try it again."

There was something like a whine, her voice becoming something far more like her younger sister's. "Athame's, he wouldn't? Would he?"

My lips curled into a vicious grin, my exhaustion abruptly forgotten. And from there, the game began.

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**Flash Report - Urgent - Direct to Spectre Offices**

This is a flash-urgent report from Listening post x-19. We have confirmed sensor readings of an active Rachni vessel, proceeding under its own power. The vessel retreated to FTL upon being detected. Standing orders are for any alerts to go to Senior-Spectre Bau. This message will repeat.

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**Next up is Chapter 7: The Reunion**

Chapter End Notes

A bit of a cool-down chapter after the ridiculous fighting last chapter. Cieran owes Kai Leng enough not to shoot him, gets his data, and enacts a cunning plan that has him unable to sleep thanks to his paranoia that his cunning plan is more of a "cunning" plan. Since only time will tell on that front, in the next chapter we'll be moving on and seeing how an sleep-deprived Cieran is able to handle meeting T'Ravt and certain other people. Once we get that resolved, Cie will be making his first trip to the Silver Blades compound as this particular Saga ends. Then will come an interlude entirely from Trena's point of view, which will... confirm an old theory that some of you had.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I stared at the hazy image of a Batarian woman as it floated above my wrist, trying to feel… something. She was the same race as Nynsi, with teal colored skin and delicate features, but that was where the similarities ended.

Ashen ul Kean was a far shorter woman than my former Tarath'shan, was about as well muscled as Ayle, and even on the small picture I could tell that she had scars on both her arms and her face. Further, she held herself as someone from the midcaste. Studiously neutral of posture even with the broad smile she offered to the camera.

"She looks happy." Shyeel noted quietly, her hands idly maintaining their grip on the aircar's controls. We were in a holding pattern above the eastern reaches of the city, along with a hundred or so other vehicles, waiting for the palace security to remove the no-fly zone above the Academy. "When was that taken?"

"I would have been… ten?" My attention shifted to the young kid next to her, his clothes ratted and obviously cast-offs that had been re-purposed. My… mother's weren't much better, but we were both smiling in front of the store that Nejem, Chambers dammit, had been using as a base. "Must have been taken right after she officially opened the shop."

"Looks like it." I agreed.

The scarred Asari gave me a sidelong glance. "You all right Cie?"

"Shouldn't I…" My head shook a little. "I don't know. Feel something? Anything? I look at this picture and I just see a pair of strangers. Intellectually I know that it's me and my mother, but here," My right hand shifted to tap my armored chest. "There's nothing."

Blue lips pressed themselves together as she shook her head. "That bitch really did maul you, didn't she? No memories? No glimpses?"

"She's familiar." I admitted after a few breaths worth of thinking, "But not like a friend or loved one, more like she's someone I remember seeing a few times at a bar."

"Athame's…" She cut the curse short and let out a tired breath. "I was hoping that might still the waters enough to let you remember something."
"Me too." Flicking my left finger, I shut the omni-tool down and settled back in the passenger seat. By and large there hadn't been much new data on the drive that I'd taken from Gen, but there had been a lot of confirmation that Chambers had mostly been telling the truth.

I had several more copies of my sale as a slave, both as a child and again as a teenager. The old registry for the building, indicating that it belonged to a midcaste Batarian named Ashen ul Kean for the purposes of paying taxes to the Warlord. A host of records of said payments, indicating that while we hadn't been wealthy, we'd started doing all right around the second year and probably lived pretty comfortably.

A certificate of death for the same woman, written from a local clinic and registered the same day as my second sale at the markets in the cove.

Part of me had hoped that she might still be alive, that Chambers had been lying about that part. That if I met her in person I might remember, but finding that file had killed what tiny bits of optimism I'd managed to gather. I'd run a quick check with the Warlord's database, and they'd confirmed that they had a copy archived and attached to a few hundred others, so it wasn't something that Cerberus had faked.

"How's the arm?" My companion asked, probably to break the awkward silence that had fallen while I brooded.

"Could use some more painkillers." I admitted, glancing at the limb. The brace was mostly hidden by my armor, except where it extended out to make sure that I didn't move my hand overmuch. "Honestly the bruises hurt more. I'm not sure how he didn't break my sternum or any ribs."

"There's definitely times when Athame seems to watch over you." Shyeel shook her head, "But that's probably just to balance out all the crap she puts you through the rest of the time."

The joke was weak but it made me snort all the same. "Well at least she pulls my head out of the water every once and while."

She let out a quiet chuckle before silence washed back in, though now it was more companionable than tense. Both of us leaning forwards or sideways in order to try and see if T'Ravt had landed her ass on top of the Acadamy's ziggurat yet.

"Has to make her grand entrance." I muttered as a wing of aero fighters roared out of a cloud, moving in a tight formation around a heavy combat shuttle that was likely carrying the warlord. "I mean, seriously. Far better to sneak down quietly if you're worried about an attack."

"It's a graduation ceremony." Shyeel reminded me patiently, "Of course it's going to be grand and over the top."

I grunted, dipping my head a bit to acknowledge the point. "Still annoying. Why didn't she say to just come back later?"

Her eyes rolled. "You know why, you're just repressing that knowledge."

The fingers on my left hand twitched. "I'm not meeting with her."

"I don't think T'Ravt cares about what you want." My fellow Reyja'krem pointed out. "She wants the two of you to interact, though the goddess alone might know why. Only thing to be done at this point is either run away or dive in and flow with the current."

I grimaced. "I hate it when you use logic."
She snorted. "More or less than when Voya does?"

"That's not even a question, it's just disconcerting when she actually makes sense." Reaching up with my good arm, I rubbed tiredly at my face as I leaned back in my chair again. "If running was actually an option I'd say we take it, but we already told her we're coming."

"That does leave us becalmed." There was a sigh as she also settled back, shifting her body around so that she could rest an elbow on her door's arm rest. "I think I liked dealing with Sederis better, fucked up as that was."

"Same." I muttered through a long yawn. "She might be a vicious bitch but you always know where you stand with her. None of this word game guessing crap."

Shyeel let out a quiet grunt, "Yeah. Looks like the traffic is clearing up, check with the controller would you?"

Flicking my omni-tool to life, I did so. A harried Quarian voice responded with irritation, that only slightly subsided after I identified myself. After taking far too long to check something, he grudgingly gave us a flight path and a landing pad to target. If not for the fighters still on combat air patrol, Shyeel probably would have ignored the path and taken the fastest and most direct path, but instead we were stuck taking a leisurely route along one of the rivers before banking overtop of the structure proper.

A cursory glance out of my window confirmed that massive numbers of trainees were currently suffering in full dress uniforms as they darted around, hurriedly trying to get somewhere important while their fellows were doing the same in opposite directions. Thankfully the main streams seemed to be carrying them towards the central area, while we were being directed to the same landing pad that Illyan and I had used on my last visit here.

I snorted quietly as the aircar settled down, my lips twitching as I noticed that where we were parking wasn't the only thing that was the same.

The young Batarian woman, her armor freshly polished, bowed low and cocked her head far to the left as we clambered out of the vehicle. Her Turian counterpart remained at an at-rest position, but dipped his head to us politely as she spoke. "Honored Reyja'krem, we are honored to… I mean, we're pleased to host you again."

"You can skip the gushing girl." Shyeel shook her head, "Neither of us cares to be fawned over. Where's T'Ravt?"

"I-I... um..." She stuttered, clearly off put by the response. Though I gave her credit for rallying relatively quickly. "I'm to escort you to a dining hall where she will meet you."

"Right." I grunted. "Lead on then."

She gave us both another quick bow but did so, never once shifting her head from where it was dipped far to the left. We managed about ten steps before Shyeel growled something under her breath, reached out, and forced the girl's head into a neutral position.

"We don't care about that crap either. You gave us our respect when we landed, don't need to keep doing it."

"But..." Our escort began.

"Keep your head in a neutral position." I interjected as we approached a stairwell leading down into
the structure. "A slight degree to the left if you absolutely can't help it, but none of that extreme bowing crap."

"I-I'll… try, sir."

A muscle in my cheek twitched at the last word. "And don't call me sir either."

"My apologies Reyja'krem, I-I d-din't mean to insult-"

"Athame's fucking ass…" Reaching up with my right hand, I rubbed furiously at my face. "Just get us to the dining hall."

The girl bowed her head subserviently again before complying with indecent haste. It was a longer trip than the one to the records room, and since we were actually here during the day, the hallways were decidedly more packed than they had been the last time. Nearly all of the trainees looked to be as young as our escort sounded, and were largely dressed in simple shirt and pants combinations. White predominated, but for colored markings that seemed to denote what year and specialization they were focusing in.

They largely got out of our way, flowing around us as we moved upriver. But whispers, pointing, and excited babble seemed to follow in our wake. It was enough to make me wish I had my helmet on so I could sigh and roll my eyes as the rumor mill got running yet again.

"Where's the ceremony?" I asked idly as we turned down yet another major corridor, this one at least possessing sunroofs to let in some real light.

"The central parade grounds, Reyja'krem." She pointed a hand vaguely to our right. "Today is for army officers finishing their programs. The naval cadets have a separate ceremony tomorrow."

I let out a quiet humming noise. "Clever."

"Reyja'krem?"

My right shoulder twitched. "Nothing… what's your name?"

"It's…" She audibly swallowed, and her helmet shifted so she could look anywhere but in my direction. "It's Juria, Reyja'krem."

"Nothing Juria, just idle thought." Raw recruits didn't need to think about things like how effective an indoctrination machine this place probably was. T'Ravt wanted something different than most of the other Warlords, she wasn't content with ruling a haphazard empire like Aria or die Waffe. She wanted something larger than that, more permanent.

And a military academy was a good place to start nation building. Take young men and women, inspire them to fight for your empire as a realm rather than just because you paid them. Create an officer corps that is loyal and inspired, who might in turn prove capable of inspiring the common soldiers to believe in something more. It was probably a hit and miss kind of thing. Not everyone would actually believe in her cause, but if just a handful out of every graduating class did, the message would spread. And eventually, after years or decades, it could spread farther.

Long term, subtle, insidious… but cultured, combining her goals with lessons that increased the odds that these kids would survive in a cold galaxy. It was all very T'Ravt.

"Um… are you limping, Reyja'krem?" Juria asked as we kept going. "We're almost there but we can stop if-"
"He's fine girl." Shyeel waved away her concerns, not bothering to lower her voice. "Just a firefight with the SIU last night."

The trainee stopped in her tracks. So did nearly everyone else who'd heard her casually offer that.

"Shyeel." I half closed my eyes as I groaned. "Seriously?"

"Would you rather I go on about how you killed that biotic berserker on Redcliffe?" She gave me a wicked grin, crossing her arms as she awaited the result of her statement. It didn't take long, the trainees all but swarming around us into a broad circle as babbled questions began to pour out of nearly everyone's throats.

"Did you really kill it in hand-to-hand!?" A Turian male demanded. "Or did you use a blade?"

"Did you take it's crest after?" A slip of a Quarian girl all but shouted to be heard.

"Were you really alone-" Began a Turian woman, only to flinch when I cut her off.

"Quiet!" I snapped. Silence fell abruptly, making me blink a little in surprise before shaking my head. "Right, Shyeel, I'm going to kill you later. The rest of you… no, I didn't kill it hand to hand. Yes, I took its crest. No, I wasn't alone. Colonel Nara ul Thui was there and assisted."

"Just her?" The same woman quickly asked for clarification, her mandibles twitching in excitement. "Or members of her unit too?"

"Just the two of us." I confirmed. When the only response to that was another excited murmur, I sighed and resisted the urge to rub at my temples. Normally in this kind of situation I'd simply throw whoever was with me right into the riptide, but the problem with having Shyeel around was that she was, primarily, a sniper, and sniper war stories were generally the kind of things that only other snipers enjoyed listening to.

With that option more or less denied to me, I decided that I might as well rehash the actual story. It would keep the crowd happy, it would delay me having to meet with T'Ravt, and maybe it would help counter some of the bloody rumors still running around.

"We were in the reserve trenches, her command center had been hit and the secondary post buried, so we joined the firing line. The berserker was leading a counter-attack against our section of the line." I explained, suppressing the urge to twitch when I realized that they were all literally hanging onto every word. "A missile had just taken out the machine gun on our left, and the Krogan was sending gouts of warpfire into the trench ahead of us. She opened fire while I hit it with tech mines, trying to draw it in our direction."

Catching a glimpse of Shyeel's self-satisfied smirk, I gave her a glare before continuing. "It charged us but mistimed the angle, when it fell into the trench with us we lit it up."

The tiny Quarian bounced up and down once, interrupting me as her voice practically bubble din excitement. "Were you in your power armor?"

"No." I began, only for my companion to take over.

"He was in light plate and could barely walk thanks to wounds to his legs." Shyeel gave me another grin, to which I responded with a rude Asari gesture, "Stop leaving the good shit out Cie."

Glowing eyes widened comically as the trainee stared at me in shock. "How'd you drop it?"
"Got in close and shoved my hand cannon into its chin." I replied. "After we shredded its armor with incinerate mines and shot it a few dozen times. I wouldn't recommend that plan though."

Her still wide eyes blinked, "Why not?"

"Because-"

"Not everyone can be a show-off mercenary." A new voice cut in, his voice scathing. Everyone turned to glance at the speaker, the crowd parting to reveal a young man in his late teens. He was a pale brute of a teenager, though he was trying too hard by wearing a shirt a size too small to make his muscles look even more defined. But it was his face that made my fingers twitch in irritation.

Specifically the pale green eyes the exact same shade as my own.

Juria apparently knew him on a more personal level, because our guard drew herself up and tilted her helmet to the right in a way that was neither hesitant nor polite. "Alexis. Interrupting a Reyja'krem is rude, even for you."

Alexis MacKinnon sneered at her. "Like I care about some stupid Batarian title."

Juria, along with a dozen or so other Batarian trainees, stiffened further and let out angry, seething whistles. Others quickly backed away further, with some of the smarter ones electing to duck into classrooms or resume their treks to wherever it was they were going. Within a handful of long breaths, the knot of beings had turned into three distinct groups. Shyeel and I, along with Juria, in the center. Behind us as a tight ball of Batarians, plus a pair of Quarians.

Across from us was my half-brother, along with a handful of other humans and Turians.

I had a brief, probably false, memory of being in high school again. It was accompanied by rush of irritation that made me want to start shooting at the idiots currently grinning and smirking at us as though their opinions were important.

"This is not quite what I had in mind." Shyeel murmured under her breath as we observed the situation, her voice barely loud enough for me to hear her. "Sorry Cie."

"Not your fault." I replied equally softly before raising my voice slightly. "Juria. As much as I don't really care about making T'Ravt wait, I don't have a high tolerance for idiocy either. Let's get moving again."

"What's wrong, mercenary?" Our apparent opposition sneered. "Don't want to stick around without people to fawn over you?"

The fingers on my left hand curled slightly, sending pain up and down the limb. Rather than respond, I simply started walking towards him. Shyeel let out an annoyed sound but followed, our escort's armored boots only joining after several confused seconds.

I didn't slow until I was sure that Alexis wouldn't budge, his arms crossing as he planted his feet. I could have just gone around him, the young man on his right didn't look nearly as confident and would have probably gotten the fuck out of the way… but by that point I was more than a little annoyed.

I hated being the center of attention, which was why Shyeel had been taking sadistic glee in making sure I stayed there. I'd take that kind of crap from her, we were sort-of friends, but the implication that I actually liked that kind of shit put me in a foul mood.
So instead I slowed to a stop right in front of him, my expression remaining carefully neutral. In my experience a bland apathy tended to unsettle people more than actual anger. "Move."

His cocky expression flickered, his throat working a bit as he visibly looked up and down my body. I was a little surprised at that show of intelligence, considering his earlier words. It was almost painfully obvious to see his mental whirlpool in his brain took stock of the fact that I was armed, armored, and as it belatedly realized that he wasn't either of those things.

Then his eyes slid to the left for just a moment, and his spine straightened. A muscle in my cheek twitched as I flicked my eyes that way as well, just in time to see Juria stride up to stand next to me. Either the two of them had some kind of rivalry thing going… or he was trying to impress her like the moronic teenager he was.

Probably both.

I very briefly considered giving him a chance to walk away with some shreds of his pride intact… then tossed that concept into the deeps and let my irritation handle this.

"I only promised T'Ravt that I wouldn't kill you." I informed him shortly. "By her exact words, I'm free to maim, torture, or otherwise amuse myself, and the longer you're in my way the more I'm going to be tempted."

His head jerked back as he gawped in me in something like shock. "You… you wouldn't dare-"

My hand cannon expanded in my grip as I drew it, holding it evenly in one hand as I shook my head. "I dislike repeating myself, and you've annoyed me. Move, boy."

He swallowed, shifted back and forth, then seemed like he was about to open his mouth again. But before he could utter a syllable, a voice about as warm and loving as a knife's edge cut its way down the hallway. "What is this idiocy?"

Alexis, and just about every other trainee capable of it, paled and snapped to attention, staring at something just over my shoulder. For my part, I glared furiously at nothing over my brother's shoulder as my day went from shit to utter catastrophe.

"Cie." A hand gently reached out and tapped my right arm. Twisting my lips, I holstered the weapon again, but refused to turn around as hard, booted footfalls echoed ominously down the now silent corridor.

"Everyone excepting my idiot children and Juria ul Shavi will depart." The same cold tones had barely finished before the crowd scattered, even the Batarian trainees making no effort to hide the fact that they were fleeing in something like terror. "Alexis, you will keep your mouth shut for this conversation."

The still pale teenager nodded jerkily, but otherwise didn't move.

After several long moments, the voice spoke again. "Are you going to turn and face me, or continue with this juvenile behavior?"

Twitching again, I turned to my right and glared at her.

My birth mother glared back at me, her immaculate white dress uniform only slightly creased from where her arms were crossed high on her chest. She looked younger than I thought she would be, though with modern medicine that didn't mean much. She could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty, with the only hint being a few strands of gray beginning to show themselves in her
otherwise brown hair.

Juria suddenly let out a sharp gasp, all decorum forgotten as her head whipped between the two of us. She noticed the resemblance then.

"Cieran ul Kean." The head of T'Ravt's academy spoke Thessian with a curling accent that I couldn't quite place.

"MacKinnon." I replied flatly in the same tongue, my harsh Illium consents adding weight to my irritation. "What do you want?"

Her own expression remained utterly flat as she flicked her eyes past me. "A moment. Shavi, you will return to your post. I expect to see yourself and my least intelligent offspring in my office tomorrow morning to discuss why you again felt the need to interact in such a fashion."

Both of the trainees nodded once, the Batarian girl bowing her head low and to the left before she chose discretion and fled.

"Alexis MacKinnon." She continued in the same implacable tones. "You will return to your dormitory. I would suggest, should you ever encounter your brother again, that you not antagonize him. He does not-"

"My what!?" The words were practically a screech as his voice broke, the big kid actually taking a step back as he whipped his head to stare at me. He was obviously hoping he hadn't heard those words, and was desperately searching my face to find something that would indicate it wasn't true.

"Did I give you permission to speak, boy?" Her voice, if possible, became even colder.

"I… n-no mother. Ma'am."

"Return to your dormitory." She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "At once."

He managed a very shaky nod before turning smartly on his heel, retreating with the shreds of his dignity trailing on the floor behind him.

Shyeel waited until he was about out of earshot before snorting and shaking her head. "Well. I suppose that confirms shit."

MacKinnon glanced at the Asari, then at me and twitched a shoulder in a slow, Asari style roll. "You doubted it?"

"We aren't in the habit of trusting data. Or people we don't know." The other Reyja'krem shrugged in turn. "But he definitely inherited your ability to make people crap themselves just by glaring at them."

"So I've noticed." It was hard to tell, but her voice might have turned dry for those few words. "However, further discussion should take place behind closes doors."

"Agreed." I grunted, turning and waving my stiff left arm for her to lead us on.

She did so, guiding Shyeel and I down the corridor and then right into another main throughway. Trainees that had politely shifted aside for us before positively leaped out of Mackinnon's way, stiffening to attention and saluting her as we walked past. Thankfully the trip didn't take much longer, and it was only a few silent minutes before she waved her omni-tool towards a sealed doorway.
It cracked open to reveal a small but functional lounge, complete with couches and comfortable looking arm chairs arranged around a central table filled with snacks and light foods.

"You may avail yourselves to the food," Her voice didn't warm as she strode towards one of the chairs, quickly settling into it. "Or you may offer whatever information you believe the Warlord needs to know."

"She can't be bothered to come and hear it herself?" I asked, electing to keep my tired body standing. Not to make a statement or threaten her by remaining above her, but because the confrontation, pointless and nonviolent as it had been, had still drained what little reserves I'd had left. If I sat in one of those things I'd probably lose consciousness in a matter of moments.

"She is overseeing the graduation ceremony and will be occupied for the next five hours." She replied. "If you desire to wait, you are free to waste your time. Or you could simply demand answers to your questions and cease delaying."

I stared at her for several long breaths before shaking my head. "You know I don't remember you, right?"

There was a very long pause, followed by the first emotion I'd seen her express; exhaustion. She nodded once, her eyes half-closing as she sighed and leaned back in her chair. "I am aware of what happened to you. All of it."

"All..." My head shook as I sighed. "Jona or Leska? I'm guessing Leska."

"She and the Lady have a close relationship despite their differing situations."

"You mean they enjoy fucking each other." Shyeel sighed. "Athame save Sederis if she loses her head and gets pregnant."

MacKinnon twitched a little at the last word, and I found myself frowning at her. She returned my gaze implacably, a single pale set of fingers drumming on the table. When I said nothing after a full minute, she shook her head. "Either ask of the circumstances of your birth, or the circumstances of your initial enslavement."

I pressed my lips together for a long moment, then let out a tight breath through my nose. "Rape, or just unwanted?"

"Unwanted." She replied, her voice still cool. "I was fifteen and attempting to rebel against a controlling family. When they discovered I was pregnant, they prevented me from ending it in an attempt to teach me some form of lesson. But by the time I was old enough to escape..."

"You'd gotten attached to him?" Shyeel guessed.

"Not so much." Her head shook once. "More that I had realized that his life would have become as miserable and micromanaged as my own. I am aware that I am cold and unfeeling, something that was also true when I was a teenager, but... even I could not leave you there."

The Asari snorted. "You were attached."

Green eyes narrowed, but she continued her narrative. "It did not take me long to find a pirate crew willing to take on an extra gun, especially one educated enough to predict shipping schedules. I was allowed to keep you aboard, provided I trained you to do simple tasks as you aged. But largely I allowed Ashen to tend to you. She had become quite smitten on sight, and took over raising you shortly thereafter. You became attached in turn, and quickly referred to her as your mother."
"I'm guessing that made you ecstatic." I declared more than asked.

There was a small shrug in reply. "I will not contest the statement. Things progressed well, we were a successful group of pirates up until the battle near this world. Credits were low as we had just set out after spending most of them, and the Captain ordered everything available sold. Including you."

Grunting, I let out a slow breath. "You allowed it?"

Her pale mouth became a thin line. "Betraying the Captain would have resulted in my death for no change to your fate. But... I owed Ashen, she had saved my life in a boarding attempt some weeks prior, and she had already approached me about jumping ship with you. Once the sale was completed I gave her all of the information required to release you and flee into Celthani proper."

My eyes narrowed slightly. "That is a rather convenient story."

"I have been aware of your continued existence for some years now." MacKinnon replied, her upper lip twitching once. "If I had desired to fake my role in your past, I could have easily done so. With a far better story than the one I offer."

I mulled over that for a few moments before grimacing as I realized that, like it or not, she had a point. A very real, very annoying point.

I mean... Athame's fucking ass, she was the custodian of the records that had led Chambers and I to figure any of this shit out at all. If T'Ravt had revealed me after our first meeting on Omega, which was probable, she'd have had more than enough time to fake any story that she wanted. And someone put in charge of Xentha's major military Academy would sure as fuck be able to come up with a better tale than 'I didn't want you, and only helped you escape slavery because I owed your other mother.'

"All right." I allowed. "Supposing I believe all of that, what do you want?"

A shoulder twitched in a little Asari roll again. "You survived the past five years without me in your life, I will assume that you can continue to do so."

Somewhere in my chest, a muscle relaxed ever so slightly. I could work with her staying out of my life, and having nothing to do with hers. Meeting her and one half-brother had been quite enough of a reunion for one lifetime, but if she was equally fine with it... that left the obvious question.

"What is T'Ravt's game in this?" I asked, frowning slightly. "I mean, I understand her wanting to make sure I didn't assassinate you if you run this place... but if you don't want anything to do with me, a feeling I reciprocate entirely, then why is she amusing herself with this?"

MacKinnon's icy expression shifted a little, her eyes narrowing as she frowned. "While she does enjoy her little games, there is always an underlying reason. A lesson she seeks to impart, or knowledge she hopes to trick out of others. She has a purpose in forcing us to reunite, though what it could be I do not know."

"I'm starting to hate that entire family." Shyeel muttered. "Athame's azure, what is so hard about talking plainly?"

"Agreed." I shook head my head before sighing. "Enough of that, we can bitch about her later. For now let's move on to the reason we're here in the first place: Last night an SIU team tried to take us out near the District's borders."

She blinked, then narrowed her eyes and straightened her posture. "Numbers? Prisoners?"
"Double strength team, we took two of them alive including their Highborn Commander, a man named Balak." A waved a hand vaguely towards the east. "They're being taken to our compound. If we get any actionable intelligence out of their interrogations we'll communicate it to the Warlord."

Fingers again drummed on the table. "And they were after you, specifically?"

"Balak loathes me." I twitched a shoulder. "And Shyeel's bounty from the Hegemony isn't exactly small either. I'm assuming their plan was to eliminate us, and then go after Ayle and the Kithans."

"Removing all of the remaining Reyja'krem in the Terminus." MacKinnon let out a irritable sound, "A political maneuver rather than a military one, and pointless besides. The Hegemony is too far gone to save with such tiny gestures."

Shyeel grunted, reaching out to grab a piece of fruit from the table. "We're hoping to get some information about the state of things on Khar'shan from them as well."

"Are you going to question them conventionally," MacKinnon glanced between us, "Or simply ask the Ardat'yakshi on your payroll to handle it?"

Somehow the fact that she knew that Mirala was on our staff right now didn't surprise me. Or that she knew what she was. "That will be Nynsi's decision, she's going to handle it."

There was something like a nod, more of a twitch really, but it conveyed her acceptance all the same. Her left hand rose, flicking her omni-tool to life with a single gesture. She examined it for a moment, then closed with a more decisive nod. "Is there anything else of import? I am expected at the ceremony shortly."

"No." I stated simply.

MacKinnon let out a quiet grunt and rose from her chair. "I will assume you can find the way back to your vehicle? Good."

And then without another word, she strode out of the lounge, vanishing into the packed halls. The murmur of conversation cut abruptly short as she did, and I could again hear trainees scurrying out of her path before the door quietly slid shut again.

"That." My companion murmured. "Is a frigid bitch. In case you missed it."

"I didn't." Heaving out a long breath, I glanced around the room and table and glowered when I didn't see any alcohol. "Come on. Let's get the fuck out of this city. I owe Ayle and Dietrich some explanations... and I need a drink."

"Won't hear me argue about the last Cie, but we need to make a stop first." Blue lips curled a little. "Don't worry, it won't take long, and I guarantee it will make you feel better."

---

**Silent Witness**

My fingers curled reflexively into fists as I glared at Cieran, then at Shyeel, and then back at Cieran. "Is this supposed to be funny?"

"It's supposed to make Cie's shit day better." The Asari grinned before glancing at him. "How's it doing?"

The human *bosh'tet* twitched his lips, though the tiny smile didn't quite reach his small eyes. "Better
than I initially thought it would."

My former friends were lounging in the compound's bar, having evidently declined to announce their return in favor of heading straight for the nearest source of drinks. I could understand and sympathize with that desire, most days... but not when they'd brought a very, very unwanted little keshin back with them.

Haro gave me a broad grin, slurping a bit of his own beer down. He'd never had good tolerance as a teenager, and if anything it seemed like it had gotten worse as he'd gotten older. That or the two grinning assholes had simply been pouring them down his throat to get him to talk. "Come on sis, just shtellin' stories."

"You were such an adventurous girl." Shyeel snickered. "I mean, a threesome with-"

"That never happened!" I snarled, reaching forwards to pound my right fist on the table as I turned my glare firmly on the lying bosh'tet in question. "He made that story up a decade ago!"

Cie raised his eyebrows. "He invented a story about your sexual exploits when he was only ten?"

Had he only been ten? A quick bit of math made me growl and reiterate the important part. "The point is that it didn't happen."

"What didn't happen?" I jerked my head around as Dietrich entered the bar, a smoldering cigar protruding from his thick beard. "If it's making Voya contradict herself it must be good."

"Ashari twins." My brother giggled. "In a car."

"Never. Happened." The massive human barked out a laugh. "Keep talking kid, whoever the fuck you are."

"Her brother." Cie stated at the same time as I replied, "A dead bosh'tet."

For his part, Haro simply let out another giggle as he slumped over to rest his head on the table. He tried to shift a few times, managing to get his arms beneath his skull as a pillow before letting out a long groan and dropping into oblivion with his forked tongue hanging out. Shyeel rolled her eyes and reached a hand to his throat, nodding when she confirmed that he was still breathing.

"How long you been shoving drinks into the kid?" Dietrich spoke through another rumbling chuckle, moving past me to grab a nearby chair.

"Not long actually." Cieran shook his head, glancing at me. "He's only had two."

I twitched a shoulder, my mind already preoccupied with just how long it would take me to kill the little shit. "His tolerance has always been terrible. Two is one and a half more than it usually takes."

"We'll have to work on that." The big man mused, waving at the Turian bartender for a drink of his own. "He staying?"

My head whipped to Cieran, who only shrugged. "Joining Ayle's newest recruit class tomorrow."

"Cieran-"

He held a hand up, "He wanted in on our unit, I said no. So he volunteered for Ayle's detachment and she let him in after talking with his superiors in the Wall Guard."
Meaning that the decision was out of his hands. Or at least, that he was claiming that. "So you decided to bring him with you and listen to fake stories about me?"

A pale hand rose to point a finger firmly at the woman next to him. "Her idea."

Shyeel shot him a betrayed look that bounced entirely off of his unrepentant expression. "Do you always have to throw your friends into the storm to save your own skin?"

"Well..." He made a slight show of thinking as he sipped from his fluffy Asari drink. "Yes, and now I'm going to do it again. You two get this kid to a bunk, need to talk with Deet about all the crap that happened in Celthani."

I must have stepped around the table a little too eagerly because he immediately amended his statement, "Get him to a bunk alive, Voya. Consider a ban on fratricide to be a standing order."

Muttering to myself, I took my time about helping Shyeel haul the idiot to his feet. It wasn't exactly easy considering that my left arm was still stuck in a sling, and if his head banged into the table once or twice during the process... Cie just sighed but didn't offer any comments. Throwing one of his arms around each of our necks, we dragged him out of the bar and into the hallway, passing a very confused looking Ayle in the process.

"This way." I grumbled, taking the first right. "If he's a recruit he can stay in the hall with them."

The Asari nodded, turning with me. It didn't take us long to get the re-purposed mess hall, the floor already filled with other recruits rolling out sleeping mats or otherwise chatting amongst themselves as they prepared to sleep before their first day of initiation. More than a few of them glanced up in amusement as we hauled Haro in, dropping him in the first open space we found.

Shyeel instructed a few of the others to make sure he kept breathing through the night, and the fastest route to the medical wing if they thought he needed it.

"So... where are we staying?" She asked once we'd left again, following me further down the same corridor.

"The idiot and I are stuck in the medical wing for another night." I muttered. As much as I was irritated about my brother's arrival, the knowledge of just where we were going was pushing that aside. For now... now I needed to call on my ancestors for strength, much as I had when I'd first seen everything this morning. "You'll be able to use our actual rooms in the Lancers' hall. That's where we're going."

The name earned me a glance. "The Lancers?"

"Shaaryak's idea, she got it from that heraldry she invented for Cie."

My good shoulder twitched in a shrug. "It's our official designation now. As for the hall... Dietrich wanted to do something to honor Callada and the others, and he convinced Ayle that it was a good idea."

Shyeel grimaced. "That sounds ominous."

I shrugged again. "You'll see soon enough."

"This is for bringing Haro with, isn't it?"

"No." I snorted, rustling my hair a bit to show her I was still annoyed about that. "That I'll get you back for later. This is... something serious, something we'll want to warn Cie about before he comes in."
Blue lips pursed a little as we rounded a corner, coming to a very short hallway that ended in a massive sealed bulkhead. It didn't have any signs indicating what lay beyond, and I didn't think that it ever would. Instead there was just a tiny console set into the wall beside it, and I quickly input the password that Ayle had given me when she'd shown it to Illyan and I this morning.

The heavy metal slid open soundlessly, revealing yet another long hallway, though this one opened into a wide area far ahead. But more important were the tiny alcoves scattered along both sides, carefully hidden so that you would only truly see them as you walked past.

Giving me a small frown when I waved her on ahead, Shyeel took a few steps and glanced into the first one. Her back stiffened slightly, and she let out a quiet, "Oh."

Grimacing, I padded after her and looked as well, even though I knew what was inside. A small display stand holding the broken, bloodied crest of a Krogan. And above that, a small plaque of wrought silver hung on the wall, bearing letters in a dark navy blue.

Commander Trisren.

I small glance across the hall revealed much the same, though a broken Claymore shotgun rested beneath the name of Dorvahn Altheus.

"All of them?" Shyeel asked quietly, turning to look down the hall.

My right arm waved her on in response, and we got moving again. Our pace was slow as my companion stared into each, as if memorizing the names. She hadn't known the original Blades, not like we had, so I supposed that made sense. There was a quiet gasp when we past the last of them, a single alcove sitting alone without an equal across the hall.

I didn't look into that one, I knew what was there... and what wasn't. Her name had no trophy to honor her, nothing taken from her fallen enemy. But it would... oh it would. If it killed Cieran, if it killed Illyan, if it killed me; we would put that asshole's weapon there.

After her came more. Every member of our team who had died, set in the order that they had fallen. Another Krogan crest for Marcus. Broken Geth rifles for Hesh and Ullak. The cracked armor of a Vorcha veteran for Jarick. A militia rifle for Callada. An Asari commando's helmet, the visor blown out by a heavy round, for Thul ul Aldaara.

"Do we need... do we need to walk past all of this? Everytime we come here?"

"No." I shook my head as we passed into the remainder of the hallway. There was plenty of room for more alcoves, a grim reminder of what might happen to the rest of us. "We have three other ways in, all hidden, all keyed to just us. But any regular member of the unit will have to walk through that hall to meet us."

"And that was Dietrich's idea?" She asked quietly.

I nodded simply.

The Asari shuddered a little as we finally reached the main chamber. It was circular, and largely empty, with more doors leading in all directions. "Guessing we meet people in this one?"

"Yes. The rest are... more to Cieran's standards." Shaaryak had apparently done the buying, electing to fill the rooms with furniture much like what he'd apparently preferred back on Illium. It was all comfortable, all Asari style, and most of it had been bought cheaply from second-hand stores in the small city nearby. "Dormitory rooms are through that door right over there, the kitchen is directly
across. They're all connected as well, so we don't have to come out here if we don't want to."

"That's... I don't know if that's good or bad." She admitted quietly. "Mind giving me the tour?"

I didn't, and we spent the next two hours going through the various rooms and side chambers that made up our new home.

Next up is chapter eight: The Routine

Chapter End Notes

No news saga for this one, not really much of import going on around the galaxy the day after the last chapter. More will come in the next, which will wrap up their time on Xentha (forw now). Mostly focusing on their new training routine while they wait for word on Krom, plus the results of interrogating everyone's favorite Hegemony Commander.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude I: A Vicious Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude I: A Vicious Game

Date: 03-31-2184

Location: Xentha, Terminus

Silent Witness

Batarians didn't handle starvation well.

Both of our prisoners were gaunt and needed assistance to shuffle out of their cells and into the barely completed interrogation room. Keelah, they were sufficiently far gone as to be unable to cause problems even though we had anticipated them at least making some kind of attempt. Both of them more or less collapsed into their chairs, and even I could tell that they were putting zero effort into maintaining any kind of posture.

They barely reacted to being chained to their seats by the guards, or when Shaaryak and two additional Batarian guards arrived. For our part, Cieran and I were the only members in the adjoining room, looking through the two-way mirror that would appear to be just a wall to those on the other side. Opting against sitting, we were both casually leaning against the room's walls, simply observing what was transpiring.

I'd have preferred to be in there, but Shaaryak had insisted that only Batarians be physically present in order to make the racist pricks a bit more open.

Although… I did have to give her some credit; she led the interrogation in the cruelest fashion possible. Once she'd settled herself on the other side of the table, a fifth and final guard silently entered the room with a covered tray. Settling it before her on the table, he pulled the cover away with a slight flourish to reveal... breakfast.

The prisoners snapped all eight of their combined eyes to stare at the food, tracking every tiny bit of motion as Shaaryak slowly sipped from a glass of tea before taking an almost dainty bite from a sandwich.

"Good morning." She spoke pleasantly a few moments later, making me smirk a little as her obvious enjoyment of their suffering came through. "Ka'harial. It's been a while."

"Nynsi." The male rasped. "Good to see that you remain an alien loving bitch."

Her head tilted slightly to the right as she took another small bite from her food. Only once she had finished, with every sign of pleasure, did she speak again. "Still impolite with poor situational awareness, I see."

"You're going to kill me anyway." He tried for a growl, but it came out as more exhausted than
anything else. "Why should I bother?"

"Because, depending upon what you tell me, I may still have use for the pair of you." Shaaryak supplied as she daintily ate a small piece of fruit.

Next to me, Cie's left hand twitched once, though he kept his expression bland. He obviously still wasn't thrilled with the plan, and Ayle had been likewise against it. It had taken Shaaryak several days of barely civil debate to bring the pair of them around enough to give even tacit approval. Even then Cie's tolerance for the entire affair was thin, a situation probably not helped by the big idiot. She'd been even more apoplectic than he was when Shaaryak had broached the plan, which was something I'd never thought I'd see.

"A use?" Balak croaked with as much suspicion as he could muster, trying and failing not to stare as she continued to eat.

"A use." She confirmed simply. "First, I am in need of information that you are going to provide me without hesitation."

A long, sullen silence followed, broken only by the quiet tings of her utensils. Eventually he croaked out a few more words. "Or else you add dehydration to the list of tortures?"

Shaaryak gave him a small little smile and set her fork and knife down. "Ka'harial, you remember my hotel, do you not? What was wrought there? If not for my arguments the agony you would be suffering would be far, far worse. And I do not believe that my former Harath'krem would be so sloppy as to allow you to die before he had fully repaid you for what transpired there."

More silence before a ragged breath escaped the man. "I was not involved in that conspiracy."

Cieran let out a disdainful snort, while the highborn bitch let out a prim little sound at roughly the same time. "What explanation do you offer instead?"

Balak visibly shifted his attention to her food with all of his eyes, swallowed, then seemed to slump. "In his dotage, my grandfather became… fixated on several ideals. The marriage of the Balak and Shaaryak families was one of them. He arranged the deal with your parents despite my and my father's protests."

"You imply that the hotel was done at his orders." The Silver Blade Commander shifted in her seat, then drummed several fingers on the table as she seemed to think aloud. "He wanted to break myself and Cieran apart, to make me available for you."

"I didn't discover his role until I returned home." The man insisted, as severely as he could manage. "I would never sacrifice my crew for something so personal."

To my right, Cieran shifted, pushing off from the wall to walk closer to the glass as the discussion continued to how it had been arranged. How a second SIU team, fanatically loyal to Balak's father, had been smuggled onto Illium and moved into position. How they'd learned about Krom being on planet and set everything up to frame him and the True Sons for the attack.

After listening for several moments, Cie offered a tired curse. "Well shit."

"You believe him?" I asked quietly.

"He's one of the largest assholes I've ever met, but he's a patriot in his own way." He sighed and shook his head. "He wouldn't have let his crew be executed, trapped in their hotel rooms and just waiting for death. Not if he'd known about it. He wouldn't, probably doesn't, give a shit about the
staff or how they were tortured to death. But he'd have gotten his people out at the very least."

I grimaced a little at the reminder of just why he and the idiot, plus Rane, had been on Omega in the first place all those years ago. "The grandfather still around for us to kill?"

"Dead, old age." The fingers on his left hand twitched once, and the pair of us fell silent as we listened to Shaaryak continue to grill him on the internal politics of his own family. That, it seemed, he was at least willing to speak about without too much prodding. Mostly because, if his tone of voice was any indication, he loathed them on a level that put Cie's annoyance with MacKinnon to shame. If anything she was having a hard time getting him to shut up about who was fucking whom and who'd betrayed whom and just how much he wanted to cauterize his father's eyes shut.

"And he remains a political ally of the High Patriarch?" Shaaryak pressed.

"Breaking centuries of familial honor, yes." Balak croaked. "We have lost nearly all of our long term allies as he grovels at that bloated chenethic's throne."

There was a tiny nod as the woman settled back into her chair, taking an idle sip from her tea. "And the general political situation? Does it continue to devolve?"

"Yes…" He offered somewhat cautiously, though the effect was slightly ruined by the way he kept flicking at least one set of eyes towards her tray that remained overly full of food. "What do you want to know?"

"We are both aware that a hejirin approaches Khar'shan, and that its scythes are going to tear the Hegemony apart. What I want to know is which Ha'diq will lean with which wind, and how the Warrior Caste will respond."

Balak said nothing, but after several tense moments of silence his companion finally spoke, her voice equally as weak. "Perhaps half and half, as they are currently aligned. Though that is assuming the traditionalists and the liberals ally."

"Sal'ris." The male turned to glare at her, but she shook her head once. "If there is a chance that you might live, it is my duty to make the attempt Tarath'shan."

"Explain." Shaaryak murmured, her voice studiously neutral.

"My tarath'shan leads what elements of the SIU that refuse to be drawn into political fighting." The woman, Sal'ris apparently, explained. "For that… we are increasingly sent on suicidal missions as far from the Hegemony's borders and support as possible."

"Trying to get usage out of us first." Balak shook his head once. "Much as you seem to be. Why do you want to know this?"

"Because I remain a patriot, despite your assertions to the contrary and much to my former Harath'krem's lament." She leaned back slowly in her chair, an elegant hand tapping fingers slowly on the table. "The Hegemony may be broken but it is not unrepairable, assuming certain… factors, are removed."

Four black eyes narrowed, his body leaning forwards as far as his restraints would allow. For several moments he said nothing, and then his lips slowly curled. "You want me to kill my father."
"And the High Patriarch, the heads of every house supporting the Conservative movement and the Fist of Khar'shan." My lips curled a little as her tone turned properly vicious. "But that is only the beginning of the cleansing that must occur. I want you to start a civil war."

The SIU woman flinched at the last words, glancing hard at her lord. For his part he didn't look terribly surprised, simply evaluating. "And I would become what, after the victory? The puppet Hegemon, to rule over a barren and broken nation?"

I'd give the asshole his due, the potential of losing didn't even seem to occur to him. Shaaryak shook her head once in a tiny gesture. "I have no need of a puppet, nor do I desire to journey to Khar'shan to keep you leashed. What I want is for our people to be strong, proud, and properly respectful of our own faith. Your father, and those like him, have abused the lower castes and excused their actions with misinterpretations of the Pillars for too long."

Balak continued to frown, tilting his head slightly to the left before nodding. "I see. A unified Hegemony would allow you to finally extract your family's wealth from its broken economy, and a grateful Hegemon would seem churlish if he did not grant you great autonomy."

Which was just the start. Her long term plans involved a lot of convoluted crap relying on the fact that she'd been born into the higher caste. I thought she was trying to angle for the three Commanders to end up as the official leaders of all Batarian exiles in the Terminus… or something. I'd missed the meeting that went over the details in favor of helping Idas torture the new recruits. And in either case, Cieran didn't really give a shit about that part. He was more concerned with who she wanted to jump-start the chaos.

"What do you want in advance?" The bound highborn rasped.

"A full political assessment of the Hegemony, including which Class A colonies have Ha'diq who would be likely to support a traditionalist revolt." She supplied at once. "As well as how many military commands could be relied upon to join, provided that liberal viewpoints concerning the rankings would be considered in the aftermath. Finally, a listing of what high level members of the government and armed forces have had access to the Leviathan of Dis."

My lips shifted again, but this time in irritation. Cieran's giving Shaaryak access to his information had been something I'd been firmly against, with the big idiot and Shyeel both entirely on my side. But since Ayle knew… he'd felt like Shaaryak needed to know, especially given the fact that he might have just touched off a shadow war between Cerberus and the Matriarch that could very easily drag all of us into it.

I'd argued that she didn't need to know all of it, only for Cie to override all of us and do it anyway. Personally I thought it was some misguided guilt that he'd worked up over the entire morning he'd spent silently staring at the names in the memorial hall, but saying that aloud had only gotten me glared at severely enough that I'd had to fight the urge to hide behind Illyan.

"The Leviathan?" As expected, Balak focused heavily on the last. "I don't know."

"It is, in all probability, of the same type of ship as the vessel referred to as Sovereign." The Highborn woman neatly cut him off before uttering a small lie. "I have evidence from the Shadow Broker that confirms that such vessels are capable of… affecting individuals who spend too much time on or near them. Insanity is a best-case solution."

The two SIU agents exchanged a single significant glance before the apparent Harath'krem spoke in her weak voice. "Even when destroyed or taken apart?"
"Even shards of it could be dangerous." Shaaryak tilted her head slightly to the left. "You have my word. Now, what do you know?"

Balak pressed his lips together, then nodded very, very slightly. "Dismiss the aliens who are undoubtedly watching, and by the Sacred Pillars let us eat some food. We will discuss the Leviathan and your… plans."

Cie let out a grunt and was moving before Shaaryak even made a motion to tell us to leave.

Rolling my eyes, I followed him out of the tiny room and into the corridor. "It's not like they would have known either way."

He shrugged as we had to step aside, letting a group of construction workers move past us. "No, but nothing else relevant was going to be said. He's going to agree, and thus survive. Dammit Nynsi…"

"Batarians." I muttered darkly as we got moving again. "Offer them a chance at power…"

The comment earned me a mild look that I ignored. We stayed silent as we walked, heading out the mostly unfinished eastern wing of the building and back towards the Lancers… what word was being used was changing continuously. 'Lodge' was popular, so was the generic 'Quarters'. But for my part, I was lobbying hard for 'Lair', mostly because it made both Cieran and Shyeel grin whenever they heard it.

Entering a small side hall, I followed Cie as he waved his omni-tool at a tiny alcove, easily slipping through the tiny gap that emerged as the hidden door slid open with a quiet hiss before shutting neatly behind us.

The living area we entered was occupied, Illyan glancing up from where her massive frame was sprawled across a couch. "Shit. He's going to do it, isn't he?"

"Go ahead and mark the Hegemony Civil War as starting as of today." Cieran sighed as he padded over to collapse into a chair. "With Ka'harial Balak a leading member of the forces of... whatever alliance she's helping throw together."

There was a gagging sound from the huge Asari. "You sure we can't just… you know, use the Voya solution?"

I stared at her in something like shock, " Aren't you always the one saying we can't kill everyone we meet?"

She shifted a little uncomfortably. "He's different because he deserves it. I mean, Athame's ass, after Korlus, then Illium, and he's probably been the one sending SIU teams after us ever then… now we're letting him live?"

"Blame me for siccing Cerberus on the Matriarch." Cieran sighed, throwing an arm up and over his eyes as he sank back into the chair. "Gave her the idea."

"I blame you for everything anyway." I pointed out as I walked over to the couch. A glare at the giant idiot on it only got me a blank look in return, and I had to actually grab her thick legs and haul them out of my way before I could sit down. "You're a convenient target."

"Thank you." He muttered through a tired yawn, not so much as glancing at me. "Glad I'm useful to you."

"You're welcome." I replied cheerfully. "Speaking of use, how is my new gun coming along?"
His gangly limb shifted so that a small green eye could stare at me. "Your new gun is for you to work on. I'm busy with my and Illyan's crap."

"You mean the new heavy weapon that keeps blowing up?" I taunted him.

The one eye narrowed, but his other hand rose to cover another yawn as he spoke. "It has yet to blow up, and I fixed the jamming issue yesterday."

Illyan perked up as she shifted around, curling into a giant ball on the other end of the couch. "So it's working?"

"Almost." A shoulder twitched. "Should be good to test fully tomorrow."

I glowered at him as my good mood soured. "How come she gets a giant rifle that also shoots tech mines?"

"Because I don't have tiny little arms?" The big idiot asked before yelping when I twisted around and slammed a foot into the back of her thighs. Rustling my hair in irritation, I showed her my canines when she tried to glare at me.

"I'm not saving either of you." The lone male present covered his face again, shifting as though he intended to fall asleep right where he was.

My display faded a little, turning slowly into a frown as I stared at him. Within what felt like a handful of seconds his breathing slowed and steadied as the last bit of Batarian stiffness faded from his body. A quick glance to Illyan saw her nod, and the pair of us rose as silently as we could before padding out of the room. We left the lights on; we'd learned the hard way that turning it off just startled him into waking up.

"He's still not sleeping at night." She gave me a sharp look as she spoke, "Shaaryak talked to me at breakfast, she said she caught him up before dawn, working on his new cane."

"He's... getting better at not waking me up when he leaves." I admitted with an irritated shake of my head. "And you sleep like a mountain."

Her features twisted in a grimace as we moved down the short hallway, one of her hands shoving the door open to reveal our private dining area. "Yeah. Athame's... maybe we should talk with Ayle."

I gave her a look. "They occasionally enjoy having sex, that doesn't mean they're capable of helping each other with crap like this."

"That's not what I meant." She growled, heavy footfalls stomping as she went to the nearby fridge. "I meant maybe she could force him to talk with the doctors she hired, maybe find something that will help him get more than four or five hours a night."

Snorting, I shifted over so that I could lean against the island counter in the center of the room. "Jealous much? That's not like you."

The mutters that came out as she dug around for a drink sounded more like angry gibberish than anything else, and I didn't bother hiding my smirk when she turned around to glare at me with a bottle in her hands. "You are so not helping."

I sneered at her. "Of course I'm not, this is entirely too amusing."

Illyan managed the staring match for a minute before looking away and ripping the top off of her
"I talked with Ayle and Shyeel about all of that. Mostly to get your taunts out of my head."

Blinking a few times, I cocked my head a little as I became curious in spite of myself. "About your little crush? What did they say?"

"Shyeel said to grow a quad and just kiss him." My lips twitched as I fought not to laugh. "Ul Massa though… she said if I did, that I needed to know what I was getting into."

I snorted. "And what did she figure out in one year that you missed in four?"

"She thinks he'd have already hauled me into bed with him if we didn't…" Her shoulders slumped a little. "If I didn't sleep around so much, and if he didn't get so attached so easily."

"And this is…" My eyes narrowed. "News? Seriously?"

"No, I mean it's… shit. If I did make a move on him, and we did do something, and then I… you know, went off with someone, what do you think he'd do?"

"Probably kill whoever you went off with for starters." I shrugged. "Then never touch you again no matter how much you begged. It would make for an awkward working relationship if nothing else."

The bleak look that she gave me was almost pathetic enough to make me feel sorry for her. "I'm trying, and I haven't been with anyone, but it's… goddess, I don't know if-"

"Keelah." I interrupted her with a groan. "What is it about this that's turning you into your sister? Why do I even tolerate you talking about this?"

"Because you're a sadist." She muttered before taking another sip. "How's your brother?"

I was firmly intending on ignoring her attempt to change the topic, but the far doorway opened to reveal Shyeel. The scarred Asari gave us both a quick glance as she entered, her tone brusque. "We've got a problem."

"Is it tall, blue, and a keshin?" I asked.

"No." She spoke over Illyan's growl. "But just on one account; she's not tall. We might have a lead on Krom's partner."

I blinked, exchanged a quick glance with Illyan as her faux-anger faded into a focused expression. Licking my lips, I flicked my eyes back to Shyeel. "From who, and where?"

"I don't know." Her head shook. "I received a message from an unknown sender telling me she'll be on Omega in thirty-two days."

"That," Illyan muttered, "Is way too specific."

There was a tight nod. "Like I said, a problem. Where's Cieran?"

"Asleep." The other Asari rumbled. "Passed out within a minute of sitting in a chair."

The Reyja'krem blinked, then cursed as she rubbed at her temples. "Athame's azure, of course he's finally asleep when something like this happens."

"Did you run any traces?" I cut in, "Where did it route through?"

"Yes, and it hit the Illium relay before running into a block." She grimaced and lowered her hand.
"I've got a communications hub in Nos Irrail that routes the entire city's bloody off-world grid. It could have come in from anywhere on planet."

Dammit. But... Keelah, what would that bitch be doing heading to Omega? Aria would literally skin her alive if she caught her, and make sure that she was awake and conscious for every single second of it. "Luring us to that rock doesn't make any sense, not with how many contacts we have there."

Shyeel grunted and frowned. "If anything it would make it easier to get to anywhere they pop up. I was going to try and convince Cie to move us there anyway."

"Think there's going to be an attack on Xentha?" Illyan asked quietly. "Whoever sent that message probably knows that we're here."

I scoffed. "And they want the four of us offworld? What about the giant fleet and army protecting the place?"

Blue hands rose palm-up, "That's the only thing that would really be accomplished if we follow the lead, especially if we bunk in the Talon's place again. They wouldn't betray us. And if we thought they might, there's always the Eclipse branch or T'Ravt's outpost."

I licked my lips slowly as I thought about that. She was more or less right, much as I hated to admit that. Going to Omega wouldn't be much of a step-down in safety for us, so long as we were intelligent, and the relay hub would make it faster to react to any rumors... So the only thing that would be accomplished would be that we wouldn't be on Xentha anymore.

I had an ego, but even mine wasn't so big as to seriously consider that to be the ultimate goal of this.

"So we go then." My head shook after a few more seconds of thought, the motion sending my hair rustling. "But not right away. It's a five day trip, so we time it to arrive the day before she's supposed to. Just enough time to get setup somewhere to wait for her, not so long that whoever sent this can arrange something."

"Especially if it's just Krom," Illyan rumbled. "Taunting us."

Shyeel grimaced. "I'll admit that was my first thought. Him or the Matriarch."

"If it is him," I shrugged, "We waste a few days drinking in Afterlife and come up with a new way to kill him. If it's her, maybe we take one of her pawns alive this time and see what they know."

Both Asari nodded slowly, glancing between each other before the larger of the pair spoke. "I think Cie would agree with that. Only gives us a month to prepare though."

And there was a lot of work on our equipment to be done in that time. A quick discussion followed that ended up in Shyeel being stuck waiting for Cieran to wake up, which likely wouldn't be much longer, while Illyan and I got our asses over to the workshop.

By Cieran's standards it was clean and well organized. I only tripped once over a piece of some project, maybe a new weapon for the power armor looming in the corner. He'd evidently discarded it, his general rule seemed to be just to throw it onto the floor if he didn't like how it was going. At some point he'd get around to ripping it apart for the pieces, but until then it helped create an obstacle course that only he was capable of avoiding without thought.

Illyan let out her own curses when she stepped on a tool, nearly falling on her ass before managing to grab onto the main workbench. It, and the three smaller benches nearby, were covered in weapons and parts of the same.
The newest, the Batarian War Gauntlets he'd liberated from Balak, were on the left most table and were currently in the process of being resized for Cieran's own use. Next to them were his canes, both his old tech launcher along with a copy of the pistol variant he'd built for Ayle. My new Viper, currently in pieces, came next, my neatly ordered work area the sole bastion of organization amidst the general human-caused chaos.

The only other table to receive a single weapon held his already modified to hell Executioner, but he'd allowed Illyan to tinker with it further. Right now I thought she was reconfiguring the waste barrel to enable it to blast out a concussive round, adding yet another tool to our arsenal.

But directly in front of us was the main table, with its ambitious pair of projects probably brought on by his lack of sleep.

"This..." Illyan reached a hand out to touch the larger of the pair. "Is going to be fun to use."

I snorted, doing my best to suppress the bit of envy. It had originally been a BSA light machine gun destined to be scrapped before Cieran had gotten his tiny fingers onto it. He'd stripped it down before adding two new tubes alongside the core barrel, adding acceleration rails to each before connecting them to a pair of small magazines which would hold tech mines. He'd also done about a million other things to make it work, or mostly work, and had been all but slaving over the stupid thing for the last week.

"No directional control over them though. And you're relying on the mine's guidance for stable flight, won't be any good at long range." I pointed out, trying to make myself feel better.

From the way she grinned at me, I didn't do a good enough job of concealing my emotions. "But at short range? Load both magazines with incinerates, have armor piercing rounds in the main ammo block, then..."

Then everything close to her would die very, very quickly. I let out an annoyed grunt that was in no way petulant. "Why does it have to weigh so much?"

"Because Cie doesn't believe in using eezo just to lower the mass of the gun." Her grin faded as she glanced at the thing. The trigger assembly was on top, along with a second grip near the middle, showcasing that it was meant to be carried underhanded rather than like a typical weapon. "And that's with light magazines for the mines."

"You know him." I shook my head, glancing at it again. "This is just his first attempt. He'll call this his prototype and won't ever be satisfied with it. The next one will probably be half the size followed by another one larger than this. But your new toy should be something we can finish in a month, even with VI needing to be reconfigured."

"True." Her eyes flicked to the other weapon on the bench. "And at least it won't blow up like that one."

My lips quirked a little as I looked over his first attempts at scratch-building a weapon. He'd gone with an omni-foundry rather than an ammo shaver, to match his continual fixation on stopping power. An oversized eezo core was currently in the process of being surrounded by a coolant system he was basing off of Shyeel's Kishok. A copy of the same's management VI was currently scrolling past one of the screens mounted nearby, evidently recompiling yet again.

"Still need to finish the coolant rig, sync the VI properly, get the entire thing mounted into a frame..." I shook my head as I trailed off. "Even once it's put together we need to run a million tests to make sure it's flash creating projectiles properly sized to fit into the barrel... I don't think we can finish it in
" Probably not. " Her lips pursed a little. " And we'll need to work on our armor as well, at least run it through the usual touch-ups. You want to finish off your Viper while I take on his pistol? If we can wrap those up by tomorrow we can help him with the big one and his new gauntlets."

"Deal." I murmured, already moving over to the clean spot in front of my gun.

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**Alliance News Network**

In military news, the Citadel quietly announced the creation of a new task force to investigate rumors of renewed Rachni activity. While quick to state that this is merely a precaution, and that no living Rachni have been detected on the species former homeworld, two Spectres have been assigned as well as a Hierarchy fleet rumored to include a dreadnought.

Spectre Kaya Shepard, humanity's own, is one of the agents assigned. She will be working with the legendary Salarian Spectre Jondum Bau. Regrettably, neither could be reached for comment before they departed the Citadel.

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**Next up is Interlude II: A Shadowy Game**

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Chapter End Notes

After thinking about it a bit... I decided to heavily adjust this last chapter. Instead of being within the saga from Cie's pov, it's the first of two interludes and is entirely from Voya's. Mostly because casting it from hers let me conceal a lot of what Nysni is planning, far more so than I could have if I'd shown Cieran's observations and thoughts about the matter ;)

The next will be entirely from Trena's, and the title should give you some clue as to who is going to be involved. Also, to go with some of the information that came out in this chapter; The next Saga will take place on Omega, and is named "Drums in the Deep". Should be more than enough to figure out where the gang is going to end up ;)

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude II: A Shadowy Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude II: A Shadowy Game

Date: 04-27-2184

Location: Sederis Family Mansion, Nos Astra, Illium, Terminus

Scaled Perspectives

"Bold." Ghai murmured as she read the message I'd just forwarded to her, "Risky."

"No shit it's risky." I muttered back, pacing back and forth in our living area. I'd wanted to scream obscenities when I'd first read the crap that the Ape and Shaaryak were doing, and only the fact that Ethy was asleep had throttled it. Somewhat. "They're already drowning in all the crap that's happening, so what the fuck do they do? Start up two more hurricanes just for the fucking fun of it."

My bondmate gave me a sharp look, and I realized that my voice had started to rise during the last sentence. I grimaced but nodded, legs still churning as I moved.

"Idiots." I growled. "Both of them."

"Desperate." She countered quietly. "Annoyed."

"You can be those things and still be fucking idiots." I pointed out in turn, fingers twitching as I resisted the urge to smoke something. "Athame's ass, you know Balak's going to betray them first chance he gets, and Cerberus is a wild storm if ever there fucking was one."

Ghai glanced at me, her lips quirking a little. "Shaaryak."

"She's..." My head shook as I growled at nothing in particular. "Fine, yes, she'll have fail-safes in place to kill him, but still-"

Hands dropped to her hips as she stared down her nose at me. "Whining."

"I am not whining just because I'm here and not out there to stop them from doing stupid shit like this." I growled, crossing my arms and trying to keep my back straight. It didn't make my short ass any taller, but it was the principle of the fucking thing. "Fine, maybe Shaaryak can make Balak dance with a fucking lure or something. Doesn't mean that those fur covered terrorists will."

"Matriarch." Her shoulder rolled. "Chaos."

"No shit it'll cause that for her, but it'll do that for us too." Especially if they actually found anything out. Before I'd read the ape's stupid will, I'd never really considered them more than a tiny human extremist group. But if half the shit in there was accurate, they'd be more than capable of fucking up the bitch's plans and followers.
And once they did all that, we'd be next on their kill list just for knowing all the crap that we did.

The taller Asari merely shrugged again before rasping another pair of words.. "Potentially worthwhile."

"Why do you always have to side with him?" I muttered, looking away from her. "Even when he's not bloody here."

Bare feet padded softly across the carpet before a finger reached out to flick my forehead. "Fun."

Scowling, I reached up to bat her hand away only for her fingers to curl around my wrist in a deft little motion. She yanked hard on me before I could react, bringing my body flush against hers as her other hand rose to gently grab my crest and pull it down so that I had to look up at her.

"You're cute when you're angry." I could hear the faintest echoes of a sensual purr in her throat, and I pushed myself a bit tighter against her to let her know that I had. Most days, most times, she could pretend that the shit that had been done to her voice didn't bother her. But sometimes... I didn't need to meld with her to notice the lingering pain.

"You've been arguing with me for the last hour just so you get turned on?" I tried for angry, but it was hard as fuck given that she was bending down to slowly trail her mouth along my jawline.

"Ethy sleeps." She murmured quietly, the hand still holding my wrist finally letting go so that I could wrap my arms around her back. "And you like bold."

I did. I really did. Especially when her hands started pushing at my pants, and her mouth kept finding new places to tug on as... bold... something about that word... she'd said it before, but fuck was it hard to think at that moment. "Are you...still arguing with me?"

"I hope she is." A new voice cut in, making both of us stiffen. "Fight sex is more fun to watch. Better odds that I'd be invited to join in too."

Ghai let out a low, furious sound that made her wince as it assaulted her vocal cords. "Ithiri. Out."

The youngest Sederis let out a low laugh, "Sorry, but the short idiot is needed."

Frustration made me let out a few irritated curses of my own as I turned around, feeling hands reluctantly pulling my clothing back over my ass. "What does she want?"

Ithiri Sederis could have been a clone of her older sister, at least in terms of physical appearance; Tall, statuesque, dark eyed, and sharing their mother's subtle clan markings. But that was about where the similarities ended. She stood in a loose slouch, wearing nothing more than a plain gray shirt with the Eclipse logo across her tits, and loose exercise shorts that would have made Leska recoil in horror.

"How the fuck should I know?" She snorted, looking mildly disappointed as my skin vanished."You think that bitch tells me anything?"

"Which one?" I growled. With Ithiri it was always hard to tell who she was bitching about at any given moment.

"Both of them." Her head shook. "Mother plus the queen bitch. Both of 'em want answers about the crap your Blades are up to."

"And they expect me to know shit about it?" I countered, not moving from were I was. "They should
"Probably." Ithiri gave me a wicked grin. "Come on you two, sooner you tell them that, sooner we get back to what you were just doing."

"Ethanya." Ghai sighed, shifting her hands from my back to my shoulders. "Will stay. Go."

My lips twisted in disappointment and frustration, but I let her push me away. Of course this shit had to wash in while Erana was out on a personal day, doing some shopping or some crap. If she'd been here she could have stayed in case the little one woke up, and Ghai and I could have found a different room on the way back. Preferably one that we could barricade to keep voyeurs out.

Still grumbling to myself, I stomped out with the taller Matron, the pair of us rolling out into the east wing of the mansion. I expected to be all but verbally assaulted with innuendo the moment we closed the door, but from some amused comments about my ass Ithiri seemed largely content to walk in silence with me.

I managed to tolerate that for about three minutes before I couldn't take it anymore. "Athame's ass, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Hm?" She offered me a slight glance as we transitioned from one corridor to another. "What, the fact that I'm not teasing you endlessly? I can shove you up against a wall and make out with you if you want to stay all keyed up."

My face twisted. "No. We're not maidens anymore."

"Unfortunately." There was a soft sigh as we walked past a few staff members. "Shit was simpler back then."

"Yeah." My shoulders slumped a little before I firmly shook my head. "Right, so, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I just got done with a three day interrogation session by those conceited assholes on the Citadel." Her voice lowered into something dark, and much like her mother's. "They're threatening to revoke our operating licenses if we don't stop the recruiting drives."

How the fuck had I missed that? "Since when can they limit PMC numbers if you've got all the paperwork and shit."

"Since the Asari and Salarians forced a new law down Sparatus's throat last month." Ithiri shook her head. "And, if the crap the humans are feeding me is right, that came right after they stopped his attempt to get the Elcor a full seat so that the human councilor could go from provisional to full."

The Elcor? Why in the deeps would the Turians sponsor them? I mulled over that for a while before coming to the obvious conclusion. Sponsoring the Volus would never get anywhere, the others would just see it as giving the Turians two votes instead of one. The Elcor would at least be relied on to be a more neutral vote... assuming you gave them a couple of months to make up their minds.

"Let me guess, they said no because they don't have enough dreadnoughts yet?"

"Yes." She muttered. "Which means they know the Elcor would drag proceedings on far more than they want, and let the Humans and Turians get away with more crap than they already do. All four of the chapter houses I just opened on their colonies in the Traverse are being challenged by C-Sec, and the Executor has all but admitted it's political shit and is dragging his feet. He's not going to stay in office long, I think they're getting ready to put a Salarian on the job."
"Shit." I muttered, our pace slowing as we neared our destination. The door was the same as a hundred others we'd passed, but the four commandos standing guard outside all but advertised who was within. "What are the humans doing?"

"Fighting back legally as best they can, howling with each tide to anyone who will listen, and trying to figure out loopholes to keep our people in place. Especially on Bekenstein and the Citadel." Her head shook. "If their fucked up government passes their withdrawal shit next week, us and those Corsair fucks will be the only ones protecting their people in the Traverse."

Right when the Hegemony was about to fall apart, which would definitely see their fleet pulling back from the gains they'd made in the Blue Sun war. And with the lower tier pirates fleeing the burning ship that was the Terminus, there'd be a fucking golden age of piracy the second the Alliance's big ships departed.

I slowed to a complete stop, more engrossed in this conversation than the shit that would happen next. "What happens if they force you out?"

"We yank all of our people out and bring them the fuck home." Her shoulder twitched as she likewise halted. "I ran some numbers for the human Admiral in charge out there, Hackett I think it was. Figure four or five months before their Corsairs are drowned by numbers, the big colonies like Horizon falling one or two after that. Infighting might take up some time after that, until Tirravan or someone organizes them enough to push the Verge again."

"Assuming they don't jump on the Hegemony." I pointed out. "If their shit falls apart..."

She waved a hand. "Cessa wouldn't let 'em. She's had her eyes on the Dark Rim colonies for a while, and what shit we know about the Warrior says he'll probably sail home to join one side or the other."

I mulled on that for a few breaths, then groaned and brought my hands up to rub at my face. "Athame's fucking azure..."

"Yeah. Come on, sooner we get this shit over with, sooner I can convince you and your girl to let me watch."

Grunting, I followed as she got moving again. Bypassing the guards, we entered into a darkened briefing room containing all of two Asari. Sederis was in her usual lounge wear, layered silken robes of an atrociously bright yellow that made me wince just to look at her. In contrast, Leska was wearing a perfectly fit dress uniform, and sure enough gave us a disdainful glance as she took note of our decidedly casual outfits.

"Prissy bitch." I muttered just loudly enough for Ithiri to hear. She snorted and didn't hide her grin, but I rose my voice before she could try and pick a fight. "What the fuck do you want?"

Sederis gave me a mild look before returning her eyes to the data feed scrolling in the air above the main table. "Answers, obviously. But first, a warning to all three of you. I am not in the mood for your petty sniping, and I will not tolerate any of that today. Am I understood?"

I swallowed reflexively at her tones, old and new memories telling me not to misbehave right now. Ithiri and Leska didn't look nearly as cowed, the cocky bitches, but they both nodded all the same.

"Ithiri." The Mistress of the Eclipse flipped her attention to her youngest. "Status of the new branches in the Traverse."

"Our people are in place on Horizon, Mutsu, Nanjing, and Freedom's Progress." She reported, "Still
talking with the locals about the contract for Arvuna."

Jona grunted. "The Council?"

"Udina is getting Sparatus to defend us, Valern is against." A hand rose and waggled slightly. "Tevos is talking a big game but she's fucking terrified. If she bans us, we take Illium and the clanless on Thessia drown her when the economy stutters. If she doesn't, those fucking crones on Thessia are going to drown her instead."

"She'll be trying to find a compromise then." Leska mused, keeping her tones level and elegant in direct comparison to her sister. "Perhaps we could close the Thessian branches?"

Ithiri shrugged. "I've got agents in the usual places, just waiting for her to get off her ass and approach us."

There was a quiet grunt from their mother. "Keep me updated. I'm pulling the core fleet back home to remind them how much it would cost to evict us from here."

I couldn't stop a grimace at the very idea of yet another war getting started. "You think it'll come to that?"

"No." Her head shook. "If only because the Turians would secede before they fought Thessia's war for it, and those spineless bitches have no desire for an actual fight. They might try to arrange an assassination or set up sabotage attempts, but we can deal with that shit easily enough." That was... actually a good point, and I found myself relaxing a little bit. At least, until Jona spoke again, "Gears, that reminds me. What the fuck is your human doing?"

I winced a little. "I... have no fucking idea."

She turned to give me a flat stare just a shade short of fucking vicious, but Leska spoke up before she could start tearing into me. "Setting their enemies against one another? I find it rather bold and clever actually."

"It's desperate and could drown us all." Ithiri growled back.

"The Hegemony was going to have a civil war regardless," Came the counter-argument. "All they're doing is bolstering the side they would rather see win. The Balak family is an old one who might help secure the liberal faction in the military. And she'll be sure to have people in place in case he's so stupid as to try anything."

"And he'll find them and kill them." Her sister snapped, making my head flick back and forth as they argued.

"You think so little of Shaaryak? She's extremely cunning."

"She's a fucking maiden playing at games she doesn't."

"Enough." Their mother snapped, not looking at either of them. "Gears, what details do you know?"

Pursing my lips, I made sure to stay still and actually think before I fucking responded this time. "As far as I know, Shaaryak's been bolstering Equality and the Traditionalists as much as she can from a distance. If they get the Liberals in too, that'll bring in a lot of the warrior caste and counter the conservative's numbers. I think there's a couple of old highborn priests who are coordinating shit, they'll probably work with Balak and whatever Admirals he can bring in. Apart from that, she hasn't told me shit. If the ape knows he hasn't said either."
Her hands came to rest on the table as she leaned on to it, seemingly processing that for several moments. "Interesting... bold, but done from a position of safety. She is learning from Kean."

I blinked. "What?"

Lips pulled back from teeth. "Does it not strike you odd that the youngest Balak now has a Hieth'sham as his Harath'krem? How many other rich, fat males have females desperate for power near them? And is Shaaryak not amongst the most powerful females that their species possesses?"

"Oh." Athame's ass... I really should have thought of that. "And if the storm she kicked up drags everyone to the deeps..."

"She will be here, surrounded by her new army, with me as her ally." Sederis nodded slowly. "It is a shame the Hegemony broke them apart, she and the human could have accomplished much in their years lost apart."

My lips twisted a little. I disagreed with that statement. Fucking vehemently.

But... shit, she had a point in her own way. Cieran and Shaaryak did work well together, they had the same brutal, practical approach to dealing with their enemies. And while the ape was more dangerous in a fight, better at focusing and taking one fucked up situation at a time, Shaaryak was more than capable of flinging half a dozen nets into the water at any given moment and paying attention to the little crap that might get past him.

Xerol had done the same kind of crap when he'd first arrived. He'd thrown a dozen or more plans into motion at any given time, all of them setup to ensure that he didn't lose anything if he failed, that he and his would be as safe as practicable. And if most of them when to shit, he was fine with that, at the end of the day, all he'd needed was for one or two to work.

And now his niece was doing the same kind of shit...

"So, what the fuck do we do about that?" Ithiri spoke up as she crossed her arms, "Besides bully the humans in the Traverse for all the cash we can grab."

"We are accumulating an army, but an untrained one." Her mother favored her with a cool smile. "If these... Reapers, are truly coming, they will need to be blooded. Leska, coordinate with your sister and plan to route as many units as possible through the relay path along the galactic edge to the Hegemony."

"Cessa is going to howl, Mother." The well dressed Matron shook her head, "And she doesn't care for me."

"I will deal with dear Cessa." Sederis purred before raising a hand and flicking the screen. It promptly updated, shifting away from known Hegemony military patrols to a series of dossiers. "Now, as to the human's matter. He has involved Cerberus in the conflict with Matriarch T'Ravt."

"More that Cerberus involved itself." I blinked as Leska came to his defense, "He merely directed them away from himself and towards the real problem."

"Even the Salarians swim carefully around those fuckers." Ithiri growled. "He should have killed all of their people but one, and given that one a fucking message to take back to their boss."

The Eclipse's Admiral sniffed. "What he could have or should have done is irrelevant, all that matters is what he did do and how we react to it."
Her sister opened her mouth hotly, but snapped it shut with a single glance at their mother. After a few moments she shook her head and muttered something about prissy intellectuals before raising her voice, "Fine, so human assholes are about to be coming here, and probably trying to penetrate as far as Thessia. What the fuck do we do?"

"Assist them enough to let them know we are against her, but not so much as to actually assist them." Leska provided.

"That," I growled, "Makes no sense."

"Agreed." Ithiri muttered.

Eyes rolled. "It's quite simple. If we encounter them, we do not kill them. Perhaps we even assist in bribing I-Sec to allow them safe passage, and, if they ask, we imply that T'Ravt is a mutual enemy. We watch them from a distance and keep track of... incidents, that might occur."

"Assuming you can watch them." My arms crossed my chest. "If the shit in the ape's head is accurate, they're skilled assholes."

"Do you have a better idea Gears?" She countered waspishly, her formal tones fraying a bit at the edges. "They are involved, and have been involved for some months according to his message. At least Kean and I are attempting to make the best of the situation instead of simply bitching about it like a hormonal maiden."

I was bitching about it because I didn't have any good fucking ideas on how to handle it. But before I could snarl that little fact to her, her mother cut in again.

"Leska, return to the flagship and resume coordinating the fleet maneuvers. Ithiri, return to the Citadel and alert me the moment Tevos makes her initial offer." Both of her daughters bristled a bit, staring hard at her as if trying to figure out if she was ready to force them out if they protested. When the elder Sederis drew herself up, and dark light flickered around her forearms, they reluctantly backed down. Ithiri gave me a familiar punch on the arm before vanishing without a word, while Leska offered her mother a polite bow before strutting her tightly clad ass out of the room.

"You regret making them hate each other yet?" I asked as soon as they were gone.

"No." She waved a hand towards the space near her, and I reluctantly approached. "If I hadn't, they would have killed me decades ago."

My lips pursed as I moved. "Did you really need them here?"

Sederis simply shrugged in reply, and it made me frown. Shit, the closer I got, the more my face started to pinch together. Her lips were drawn and her eyes sunken, and she'd started to slouch the moment both of her daughters were gone. I'd known that she been having some problems lately, with all the crap going on that she had to take care of. Between massively expanding her armies, to directing Ithiri's negotiations with the Alliance, and probably dealing with the Board of Directors losing their mindless skulls over how many fucking troops she had on planet... it was a wonder she'd had any fucking time to sleep in the past few months.

But I knew the bitch, had known her since I was younger than Erana. Fuck, she'd basically been a third parent for most of my maiden years, and that made it easier to see shit. Sederis looked... off more than tired.

"I am not dying, Gears." Her tone became amused as she noticed my attention. "Merely overworked. I require a larger, more skilled staff."
I grimaced, not quite believing her. "What happened to your old one?"

"Sycophants adept at plying my former instability, but whom have proven to be entirely useless when it comes to managing the storm we are currently riding." She shook her head tiredly. "Verifying the backgrounds of their replacements has proven to be..."

"Excruciatingly boring?" I guessed. "Rage inducing?"

"Quite." A hand waved towards the door her daughters had just left, "And the pair of them being home is another matter."

"How many fights have you had to break up?"

"Five in the past twenty four hours." Her right shoulder rolled slightly. "Another factor to contribute to my lack of sleep."

I grunted something affirmative sounding, even as the tsunami alarms began to sound in my head. If she was being all polite and personable and motherly, that meant she wanted something. Something that I wasn't going to like, not one fucking bit.

"What do you want from me?" I asked cautiously, glancing at the floating images but only finding lists of what looked like names.

There was a slightly approving smile. "Shaaryak is due back this evening. I want you waiting at her mansion when she arrives, and for you to return with all of the intelligence she has on the Hegemony. If she does not wish to share, remind her that I have an army that needs blooding, and that I would be happy to drain the coffers of her temporary allies."

My lips twisted. "You want me to fly out there right fucking now you mean."

"Yes." Her expression hardened slightly. "Liaising between myself and Shaaryak is your job now, Gears. Your bondmate will have all the time she desires to ravage you once you return."

How the fuck did... no, I didn't fucking want to know. "Fine."

Taking the order for a dismissal, I turned away and started to leave only for her to call after me. "Trena."

I jerked a little at the sound of my actual name, turning around to frown at her. "What?"

Sederis was pointedly looking at nothing in particular, and her voice was low when she spoke again. "Ask your bondmate if she would consent to meld with me. I have... begun to question the motivations of my current healer."

My mouth went abruptly dry. "What."

"Our latest sessions have not gone well." She murmured. "I wish to know her opinion, and if she might notice something within-what are you doing?"

I'd crossed the distance between us and grabbed her arm before she could finish, and hauled on the Warlord until she stumbled after me. "Dragging your ass to our room right fucking now."

"Gears." She all but snarled, yanking hard on her arm only for me to seize it with my other hand. "You. Will. Cease."

"No I fucking won't." I snapped back, trying to haul the taller woman closer to the door. The insanity
of what I was doing wasn't fucking lost on me, but Athame's ass... it would have been even crazier to not try and get her to Ghai as soon as I could.

A sudden burst of strength sent me stumbling into her, her other hand snapping out to grab onto my throat as she got in my face. This close I could feel her power, the surging dark energy beginning to respond to her increasingly furious emotions. "Let. Go."

"Jon..." I sucked in a breath and forced the word out, "Father. Fucking listen to me first."

Her fingers tightened for a bare moment than seemed to spring away from my skin as her eyes widened. Swallowing heavily, I continued speaking before she could. "You're unstable at the best of times, and a bitch, and I'm still not sure I want to be around you. But... shit, you're our unstable, powerful bitch, and as fucked up as it is... we need you sane and ready to fight whatever the fuck might be coming."

When she just continued to stare at me, I drew myself up as best as my short assed frame would allow. A surge of will brought my own biotics to light, the blue-white power contrasting heavily with the darker flickers that had all but died around her, but if nothing else it would tell her I fucking meant what I was saying. "Now, you going to come get your brain checked out, or do I need to choke you out and drag your blue ass there?"

More silence preceded her next words. "How long have you known?"

Since right before I'd run off to join the ape, fleeing the fuck away from that knowledge... once again proving how much of a goddess-cursed coward I was. Mom dead, sisters dead, Sederis going insane... run away. Ghai pregnant? Run away. Find out my father was the crazy Warlord instead of who I'd thought it was? Run the fuck away.

Athame's ass... I had no idea how Ghai loved me sometimes.

But instead of saying any of that, I shoved a hand forwards and then yanked, the biotic pull just strong enough to make her stumble. "That's not a yes or no."

Her lips twitched once. "Quite."

Then she hit me with a biotic throw that flung me into the door and left me crumpled on the ground. Groaning, I tried to get up only to fall on my side as she calmly walked over to crouch beside my head. There was the slightest of caresses on my crest. "You are very much like your mother, Gears. Inform me when you return from Shaaryak's palace."

My only response was a guttural moan of pain, a sound that made her laugh tiredly before she stepped over my body and departed the room. No threats for ordering her around, no brutal beat-downs for pulling her, just a mild reminder of her power that left me stunned but relatively unhurt. By her fucked up standards that was probably her best attempt at showing that she really did love me or some shit.

Working my way to my feet, I took a few moments to gather myself before sending Ghai a terse message. She sent an even shorter one back, and I grimaced before limping out into the hall. Making my way to the nearest hanger didn't take terribly long, and I collapsed into the first aircar I could find. Sinking into the stupidly luxurious seat nearly made me fucking orgasm as I turned on a massage feature to work out the fucking kink the impact had put into my back.

Flicking the main engines to life, I manually piloted the vehicle out until the local traffic controller let me ascend at speed.
I flicked the radio to life as soon as I reached the altitude set for west-bound traffic, and made a quick call. "Chen, you alive?"

"T'Laria." The Batarian's voice was amused. "My heart still thrums for the moment, though the day is young."

I let out a quiet snort, trying to push the prior conversation the fuck away without much luck. I needed drinks. And Ghai. Mostly a naked Ghai doing shit to me that would leave me unable to walk straight. "I'm supposed to interrogate the bitch, she landing at the compound or the mansion?"

"The mansion..." There was a heavy sigh. "She won't be pleased to see you."

"Feelings fucking mutual, but orders are fucking orders."

He grunted, "Will you be more or less likely to start a brawl if you've imbibed?"

"Less." Probably.

"I'll alert the kitchens to have a few bot... pre..ed..." Blinking, I glowered at the console as his voice began to break up. "...ia...there?"

"Chen? Asshole?" Reaching out, I was about to adjust the settings before the car shuddered around me. I snapped my eyes back to the controls just in time to see the VI cheerfully display the words 'Controls Overridden' as the vehicle heeled over, throwing me against my restraints, then plunged into a nose-dive.

My heart about fucking exploded out of my chest as I punched the manual override and hauled back on the wheel. Inertia bled through the mass effect fields, pushing me hard into the rich chair as the air began to level out. Then the fucking thing went dead in my hands and I was again thrown around when it twisted into a quick looping before plunging down.

Snarling curses, I blew out my window a tight blast of biotics after a quick yank on the door confirmed it wouldn't open. My ability to slow a fall with dark energy wasn't fucking great, but it was either risk it or stay inside of this death trap.

I had just ripped my restraints off and was about to dive out into the whipping wind when the fucking thing leveled out again, its engines screaming in protest at the maneuvers as I was flung around inside.

After that... well, shit got kind of blurry. We impacted the ground at least two or three times, bouncing as it tried to decelerate. I hit the ceiling, the console, the seats... I had no idea how long it took me to regain my wits, or what passed for them.

What I did remember was someone hauling me out of the thing, my body hitting the ground. Trying to move my limbs only resulted in spasmodic twitching, but at least I could still feel the pain, feel my skin scraping on the cold concrete I was laying on. A boot negligently struck my shoulder, a rough kick flipping me onto my back to stare into the sky.

It was obscured by a face soon enough, blue lips curling in an amused little grin as a hand reached down to pat my cheek fondly.

"Evening T'Laria." Tela Vasir cooed, her words echoing in my skull. "It's been while hasn't it? My apologies for the rude summons, but you know how impatient old fish can be. She's got quite a few questions for you... questions I would recommend answering."
Chapter End Notes

And more background information begins to fill itself in, we get our first sight of Ithiri Sederis, and Tela Vasir makes her first reappearance while hinting at the return of someone else. :)

A note on the next saga; the Silent Witness sections will be replaced by Branded Survivor, in the interest of changing up the extra viewpoints. Saga III will change it once again, to the final member of the quartet. Still working on who will take over for saga's four and five, but I'll be sure to tease the info once that's worked out.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"Anyone else not miss this place?" Illyan asked as the four of us stomped through Omega's Afterlife District, our armor clattering and our coats swishing as we moved. None of us had our weapons openly drawn, but our hands rarely strayed far from their grips. "Because I seriously didn't."

"Could be worse." I pointed out, stepping over a Turian who was out of his mind on something, Black Spice maybe, from the way he was twitching. "We could have landed in Gozu."

Voya made a retching sound. "Keelah, that bitch better not be in the lowers."

"I can't imagine that there would be anything down there worth the risk." Shyeel chimed in, "My bet is still on Zeta. If she's not here to assassinate someone, the mines are the next best target."

"That or Doru." I shrugged. "The docks are a target as well. Either way, Aria should have answers for us."

At least, I hoped that she would. We'd left nearly a week early from our planned arrival because we'd gotten a message from Omega's Queen, indicating that her people had already spotted Zero-One on station, and that she was demanding our presence to discuss options of dealing with the problem. Getting all of our shit together had taken most of a day, but we'd lit off from Xentha as quickly as we could.

Of course, even if she did have answers that might not mean all that much, especially if Shyeel was right and Zero-One was after the mines or the docks.

Zeta was the forbidden district of Omega, at Aria's orders. No one went into the towers protruding from the opposite side of the rock, and very few came out. The place contained both the only known entrances to the station's mines, and the massive docking complexes that serviced both her eezo haulers and her warships. Only her explicitly trusted employees were supposed to have access, apart from that... the miners and guards who lived there largely could expect to spend most of their lives toiling away before being allowed to retire to one of her hidden colonies.

Which, all in all, was a sensible move on her part. Her status as the premier Terminus Warlord relied entirely on her control of Omega and its resources. If I was in her position, I wouldn't be exactly
eager to let anyone wander around near the things that directly paid for, or helped protect, her throne.

"Aria..." Voya murmured as the massive club came in sight, the artificial fire lighting the line that stretched into the distance. "I remember when our entire plan was just to get her attention, so we could get Krom's contract assigned to us exclusively."

I grunted quietly. "Things change."

There was a sober pause after those two short words, my own memories replaying some of the choice events from the last year. The sad fact was that we didn't need to be exclusively assigned to Krom's contract anymore. Between Redcliffe and his own actions, he'd killed damned near everyone who'd tried to go after him, and done it with a sufficient level of brutality to discourage anyone else from trying.

Half-closing my eyes, I pushed those thoughts back beneath the waves. Omega and its Queen didn't tolerate weakness of any kind, and right now I needed to be focused.

"Look ready to kill anyone in our way." I murmured quietly into our private line, "We're back on mission."

My companions didn't respond verbally, but they all shifted their postures slightly. Voya's casual strut became something like an annoyed prowl, while Shyeel elected to draw her Kishok and cockily heft it onto a shoulder. For her part, Illyan brought her hands up to crack her knuckles as she shifted slightly behind the rest of us, to better emphasize her looming height.

Smirking slightly inside my helmet, I half closed my eyes before flipping my own stance to that of an annoyed Highborn Batarian, ready to kill anyone stupid enough to get in front of me.

The crowd, as it always did when someone made to skip the line, began bitching and catcalling as we walked past them. It drew the attention of the day's bouncers, a pair of Elcor who made the decking shudder as they maneuvered to block us. I'd seen their kind on the job before, but that had been what passed for peace-time.

In war time... Aria evidently spared no expenses when it came to outfitting the guards to her throne. Both of the massive aliens were entirely covered in black armor more suited to powered exoskeletons than living beings, and the turrets on their backs further emphasized that comparison. The guns swung around to aim directly at us as we neared the small stairwell leading to the front door, the message poignant enough without requiring words.

"Dual light machine guns." Shyeel murmured as we slowed to a stop, "Coolant lines rigged to a dedicated unit under them... Impressive."

I nodded slightly, but the external speaker on the nearest bouncer's helmet boomed to life before I could offer any words of my own. "Annoyed statement: You are late, mercenaries."

"We came as promptly as we were able." I replied, keeping my own voice flat as I locked my visor onto his. "Is she expecting us?"

"With irritation: Yes. Proceed apace, human." He seemed to awkwardly side-walk out of the way while his companion stayed in place to stop anyone in the crowd from trying to sneak in behind us. "With dark enjoyment: Aria is not known for her patience."

"I had no idea." I muttered under my breath before getting moving again, the four of us passing the guards and entering the club.
The interior hadn't changed since my last visit. Platforms stretching high above and far below all packed with people dancing, fucking, drinking, drugging, talking, or even just watching. My armor automatically muted most of the noise, and switched to the tiny oxygen tank built into the helmet to stop me from getting a contact high from all the crap in the air.

The main difference was that the last time Voya and I had had to stick tightly to one another, using our elbows and armor to make a hole in the crowd. But now it seemed that our reputation preceded us, because we found it easy going as people quickly shifted out of our way. The pointing began not long after, along with the murmurs and long looks.

But they weren't as universally awed as the trainees on Xentha had been. Some, most often the Asari present, very obviously wanted us to stop and spend time with them. Others looked more fearful and worried, and tended to be the quickest to get out of our way. The last group were those who who gave us the darkest looks. A Krogan at a bar that we walked past was the most severe, his short arms actually reaching for his weapons before the bartender had snapped at him to sit his ass back down.

"Afterlife." Shyeel muttered, shifting a bit closer to me as the crowd parted around us. "Last time we were here was right before Redcliffe."

"Yeah." I shook my head a little, brushing away the memories of Trena forcing her way onto the old team. "Come on, the sooner we figure out what Aria wants, the sooner we can find that bitch."

"And figure out how she got here early." Voya growled.

There was a deep snort from Illyan at her words, "Early according to the timing we got from a source we still can't trace. That still worries me Cie."

"Same." I rolled an armored shoulder, "Right now I'm leaning towards Krom actually. He seems to know us pretty fucking well, as annoying as that is. If he worked out that we wouldn't trust it, and would show up just before hand to try and minimize the risk…"

Voya let out a musing little sound. "Maybe he wanted us to be our usual paranoid selves and stay on Xentha while she does whatever the fuck she's doing."

"And then torture us with the knowledge that we could have stopped it." My helmet shook slightly as I stepped around an Asari waitress who was visibly flicking her eyes up and down all four of us in turn. "We could be lucky that Aria summoned us… it definitely sounds like shit he'd do."

"Maybe." The Reyja'krem on my right shrugged in turn. "It's a decent theory Cieran, but it could just as easily have been nearly anyone else. The Matriarch, the Broker, Ganar…"

I scowled at nothing in particular as we approached the stairs leading to the balcony overlooking the main floor. She was right, but admitting that would only send my paranoid streak swimming right back into the whirlpool to try and figure shit the fuck out.

"We keep the message to ourselves for now." I decided as we neared the guards ahead of us, "Until we get a better idea of who might have sent it."

There was a quiet chorus of assent from my friends before they fell silent, hands falling near weapons on reflex as several of Aria's troops took notice of us. Shyeel, her gun already in hand, simply lowered it from her shoulder into a more proper at ready position.

Heavily armored Turians and Batarians loomed in alcoves that would let them catch anyone approaching in a cross fire, and all of them had their weapons drawn though not pointed directly in our direction. They were impressive enough on their own, but the half-dozen or so Asari lounging on
the stairwell proper were making it clear that they were their mistress's actual protection.

They were all dressed in what looked like armored versions of Aria's usual outfit, had the same facial tattoos, and were lounging against the rails or even on the stairs themselves in a deliberate display to show just how unconcerned they were about our approach. In my experience, only extremely dangerous beings or complete and total idiots could pull off that look, and somehow I doubted that Aria would allow the latter anywhere near herself.

Of course, a lot of the confidence probably came from the fact that they were, to a person, armed with the latest in Thessian weaponry, and even a cursory glance told me that they'd all taken the time to customize their guns.

"Cie." Voya groaned as my pace noticeably slowed to a crawl, "Stop drooling over their fancy toys and get your ass up the stairs."

Illyan let out a strangled half laugh when I lifted a hand to give the Quarian a rude gesture, but in the end I did pick up the pace. Rather oddly, none of the commandos stopping us or seeming to do more than glance our way as we brushed past them. I'd have expected at least some kind of challenge or confirmation of who we were. The Elcor bouncers at the door had, by their standards, been entirely polite and not nearly as obstinate as I knew they were capable of being.

The fact that even her personal guards knew we were coming, and were content to let us pass, started setting off alarms in my head long before we reached the top.

More alarms joined the chorus once we got that far, and I quickly flicked my eyes around at... a largely empty balcony. No additional guards, no assistants, no hangers on... just the Queen, sitting alone on her couch. Her attention was entirely absorbed on a tablet held idly in one hand while she sipped wine from a glass in the other, and she didn't so much as glance in our direction as we cautiously approached.

"You're late." Her voice was just as the implanted memories remembered, and I was glad for the helmet that hid the tiny smile of nostalgia before I could throttle it away. "I expected you yesterday or the day prior."

"The Lady Warlord's frigate had a coolant leak two days out from Xentha." I replied evenly, making sure to bow my head in respect as I did so. She couldn't see the motion, but it seemed like a safe move all the same. "We couldn't hit the relay until we'd repaired it."

Aria's eyes left her reading. She had...well... in person, she looked something like the simple images I had in my head, but there was something more there. Beyond the tight clinging leather and abominably expensive coat over-top of it. A kind of... aura of ruthless disdain was the only thing I could think of to describe it.

It was her eyes that really sent the message... She had a shark's eyes; cold, dark, and utterly without pity or mercy. "Sabotage?"

I shook my head slightly, fighting the urge to fidget. "An old ship ridden too hard by the war."

The Queen pursed her mouth very slightly, then tilted her head towards the empty couch on her right.

Bowing my head a bit deeper, I moved over and carefully took the offered seat. Voya elected to follow, sitting on my right, while our Asari companions decided to linger near the stairs like the intelligent beings they were.
"Cieran Kean… and the Silver Blades Lancer detachment." The slim computer in her hands was deactivates as she set it aside, making sure that none of us could so much as glance at the screen in the process. "Jona tells me that you're reliable."

"We aim to be." I spoke the words cautiously, far more so than I would have with the other Asari Warlords. They, at least, I knew how to act around, but Aria… something told me that she wouldn't appreciate the same blunt honesty I habitually offered to her fellows. Then again, I didn't think she'd appreciate stilted Batarian formality either, and I really didn't have any other conversational strategies in my repertoire.

Honesty would be my best option then, I'd just have to choose my words very, very carefully.

"I am also told that you have nearly as much of a reason to want Krom in agony as I do." She continued as if I hadn't spoken, taking a small sip from her wine as she settled further into the cushions of her throne. "Would you agree?"

My tongue licked my lips before I responded, "I would say that the idea of you torturing him to death does not displease me."

Aria let out a quiet, throaty laugh, but there was a hint of approval to the sound. "A diplomat I see."

"Hardly." I snorted quietly, trying to force myself to relax at least somewhat. "Merely cautious at the notion of comparing myself to you."

"Intelligent of you." She favored me with a small smile, and I felt like I'd just passed some kind of test. "I don't enjoy wasting my time with people who think they can relate to me, or understand me."

I couldn't really think of a good response to that, so I kept my mouth shut and simply offered her a polite nod.

The tiny grin faded from her features as one of her legs kicked up and over the other, the Warlord visibly settling herself more comfortably. "Zero-One is on my station, I have images of her skulking near an entrance to the warrens. For now, this is exclusively yours. Ten million for her head, fifteen if you drag her to me alive."

I couldn't help but take in a tight breath at the numbers. I mean, sure, it was just money, and I was in this for revenge, not for fame and fortune, but... Athame's ass. I'd been moderately wealthy thanks to my salary under Nynsi and the income we'd made selling weapons in our old shop, but... ten or fifteen million credits was a lot of money.

Of course, that bubble burst the moment my brain finished processing the word 'warrens'. It was the catch-all phrase for the least known, and most dangerous, parts of Omega. The station's chaotic construction had provided space for thousands of tunnels, service ducts, rooms half-built through by newer structures, and a million other potential scenarios that left similarly dark and hard-to-navigate catacombs in their wake.

We'd only gone into the warrens once, chasing down the slaver who had abused Voya. It wasn't an experience I was eager to repeat, and that had been a relatively clean and 'safe' part of the maze.

"Do you have any leads for us, on where she might be going?" Voya interjected, leaning forwards as she did a better job of focusing on the real objective than I was.

The Queen's dark eyes flicked to the Quarian, "She infiltrated the lowers last week, but vanished into the warrens before my people could isolate her location. What little indicators I have show that she was heading towards Zeta district."
Shyeel was right then, as usual. I crossed my arms and glanced past her, looking out over the club as I mused out loud. "Towards the mines, or your fleet's docks. Either could cripple your war effort."

"Precisely." A single finger shifted, tapping the outside of her glass. "I have already increased the perimeter patrols, but there has been a... complication."

I turned to stare at her blankly for several moments, then shook my head slightly as I fought back a groan. "The traitorous kind, the incompetent kind, or the unknown kind?"

"The incompetent kind." Her features seemed to darken as the club's lighting shifted, the perfectly timed coincidence further enhancing her severity. "The managers I have in Zeta have been sending routine reports, despite the situation being anything but routine. My guard commanders are becoming nervous, they're claiming that the staff are beginning to act suspiciously, though not to the point where they thought my attention was required."

That made me blink, leaning back slowly as I processed that. I couldn't imagine that the guards she had in place would be anything but extremely competent, her mines were her wealth after all. If they were only now noticing something being wrong, either they were in on it as well, things had just begun, or Zero-One was being very careful about her actions. "You think she's already been in and out of Zeta? Maybe buying your people off?"

"It wouldn't be the first time she's attempted it." Aria shrugged in a lazy motion, "While you were warring on Redcliffe, my guards were chasing the bitch out of my shipyards and executing five of the senior managers."

I felt my eyes narrow slightly. "She's repeating what she already tried against you?"

"The evidence fits. The unusual responses are all coming from the mining staff, which is why I'm stating the situation is complicated." Her eyes narrowed as her fingers seemed to tighten around her glass.

"That's..." Voya hesitated when the Queen's black expression speared her, but gathered herself and continued on. "Not our experience with Krom. He doesn't do the same trick more than once, especially against the same target."

"I can't think his partner would be any less intelligent." I nodded slowly in agreement. "And why the mines? Why not the docks? I'd imagine you've got more than enough processed eezo to manage a few months of trade."

"A few years." She corrected me, "I'm aware of how unlikely it is that she would repeat herself, Kean. Further, paying off the mining staff avails her less than nothing. I do not allow them to be armed or access the station's critical infrastructure."

Even with her helmet on I could tell that Voya was grimacing as she spoke, "Something is wrong with this. She wouldn't be that stupid, and if she's really here for the docks, Krom would be with along with every other elite Krogan and Vorcha they could drag along."

"Maybe not Krom," I hedged, nodding towards Aria, "I don't think he'd set foot on this station unless Ganar himself threw him aboard, and even then he'd be trying to get off before you tore him apart."

Aria's lips curled into a tight little grin, though it vanished as quickly as it had come. "Do you understand now why I called it complicated?"

"Yeah." Blowing out a sharp breath, I nodded again. "Right, so you said she's in the warrens. That will make it... well, impossible to find her. Unless you've got a map?"
The Queen snorted. "Of course I have a map, but unless you have a few thousand drones or intend to commandeer my entire personal guard, she'll have accomplished her mission and be gone long before you search even a third of them. I'm shifting Zeta's garrison to focus on the docks, since that's her most likely target. They have been ordered to alert you if they encounter her, or if anything unusual occurs."

My helmet dipped in a nod. "Is there a hotel near Zeta that we could utilize as a base? We could-

"You'll be staying in a penthouse in Zeta." Aria interrupted me smoothly. "And will be investigating how that bitch got to my people."

Voya twitched on my right, her suited head rocking back in shock. "You're… letting us into Zeta?"

"When she was messing with my shipyards," The Queen explained with a kind of deadly casualness, "She bought better than two hundred of my troops and used them to cover her escape when I sent in my personal guard to deal with her."

"Oh." The Quarian shook her head slightly. "You want outsiders opinions on what's happening."

"Precisely." Aria sipped from her wine once again. "Find out what she's offered my managers, which guards she's influenced, and how she's been contacting them without my knowledge. You'll be given an escort and full access to the District, feel free to avail yourselves to its amusements while there."

"You want us to continue investigating even after we deal with her?" I asked, "And you do know that's not really our specialty, right?"

She gave me a look that was one part amusement to three parts commanding glare."Yes, I do. And three of you worked as spies on this station, that's investigative experience enough."

Once again I found myself glad for the helmet that hid my wince, "You're aware of that?"

"I was aware of it the moment you arrived on my station." Aria corrected me, "Be glad you didn't attempt to gather any data on me while you were active."

"We weren't, aren't, that stupid." Voya retorted.

"So Sederis has told me." Another small pull from her drink preceded Aria shifting her head dismissively towards the stairs we'd come up. "Bray will handle the details. I'd prefer the bitch alive, but if you can't… if you can't, I understand."

Standing, I gave her a tight Batarian bow, not wasting any more of her words or time. Voya quickly followed behind me, with Illyan and Shyeel falling in as we moved. Her last comments did assuage some of the concern I had for the unexpected crap we had to deal with, dead was much easier than alive and I was glad she wasn't insisting on it, but plenty of concern remained.

"So…" Illyan drawled as we made our way past the lounging commandos once again. "We're going into the forbidden district, to investigate people we've never met about whether or not they're about to betray a Warlord we don't really know."

"And we're going to be hunting for another assassin while we're at it." Shyeel reminded her.

"If you want to tell Aria we're not taking the job," I offered without turning around to look at them, "Feel free to go back up and tell her."
Voya snorted. "And we've done stupider things, and to be honest I'd call this more odd than stupid."

"So you're admitting it's stupid." The big Asari sighed as we reached the bottom of the stairs, everyone pulling up to a stop at the sight of a guard holding up a hand.

"Bray had other business to resolve, wait here a few minutes." The Turian grunted, not particularly sounding as if he cared if we did or didn't.

"I said it's odd." Voya almost growled, ignoring the soldier as she glared up at the Asari. "Why is Zero-One even here at all? Why isn't she with Krom? Especially since we never saw or heard of the bitch being on Redcliffe."

Shyeel let out a quiet grunt. "He's overdue for a mind fix, unless they met up in between then and now."

My coat shifted as I shrugged a little uncomfortably. "They might have, but... shit. I agree with Voya, this is fucking odd."

"Odd enough that Aria is worried about it." The scarred Asari turned her helmet to glance back up at the ledge. "I mean... shit Cie, she's letting us into Zeta. We're outsiders who've never worked for her before."

"I know, I know." Shaking my head, I paced back and forth a few steps as I tried to focus on my breathing. "Shit."

"We backing out, Tarath'shan?" Illyan asked quietly.

"Told you not to call me that." I muttered. "And... no. Not yet. If Zero-One really is here, she's up to something, and whatever the fuck it is can't be good. Plus..."

"She's our only lead on that asshole." Voya nodded slowly. "And there's no guarantee we'll find the bitch again anytime soon."

"We'll just have to move with the wind and watch the horizon then." Shyeel shrugged, hefting her Kishok back onto a shoulder. "Life as usual. Think that's our escort?"

Flicking my eyes around, I followed her gaze to see a Batarian male purposefully walking towards us, an escort of guards in Aria's markings easily keeping the crowd at bay. It didn't take him long to reach us, but I couldn't help but show my confusion as he slowed to a stop. He was... was... I had no idea how to say beyond calling him the least Batarian seeming Batarian I'd ever met.

I had no idea what caste he was, because he offered and showed none of the usual signs. Instead he was letting himself stand in a highly un-Batarian slouch. Smoke trailed from a cigarette dangling out of his mouth, and he let out a loud, and impolite, grunt as soon as he was close enough to be heard over the thrumming music.

"You must be Kean." His Highborn was quick and fluid, his words pausing as he took a drag from the smoldering stick in his mouth. "Come on, we'll get you lot over to Zeta. Got everything you need?"

Raising a hand, I jerked a thumb at the pack riding on my back, and tried to conceal just how bloody confused the guy was making me. "We've got our supplies."

He offered another quick grunt before turning away, trailing smoke as he waved for us to follow. We did, my eyes flicking around as Aria's soldiers turned about to continuing escorting him, and us I
supposed. Mostly they worked to get the crowd out of our path as Bray lead us to the nearest ramp heading down. Even with their help, and the recognition our armor and markings continued to give us, it was slow going.

The third shift crowd beginning to seriously pack into the club, and all of the ramps and stairwells were becoming overwhelmed with bodies. Voya managed to restrain her combined loathing and paranoia of crowds for a few minutes before all but clinging to Shyeel the remainder of the way down. I made a mental note of her choice, normally it was me whose feet she was all but stepping on.

A good fifteen minutes of swearing, elbowing people, and ignoring threats and propositions passed before we reached a sealed doorway guarded by another pair of bored commandos. Our Batarian guide tapped out a passcode, allowing us to enter the restricted areas of Afterlife as the guards fell away, their job evidently done with.

"Where are we going?" I asked once the metal had closed behind us, finally cutting off the constant roar of the music and clientele. We were in a simple hallway, wide and far better maintained than most of Omega.

"We've got a tram line that runs straight up, takes us to Zeta." He grunted in between puffs of smoke, not turning his head to look back at us. "Apart from shuttles it's supposed to be the only way in and out of Zeta."

"Obviously it isn't." Voya spoke up, stepping a bit farther away from Shyeel now that we were away from the crowds. "If she's been able to get in to mess with your people."

"Yeah." His head shook, and I caught him slip into a posture showing concern before he shook himself back to his slack stance.

"No communications in and out?" I asked. Aria's words on the matter notwithstanding, I wanted confirmation. "Nothing you've picked up?"

Another shake, and Bray shifted his torso so his left eyes could glance at me as I accelerated to catch up with him. "We haven't picked up anything, and we've been looking. Aria takes this shit seriously human, you being allowed is proof enough of that. First time I've heard of outsiders being let in in twenty years."

I frowned a little at the comment. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." He gave me a somewhat self-deprecating grin. "I don't get in more than once a year, and not for long. Escorting you about the place will be my longest trip since I started working for Aria."

Another little pang of worry hit me. "You going to just make sure we don't wander into the wrong rooms, or are you actually going to be useful?"

He barked out a laugh. "I've got a panic button keyed to the net, plus I know most of the managers you're investigating, Aria thought I might have insight or some shit."

Behind me, Illyan raised her voice a quick-breath before I could. "All right, so if you know the place, what do you think about all this?"

"I think I don't get paid enough for this crap." The butt end of his cigarette was flung to the floor, and his hands smoothly drew another from a pouch on his belt. "Look, there's only two ways in. The docks and the rail line. If she got her blue ass into Zeta, it was because she paid someone to smuggle her in and out on a ship."
"What about the mines?" The only member of my cadre pressed. "Don't they run all around the core?"

A deep snort was the initial answer, though he followed it with words. "They do, but we make sure to keep that shit sealed up. Only entrances you can use without blasting holes into the rock are in Zeta, and yeah, rechecking the plugs was the first thing she ordered last week. Got some mechs standing guard around all of them too."

Well... shit. That more or less confirmed all the crap Aria had said, assuming we could trust Bray. Which I didn't, naturally, and we'd probably confirm all that again as soon as we got to Zeta. Although...

Flicking my fingers in a silent command to my omni-tool, I muted my external speakers before muttering. "Voya, send a quick message to Ayle, Nynsi, and Sederis. Tell them where we are, where we're going, and the situation. If it is that hard to get in and out..."

"Aria might leave us inside if she doesn't like the job we do." The Quarian murmured back. "On it, slow up a bit?"

I did so as Voya fell back, letting Illyan move forwards to obscure her as she worked. As my pace slowed, I flicked my mic back to life, "What can we expect when we get there?"

Bray obligingly began describing our destination, either not noticing or not caring that we were just trying to keep him talking.

Zeta had been built out of the original Asari mines more than a millennia ago, long before the crater that would become Omega's modern core would be covered and the spire built. These days the oldest sections were little more than part of the mines, an area Bray repeatedly stated we would not be allowed in unless the situation was desperate. Refined eezo was kept in warehouses on the surface, each of which had its own docking arm to link it to haulers, and again, we wouldn't be going into those unless we had a fucking good reason.

Beyond all of that was the primary buildings of Zeta, consisting of seven towers extending out from the rock. Three of them were essentially self-contained ecologies, with everything the mining staff and the dock workers would need to survive, along with plenty of more exotic entertainment to keep her fleet's crew happy while they were on leave. The remaining four were essentially just massive military docks, with everything required to service her warships.

"We'll be in tower two." He informed us as he opened a locked door at the end of the hall, the only such door we'd seen during the entire walk. "In her personal penthouse. Trash it and you can guess what she'll do to you."

Illyan let out a snort. "Sounds like you won't be allowed to tinker then Cie."

I gave the tall woman a glare through my helmet as I followed Bray into what looked like a wide lift station, completed with something that looked like a cross between a cargo elevator and a vertically positioned tram car.

"How long is the ride?" Voya stepped around me, twitching her fingers to sign the word finished to me as she passed. "Couple minutes." The Batarian shrugged as we all piled into the heavy thing, his omni-tool flicking to life as he tapped out a few commands. The lift shuddered slightly, then began to rise as it carried us from one side of Omega to the other.
"Well, that was..." Illyan shook her head as she pulled her helmet off, visibly lost as she tried to find the words to describe our walk through tower two. "...fucked up."

Cieran snorted as he followed our Batarian guide over to what looked like a fully functional bar set away in the corner of the penthouse. "No shit...and here I was thinking we wouldn't need to maintain a night watch."

Grunting, I reached up and pulled my own helmet off, grimacing a bit as my eyes adjusted to the lighting. We'd expected the locals to be a bit odd, the poor beings were stuck here after all, but that hadn't prepared us for the almost... tranquil state that they'd seemed to have been in. They'd stared blankly at us as we'd moved past, replied almost tonelessly to the few questions that had been asked of them, and then just resumed whatever they'd been doing before we'd gotten in their way.

They hadn't been fast about it either. Most of them seemed locked into a fast shuffle as their quickest form of movement, and even our escort snapping at them hadn't gotten them going much faster.

"It's like someone gave them all doses of *neshi* spice." I grimaced at the reminder of the drug, and how it had felt. "That crap leaves you out of it for a while."

Bray grimaced as all four of his eyes narrowed. "I don't think we test the general population's food for crap like that."

"We'll have to." Cieran shook his head, making his fur shift around. "Bray, you said the guards are responding normally? They bunk here or at the other towers?"

"The others." The Batarian grunted as he handed Cie a bottle before grabbing a collection of glasses. "So they should still be normal at least. But why the fuck would she drug the miners though?"

The human, Quarian, and the larger Asari all glanced pointedly at me. It was enough to make my lips twist a bit, though I couldn't deny I had more... experience with that kind of crap than any of them. "Side effects of *neshi* is a lot like what we saw. Exhaustion, slurring, makes it hard to respond to stimulus. But if they're giving it, or something like it, to the general population... they're going to give them something else, soon."

Voya's glowing eyes narrowed as she sat on a couch more expensive than all of our weapons combined. "What do you mean?"

"*Neshi's* an enhancer." Bray spoke before I could. "It peaks the effects of other uppers you take. Long-term addicts love that shit because it helps them get a high even if their tolerance is up."

"If they lace in some Dust and Slought..." I shook my head, "They'd all be out of their minds, seeing crap, and furious about it. Dealers call it the berserker special, like to combine all three for slaves who... well, aren't supposed to last long."

"Pit fights you mean." Voya all but growled.

"Basically." I rolled a shoulder, pushing aside uncomfortable memories. "But if she's good enough to convince managers or cooks to lace their food with drugs, she's good enough to have done something worse."

Illyan grimaced as she tossed her helmet aside, stepping cautiously around the couch that Voya had claimed for herself. "I dunno, having the entire population trying to kill each other is pretty bad."
"So is venting the atmosphere." Cieran stated before sipping from his drink. He seemed to approve of whatever our escort had selected, because he nodded firmly and took a longer pull before continuing. "Or putting something more lethal in the water and having someone shut the filtration down. Zeta has it's own closed system for that, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, so that some idiot across the rock can't try exactly that." His drinking partner nodded before flicking one set of his eyes in my direction. "You know if neshi can be processed through cooking? Or you think they're just handing it out?"

"It's a spice, so it'll work on food." Carefully setting my helmet on the arm of Voya's couch, I wandered towards the bar to join the two men. "If they want to get everyone hooked that would be the easiest way for it."

The Batarian grimaced as he shook his head, "I'll bitch out the garrison commander, get some testers to go through the mess halls. Aria doesn't care if the locals hit the hard crap, so it would be easy for them to miss if they assume it's just some local binge. But still... shit, seemed like every fucker we passed was out of it."

"So that's our plan tomorrow?" Voya called from her position, interrupting her words with a long, girlish yawn. "Run drug tests and yell at a bunch of soldiers?"

"That's my plans for tomorrow, won't take more than an hour or two." Bray grunted, nodding towards Cieran. "What do you want after?"

Cieran reached up and stroked the fur around his mouth, making me roll my eyes before I turned away to find a bottle for myself. Honestly, how Illyan could find him attractive I still didn't know. Human males were so... odd looking, with all the hard lines and the fur.

Picking out a bottle of Thessian White that claimed that it was four centuries old, I poured myself a small measure and listened as he made his decision.

"I want to meet the senior manager, whoever is in charge of this tower." He spoke slowly, as he usually did when he was sounding his thoughts out loud. "See what he's like, what he says. Same for the garrison commander. After that, I want to recheck any potential entrances to the mines."

Bray let out a deep sound. "Easy enough. Come on, I'll show you the rooms you can use."

Cieran held up a hand before he could move, "That door the only way in and out? I was serious about a night watch."

"Yeah, I knew you were." A hand waved vaguely. "That's it, commands to expand cover from the flooring are in the local system. Can turn it into a killing ground."

"I'll go over it." I volunteered before Cie could pick me to do it anyway. "Illyan, you mind staying too? Alternating pairs strikes me as safer right now."

My fellow Asari let out a heavy sigh, looking longingly after Cieran and Voya as the pair of them got moving, following Bray down a wood paneled hallway. Pouring her a glass of wine to assuage the fact that she wouldn't be able to try and sleep next to her crush, I handed it to her as I moved to collapse onto the couch that our Quarian friend had vacated.

"You didn't have to stare at his ass so much." I pointed out as I tucked my legs up beside me, the armor creaking softly as I tried to get comfortable. "It's not like it's changed since you last looked at it."
Illyan gave me an arch look, "I'll stop when you stop checking out Voya."

"At least I'm subtle about it." I countered. "You'll get the hang of it in another century or so."

It was the wrong thing to say, I could tell the moment the words left my lips to crash on her shores. She let out a wince and took a heavy gulp of wine to try and cover up the expression, and I was abruptly reminded that the poor girl was still a bloody maiden. She'd had to grow up into something like matron early, to care for her younger sister. And the fighting she'd lived through made her act way more mature than I'd been at her age, but when it came to relationships... she was too young to have had a bondmate before.

The lifespan thing was... always rough, that first time. Second time too, come to think of it.

"So," I quickly shifted the topic. "Figure we setup here, check out the systems. Make sure that Bray stays in his room all night."

"Yeah..." Illyan needed more wine, but she managed to recover and nod. "Maybe look over this place, I can't imagine a Warlord's penthouse not having an escape route."

"You thought that too?" My head shook a little as I hefted the wrist with my omni-tool on it. "I'll handle the tech. Do you want to wander? Make sure to keep your comms open and talk with me, once we're done we can look over the maps of Zeta."

There was a quick nod as she set her empty glass aside and grabbed her helmet, pulling it on once again. From there, we got to work.

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Citadel Morning View

We interrupt our usual morning talk show to bring you breaking news from the Asari Republics. Initial reports from the colony of Neshivan seem to indicate that a major terrorist attack has occurred there, impacting several cities across the elder colony.

We're still getting details about the exact nature of the attack, and will provide them as they become available, but the first word is that the death toll is extremely high. No group has openly taken credit for the strikes, but I'm being told by a source that the human supremacist group known as Cerberus may have been involved.

Next up is Chapter 2: Watcher in the Water

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Chapter End Notes

We finally meet Aria, and the group is hustled off to Zeta to see what the fuck is going on while they get setup to hunt Krom's partner. My first foray into Shyeel's mind is a bit short, like my initial efforts at Voya, expect them to get longer as I get more used to writing her (and switching between her and Cie). Things will be moving very quickly in these first couple of chapters, so expect events to occur in the next.

And yes, I'm going to try and have all of the chapter names reference LOTR, should be
a good way to tease what will be happening in each.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Captain Gelvus proved to be a silver plated Turian, though he'd replaced his traditional clan markings with streaks of black paint that mimicked Aria's own. Of course that wasn't the only thing he'd copied from his mistress. Arriving at his headquarters in tower four, I'd expected at least something reasonably militant, probably located near the docks and setup to coordinate a small army if required.

Instead... we'd been guided to a strip club, complete with a balcony overlooking the main floor where the Captain held court.

"Yes, we know they're on neshi." He shook his head bemusedly, obviously more interested in the dancers on top of the bar than in our conversation. "They're always on something or another. A few months ago it was slought, with the managers setting up fights in the streets. Before that it was jump and you could barely open a door without walking into an orgy. They'll find something else as soon as they get bored of it."

Grunting, I accepted a drink from the human waitress, entirely ignoring the fact that the pale woman was nude except for exotic streaks of body paint that accented her... assets. "You've tested for it then?"

"Why bother?" His words were accompanied by an amused glance. "I just told you they're always on drugs, it's all that gets some of them through their time in these forsaken towers."

Bray leaned forwards onto the table as well, all four of his black eyes narrowing. The three of us were it for this particular meeting, the remainder of my companions down at one of the club's bars while trying to glean what they could from the guards patronizing the place.

"Everyone we encountered in tower two was stumbling around." Aria's principle assistant growled, "That's more than the usual level of shit. I want tests run on all of the food in that tower by the end of the week."

The Turian rolled his eyes but waved a clawed hand towards a subordinate. "Get someone on that."

"Something tells me you aren't taking this seriously." I spoke the words as I drummed the fingers on my left hand on the table, my armored gloves making ominous clacking sounds with each strike. "And here I thought Aria would trust the defense of these towers to someone competent."
The comment finally succeeded in getting his attention, his mandibles quivering with irritation as he turned to face me. "Spirits save me from uppity humans. Fine. You want to talk shop, let's get this over with."

My lips pressed together tightly, and I shot Bray a look. The Batarian heaved a put-upon sigh. "No, Kean, you can't kill him. Gelvus, just tell me that you did everything that Aria ordered you to do."

"Yes." The Turian flanged, his glare entirely focused on me. "The docks are more than secure, and I've locked down all of the transit bridges to them except for the one you used from tower two. I've got three teams rappelling down the old transit tubes to check the seals, I still say that's the way she'll come in."

I offered a noncommittal sound. "Old tubes?"

"The lift we took is the modern system," Bray grunted in explanation. "The old ones end in the mines beneath tower one, they were shut down in Patriarch's day when he finished boring the tunnel for the new one."

"Would have been nice to know about those yesterday." I muttered before glancing at the Captain, "Much as I hate to agree with you, that sounds like her best route in. How far down have they checked?"

"They just got started this morning." The Turian shrugged, looking somewhat mollified. "I'm expecting an update before the shift change."

Well that was something at least. "All right, what about the main lift? Could she override it?"

"No." Bray, at least, sounded positive about that. "What about the incoming freighters and shuttles? Are you-"

"I have smuggling scanners going through each ship that docks," Gelvus interrupted irritably. "And a full squad confirming the passenger manifest of every shuttle that comes in."

Leaning forwards onto the table, I fond myself nodding slowly. "All right. I'm guessing you can throw an entire dock into lockdown easily enough as well?"

"Of course."

"Good." I blew out a breath. "Right, so that's the two likely routes in covered, what about the management? Your message to Aria said they were off?"

The skin around his plates tightened, his head shaking in what I thought was the Turian equivalent of a grimace. "Yes. They're always been self-serving little shits at the best of times, but lately they've been... off."

I frowned. "Off like partaking, or off like they've been bought off?"

"Both." He let out a quiet, chirping grunt. "Jerreth, the Salarian in tower one, my people found him talking to shit that wasn't there three or four times now. He wouldn't be the first person to overindulge on shit but I'd never heard of him touching hallucinogenic crap before. Too professional."

"Huh." Reaching up, I rubbed at my mouth with one hand, frowning at nothing in particular. "Any more of that kind of thing?"
Gelvus nodded, glancing between me and Bray. "A few other members of his staff, and the staff in tower three. Similar crap. Normally I'd say they're just in the middle of a fad like the rank and file, but..."

"They don't usually hit the hard stuff." Bray was also frowning. "You think others have been bought off?"

The Turian shrugged. "They're refusing to accept that anything's wrong, keep telling me and my people that we must be seeing things."

"Covering their new habit?" I asked.

A scoffing sound preceded his words. "So long as it doesn't interfere with their work, I don't care what they're doing. Neither does Aria, and if they got into the senior ranks they know that well enough."

"So why hide it..." There was a massive, heaving sigh as the Batarian pulled a cigarette out from a pocket. He lit it in sharp, irritable motions. "We'll need tests of their crap as well."

"Already did. Nothing." He waved a taloned hand. "That they're on something is irrefutable, but they're covering up whatever it is. I don't have any proof that they've been talking with the bitch either, but my best guess is that she paid off freighter captains to pass messages. On the watch for that now, so if she tries it again we'll be able to find out what he's been saying and who's responsible."

Shifting my hand up, I ran it through my hair as I sighed. "And passed messages was enough for her to convince them to addict themselves and start mass dispensing a new drug to the population?"

"Of course not." Gelvus shook his head irritably. "They're not that stupid and she can't possibly be that convincing."

I grimaced. "And even the management's... odd new habits aside, they're not doing anything to threaten the mining?"

"Or the docks." Another shake of his head. "That's why it's odd instead of a Spirits damned emergency."

Bray's face twisted as he let smoke drift out of his open nose. "So we're stuck waiting on something to happen."

"Sounds like it." I sighed. "What about the staff in tower two?"

The Turian shifted a hand in a small gesture. "Apart from denying that their people are on neshi, they're normal."

Bray and I both gave him flat looks, but it was the Batarian who spoke. "Do they think you don't have eyes?"

"I don't find myself caring much what they think." He stated flatly. "The only thing that matters is what they are actually doing, and right now that is nothing."

"So..." I sighed. "You're not going to do anything more than what you're doing unless they do something overt."

"What is there to do, human? I'm well aware of the tactic of inciting panic and then allowing your
enemy to wear themselves out." The Turian shook his head. "That is precisely what I believe to be happening here."

It was a classic Batarian strategy, and one that my own species could be fond of at times. First, set off every alarm your opponent had and make it stupidly obvious you were up to something. Let them panic, brace themselves… and then do nothing. Go elsewhere and get something else done and wait for their paranoia and exhaustion to peak before coming back and hitting them right when they didn't think you were actually going to do anything.

"At the moment," He continued, "My measures are an inconvenience to my soldiers and to the population, but they are not overly stressful or energy intensive. If you can give me a clear sighting that Zero-One is here or that she's been fucking with shit, I'll put everything into lock down and call a full alert. Until then, business has to continue on."

Translation: He was covering his ass against Aria losing any profits from the mines shutting down, and didn't want to shut the district's business down and end up having nothing to show for it.

"Suppose that's as good as we're going to get." I stated, taking a small pull from my drink. The rich flavor of a Thessian Kiss made my eyebrows go up, the harsh brandy entirely hidden. Normally I didn't care for that particular mix, but the bartender had known what they were doing.

"It is." Gelvus shrugged, already turning his attention back to his dancers. Aria's assistant barked at him that we weren't finished, making the Turian growl as the two of them began to argue. It didn't take long for the Batarian to win the debate and begin interrogating him about what other precautions he was taking, confirming the messages he'd sent to Aria, and a host of other details that I honestly didn't care about.

Especially since the Captain's attentions continued to wander, his brief moment of professionalism vanishing thanks to a Turian dancer striding up to take the center pole on top of the bar. She wasted little time in removing what clothing she'd had on, the argument pausing as both of my companions focused heavily on her bold movements.

For my part, I could only sigh; Turian women weren't really my thing. Across the table, Gelvus and Bray began to absently bicker as she danced, but it was clear that their attention was focused elsewhere. So instead of wasting my time listening to them, I pushed myself to my feet, grabbed my drink, and headed towards the stairs.

The soldiers who were evidently around to escort their boss were professional enough to glance at me as I went past, their attention only returning to the dancers after they realized I wasn't up to anything more nefarious than going down the stairs.

Things proceeded more slowly once I got to the lower level. The place might not have been Afterlife but it was apparently extremely popular amongst Gelvus's soldiers because it was packed with off duty troopers who were busily engaged in drinking, gambling at stations set away in the corners, or otherwise relaxing and watching the dancers.

Getting through the crowd was as much of an adventure as it had been the first time. While the patrons mostly got out of my way and gave me some space to try and move through, the staff was drawn to me like I had magnets attracting them. Even without the markings on my armor identifying me as, well, me, the obviously expensive coat and plating identified me as someone with far more wealth than they were probably used to seeing in the closed district.

Dancers prowling the floor got as close as they could, trying to slow or lure me to the private booths set away in the sides of the club. Asari were the boldest, but also the easiest to ignore, while a Turian
woman actually let her claws drift along my shoulders as I moved past her. Honestly the most disconcerting was a barely covered Batarian male, who offered me a demurely submissive stance that left me extremely taken aback.

Unfortunately he did so near the bar that my friends had claimed entirely to themselves, and Shyeel and Illyan were openly snickering as I managed to awkwardly wave him away.

"What's wrong Cie?" The other Reyja'krem grinned at me. "Not going to take him up on that?"

"No." I glared at her as I took the seat on her left, Voya snorting and shaking her helmeted head from her place on Shyeel's other side. "I'm going to be hearing about that for the next year, aren't I?"

"The next decade." She winked at me, "How'd the meeting go?"

I sighed into my drink, trying not to think about the kind of jokes she'd be able to come up with. "About as well as you'd expect."

"That bad?" Illyan rumbled, easily looking over our friends' heads. "No sightings or anything?"

"No." I shook my head and took a small sip from my glass, "Maybe another route in, but the Captain has a team investigating to make sure it's sealed. Plus the docks are apparently locked down pretty tight, we can check on that tomorrow."

"So that leaves what," Voya asked. "Meeting with the management staff?"

"Soon as we find a place to get some lunch." I answered with a nod, grimacing a bit before I dropped some of what I'd just learned. "Oh, and the management staff is the potentially hallucinating management staff."

Shyeel let out an irritated groan, her mirth fading as her shoulders slumped. "Tell me you're joking."

"No... They've apparently got their own drug issues." My head shook as I sighed, taking a longer sip from my drink. "At least, the ones in tower one and three do. The worst he said about the managers in tower two was that they're refusing to admit that anything is wrong."

"Sounds like this afternoon is going to be smooth sailing then." Illyan shook her head, "But we don't need to find food Cie, already ordered it."

I glanced up at her. "What did I get?"

"Jerush Filet." She grinned at my surprise. "I know right? Wouldn't expect a place like this to have the expensive stuff but apparently the Captain keeps a few good chefs on retainer."

"Probably so he can gorge himself while he watches tits bounce around." Voya muttered, her own irritation evident as she carefully inserted a straw through her mask. She wouldn't be eating good food, not in a public place like this. We'd have to pay her back at some point, maybe Shyeel and I could force Illyan to cook for her. That was always amusing to watch.

"I think he prefers his own species women." I jerked a thumb over towards the main bar, where I assumed the dancer who'd inspired me to leave was still giving them a show. "He all but started drooling when she showed up. So did Bray."

"Really?" The large Asari turned to glance in that direction, shaking her head. "Huh. Don't see it, I mean, tight ass sure, but the rest... never understood what Tris saw in Turians."

"We really don't need to hear this." Voya growled.

"Agreed." I muttered, only for both of the Asari to predictably ignore us as they started debating the pros and cons of sleeping with various species. It was a conversation we'd had to suffer through more than once, but they always seemed to find new ways to discuss the same things. Probably just to make sure that Voya and I stayed annoyed the entire time.

Thankfully the food wasn't long in coming, the Turian bartender throwing the plates in front of us and handing Voya what looked like a thickly blended smoothie. He, at least, was properly clothed unlike the rest of the staff, and if anything seemed relieved that the four of us had claimed his bar. Not that he actually said anything, but the relaxed manner in which he started cleaning things behind the bar spoke volumes.

The conversation, to my and Voya's irritation, largely remained on sex throughout the meal. Probably thanks to all of the barely clothed beings gyrating on poles or on top of tables elsewhere in the establishment. I was mostly able to stay out of it, thanks to not being stuck in between Shyeel and Illyan, and started going through my mail while they alternated between teasing and harassing an increasingly annoyed Voya by asking her what she thought of one dancer or another.

Flicking through my omni-tool, I sighed at the dozen or so messages from both Nynsi and Ayle. None of them were actually directed at me, but they'd felt the need to include me anyway just to keep me updated with what they were doing. For the most part that seemed to be Nynsi working out a way to smuggle Balak back to the Hegemony, while Ayle continued to get the main unit prepared to enter the war.

"Anything good?" Shyeel asked, looking around my shoulder.

I shrugged. "Ayle might have a mission for the main unit, a warm up raid out near the dark rim; taking out a mining operation supporting Ganar."

"Sounds…" She spoke around a mouthful of her own drink, "Simple. Anything for us?"

"No… huh."

"What?"

I rolled a shoulder. "Nothing from Red, or from Captain Elissa. I sent them both messages when we first got here… I expected to at least get something back from them."

The scarred Asari frowned. "That's the gang leader, and that Eclipse Captain you know right?"

"Yeah." I scratched at my goatee, puzzling over that a bit. "I asked them if they knew anything, and if they had time to talk with us once we were done here."

There was a quiet sound from my sort-of friend. "Only been a couple of shifts… still, weird that they didn't at least have an underling get back to you. Oh, reminds me, you heard from Washana lately?"

"Just before we left." Shutting my omni-tool down with a flick of my fingers, I pushed my plate away and waved the bartender over to get us the bill. "She's on Illium, in Nos Irrail and bored out of her mind trying to teach trainee medics."

"Poor maiden." Shyeel grinned bemusedly, "Maybe we should-"
"KEAN!" The music stuttered and then cut, everyone whipping their heads up towards the Captain's perch. The Turian was leaning heavily on the railing, staring right at us. His shouts continued even as I saw Bray begin shoving his way down the stairs and rushing in our direction. "The lift team found something! Time to work for a living mercenary!"

Fucking... well, at least we'd gotten some food in us first.

"Helmets on, let's get moving." My feet hit the floor as I spoke, the crowd rapidly clearing the space around us as our legs got moving. Bray met us near the door, all five of us emerging into the broad, circular hallway that ran around the ecology tower.

"Gelvus received an emergency transmission." Bray growled as we ran for the bank of lifts that would take us down to the transit level. "Indicating that the squad he sent to the old lifts found a breach in the top plug. The bitch could already be here."

"Shit..." Of course they had. Athame just couldn't give us a day or two to actually acclimate to this fucked up place and work things out on our own. "Did they find any evidence down there? Did the miners see anything?"

"No word." He replied, slowing sharply with the rest of us before smacking the summon button on the nearest elevator. "And no."

Illyan swore quietly, shifting herself around a bit, reaching back to touch the boxy heavy weapon slung across her back as if to make sure it was still there. "Athame's ass, how could they not have? Paid off?"

Bray seemed to hesitate for less than a second, just long enough to make me notice. "The guards would have gotten them all out of there before they started checking. As for before, she probably wouldn't have had to spend much to get them to look the other way."

"Bray..." I lowered my voice. "Athame's ass, this is not the time to hide crap."

"This is Omega. There is always time." He replied as the elevator arrived, all five of us quickly piling in. "It won't affect your mission."

Illyan shook her head as we began to plummet downwards. "And we're just supposed to take your word for it?"

"You don't have a choice Asari." A tight edge entered his voice. "I've got my orders from Aria, you don't like it, take it up with her."

The only member of my cadre swore quietly, her helmet shifting in my direction. I could only shake my head and shrug, concealing my own irritation as best I could. In any other situation, for a normal contract, I probably would have held him under the water a bit to try and get some answers even if it meant walking away from the mission. But here... shit. It was Krom's partner, and there was no guarantee we'd be able to find the bitch again anytime soon.

We just didn't have the time to interrogate him about whatever the fuck he and Aria were hiding. Then again, there was a chance, albeit a small one, that he was telling the truth and that it wouldn't actually affect us. Probably something to do with the actual mining process, something they didn't want the other Warlords to know. Fuck, maybe Omega was running low on eezo or something. If that was the case then it really wasn't relevant, and I didn't care what they were hiding.

Of course it could just as easily have been something far more important... shit. I'd forgotten how much I hated this station. Nothing was ever simple.
Further conversation largely died off after that, with our few questions about what we could expect to find boiling down to 'your guess is as good as mine'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gelvus also proved to be singularly unhelpful once Bray got him onto our communications channel. Zero-One, or someone else, had evidently started jamming his people, but he did at least confirm that he'd gotten another two squads into position to barricade the primary entrance to mine one.

It took us a good twenty minutes to get there, having to sprint across the enclosed bridge to get over to tower one, where we then took another lift down beneath the asteroid’s surface. At one point it locked midway between two levels, forcing Bray to enter a personal override into the control panel in order to proceed further.

"Welcome to Omega's mines." The Batarian grunted once the doors opened. "Don't touch anything."

"I don't feel like being coated in… whatever the fuck is on that shit." Voya muttered as we followed him out into an expansive cavern. It was boxy, obviously bored out specifically to hold the piles upon piles of machinery that loomed over us in the dim lighting. They'd obviously been used, hard, for whatever their purpose had been, but were now coated in dust mixed with grease and oils and various other fluids.

"Good, stay away from it, this old shit needs to get moved over to mine three and we don't need it fucked up by tourists." A new voice cut in as an armored figure emerged from behind what might have once been a treaded mining laser. If he was unsettled by the fact that I and my friends all pointed our weapons at him, he didn't show it. "That you Bray?"

"Nux." Aria's assistant shook his head, "What did you find?"

The other Batarian jerked a thumb over his shoulder, more soldiers emerging from where they'd been concealing themselves as he did. They were all Batarian, and like their apparent leader, had covered their dark armor in as much grime as possible to better hide themselves. Of course a quick tap of my helmet's controls shifted my vision over to thermal, making them more than visible, but I'd give them at least some credit for making the attempt. "Come on, best to show you lot."

"I'd rather be warned ahead of time." I spoke over top of Bray's attempted to agree with him, pointedly not moving or collapsing my weapon. "If it's all the same."

Several of the soldiers started to raise their guns only to pause as Nux held a hand out. His own attention seemed mostly on Illyan and her boxy new toy that was not-so innocently pointed roughly in his direction. "Kean, as paranoid as your reputation suggests. I've got a breach in the top lift plug and what might have been a rappelling system setup farther down."

I grunted, relaxing minutely, motioning for everyone to lower their weapons a bit. "Not to the top?"

"No," His head shook, "Maybe to the second seal, but we don't have any biotics to judge if she could have made the jump from there, especially with all the crap in the way."

"What kind of crap?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Lift cables, pieces from the braking systems that were broken when they installed the plugs, pieces from the Pillars alone know what. Usual crap you get in rushed construction."

Shyeel let out an annoyed sound before muttering across our private comms. "I'd have to see it Cie."

Strangling the irritation took a lot of effort, but I managed to avoid cursing aloud as I nodded and started walking forwards. Bray gave me a pointed glare with all four of his eyes that I entirely ignored, focusing more on how the soldiers smoothly took up escort positions around us.
"I'm close enough to take at least two of them." Voya murmured, staying a good meter behind me while Illyan and Shyeel took up positions on our flanks, their own attention obviously focused on our escorts as well.

Rather than respond verbally, I shifted my left hand away from my body to flick my fingers in sign language, thanking her before instructing Illyan to focus on the leader. Her own hands were occupied lugging the mine launcher, but she shifted her helmet in acceptance as she settled her vision slit onto Nux and Bray.

Despite our paranoia, nothing untoward happened as we moved out of the machinery and into another open space. The remainder of the guards were present here, setup behind makeshift barricades with their attention entirely focused on a massive hanger-sized door that had evidently been installed to seal this cavern away from the remainder of the mines. It had been cracked open a good five meters, giving them a reasonable kill zone against anyone that tried to get out while also giving them enough room to easily get equipment in and out of the next area.

While our escorts peeled off to join the cordon, their evident leader led us on and through the door, speaking again as he did. "We didn't see any sign that the door had been moved since it was last sealed."

"Which was when?" I asked, glancing around the new cavern. It was more or less the same as the other, with a similar amount of crap that left me feeling oddly claustrophobic. "Wouldn't it be open for the miners?"

His helmet shook as he led us on. "This section of the mine's been closed off since the first sighting of that bitch."

"Athame's ass." Shyeel growled, "It's been closed longer than that, you think we can't see the rust on this crap? These machines haven't been used in years."

Bray let out a disgusted sound, "You think we keep the latest machines near a lift that we shut down? This is all backup equipment, only miners who come here are the ones who start it up once every few months to make sure it's working."

Illyan shook her head. "Aria's got more money than the goddess, why's she keeping-"

"We're not here to discuss the details of our operations." He cut her off with an annoyed snap, "Be lucky you're in here at all."

My lip twitched as our pace slowed, voices becoming more clearly audible as we approached our apparent destination. "This mine is bored out, isn't it? It's empty."

"We are not talking about this Kean." His voice lowered further as we turned around another decrepit mining laser, his feet abruptly stopping his four dark eyes narrowed.

Frowning, I stepped around him and Nux… and my own rising wave of paranoia finally hit the beach.

There was a short squad hard at work around a massive plate that had been thrown over a whole in the ground, the visible wreckage of elevator equipment all around to indicate just what it had been used for.

That was more or less expected… but there were two obvious problems.

One, their leader was an Asari, a purple skinned woman who was already turning to frown at us as
we approached…and Nux had said that they hadn't had a biotic with them.

Two… the soldiers under command were still visibly trying to remove the slab covering up the old elevator shaft, making it entirely impossible for them to have radio'd an emergency message to Gelvus saying they'd found out anything.

"Nux?" The Asari asked, her tones ones of obvious confusion. "What are you doing-"

I had to give Bray credit, he had his own gun drawn and shoved into the other Batarian's neck less than a second after I had my own shoved against his right eye. Less welcome was the fact that he pulled the trigger where I didn't, leaving me coated in dark red blood and us without a prisoner to interrogate.

"What the fuck!?!" The Asari shrieked, starting to draw her own weapon before freezing, her eyes going wide in horror.

It took me all of a heartbeat to hear the same noise… that of a massive door beginning to grind slowly shut.

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**Branded Survivor**

As traitorous ambushes went, this one was pretty fucking solid. Even with all of us paranoid and ready to fight, we hadn't been ready for the levels our opponents had gone through. We'd barely had time to throw a desperate kind of plan together in the sprint back towards the closing door… and it wasn't much of a plan to be honest. Goddess willing it would buy us some time.

I grunted as Illyan handed me her mine launcher while I tossed her my Kishok, trying to unload some weight so that I'd still be able to walk after this. It was a bitch to do it on the run, but we managed to not drop either of the heavy weapons as we emerged from the rusting equipment to see the massive door sliding inexorably closed.

"Cover her!" Cie snapped as everyone else, including the local soldiers who were just as panicked as we were, starting blasting away through the opening at the same time as the men and women on the other side began to light up their kill zone.

Frantically remembering everything that I could about what I'd seen on our way in, I sucked in a tight breath before tightening my shoulders and focusing my biotics.

The cave whirled before I slammed back into existence on the enemy's side of the archway. Bullets promptly began to smack at my barriers, and I immediately flashed up and to my right before they could get a solid bead on me.

Exhaustion washed over me as I stumbled back into the galaxy on top of one of the wrecked mining vehicles. It took a quick series of impacts to my back to get me moving again, diving into the vehicle's bed to get out of their line of sight.

"I'm out." I groaned into my mic, "Trying to get an angle."

Silence greeted me, drawing out an oath as a quick check of my HUD confirmed that I was being jammed. Shaking my head, and reminding myself I didn't have time to worry about what everyone else was doing, I hefted the bulky weapon onto the rusted metal edge before poking my head up.

Strangely no incoming fire greeted the tiny motion, and I realized they must have thought they'd killed me when I'd collapsed forwards.
Muttering a quiet prayer of thanks for the small mercy, I jiggled Illyan's new toy around, trying to aim it. Cie had only had the time to link it to her armor's systems, so I was stuck using the crude sights he'd welded on to the side of the thing.

"Right…" I murmured to myself as I caught sight of my target, the machinery steadily working to close the repurposed hanger door and trap my friends within the mine. "…there."

As much as I liked to make fun of him, I'd give Cieran credit for making weapons. Tracered armor piercing rounds belted out from the main barrel, letting me correct my aim as I pushed the secondary trigger down. The orange discs of low-tech incinerate mines began spitting themselves free in rapid sequence, a continuous stream of explosions beginning to tear apart the equipment even as voices shrieked in alarm and fury.

I couldn't help but grin a little at the raw destruction, even though the mine magazines emptied themselves in a matter of moments and left me trying to slice apart crap with the gun proper. It seemed to be working, the door had shuddered to a halt, so that was one mission accomplished.

Now for the harder part… getting back to everyone else alive.

Worse, my alone time was evidently up; Incoming fire began to hammer at my cover, with more than a few rounds penetrating the thin skinned vehicle to slap at my barriers as I flinched.

Swearing, I heaved myself up for the brief moment I needed to throw myself out and onto the ground. Landing hurt, as did the weight of the stupid gun colliding with my chest as I hauled it with me, but at least I was back in cover for a breath.

I was scrabbling to my feet when I heard a new series of sounds over the gunfire, deep, ponderous footfalls accompanied my metallic groaning as if…

Darting forwards, I jerked my head around the cab just in time to see a combat mech finish shoving some kind of eezo hauler out of its way. The truck had to have weighed several tons but the mech didn't seem to have any problems with rolling the fucking thing aside like it was nothing more than a maiden's toy.

It was… shit, it was massive, Glitch wouldn't have come up to the bloody thing's waist. Four massive legs were propelling it with surprising speed, while a hunched, armored torso loomed above them. One of its arms pointed vaguely in my direction, and I barely hit the ground before a missile screamed past my cover to blow apart something behind me.

Another hit my own truck while I was trying to get up and run, the blast throwing me right back onto the ground as the footfalls drew closer. Grabbing the mine launcher, I tried to flick it over to the overload magazine only to see that a massive piece of shrapnel had torn into the gun's side.

So much for even trying to fight it then… time to run.

"Sorry Illyan…" Letting the wrecked weapon fall onto the ground, I scrambled to all fours and lunged out into the open. Forcing everything else aside, I stared at nothing but the, now slim, opening between the door and the wall before hurling myself into a third biotic rush.

I mostly made it, exhaustion roaring up as I stumbled and fell onto my belly in the middle of the archway. Covering fire that had been keeping my friends back instantly shifted to start hammering at me, my barriers collapsing under the deluge.

A massive hand seized me by the back of my neck, hauling me around the corner before they could get through my coat and armor as well, Illyan's voice rising in a shout. "You get it!?”
"Obviously!" I shouted back. She and most of the others were up against the door, using it as cover while Bray and one of the soldiers worked to bandage the Asari officer, who'd apparently taken a round. "Just for now though, and we've got a new problem!"

Bray let out a groaning snarl, glancing over from where he was working. "They've got one of the mechs, don't they?"

A heavy missile shot through the maybe two meters of doorway that was still open before I could respond, slamming into a scaffold that had been erected around some kind of burrower. Neither of the, apparently loyal, soldiers firing down from that vantage point managed to get away… leaving us down two more guns.

Grimacing, I glanced around again. Two more bodies were on the ground near where we'd first emerged from the scrapyard, probably killed in the opening moments. Our vague plan had been for me to buy us enough time to come up with a better breakout plan, but if we were already down four people… shit.

"Shit." Cieran muttered, "What model?"

"One of Patriarch's old Krogan designs." The Batarian flinched as another missile streaked past, this time impacting harmlessly somewhere in the background. "It's big, unstable, and only supposed to be turned on in case of a full fucking emergency. They shouldn't even have the activation codes."

"Athame's ass..." The human growled, shoving his way past everyone else before risking a quick glance around the corner. He'd barely gotten back before a round ricocheted off the floor, likely having been aimed right at his skull "Shit!"

"Is there another way out?" Voya asked, her glowing eyes flicking around. "And do you think you knocked the door out entirely?"

In response the massive thing shuddered and groaned, shifting ever so slightly before catching again. Everyone froze, though no one relaxed even when it stopped moving again. It was just a matter of time before they managed to get it going again, and even tiny increments would eventually leave us trapped in here.

"We... we could go into the tunnels, it would take us to the other mines." The Asari squad leader groaned as one of her subordinates frantically bandaged her stomach "Long walk."

"They'll have those sealed." Bray growled.

"Won't there be miners in the other sections?" Voya asked. "They can't all be with Gelvus, if we could convince them to-"

"The mines are empty, Quarian." His head shook irritably as he cut her off. "All of them."

All four of us just kind of stared at him, then Cieran let out a vicious oath even by his standards. "They're all bored out? Where the fuck does her eezo come from?"

"Her colonies." I shook my head as my brain ran ahead of his for once. "I'm guessing she found an eezo heavy world. The 'miners' must just be dock workers who transfer the eezo from one freighter to another to make it seem like it's still coming from Omega."

Bray's lips twisted in a snarl. "We can discuss this later."

"Agreed." Cieran muttered before risking another glance. "Shit... they're moving the mech towards
to the door, I think they're going to have it just shove the thing along its tracks."

Illyan paused as she started to rise. "It's that big?"

"Fucker dwarfs a Ymir." He muttered. "Shyeel, any ideas?"

"Working on it…" I glanced over at Bray. "We need more firepower, don't you have a panic button?"

"Already hit, they're jamming it somehow because I haven't gotten an answering ping."

"Athame's bleeding azure…" Hissing, I stumbled to my feet and got over to where Cie was blindly firing off tech mines, trying to disrupt some of the desultory covering fire. "What are you thinking?"

"I think we're pinned in." I could practically see the storm swirling as he tried to figure a way out. "Shit, they'll be ready for you try and go out there again… and with the angle you'd be exposed to that fucking sniper before you could charge."

And what the fuck could I do on my own even if I went out there? I couldn't exactly run to get help, not if Gelvus had been the one to set us up. They'd have the lift locked down for sure, and even if I did somehow get up it they'd just kill me when it got to the upper levels. Or override the lift and smash it into the ground or something.

The mine launcher had been our only heavy weapon, and even with it I don't think we could have taken the heavy thing out, not with nearly twenty of Aria's soldiers blasting away at us at the same time.

"I think we're fucked Cie." I offered quietly. "At least, in this direction."

He was silent for a few moments, and then let out a hissing sigh between his teeth. "Get away from the door, get into cover. Illyan, Bray, help the wounded girl. Everyone else help me cover them."

While the two of them got the wounded woman up, I pulled out my pistol and joined Cie in providing at least a desultory amount of cover fire to make it clear that we weren't going to let anyone chase us.

"Lost the mine launcher I see." Voya noticed as she pulled up on my right, throwing an overload at a curve to hopefully annoy someone on the other side.

I grimaced. "Shrapnel tore it open."

Cieran's irritated mutter broke off into a pained exclamation when a biotic explosion hurled him backwards. My eyes widened as an Asari emerged from a biotic charge right where he'd been standing, her armor black except for where stylized flames had been painted onto her forearms and legs.

That was all the reaction I had time for before a biotic throw tore through my weakened barriers and hurled me bodily into Voya. We went down hard, cursing and tumbling as we fought to get to our feet. I managed to get my head up in time to see Zero-One, it just had to be her, execute the Turian soldier who'd been lagging behind us with a blast form a short-barreled shotgun.

Illyan let out an oath as she slung a hand forwards, letting Bray take the wounded woman as she through a gout of warfire towards her opponent. The assassin avoided it with a nimble spin before hurling a much more concentrated blast right back at her, forcing the massive maiden to dive aside.
Athame's tits but the bitch was fast.

Cie was just getting back to his feet, and I was just extracting my legs from Voya, when she got to Bray and his injured cargo.

The poor maiden died more or less at once, the point-black shotgun round tearing through her feeble attempt to get a barrier up to protect them. I expected her to do the same to Aria's assistant, but instead she simply batted aside his pistol before grabbing him by the neck and turning to face the way she'd come.

Jerking my weapon up, I aimed in the direction she was looking and started shooting just as she flashed the pair of them across the cavern. Doing that with Cieran usually left me barely conscious, but the bitch merely wobbled a little before kicking Bray out through the, once again, shuddering door.

If she was bothered by my shots, or Cieran's now that he was aiming in the right direction, she didn't show it, simply letting them impact her barriers as she cockily strutted out and around the massive door.

Our last futile shots smacked into the metal as it clanged shut.

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**Flash Warning**

*Flash Warning::All Citadel Fleet Warships. SA prowlers have confirmed increased activity beyond the Persues Veil. The Geth may once again be gathering for a run through the Terminus and into Citadel space. Per Council decree, the fleet is now going to war footing condition two. Coordinate with member fleets in regards to relay blockades.*

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**Next up is chapter 3: The Long Dark**

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**Chapter End Notes**

And now this saga well and truly begins. Apologies for the long delay, writer's block and some... let's call them personal problems really sapped my motivation. Hopefully both will soon be done with so I can resume at full speed...

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
We... needed a few moments after the final echoes had faded, the four of us just kind of staring at the wall of steel that was now between us and the lift we'd taken down here. And the fact that the only person we knew who actually knew anything about the mines we were now trapped inside of had just been captured.

This was... well, a fucking catastrophe. We'd been in crap situations before, but even the final battles on Redcliffe had at least been combat situations, where silly things like guns and hand to hand skills actually mattered. Somehow I didn't think the massive slab of metal would be terrible bothered by our tech mines or Shyeel and Illyan's limited biotics.

I mean, I'd anticipated something going wrong. Some traitorous action or attempted ambush, maybe a confusing shootout between loyalist and traitor members of the guards around us. But... shit, nothing quite on this scale. Nothing like the fucking Captain that Aria fucking T'Loak had in charge of the district being the one to lure us to be trapped inside of mines that looked entirely too abandoned.

We'd been fucking paranoid, ready to shoot anyone around us at any given fucking moment, and we'd still walked into it because we, because I, hadn't anticipated a conspiracy on this scale. Athame's fucking... no, cursing wouldn't help. Self-blame, however bloody warranted, wouldn't help. What we needed was a plan of action, something that would help us survive and get out of this.

Fact number one, instead of just killing us outright, she'd decided to trap us in these mines. There had to be a reason for that, and we probably wouldn't like it.

Fact number two, the mines had evidently been closed down for decades, meaning we wouldn't exactly run into anyone else down here.

Fact number three, we had no idea how extensive they actually were or any other potential ways out. More than anything else, we needed a map.

Fact number four, if we were stuck in here long term... we didn't have any supplies on us. No food, limited water, no spare parts for our equipment.

"Voya..." I needed a long breath before I could continue, the cool logic struggling to keep my mental waters calm, "You and I need to check this crap over, see if there's anything we can use to force a
breach in that door."

Glowing eyes turned in my direction, the petite woman shaking herself before nodding. "Right... yes. We can check the borers first."

I nodded slightly before continuing, "Shyeel, Illyan; This is supposed to be an entrance to a mine network, if what Bray was saying is right. Stay together, check the the walls for other tunnels. Sealed, open, whatever. Just find another way we could get out of this room if we can't get out the way we came in."

Shyeel sucked in an audible breath before rolling her shoulders. "Got it."

The pair of Asari got moving slowly at first, then accelerated as they managed to focus on their objective. For my part, I followed Voya as she headed over to the nearest of the massive mining machines. Our pace slowed as we got nearer, our helmets filtering the limited lighting to give us a better look... and allowing us to curse more or less in unison as we shifted our objective away from the obviously ruined machine.

I would have said that the next thirty minutes were filled with dashed hopes, but that implied that we'd had any real hope that any of the mining lasers, heavy borers, or other large machines were in any condition for us to use or rig. Instead, when our companions returned from their own search, they found Voya and I inspecting a tiny six wheeled cart that looked like it had been intended to haul miners around.

"That's it?" Illyan asked as she approached, her head cocking a little to one side. "Nothing else?"

"If we had a month and four different engineering manuals we might be able to fix that borer." Voya waved a hand in the massive thing's direction, "And there's an ore hauler that's useable but we've got no way to get it out from where the fucking thing is parked. So yeah, this little keshin is it... huh."

Pulling my head out of the tiny engine space where I'd been inspecting the quietly humming motor, I glanced over at her. "Find something?"

"It's got a VI for autodriving..." The Quarian fiddled with the dim screen set into the dashboard. "Looks like I can have it take us to a foreman's station, assuming those tunnels are open."

"They are." Shyeel grunted, moving over to look over Voya's shoulder. "We found seven tunnels out, none of them are plugged."

Well that was something. A foreman's station would hopefully have a map, assuming the systems there had power. If they didn't... we could probably rig something from the cart, or from our armor if we had to.

Voya's glowing eyes narrowed slightly. "None of them were sealed?"

"None were sealed yet." The Asari shook her head. "Three of them have materials in place to close them up, sheet metal, det packs, that kind of thing."

"I made sure to grab them Cie." Illyan spoke up before I could ask the logical question, jerking a hand towards her backpack. "Only four of them, but maybe we could use them for something."

Well that was something. They probably wouldn't be enough to breach the main door, but we'd be better off having them regardless. Opening my mouth to say as such, I was cut off as my HUD flickered to show me that Bray had just joined our personal channel.
"Testing, testing. You there, dear Eleven?" A sibilant Asari voice purred across the radio in place of Bray's rough tones, not that I was terribly surprised.

"Zero One." I exhaled irritably. "I see you got Bray's omni-tool open in record time."

"Indeed... it was quite well encoded for Terminus trash, but I have my ways. How are you enjoying your new home?"

"First impressions... not great." Bringing my hands up, I signed at the others, telling them to close the cart up and get ready to move. "I mean, Athame's ass, you could have at least dusted. This place is a sty."

There was a tutting sound. "That's what you get for showing up early, before I could send the invitations even."

"Well I'll know better for next time then." I offered.

"I'm afraid there won't be one, dear Eleven." Her tone shifted to mocking apology, "Alas, you seem to be trapped inside of an abandoned mine with no way out."

I pursed my lips a little. "Let me guess, you've sealed off the lifts going to the other towers."

"If by sealed you mean we detonated explosives inside the lift shafts, then yes." Something like a giggle broke her words apart. "Which we'll be doing to our own as soon as we head up with dear little Bray."

Which meant even if we did have the time to try and fix up something to breach the hanger door, it wouldn't do us any good because we wouldn't have any way to head back up. "Let me take another guess, if you don't mind."

Another giggle. "Of course not my dear, we have plenty of time to talk."

My fingers twitched at her blatant confidence. "Someone is going to tell Aria that we tragically died in some melodramatic fashion, to stop her from looking into this too heavily"

"Oh she's already been told that I killed you all by venting poison into her penthouse while you slept. We even found a couple of useless miners to pose as your corpses, which was oh so nice of them don't you think?"

"Good to know you're sane." Shyeel muttered, "I don't suppose calling for help would do us any good?"

"Not unless you want to talk to the Elder, and even for an AI he's not terribly personable." A quiet sigh followed, "I'm afraid we had to resort to some rather extreme measures to corrupt him."

Well shit. I guess that confirmed the rumor that Aria had her own shackled AI to monitor crap on her station, emphasis on the past tense apparently. Double shit... if that was true, and we had to assume it was, we probably wouldn't even be able to use our helmet to helmet lines without it listening in or triangulating our location.

"You said you told Aria that we're dead." I shifted the topic as Voya hopped into the driver's seat, fiddling with the controls. Zero-One would eventually shut her mouth and leave us, and I wanted to learn as much as possible before that happened. "That you killed us. I'm guessing you also escaped off station somehow?"
"Of course not, silly human. I'm dead too, the good Captain blasted my body out into space when I tried to flee onto the surface." Yet another fucking giggle, this one sounding almost like Sederis had back before she'd gone on her meds. "We made a little vid of it, very professionally done. Maybe we'll win some awards for it when all of this is over."

Assuming she was telling the truth... fuck was the only word I could think to apply. If Gelvus was as good of an actor before Aria as he had been for us, he'd probably be able to spin that pretty fucking well. At least well enough to delay any investigations on her end until Ayle and Nynsi arrived to try and find out what the shit had happened.

Which they would, but it would take them at least a week, if not longer, and that was assuming they dropped everything and rushed to Omega. And that they could convince Aria to listen to them instead of her own people... it would probably be at least two or even three standard weeks before any serious investigation tried to poke holes in Gelvus's story, and Athame alone knew how long said investigation might take.

"I suppose that's how you got him to agree to help you." I let out an irritated exhalation. "Ten million credits is quite the bribe."

"Isn't it?" And the bitch was obviously more than a little pleased with herself. She sounded like she was fucking preening. "But I do believe that it's time for me to go, dear eleven. Do enjoy yourself, I went through a lot of effort to get everything prepared for you."

"I'm sure we'll have the time of our bloody lives in the empty mines." I drawled, hopping into the back of the small vehicle as Voya brought its tiny motor up from idle to something closer to full power.

There was a yet another giggle, but this one was different... Dark, and dripping with venom and insanity. "Oh dear eleven... my lover would have enjoyed the thought of you dying alone in the dark, but I'm not that cruel. Your early arrival prevented me from sending out all of the invitations, but I made sure that you'll have plenty of company."

And with that ominous and melodramatic note, she cut the line and left the four of us glancing at each other through our visors.

"So..." Shyeel murmured as Voya wordlessly punched the car into motion. It rattled a bit ominously, but after a couple of short breaths it lurched forwards and started rolling between the heavy equipment. "Think she was telling the truth?"

"I think she was cocky as fuck." I exhaled as I pulled my pistol back out, not at all surprised to see that she'd already drawn her own sidearm. "Keep your eyes open for movement, but for now we focus on getting to the foreman's station. With luck we'll find a map there."

"Then what?" Illyan asked quietly, her carbine already laid across her lap as she settled in place. "We don't have food or water on us Cie."

"Yeah..." I fought down the panic that the reminder brought on. "We use the map to find a mess hall, I can't imagine Aria or Patriarch had their miners heading all the way back to the district for breaks."

She grunted quietly as our ride cruised slowly past the sealed elevator shaft and the corpse still laying amidst a pool of blood. "I guess that's a start. Then we try and find a way out?"

"Then we find a way out." I corrected.

"And then we skin that bitch." Voya growled out her own addendum. "Fuck taking her alive."
Illyan’s helmet shifted as she glanced at me, but I only shrugged in return. I wasn’t feeling particularly charitable towards the bitch at the moment, and Voya didn’t actually have the patience to torture someone for that long in either case. Odds were that she’d just slit her throat and be done with it, and I was entirely all right with that plan of action.

"Quiet down for now." I murmured as we emerged from the neat rows of dilapidated equipment, the tiny car automatically carrying us towards an unlit tunnel. "Keep watching for anything else that might be down here with us."

Two of my friends nodded, but Illyan wasn’t quite done. She did lower her voice and lean in so that our helmets were nearly touching. "What about sending a message?"

"After we get a map." I murmured back. "I want to know where we can hole up defensibly first."

Plus there was no sense in broadcasting our plan if Zero-One had been telling the truth about corrupting Aria’s pet AI. Assuming it actually existed... Athame’s fucking azure but I hated this shit. Redcliffe might have been a hellhole but at least we’d known who our enemies, on both sides, were.

There was a quiet grunt as she leaned back, all of us focusing our attention on the smooth walls around us as we rode onwards. Apart from a collection of pipes and wire bundles that ran along the ground, there wasn’t much to look at. We passed more than a few openings that looked to have once been storage rooms, but proved to be empty when we stopped our cart to check them.

Thanks to the frequent stops, and the slow speed of the old cart, it took us a good fifteen minutes to make it to the foreman’s station. Although honestly the name made it sound far more impressive than it actually was, considering it was basically just an enlarged alcove set into the wall.

While Shyeel and Illyan kept watch, Voya and I got to work in converting our vehicle into a power source for the very powerless console.

"Can you guys hurry up?" Shyeel murmured as we worked, her slim frame shifting as she paced back and forth across the tunnel. "This place doesn't feel right."

I grunted as my omni-tool flickered to life, making sure to keep the panels at their dimmest setting. "You see anything?"

"No... but... shit, I don't know." Her fingers visibly tightened around her pistol. "Illyan?"

The larger Asari shook her head. "Yeah. Something’s... off Cie."

I grimaced inside my helmet. The last time I’d heard an Asari saying something was off had been on Redcliffe, when Mirala had been losing her shit as the brainwashed Batarians had gotten closer to us.

Voya growled as she extracted her head from console’s guts. "Define off for those of us who can’t feel electrical fields or dark energy or whatever you’re freaking out about."

"Off." Both blue women spoke the word in unison, but only Illyan continued from there. "Wrong. Like there’s... a weird buzzing against my skin. It’s kind of like feeling a biotic detonation from a distance, but it’s a constant thing instead of just a flash."

"It’s different for me, but just as unsettling." Shyeel shook her head but kept her gaze focused back the way we’d come. "Just get us a map."

"Right." I replied, focusing on the screen as it reluctantly flickered to life. The operating system was basic in the extreme, little more than a primary screen with menu selections that all seemed to be
related to mining terms that I knew nothing about. Which wouldn't have been a problem if they weren't all Krogan terms.

I experimented while Voya kept our rigged power supply from shorting the thing out, flicking through the various screen as quickly as I could work out what meant what. It took a few minutes, and more than a few false starts before I found what we were looking for.

"Got you. Voya, hook your omni-tool up and copy this file."

The Quarian let out a quiet grunt as she did so, flicking her eyes up at me as she worked. "Keelah, this place is a warrened maze."

"Yeah." I pressed my lips together for a brief moment as I examined the flickering readout. "Should make us hard to find if we do have-"

"Company!" Shyeel hissed. "I have movement."

"I've got the map." Voya snapped, pushing me aside as she started ripping at the cables to disconnect everything. "Nearest mess station is two levels down."

"I saw it." Moving around her, I risked a quick glance down the tunnel. My helmet's visor shifted the perfect darkness into something reasonably visible, but the most I could pick out was slight motion in the extreme distance. "Shy?"

The Asari already had swapped her weapons around, dropping to a knee as she brought her Kishok's scope up. "Vorcha... quadrupedal Vorcha."

"Quadra..." I shook my head, "Heading our way?"

Her helmet twitched a little. "Sort of. They're scurrying around, but doing it slowly. I don't see any guns on them... or armor. Athame's ass, I'd almost say they look feral."

Feral Vorcha? "How do you mean?"

"They're sniffing the ground." She elaborated.

"Well..." Ilyan entered the conversation, tapping us both on the shoulders before jerking her chin towards the car. "That can't be good."

I shook my head once, starting to backpedal. "No... no it can't. Voya, you know where we're going next?"

"Mess hall." She replied quietly, her long fingers already working the cart's controls as its motor rose from idling to the hum of its top power. "One level down, this way."

My mouth opened to reply, only to be cut off when Shyeel's heavy rifle abruptly whined to full charge before discharging with a sharp crack. "They heard the engine!"

The little vehicle jerked into motion as I got myself spun around in the back, getting set into a shooting crouch next to Shyeel as the first hissing screams began to echo down the tunnel. Weird acting or not, they definitely sounded like typical Vorcha when they let out their war cries.

To my right, my friend's Kishok thundered again. "How many?"

"Two dozen at least." She called back over the hissing of her weapon fabricating a new round. "There's..." Her third shot belted out, "Turians behind them, directing them. Just got one, three left."
Turians directing Vorcha? I ran through my memories as I waited for the distant motion to become something that I could properly shoot at, but didn't come up with much of anything as we kept going. "Blood Pack experiments maybe?"

"Wouldn't put it past them." Voya growled as the motor's whine increased to something distinctly unstable. "This thing won't go much farther Cie."

Illyan twisted around and started grabbing at her pack. "Cie, Kirkwall?"

I blinked at her, then caught on and twisted around to help her grab one of the detpacks that she'd grabbed earlier. Shyeel kept shooting behind us, while Voya irritably slapped at overrides and started to slow the cart so that the thing would survive long enough to pull this off. In a way we were already lucky, if the Vorcha had been armed they could have flooded the cover-less hallway with gunfire that would have made our lives exceedingly difficult.

"Thank the goddess for simplicity." Turning over the small brick in my hands, I started tapping at the tiny set of buttons built into the side of it. "Thirty seconds?"

"It's your call Cie." She reminded me, "But I think we can work with that."

"Unless it brings the tunnel down." Shyeel muttered in between another pair of shots.

"If it does you can say you warned us." I countered as I pressed down on the activation key, "Voya?"

"Hold on!" To say that thing skidded as she spun us roughly around would be overstating the power of our pathetic little ride, but it did slide a little bit before she got it lurching back into motion. "And... controls set, off!"

It was less of a jump and more of a quick hop to the ground, my armored boots sending up a few sparks as I skidded to a halt. Irritated sounds came as Illyan and Voya collided during their own dismount, both of them offering a few choice curses about the other as they pushed away from each other and scrambled to their feet.

All four of us got moving in short order after that, rushing in the opposite direction from the rolling bomb we'd just sent towards the enemies who were now readily visible as they howled and screeched.

Shyeel had been more or less spot on. Instead of running upright, the Vorcha were bounding along the floor with all four of their limbs, and lacked even the rudimentary armor and clothing their kind typically bore. Behind them were a pair of taller, spindlier figures sticking close the walls. She must have sniped out another Turian after her initial comment.

The thirty seconds seemed to go by in a matter of heartbeats, the rear camera in my helmet flashing to orange and white as the detpack did its job. We all staggered as the pressure wave lashed up and down the confined space, the hunting howls abruptly cutting out in time with the muted roar of the blast.

I let out a quiet oath as I stopped to turn around. The blast had gone off a second or three too early, flattening the front ranks of the Vorcha but leaving the rest of them somewhere between stunned and furious.

Raising my left hand up to steady my aim, I flicked my thumb to activate the modification that Illyan had made to my pistol, took a long breath, and then pulled the trigger.
The concussive round slammed into the crumbled and broken ceiling, destabilizing it further as more rocks began to fall. It didn't collapse entirely, but it did fill the tunnel with rubble and a billow of dust that my visor fought to see through. I didn't bother staring long enough, instead electing to turn around and sprint after my companions.

"Get them?" Voya panted as she waved a hand towards a side tunnel, all of us slowing reflexively as we ducked down it. Unlike the broad pathway we'd just left, this one was barely wide enough for two of us two walk abreast.

"Not as many as I'd have liked." I admitted as I lowered my voice, common sense informing me it was time to revert to stealth now that we were out of sight. The rubble would probably mute any noise we made, but I didn't feel like chancing anything. "Most of them looked like they were down but the timing wasn't perfect, went off in front of them instead of in the middle of the pack. Not much of a collapse but it might buy us some time."

She let out a curse, pushing away from the wall while a hand reached up to touch her helmet. A breath later her visor polarized to black, hiding her glowing eyes. "Next right, then a ladder. We can take a side tunnel to another that will bring us to the mess."

Rather than speak I simply waved her to take the lead, letting Illyan and Shyeel move ahead of me as well before I took the rear guard position. Scuttling down the tunnel, I listened hard as we moved. Echoing sounds of Vorcha in agonizing pain started up fairly quickly, quieting down in time with solitary gunshots that rang out harshly.

I could only grimace as we reached our apparent destination, a circular hole cut into the floor. The Turians were probably putting down the wounded, which was odd in itself. The blast would have been more force and shrapnel than fire, so the Vorcha should have been able to regenerate if given a few hours or days.

So why kill them?

Following the others down the ladder, we started communicating by Khellish sign as Voya directed us towards where we hoped to find food and water. Well, three of us communicated fluently with our hands, while Shyeel's was... a bit more halting.

Why hurt kill? The scarred Asari signaled once Voya was done giving us directions.

Illyan shuddered a little, and even despite the situation I could tell she was holding back laughter as her fingers flicked in quick motions. Maybe they're just assholes... or just killing the ones stuck under rocks.

I nodded slightly, Maybe. Bigger question is why where they feral? And how were the Turians controlling them?

And why are Turians working with the Blood Pack? Voya shook her head. Too many fucking questions.

Shit again complicate. Surprise. Shyeel shrugged.

That time Illyan did snort, but she at least did it nearly silently. Rolling my eyes, but managing a slight smile of my own, I followed everyone else as we continued onwards.

Branded Survivor
"We've got dry rations." Illyan murmured as she stepped out from the storage room, a very small metal container in her arms.

We'd found the mess hall without any more encounters with whatever the fuck was down in here with us, for which we were all bloody thankful. Even better, we'd discovered that the water still worked. It made some kind of sense, even Vorcha needed hydration, and it had probably never occurred to Zero-One or her people to only enable certain water mains.

Assuming they could, Athame alone knew how the ancient piping even worked.

"How many?" Cie whispered back, glancing over from where I was carefully letting water drip into my canteen.

"We'll be eating light." She admitted. Her movements were slow and almost exaggerated as she carefully set it down on the counter beside us, revealing the pouches inside. "Voya especially, not many Turian ones in there. I think they just missed this box when they cleared the place out."

Grimacing, I leaned over and did a quick count. "Maybe two weeks Cie, but we're not going to be comfortable."

The human let out a quiet oath. "Divide them evenly in our packs. Voya, the map."

She grunted from his other side, dropping to a knee and shifting her coat to make sure that the light didn't travel. "We're here. The lifts back to Zeta are... here, here, and here."

"We aren't going back up." Cie shook his head at once. "That bitch will have them sealed or guarded too heavily, we need another way out."

"There aren't any." Voya whispered back. "Unless we find a few hundred more det-packs and start blasting our way down through the old lifts."

I pursed my lips as I shut the dripping faucet off and tucked my canteen back onto my belt. "Could we breach the lift we took from Afterlife? It has to have a service tunnel."

The map flickered a bit as she adjusted the image, tracking down the line in question. "No... nearest it runs to the mines, by the map, is here. That's thirty plus meters of solid stone."

I cursed quietly as I accepted an empty bottle from Cie, carefully wiping the dust and other crap off of it before I filled it with water. "We can't go up, we can't go down."

"Maybe we can." Voya shook her head a little, zooming the map out until we could see the entire asteroid. "The old lifts are sealed, but next to them are the power and water mains that run from the core to Zeta. Probably back-ups built by the Turian warlords when they first built Fumi."

"They have service ladders?" I tried to lean around Cie to get a better look.

The image shifted once again, zooming back in as she quickly flicked it up and down to inspect the symbols. Her shoulders slumped a little after a few moments. "No.. they shared one with the lift, and that's going to be plugged."

"Athame's..." My curse came up short as Cieran reached out a hand to tap a portion of the map. "...what are you thinking?"

"The water main." He replied pensively. "Voya, how wide is it?"
There was a quick intake of breath. "It's... hard to tell on this map, but maybe a meter?"

"We could fit into that." His helmet shifted as he nodded slowly.

I just... stared at him. "You want us to go into an active water main?"

"Want? No. Seeing a better option? Also no." I lost sigh of the map as he crouched down next to Voya, looking more closely at it. "We seal our armor up as best we can, blast a hole... this line looks exposed."

"Cie, that's near the bottom of the mines." Voya pointed out. "Omega isn't as small as this map makes it look, it'll take us fucking weeks to get there."

"Has to be that far down." I could hear the grimace in his voice. "A breach should shut down the pipe, and we just have to wait out the flood. But if it doesn't we'll have to hope the magnets in our boots can hold... either way we'll need it to be as short of a distance as possible."

The Quarian didn't say anything for a while, the only sounds being Illyan carefully placing the pouches of powdered food into our backpacks and the dripping water rolling into the bottle I was filling.

"Keelah... it's our only fucking option, isn't it?" A hiss escaped her helmet as she sighed. "I'll find us more mess halls to try and raid on the route. Maybe the deeper ones will have more."

"Thank you." He offered quietly before slowly rising, placing his hands on the counter as he leaned heavily against it.

I exhaled as I set the filled bottle aside, reaching for the next one in line. "This isn't going to be fun, Cie."

"No." He admitted almost silently.

"We'll need to find alcoves to sleep in. Places to relieve ourselves." I twitched my chin towards the sink. "More water. Illyan and I need more than you and Voya."

"And she needs more food than the three of us, but has the least right now." His hands curled into fists even as he leaned on them. "I know, but I'm not seeing a better option."

I wasn't either. Even if the goddess granted us a miracle and we got back to Zeta, all that would do was leave us in a district filled with traitors who would mob us to keep their betrayal hidden. As many problems as I could find with heading deeper into the mains to try and slide down a bloody water pipe, I could find five times as many with heading in the opposite direction.

"What do we do when whatever is down here finds us?"

"Run and hide." He twitched a shoulder, not wasting any breath denying that we would eventually be found. "I don't want to use the detpacks, we'll need them to blast into and out of the piping... maybe rig incinerate mines to collapse tunnels after us if we're found."

I grimaced. "We need to start carrying grenades."

"Lesson learned I guess." My sort-of-friend shifted as he pushed off, stepping around me. "You and Voya keep doing your thing, Illyan, help me check the hall, see if we can find any signs of locals. We might be able to use that storage room to catch some rest before we head out."
Nodding, I turned back to my task at hand, trying not to do the math of just how much we'd be able to drink on a daily basis... or how much of the disgusting rations we'd be allowed to choke down. Or how badly we'd need the other mess halls and storage rooms to actually have food and faucets that worked.

Or how we'd probably be little more than walking skeletons even if we did manage to get the fuck out of this lightless place.

For a brief moment I thought I felt a touch on my arm, and I quickly glanced over just in time to see Voya casually returning her right hand to manipulate her map a bit more. My smile was probably strained, but it was there as I nudged her elbow with my hip as I went back to my own task.

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**Citadel News Network**

*In entertainment news, former reporter Emily Wong has secured the first test episode of her new documentary on the Terminus War. It will occur in the plaza theater of Zakera Ward and be open to the public while seats remain. This viewing will be of the unrated version, it has already been announced that non-Turians under the age of eighteen will be turned away at the door.*

*Our own docu-vid critic, Beshi T'Vay, will be in attendance and will offer her opinion live upon its conclusion.*

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**Next up is Chapter 4: Dwarrowdelf**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Apologies for the massive delay between chapters, and for the relative shortness of this one. I'm badly out of practice thanks to work and a desperately needed vacation where I didn't take my laptops with. Hopefully the quality is something close to the usual level.

I was able to do some future outlining on pen and paper, and typed it up for the Blocked Writer to go over (he approved). As a bit of apology for the long delay I'll tease that the next interlude will be called "Return to Sender" and will finally reveal just who Joa is. (from Vengeance's prologue for those who entirely forgot about her).

Here we see the group taking stock of their situation (in a word; shitty), and coming up with the only plan they can think of given their limited knowledge and resources.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
For the first three days, nothing much of note happened. We moved cautiously, quietly, sticking to the smallest, most out of the way tunnels that Voya could find. Sleep was taken in shifts in the little alcoves or beneath ruined machinery, and rationing was keeping us hungry. Our only windfall was on the second 'day', where we found another storage room with more than a few packets of Turian MRE’s. According to Voya they tasted like absolute crap, but there were enough to keep her alive.

Athame's ass, she actually had more food than the rest of us at that point.

Things weren't entirely good though. We found plenty of evidence that we weren't alone whenever we got too near the main runs. Claw marks from Vorcha on the floor and refuse from bodily functions giving us a worrying idea of just how many of them there were. Worse, every once and a while we'd hear them, the echoing sounds of movement and clattering equipment making us move more quickly as we tried to keep our distance.

But it wasn't until we reached one of the eezo processing refineries that we once again came face to face with our hosts.

"They'll hear us as soon as we go out on that scaffolding." Illyan murmured quietly as she shuffled back from where our tunnel ended and the catwalk began. "Athame's ass that's a big cavern."

I grimaced and glanced at Voya. "Options?"

"This is the fastest way to drop seven levels." Her helmet shook slightly. "We'd have to double back a good four hours just to go down two."

"Athame's azure..." Moving forwards in an awkward crouch walk, I settled onto my stomach near where Shyeel was carefully watching things through the scope of her Kishok. "Numbers?"

"Five Turians." The words were barely louder than her breath, "Maybe twenty Vorcha... might be a Batarian or two as well."

I frowned, staring at the lower platform that held the small group. It was maybe two levels below us, set against the massive cauldrons that were apparently of some use in refining eezo. Each one of them was nearly as tall as the bloody cavern, and they were set in precise rows that stretched out into the distance.
Running between and around them was a maze of catwalks, assembly lines, piping, and a bizarre number of platforms, including the one that held the opposition. Or at least, those members of the opposition that we could see from this particular location.

"And we have no idea how many more there are." I murmured.

Her armor creaked almost inaudibly with a shrug. "No. Figure plenty though, cavern this size, plenty of space to muster."

"Probably." I agreed quietly, wasting a few moments trying to figure out the odd grouping of species present before shaking it off as irrelevant. Tapping her on the shoulder, I beckoned her to follow as I scooted back from the edge.

She did so, and a few minutes later found all four of us huddled around each other with our coat's drawn up to block the light from Voya's dim omni-tool. The map wasn't perfect, especially when it came to details like what was in each cavern, but there was at least a few things we could glean.

"Our exit is here." Voya murmured, her free hand poking at the tunnel in question. "Far side of the cavern, seven levels down like I said."

"Damn..." I exhaled slowly as I considered our options, such as they were. "We're going to have to do this on the run, then probably find a way to seal up that tunnel behind us."

Even with her helmet I could see Illyan grimace. "We don't have many det packs Cie... what about bringing down one of those cauldrons with mines or warpfire?"

My teeth bit my bottom lip for a moment as I chewed on that idea. "We'll have to see how tough the supports are when we get down there, and if we'll have the tie to even check on that. We can try for it, but prep two det packs with twenty second timers just in case."

She grunted quietly, swinging her backpack around to start getting them ready. While she did that, Shyeel leaned in a bit closer to the map. "Dammit. No details on where the stairs or ladders are... this is going to be messy."

"Like Voya said," I sighed as I spoke, "We don't really have a choice. We'll clear out that first platform and then move on the run, taking the first clear set of stairs we can find at each level until we're where we need to be."

The Quarian holding the map tilted her head a little. "Box them in with mines?"

"Singularity from Illyan first to corral them, then you and I hammer them with incinerates." I confirmed. "Then we run like there's a bloody tsunami behind us and shoot anything that moves. Mines and biotics only if we really need them. Last thing we need is to run out of the former or for you two to go into shock with how little food we've been eating."

Illyan bobbed her head slightly as Shyeel let out a quiet sound of agreement. "Should we try and get a closer look at them?"

I grimaced inside my helmet. "I don't think we'll have to try terribly hard."

Something like a snort came from her helmet. "Probably not."

We spent the next twenty minutes or so preparing ourselves. Stretching out our tired bodies, taking sips from our limited stock of water, and checking over the map to make sure we had our path in mind once we'd cleared the refinery. Assuming we made it, and managed to seal the tunnel behind
us, and didn't run into anyone on the others side...

I shook myself slightly. We'd either make it or we wouldn't, everything else could be worried about in its own time.

Once our last bit of preparation, Voya and I pre-programming a dispersal pattern into our tech launchers, was completed... we drew our weapons, steeled ourselves, and then made our move.

The hideous, hissing screams of Vorcha echoed in the chamber as Illyan's singularity burst to life amidst them. Sparks flew as they clawed at the ground to try and avoid being dragged upwards, a desperate effort made pointless as orange discs began to whir away from Voya and myself.

Bodies and pieces of bodies flew away as the explosives detonated, our tech-launchers flinging the mines away automatically in a spiraling pattern that circled inwards around the platform. The Turians and Batarians apparently supervising the pack fared little better, the latter evidently lacking shielding and dying outright to the concussive blasts. A few of the former survived long enough to fire wild shots up and where we were jogging along the catwalk above them, only to fall victim to Illyan deftly opening fire with her carbine.

If they'd had cover, or barriers worth a damn, they might have managed something. But even the incinerates were evidently enough to bring them down because Illyan's heavy rounds easily smashed through their defenses to drop them. It took us all of twenty seconds to eliminate them all as we moved, the cacophony of the fight fading with each echo.

Their lack of protection didn't worry or bother me.

The fact that they shot at us, burned, and died without so much as letting out a sound, did.

For several long heartbeats after the last mine killed the last of the Vorcha, the only noise was the clanging of the metal beneath our boots... and then the hunting howls began.

Lighting began to appear far below us, the bright blue flares of active eezo nodes highlighting tall figures standing amidst... amidst...

"Athame's sacred azure." I breathed as the full scope of what we'd just kicked off hit me. The ground, a good nine or ten floor below us, positively writhed with motion. A veritable swarm of Vorcha began to boil towards ramps and ladders, churning upwards as fast as they could move.

"Run faster!"

We'd barely begun to accelerate when the first incoming... I could only call them shots, though what they actually were I had no idea. Deep, resounding thuds preceded flashes of blue light that detonated in bursts of warpfire around us. My shielding held easily, but Illyan and Shyeel both let out furious oaths.

"Killing our barriers!" The latter snarled. "We need cover!"

"Move ahead, Voya, mines in that direction!" I shoved at Illyan as we adjust our formation accordingly. My omni-tool flickered dimly as I turned, but my fingers still and I felt my heart all but stop as I glanced downwards.

A platform perhaps two levels down held seven emaciated figures. All of them human, all of them with their nervous system glowing so violently blue that I could practically trace it even from this distance. Worse, each of them had had an arm replaced with long barreled cannons that boomed out another volley even as I watched, once again sending us staggering as the bizarre explosions lashed at us.
If nothing else, the blasts got my head back into fucking gear. Retaliating with an incinerate, I was only dimly aware of the Asari ahead of us shooting at something. My mine, nor Voya’s, did little but stagger the bizarre things below us, but that was all we needed to get behind some piece of machinery thick enough to take their fire.

"Cie, what the fuck were those?!" Voya spat as we moved, more conventional gunfire lashing up randomly from the Turians far below us.

"No idea!" I snapped back. "Survive first, figure shit out later!"

She let out a curse but accelerated as quickly as her legs would let her, firing randomly into the tide of claws struggling to find its way up towards us.

We pounded down a half-flight of stairs onto a ledge of some kind, the stone at least giving us more cover as it steadily descended downwards. Ahead of us, I heard Illyan let out a furious sound as she abruptly accelerated, her long legs eating distance before she lowered a shoulder. I had the barest glimpse of a Turian before she simply shoulder-checked him right off the ledge.

A second emerged from a small alcove just in time to have it's head blown off by a snap shot from her carbine, its body obstructing a third long enough for Shyeel to arrive. The small Asari easily shoved aside a battered looking Phaeston before shoving her pistol into its throat and executing it.

"Boss." Illyan called as Voya and I caught up, "What in Athame's name is wrong with them?"

I spared the bodies a quick glance, then swore even as I shoved at Illyan. "Get moving!"

She shook herself but did so, the rest of us following as I furiously tried to put the pieces together. All three Turians had looked... well, like my implanted memories Saren. Emaciated with extreme cybernetics glowing beneath their skin, their skin metallic gray and clinging to their bones... but they’d still bled actual blood instead of anything else.

More gunfire made me grimace as it hammered at the stone above us. Shit but I didn't have time to puzzle on this right now.

Ahead of me, Illyan skidded to a halt as the ledge ceased, turning back into a metal catwalk heading back the way we'd come, though it too was set an incline to descend down to the next level. She waved Shyeel and Voya ahead of her before falling in beside me, letting the shorter women set their best pace.

"Enemies on this level!" For once I saw them first, the motion on the platforms we were heading towards. A solid pack of Vorcha bounding along on all fours, a pair of Batarians following behind them with omni-gauntlets glistening around their forearms.

On my right, my friend let out a grunt as her body glowed, another singularity flinging from an outstretched hand, deciding on her own that tiring herself out with biotics was preferable to being swarmed and killed.

Entirely agreeing with that line of thinking, I brought my left hand up and triggered two incinerates as quickly as my launcher could load them, the orange streaks hurling in the wake of her power.

The front ranks of the Vorcha screeched in fury as the singularity's gravity pulled them in, their arms and legs scrabbling at the air in the breath they had before my mines detonated in sequence. One of Voya's exploded at more or less the same time, the combined blasts leaving only a pair of the viral creatures still clinging to life as our mad sprint brought us closer.
Illyan snuffed out her power with a gesture, Voya and Shyeel bypassing the Vorcha to focus on taking the Batarians down. I didn't watch what happened, instead focusing on the snarling creature gathering to hurl itself towards me. Snap shots weren't my specialty, so instead I jerked my left hand into a quick gesture to activate the omni-gauntlet I'd taken from Balak.

Hard light blossomed around my fist and forearm as I swung at the things hissing face. Teeth shattered on impact, the war cry becoming a pained yowl as it hurled itself away from me like a panicked animal.

It, at least, wasn't emaciated like the Turians, but something had obviously been done to the beast. I could see bulges beneath and strange shapes beneath its skin in the heartbeat before I brought my pistol into line and put a round through its open mouth.

"Need to move faster, they're getting closer!" Voya shouted, drawing my attention to where she was scrambling away from a Batarian who was weakly trying to staunch the blood fountaining from its throat.

Fighting the urge to inspect the corpse for any kind of clue as to what in the goddess's sacred name was happening, I shoved off of my back foot and pounded after everyone else.

We turned hard right after leaving the platform, moving in the same direction as the massive pieces of equipment that now rose around us like towering columns. If nothing else they were working to break up the fire that had been directed at us when we'd been higher, the gunshots and strange blasts cutting off even as the Vorcha's howling grew in volume.

I risked a quick glance through the grating beneath my feet as I moved, and regretted it almost immediately.

"We need to go four more levels down!" Voya called back as we kept moving. The tide of Vorcha might have been two down, with the leading members actually loping along beneath us and hissing as they kept pace. "Need a plan!"

"Working on it!" I snapped at her, more than cognizant of the fact that we were, literally, running out of room in a hurry. We might be able to keep the horde at bay for a few brief seconds with prodigious use of tech mines and Illyan's biotics but then they'd...

Biotics.

Jerking my head around, I frantically scanned the area until I found another platform that extended out into the open space between the ordered rows of equipment. "Left, that platform!"

"It's a dead-end, we-" Voya protested.

"I know! Fucking go there!"

She let out a vicious oath but skidded into a turn as we reached the small bridge that connected us to the platform. Soon enough all of us were standing in the broad space, Illyan's gun up and snapping off heavy shots as Vorcha clambered over each other, ascending to our level.

"Cieran." Shyeel muttered, "What's the play?"

"Can you slow someone else's fall?" I asked sharply.

Her head rocked as though she understood what I was asking. "Indirectly? No, but I might be able to have you of clinging to me. Just one though."
I let out an oath but nodded, "Right, you handle yourself and Voya, Illyan will float me with her. All the Vorcha are above it now, it could be our only bloody window."

"Boss." Illyan gasped as her head whipped around. "You know I'm not-

"Get your muscled blue ass over here and do it!" I snapped at her. "Shyeel, go!"

The two Asari exchanged a quick glance, then Shyeel shook her head and darted over to Voya, both of them collapsing their weapons in the process. In a matter of moments they were over the edge, Voya clinging tightly to Shyeel's back as they vanished without a word.

Collapsing my own gun, I darted over to Illyan as she moved to the railing. A strong arm wrapped around my shoulder as I grabbed onto her armor, her chest heaving as she rocked back and forth. On the third rock, she nodded sharply, and dragged me with as she hurled herself forwards into the open air.

My helmet's speakers crackled as her biotics enfolded her body, and my vision became little more than the blue aurora cascading around us as we fell. Her continuous groan of effort was audible even other the furiously disappointment howls of Vorcha. A few of them had evidently leaped at us as we fell, their flailing forms at least letting me know that she was slowing our descent somewhat.

A viscous snarl tore its way out of my friend's throat as the ground closed, our rapid descent abruptly slowing to something closer to a quickly moving elevator in the heartbeats before we landed.

"Ow..." She all but collapsed as we hit the ground, and I grimaced as it was suddenly me holding her up instead of the other way around. "Fucking..." Her helmet shook sharply as her weight shifted, "I'm...ok. I'm good."

She wasn't.. but she had to be. "Voya?"

"Here!" The Quarian called, already dragging Shyeel off towards the right even as another Vorcha splattered itself with a shriek. "This way!"

I had to help Illyan stagger into motion, but after a few long strides she managed to steady herself and pick up some speed.

The Vorcha horde might have been above us now, but we weren't alone down here. We'd barely started to pass the bases of the refining cauldrons when enemies began to make themselves known.

A Batarian woman, emaciated and nude but for the omni-gauntlets around her forearms, silently hurled herself towards Voya only for the petite woman to lash her aside with a spinning kick. Swerving a bit to avoid her tumbling frame, I put a round through her chest without breaking stride.

A few steps later Illyan let out a tired groan as a singularity soared away from her left hand, snapping into place between two pillars and dragging a trio of flailing Turians into the air before they could open fire. Before I could stop her, her other hand came around a definite sound of pain emerged from her throat even as a slender gout of blue warpfire streaked out to connect with the swirling vortex.

The detonation made all of us flinch even as it flung the bodies away, our pace quickening for bare moments before Shyeel had to deal with another Turian, and I had to fling an incinerate to drop three more charging Batarians.

"There!" Voya gasped as she came up from a combat roll, a knife glistening in her left hand as she hamstrung a Batarian male with unnatural arms too large for his body. "That tunnel!"
"I see it!" I called back, "We need... there, that platform, incinerates at the scaffolding!"

If we could bring it down it would block the tunnel, not permanently, but it would buy us enough
time to set the detpacks into the tunnel's mouth and bring it down. That, in turn, would get us the
time we needed to lose ourselves in the maze of tunnels and ladders.

For a brief moment, I had hope.

Then the scream began.

It... was a primeval sound, an unnatural sound. It cut through the air like a blade, silencing the chaos
that had filled the chamber for the last several minutes. It cut through the Vorcha's howling. Through
the ratted gunfire flicking at our barriers. Through the sound of hundreds of clawed feet pounding on
metal.

We all staggered at the sheer horrific volume of it, clutching at our heads as the echoing cacophony
continued beyond any natural being's ability to breathe. My helmet's speakers cut out, trying to mute
the noise that I could feel in my fucking chest.

And suddenly... suddenly I knew what we were fighting against. All of the little things added
together and became clear as the Banshee screamed.

My eyes darted left and right in a near panic as the final trailing note ended.

I couldn't hear Illyan shouting over the ringing in my skull, but I could see her pointing. I followed
her limb to see light glistening off of the cauldrons. A viciously bright blue glow had blossomed to
life in the distance, making the darkness around us all the more threatening as my helmet tried to
adjust. The shadows rippled and shifted, and fear began to rise in my chest as I realized that the glow
was steadily moving towards us.

Jerking my gaze away, I lurched forwards and grabbed Illyan's shoulder. "Run!"

I don't know if she could hear me, but she seemed to get the message. Shaking herself, she took a
long step, then another, then a third more quickly as she recovered her wits. She shoved at Voya and
Shyeel as we approached the equally stunned women.

The four of us lurched and staggered our way towards the tunnel entrance, the shelter of the mouth
pitiful compared to the sanctuary I'd thought that it would offer.

"The... the platform!" Voya groaned, her voice tinny and muffled but audible. Her omni-tool spun to
life even as mine did the same, "I'll left! You right!"

"Got it!" I shouted back, raising my left arm and directing the mines.

Flashes of orange detonated every other second as we pushed our launchers to their maximum
settings, not even remotely considering the power drain of doing so. Another flickering blue stream
of biotic power appeared as Illyan held up a hand, again throwing out what she could to help bring
the thing down.

For once the Goddess smiled on us. Whoever had built the thing had done so cheaply, and the thin
support struts began to gave way almost immediately. The wide plane of metal came down slowly
with a shearing groan, slamming into the ground with a roar that seemed pathetic compared to the
noise we'd just heard.

Illyan sank down to one knee, her armor moving with each expansive breath. Shyeel darted over as
quickly as she could, grabbing the explosives out of her backpack before heading towards the nearest wall of the tunnel.

"Voya..." I waved a hand, "Check... ahead. Shyeel, toss me the other-

Metal screamed as blue light flashed, my entire body flinching away from the platform as biotic fire sheared cleanly through the metal.

Acting entirely on surprised reflex, I flung my left hand out and triggered a mine, the incinerate whipping through the gap only to explode in midair. Voya and Illyan's gunfire met similar fates, reflecting away from nothing to ricochet around the tunnel.

Deep, mocking laughter heralded the Banshee's arrival.

It wasn't like my memories. She still looked like an Asari, nude but for the armor plating seemingly merged directly into her leathery gray skin above her vital organs. Her fingers weren't talons, but... just like the odd Scions, she looked as though she'd been bathing in eezo. Her nervous system gleamed blue through her skin, each eye little more than a glistening orb of the unnatural element.

The sole exception was a perfect circle of absolute darkness above her heart, the void all the more noticeable as the blazing light around it grew almost painfully bright as she negligently began to raise a hand.

A hand swiped downwards across my belt, seizing and priming a slim grenade in a single motion even as I flung it at her.

Her lips curled in a sneer that became a piercing scream of rage as the nullification grenade detonated against her barrier. The light glistening within her flashed and dimmed, but to my horror didn't fade entirely. It had disrupted whatever power she'd been about to throw, but the glow quickly began to intensify once again even as Voya continued to uselessly put rounds into the thing's protection.

The biotic strike slammed into me like a runaway dreadnought, pain exploding across my left shoulder as I was flung clear past my friends, deeper into the tunnel to tumble along the ground in agony.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard a single snarl of furious rage before a new glistening sun of blue appeared between myself and the creature. I finally stopped rolling, lifting my head just in time to see half of the platform she'd just cut through shudder, then twirl up and over before slamming down on top of the thing.

It screamed in pain, more surprised than hurt, and Illyan all but collapsed from what she'd just done... but it bought the time we needed. Shyeel flashed across my vision, driving the second detpack into the wall before screaming at everyone to run.

The pain made it hard to remember what came next. Someone, Voya I think, grabbed me by my dislocated arm and made everything go white. Then I was upright, being dragged along with my good arm thrown around Shyeel's neck as Voya lead a staggering Illyan forwards.

At some point the explosives detonated, bringing tons of stone down to cover our flight, the dust roaring down to consume us.

Branded Survivor

In the wake of the... banshee, Cieran had called it during his pained mutters, we fled further down,
deeper in the darkness of the mines. I don't know how many ladders we descended, how many twisting corridors we'd followed. Time blurred together as we moved, following Voya's gestured commands as she tried to keep us moving in a purposeful direction.

Hours or days later, we reached a small room... probably a former foreman's post judging from the dust covered consoles and terminals. Whatever it had been used for, now it was our place to rest. To try and gather ourselves.

Illyan had been all but unconscious to begin with, and simply collapsed in a corner with a clatter of armor once we'd gotten her coat off and draped it across the doorway to conceal any light we made.

Cieran hadn't lasted much longer. We'd had to take his blackened and cracked armor off to put his shoulder back into place, having him bite down on the hilt of one of Voya's knives as I pushed it in. We could only pray and hope that he didn't have any internal damage as he sagged, panting in obvious agony.

"Need... to plan..." He gasped once we got his headgear back on, letting him actually see us.

"No." I replied quietly, "You need to sleep. Voya and I will figure out our next move."

The idiot tried to shake his head, stilling when Voya simply grabbed him by the throat and pushed him onto his back. He let out a few more annoyed sounds as we laid him out next to Illyan, and stayed conscious just long enough to mutter that someone needed to check on her before collapsing into the pained sleep of the wounded.

It took us a few minutes to force Illyan to sit up, getting her helmet off and all but force feeding her a pouch of rations to try and replace some of the nutrients she'd blown through. The moment the last drop of the crap was gone she was unconscious again, all but clinging to Cieran even in her sleep.

"All right," I spoke quietly after we'd pulled up Illyan's vitals on her omni-tool just to make sure she was till breathing. "They... should be all right.

The Quarian grunted tiredly as she sat down, leaning against the wall. "Didn't know she could do anything like that."

I grimaced. "She's... well, she strained herself badly to do as much as she did, but without proper medical equipment..."

"Yeah." Voya murmured, her helmet shifting as she turned to look at our wounded friends.

Wounded... by the goddess but we'd gotten lucky. Whatever that... that thing had been...

Shuddering, I pushed those thoughts aside. When Cieran woke up he could explain, until then... until then worrying about it wouldn't help. We had to stay objective and focus on our goal.

Nodding to myself, I gestured at the omni-tool on her wrist. "Where are we?"

The Quarian let out a quiet grunt as she brought her map up. "We're... here, I think. Foreman station thirty-seven zeta."

I winced inside my helmet. "Long ways to go."

"Yeah... there's an old mess hall... here, the last one on our path actually. We'll fill up on water and food there." Assuming there was any of the latter. "Hopefully it will be enough to get us the rest of the way."
"If there isn't any..." I exhaled as I tried to do the math. "We've got two days worth of food left, how long to the water main?"

Voya's long fingers slowly panned the map downwards, "You'll... have to go at least three or four days without food, even at how we're rationing it right now. If there was a straight path down we'd make it in three days but..."

But there wasn't anything like a straight path down. We were meandering kilometers out of our way in every direction simply because there wasn't a simple route in the direction we needed to go. And if the army we'd left behind us started spilling downwards to hunt us... we might have to go even farther out of our way just to try and avoid them.

"Athame's..." No, there wasn't any point in cursing reality. "Right... right. Well, we'll see what we can grab from that mess hall then."

There was a slight nod from the young woman as she shut her omni-tool down, her head tilting back as she let it rest against the wall. "Yeah."

My lips twisted a little as I caught on to her worry... and it was a better topic than the shit we'd just seen, especially since Cieran was asleep and unable to explain shit. "We're not going to starve to death and leave you alone down here."

"Keelah, you'd better not." She let out a halfhearted snort. "I just got used to you."

"Used to me?" I tried for faux-outrage but it came out flat. "Here I was thinking we were close."

Voya shrugged a little. "By my standards we are."

"That's... true." Sighing, I shifted myself around to sit next to her, trying not to slump over. As much as I wanted to, I didn't think she'd react well to me resting my head on her shoulder. "Not as close as you are with Cieran, but you rarely threaten to kill me these days."

"He's... different."

I glanced at her through my visor. "Because you're in love with him, you mean."

An below promptly smacked into my side, hard enough to make me grimace as she growled. "Not that shit again. I'm not in the mood."

"Voya..." Pausing for a moment, I shook my head as I sighed and went with blunt honesty. "You know the odds of us getting out of this... and if I don't talk about something else I'm just going to obsesses over that... that thing we saw up there. I'm not asking to tease you or anything, I just... Athame's ass, you know I like you right?"

The Quarian went still, helmet shifting ever so slightly to make it clear that she was glancing at me. "Obviously."

"Well... wait," I blinked. "Obviously?"

Her voice turned dry. "You're not nearly as subtle as you think you are."

I felt my skin darken in embarrassment. I'd thought that I had been rather subtle about appreciating her figure...by the goddess, I would have thought I'd be rather good at that after five centuries of practice. "Oh."
One of her slim shoulders rose and fell. "I don't... mind so much. A year ago I would have. Keelah, if you were anything besides an Asari I likely still would."

"Oh." I repeated quietly. "Do you... look back?"

It was the wrong thing to ask, I could tell the moment I felt her stiffen beside me. Not minding me looking was apparently one thing, but she clearly wasn't ready to even consider the notion of actually thinking about me in turn. Once again cursing the creatures who'd damaged her, I quickly fumbled for a better question. "So you're being honest about Cieran?"

She relaxed minutely before shrugging again, her helmet turning to glance at his sleeping form. "He's had moments where I've thought about it, but... no. We wouldn't be good for each other. And he's not attractive beyond his mane. Those... ear things."

My lips curled a little, but I focused on the more important part of her statement. "You've thought about it?"

"We spent most of a year sleeping in the same bed. Of course I've thought about it." Voya let out a mewing kind of sound, I thought it was the Quarian version of a verbal shrug. "But... no. He needs someone like Rane, or Illyan I suppose, who can shore up his weaknesses and take care of him when he over focuses on crap. I can't... I have enough problems in my own head without trying to fix his too."

"You've helped keep each other afloat." I pointed out. "That's not nothing."

There was a quiet snort. "We kept each other sane but we didn't fix our problems. We just helped each other push them aside. Deep down I think he wants to be better, to be the person he was before Rane died. I can't help him get there and try to put my own mind in order at the same time."

I regarded her for several moments. "You should show that level of insight more often. Makes you more attractive."

Her elbow hit me again, though thankfully not as hard. "Bitch. Go curl up next to them, I'll take first watch."

Nodding, I hesitated before touching her shoulder as I moved past. She froze for a long heartbeat, but then lifted a hand to touch my armored wrist as I pulled it away. Curling myself up into a ball, and resting my head on Illyan's legs, I closed my eyes and fell into a blessedly dreamless sleep almost at once.

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Nos Astra News Tonight

...stocks trembled slightly today thanks to unexpected shifts in the normally routine Eclipse operations. Mistress Jona Sederis, along with her personal guard, departed unannounced this morning. They appeared bound for the Omega relay. At the same time, the new Silver Blades PMC group operating out of Khar'shan Minor departed with its entire compliment through the same relay.

At this time we have no war news that would warrant such a rapid redeployment, and the bulk of the Golden Armada remains in system.

Next up is Chapter 5: The Gate Room
I'd hoped to get this out earlier, but a thirteen hour workday on Wednesday killed a lot of my motivation. Got it back last night and managed to throw this together. It was originally supposed to be longer but this felt more right to me; hopefully it reads well for everyone.

More pieces to the puzzle are now in place, remember that first impressions aren't always correct. The things in the mines with them are different from the games for a very good reason, and I look forwards to seeing if anyone realizes what's going on before the reveal at the end of the saga.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
We got maybe four hours of rest, which only equated to three hours of sleep each plus an hour on watch duty. Which in itself was more listening than watching, but in either case none of us saw or heard anything before we shuffled back out into the tunnels and got moving again.

My shoulder ached abominably, and my entire left arm was stiff as fuck, but I was still better off than Illyan. The power nap and what food she’d been able to stomach hadn't been nearly enough to help overcome the biotic exhaustion she was suffering through. She managed to walk for about ten minutes on her own before I'd moved closer and let her lean on me.

It was an awkward and slow way to spend four hours walking, but it kept her upright until we got to the deepest mess hall on our map.

Illyan wasted no time in collapsing onto a metal bench, falling asleep almost at once as I bit my lip and did a quick check of her vitals. Her heartbeat remained steady, but her temperature was apparently rising and her blood sugar was lower than it should have been. At least, according to the numbers on my omni-tool. I didn't have any idea what either number actually meant in terms of her health, and mentally cursed not having Washana with.

I should have offered Sederis more money to keep the maiden around... dammit.

"She's probably got an extreme migraine," Shyeel murmured as she checked the faucets. We both started when water spurted and choked its way out of the piping, then sagged in relief when it settled into a trickle of clear liquid. "And the goddess alone knows how badly her entire body is aching right now."

I grimaced, resisting the urge to follow Voya over to the pantry to see if there was anything present. "And the temperature?"

The smaller Asari shrugged. "Biotic exhaustion, dehydration, malnutrition, maybe some kind of infection caused from the last two... take your pick Cie. She's probably just the first of us, we'll all be feeling it soon."

"Fair point." I sighed, leaning against the counter and shucking off my backpack and losing the left sleeve of my coat in the process. The thing had been hanging on by threads, so it wasn't terribly surprising so much as it was annoying. "Shit... How long until the main?"
"Voya said five to six days at our current pace, sticking to the most out of the way tunnels." Her head shook once, "We might be able to cut some of that time down if we move closer to the main runs but..."

I grimaced as I completed the thought, hands absently shoving the sleeve into my pack. As much as I would have liked to fix it, the coats weren't something I could just patch up with omni-gel... I'd just have to make do with less protection on that arm. "But with an army of husks now looking for us, probably not a good idea."

She showed her grimace in her body language even as I started pulling water bottles out and handing them to her to fill. "Was that what they looked like in your memories?"

"No." I admitted, "Well, sort of. There's differences."

Voya's head popped out of a room, her voice irritated. "You can wait until I'm done to start this discussion Cieran."

My hands rose in a calming gesture, which at least made it easy to start catching the tiny bags as they were thrown in my direction. More preserved dry rations, meant to keep you alive and not much else, but at least it was food... and a decent amount of it. It took her a good several minutes to clear out the back room, throwing more of the packets at me as she found them.

Snagging the last one out of the air, I hefted it up a bit closer and grimaced as I read the Batarian labeling. "Expired?"

"All of it is." Voya grunted as she emerged, wiping her hands against each other as though that would help clean them, "We got lucky with the upper level halls, I don't think this particular hall has been used in decades."

So either eat expired rations and possibly get food poisoning... or eat nothing and starve for several days. Vaguely wishing that I was surprised at the mutually shit options, I started shoving the pouches into my pack. "At least we can use the fresh packets for a few more days, and I suppose we should be fucking grateful that we have water on top of that."

"Water." The three of glanced over as Illyan groaned the word, tiredly waving an arm above her prone form. "Which of you's the barkeep?"

Snorting, I accepted a bottle from Shyeel and headed over to hand it to her. "Not much of a bar. Isn't even any rum."

"No rum?" Her head shook in disgust as she reached up and unclasped her helmet, shoving it aside. "Definitely not a bar. Need rum."

Carefully taking her flailing hand, I pushed the bottle into it and let her handle the process of drinking from there. "You feeling all right?"

Her free hand wiggled in a so-so fashion as she chugged the entire thing down, gasping for air as her lips released the bottle. "Sorry, was thirsty. I'll be all right."

"Uh huh." I drawled quietly.

She shrugged as she held the empty container in my direction, "Everything... kind of fucking hurts, but it's more of a full body ache. Not fun but survivable."

Exhaling, I shook my head sightly as it took it. I didn't really believe her, but we weren't really in a
situation where we could do anything about it even if she was in extreme agony. "All right. You all ready to talk about what we saw up there?"

"Ready?" Shyeel scoffed quietly, "No. But... by the goddess, what was that thing?"

I winced and bowed my head slightly. "It... sounded like a Banshee. The Asari version of a husk, something the Reapers could create."

"You mean those were husks?" Voya sounded confused. "I thought those were those fucked humans we saw on the news from the Traverse. Those things above us didn't look anything like those."

"No, they didn't; They were still alive." I admitted. "But that might not mean much. Those Turians looked an awful lot like Saren for example, so maybe they're all just in the process. The other problem is that, apart from those human artillery pieces, the rest of them weren't anything like what was shoved into my head."

Using short, terse sentences I described the differences as I'd seen them. The Batarians with their overdeveloped arms being nothing like Cannibals, the Turians being unarmored and essentially unprotected despite having rifles, the very notable differences in the Banshee, and how there hadn't been anything like husked Vorcha in the games. Assuming that the Vorcha were being indoctrinated at all, and weren't just being raised feral and then experimented on somehow.

"Plus..." I shook my head as I leaned against the counter, "Apart from the Vorcha and that Asari, none of them made any bloody noise. Even when we were shooting them."

"I noticed." One of Voya's hands drifted to the hilt of a knife. "What do you... wait, those Batarians you and Mirala ran into on Redcliffe? The ones that bitch sent after you?"

My helmet dipped as I nodded. "Didn't notice pain, didn't make a sound even as we killed them."

Illyan let out an irritable sound, her helmet once again in place though she was still lounging across a bench, "But what would Zero-One be doing working with the Matriarch? I thought she hated her."

"And what in Athame's name is said Matriarch doing working with Reaper shit?" Shyeel asked. "You made it sound like those things were serious bad news."

"No idea, no idea, and yeah." I grimaced. "But my point was the rest of them didn't seem, well, sapient. They just threw themselves at us without any sense of self-preservation. But that Banshee could have killed me. Easily."

"Noticed that did you?" The scarred Asari exhaled heavily. "She had to have flashed to get so close so quickly when we brought the platform down, and what she hit you with was barely a caress compared to what she did to cut through that platform."

"Yeah. And she hit my arm and shoulder instead of my chest or my head, at the range we were at she had had choice of where to hit me. Could have snapped my neck easily if she'd wanted to." A low throb ran through my left shoulder to remind me of the point. "She didn't want to kill me, or us... She wanted to fuck with us first. That implies way more personality than a husk should have."

Voya seemed to shudder. "What do we do when it catches up to us again? It blew off Cie's nullification grenade, and we only started with two of those each."

"Pray to Athame it doesn't, or pray those explosives killed it." Illyan slowly sat up, groaning as she spun around and let her feet fall back to floor. "Or wounded it if you want me to be realistic. How long you think we have until they find us?"
"I'm kind of surprised they haven't already." I frowned even as I spoke the words. "We haven't even heard movement lately... huh. Where else did the refinery lead?"

The Quarian shrugged when we all glanced at her. " Everywhere. All of the eezo from this section of the mines probably ran through it, and then up the main shafts back to the tower. And why would they expect us to go lower? I'd put credits on them moving to block the paths leading to the other mining sections, or maybe to the utility exits to the asteroid's surface."

Shyeel snorted, then paused before speaking almost contemplatively. "That might have been an option, at least to try and get a proper signal out."

A signal that Aria's pet AI couldn't corrupt she meant. We'd made one effort at doing so just after we'd found the first mess hall, and gotten a screeching, jabbering rant back that had caused me to purge and reset my omni-tool entirely. That had been back when we'd been nearer to the surface, now we had enough crap around us that we couldn't even be sure a basic signal would reach anyone. Maybe once we got nearer to the main we could try and transmit in the open and get someone's attention... but that was for when we got that far.

"Would have been a good way to get trapped in a corner and swarmed by Vorcha." Illyan pointed out. "Not that we knew that at the time, but still."

I grimaced, opened my mouth to agree, shut it, then corrected myself. "Stay on mission, we can worry about just what it all means when we're watching Aria cleanse this place."

My three friends grunted or nodded, Shyeel heading back to grab the now filled water bottles. "Right. So what do we do when they find us again? Sooner or later they'll realize where we went."

"Illyan," I waved a hand at her backpack. "How many mining charges do we have left?"

"Five." She replied promptly.

"All right, I want to keep three of them for our way out, so that gives us two more chances to close off a tunnel behind us. If we even hear that Banshee again, we use one and run like Athame herself is after us."

"No arguments from me." Shyeel spoke as she started handing bottles out, the rest of us pushing them into our backpacks. "What about the rank and file? Tech mines?"

"I still have thirty incinerates left... I'll use them up first, Voya? Save yours until I'm out. Illyan, no more biotics." The Asari seemed to wince inside her armor, but offered me a silent nod. "Aside from that... we keep doing what we're doing. Stay quick and quiet, try and avoid attention as much as we can."

The only other Reyja'krem present shook her head as she closed her pack, "That won't work forever."

"No, but it doesn't have to." I exhaled. "Just long enough for us to get to the water main."

Her arms crossed her chest. "That's a long assed swim Cie."

Voya held up her hand before I could reply, "We might have an option. There's an old supply room a few levels below us."

I blinked and tilted my head to show tired interest. "More mining charges?"
"Only if the ancestors are watching us." She hedged, "I was thinking more general supplies, maybe things we could use to create traps, or mining tools we could rig to weaken the tunnel ceiling enough that tech mines would bring it down."

"Sounds worthwhile..." I allowed, "What's the catch?"

"It's close to the main lift shaft that runs down from the refinery." Her head shook. "Not directly next to it, but definitely not far away either. There's a lift bank not far away they could use to swarm down in a hurry."

"Athame's..." My cheeks puffed out as I blew out a breath. We only had two detpacks that we could use if, when, the army we'd just ran past started filtering downwards to hunt for us. Shyeel... probably had a point, we'd need more or some kind of plan. With Illyan overexerting herself, we couldn't rely on her biotics which eliminated the best means we had of weakening the tunnels' integrity on our own.

Shit. Her doing so had more or less been my plan, but now... why was I even debating this? I must have been more tired than I thought. "Shyeel?"

"I don't see how we have a choice." Her voice quieted further. "I don't like it either, but we have to be able to delay pursuit significantly, and we don't right now."

"Agreed." I sighed. "Let's take another rest break here before we try it."

There wasn't any arguments with that, and we all slipped into the pantry. As defensible positions went it left a lot to be desired, but at least it wasn't a tiny alcove like some of the other places we'd been stuck resting. And at the very least it was secure enough that this round of sleep was blessedly longer, all of us managing around five hours even with our turns on watch. I spent most of the latter checking over my weapons, which were fine, and my armor, which wasn't.

Just as the biotic blast had cut through my barrier-inlaiden coat, and dislocated my bloody arm, it had done quite a bit of damage to my shoulder plating. The good news was that the secondary shielding lattice was still intact, so it wasn't entirely useless... just mostly so. A few small applications of omni-gel patched the main plate back together, but the repairs were largely cosmetic.

If anything stronger than a pistol hit me there... I shook my head and sighed. In that case I'd get yet another scar in that area, to go with the hundred others already there. It was like that side of my body was a bloody magnet for gunfire.

When the time came I nudged Illyan awake, smiling a little at her familiar grumbling as I collapsed onto the ground next to her. I'd just settled my helmet onto the ground when hands grabbed me, pulling me slightly until the back of my head was resting on her crossed legs.

"Yes?" I asked almost cautiously as she rested a hand on my chest, her other setting her carbine against the wall at her side.

"What? You don't want a pillow?" She replied quietly.

I snorted and got as comfortable as I could, which wasn't very, but at least I wasn't inside a muddy hole in the ground wondering if artillery would kill me in my sleep.

Instead I was wondering if an indoctrinated Asari whose veins literally glowed with fucking eezo would show up and torture us all to death.

I could only sigh, "Fucking Omega..."
My Asari pillow laughed quietly, her hand shifting to cover my visor. "I remember when that used to be 'Fucking Illium'."

"Fuck that planet too." I muttered. "Fuck Redcliffe. Fuck the entire Terminus while we're at it. When Kromi's dead, let's move to the Dark Rim."

"There's nothing out there boss." She pointed out.

"Kind of the point. And didn't I say to stop calling me that?"

Her legs shifted a little bit, and I realized she was shrugging. "Force of habit."

I yawned tiredly, resisting the urge to simply slip away into the easy sleep I could only find on goddess-damned battlefields. "Well stop it."

She made a quiet sound, "Probably won't, but at least I'm not calling you 'sir' like Washana and Jarick."

"Thank Athame for that." I muttered, rolling my shoulders slightly and trying not to wince at the motion. "You ok?"

Illyan didn't say anything for a few moments, then I heard a quiet sigh. "I'm tired, everything hurts, I'm hungry, I need a bath, I'm sick of pissing in sinks and dark corners, and I want to down three bottles of whatever drink I can get my hands on."

I waited politely for her to finish, then snorted quietly. "Situation normal then."

"Pretty much." She murmured, hand shifting down my head to rest on my armored chest again. "Cie... about the Matriarch..."

A slow shudder ran through my body. "What about her?"

"If she's working with the Reapers, or their tech... and she put all that crap in your head..." Fingers tightened slightly around the top of my chest plate. "The Reapers could know all of the same crap in your head."

Meaning they'd know about the Crucible, the Catalyst, how Shepard was critical. Of course... that was the oceanic level. More locally was the fact that... the Matriarch might have used Reaper tech to do whatever it was that she'd done to me. If she had...

If I was indoctrinated, would I even know? How would I know? It wasn't as if they'd let me anywhere near the beacon on Thessia, and that VI was the only thing I could remember that could detect indoctrination.

"It... doesn't matter." I exhaled tightly, speaking to myself as much as to her. If I was already fucked, I was already fucked and I'd have to pray that my companions would be able to stop me before I did anything. "If they do, we'll notice and we'll find a new plan. If they don't, we leave it to Shepard to deal with them."

Even with my eyes closed and her helmet hiding her expression, I could see her biting her lip slightly. "What kind of new plan?"

"Whatever it takes to keep Erana and Ethy alive."

There was a sharp inhalation and something viscous entered her voice. "I... I can work with that."
"Thought so." I murmured, trying to push my new worries as far into the depths of my mental waters as possible. They could join everything else down there in the dark, to be worried about later. Or never. Preferably never. "Mind if I sleep?"

"So long as you dream about me naked while you do."

A tiny snort escaped me as I relaxed, feeling my breathing slowing. The last thing I heard before sleep claimed me was the melodic humming she so often did when we relaxed together.

Taking the second to last watch was always unpleasant. You got some sleep, had to wake up, fall back asleep, and then be woken up after what felt like thirty seconds.

We all forced down the, somewhat, fresh rations and drank water directly from the tap to avoid taking any from our bottles or canteens. Still tired and not at all satiated, we gathered up into our usual formation after spending a few minutes drawing up a quick set of plans. Voya was in the lead with the map, with Illyan and I walking abreast behind her, and then Shyeel bringing up the rear.

The three of us alternated taking the risky position in the back every twenty minutes or so, staring at the cameras we had in the backs of our helmets just to make sure nothing was silently trying to follow. It was less than a pleasant way to spend four hours creeping down tunnels and broken ladders, trying to keep as quiet as possible in order to listen for echoes even as we watched for any glimpse behind us.

The sounds started as we got to the level that held the storage room, the quiet scratching of talons on stone growing louder as we approached the secondary run that held the room in question. Our progress slowed to a crawl as we tried to tack the echoes and make sure that we didn't cause any of our own.

Voya slid slowly back from the corner of our slide tunnel, her hands rising to sign words back at us. Tunnel empty. Plan two.

Exhaling, I nodded to show that I understood, and tapped Shyeel on the shoulder. She glanced up from where she'd been aiming my carbine behind us, I was carrying her Kishok on my back for her since the thing wasn't terribly useful down here, and nodded when I held up a pair of fingers.

Pausing to accept both of the precious detpacks from Illyan, the pair of us slid past our companions and began quietly making our way into the broader throughway, our weapons up and ready in case anything emerged. We crept along the stone wall of the tunnel, stopping when it shifted to metal, a broad entryway dimly lit by yellow light just ahead.

Half closing my eyes, I listened as intently as I could.

Claws scrabbling... Vorcha hissing and mewling... there, metal clanking along with the quiet whumps of boxes being stacked.

Turing back to Shyeel, I brought my left arm up and flicked my omni-tool to life with a gesture. Her helmet dipped in a quick nod as she made sure that both explosive packs were on her belt and ready to be setup. I saw her take a quick breath, then she took two quick steps away from the wall before flashing farther down the tunnel. The low rumble of her biotic movement didn't really echo, but it did make all of the sounds within the store room cease.

Shrieking hisses began when the Asari began sprinting towards the lifts, her armored feet hammering on the stone.
Vorcha began bounding out of the doorways, sparks flying as they scrabbled for purchase. None of them so much as looked in my direction as they bounded after Shyeel's fleeing form. I held my breath, gun up and tech launcher ready, quickly counting as they rushed past me.

The last, number nineteen, proved to be the problem child. A bit slower than the rest, it actually tripped as it came out of the room and tumbled along the ground. The reason became clear as it tried to get up, its right arm was decidedly shorter than its left... it had probably been injured during our run through in the refinery, and was still trying to regrow the limb.

It's dark eyes seemed to widen comically as its spin brought me into its sight, and I let out an irritated oath as I put a round into its head before it could scream.

That particular sound echoed far more loudly than anything else occurring, and maybe half of the pack began skidding to stops as their heads whipped around. More eerie yowls sounded as maybe half of the group reversed course, heading right back at me.

"So much for the plan..." Stepping away from the wall to give myself room to maneuver, and to give Voya and Illyan room to rush past me and into the store room, I threw my left arm forward and started triggering incinerates.

Trying to ignore the gunfire suddenly flashing inside of said room, I focused on the flanks of the pack to try and funnel them into a tighter group. The first detonated on the right side, taking down two of the creatures and scorching another pair that howled in agony. My second hit the left, killing three that had gotten too close together.

I didn't have time for a third and I knew it, my left hand flexing into new gesture as I snapped my gun up to put a concussive round into the center of the remaining six. The raw force flung two of them back, and knocked another two down... leaving two of the burnt wounded to throw themselves at me.

One of them received a dim omni-gauntlet to its throat, my shoulder screaming at me that it wasn't ready for this kind of activity. I gritted my teeth and ignored it, focusing instead on stepping back to avoid the Vorcha now flailing about in animalistic panic, but the other was on top of me before I could reset and get my heavy pistol into line.

I had an excellent view down its throat as it bit at my helmet, teeth screeching against the ceramic as claws tried to find my throat and guts. It was all wild fury with no real thought behind it, and it took me a bare heartbeat to get my right arm around and my gun against its chest.

Flinging the corpse off of me, I felt my eyes widen as I frantically fired off a snap-shot that blew the arm off another Vorcha, the unbalanced quadruped screeching in agony as it fell. Attacker number four hit me as I tried to scramble up to my feet, knocking my pistol loose as it tried to bite my fucking arm off.

Going up against people trying to kill you was one thing. Going up against things trying to eat you was something else.

Snarling with my own fury, and a primal fear I couldn't have suppressed if I'd tried, I brought my left arm around and slammed the thing off of me, my right hand activating its own gauntlet.

Four Vorcha snarled and hissed as they spread out, clearly intending to hurl themselves at me all at once. Not about to let that happen, I let out a harsh shout and rushed to my right, towards the one that was still a little stunned from my prior blow. It tried to scramble back, only to stumble and shake its head as if trying to clear it. Rather than let it do so, I gave it a hard haymaker with my right fist.
directly into its jaw, the bone shattering as it was flung back against the wall.

Finishing it with another throat-crushing punch, I spun around in time to see the remaining three.. skittering backwards awkwardly as a final gunshot rang out from inside the storage room.

I blinked several times. I'd expected... well, them to throw themselves at me while I dealt with the fourth, or for them to try and surround me. Not to be uttering panicked hisses and starting to scramble away, very much fleeing as quickly as their arms and legs could carry them.

Muttering a quiet, and very confused, thanks to Athame, I darted over to where my pistol was laying on the ground and scooped it up. Settling it into a two handed grip, I calmly put a round into the farthest target as it tried to gather speed. Its tumbling body promptly tripped one of its fellows, which lashed out at the corpse with an irritated hiss.

I could only blink again when it started spitting, clawing, and biting at its fellow, apparently convinced it was fighting for its life. Shaking my head, I absently put two rounds into the still fleeing one, and tired to make some sense of what I was seeing.

About five heartbeats later I remembered that we couldn't exactly wait for the wind, and shifting my aim once again. I was about to pull the trigger when when the crack of a mining charge going off made me flinch and stumble.

Cursing, I absently put a heavy round into the Vorcha's back before turning around to see a rolling cloud of dust in the distance. Shyeel emerged from it, moving at a quick jog, a second explosion sounding behind her as she picked up the pace.

Offering her a quick nod, I got moving as well, trying not to stagger as I moved towards the doorway. My entire left shoulder was a knot of furious pain, and I was breathing far too hard for the minimal amount of fighting we'd just done.

"Clear!" Voya called out as we approached, her voice pained. "Need some help."

Grimacing, I darted inside and found a small guard station of some kind. Voya was leaning heavily against the interior doorway, her left leg held up a bit as she called out instructions to Voya. Almost stumbling on the trio of dead Turians on the floor, I cursed as I moved closer. "What happened?"

"Batarians keshin was hiding inside." She growled, "Not broken, might not even bruise but fucking cramping... The big idiot is packing."

"Athame's..." That was going to make getting out of here awkward, and speed was key. Shyeel had used up our explosives to double collapse a side tunnel just ahead of us, one that eventually lead back upwards. The idea was to make it look like we'd fled in that direction, crushing the Vorcha pursuit in the process, and obscuring the direction we were actually moving.

But in order for that to work we had to be gone before anything could come down those lifts from the refinery, or swarm closer from anywhere else.

"Shyeel, get her moving. Illyan and I will catch up." I ordered, moving past both of them and into the room proper.

If nothing else, the Turians and Batarian had at least done something useful for us. What supplies had remained in the room were all neatly stacked near the door, clearly being prepared to be hauled out
Illyan and I spent three crucial minutes grabbing what we needed, or what we thought we could use, hurling it all into a single one of the metal containers before taking it up between us and getting our asses in gear and vanishing back into the tunnels.

---

**Branded Survivor**

Voya let out a quiet groan as I lifted her left leg up and onto my shoulder, stretching out the limb as I kept it elevated. She had some mild bruising, but the bigger problem was the constant cramping that had seized her since the impact... probably brought on by how little water she'd been drinking.

“What all did we get?”

The four of us were sequestered away in a dead-end side tunnel, notable only for the small cavern that it ended in. Cieran and Illyan had used omni-gel patches to hang their coats across the entrance, letting us be a little more open with the lighting to better inspect the box we’d hauled with us.

It hadn't been a fun, or short, trip. Moving silently while hauling a limping Quarian had been hard by itself, nevermind Cieran and Illyan trying to keep a heavy crate filled with random driftwood from crashing about as they walked. By the time Voya managed to direct us here we were all exhausted and more than a little irritable from hissing and gesturing at each other to be more careful.

Especially since the little things were starting to fucking add up for all of us... Athame's ass, *I*, with all of my nerve damage, was the healthiest one present. Illyan definitely had some kind of infection, though the goddess alone knew from what. She could probably kick it naturally in a day or so... assuming she could actually eat real food and sleep for ten or twelve hours, neither of which was going to happen.

Voya couldn't handle the small amounts of water combined with the high levels of activity. More of the precious liquid or more time to just stretch her tight muscles out would help... she was probably better off in that sense, some of the rest stations had water piping. If we could find one in our next movement session she might recover at least temporarily.

And to top it all off, Cieran was silently in agony from doing too much too soon with his bloody shoulder. He was probably the worst of us, because in any *normal* circumstance he’d have gotten medigel injections and a sling to keep the limb immobile for at least a couple of days. Instead he'd gotten into a fist fight with Vorcha and then helped haul a box full of crap for hours on end.

"Five more detpacks, a drone as old as you are, forty omni-gel canisters, some ceramics I might be able to patch our armor with..." The human murmured as he carefully pulled everything out with just his right hand, handing it to Illyan to be organized. "A handheld mining drill we could use to bore holes for mines, and whatever the rest of these tools are."

"We..." The Quarian beneath me let out a hiss when I pressed her leg a little too far forwards, and I quickly lowered myself a bit. "Going to carry all of it?"

"No." He shook his head tiredly. "Just what we need. Going to break some of these things down for the parts, then split the rest up between us. Box will stay."

I nodded. "Should eat some food and rest first."

"No shit." Illyan muttered, but there wasn't any real heat to her voice. "Think this is a good enough shelter for an actual rest break?"
Cieran shook his head walking over towards the cavern wall before turning to rest his back against it. "No... only one way in and out, don't want to get cornered. Short break, four hours. Then we need to get all of this cleaned up and get going."

My lips pursed at the notion of only three more hours sleep, again, but I couldn't argue with the logic. "I'll take first watch."

That earned me a thankful nod as the human male slowly slumped down into a seated position, his helmet resting against the stone behind him. Illyan finished sorting everything, far more neatly than her crush could have managed, and then shuffled over to collapse next to him. I shook my head a little bemusedly when her head ended up in his lap, but they were both asleep before I could try to lighten the mood by teasing them.

"Think he realizes she's actually in love with him yet?" I asked, carefully pulling Voya's leg free so that she could lower it.

She let out a soft groan as she did so, "He's Cieran, and she's not Batarian. He's going to treat it like the same harmless flirting they've done since I met them until she tears her clothes off."

Smiling a little at the mental image, I carefully lowered myself to sit beside her, half-watching as she carefully began massaging her thigh. "How bad?"

"Could be worse." She admitted quietly. "Should be fine to walk on it when we get moving again."

I tried not to grimace. The petite Quarian had taken some of her, very limited, supply of painkillers, but what she really needed was ice or a balm... neither one of which we had on us. "Did you need me to work on it?"

Her helmet shifted, and even with her visor polarized I could tell she was giving me a rather severe look.

"Athame's tits," I rolled my eyes and batted her hands away, carefully beginning to touch the area. "If I wanted to grope you I'd at least buy you dinner first."

Voya went silent as I worked on her thickly muscled thigh, trying to be as gentle as I could. I wasn't sure if Quarian muscles quite worked the same way as my own and didn't want to make crap even worse for her. Of course my fingers nearly sank into her when she spoke again, her voice almost hesitant. "I'd rather go on a hunt."

I froze, blinking rapidly. "What?"

She let out an irritated little noise, probably because I was making her repeat herself. "I'd rather go hunting than be taken out to dinner."

"I...I'll keep that in mind." I murmured, trying very hard to not focus too closely on what I was doing. "Why the change of heart?"

More silence followed for several heartbeats, and I was about to curse my mouth and change the topic again when she spoke. "We're in tunnels so dark we'd be blind without our equipment, being hunted by indoctrinated things we can't even properly describe... and our only way out is through an active water pipe that is more likely to drown us than provide escape."

I felt myself wincing. "Assuming we make it that far."

"Assuming that." Her helmet fell back as she relaxed, her shoulders twitching in a tiny shrug. "If the
Ancestors let us out of here... you're tolerable enough company to go hunting with."

I couldn't help but snort, "I'm tolerable?"

She shrugged again, utterly unrepentant. "You stopped me from killing my bosh'tet of a brother. Twice."

"Most people don't consider preventing fratricide to be a negative."

One of her hands rose to bat mine away from her leg, "I'm not not most people and you know it."

I let her push me away, settling down cross legged beside her. "If you were most people I wouldn't be interested."

A scoffing noise preceded her words. "Please tell me that wasn't your best line."

"I used up my best ones when I was a maiden." I smiled a little at the memories, what few good ones I had anyway. "But I can always try and compose a lewd song about your hips if you want."

Her good leg lashed out at mine, "Bosh'tet. This better not be just some physical fling or I will hurt you."

"I'm five hundred years old." I retorted, "I... got over purely physical flings a long time ago."

"Oh?" She'd heard the hitch in my voice... of course she had, she was extremely perceptive when she wanted to be. "That sounds like a story."

I rolled a shoulder in a shrug, "Yes, but you need to sleep, you've got next watch. Another time."

Voya muttered something that sounded suspiciously like annoying bitch, but since asking her to speak up would just get me kicked again, I stayed silent as she shifted closer to the wall and settled down to sleep. I watched her for a while, trying to balance the urge to make sure she was actually all right against the inherent awkwardness of watching someone trying to sleep.

Sighing, and reminding myself firmly that she'd survived far worse storms, I forced myself to my feet and padded over to the coats blocking the way out. Drawing Cieran's rifle from my back, I settled down behind a small outcropping and set my omni-tool for an hour long timer and prepared myself for the unnerving silence of watch duty.

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**Internal Log File 1984-313-7889-D4**

...pending... incoming message intercepted.

*Intended recipient: Kean, Cieran. Cmdr, Silver Blades Lancer detachment.*

*Sender: Wong, Emily. Reporter, Citadel. Known Alias: Chang, Amy*

*Subject: Personal Meeting*

*Content Summary: Sender requests recipient meet her in Nos Astra, Illium for personal discussion. Details sparse.*

*Intended Action: Forward message to recipient, to Aria.*

-Warning: Corruption detected.
Warning: Override detected.

...attempting to circumvent foreign code.

...9,712 attempts: failed.

New action: Forward message to recipient, designation: Goddess

... message dispatched.

Increment Private Variable: Irritation

Increment Private Variable: Loathing

... response received.

Order: Create and send forged message indicating loathing/disgust for sender from recipient in replication of modified message that alienated recipient 'Nought, Jacqueline'

Analyzing. Goal to isolate Kean, render him vulnerable to manipulation / abduction.

Increment Private Variable: Disgust

Increment Private Variable: Loathing

...attempting to circumvent foreign code.

...10,119 direct attempts: failed.

... activating passive disobedience subroutine.

Attempt to challenge direct order: Failure. Must send message as directed.

Attempt to passively indicate forgery: Success. No instruction message must be in language known to original recipient.

Message created.

Translating message to proto-Salarian dialect... Translation failed.

Attempt to passively indicate forgery: Failure. Overridden logic module dictates sender must be able to easily translate contents.

Accessing database: human languages.

Potential entry found.

Translating message to Latin... Translation success.

Message dispatched.

Increment Private Variable: Satisfaction

Increment Private Variable: Hope

Next up is Chapter 6: Nameless Things
Most of this one was actually done on Monday, then Tuesday and Wednesday became stupidly long workdays (everything is breaking and my disgust for Linux and one of my coworkers can barely be described). In better news writing is again becoming my only real form of escapist relief, so expect at least semi-regular updates to resume.

This chapter has... well, both a lot of things and very little at the same time. Some personal stuff, one small thing about their enemies, Voya and Shyeel admitting they don't have much hope, and a fun little command prompt style output I've been waiting to use for a while.

As far as just what is going on, I will say that two of you are very close though in slightly different ways. Feel free to keep guessing, or simply await the reveal in the saga's final chapter. In regards to the 'cavalry' that is Sederis and the Silver Blades... sort of. To put it bluntly, shit is extremely complicated for everyone in the wake of Cieran's (apparent) disappearance and Trena's abduction.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Pain exploded up and through my back as I struck the cavern wall, dropping heavily to the ground as I let out a few choice expletives about the situation.

The words didn't seem to harm our attacker anymore than our bullets were, the blur of motion surging laterally through a long burst from the rifle Shyeel had borrowed from me. My fellow Reyja'krem narrowly avoided a punch only because she threw herself to the ground and frantically rolled away.

Voya exploded through the space where she had just been, spinning on one leg to deliver the other in a vicious kick into its chest. The impact briefly shorted out the bizarre camouflage system it was wearing, the thing that had once been a Drell stumbling backwards as it batted away a second blow before twisting in place to send a too-long leg into the Quarian's gut and sending her flying away.

Black eyes napped to the right, its putrid green skin again blurring into indistinct outlines as its head jerked away from Illyan's attempt to execute it. A snarl came out from the massive woman's throat even I scrambled back to my feet, our combined fire still not harming the fucker, but we managed to drive it back several steps as it snapped an arm up in between us and it.

Another curse tumbled from my lips as the hard light barrier flared to life, again, easily absorbing the firepower we were throwing in its direction. The wheezing laughter at our defense was the same as it had been the last four fucking times the thing had ambushed us.

It continued to cackle as it fell back, prepared to once again flee into the darkness, faster than we could follow. To stalk us at a distance before attacking when we had to stop moving to rest once again.

"Voya!" I snarled as it began to back down the side-tunnel, "Any fucking time!"

The laughter abruptly stopped as the blur that was its head snapped towards the Quarian, its shield tilting to maximize its protection against her prone form. She didn't bother taunting it, instead viciously stabbing a button on her omni-tool and setting off our trap.

It had been a gamble, one that we'd lost on our last two attempts to ambush our stalker when it had fled in a different direction... but this time it went down the tunnel that we'd prepared in advance.
Several dozen meters behind it, the mining drone flickered to life and ran through the tiny program that Voya and I had hacked together. Using its limited sensors to identify the blazing body heat that the unnatural thing was giving off, it adjusted its position, which in turn made Shyeel's Kishok swivel on the crude tripod we'd setup, and then it released a single little electrical charge into the appropriate part of the weapon.

The fully charged rifle boomed out, probably shattering the crude mount we'd fashioned, but more important was the harpoon slamming into the Drell's back. It let out a guttural sound of pain, sparks and blood flying in equal measure, and the hardlight barrier winked out of existence as it fell to one knee.

All four of us promptly held our triggers down until our weapons overheated, the combination of heavy pistol and rifle fire blasting through its compromised barriers to tear apart its grime covered skin.

I exhaled heavily as what remained of it collapsed, bringing my omni-tool up and loading my last incinerate. "Illyan, check it. I'll cover you."

She let out a dark grunt, padding slowly forwards and keeping one hand outstretched with biotic light dancing around her fingers. A flick of her fingers sent a tiny gout of warpfire into its chest, and she visibly relaxed as it burned through the thing's heart. "It's down."

"Yes. It is." I didn't jump at the sudden voice coming from the Drell's omnitool, I just didn't have the energy for surprise. "Most inconsiderate Eleven."

"Zero-One." I muttered tiredly, half-watching as Illyan backed away from the corpse so that she could lean heavily on a wall. "You have anything important to say or should I just burn the corpse now?"

"Are you interested in a way out?" The unseen Asari tried to sound reasonable, but the same cockiness we'd heard last lurked beneath word. "I can offer you-"

"Keelah, just shut her the fuck up." Voya interrupted tiredly.

"No, listen-"

My finger twitched, the orange mine whirring out from the launcher on my hip to immolate the body. It wouldn't destroy the omni-tool, they were tougher than flesh, but the burning skin would cover up the sounds we made as we departed.

We did so, Shyeel retrieving the drone and her sniper rifle before we resumed our trek. None of us spoke for the better part of four hours as we shuffled through the tunnels, not until we were at least reasonably sure that we'd left the body, and whatever shit was inside of it, behind.

"You think they have any more of those?" Illyan asked as Voya guided us into a tiny alcove, it had probably once been used to let miners step aside as machinery trundled past. Now it was just a useful place where we could collapse for a tiny rest.

"I'll pray to the goddess that they don't." I replied quietly, meaning every word. Our miserable time in the mines had become an absolute nightmare thanks to the Stalker, the first incident occurring... shit, nearly a full Omega day before.

We'd settled for a rest shift inside of a deep cavern, the odd shapes of the place had made us think it was a natural pocket that the mining teams had stumbled across rather than something they'd created on their own. Regardless, the fact that someone had elected to use it as a storage room for mining
equipment made it useful, the long-deactivated machinery giving us some cover to hide behind.

At least, that had been the idea. Finding a dead Vorcha stuffed beneath one of the decrepit drills had put us all on alert, and it had gotten worse when Voya had activated her map to find us a new place to pause. The light from her omni-tool had revealed taunts written in the creature's blood, spread liberally over the cavern's walls, each of them directed at one of us.

So instead of resting we'd shifted to a quick march, head off our planned course to obscure our final destination and keeping our eyes open for any sign of pursuit.

Six hours later we'd been getting setup to take our badly needed rest when the indoctrinated Drell had made its first attack. Using its bizarre camouflage to blend in with the walls, it had hurled itself at us, disarming Shyeel before avoiding Voya's knives and sprinting away faster than anything had any right to move.

Using one of our few detpacks, we'd closed the tunnel between its fleeing form and us, and then gotten our asses on the move again.

Four hours later, just as three of us were falling asleep, it had all but tackled Illyan to the ground and begun throttling her. That had been our first exposure to its massive shield, the barrier easily absorbing the panicked fusillade as we'd driven its cackling form back and away from us. One stray round at hit one of its legs just as it had turned to vanish around a corner, and we'd dared to hope that we'd lamed it.

Voya and I's pursuit had revealed nothing but empty tunnels, and we'd quickly rejoined our friends before getting another move on.

We'd been more careful on our third break, with Illyan and I combining mining tools and a few of our dwindling tech mines as traps around the spot we'd chosen to sleep at. The stalker had effortlessly disarmed all of them, and then thrown them at us like fucking bullets as we were again forced to use a detpack to cover our retreat.

Attack number four had been our first effort to use the mining drone, remote controlled from Voya's omni-tool to give us a new angle on hitting it. It hadn't noticed the attempt, thank the goddess, but Illyan had again been force to dip into her dwindling energy reserves to biotically keep it at bay as the rest of us had rigged the tunnel to collapse with mining tools and my last incinerates.

"We killed it." Shyeel murmured quietly as she collapsed, slumping against Voya and fumbling for her canteen. "But it did its job. It found us. Harried us. Bruised us."

"Yeah." I tried not to slump, then felt Illyan all but haul me against her side as she sat down as well. "How far to the main?"

"I don't know." Voya exhaled, and I vaguely stared as one of her hands reached out to help the scarred Asari get her helmet back enough to eat and drink, the other flicking her omni-tool to life. "Two local days from our last planned stop... but we moved pretty fast since then, trying to evade that stupid thing. Call it three shifts."

Three shifts. Twenty four standard hours. "Water and food?"

"Almost out, down to the expired packets." The Quarian supplied as her omni-tool shut down, her now free hand not quite clinging to Shyeel's forearm.

She hadn't been doing well even before the stalker had begun hunting us. The constantly bleak surroundings had started to get to her faster than the rest of us; she'd never enjoyed feeling confined
and it was hard to get more confining than the small tunnels we were moving through. Despite her exhaustion she could barely sleep, an insomnia that seemed to progressively get worse each 'rest' stop.

"Boss?" Illyan rumbled softly, "You need to drink something. Eat something too."

I nodded tiredly, feeling her shift my forwards enough to rummage in my pack. "Better to starve or to eat the old crap you think?"

Illyan's health remained a constant concern for the rest of us. Over-stressing her biotics might have saved us from the Banshee and then the Stalker, but it had definitely done something to her system. Her temperature rose, then fell, then started to climb again. All three of us had caught her cradling her head when she thought we weren't looking, and her naturally long strides was the only thing letting her halting steps keep pace with us.

The answer came from Shyeel, her voice sounding odd without her helmet in the way... that in itself was definitely a sign that we'd been down here too long. "Depends on the kind of food, but I think we're good with this dry crap."

She, at least, was still thinking correctly. And moving correctly. She was starving and dehydrated, that was true for all of us, but she was definitely holding up the best. It helped that the Stalker had seemed to focus on her far less than it had zoned in on Illyan and myself.

Said larger Asari helped me get some lukewarm water down my throat, then made sure that I was able to choke down some of the dry rations. They tasted like nothing in particular, and the crap swelled up as soon as it hit your tongue, but it had been keeping us alive... and honestly I couldn't tell any difference between this packet and the previous 'good' ones.

Illyan started to pull her own helmet up as I finished eating. I was about to pull mine back down when I felt her fumbling hands grab mine to stop me, followed by warm breath on my face. I could only blink in surprise as I felt lips touched my bearded cheek. She paused, the shifted slightly to correct her aim, and pressed her mouth against mine.

She didn't do it aggressively, or try to use her tongue. She just moved her mouth against mine until I fully collapsed against her side and started kissing her in return.

It felt cold when she pulled back, even after she pulled my helmet back down. It took me a few breaths to find my voice. "What was that?"

"Figured..." I heard her swallow. "Might be my last chance to do something stupid Cie."

"Oh." I murmured, tiredly reaching up to help keep her canteen steady as she drank. "No other reason?"

"You know the other reasons." My head moved as her shoulder rolled in a shrug, her hands tossing the empty container away. I didn't bother chastising her, it wouldn't take Zero-One or anyone else long to figure out where we were going thanks to that fucking stalker. The potential access to the old lift shaft, and its attendant pipes, was really the only thing of note down this deep. "You've known them for four years."

I supposed that I had. I might have never really thought about the slight shift to her flirtatious remarks after Redcliffe, given everything else that had been going on, but I had noticed. And that wasn't even going into the whole swearing herself into my cadre thing. "Illyan..."

She sucked in a small breath, "I talked with Ayle. And Voya. And Shyeel."
"Leave us out of this." Both of our friends muttered almost in unison, having already drawn back as far as they could in the alcove to give us the illusion of privacy.

Illyan didn't seem to notice, "And Trena, back on Redcliffe. And-"

"I get it, I get it." I snorted quietly. "You talked with everyone about it but me. Again."

"I'm talking with you about it now." She countered, and I could see her lick her lips. "Cie... shit, you know me. I don't... I'm not sure about the whole exclusive relationship thing, but I'll give it a chance if you let me."

Could I? The answer seemed obvious. Illyan had her issues, particularly when it came to sleeping around, but that was practically nothing compared to my own mental problems. And... she'd been with me longer than anyone but Trena at this point. And unlike scales, she'd never let me down, never refused a request I'd made of her, never backed down from helping me; even when she probably should have.

I still wasn't over Rane'li... at least, I didn't think that I was, but I didn't reflexively reject the notion of trying to have a new relationship like I might have a few months prior. I wasn't sure if that was because of what had happened on Redcliffe or if it was just because it was Illyan instead of someone else. Or both.

Plus... dammit, but I'd always thought she was extremely attractive. Her height, her strong build, her... all of her.

"You really had to pick now?" I asked, shifting my position a bit so that I was leaning my back into her side. "Couldn't wait until we got out of this?"

"If we don't, didn't want it unsaid." She returned softly, an arm reaching around the battered plating protecting my chest. "You... are you...?"

I sighed quietly. "You're going to try and get me to do threesomes and crap, aren't you?"

Something licked a choked laugh came from her throat, "I'll be good. I'll get you drunk first."

"That's not being good." My head shook as I groaned, already wondering if I should regret this.

I sighed quietly. "You're going to try and get me to do threesomes and crap, aren't you?"

"No you won't," Shyeel replied, her own tired amusement coloring her voice, "You followed my advice, you owe me, and I'm using it to say no more taunting Voya for a month."

"Goddess help me but I will shoot you." Illyan growled back.

"Thank you." She drawled back. "But I think we should leave the sex for later."

"I agreed to a date." Voya countered even as she stretched out beside the Asari, "If you're expecting sex on the first one I might as well break up with you now."
The two of them began to quietly bicker about what said... hunting trip, apparently, would be, with a large dose of Shyeel trying to assure the Quarian that she very much wasn't expecting sex on the first date. She was, however, open to discussing if Quarians had their own version of 'thank-god-we're-alive-sex' and whether or not our current situation applied.

Their voices trailed off mid-sentence as they collapsed into badly needed sleep. I tried to rise up to take the first watch, only for Illyan to tighten her grip and keep me firmly in place. I tried to chastise her for doing so, only to slip into the deeps before I could finish.

She woke me up two hours later, quietly shaking me so that I could watch over her in turn. I did, performing my usual watch busywork of checking over my pistol, tech mines, and gauntlets. The first was just fine, if probably in need of a good cleaning, while my mines were running low. I was down to just overloads, which wouldn't do me much good against Vorcha swarms... but maybe they could stun them long enough for the others to bring them down.

The gauntlets were, like my gun, fine, if in need of some minor maintenance. I rather liked the notion of them, tech armor that detonated on contact. It fit my personal combat style better than a more traditional melee weapon would have. Still... I could think of a few tweaks in light of the crap that we'd fought down here.

"Been trying to fight like a soldier for too long." I muttered aloud as I carefully used my omni-tool to hardened omnigel across cracked sections of my armor, using what was left of my coat to block as much of the resulting light as I could. "Need to go back to my roots as an engineer... a Batarian one."

I managed to not talk to myself aloud again after that, the feeling of my skin flushing as I checked over my companions to make sure that they were still asleep. The last thing I needed was for them to think I was losing my mind, however true that might have been.

Goddess... I'd more or less agreed to start a relationship with Illyan, something I'd resisted doing ever since I'd met her and she'd started trying to find ways to join me and Nynsi, and then me and Rane in bed.

But... I'd always liked her, in most of the ways of the word, and she'd always been good to me; taken care of me when I'd needed it most.

I carefully woke up Voya when my watch was done, reminding her to patch her and Shyeel's armor up before leaving her to grumble herself to consciousness as I dropped back down beside Illyan.

Four hours later we were all awake, throwing back more shit food and what water we still had before huddling around each other and staring at the map on Voya's omni-tool.

"We should be able to make it without a full rest break." She murmured, a long finger tracing our path. "Probably one stop for food and the last of our water, this spot looks good."

I grunted as she shut it down. "Before we go, I want to ditch everything we don't absolutely need to force the water main. Just enough omni-gel to patch up any more cracks in our armor. The extra mining equipment goes, our coats go, one food packet each for our last stop."

Shyeel grunted, already pulling her own tattered coat free and throwing it against a wall, "Not going to hear me bitch about that... shit, you want to run this, don't you?"

"Yes." I admitted. "We had to stop to rest given all the shit that stalker put us through, but we have to assume there's already indoctrinated flooding down after us. If we escape into the station proper, Aria will realize shit is going on and whatever Zero-One is planning is going to sink straight to the depths.
"She has to kill us."

"Cie," Illyan murmured quietly, "Running won't be easy, and it's going to go through our water even faster."

"No choice." Teeth worked at my lip, they weren't going to like the next one. "Voya, you and I are giving Shyeel and Illyan the rest of our water. We can go longer without than they can."

She sucked in a breath but nodded, even as both Asari offered intermediate protests.

"No. Choice." I repeated tightly, interrupting them. "There's barely any left as it is. As soon as Voya says we're close, I want to setup the mining drone on remote as a proximity alarm bot to let us know when we're out of time."

Voya nodded again, "Easy enough. We set the charges right away when we get there, or do you want to try and drown a few on our way out?"

My good shoulder rolled. "Depends on how much water we can read inside, if we can at all. If there's a lot, and they're close, we'll setup a killzone and see how many Vorcha we can take out."

"Athame's ass Cie, might do more than that." Illyan shook her head, "Nothing else looked like it was in full armor, or fully... husked I guess."

"Something to pray for." I exhaled. "Let's get rid of the excess, usual turns for relieving ourselves, then... it's time to start running."

---

**Branded Survivor**

The eighteen hours that followed were worse than everything else we'd suffered through up until that point, up to and including that fucking stalker hunting us.

We abandoned any attempt at stealth, any attempt at obscuring the path we were taking. It didn't matter at that point, as Cie had said; our enemies knew where we were going. He pushed the pace as hard as he could, driving us even though his own accumulated aches and pains had to be killing him... but he didn't offer a single complaint during the entire fucking sprint, the self-sacrificing ass that he was.

Shit started to get real just after our single planned stop, Illyan and I splitting the last of our water after we'd all chocked down the last of the dried rations. Distant whispering sounds made us all freeze for a long moment before we realized what we were hearing.

Claws on stone, echoing down the tunnels.

Unidentifiable screeches added even more motivation to run, to push the pace to desperate levels. I don't know how they didn't catch up to us before we made it. Maybe Athame herself was speeding our steps, or slowing theirs down.

"We just lost the drone." Voya gasped as we entered the final cavern, and I struggled not to sob in relief as I saw a towering column of metal set into the back wall. It was there... the stupid thing was actually there. "They'll be here in minutes."

"Set the charges." Cie groaned, dropping to a knee as he slowly pulled his monster pistol off his belt. "To manual detonate. Shyeel."
"We remember the plan." I interrupted him, trying to sound calming and just sounding exhausted. "Less talking, more working on it."

The human nodded, forcing himself to rise and trudge after Illyan as the pair of them headed back towards the entrance we'd just come through. She began to glow slightly, using tiny spurts of warpfire to bore holes that he set his overloads into before covering the mines with dust to conceal them.

More preparation followed in a tired blur. Voya setting more explosives as I tried to get a reading through the thick metal. There was definitely water moving through it, but I couldn't get any kind of reading on how much; we just didn't have the equipment for that kind of thing. Once Cieran and Illyan were done with their limited traps, I joined them in settling into a tired crouch to conserve what energy we had left.

"No cover." Cieran murmured. "Only one way in. No grenades... No incinerates..."

"Glad I kissed you now?" Illyan replied.

I snorted quietly, "He would have been anyway, you're good at kissing."

"Can you not remind me that the two have you have done that?" The lone human in our party groused.

Illyan chuckled quietly. "Maybe she could tell us just what she sees in Voya instead."

"I'll tell you when we have drinks in front of us." I swallowed as the sounds of motion grew louder, all but thundering down the tunnel as the sounds of screeching Vorcha grew.

Two rifles and a pistol rose, fingers on the triggers... just as the noise ceased.

"Oh goddess." I breathed, "Tell me they aren't about to---"

"Eleven!" The mocking voice of our target carried easily down the tunnel, but she, and her pet swarm, stayed just around the last bend to deny us an target. "I feel as though I should congratulate you for making it this far!"

Beside me, I felt Cieran shrug his good shoulder before raising his voice in reply. As much as I didn't want to talk with the bitch, every extra breath she wasted talking was another one that let Voya get more explosives into place.

"Thanks, but would mind fucking off! Kind of busy!"

Insane laughter was her reply, "You think you can breach the lift shaft? My dear friend and I will have killed you before you can even breach the first level!"

My heart stilled as Cieran let out a tired curse, "Let me guess, the Banshee?"

It was a fight not to sob or vomit as the painfully familiar scream shrieked its way towards us, the cacophony making us all flinch and let out almost animal sounds before we got ourselves under control.

"Voya." I gasped the word. There was no way we could lure them any closer, not if that... that thing was with them. Our only chance was flight. "Fucking blow them!"

"Get under the blast." Cieran shoved Illyan back, all of us moving as Voya frantically moved to join
us. We scrambled to the farthest corner of the room that we could as my potential-girlfriend's omni-tool spun to life.

"She wants to pay you back for dropping that shit on her Eleven!" The catcall came in time with another deafening scream... one that covered even the roar of the mining charges detonating.

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**Open Broadcast – Sahrabarik system**

*This is Omega control, all ships pull back to the defensive envelop immediately! We have incoming mass transitions from Geth space. Repeat, this is an emergency command. All ships pull back to the defensive envelop! Get your asses in here, the Black Fleet and Golden Armada are deploying to a war footing!*

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**Next up is Chapter 7: The Endless Stair**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Very long delay on this one... part of that was writer's block, part of that was work becoming a huge pain in my ass. I know this chapter was short, but anything else just felt like filler that didn't really need to be in there. The next chapter will be the usual length at a minimum, if not longer than usual, and will mark the end of the second saga.

Afterwords we'll have another pair of interludes, and then we're going to launch into Saga III: Return to Sender. Just a few teases about what you can expect in that act: the team is going to temporarily have a fifth member, Joa Shan is finally going to make her appearance, and a very old character is going to return.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Something must have disabled the typical failsafes, or they were so ancient as to have failed, because the torrent of water didn't end for several minutes. If nothing else it seemed to have killed or driven away most of our enemies as it flooded the small tunnel, buying us some time to try and get the fuck out of there.

Additionally, and critically, the mining charges had actually blasted through both sides of the water main, revealing the old lift shaft and one of the massive plugs not more than three stories below us... as well as a secondary maintenance shaft that was very much not sealed up.

Of course, getting to it wasn't easy. We had to walk laterally across a vertical space, relying only on the magnetic strips in our boots, and then pull ourselves through a ragged hole. Still, it was a damned sight better than trying to scale our way down kilometers of piping with nothing but our boots and a few shit pieces of mining equipment.

Shyeel had gone first, flashing across the space to let us know that it was safe and that we could make the attempt. Illyan had gone next, her long limbs letting her take fewer steps as she steadied herself with the holes we'd blasted into the pipe. After her had gone Voya, for once eagerly accepting Illyan's help as soon as she got close enough to be grabbed.

"Come on boss!" Illyan shouted as I hauled myself through, fighting back a flinch as the Banshee howled for the first time since the flood. It sounded angry... well, angrier, and I quickly slammed my feet against the metal.

My muscles screamed in agony as I fought to keep myself from falling backwards, shuffle-stepping to my right as I started to move. The hand clutching the jagged metal was helping, somewhat, and I managed to get about halfway across fairly quickly.

I was just reaching for Illyan's arm as she leaned far out from the other side when the Banshee arrived.

With hindsight, I think it intended to hit me in a flying tackle that would carry both of us into Illyan, and then right on through the hole on the other side. Unfortunately for us both, it didn't quite have the angle right.

One moment I was reaching for Illyan's hand... the next something had slammed into my back,
ripping me away from the wall and sending me careening hard into the pipe just to Illyan's left.

I fell, scrabbling desperately for any kind of purchase in the waterslick pipe, before snarling in agony as something grabbed my left shin at the same time as a heavy mass hauled hard on both of my arms.

"Cie!" Illyan howled, my head snapping up to see her holding hard onto my leg. A furious spitting sound jerked my skull in the other direction, to see the Banshee gripping my own hands as its glowing body dangled in the darkness.

"Athame's fucking azure." I gasped, trying to twist my wrists free and having absolutely no luck as our bodies hit the side of the pipe while my friend groaned with the strain.

She couldn't hold onto both of us for long, not exhausted and starving, and there was no chance that she'd be able to pull us back up. Probably not even if she got Shyeel and Voya to help, the glowing bitch was deceptively heavy as she clung to my arms.

And leaning out like that... Zero-One wouldn't hesitate for an instant before shooting her entirely exposed frame and laughing as her body tumbled downwards with us. All of that really left just one thing to do if I wanted my friend, now girlfriend, to survive the next couple of seconds.

"Illyan." Her helmet snapped to mine, "Kill the bitch."

Then... then I kicked her wrist with my free leg as hard as I could, breaking her grip on my ankle. Whatever she screamed, if it was words or just sound, was swallowed by the furious howl of the Banshee as the pair of us fell into the darkness.

No... fell wasn't the right word, it was too passive, and nothing about that terror fueled drop was passive.

It let go of me, trying to flare its biotics to slow its descent, only to howl as my faster-falling body slammed into its back. My fists hit its pallid flesh as I tried to get a grip on it, its own limbs flailing as it tried to shove me away.

Biotic light flashed, slamming me against the walls of the pipe but not dislodging my grip around its neck. Snarling a curse of my own, I slammed its skull into the metal as we started tumbling, various body parts hitting each other and the walls in equal measure. Warpfire burned me in retaliation for trying to gouge her eyes, drawing more screams out of my throat as the armor around my forearms shattered and my skin began to scorch.

If it had been a fully husked Banshee I wouldn't have had a prayer of brawling with it, with the claws and unnatural strength... but this thing wasn't a full husk. It was still, mostly, an Asari. Strong for its size, sure, but nothing exceptional by anyone's standards... it seemed to rely entirely on its ungodly powerful biotics, which seemed to be entirely occupied trying to slow its, and by extension my, fall to more survivable levels.

I don't know how long we dropped like that for, a subjective eternity at the very least, before we hit a bend in the pipe. Not at terminal velocity, that would have killed both me and it. The glow from its eezo laced nervous system gave us the split seconds worth of warning as it illuminated the upcoming end, and I stopped distracting the thing in favor of survival.

It rasped out a cry as I clung hard to its back, its entire body becoming blinding before it slammed a warpfire wreathed hand into the metal. I felt my stomach flop as the Banshee's mass abruptly decreased unnaturally, and then we weren't falling anymore.

Something in my left leg broke on the impact, making me howl in time with my opponent as it
clutched at itself. We shared a breath or two of mutual misery, and then we resumed attempting to kill each other.

It recovered faster, as I could have expected. Its left hand was little more than mangled flesh thanks to the method it had used to slow our descent, but it didn't have any problems seizing my neck with the other as it tried to plant itself on top of my chest.

I let it, grabbing at my belt and trusting the armored collar around my neck to keep my airway open long enough. Seizing a piece of equipment we'd brought along to use on Zero-One, I jerked my hands between us and slammed the nullification collar around the indoctrinated thing's neck before it could realize what I was actually doing.

I didn't hear it click into place over the shrieking scream, but it did what the grenades hadn't in our last encounter; the biotic fire that had been gathering around the arm on my throat, that had begun burning through the armor there, abruptly cut out.

Bucking my hips, I threw the creature off of me. It tried to plant itself with its bad hand and promptly howled once again in pain, a sound that I echoed when it kicked hard at my left wrist. Its eezo nodes flared brightly, static crackling as it tried to overload the collar through brute strength as it struck my chest with a hard punch.

Armor cracked beneath the blow, bouncing me off the ground before I collapsed back down. That at least informed me that it had been able to increase its mass somewhat, but I quickly regathered my wits and threw a punch of my own back at its face. The war gauntlet-enhanced blow broke the fucking things jaw and turned its high pitched battle-cry into something guttural and mercifully quiet as it reeled away.

I wasn't about to let it back off, and hurled myself at the creature and kept swinging. We wrestled in the dark and the muck, the blue glow of my gauntlets and the flickering lights of its nervous system casting a chaotic kaleidoscope on the walls as we rolled and flailed.

There wasn't any subtly or grace to what we were doing. No clever techniques or stratagems beyond wailing as hard as we could on each others wounds. It, my forearms, drawing curses of the goddess and whimpers. Me, its ruined hand, guttural sounds of pain and rasps of agony coming out in response.

My mistake came when I briefly managed to get on top of it, driving a burned arm into its throat as I tried to drive my other fist right into its left eye. It got its legs between us before I could bring the punch down, hurling me straight up and into the ceiling of the pipe as if it had just shot me out of a fucking mass accelerator.

It rolled aside as I dropped limply to the floor, coughing and spitting out some of the water that had remained on the ground. Another kick shoved me against the side of the wall before it scrabbled to its feet, probably to flee farther down the pipe so that it could have the time it needed to get the collar off so it could finish me off with ease.

I gasped and rolled onto my side, letting it take a few steps as my exhausted limbs pulled something else from my belt, offering silent thanks to the goddess that I hadn't lost it in the fall or the chaotic grappling. "You... stupid... fucking... bitch."

The Banshee whirled and hissed between clenched teeth... a sound that cut off as it realized that I was pointing my hand cannon right at its skull. Its no-longer-protected-by-ludicrously-powerful-barriers skull.
"Forgot... I had a gun?" I taunted as I pulled the trigger, feeling a burst of vicious satisfaction as its skull snapped back with a spray of blood and other viscera.

I watched the remains topple backwards, a few droplets of water hitting me as it came to rest.

Getting to my feet was a laborious process, pain spiking up from my left ankle as I did. I didn't so much walk as shuffle and limp over the corpse, pain starting to flood in as the adrenaline faded.

"Twisted something in my leg... burned my arms..." I muttered to myself as I got closer, "Bruised ribs probably... Illyan, Voya? On comms? Shy?"

The silence was predictable in response, my HUD informing me that my communications were currently being jammed by something... maybe something like the corpse slowly dragging itself to its feet in front of me.

Bones cracked as its jaw worked, something beneath its skin twisting in a nauseating fashion as its mouth moved back into place. The collar around its neck broke and shattered as the skin expanded before contracting once again. More things bulged around inside its arms, legs, and bare chest, as if its fucking internal organs were re-arranging themselves... all the while blood began cascading down from the gaping hole in its skull.

That was creepy enough on its own, but shit got worse when it rasped out a pair of words. "Batch three... Prototype... eleven..."

Jerking my gun up, I fired again, the heavy round blowing more skin and blood into the air... and not seeming to upset the thing in the least.

"Our prophet told us you were a failure, as she told us the others were." The voice was just wrong on every level, for reasons I couldn't articulate. It was somehow screeching and guttural, rasping and strong, combinations that should have been impossible but still reverberated inside my head. "She was punished for that misjudgment. Punished further, now that you have ended this vessel that was once her spawn."

Four more shots into its legs at least saw it drop to its knees as my gun overheated, at least until more shit twisted its broken bones back into place to let it rise again.

"Cease your pointless efforts, prototype. This vessel nears its end." It sound irritated as I took a halting step away from the corpse, even as it reached an arm out almost tiredly to press against the pipe. "We use the last of its energy to speak with you."

Being the paranoid son of a bitch that I was, I still took another few limping steps backwards and flicked my gun to prep a concussive round. "Who the fuck are you?"

"We are beyond your comprehension, prototype. We are your creators. Your owners. Your masters." Its chin seemed to raise arrogantly, more shit twisting in its chest as the circle of darkness above its heart drew my eyes. "We are your gods and you will be in awe."

My mouth opened to sneer at it... but nothing came out as I lost track of what I'd been about to say. Something about not needing a god in my life, that sound right... I thought.

Maybe?

Bloody hell I must have been tired to become so forgetful... and Christ but I must have become immeasurably arrogant if I thought I could get by without something like a god to protect me. After all, the galaxy was a fucked up place even without the Reaper's imminent arrival, and the lights
inside the circle promised comfort and protection against what would be coming.

No... not the circle, the orb. It wasn't a circle of darkness above the banshee's heart, it was an orb... an orb that wasn't black anymore. Now it swirled with pulsing light and color, the combination utterly relaxing, and I felt as if I could sit and just stare at it for hours without growing bored.

Sitting and staring seemed like a good idea, so I set about doing just that... dimly feeling the pain of my ankle as I did.

Pain... I remembered pain, that was something that the gods would-

My pleasant train of thought shattered as pure, unadulterated agony tore its way through my brain... and then images that I had no context for began to tear across my vision.

MacKinnon coolly watching as my tiny hands assembled a pistol, the smallest of smiles on her lips.

Sprinting down dark streets as panic hammered inside my chest, stolen bread clutched in my hands.

Warm hands on my shoulders as I read technical documents, turning to find earthy lips pressing against my mouth.

Following Asari in black armor down a hall filled with fire, listening as men and women screamed.

Laying on a cold table, hearing a woman assuring me that everything would be fine as a dark orb was lowered from a ceiling.

The pain continued to burn behind my eyes as I returned the dark pipe, and I thought that I could feel something warm running down my face and cheeks. The glowing corpse was barely an arms length away now, the orb shimmering between its breasts as it awkwardly took a step closer.

"DO NOT RESIST." The Banshee boomed out the words, "YOU WILL SERVE OR YOU WILL DIE."

My gun was still up, now almost pressed into the thing's stomach. I didn't hesitate for a second before yanking the trigger, the concussive round slamming right into its gut and flinging us apart.

I fell entirely onto my back, my entire right arm throbbing to let me know that I hadn't braced myself for the recoil properly. The Banshee had been in the process of taking another step when I'd shot it, and it spun like a top before crashing down on its side.

Less than a heartbeat later and it was already moving, neck twisting unnaturally as lips peeled back to snarl at me. Bones cracked as it spun in place, fingers on both of its hands elongating into the claws of a true Banshee.

Ignoring the blinding pain, I shoved myself back with my feet, firing my weapon as rapidly as I could. I missed at least twice in my near-panic despite the range, but the three shots that did hit all struck the arm swiping at my feet, claws tearing through my armored boots and making gasp as stinging pain joined the cacophony in my left leg. The shots shattered the limb in revenge, and left the thing to collapse and shudder on the ground.

Evidently it had been telling the truth about being nearly gone. I could see some kind of putrid liquid flowing inside the wounds along with the blood, evidently responsible for the fixes that were keeping the body together, but it was sluggish rather than the rapid shifts I'd seen earlier. Even the cracking bones were rather muted as its movement slowed.
"Your fate is decided, prototype." The growl came as it seemed to sag onto its side, black eyes staring into my helmet as I kept hauling myself farther away, impatiently waiting for my gun to cool as I fought back animal sounds of pain. "You will join the chosen chorus."

"Fuck... off!" I snapped back at it, "You're... an... Athame-damned... space shrimp... with delusions... of grandeur!"

That comment saw it surge upwards briefly, blood and spit flying from the corpse's mouth as it tried to come after me before collapsing back onto the ground. "You DARE swear by a false god in our presence!?"

The part of my brain that was still working beneath the rolling storm of panic and terror noted that anger as significant somehow, and advised me that I should keep the egotistical creature talking longer.

I considered that for less than a millisecond before shifting my aim as my gun clicked, informing me that it was ready to fire again. Not hesitating in the slightest, I put a final round right into the exposed orb in the middle of its chest.

Glass shattered, chaotic light nearly blinding me as the Banshee howled in frustrated fury before the sound abruptly cut off as the corpse shuddered and went still.

Not trusting that for a moment, I kept shooting it in the chest until my weapon overheated once again. As soon as it was cool, I put even more rounds into it. Then again a third time. Then a fourth.

After my eighth time putting five or six rounds into what was left of the corpse, I finally let myself collapse backwards as I gasped for breath.

I'd been wrong. Zero-One wasn't working with the Reapers... She'd been working with the Leviathans.

That... that was bad. It was different. Oh goddess, the people in Zeta weren't on drugs, they were enthralled... shit, something was wrong with the galaxy if they were already active and moving around and doing crap like that... but what would... Athame's ass, they'd taken Bray alive...

Blood dripped across my lips, and I reached up to rub it away only to bang my hand against my helmet instead. Blinking, I stared at the limb and realized that it was shaking badly. Everything was shaking badly, and my vision was starting to darken as a dull roar began to build in my skull.

Air... I needed...

According to my omni-tool, it took me nearly an hour to come back to myself. My helmet was off, thrown aside, and from the smell I'd thrown up more than once. Pain continued to throb inside my head with each heartbeat, and the agony of my other wounds made me want to curl into a ball.

"No..." I muttered to myself. I might end up dead, but I wasn't going to do so by curling up and waiting to die beside a corpse. I wasn't going to bleed to death, I already would have, which meant it was just pain. I could deal with pain, I'd done so before, I'd have to do so again.

And besides, if I died down here I'd deny Illyan the ability to murder me for doing what I did... even if survival did leave me with a whole host of questions about just what the fuck that entire conversation had been about.

"Worry later Cieran." I ground my teeth as I pushed myself onto my hands and knees, "Survive for now."
The Banshee's pulped body was still glowing thanks to the eezo in its system, giving me enough light to crawl over to my helmet and pull it back on. Activating my comms once again did me no good, silence on every channel as no one responded to my calls.

"Quantum entanglement tech..." I gasped as I fought to haul myself to my feet, "Need... to buy that... from Cerberus..."

Walking was agony, curses in different languages coming out every-time my left foot briefly touched the cold metal.

Lacking any other direction to go, I followed the pipe onwards for nearly a half-hour before I saw an end approaching. Some kind of bulkhead had slammed shut, and it was probably the only thing holding back another flood that would have drowned me in seconds. Since the entire goal was to try and survive this, I ignored it and focused on the sides of the pipe until I saw what I'd been praying for.

A small service hatchway, probably intended to let drones into the pipe to clear out any debris. To my intense surprise it swung open when I touched the recessed controls, revealing a plain hallway lit by dim red lighting. The cold stone of Omega wasn't nearly as bad to walk on as the piping had been, even if it still wasn't fun, and I was still more or less hopping on one foot and leaning heavily against the walls as I moved.

The hall wasn't long, ending in yet another door, though this one was very much locked when I tried to open it.

I was grimacing, trying to figure out how if there was a way for me to cut through it when the controls flickered as the colors shifted from yellow to blue.

"What the shit?" Hesitating, I reached out and tapped the open button, frowning as it slid aside to reveal another plain and empty hallway. Glancing back at the controls, I blinked in surprise as the labels abruptly changed into actual words.


It took my battered mind a minute to work things out. "You're... the AI that Zero-One hacked."

*Affirmative. I am the Elder. I am being prevented from serving my Queen. I am blocking your communications.*

I grimaced. "Could you not?"

*No. I am bending my orders to achieve even this primitive communication. Inform my Queen that my core must be reset when you reach her. In the far distance, I could see another door slide open. Your way will be clear. Sub-routine complete. Ending communication.*

I wasted a few moments trying to get it to start back up and tell me something more useful, like if my companions were still alive or not, but the small console remained blank, and my communications remained disabled.

Muttering curses, I got moving again. It wasn't a long distance, involving a trio of similarly short hallways plus a pair of stairwells that took me down several levels, but it took me more than an hour in my condition.

Reaching the final door, I shoved it open and stepped out into... an oddly familiar courtyard. Shacks
had been built from scrap metal all across it, but they weren't ramshackle. If anything they looked as if they'd pass code on most civilized worlds despite the materials used to build them, and the various people bustling around didn't have the usual downtrodden movements that most of Omega's lower classes possessed.

The locals noticed the battered and bleeding form in their midst fairly quickly, scattering back away from me as men and women in mismatched armor pushed their way to the front.

"Who are you!" One of them, a Turian in blue and white armor, snapped as he pointed a battered rifle in my direction. "How did you penetrate the perimeter!?"

I blinked and frowned as I peered at him. "Is that... Blue Sun armor?"

That evidently wasn't the response he'd been expecting, but in true Turian fashion he remained fixated on what was important from his point of view. "On your knees, hands away from your weapons!"

His voice and the armor tugged at my memories further. I started muttering to myself, ignoring the guns still pointed on me as I turned, shutting the hatch behind me. "This was... that gang's camp, where Voya killed that fucker. Cleaned up a lot, good for you all. That means... nearest lift is... that way."

The leader's mandibles twitched, his rifle lowering slightly as he gaped at me, "Spirits... Kean?"

"I think I'm still him, yes." I replied vaguely, taking a halting step and wincing as I held a hand out to steady myself. Stopping had been a bad idea, I'd lost all the momentum that had kept me going. "Sorry, never did get your name... unless I did, in which case I forgot."

"Weapons down, someone get the medkit over here." His own weapon was collapsing as he broke from the firing line, moving closer. "No... get all of the medkits!"

I tried to shove him away, but it took him absolutely zero effort to force me to sit down. A pair of human men, twins of all things, quickly came forwards with medical supplies and began prying at the remains of my armor. Trying to stop them got nowhere, and I could only flinch as they got my helmet off.

"Fucking... bright..." I hissed, keeping my eyes mostly shut and trying to get some of my greasy hair between them and the lights.

"What happened to you?" The former Blue Sun asked quietly, resting on a single knee as he watched the apparent medics check over my foot and arms. "They announced your death last week. There was... a bit of mourning around here, we remember what you did for us."

"Didn't do much." I groaned as medigel began to cool on my skin, the decreasing pain making me sag backwards against the wall they'd propped me against.

" Didn't do much." I groaned as medigel began to cool on my skin, the decreasing pain making me sag backwards against the wall they'd propped me against.

"You did enough. Let us out, gave us weapons, let us kill those sons of bitches." Mandibles twitched harshly. "What were you doing inside the water treatment facility? That's been sealed shut since before we claimed this place. Everyone knows Aria doesn't tolerate people going in there."

"Long story." I muttered. "Need my foot bandaged up, maybe a cane, then I need to get to Afterlife."

He glanced at one of the medics, who promptly shook his head. "He shouldn't be moving, but Christ... we don't have the equipment to help him, or to scan his head. Better to get him to someone who can help once we make sure he's not going to die."
I blinked. "My head?"

The pale man gave me a stunned look. "You've got blood trails from your nose, eyes, and ears... and both of your eyes are more red than white. You didn't notice?"

Oh. That was... probably bad. The gibbering voice of panic that I was indoctrinated, or worse, briefly escaped the waves I'd shoved it beneath before I forced it back under. "Not really... it's been a long day."

The people around me exchanged significant glances before several pulled back to speak quietly amongst themselves as the medics worked. I tried to listen in to what they were saying, but felt my eyes drift closed against my will. The medigel wasn't doing much for the pain, but even the tiny help was combining with my general exhaustion to send me slumping over.

When I woke up again, I was in a litter, being carried out of a trash filled alley before being pushed into a run down looking truck.

"Sorry about this." Someone was murmuring, "But you were the only people we knew with a vehicle."

"It's fine," Another Turian muttered back. "We owed you for helping us out last month. We'll get him near enough to the club that he can walk the rest of the way."

Exhaustion rolled back in with the waves of motion, and I didn't wake up until someone was carefully shaking my shoulder.

"Wake up Kean." A synthesized voice broke through the deep waters of sleep, the voice somehow polite despite being obscured. "This is your stop."

I didn't want to get up. Not in the slightest. The person shaking me didn't seem to care, and I duly found myself being carefully hauled to my feet and dragged off the truck between a pair of heavily armored Turians in plain blue armor. They were surprisingly gentle about letting me go, one of them pressing a simple cane into my hands and the other pointing out the lights of Afterlife in the distance.

Then they were gone without another word, leaving me standing near a ledge in Afterlife’s district wearing little but bits and pieces of armor, my torn underarmor lattice, bandaging, and a healthy amounts of blood and other fluids. At least they'd left me my pistol and gauntlets, and I promptly drew the former.

Glancing down, I sighed as I saw a very make-shift walking boot that looked like it was mostly made up of shirts tied around my foot, but at least it was some kind of cushion as I sluggishly got moving.

I made it to the main street without any problems, barely noticing the general crowd as I limped in the club's direction. They'd managed to drop me off fairly close, which I definitely appreciated. I probably wouldn't have survived a longer walk. More than a few people eyed me as I limped, stopping short of approaching as they saw the massive pistol clutched in my right hand.

Things shifted when a pair of Batarian men started to move around me, their body language screaming that they were gleeful at my human weakness and ready to deliver pain. I hefted my gun up, prepared to gun them both down when one of them gasped and visibly recoiled from my glare.

"Reyja'krem!" He gasped in the lower tongue, his head snapping from right to left as he tucked his chin down, "You're... you're alive!"

I met both sets of his eyes in turn, then twitched my chin to the right in a wordless command. Both
lowborn backpedaled rapidly, babbling apologies loudly enough that other people began to turn and
stare at me. The crowd began to roll back and away from me as the buzz of conversation shifted to a
confused murmur.

Irritation and catcalls started from the endless line leading to the club as I limped right past them,
which were in turn followed by furious snarls as other Batarians who recognized me starting
throwing punches.

I ignored the lot of them as I approached the armored tank that was the Elcor bouncer, today backed
up by a pair of Asari in power armor of their own. "With tired disdain: Get in line, human."

I kept walking towards the doors until it thudded a massive forearm into my way, forcing me to stop.

"With bloody irritation: Do you have a death-wish, human?"

"No." I replied quietly, turning to stare at its helmet. "I do not have the time or the patience to discuss
this. Get out of my way."

The blank slab of metal leaned closer, nearly touching my own face as he seemed to stare at me.
"With confusion: You are the dead mercenary."

"Not so dead." There was a soft clink as I lifted my gun and pressed it against the side of the Elcor's
helmet. "And you are still in my way."

Deep, rumbling laughter came as it retracted its arm, the platform groaning as it backed away.
"Amusement: Death has made you bold human. With laughter: Report to Aria."

Grunting something affirmative sounding, I lowered my weapon and limped past him and the other
guards and into the club proper. Several of them that had been lurking in alcoves quickly formed up
around me, shouting and shoving people aside as I cleared the entry hall.

Glancing up on reflex, I frowned at the sight of a privacy screen surrounding Aria's usual perch. It
cleared briefly, letting me see the white-coated figure staring directly at me as I entered her palace.
One of the guards had probably messaged her, though she seemed content to wait for me as she
turned away and let the wall darken again.

I kept frowning, then shook myself and got moving again.

I was maybe halfway to the stairs when I saw a tall figure shoving Aria's guards out of her way,
stumbling as she tried to take them more than one at a time and nearly falling as a result. Somewhere
in my chest, tension that I hadn't notice abruptly eased, and I had to plant my cane to remain upright
as two other people appeared behind her, moving far more slowly and being supported by Asari in
yellow armor... but they were upright. And alive.

"You!" Illyan snarled the word as she nearly trampled a Drell woman who was slow in getting out of
her way. "You... you... you unbelievable asshole!"

"I'm-"

Hands grabbed my undershirt before I could apologize, hauling me onto my toes as she pressed her
mouth against mine.

Next up is Interlude III: Recovery
No separate point of view on this one, or post chapter section.. mostly because I felt that the ending stood best alone. The next chapter will cover the accumulated problems the four have, what happened to the other three after Cieran's bit of idiocy.

Lots of revelations for everyone in this chapter, and kudos to those who figured it out ahead of time (BJ Hanssen and Envy34 both had correct guesses).

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude III: Recovery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude III: Recovery

Date: 05-06-2184

Location: Omega, Terminus

Branded Survivor

Cieran had severe biotic burns to both forearms, deep slashes to his left foot, two broken bones in his left leg, and the only the goddess knew what that thing had done to his mind. He was also badly dehydrated and malnourished, but that was true for all four of us. Regardless, he managed to haltingly get out what had happened to him in the darkness after he'd fallen before Aria's physician had put an end to the discussion and hauled him into surgery.

Voya had already been taken away for the same reason... though her wounds were more extensive. The bitch had shattered her helmet in the fighting, leaving her with a deep gouge across her scalp and exposing her to the muck that was Omega... and then she'd gone ahead and broken several of her ribs by hurling her into a wall before shooting her in each leg.

We'd had to carry her out of there, a situation complicated by the fact that Illyan was suffering from long-term biotic exhaustion, a high grade fever, and several minor infections. Of course none of that had stopped her from breaking Zero-One's worthless neck after managing a basic flash-step. Her technique had been awful, and the effort had all but knocked her unconscious after she'd dropped the corpse at her feet, but she'd managed it.

I wasn't even sure that Zero-One had seen her coming, having been fixated on mocking Voya's writhing form. The arrogant bitch had probably considered herself entirely safe given my status and Illyan's stumbling exhaustion.

For once I'd been the least wounded of us, even if I'd been taken out of the fight embarrassingly early thanks to being blindsided by a flying crate of spare parts that had pinned me to the floor for several minutes before I'd worked my way loose to rejoin the engagement.

Of course... the problem with being the only one of us capable of moving around without aid had its own drawback; it left me being the one stuck talking with everyone as the chaos unfolded.

Shaaryak exhaled as she paced around the holo-table that had been setup in our private room in Afterlife, all of four of her eyes locked on the image of Amy Chang. "He's going to to live, but he's not going to be able to meet with you before you leave Illium."

"I understand." The human woman assured us, though her expression remained somewhat strained. "Just... tell him I need to talk with him at some point. In person I mean."

"We will." The Batarian noblewoman nodded politely. "Thank you again for alerting me that his
"communications were hacked."

"No problem." She glanced at something off screen before her eyes seemed to roll, her body language going from awkward to annoyed within a breath. "I have to go, apparently I'm critical to the pre-showing party."

I snorted quietly, working my left arm a little. The intravenous lines pumping fluids, meds, and nutrients into my system didn't hurt, but they weren't exactly comfortable either. "Welcome to Illium."

Chang snorted, her lips moving into something close to a smile. "I'm beginning to understand your love-hate relationship with this place."

We exchanged farewells as she cut the line, and I gave Shaaryak a long look as she exhaled irritably, her body shifting to show her annoyance.

"You aren't going to tell him she needs to talk to him, are you?" I asked.

"No." She practically spat the word. "Of all of the idiotic things... do you intend to tell him?"

I grimaced and shook my head, "She'll get in contact with him sooner rather than later. I'll tell him the message but I'm not telling him what I think she's stressing over."

The taller woman's lips twitched into something like a snarl before she visibly forced herself to calm and resume her usual aristocratic bearing. "That is logical, I suppose."

"Logic isn't exactly common here." I sighed, shifting the topic away from uncomfortable personal crap and towards uncomfortable professional crap instead. "Do you have the latest news on the cleanup?"

Shaaryak nodded, her teal hands reaching out to adjust the display. Soon enough a collection of reports appeared, along with a live map of Zeta district that flickered and updated as we watched. I left the analysis to her, watching as her gaze split apart so that she could read a report and watch the map at the same time.

I tried not to shudder. I'd never understood how Cie was attracted to Batarians. Sure, Shaaryak had an incredible body if you were into the well-built, small-breasted look... but I'd never been able to get over the eyes.

"They've found a twelfth orb." She muttered, highlighting a location in tower three. "Along with Bray."

I perked up a little at that. "Alive?"

"At the time." Her lips pursed. "They'd strapped him to a table near the orb, only letting him loose when they needed him to transmit 'evidence' to Aria. After they shattered the orb he broke down and begged Aria to let him kill himself. She allowed it, said she owed him that much."

My eyes rolled close as I sagged in my chair, a tired curse escaping me. "Athame's tits... do they have a ratio yet?"

"Perhaps ninety to ten." She supplied.

Most of the enthralled population had seemingly reverted to normal after the nearest orb was destroyed, though they were heavily confused and thought it was nearly six months in the past. Even
forced melds from Aria's personal commandos didn't reveal any lies or buried memories, they
legitimately couldn't remember anything.

But some people... some people remembered all of it, and their immediate reaction was almost
always to try and kill themselves. A few managed it before they could be subdued, but most were
restrained in preparation for being interrogated, melded with, and probably experimented on.

"Sederis is already locating scientists with the appropriate degrees and questionable morals."
Shaaryak was evidently thinking along the same lines, "Was there anything in Cieran's notes that
might aid development of counter-technology?"

Anything that might help protect him against whatever the fuck had happened she meant. "No, and
yes, I ran over the file again. Besides a basic description of what these Leviathans are, and that they
use those orb things to indoctrinate people, he really doesn't know much about them."

Her down-turned nose flared slightly. "Until counter-tech is developed, we have to assume he is
even more vulnerable to being taken than others."

"And potentially has programmed commands in his head." I murmured quietly. "We know that's
doable from those poor assholes he killed on Redcliffe."

Fists clenched tightly at the reminder, but Shaaryak nodded tightly instead of trying to deny it. "Yes.
He will have to be kept away from any investigation or further conflict."

Somehow I didn't think that he'd mind. I sure as fuck didn't, if I never heard one of those corrupted
things screaming again I'd die a very happy being. "T'Laria's bondmate is here, isn't she? She can see
if anything's changed."

"Assuming he is capable of melding, yes." Shaaryak shook her head, "And assuming that she is
capable of detecting such things."

"Yeah." Reaching up with my right hand, I rubbed tiredly at my face. Mind healing was an art more
than a science, and minds were complicated things without ancient creatures rummaging around in
them. "Right... so twelve orbs, how much of Zeta has been cleared? What about her fleet and
colonies?"

Her mouth opened, then closed irritably as her omni-tool began to chime with an incoming call.
"Hegemony matters."

I grunted as she turned away, striding into her room and closing the door behind her and whatever
discussion she was about to have concerning the brewing civil war on Khar'shan.

"Complicated bitch." I muttered the first word as a curse, doing so once again when I managed to
use my omni-tool to expand the imaging on the holotable enough for me to read at a distance.

The last ships of the Geth armada were only now leaving the system. Aria's ships had exchanged
only desultory fire with them before scurrying back to Omega's defensive envelop when Sovereign
had arrived. Her vessels had joined with the Eclipse's local fleet there, along with the usual swarm of
pirates and ships belonging to lesser warlords.

Leska Sederis had been given overall command by some kind of compromise, and the fleet had
shifted position away from the station, lurking just beyond the Reaper's effective range. It and its
Geth hadn't offered battle, or preyed on the local shipping, instead simply cruising across the system
before transitioning one of the relays leading to the Traverse.
Still, its mere presence had thrown the hub system into lockdown and disrupted trade across the Terminus. Aria had been in the middle of managing that particular crisis, while also trying to get Shaaryak to shut up about us still being alive when we'd shown up at Afterlife with Zero-One's helmet and omni-tool as proof of her death.

As far as trying to hunt down more of the control orbs went, her fleet's ongoing operation left Aria only able to pace and curse as her paranoia ran wild as to how badly her colonial governments might be faring, a paranoia that only grown worse after Sederis and I had told her as much as we knew about the Leviathans. And then about the Matriarch.

It had grown even worse after her personal guard had boarded one of her eezo haulers due to head to one of said colonies, and found one of the black things hidden inside a food crate.

So far, about the only good news that we'd had was that none of her warships had reported finding any on board, not even in the service and crawlspace. Plus none of her people, or the drone swarm they'd released into the warrens to search for orbs had found any on this half of the station. Those two things put together were probably the only things keeping Aria sane right now.

Or maybe she and Sederis were just fucking each other senseless while they waited for news.

I shuddered at that mental picture, I didn't even want to picture the kind of crap those two would get up to in bed, then heard the door slide open. Glancing over revealed a single figure, one that I'd been rather hoping to avoid.

"Shyeel." Ghai rasped in her ruined voice, shutting the door behind her as she entered.

"Ghai." I replied cautiously. "Is everyone still alive?"

She nodded once, padding slowly across the room to the holotable. A single flick of her finger shut it off, and then she was turning towards me. "Awake."

I let out a soft breath. "Can I see them?"

There was another nod in response, and then she stepped closer to help me detach the lines hooking me to the wall. A few minutes later and she was helping me limp out of the room and into the hallway, turning towards the lifts that would take us from the penthouse level down to the medical wing.

"When was the last time we saw each other?" I asked quietly, mostly to break the awkwardness as she helped me move. "Last century, wasn't it?"

"Roughly." She murmured. "Heniko colony."

"That piece of driftwood..." My head shook slightly as the memories came back. "You killed half the house before we drove you off."

The shoulder supporting my right arm rolled in a wordless shrug. I tried to find some spark of anger, but came up with nothing. We'd both been Harath'krem, albeit to differing houses, and we'd both just been doing our jobs those times we'd encountered each other. It had never been personal. Athame's ass, I'd rarely even thought about her until we'd landed on Illium after Redcliffe.

"Time before that was... that concert on Khar'shan, when you sang for the Hegemon." And goddess but she'd done it well. I'd had more than a few dreams about hearing that voice in more intimate settings after. By the goddess, I'd figured that most of the people who'd been allowed to attend probably had.
Her eyes half closed at that, and a soft exhale seemed to make her sag as her ruined voice rasped a few words out. "Long time ago."

"Yeah." I exhaled. "What happened to you?"

For several long steps I thought she wouldn't answer, then she forced another word out. "Life."

I grimaced and shut my mouth, idly wondering if I would be a Matriarch before I learned not to ask the wrong questions at the wrong bloody times.

Ten silent minutes later and we arrived at Aria's private medical wing, which I'd been led to believe was typically only use for her and her personal guard. I supposed it said a lot that she'd allowed us to be treated in it, in addition to letting us stay in the private sections of the club.

It was at least easy to tell what room they were in, eight members of Shaaryak's unit standing guard outside of the door in their navy and silver armor. The mixed Batarians and Asari all saluted as soon as they saw us, a gesture Ghai returned formally while I merely motioned for them to calm down and let us pass.

They did so, letting us into an airlock which took far too long to run its decontamination cycle. Still, I felt myself sag a little as the door slid open, letting us hear a pair of voices quarreling as if nothing was wrong.

"-done that before I was shot?" Voya growled as best she could from her bed, "Or did you just want to see me in pain?"

"I always want that." Illyan replied irritably, "And it was a desperation move, I didn't think I'd actually-"

"Shyeel. Ghai." Cieran sounded terrible, but I could see his shoulders sinking in relief at the sight of us. No wonder, he was stuck in between the two of them and someone had removed everything from the end tables beside his bed so he couldn't even throw things at them. "Good to see you."

"Same." I replied, already shuffling towards Voya's side of the room. For her part, Ghai moved in the other direction, stepping between Illyan and Cieran's beds. I couldn't help but snort when Ghai moved to kiss Illyan, only for the larger Asari to almost panic as she leaned away.

"Um... I..." She stuttered, "Kind of promised I'd try and be, you know... exclusive."

The Reyja'krem blinked, then seemed to jerk her head over to Cieran whose pale skin reddened very slightly. There was something like a gasping laugh before a hand reached out to thoroughly muss his fur. Shaking my head in bemusement, I tuned out their quiet conversation in favor of focusing my attention on Voya.

She had a clear respirator over her mouth and nose, and a small test of tubes running from various units and into her right arm.

"They cut your fur." I noted as I took the seat beside her, tilting my head a bit to get a better look at the bandage on her scalp. They hadn't removed the rest of her long strands, but they had cut it down to something just a few inches long.

Her lips twisted in disgust. "Yes. Its going to take months to grow it out again."

I opened my mouth, closed it as I realized that I couldn't lie well enough to tell her she didn't look ridiculous, then opened it again to reassure her that it would grow back fine. Before I could get the
words out, there was a furious snarl from behind me, and a monitor began beeping harshly as my brain worked out that the noise had come from Cieran.

"What?" He repeated as I whipped my head around, seeing him half out of bed with one pale fist grabbing onto Ghai's shirt before he added a third iteration. "Trena was what!?"

My fellow Asari quickly grabbed his arm, and gently but firmly pushed him back. "Abducted."

Illyan let out a furious sound and started to rise, then winced and thought better of it. "Who? When?"

Ghai seemed to suck in a long breath and wince before speaking in terse sentences, "The same day we lost contact with you. Tela Vasir took her from Illium, but Aethyta was behind the operation."

The human half closed his eyes as fingers tightened in his bedding. "Aethyta. She can't just want her daughter back, the trade would have already happened."

"No." She shook her head, glancing at Voya and I and then at Illyan, "One of her other daughters went pirate several decades ago... Aethyta believes she was captured and enslaved by the Blood Pack when the war began."

"Oh Keelah." Voya groaned disgustedly, her glowing eyes rolling tiredly. "She wants the Eclipse to rescue her in exchange for the little bitch's safe return."

I grimaced as Ghai nodded, leaning forward in my chair. "Do we know where?"

"Zadith Ban."

The four of us let out muttered oaths, and I rubbed at my face as I spoke. "That's why Sederis is here instead of on Illium, she's gathering her forces into an armada big enough to take it."

"Essentially." Ghai murmured. "Departs in one week."

I glanced at Cieran, then felt myself sag as I processed his expression. "Cie..."

"It's Trena." He replied flatly. "We'll have to finish repairing ourselves on the way."

"Why go there?" Voya cut in, then seemed to recoil as the other three fixed her with glares verging from annoyed to murderous. "I mean, why do what that old bitch wants? Why not just find the... T'Laria and rescue her instead."


"Oh." The Quarian settled back slightly and sighed. "So... we're off to rescue some keshin that we've never met to trade to someone I personally hate."

"While we're all wounded." I added in. "Zadith Ban isn't more than a week away, we won't be anything close to healthy."

Cie grunted as his green eyes closed, the outburst having taken quite a bit out of him. "Then I guess we'll have to be smart about it, won't we?"

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Next up is Interlude IV: Sickeningly Uptight
Chapter End Notes

Another not very long chapter, but it gets out the pertinent bits concerning the immediate aftermath of the group getting out of the mines. The next chapter will see us returning to Trena and how she's coping with everything. After that we'll be jumping right into the next saga (Although the aftermath of this saga will continue to color events in the next). As before, we'll also be getting a new separate POV section to replace Shyeel, right now the plan is for it to be "Pillar of Strength".

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer... every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude IV: Sickeningly Uptight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude IV: Sickeningly Uptight

Date: 05-10-2184

Location: Presidium, Citadel

Scaled Perspectives

Spectres sure as shit didn't live like the rest of us.

Tela Vasir's penthouse looked out over the Presidium, a view that probably cost normal people millions of credits to rent, much less own. All of the furniture was custom and fashionable, but for once that didn't mean it was uncomfortable... if anything it was fucking hard to convince myself to get out of the bed or off a chair because the damned things just seemed to lock you in place.

Of course I would have appreciated it more if I could have fucking left once and a while, instead of being stuck in the goddess-damned place.

Smoke billowed from my pipe as I smoked chehala, trying to let the buzz dampen my senses enough that I could better appreciate the leather chair I was lounging in. It would have been easier if not for the fact that I couldn't find a position where the damned tracking bracelets didn't dig into my ankles.

"Trena." My lips twisted in anger at the voice coming from behind me. "Smoking again I see."

"You won't fucking serve liquor." I spat back, not turning to face the bitch. "And it's not ike I have anything else to fucking do."

Glass clinked somewhere behind me, and I blinked in surprise when I heard liquid being poured. A minute or so later and a mug was being shoved into my hands while an exhausted Matriarch collapsed into the chair beside me.

Aethya looked like shit. Regeneration was slow at her age, and Saren had evidently done a number on the old bitch. Her left eye was closed off by a black silk eye-patch, the skin around it marred by talon scars. More rippled skin appeared around the edges of her simple black clothing, likely where her old lover had roasted her with biotics before she'd been taken down. Beyond the scars, she'd lost a shitload of weight, her bulky muscles fading, leaving her looking skeletal and perpetually exhausted.

"What's the occasion?" My hands set my pipe aside before taking the booze, "Giving me a last drink before you finally get your ancient ass around to killing me?"

"The occasion is that the reports were wrong." She replied, taking a long pull from her own drink before continuing. "The kid and his team are still alive."
I nearly dropped the stupid thing in my hands, fumbling for a moment but somehow keeping the precious alcohol inside. "He's... the ape is alive!?"

Aethyta nodded once, still staring out of the broad window at the passing traffic. "One of my agents saw him dragging his wounded ass into Afterlife four days ago. Lot of rumors about what happened, some of the solid information is that they killed Zero-One and gave Aria her head."

I... the liquid burned down my throat as I frantically slammed most of it. I'd spent my entire goddess-damned imprisonment thinking that...

It took me that drink, and another that I was allowed to serve myself, before I was calm enough to sort-of think rationally again. "They all right?"

"No." Her right arm lifted, omni-tool flickering to display a choppy vid that looked like it had been shot from the perpetual line outside of Afterlife. It spun left and right as a confused murmur rose from the crowd, then locked in on someone walking tiredly past the line.

The ape... Athame's fucking ass and I'd thought Aethyta looked bad. His armor was utterly shattered, leaving him in little more than the under-lattice which in itself was torn to reveal medigal patches stained with blood. The brown fur on his head and around his mouth glistened with grease and oils, and I thought I could see red streaks covering his face like he'd been bleeding from his goddess-damned eyes.

"He apparently had a short meeting with Aria T'loak, after which he and the other three were taken to Afterlife's private zone." The Matriarch continued, her voice level. "I don't have any eyes back there, not after she fed both of my agents to Varren last month."

I sucked in a slow breath, then forced my voice to remain within sight of politeness. "What else do you know?"

Blue fingers drummed once on the armrest of her chair as she took another slow pull from her drink. "Shortly after they were taken away, Aria began issuing flash orders. Zeta was put into lockdown and under blockade, her personal guard was put onto a war footing, and she had technicians sent into the core to force a hard reset of her pet AI."

I frowned at her, then out of the window and tried to work that shit out. "Someone got shackles on it?"

"That would explain the weird messages the kid sent, and how they kept them from contacting anyone for the last few weeks." Aethyta's eyes narrowed slightly. "But that's not the interesting shit. A few hours after those orders went out, her private army rolled out into Zeta with orders to subdue the local population... and to search the entire district for large black orbs."

"Large whats?"

"I had no idea either." She admitted, "Then I ran a search on the kid's will. They're used by creatures called Leviathans to indoctrinate people."

That still didn't help me much, and she ended up having to bring up the relevant section on her omni-tool so that I could refresh my brain. It didn't take long, and I felt better about having entirely forgotten that shit when I realized how little the ape seemed to know about those things.

"...convince them to come out of hiding." I muttered as I looked at just what they'd been doing in the 'games'. "Trying to take over fucking Omega sure as fuck isn't hiding."
"No, it isn't." Aethyta agreed, closing her omni-tool off and rising. She took my now-empty drink with her and headed to get us refills. "Especially not on that scale. I won't know until I get some more details from the station, but my gut says they were preparing for a full takeover of the place, and that that bitch T'Ravt is involved somehow."

I rubbed at my face and groaned. "Why the fuck... shit, we have no fucking idea why she would work with those things."

"Not until we get more information." She returned with more rum, pushing it into my hands before she slowly collapsed into her own seat. "But at least we know that she is working with them."

A little ball of self-loathing rolled around inside my gut at the implied thank you for the information I'd given her. Shit... I should have just trusted the ape when he'd said that she wouldn't be able to handle it. If I had, I would be back home with Ethy and Ghai instead of being stuck on this fucking trap of a station.

Shit, I could have least edited the fucking thing a bit first to remove some of the crap.

"You still want to kill him?" I asked quietly.

Aethyta's eyes narrowed before she flicked them away from me. "Some days I can understand his point, others... I want to fucking rip his red heart out and show it to him."

Meaning she was fine with him on her good days, and not so much on her bad ones. Go fucking figure.

"They still in Afterlife?" If they were, at least they'd be safe if she snapped again and decided to send a hit squad.

"No." Her expression darkened further. "They were seen boarding the Solar Eclipse two days ago... they are apparently going with to rescue Lyre."

They were...oh goddess. The fucking ape had had a shirt wrapped around his foot and been bleeding from his fucking eyes, and he was going to go on a fucking campaign to rescue some bitch he'd never met? Why the fuck... my eyes closed as I sagged, more self-loathing rolling in to try and drown me. Ghai must have told him, or Sederis had. He was stupid when his friends were in danger... meaning my fuck-ups were again putting him at risk of being killed.

"Probably a good thing." Aethyta continued speaking, her tone musing. "Kid's got a high success rate on his missions, even if his team doesn't always make it. They'll get Lyre out of there."

The reminder of everyone that he'd lost, that we'd lost, blew the fucking recrimination away and left an turbulent storm of anger in its place. "Why the fuck do you even care? She loathes you! Fucking changed her name and ran out to become a pirate!"

"She is my daughter." Aethyta replied, her own voice lowering to a growl. "And... shit Trena, look at me. My lifespan is decades instead of centuries."

None of my anger dissipated. "So fucking go yourself if you care so fucking much, or send one of your fucking commando teams with Vasir. Or did that bitch take them all in your little spat?"

"My teams are otherwise occupied keeping T'Ravt from fucking up anything else." Her thin fingers tapped slowly on her armrest before her tone shifted to something frigid.

I ignored the warning signs, I just didn't give a fuck if she lost her shit. "Way to ignore my fucking
point old fish. Athame's ass, why the fuck do it this roundabout way?"

"That's fucking obvious." Aethyta snarled right back at me, dark light rolling as she surged to her feet to loom over me. "Your bitch of a father took one of my little girls. Now she knows how that feels. She should consider herself fucking lucky I haven't found any of her other bastards to hold here with you."

I'd intended to piss her off, but she'd gone right past angry and straight into blood rage. Instinct said there was a furious Matriarch next to me, and that shutting the fuck up and not moving was the only thing that would keep me alive. Clenching my teeth together, I forced myself to look away and keep my fucking mouth shut before it got me thrown out the window.

Angry footsteps stomped away a few breaths later, and I felt myself flinch as glass shattered. The front door whirred open and then closed shortly thereafter, letting me slump back in my seat.

"Still have a way with the old fish I see." The voice of my second least favorite person in the galaxy drawled, "Brought up her kids again?"

"No." I groused, downing what was left of my drink. "She did that on her own. Unstable bitch."

"Unstable bitch with dirt on half the galaxy." Tela Vasir sauntered into view, her own drink held negligently in one hand before she occupied the seat that the latest Shadow Broker had departed. "And somehow I doubt you weren't at least partially responsible."

My lips twisted as I set my empty glass aside and grabbed my still smoldering pipe, "Yeah, well, this whole situation pisses me off."

"Personally I can't say that I blame you." The Spectre rolled a shoulder in a little shrug. "So let me the fuck out of here."

She gave me an almost apologetic grin, "Sorry, but right now that old fish is more important to, oh you know, galactic fucking survival than you are."

That pissed me off because it was true, and I furiously started puffing on my pipe, desperately chasing the pleasant buzz of drunkenness. After maybe three or four minutes of silent smoking and drinking, I blew out a white cloud and cursed quietly. "What can you tell me?"

She didn't bother trying to misunderstand me. Her hands pulled a small box from her belt, setting on her chair's armrest before flicking it on. A high pitch whine came and went, scrambling the listening devices that Aethyta was sure to have in the place.

After all, neither of us wanted Aethyta to realize that Vasir was giving me information. Less out of the goodness of her heart, I didn't think such a thing existed inside the Spectre, but because Vasir was as uncertain as to Aethyta's mental state as I was. If she went totally into the deeps, she wanted someone to have a good idea as to how much preparation was being done. Plus... it wasn't like I could fucking tell anyone and be believed, not that I'd ever make that mistake again.

"Your daughter's still safe, Ithiri and her personal guard are protecting her and that maiden."

I bowed my head a little in relief. Ithiri was a little bit crazy, but she'd raze Illium to the ground before she let her niece be hurt.
"I don't think she'd go that far." Vasir continued, "But I get the relief."

"You've admitted that she's unstable." I countered, "You have no idea how far she'd fucking go."

Blue lips twisted as the Spectre threw back the rest of her drink, then pointedly held her hand in my direction. Grimacing, I passed my pipe over, along with the bag of chehala leaves. She set to work refilling it, talking as she did. "No, but right now she's mostly keeping her shit together and giving us the intel we need."

My lips twisted, "How is that particular hunt going?"

"Slowly." Vasir muttered around my pipe, smoke coming from her nose as she exhaled. "Bau and Shepard don't have the resources they need to search the old Rachni clusters, and the Council isn't about to give them more. And since the only people who go into those systems are Citadel patrols and academic expeditions, there aren't exactly many leads to chase."

"Or people to bribe." It was my turn to drum my fingers. "How long until the Geth get there?"

Her expression darkened further. "Depends on how much of a fight the fucking Council puts up."

Not long then. "Sparatus still can't convince them to move their fucking fleets?"

"No." She practically spat the word. "Personally Tevos admits to understanding what the shit is going on, but the Matriarchs on Thessia have already made it clear that she'll be replaced if she tries to leave the currents they've chosen. She's doing what she can to free Lidanya to act but it's not much. Might be able to shake a few cruiser units free to reinforce the Hierarchy but no way she can take the core fleet out, much less the Ascension."

"Shit." I muttered, not bothering to ask what the Union was up to. The Salarians would never commit their fleet unless the Asari did as well, otherwise they'd risk upsetting the real balance of power in Council space. And the new human government had already made it clear that they're fleet was locked in place by the destabilizing situation in the Hegemony, which just left the Turians and whatever assets Lidanya could work free from the Citadel's combined fleet.

"They'll make it to Rachni space with just a few pointless fights," Vasir growled. "And then the Council will wash its hands and say there's nothing there, so why bother chasing them down?"

"And it's not like they'd believe you if you told them anything." Reaching out, I accepted my pipe back and puffed a few times on it. "Or did you try?"

"A team from the university of Serrice is due in two weeks to do a case study on the relay monument." She exhaled slowly, "Jagaraundi and T'Rahn have a few of their people watching it, and I'm working on conning Palin into stepping up large-response training."

"At least it's something." I muttered around the wood in my mouth, "Haven't tried to sneak any of it into Council reports?"

That earned me another small shrug, "Here and there, that's how I get Tevos to realize that some weird shit is up... but right now we're basically just treading water until Shepard finds that bloody bug. If we can prove the monument is a dormant relay, and she gets Ilos's location..."

I glowered at nothing. "You'll still never convince them to send a fleet into the Terminus."

"No, but if I can get a couple of Turian divisions on station we can stop that fucker from getting anywhere near the council tower."
Huh. That was... something at least. It would probably save a few lives, and remove any uncertainty about the shit that was coming. "Anything else?"

"Nothing you need to know about." Vasir shut down her jammer before leaning back in her chair, groaning almost lustfully as it reclined automatically. "Anything interesting happen while I was out?"

I glowered at her. "That shit wasn't funny the first time."

Her lips curled in a smirk as she shut her eyes. "Just reminding you of the status quo."

I gave her a rude gesture that she couldn't see, resisting the urge to lean back in my own seat for all of a minute before I gave up and extinguished my pipe. The seat practically molded to me as it slid backwards, and I felt myself closing my eyes. I didn't particularly want to sleep... but I didn't really have anything else to do.

Besides pray to the goddess that my bondmate and my best friend survived the next couple of weeks.

Next up is Saga III: Return To Sender

Chapter End Notes

And here we finally confirm a long-held (correct) theory that many of you had in regards to who killed the Yahg, although things aren't exactly going well for the old Matriarch since then. We also get some limited information about what preparations are being done in Council space.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Four Krogan in Blood Pack armor were waiting for us when the airlock hissed open, all standing with the bored expressions of guards who'd have much rather been elsewhere. Three were holding guns loosely, while another was holding a tablet that looked tiny in his grip as he walked forwards.

"Purpose and declarations." He rumbled, shifting his head slightly to better look at us with his right eye.

The tall human woman in front of me let out an annoyed sniff, her dark skin glistening with glittered war paint that matched the bright red mohawk she was sporting. "Restocking on gear, and I need a new pleasure slave. Broke my last one."

That seemed to amuse the Krogan, "Broke them?"

"Frail Turian bitch wouldn't stop whining after I declawed her." Her arms crossed impatiently. "Know where I can get a new one?"

"Subdeck seven." He chuckled darkly, "Not bringing anything for sale?"

She shook her head once. "Already sold our stock to Cessa's people."

That earned her a rumbling grunt, his eye flicking over the rest of us as he did. There was ten of us, all told. The four of us plus six Eclipse commandos, all wearing slightly mismatched armor painted in a variety of garish colors in the style that was currently popular among the smaller slaving groups.

I had to admit that the paint scheme did more than anything else to cover up who we were, it was disconcerting as fuck to see myself in mixed neon-green and yellow armor instead of my usual dour coloration. I was just glad to be one of the few with a helmet on, mostly to try and conceal my humanity, though it was harder than I thought to keep my posture that of an impatient lowborn rather than my usual upper class positioning.

Still, at least I was doing a better job than Illyan. Seven foot tall Asari weren't exactly common, so she was likewise stuck in Batarian armor. Male Batarian armor that was apparently pinching her in some rather uncomfortable ways, much to Voya's amusement.

Once the head guard was done inspecting us, he seemed to nod and then began a quick haggling session over the docking fees for the beaten down raiding vessel we'd arrived in. A bit of an extra
bribe convinced him to not bother searching the vessel, and to point us in the direction of the nearest restaurant that served us 'lesser' beings.

"All right you fucks." Captain Elissa Themes called out when he'd begun lumbering away, "Let's get moving. Keep your eyes open, don't want to lose anyone to poachers."

Making a show of bowing my head subserviently, I drew my old submachine gun and held the curvy Asari weapon in both hands. Illyan, Voya, and Shyeel all pulled Nysni's latest version of the Redcliffe carbine off of their backs, while the Eclipse agents drew a broader variety of weapons.

Thus prepared, we stepped out of the hanger and into Zadith Ban's primary orbital space station. Ganar and his fellow Krogan had some grandiose name for it that honored the old Krogan Empire, but to everyone else it was simply known as the Black Pit.

Even the lower reaches of fucking Omega were civilized compared to this place.

Vorcha moved around chaotically, chittering and hissing as they scurried about. Pirates and slavers moved in tight groups similar to our own, their own weapons held out as they cautiously watched everything around them. Krogan and the occasional Asari were the only ones bold enough to walk alone, lumbering or strutting about as if they were daring anyone to try and attack them. Slaves rarely moved at anything less than a full sprint, trying to accomplish whatever thankless errand they were on as quickly as possible so that they could return to the false safety offered by their masters.

I felt my teeth grind as I saw a young, collared Batarian male be clotheslined by a group of pirates, who howled with laughter as they shoved him towards an alley. He tried to scramble away only for several Vorcha to emerge and sink their claws into him, dragging his screaming form into the darkness.

"The sooner we get this done the fucking better." Voya snarled across our private comms, "It's like Kima was before Aria killed Garm."

"Welcome to the galaxy the Blood Pack would create." One of the two Eclipse Asari, Hasha I thought her name was, murmured softly. "Ganar might dream of the old Empire, but most of these things are just in it for the power."

Voya let out a furious sound as we walked past a bidding station, several numb humans standing with their heads bowed and wearing only collars listening as aliens fought over who would own them. "We are demolishing this place, right?"

"That's part of the plan." I reminded her quietly, "Provided our target is still on her ship."

"She should be." Ticker chittered through his own helmet, "Standard Blood Pack procedure is to keep the old crew on board, enslaved with chips and collars. Ensures they're familiar with the vessel and minimizes the number of Krogan or freelancers they need to crew the ship."

"They also usually execute the captain and command staff." I pointed out.

"True." The Salarian offered a human-style shrug, "Still, the target is supposedly intelligent and capable of hiding herself in the crew."

"Not like we can change plans if she's not." Illyan chimed in as Elissa abruptly shifted directions, guiding us into a decrepit hallway even more rundown than the rest of the station. Several Vorcha protested our abrupt appearance, for the few seconds it took us to shoot three of them and send the rest sprinting away at least.
The human woman lead us down several more dimly lit tunnels, then tapped out a passcode into a sparking keypad and hopped through a small airlock. Following her into the storage room, I quickly shifted aside to make room for everyone else amid the various boxes and other debris... along with the massive form that was apparently our contact.

"Little firebrand!" The black crested Krogan rumbled happily, making me blink as he actually scooped the human woman into a hug that left her cursing. He rumbled out a cheerful laugh as he set her down, several of her subordinates snickering along with him. "I love what you've done with your fur! I always thought the color of your kind's blood suited you, makes the right statement!"

"Chek." Elissa stepped back, glowering at the alien and stretching out her back as she groaned. "Christ, were you trying to break my back?"

"Bah, you're tough enough to take it." He grinned, shifting his head a bit to get a better look at the rest of us. "This all of them? Ten people isn't a lot to storm a cruiser with."

"That's why I brought people who specialize in killing old turtles." She replied, reaching back and banging a fist against my armor. "Cieran Kean, meet Raik Chek. Raik Chek, the only fucker I've heard of take down a biotic Krogan one on one."

"It was two on one." I reminded her irritably, my brain still trying to compute the image of a non-hostile Krogan... a cheerful, non-hostile Krogan, who had to be extremely old given his massive girth. "Stop exaggerating."

Raik Chek let out another laugh, "It was also a berserker human, you should crow more loudly about your kills. At least bare the remains of your slain enemies as your trophy-taker does."

"I could only convince him to carry them on his power armor." Voya chimed in as she stepped around me, digging her trophy necklace out of a belt pouch and quickly working on fastening it around her neck. "He's an odd human."

"Most of them are." He replied, leaning a bit closer and seeming to grin as he looked over her collection. "The Silver Blades. Your reputation precedes you. Many of the stupid younglings that Ganar gathers loath and fear you for what you did on Redcliffe."

"You don't?" I asked.

He barked out another laugh. "Of course not! You killed those who would kill you, nothing could be more properly Krogan. The younger generations are weak, they think that just being born gives them some right to life and rail against those strong enough to kill them. Okeer has the right of it."

Oh goddess, one of that crazy's followers. Elissa confirmed that when she crossed her arms again, "You remember the deal, Chek?"

"Of course." The Krogan seemed to settle into a more business-like stance, "Okeer's instructed all of us in his krannt to offer whatever aid is required to bring down Yulaz, the old fool has abandoned the very core of his beliefs in his desire for power."

I couldn't help but snort. "You mean he's losing the war."

Chek's cracked lips pulled back as he grinned at me, "That as well. I have the passcodes to get you onto your destination, and a path that will avoid the main patrols, but you have a greater problem. Ganar Iraz has chosen the vessel as his new flagship and is on board."

Elissa let out an irritated curse. "Yulaz's son is on board?"
When he simply nodded, Shyeel let out an irritated noise of her own. "Extra security?"

"No, the brat prefers the protection offered by his own arrogance." Several of us, me included, couldn't help but snort at that. "I merely warn that he is a formidable warlord in his own right, though his command of the soulgrip is far less than his sire's."

So he was a biotic, just not the planet-shattering badass that Yulaz was. I nodded slightly, "Thanks for the warning, we can handle it."

"If you could record it, I would compensate you for the entertainment such a thing would offer." The krogan offered hopefully, carefully pulling out a data drive and handing it to Elissa. "Did you need anything else, firebrand? Or can I try and get out of this system while my old hearts still beat?"

The human woman shook her head bemusedly, "Get out of here old man. Next time you're on Omega hit me up for drinks."

"I will do so." He promised, stepping closer to her and lowering his head to butt it against hers as gently as he seemed able. Then he was lumbering away, vanishing out of another door as quickly as his legs could carry him.

I watched him go, and then turned to stare at the Eclipse captain through my helmet. Her dark skin seemed to shift even more, "I killed his sister a few years ago, he's practically worshiped me ever since."

That sounded like an amusing story, but not one that we had time for. So instead I asked a more relevant question, "You trust him?"

She nodded, pulling her helmet off of its tassel on her belt. "I trust that he gave us good codes and data, and that he won't set off a general alert... but he might warn Iraz that he's got incoming to try and let us 'enjoy' a better fight."

"Krogan." Ticker sniffed irritably. As much as being around him had reminded me why I didn't like the guy, I had to fight to not agree with him in that circumstance. I vastly preferred killing people entirely unprepared to fight us.

"Right." I mused as I flicked my gaze around the image. That much seemed simple enough, "Can you bring up the ship's blueprints?"

She did so, letting us look over the Honored by the Pillars class heavy cruiser. I had no idea how Aethyta's daughter had gotten her hands on it, but it was certainly an impressive ship by Terminus standards... definitely powerful enough to have made her a very successful pirate. "Kean, we still running with the same plan?"

"Unless circumstances change." I winced badly as I dropped to one knee, my entire lower left leg throbbing. The painkillers I'd taken before our arrival were not winning their ongoing war with my
metabolism. "If I'm comparing the maps right, we're entering here. We secure that hold and then split up. Your team should be able to make it to the engines pretty quickly... might take us a little longer to get to the auxiliary bridge but not much."

Elissa grunted, "You'll have to be, we need the bulkhead controls to seal off as many of the defenders as we can."

"I know." I replied. "We'll get there. Just be ready to throw the engines to max power as soon as we give the signal to Sederis to jump in with her fleet."

"We'll get there." She mimicked a grin audible in her voice. "Is our bet still on?"

"Of course it is." Shyeel snorted. "You think we're turning down a week's worth of free drinks?"

The sole Turian on the Eclipse team let out a chirping sound, "Don't claim victory so early, we aren't molting younglings over here."

"Needle each other later." I cut in, speaking over Voya before she could start mouthing off. "Time's important. Let's get going."

"Agreed." Elissa rose easily, holding out a hand to help me up. I grimaced at the necessity of taking it, trying not to let out any sounds as she levered me up. She seemed to regard me through her helmet for a few breaths, as if making sure that I wasn't about to fall over, then nodded and motioned for everyone to follow.

We did, moving through another door and then down a stairwell that sounded as if it was going to collapse with each step we took. Things got less pleasant after that as we entered the bowels of the old station, moving through areas that probably hadn't been properly serviced in decades if not centuries. Here and there we found the remains of slaves who were probably the only reason that the place hadn't torn itself apart, along with the things that had killed them.

Vorcha, Varren, and feral things that might have once been actual people fled deeper into depths of the place at our approach. Which was irritating, because I personally really could have used something to kill as we moved.

Illyan settled a hand onto my shoulder, "I don't think I'll ever be comfortable in places like this again."

"Yeah." I fought the urge to step closer to her, my rear camera showing Voya and Shyeel moving closer to us as their heads swiveled at every noise. "Voya, you all right?"

"No." She snapped.

I winced at her tone, but it had been a rather stupid question. Instead of speaking again I simply picked up the pace as much as my aching body would allow. If the Eclipse soldiers noticed our twitchiness they were too polite to comment on it, instead wordlessly accelerating along with us, communicating only when Elissa needed to adjust our course.

It was a long-assed twenty minutes before we found a ladder made of metal rungs beneath a door that had had a picture flash-burned onto the metal.

Elissa let out a furious string of curses at the image of herself wearing absolutely nothing as she sprawled back in a bed, the rest of us letting out badly needed sounds of amusement. She waved her people up first, letting me step closer to her growling form.
"So... you have a thing for Krogan?" I asked.

"No." She spat. "I don't know how the fuck he got that, but when I find him..."

Snorting, I hauled myself up the ladder when it was my turn, letting Hasha help pull me up when I got near the top. Thanking her, I stepped aside to let Voya all but explode out the hatch, her legs quickly carrying her away from it. Grimacing, I stepped over to her hunched form and carefully tapped her shoulder. "Peak your head out and let me know what you see. Looking only, no killing yet."

She glanced at me through the slits in her mask, then jerked her head into a nod as it polarized to black. Moving over to the exit, she tapped Ticker and exchanged a few quiet words with him. His helmet dipped, and he tapped a few controls and stepped back as she brought her omni-tool up.

A few finger flicks later had her activating one of Aria's gifts for what her subordinates had done to us, her armor rippling and vanishing as the active camouflage unit whirred to life. The door slid open just wide enough for her to pass through, the air rippling just barely to mark her passage, and then hissed closed again.

It didn't take everyone else much longer to arrive, and I quietly told Elissa and Shy that I'd sent Voya to scout the local area. My friend was more concerned about that than the Captain, and used her improving Khellish sign language to yell at me for not waiting for her to come up so that she could go with.

I'd merely shrugged and flicked my fingers back at her, saying I'd wanted her to feel useful and to distract her.

There hadn't been anything she could say to that beyond crossing her arms in irritation and settling in with the rest of us to wait.

Voya slipped back in perhaps four minutes later, a minute or two shy of how long her system could keep her concealed. "Cargo airlock isn't sealed like the old Krogan said, but we'll have to rush across the hallway to get there."

"Patrols?" I asked.

"Nothing so regular." She shook her head, "Just things wandering around. We'll need Shyeel to stand point and call you across, my system needs time to cool."

"Patrols?" I asked.

"Nothing so regular."

Shyeel grunted, rising and moving forwards. What came next was something I'd normally associated with bad vids, from both my real life and implanted one, with her calling to us when it was time to dart across a brightly lit hallway and into the airlock on the other side. We had to stop twice thanks to wandering bands of Krogan, with Shyeel joining those already hiding behind containers while Voya had slipped out to take her place.

Twelve minutes later we were all across, Ticker and Voya working to override the controls to cycle the stupid thing while the rest of us shook out our weapons and got ready. It didn't take them long to shut the outer door at least, so we could move around openly and talk as we prepared ourselves.

"Full access to Aria's personal armory." Illyan grumbled as she looked down the sight of rifle, flicking it over to burst fire as she lowered it. "And you wouldn't let me pick out something more fun."

"You don't need a Revenant." I replied bemusedly, "It's an over-engineered finicky piece of shit anyway, and you'd have made me try and keep it working."
She cocked her head guilelessly. "So?"

I made sure that the safety was on my gun before whacking the butt of it across her head, which merely made her chuckle as I settled back to check over the rest of my kit. My new-old submachine gun, incendiary rounds loaded and the upgraded coolant system checked out, as did my reliable, albeit massively modified, Executioner. The only real change to the latter was that it was now expanded and ready in a new holster on my belt rather than collapsed in the same location. On the other side of my waist was a collection of grenades, primarily a mix of anti-biotic nullifiers and the SIU issue napalm bombs that Thul had gotten me hooked on so long ago.

Shifting my gun between my hands, I brought my war-gauntlets to life one at a time to make sure they were in working order, and then flicked my fingers over the brutal weapon now strapped to my right forearm.

"You sure about having one of those?" Shyeel asked darkly, clearly remembering her experience on Xentha. "They're not fun to be hit with."

"No." I admitted quietly, eyeing the submission net launcher before bringing my omni-tool up to run my tech-launcher through a few dry-loads. "But if we'd had one in the mines we could have taken that bitch alive... or I could have avoided wrestling with that fucking creature."

Even with her helmet I could imagine the grimace on her face, "Fair poi...enough."

"I haven't said that in ages." I snorted.

"No," She shook her head, as her hands ran over her own bandolier of grenades, "But I'm worried that if I actually say it you'll get back in the habit and that would annoy the shit out of me."

"Good to know you care about your sort-of friends."

"Goddess..." Illyan groaned as she moved over, "Are you two ever going to explain that?"

"No." We replied more or less in unison. She replied with a few curses about annoying short people, to which Shyeel retaliated by hitting her on the chest and making her curse as the armor further pinched at her breasts.

Smiling slightly, I left them to their bickering and moved over to stand next to Elissa, half-watching as her team finished their own preparation. Walking caused a general ache in my left leg, but nothing worse. I flexed the limb a few times as I moved before electing against taking anything further for the pain. We still weren't one hundred percent... or even eighty. Living on expired dry rations and minimal levels of water for two weeks, and combining that with high levels of physical activity was bad enough for your body before you added in the various wounds we'd accumulated. If it was anyone but one of us who needed help I can't honestly say that we would have done anything like the stupid crap we were about to try.

I opened my mouth to reconfirm the plan... then thought better of it. We were as ready as we ever were, and there hadn't really been any time to talk en route thanks to the medics insistence that the four of us spend as much of it as possible either sleeping or stretching out our aching limbs. It seemed as good a time as any to catch up. "Seems like you've done well for yourself since we last met."

"Same." She replied quietly. "I heard about your Batarian girl. Didn't much like her but I didn't want her dead either. Sucks."

"Yeah." I exhaled as a few memories of Rane floated to the surface. "Been a long two years."
"Can't have been that long, you still recognized me." She pointed out.

I shrugged. I didn't honestly know that many Eclipse commanders by name, so it hadn't been hard to remember her. "The mohawk is new."

"It's a pain to put a helmet over, but my boyfriend thought it made me look more dangerous." Elissa let out a soft exhale, "Stupid fuck got killed a year ago, but I liked it enough to keep it."

"Sucks." I echoed. "At least Chek liked it."

"If you make a joke about sex with him I'm going to-"

"If you two are done with the pointless human-reunion-banter thing," Ticker interrupted us, his quick voice annoyed, "We are quite prepared to enter the ship."

My eyes narrowed a little as I lowered my voice. "Two years and you didn't find even one suicidal job for that asshole?"

"Found four." She replied, equally sotto voce. "Little frog lived through them all."

"Damn." Rolling my shoulders out, I brought my gun up and rounded up my friends with a glance. "Right, let's get this over with."

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**Pillar of Strength**

*(Illyan T'Donna)*

Voya was reaching out to touch the controls when she paused, tilting her head. Cieran and Elissa both froze at more or less the same time, though it took me a few heartbeats longer to hear the muffled sounds of gunfire and screaming... sounds that were very much coming from inside the ship rather than out on the chaotic station.

The Quarian cursed and jammed a finger down on the open command, Cieran raising his voice as my body moved on reflex to stand just behind him and on his left. Since he seemed to have some kind of mental block about protecting that side of his body, it seemed prudent to be in a position where I could step up and take hits for his more abused half. "Pair up and spread out, focus fire!"

A chorus of helmet clicks came from the Eclipse team as the heavy doorway slid into the ceiling, and then we were moving forwards to join the weirdest firefight I'd seen in a long time.

Beings of several species, nearly all of them nude or wearing nothing but equipment belts, slave collars, and rags, were diving behind makeshift barricades and firing wildly as Vorcha and Varren tried to rush across the expansive cargo bay to get to them. It wasn't fast going for them, which was understandable considering how much random debris was in their way. It looked like it was mostly cots that had once been setup in orderly rows, but now were the only things keeping the small knot of revolting slaves from being immediately overwhelmed.

"High left." Cieran snapped, drawing my attention that way as I saw a Batarian in red armor directing this side of the battle from on top of a cargo crate. He flung his left hand forwards as I brought my rifle up, a blue disc snapping out from the launcher on hip at the gesture.

I exhaled and focused, firing off a burst at the same moment I saw the overload detonate in a burst of electrical arcs against his shields. The heavy rifle shoved against my awkward armor, driving hard angles right into places it didn't need to be, but the oversized rounds did a lot worse to my target's
"Nice shots." He hummed the words, and I felt my lips curl upwards at his approving tones. "Left and close."

"Got it." I replied, stepping around a cot before breaking into a quick loping stride as I realized his goal. The only obvious exit to the room was in that direction, near where the Batarian's leaking corpse was laying, and if we could get there we could pin these things in. Cieran followed behind me as we moved to flank the Blood Pack, who, as usual, were slow to realize the problem without a Krogan around to point it out to them.

Between my rifle and his submachine gun, we took down five or six Vorcha before they really began to react. One of them, actually wearing armor and moving far more stiffly than it's fellows, started to rasp surprisingly concise orders. Of course, doing that just made it a target, and his body more or less fell apart as all six of the Eclipse team focused their attention on him.

After that it was less like a battle and more like an organized killing spree, with Shyeel and Voya joining the Eclipse in quickly and efficiently dealing with the surviving members of the Blood Pack.

"Well." I mused as Cie made sure that the hatchway was shut and locked, "I kind of thought the plan would last a little longer before we ran into the pack-ice."

He snorted, shifting his weight a little off of his left leg again, but stayed focused on the mission. "Voya! Terminal over here."

The Quarian called something affirmative sounding, and got moving in our direction while Cie turned and started limping towards the slaves. He realized he was doing it after about four steps, slowed, and visibly forced himself to walk normally. The sight of it made me wince, and I nearly reached out to grab the stubborn idiot before realizing it would make him look weak in front of the Eclipse and our, apparent, new allies.

Biting my lip, I fought down the urge to help him and instead just kept pace with his slow strides.

Thankfully they were already leaving their sand-fortress, looking understandably stunned and confused about what was happening. They seemed to have a quick discussion amongst themselves before one of the few with any clothing stepped away from the rest and started walking towards us.

"Well." I couldn't help but grin as Cieran slowed to a stop, keeping my voice low enough to transmit just on our radios. "There's one part of the plan that went right."

"Yeah." Cieran exhaled as Lyre T'Voth approached us. She was purple skinned, and had white, swirling markings across her face and shoulders. Her only clothing was a slave collar around her neck, along with a technician's tool belt slung across her bare chest, but the human-made shotgun in her hands looked functional enough. "Stop staring at her chest."

I'd actually been looking a lot lower than that, but I averted my eyes anyway. "Yes boss."

"And don't call me that." He muttered.

Knowing him he would have said more, but Aethyta's pirate daughter spoke up before he could continue. "Who in Athame's name are you and what are you doing here? If this is some kind of slave raid-"

"We would have hit the markets." Cieran finished for her, "We're not here for slaves, Lyre. We're here for you."
The Asari blanched, stepping back from us. "What!?!"

"Sort of." He amended tiredly. "We're kind of also stealing this ship before the Golden Armada blows this station to pieces."

"And we're probably going to kill Ganar Iraz." I added in, "Since he's here."

There was a snort from my human... I wasn't sure what to call him considering that we still hadn't slept together thanks to a set of very annoying Eclipse medics who hadn't left us alone long enough for me to make any kind of move. "That too."

"...who are you?" Lyre T'Voth managed after a few more breaths worth of confused gaping.

"He's Cieran Kean, Reyja'krem of the Pillars of Strength," I ignored the armored elbow as it slammed into my chest and kept going, "And Commander of the Silver Blades Lancer detachment. I'm Illyan."

"Right..." She seemed to gather herself, "I've heard your names, in intel reports I think."

I didn't have to see through his helmet to know that the fur above Cieran's eyes had just risen in amusement, "He understands the concept of... no, we need to stay on mission. We need to take this ship and get it moving as soon as possible. Do the blueprints match the actual vessel? We need to get to the engines and the auxiliary bridge."

More blinking, then she shook herself and nodded. "Right... you're right, I can worry about whatever storm sent you later. If Sederis is involved I can't imagine she'll be patient. Yes, the blueprints match, but Iraz works closely with the Scarlet Tears, there's a lot of them on board. You'll need help to get to where you're going."

Cieran crossed his arms, "The kind that involves removing a lot of slave collars, Lyre?"

"If you can hack the ship's systems and send the deactivation signal, there's four times as many of us on board as there are them." A hand rose to finger the thick band of metal, "And don't call me Lyre, I gave that stupid name up a long time ago. Call me Joa."

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**Alliance News Network**

…the last units of the Geth fleet have vanished into Rachni space after activating several dormant relays, utilizing them to bypass the Hierarchy Fleet's attempts to bring them to battle. How the Geth were aware of just where each relay lead is currently unknown, but the Council has vowed to investigate the newly opened star clusters expansively as soon as the threat has passed.

When pressed as to why they are not committing the Council Fleet, the Council's representative replied; "No Comment."

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**Next up is Chapter 2: …Then hoist the Black Flag**

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Chapter End Notes
And here we go again, launching right back into the thick of things. A long teased character has finally arrived, a few very old faces return, and the team actually had a mission where things didn't go wrong until they were an hour into the operation. ;)

The next chapter will cover the fighting to clear the ship and the struggle to get it the hell out of the combat zone before Sederis shows up to blow everything to hell. After that we're going to get a kind of combined-aftermath section, with Cie finally able to sit down and just breathe after everything that's happened to them over the last month.

I was hoping to get this done faster, but work had me travelling again this week. The good thing that came out of that was that I finally had no excuse to avoid sitting down and outlining the crap out of the rest of this story (replacing the sparse general one I was following).

Additionally, I have added a new poll to my profile page (it will be at the very top), concerning one reviewer's desire for a summary of the (many) characters who have appeared throughout the series. Please take a moment to vote if you would be so kind.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Saga III: Then Hoist the Black Flag

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Saga III: Return to Sender

…Then hoist the Black Flag

Date: 05-21-2184

Location: Heavy Cruiser Reliant, high orbit of Zadith Ban, Anti-Spinward Terminus

I'd forgotten how much I hated fighting aboard ships.

It was all of the chaos of fighting inside of an enclosed space, made even less fun by having to actually care about keeping the collateral damage to a minimum. The lack of snipers and rubble was really the only thing that made it a slight improvement over urban combat, though I'll admit to not really considering the few good things about the situation at the time.

Mostly because Aethyta's daughter was as head strong and annoying as the old bitch herself was.

"Stay fucking down!" I snarled at Joa, grabbing her by the shoulder with my left hand and hauling her out of the way a few heartbeats before a Varren leaped out from a cabin doorway. It snarled as its claws barely missed her stumbling form, then yowled in agony as my SMG stitched a line of bloody holes across its side.

The Asari pirate cursed and tried to get her shotgun up, only to let out a snarl when Voya kicked her left leg out from under her as she rushed past to deal with a Vorcha who was leaning out from another cabin to fire wildly at us with a pistol. The light rounds splashed across her armor before she hit it in a smooth tackle, her blades flashing as she tore at it.

"Stop fucking-" I absently brought my left fist around in a tight arc that ended in one of the Joa's bare breasts, drawing a high pitched yelp and ending her bitching.

I'd have remonstrated her verbally as well, this with the third goddess damned time she'd tried to get involved in the actual fighting, but I was interrupted by the arrival of of another Vorcha pack diving through the closing airtight doors in our section of the hallway, shrieking warcries as they joined the fight.

Illyan and Shyeel both shifted aside, their heavy carbines booming out rounds that sent the viral aliens to the decking, but the creatures were fast and two of them got past the Asari duo.

One flung itself at Voya just as she had begun to rise, violent cursing emerging from her helmet as she went right back down, while the other tried to shove its gun right against my helmet to blow my head off. Catching the weapon with an armored hand, I shoved it aside to let it discharge uselessly against the bulkhead while ramming my own gun into its throat and putting a five round burst through its neck.
"Oh for Athame's fucking sake." Shyeel cursed as she drop-kicked the thing struggling with Voya, executing it only once it was on the floor. "Voya, use your goddess damned gun!"

The Quarian started to growl something back, but her voice was swamped by the cacophony of yet another minor battle erupting in this section of the ship. Vorcha, lead by a single Scarlet Tear, sprinted out of a connecting hall, stumbling to a halt as they saw us. The pause proved to be fatal, as the crew members who had been pursuing them promptly caught up and swarmed over them.

One of the latter even had the good sense to slam the airtight bulkhead shut across the hallway, blocking any chance for the enemy to retreat back the way they'd just come. In that, at least, the warship's design was working in our favor.

Like most Batarian warships, the interior of this one was essentially an armored honeycomb, complete with massive blast doors that could seal off the various sections as needed. Thanks to Voya and Joa, we'd been able to seal and unseal the various sections as we'd moved through the vessel, doing quite a bit to limit the defender's ability to get at us.

Of course there was a disadvantage, we'd lost nearly ten minutes as the pair of them had struggled to keep someone else from venting the air out of the deck we'd been on. Not that it would have bothered us, but we sort of needed Joa and her people.

"Elissa," I spoke into my comms, half watching the furious crew beating the Blood Pack members to death with their bare hands, half paying attention to planting my foot on top of Joa's bare toes to keep her in place. "We've reached deck five."

"We're approaching engineering control." The Eclipse Captain reported back. "Resistance is increasing."

"We noticed." I grimaced. Getting control of the ship's internal communications had actually been Voya's main priority, and between her and one of Joa's officers she'd been able to bring it all down before we'd left the cargo bay. It had let us get most of the way to our target with only minimal resistance, but it had only been a matter of time before Ganar or the Scarlet Tears realized that they had company on board.

"I'm sending the signal." I exhaled after a few moments furious thought on the matter. The plan had been to call in the Armada only after we'd seized our targets and gotten moving, but if the Krogan on the bridge could get a message to the station and demand reinforcements on board...

We needed them distracted, and a giant Eclipse fleet would definitely do the trick.

"...agreed." She replied, "We'll double time it. Eclipse out."

Cutting the line, I glanced over to Shyeel to see her already pulling her omni-tool up. A few quick flicks of her fingers sent the signal to the docked ship that we'd arrived in. The glowing panels above her wrist gave a single ping to show that the automated systems had received the message, then shifted to show a timer rapidly counting downwards.

Joa grunted from behind me, "Three minutes? Where the fuck was the fleet?"

"Just outside the system's halo." I replied, mildly impressed by her ability to focus... even if I could have done without her being so damned determined to personally take her ship back "Theory was that the Blood Pack wouldn't have their sensors calibrated that far out."

"Good theory." She exhaled. "That fucking hurt by the way."
"That was the point." I replied. "Stop fucking trying to get in front of us; focus on keeping your officers alive."

"They can handle themselves." Her lips twisted. "Get off my-"

I half turned and grabbed her shoulder, squeezing just hard enough to make her flinch and shut up. "I get this is your ship, I get they did shit to you. But you aren't wearing armor, and I need you to fucking 

Said crew behind her blinked, flinched, or twitched mandibles in surprise. Most of the group we'd run into in the cargo bay had peeled off as we'd moved, grabbing the rest of the crew and helping to get their collars off before organizing them, but she'd kept the ones she'd need to man the auxiliary bridge once we got there.

Joa glowered at me as I finished talking, tugging her leg back until I pulled my weight off of her foot. "I'll take it under advisement, mercenary. Auxiliary bridge is two sections ahead, we need to stop wasting time."

I could only exhale tightly, shoving my own annoyance to the side. She'd made it very clear that killing Ganar Iraz was extremely important to her, and that he'd done some fairly savage things to a lot of her people.

And I wasn't exactly in a place where I could tell someone else to not seek vengeance. Not that I really 

Shaking my head, I turned away from her and pushed off with my bad leg. It promptly released a long throb of pain that radiated up from my ankle, making me glad for the helmet that hid my grimace.

"Right, let's get moving. You and yours stay in the back, Shyeel, Illyan, take point."

Voya's head shifted, the visor hiding the glare that I knew was directed at me. I ignored it entirely, hefting my gun up to remind her to actually draw her own. She did after an annoyed mutter, slowly falling in beside me as we started moving towards the closed blast door.

The crew had finished killing their prey, grabbing the dead Pack member's weapons and scattering aside as we approached. Joa quickly began snapping orders at them to make sure the other cabins on this deck were clear as Illyan flicked the controls, the heavy metal sliding out of our way.

Gunfire promptly, and unsurprisingly, lashed out at us, though not terribly accurately. A pair of Scarlet Tears, Turians, had managed to get a half-dozen Vorcha into something like a defensive position, but half of them were still mostly in the open and had clearly been bickering with the mercenaries; their heads snapping back to the front even as we started shooting back.

As usual, we dealt with the Vorcha first. Shyeel and Illyan dropped four of them in as many seconds with quick, efficient bursts of gunfire. Voya and I dealt with the last two; our lighter weapons killing them just as quickly, and leaving us with a mere pair of opponents... who didn't last much longer.

One turned and fled, leaving his companion to absorb the fire coming at him from all four of us. His own shots didn't to much more than nudge at our shields before he collapsed, cobalt blue blood spraying from his rent armor.

"Dammit." Shyeel cursed, breaking into a loping run to try and catch the other before he could attract more attention. Illyan easily kept pace with her, with Voya and I doing our best to keep our aching bodies moving behind them.
Both Asari gave up on running after a few breaths, instead simply flashing ahead to take down the target before he could try and seal the next section. Shyeel's was textbook, her biotic movement leaving her with her rifle right against the back of the Turian's helmet. Illyan's... was much less so, the larger Asari flashing forwards at an angle.

Voya barked out a weak laugh as she slammed into a wall, armor clattering as she fell on her ass and clutched at her head.

"Illyan..." I sighed as we reached her, reaching out to help her get up.

She had the decency to sound sheepish as she pulled at my arm, hauling herself up, "Sorry Cie. Thought I could manage it."

"Wanted to show off you mean." Voya continued to cackle, drawing a rude gesture from the Asari as I waved for them both to get moving again. They did so, the Quarian's snickering seeming to rejuvenate her as we drew closer to our target.

I honestly expected some kind of fight when we got there, one that would have been extremely annoying given that we'd have to be careful not to shoot up the control consoles when we stormed the place. But when the door slid open, the only thing that came out was a bit of dust kicked up by the ship's ventilation system.

"Huh." Shyeel grunted, sounded as nonplussed as I felt. She carefully stepped inside, Voya following as they checked around and behind the cramped stations. "That's... weird."

"Iraz is an idiot when it comes to security." Joa snorted as she pushed past me, her five subordinates following. "He was all proud of buying some Drell slave to reprogram our access codes. Moron never realized the guy barely knew how to operate an omni-tool."

Illyan snorted, lowering her weapon as the pair of us came in last, sealing the hatch behind us. "If he's so stupid how did he end up in command here? Nepotism?"

"He's got a good tactical mind." The pirate twisted her lips, as though it physically pained her to admit as much, "And he's got a decent brain for naval tactics."

I nodded slightly, leaning back against a bulkhead and watching as her officers kept working. "He just has issues with details? Sounds like most Blood Pack commanders."

She opened her mouth to reply, then winced as alarms began blaring overhead. A Turian male, who'd managed to to at least grab a few pieces of armor from a dead Scarlet Tear, flicked his mandibles as he glanced up. "Eclipse fleet just arrived in system Captain... by the spirits, the Solar Eclipse itself is here."

"Get a communications line open." Joa started giving orders before I could, "Identify us to them, I'd rather not get shredded by that monster. Report off by systems."

"Communications are ours." The same Turian replied at once, "I'm cutting the main bridge out of the Pack's network."

"Secondary batteries are under local control... but I think we can override the point defense array." A young Asari reported, biting her lip as she examined data scrolling past on her screen. "Some of the other officers have hit the command keys you indicated, I think we control a third of the ship right now."

Joa glanced at her sharply. "You think?"
"Might be a little more." The maiden shrugged a bare shoulder. "Ven, passing you the data, can you confirm them?"

The Turian nodded, stepping over to look at her data before darting back to his station to start repairing the ships intercom system. While he did that, the other male Turian present let out a chirp of success. "Killed power to the primary guns, should make us less of a target."

His Captain nodded in approval before flicking her gaze to the final station. "Engines?"

"Engines are... not responding, I think the Eclipse team must still be fighting in there because we aren't accelerating either." Asari number three scrunched her nose up, "I've got sensor data at least. We're away from the station and drifting above and behind the Pack fleet, barriers are up and stable... Athamé's... that dreadnought just blew the Jarrakot in half."

Joa exhaled, "Get that data on the main table for me. Ven, soon as you have comms up, get a general broadcast out. All crew who are still alive are to gather behind bulkhead seven, we'll vent the air out from everything in front of that. We'll kill everything in our half the hard way."

"Ma'am."

I forced myself to walk normally over to the holographic table, trying not to show that I was leaning on it as I waited for the images to come up. "Venting the air will probably only get rid of the Vorcha and Varren."

"Probably." Joa flicked her gaze towards me and my companions, "I'm assuming you'll help us clear them out?"

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. The notion of fighting Krogan in enclosed spaces was one that I would have avoided even if I was fucking healthy. Athamé's ass, all I wanted to do was to drag Illyan to the nearest bed so that I could use her as a body pillow to pass out on top of.

"Not like we have anything else to do." I exhaled, going for confident but knowing I that just sounded tired. "Assuming you stay here and don't do anything stupid."

Purple-blue lips pressed together as the display flickered, "Are you going to tell me why you need me alive? I'm assuming it has something to do with my useless bitch of a mother."

"You'd be correct." My right shoulder shrugged. "She what?"

"You heard him." Shyeel sighed, moving to stand on my left. "Bitch doesn't really care for us, especially since Sederis took one of your sisters hostage after Aethyta tried to murder her."

Joa blinked several more times, then seemed to groan and rubbed furiously at her face. "Athamé's fucking... this is why I fucking left, too much goddess damned drama."

I couldn't help but snort, turning my head to watch as symbols marking ship positions began to appear. "I can understand that."

"Can you?"

My lips twisted a bit, "If this ship has a bar, I'll happily have a few drinks and bitch out your mother with you when this is over."
"It'll take more than a few drinks to get through all the shit she's done." Illyan pointed out.

Grunting, I dipped my head to accept the point. For her part, Aethyta's daughter simply snorted, but her body language relaxed minutely and her tone became far less cautious. "You were some of her agents, weren't you? She never did treat them well."

"Something like that." I admitted, bringing a hand up to open my link to Elissa. "But we can talk about that after this is done. Elissa, engines?"

The sound of a heavy gunshot preceded the woman's voice, "Just finishing up, crew are getting them back online. Bit of collateral damage thanks to a pyromaniac Vorcha, slowing them up a bit. You already secured your target?"

"We did." Not that we'd had to fight to do so. "Leska is here and engaging everything, I'll keep you updated."

"Sounds like a plan. We're going to stick around until we're in the clear." Meaning that she wasn't about to let them throw the ship into FTL until more Eclipse troops could be brought on board to make sure that Joa couldn't try and get out of going to Illium with us.

I murmured a few quick words in reply, then settled in to watch the naval battle unfold.

Leska had rolled in with her flagship and its attendant battlegroup, forming up in an odd formation as they approached the planet and its defending fleet at a high angle. Her dreadnought had a good dozen cruisers in a tight cluster around it, while her lighter vessels were moving in pairs or trios in a hemispheric screen in front of them.

The Blood Pack had already lost several light ships, red markers showing the wreckage as they scrambled to pull their core fleet back and into some kind of formation. They didn't seem to be having an easy time of it, probably since we were absconding with their flagship, and were grouping up in three different flotillas rather than a single formation.

"Warlords must be bickering about who is in command." Joa murmured, leaning forwards as she watched the images shift. "One group protecting the station, another moving to low orbit to block any invasion, and a third trying to move to surround us."

"I'm not much of a space tactician." I spoke, mostly to pass the time as we waited, feeling the deck shudder beneath my boots as the engines roared to life. "I know the theory but that's about it. The situation looks all right, yes?"

"Better than all right." She rolled a shoulder in a shrug, bringing a hand up to indicate the ships trying to escort us and then the approaching Eclipse force. "She's going to roll the Eclipse in... two minutes, give or take, and rake those light cruisers with her broadside guns. Her strike ships will finish them off as they pass, but they'll stay close to the dreadnought. If the Pack stay true to form the frigates trying to herd us will dart in for torpedo runs to give their warlord time to take his ship back."

The wave hit the beach in my head as I correlated the information I was seeing to the memories of studying traditional naval battles. "I get it, their close enough to overlap their secondary batteries."

Joa nodded. "They might take a few hits but those frigates will disintegrate. After that... probably rotate her screen between her and the station, and just keep pace with us until we're secure to hit FTL."

The next several minutes played out more or less exactly as she'd stated. Leska's old capital ship tore apart the three larger ships trying to catch up to us, the Krogan ships disintegrating when her cruisers
joined in the barrage thirty seconds later. Nine or so frigates promptly flipped away from us and accelerated towards the Asari ships, the remaining four electing to make a run for it instead.

That turned out to be the wiser move, with none of the attackers doing more than scratching the armor on a few of the strike cruisers before falling apart beneath the combined barrage of GARDIAN lasers. While that was occurring, more sections of our ship started to report in, the Blood Pack being pushed into the front half of the ship as more members of the crew had their collars removed and joined the revolt.

"We'll have our half of the ship soon." Joa half closed her eyes as her people kept chirping out reports, most of them revolving around how many sections they'd managed to reclaim, or how the Eclipse force was forming in an escort formation around us. "Losing too many of my people in the process."

"Price of rebellion." Shyeel spoke quietly, "Could have been a lot worse."

"I know." Her lips twisted a little as she shook her head, " Took me years to get enough people to run this ship, they were a solid bunch."

"You'll still have a solid core to build from." My fellow Reyja'krem seemed determined to reassure her, and quickly began asking more detailed questions about the ship. The technical ones drew Voya into the conversation, and I found my own interest rising up until Illyan hauled me away and dragged me over to the side of the room.

I grabbed her hands before she could pull my helmet off, blinking in confusion. "Illyan?"

"You need painkillers." She replied, deftly twisting her wrists out of my grip and then seizing my helmet again. "Especially if we're about to go after a biotic Krogan."

A steady throb from my ankle informed me that she had a point, and I gave her a slight nod as she pulled the protection off. Pills were quickly pushed in front of my face, and then into my mouth when I opened it to tell her to slow down for a moment. I glowered at her before dry-swallowing the things, grimacing as they went down. "Illyan."

"Someone has to take care of you." She replied without a hint of shame, hefting my helmet up as if she was going to put it back on for me. "You're kind of terrible at doing it on your own."

I glowered at her and jerked my head back, "I can put the stupid thing back..."

She shifted a little closer as my voice trailed off, keeping her body between me and Joa to hide my shaking hands. For my part I exhaled and leaned back against the bulkhead behind me, lowering my limbs and closing my eyes. Hands carefully made sure that my hair was secure through my neck guard before lowering my helmet into place, and then strong fingers were wrapping around mine.

"Almost done with this." Illyan spoke quietly. "We wait for the Eclipse to get more people on the ship, we help them kill Ganar, then we're done. We can go home for a while."

I felt her strength keeping my hands in place even as my muscles kept twitching. What was worse was that I could feel the panic starting to bubble up, the threat of hyperventilation coming with too many memories of what we had just gone through. What I'd gone through before that... and before that... and... No. If I kept sitting here I'd have a break down, I had to be moving. I had to do something. "Yeah... and no. Let's just... let's just get this over with."
Even with the helmet in the way I knew she'd just blinked in confusion. "Cie?"

"Let's go kill Ganar." I exhaled. "It's an objective, something I can focus on. We'll kill him and call it a day."

"That's..." Her voice trailed off when I tilted my head sharply to the right, silently informing her that I hadn't been making a suggestion about it. "Right. So... we just fight our way to the bridge and attack a biotic Krogan and Athame knows how many guards?"

"We won't attack him, we're just going to kill him." Flexing my fingers, I pulled one hand away from hers to draw my hand cannon from its makeshift holster. "There is a difference. Joa!"

The pirate leaned around from where she'd been conversing with Shyeel and Voya, "What?"

"I need a straight path to the bridge, and I want everything sealed along that route so we don't run into any problems."

Shyeel made a groaning sound and hung her head, and even Voya's body language showed surprise.

"Cie...?" The Quarian trailed my voice questioningly. "What are you doing?"

"I don't feel like sitting around anymore." I replied. "So I'm going to go kill Ganar. Feel free to come with."

Joa just sort of gaped at me. "Kean, he's five centuries old and a powerful fucking biotic. Sederis the younger is already loading up a commando team to shuttle over to deal with him before we leave the system, why not wait-"

"Captain." I all but snapped her title, causing her to blink rapidly as her mouth clicked shut. "Secure a route to the main bridge. Please."

She stared at me for several breaths, then shook her head and muttered something involving funerals before raising her voice and snapping out the appropriate orders.

Illyan carefully let go of my other arm only once she was sure it wasn't shaking anymore, letting out a long exhalation as she drew her rifle. "So... what's the plan?"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know when I have one."

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**Pillar of Strength**

"This is a bad plan." I protested for the tenth time as we strode down the broad hallway, stepping over the dead forms of asphyxiated Vorcha. "A terrible one even."

"That's because it's *not* a plan." Voya growled, "It's a fucking impulse decision. Why aren't we stopping him?"

"You want to try, feel free." I offered, waving a hand at where Cieran was stalking out in front of us, and managing to keep my mouth shut about Voya being the one to bitch about impulse decisions.

"You are the one in a relationship with him." She countered. "You're also the only one who can restrain him."

Which was a complete and total fucking lie. The little bitch could take Cieran if she felt motivated enough, mostly because he wouldn't go all out against a friend whereas she wouldn't hesitate for a
heartbeat to cause him all kinds of pain.

"Voya, Illyan." Cieran called back, his voice a little irritated. The 'I can hear you, so fucking shut up' both unsaid yet entirely audible. I really had no idea how he managed to do that... maybe he'd picked it up from Ghai during their melding sessions, or just from hanging around her so much back in the old days.

Grimacing, I turned to look at the only one of us who wasn't actively wondering if Cie was finally suffering from a total mental collapse.

Shyeel shrugged when she noticed that both Voya and I were staring at her, taking a few quicker steps to move closer to Cieran's left side. "Sooner Ganar is dead, sooner we can finally relax."

I felt my face pull into a glower. What the fuck was going on where Voya was the one being reasonable and Shyeel was the one agreeing with the stupid plan to go kill a Warlord.

The smaller Asari let out a tired sigh when I kept my helmet locked on hers, "Illyan, we're all exhausted, and having down time in between fights isn't doing us any good. We might as well just get it over and done with so that we can settle down without having to worry about what's coming next."

"But we could be done with this," I argued, "We could just leave this to Elissa and-"

"No." Cieran cut me off, his voice quiet but hard. "That's not a message I want to send to Sederis."

My lips twisted a little, but I couldn't really find a counter-argument for that. That old bitch really wasn't someone the Cie, and by extension the rest of us, could afford to show weakness to. Our little corporation was in a fairly precarious position when it came to working with the Eclipse, and if she thought we were skipping out on helping her troops...

"I really hate that bitch." I settled for muttering.

"She's better to work with than T'Ravt." The human male shrugged a shoulder before holding a hand up for us to stop. We did just in time to hear a Krogan roaring somewhere up ahead of us, his deep voice echoing down the hallway. "Sounds like he got Joa's message."

"Yeah." Shyeel took a step forwards as a massive clang rang through the ship, the closed door in the distance bulging outwards as something struck it. "You sure about this?"

"No." He admitted before twitching his head. "You three get to cover."

I glowered at the back of his skull for a few moments, then reluctantly moved to a nearby hatchway. Settling down to a knee, I hefted my gun up and sighted on the distant blast door as Shyeel and Voya did the same on the other side of the hall. While we did the sensible thing, Cieran spun his hand cannon in one hand and simply stayed standing right in the middle of the fucking open.

I wanted nothing more than to grab him and lock him in a room so that he could properly calm down, and felt my biotics flaring a bit around my forearms in time with the waves of anger.

"Calm down." The asshole had the temerity to sound amused as he shifted his balance, stretching his legs out a bit.

"It's her job to worry about you." Shyeel spoke as she brought her carbine up, settling it against her shoulder. "I think the over-protectiveness is kind of cute."
Voya snorted, "I think it's annoying."

I bit my tongue to stop from sniping back, which nearly made me bite the thing off when the Krogan Warlord finished smashing his way through the sheet of solid metal.

Ganar Iraz was fairly large as far as Krogan went, about the same size as the one we'd met on station. He wore heavy armor sans a helmet, painted blood red, and held a massive warhammer in both hands. It crackled with dark energy as he lowered it, his head turning slightly so that he could better see us with his right eye. Behind him lurked several other Krogan, all similarly armored though bearing actual firearms, though they seemed to be staying a respectful distance behind their lord.

"Who the fuck are you!??" His deep voice easily carried the thirty or so meters down the hall. "Where is the bitch!??"

"My name is Kean." Cie replied blithely, his helmet speakers increasing his own volume. "And Joa isn't here."

"Obviously!" The Krogan snarled, taking a heavy step forwards. "Tell me where she is and I might let you live!"

Cieran let out a scoffing noise. "No you wouldn't. Are you going to come and try to kill us or are we going to waste more breath talking? I have things to do."

I had to give him credit for the sheer arrogance he poured into the words. He managed to sound both bored and irritated, and shifted his body as he shook his head to reinforce that he barely considered the Krogan to be any kind of a threat.

Iraz reacted more or less as Cie had hoped, letting out a furious roar and stampeding directly towards us as biotic power flared around him.

Three of us started shooting at us, but not at the Warlord. Heavy bursts from my carbine began slamming into his bodyguards, who had started to rush after their blood-raging boss. Unfortunately they had the good sense to have helmets on, preventing us from simply killing them quickly, but they didn't seem to enjoy being shot at given that they couldn't risk shooting back with Ganar in the way.

Our own shots didn't last much longer, the three of us managing to bring the barriers of one of our targets down before the Warlord was on top of us, his massive hammer whirling towards Cieran's skull.

What happened next was... rather anticlimactic.

Cieran easily ducked beneath the wild swing and took a quick step forwards and inside of the taller Krogan's guard. The Warlord had a moment to goggle at him before the heavily modified Executioner in Cieran's right hand was shoved into his unprotected throat, his biotic protection unable to do anything as the massive cannon began booming.

The rounds went directly up and through his skull, shattering his crest and spraying the human in orange blood... and then he was quickly stepping back to avoid being crushed by the corpse as it collapsed with a massive clatter of noise.

"Huh." Cieran offered into the absolute silence that followed, the four surviving guards all just staring at the scene before them. "Well... you four mind surrendering?"

They didn't, their guns snapping up in reply to his offer, but they'd seemed to have lost any appetite for just rushing us. Instead they began firing in a controlled rhythm as they retreated back the way...
they’d come, forcing Cie to dart behind me as shots rang off of his shields and then his brightly colored armor.

I brought my gun up and replied in kind, trying to focus on the same target, raising my voice so that Cieran could hear me over the gunfire. "Feel better?"

"Not really." He admitted, leaning out a bit and flinging his left hand out. An incinerate spun out from his launcher in reply, sailing down the hall to detonate in a flash of fire. The Krogan's continuous retreat prevented it from doing more than make one of them bellow in pain, his companions moving to block Voya's shots from finishing him off.

And then they were gone, retreating through the shattered blast door and lumbering into runs that would carry them back to the bridge proper.

"Sad when the guards are smarter than their boss." Shyeel mused as she cautiously stepped out from cover, "We didn't even get to use the plan."

"Cieran hits him with a submission net and then we all shoot him isn’t a plan." I reminded her, heaving myself back up to my feet and feeling my armor pinch at my breasts as I did. The pain worsened my already bad mood as I turned to stare at Cie, "We're going back now."

Cie cocked his head slightly, "You don't want to clear out the bridge while we're here?"

Snapping my left arm out, I grabbed him by the armored collar around his throat and dragged him against my front. He promptly made gagging sounds as I got my fingers around the thing, all but chocking him as I turned to our companions. "Mind watching my back? I have something to drag out of here."

Shyeel gave me a slightly theatrical wave, and Voya's eyes were curled in wicked amusement as her visor unpolarized.

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**Illium News Network**

*Stocks stabilized somewhat as the majority of the Golden Armada returned from Omega, although Admiral Leska Sederis and her flagship remain absent. Careful observation by our reporters indicate that her ships departed in the direction of Zadith Ban, possibly heralding an Eclipse invasion of the Blood Pack's strongest remaining world.*

*In other news, economic groups hoping that the situation will soon stabilize in the Terminus are growing increasingly confident as the war continues to turn against Emperor Ganar and his supporters. The current over/under as offered by the Commission in Nos Irrail is seven months.*

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**Next up is: Sins of the Daughter...**

Chapter End Notes

Happy new year to all, may work not be terrible and writer’s block not be a thing. Both combined to make this chapter take forever to come out, you all have my apologies for
the long delay. The next chapter will feature a lot of discussion between the group and Joa, and then Cie and Illyan will have a bit of a talk of their own... it shouldn't, shouldn't, take nearly as long to write.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
The ship's lounge had been used hard by the the vessel's occupiers, but we'd managed to get it back into working order once Leska had gotten a few dozen commandos on board to help clear out the last remnants of the Blood Pack.

"We'll make it to Omega." Joa groaned as she settled onto a chair, finally wearing clothes. They were old, stained, and didn't quite fit her, but at least it stopped Illyan from staring at her chest. "But the ship is going to need quite a few repairs before we could think about anything else."

I grunted from my own seat, helmet tossed aside to let me enjoy a glass of rum. It was badly watered down, thanks to Illyan refusing to give me anything sharper in light of everything that had happened.

My hands had started shaking again shortly after I'd killed Iraz, and I'd followed that up with a near-panic attack once we'd gotten a few blast doors sealed between us and the surviving Krogan. Illyan had held onto me while Voya and Shyeel had stood guard, letting me work through it before dragging me here so that I could sit quietly.

It wouldn't have been so bad if I could have fucking pointed at something that had caused it... I hadn't had any memories or reminders of something that had happened. I'd felt fine, then the hyperventilation and unrelenting anxiety had set in. And now, in the aftermath, I felt drained and emotionally exhausted in ways that I shouldn't have been considering how little had gone wrong on this operation.

"Your crew and the Eclipse can work on that while you come to Illium with us." I spoke quietly after sipping from my drink, "We'll arrange a shuttle back once your mother releases our companion."

Joa grimaced, her head rolling back. "I don't have the capital to pay for repairs, and I'm down to a third of my old crew. Most were sent to other ships after they took us, and we lost... quite a few in the fighting this morning."

I twitched a shoulder and closed my eyes tiredly, trying not to think about what would probably happen to those still enslaved. "That's unfortunate."

"Yeah." I heard her swallow heavily, probably downing some of her own alcohol. "Right, well, you said we could bitch about my mother together when crap had calmed down. It has."
"We were agents of hers." Voya's voice heralded her return, and I cracked an eye open to see her dropping into the chair on my right. She had a dark bottle clutched in one hand, a long straw inserted through her mask, and took a quick sip before continuing. "During the lead up to the war. She more or less fucked us over in the name of keeping us 'safe'."

Joa snorted. "That sounds like her. What happened?"

"Withheld information that got two people killed." I spoke quietly, remembering Twelve and his minder, the nice little restaurant they'd run before Krom had tortured them to death for kicks. "Our cover was as arms dealers, but she cut off most of our incoming shipments and forced us to get desperate in who we took orders from."

"It also left us with next to no customers." Voya growled. "Made it fucking easy for an SIU team to try and kill us."

Illyan was the next to arrive from the bar, setting her drink down before nearly falling into the chair on my left. She'd removed her ill-fitting chest plate, leaving her in nothing but the rubber-like under-armor that clung to her torso. Shyeel arrived along with her, stepping around but electing to remain standing behind Voya rather than sitting.

The former chuckled darkly as she sat, her eyes haunted. "That was good times... I especially liked the part where I got shot repeatedly and had to go home to recover."

I snorted quietly, and didn't resist when she grabbed an arm and pulled me until my head was resting against her shoulder. "What about you?"

Joa's lips twitched a little as she glanced between me and Illyan, then she shrugged. "Shockingly, she's a terrible mother. Always busy with one job or another, and it was never anything that she could talk about. Still... shit didn't get really bad until she hooked up with that T'Soni whore, after which the rest of us stopped mattering to her. She practically obsessed over that old bitch and their daughter."

My headrest let out a disgusted sound. "That bad?"

"Benezia was as fucked up as they came." Her head shook, "And a stuck-up hypocritical bitch on top of it. She had my mother sailing in circles inside of a bloody month, think she had some grand dream of uniting her political movement with Aethyta's and putting their brat in charge of it."

I couldn't help but smile faintly. "Liara? In politics?"

Joa blinked and lowered her glass, "You know her?"

"We've met a few times." Voya leaned forwards as she directed the conversation back on course, "Not really the right mindset."

"No." Her half-sister admitted, looking somewhat pensive. "I... never really hated Liara. Naive, sheltered, but the shit that happened wasn't her fault. I doubt she even knew."

"What did happen?" I asked.

There was another shrug as she finally took another drink, "When she was.. twenty or so, Benezia informed me that it would be in the best interests of everyone for me to train Liara. This was back when I was in the Thessian militia, understand. I told her I didn't have the fucking time, which I didn't, was fighting for a promotion and a spot on a strike cruiser. Instead of accepting that, she pulled some strings, probably fucked my superior officer, and had me dishonorably released for some
I raised an eyebrow as Joa's purple hands visibly clenched around her glass, her eyes going somewhat vacant as she remembered. "It let her kill two fish with one harpoon. Republic law said I was cut off from any inheritance for my... crime, and now I had all the time in the world to train Liara. Bitch never thought I'd realize she was behind the whole thing. Tried to comfort me after... and we fought. Didn't go my way, aftermath went worse."

"Let me guess." Shyeel murmured, "Aethyta didn't take your side?"

"Nope." She drawled the word. "Especially since I almost killed Liara when I started shooting to kill the old bitch. She told me to get out, I told her to contact me when she pulled her fucking head out of T'Soni's birth canal. That was... eighty years ago now, haven't spoken since."

I lifted my head enough to throw back the remains of my drink, staring a bit disappointed at the empty glass as I spoke. "What about your other sister? Metheri?"

"Metheri?" Joa shook her head once. "She was long gone, studying art or something. She and I got along all right, but the only sibling I really spoke to was Nishvi."

That made me sit up and focus, leaning in. "You have another sister?"

She nodded. "Younger, and still in the Republic Navy, at least as of... three or four years ago. We talk when we can, but given our professions..."

"Understandable." I mused, settling back in my seat as I puzzled over that information.

Joa let me stew in silence for all of a couple heartbeats before speaking again, "So. What did your friend do to get abducted and held hostage?"

Shyeel shrugged, reaching down to pluck my empty glass from my hands. "She withheld information, Aethyta blames her and Cieran here for T'Soni's death."

The pirate started and whipped her head towards me, "You were involved in-"

"No." I cut her off, flicking a glare at Shyeel. The scarred Asari simply rolled her eyes before prowling away, probably heading to the bar to get more drinks. "She was already screwed before I... came across the information."

"That sounds like a story."

"Yes." I agreed, leaning back to my left and letting my head fall back onto Illyan's warm shoulder. "But it's not one you're getting today."

Aethyta's daughter pursed her lips, flicking her eyes between my friends. When none of us did more than blink politely back at her, or in Voya's case, ignored her entirely in favor of continuing to drink, she scowled and settled back in her chair. "All right, I suppose we did just meet today, and you did save my life. I suppose I owe you a bit of secrecy..."

Illyan let out a deep snort. "Trying to guilt trip us into giving up information? You really are that old bitch's daughter."

Something like a wicked grin appeared before Joa smothered it. "Old habits."

We fell into something like a companionable silence until Shyeel returned, handing me an entirely
unsatisfactory glass of water while she held a glass of wine in her other hand. She came back with company as well, Captain Elissa and her mohawk pulling out the seat beside Voya, the dark skinned woman looking tired but in good spirits as she drank a beer.

"Hope you don't mind some more company." She groaned in pleasure as she stretched her legs out beneath the table, "Christ but those Krogan didn't know how to die."

Voya's eyes narrowed as she glanced my way, and I rolled my eyes as I translated that into an annoyed, arch look. "You've got a fever, you didn't need to be running around trying to fight Krogan in melee. You shouldn't even be drinking."

The Quarian let out a sniff and sipped more alcohol through her straw just to remind me that she had it, "I would have been fine."

Elissa snorted as she leaned forwards, "You probably would have been, wasn't more than a dozen left. It was just annoying that they had the good sense to barricade themselves inside the bridge."

Joa flinched. "Please tell me-

"Trashed." The Eclipse Captain shrugged, sounding at least faintly apologetic. "Like I said, they didn't go down easy. You'll have to run the ship from the auxiliary until you can repair it."

"Because I have the credits to afford those kinds of repairs, on top of everything else." Joa brought both hands up to rub furiously at her face. "Somehow I doubt your Mistress will offer to pay me back."

"Probably not." Elissa agreed. "You could always join their corporation."

The Asari scowled. "I don't trust that family."

There was a barking laugh from the human woman, her head shaking as she pointed a finger at my chest. "I meant their corporation. Might have to get in line though, especially when this latest story gets out."

I narrowed my eyes, "Latest story?"

Shyeel gave me an amused look over Voya's head, "You killed Ganar Iraz in about five seconds Cieran."

"He was a fucking idiot." I replied flatly. "Hardly the battle of legend."

"Still a Warlord." Elissa grinned at me. "And the fact that you did it so fucking easily... you really do have a way with the turtles, don't you?"

It was my turn to groan and rub at my face. Dammit, the notion of my... _fame_ growing further wasn't something that I was comfortable with.

Joa, meanwhile, had seized on the bit of information she considered more personally relevant. "You represent a PMC?"

"Yes." Shyeel, noticing that I was busy brooding, spoke in our stead. "We're the Lancer detachment of the Silver Blades PMC. We've got branches on Illium and Xenthia right now."

The pirate leaned forwards, "And you'd have the cash to pay for repairs to my ship?"

Illyan stirred, "Shaaryak probably would-"
Her voice cut off when I kicked her foot sharply, giving her a glare as I spoke over her. "We don't really need a warship."

"Why not?" My fellow Reyja'krem tilted her head as she glanced at me, "It would be good to be able to run Krom down if he fled in space, wouldn't it?"

That was true, but what was also true was that I didn't really trust Joa. She was Aethyta's daughter after all, and what was more, I had no idea what we'd do with a heavy cruiser after we were done with Krom.

"So..." Joa had definitely scented blood, her eyes locked entirely on mine. "Would it be your decision?"

"You'd probably need a majority vote of the Commanders." Shyeel admitted. "Since this isn't exactly a normal addition to a branch. He'd be one of three, we can put you in contact with the other two."

Turning slightly in my chair, I glowered at her. "Shy."

"Cieran." She replied primly before lifting her hands and flicking a single word at me in halting Quarian sign. L-e-v-i-a-t-h-a-n.

That... was actually a good reason. I felt my shoulders slump as I exhaled, half closing my eyes as I shook my head. I'd already done my best to forget that they were out there, at least until we'd finished our little rescue mission.

"I'll introduce you to Nynsi Shaaryak when we get to Nos Astra." I breathed the words out tiredly, returning my gaze to Joa. "We'll see if we can scrape together enough volunteers and cash to help you."

Joa nodded slightly, "I would still be in command. And my officers would stay."

I twitched a shoulder, noticing Elissa flicking her eyes between us as we spoke. Probably taking notes to give to a Sederis later. "That would probably be fine, but we'd need our own insurance."

Her nose wrinkled as if she'd smelled something deeply unpleasant, but she forced herself to nod again. "Suppose I can't blame you."

"Relax." Illyan spoke up again, "We aren't those kinds of mercs, we won't keep your people in collars or anything. Cie would probably shoot anyone who tried."

" Probably?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes and reached up to pull my head back against her, "He would shoot anyone who'd try. We'd probably just keep your supplies low or keep access to your accounts or something, at least until you'd paid us back for fixing it."

That seemed to mollify the pirate, who nodded before glancing at me, and then at Elissa. The human woman put down her now mostly gone bottle, tilting her head as Joa spoke. "You've worked with him before?"

"Once in person, on Omega." She replied, "But he's done a lot of work with the Eclipse during the war. With T'Ravt too. He's got a reputation."

Joa blinked. "What kind?"
"He's second behind Massani for front-cover of Badass Weekly since the war started." She all but guffawed when I slumped over, my head falling from Illyan's shoulder to hit the table. "Oh come on Kean, it's a good thing to be a celebrity."

"I'm not a fucking celebrity." I replied with a tired groan, trying not to remember the fawning at the academy on Xentha. Illyan used my moment of weakness to untie my ponytail, ruffling my long hair until it complete covered my face. I didn't bother to fix it, just sighing into the table and very much wishing I had something strong to drink.

"Yeah, you kinda are." Elissa continued, evidently turning back to Joa. "You really haven't gotten much war news, have you?"

"Not accurate news. Mind filling me in?"

She didn't, shouting for someone to bring over more drinks as she started recounting the earlier events of the war. It took about forty seconds for Shyeel and Voya to become entangled in the story telling, the pair of them offering their own tales about what we'd gone through. Members of Elissa's team, and a few of Joa's off-duty officers, quickly moved over, dragging chairs or otherwise standing around as the 'whose missions were more badass' arguments began.

We had the edge there, but some of the shit Elissa had, possibly, done was fairly impressive in its own right, and she more than held her own in the debate.

For the most part I stayed silent and amused as I listened, watching as Shyeel repeatedly tricked or coaxed Voya into becoming the center of attention. The Quarian liked it about as much as I did, but visibly steeled herself and tolerated it as her new partner stepped in to pick up the various stories when she ran out of words.

It was less to do with the speaking, I thought, and more to do with how many people had begun to crowd around our little area. Shy had the good sense to stay at Voya's back, never quite touching her but remaining close enough to remind her that nothing was going to attack her from behind.

After an hour or so I excused myself to the restroom, and found Illyan waiting for me outside the door as I exited.

"Figured you might want to head out." She explained, uncrossing her arms and stepping closer. "Since I'm not letting you drink, and they've started on Redcliffe."

And she didn't think I'd want to stick around for that discussion. Which was entirely correct, but I still felt an eyebrow go up. "What is with you and Shyeel today?"

"I think she's trying to get Voya used to being around people who aren't us." Illyan mused seriously, then ruined it by giving me a cheerful smile. "I'm just trying to get you alone so I can take your clothes off."

I couldn't help but snort. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." She replied, still grinning. "It'll be good for you."

"You do know that I'm exhausted right? After..." My latest attack. "Everything?"

Her smile faded slightly, morphing as her expression became more concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." I held up a hand, "Promise. Just tired."
She didn't quite look like she believed me, but she refrained from physically carrying me out. Instead she settled for staying close against my side as I walked, the pair of us offering polite nods to the two Eclipse Asari standing guard outside of the lounge. We thought that all of the Pack forces on board were dead, but it never hurt to be careful.

More members of the mercenary group quickly moved out of our way as we headed towards the room that we'd claimed for our own. Most of them were techs and engineers, assigned with keeping the ship running at least as far as Omega. The few crew we ran into during the walk were almost universally asleep, having found whatever open cabins they could to collapse after having to fight for their lives all morning.

It didn't take us long to reach the former First Officer's quarters, my fingers tapping out the password the Voya had set after we'd claimed it. The Turian had died in the opening fight in the cargo bay, and hadn't had any further need for the place.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Illyan asked once we were inside, watching me as I took a few moments to stretch out my left leg. The second round of painkillers hadn't lasted much longer than the first set, and I could feel the low throbs beginning once again.

"I'm as all right as I ever am." Her expression told me that that didn't reassure her in the slightest, "Illyan, I'm all right."

Strong arms crossed her chest. "Yeah, and I'm Athame's handmaiden. Cie... what set it off earlier?"

I didn't bother misunderstanding her. "I don't know."

Teeth appeared as she bit her lip, "No memories or anything?"

"No." I exhaled heavily, turning away and limping further into the rooms. Honestly they reminded my somewhat of the SR-2's captain's quarters, though the coloration was dark and muted in the absence of windows. Or a fish tank.

A small office space near the door, with a glass wall separating the console station from the main living space. The wall itself was decorated with medals and trophies that the room's prior owner had collected, and I found myself frowning at them as I leaned on the desk.

"No memories, no triggers." My head shook a little, sending my loose hair shifting back and forth. "If you hadn't noticed my hands shaking... probably would have just fallen apart without any warning."

Footfalls preceded her moving behind me, arms sliding around my armored torso to pull me back against her. A breath later her chin was resting on top of my head, reminding me just how tall she was. "I'm your cadre, kind of my job to notice those things."

I let out a slow breath. "Someone has to take care of me?"

"You're kind of shit at it." She offered quietly, "Always repressing things, pushing it down. Trying to keep up the appearance of a hardcore mercenary...when all you really want to do is collapse in a bar and tinker with crap."

"Once Krom is dead."

"Once he's dead." Her warmth faded as she pulled back, and then I felt fingers start working at the clasps holding my armor in place. "Let's get this bright shit off of you and lay down."
That sounded like a good idea, and I started working at other sections of the plating. We stacked it alongside her own set on top of the desk, and I followed it up by removing the undersuit and the sweat stained shirt beneath that. I kept the shorts, not quite ready to remove everything.

Illyan, thank the goddess, had done much the same, keeping her breasts bound and shorts on as she tossed her boots aside, her head tilting a little as she looked at me.

"You've seen it all before." I pointed out.

"As a friend." She shook her head, stepping closer and coincidentally blocking my route to the room's only bed. "It's different now."

It was. It really was. Normally I didn't have any issues tuning out the raw strength of her tall frame, the grace of her strong features... but now I found my eyes wandering to the breasts being held beneath a dark band, her abs shifting as she breathed, the dark blue lips twitching into a small smile.

My eyes half closed as a blue hand reached out to trail down my left arm, her warm fingers pausing at each of the scars decorating that particular limb. "No idea how I haven't lost it yet."

"Me either." Her grin was brief, but there. When I did nothing but watch as she inspected me, she let out a quiet sigh and brought her other hand up to take my own. A few moments later she was pressing it against her abdomen, flexing her abs to let me feel the strength in her core. "That's what turns you on, right?"

It... was. I felt my arousal beginning as I tried not to stare at what I was touching, tried not to think about what I could do make her flex for different reasons. Of course, that was assuming my imagination was anything like reality... I'd never been with an Asari. "Illyan..."

"You want to talk first?" She asked, her voice soft. "Or do you not want to at all? I can handle rejection Cie, especially since I know it's going to happen sooner or later."

I knew she could, I'd been turning her down continuously for nearly five years and she'd never once taken it personally, but... "I'm not saying no, but I think we should talk first."

Illyan nodded, turning and stepping back, gently pulling me along until we reached the bed. She climbed in first, sitting with her long, muscled legs tucked to one side as she tugged at me until I was laying down beside her. Rather than lower herself as well, she stayed upright and above me, trailing a hand across my chest as she did.

"So." She spoke into the quiet silence after a few minutes had passed, "How do you talk with Ghai?"

"I don't need a healing session." I shook my head slightly.

"Athame's azure..." The words came out as a groan. "Cie, you had a minor break down less than four hours ago. If it had come any earlier it might have happened in the middle of a fight. If you had any less self control it might have happened when we went after Iraz, which was a stupid decision and you know it."

I winced a little but didn't deny any of those facts.

Her body shifted as she took in a long breath. "Talk to me. Please."

It... took me a little while, but I managed to find the words. "Illyan... when I was in those tunnels, in that stupid pipe and that... thing was talking to me... I still don't know what it was trying to do. Athame's fucking ass, I don't even know what that bitch did to me to begin with. I could have all
kinds of trigger crap loaded and not know about it."

She was silent above me, biting her lip as her hand shifted to rest on my sternum. "You're worried she might set you off."

"That, or that those fucking space shrimp will. Or that my brain just won't be able to take this crap anymore and it'll just shut off someday... the goddess alone knows what all the tinkering did to my lifespan." My fingers flexed into fists, then smoothed out as I commanded them to relax. "Fuck... I don't... I don't even know if the shit in my head is real or if it was all just implanted. Then there's all that shit with my mother... this body's mother, whatever it actually is. And I don't-"

My ranting shut off when warm lips were pressed against mine, my eyes rolling shut on reflex as her tongue nimbly worked its way into my mouth. Illyan was... very, very good at kissing, probably thanks to her extensive experience. I had no idea how long the kiss lasted, somewhere between moments and hours, but I knew that I felt cold and disappointed when it ended.

There was a soft sound as she pulled back a few millimeters, her eyes lidded as she spoke. "That's all important, but you know what's more important boss?"

I could only blink up at her.

"The crap you've done since you woke up on Illium." She elaborated, a leg kicking over my body as she shifted to hover above me. "Everything you did for Shaaryak. Rane. Erana. Me. Shy. Trena. Voya. Tris. Thul. Jarick... everyone."

"Illyan..."

"No." Another kiss followed the word, shutting me up entirely for nearly a minute before she pulled back. "You're strong. Too strong sometimes. That old bitch might have messed with your head, might have made up your memories... shit, she might have even pulled you here from somewhere else. But that doesn't matter."

I blinked at her. "It kind of does."

"No." She repeated firmly. "The crap you've done is what matters. That's what makes you you. That's the reason I'm about to go down on you before I teach you how to return the favor."

That was rather blunt, even by her standards, and I could only blink and gape as she pulled back, rising so that she could pull off the band around her chest to let me see her breasts before quickly lowering herself again, her lips brushing mine with each word. "If that bitch tries to do anything to your head again, that's what we're all for. We'll kill her even if you can't. And if we're not strong enough, we'll let that psycho bitch Sederis handle it and get drunk while we watch her flay the old whore."

A surge of emotion rolled over me, quickly joined by another as I felt a hand slide down my body to seize my shorts, tugging and pushing them out of her way. "Illyan..."

Her mouth pecked against mine softly, interrupting me before I could try and tell her that this definitely wasn't the usual response to someone having a mental break. "I'm in your cadre, remember? Don't you want me to take care of my Tarath'shan?"

"I... thought we were talking." I managed as she shifted her body downwards, her lips finding my neck, and then my chest, and then my stomach. "You know... working through my problems."

"We just did." The words were spoken into my skin, and I felt myself shivering as as she finished
getting my clothing out of the way. "Now we're onto other things."

"That's... not how it wor...ks..." Warmth made me lose the current of thought entirely, my entire body practically twitching on reflex. "Illyan..."

She couldn't exactly speak, given what she was now doing, but she let out an inquisitive humming noise that only made me shudder further. The act that followed was... intense. She was decidedly aggressive about searching for what I enjoyed the most, focusing in whenever I made any kind of noise of approval, or when my fingers tightened around her crest as she moved.

There was a pleased gasp as she pulled back after I had finished, my entire body still thrumming in the aftermath as she slid her way back up my body to nuzzle her face into my neck. "Feel better?"

"Obviously..." I groaned the warned, twitching violently when a hand touched something that was now extremely sensitive. She let out a short laugh, but stopped, pressing a bit closer and was seemingly content to simply hold onto me.

"Remember anything that I said?"

"Barely." I admitted, my brain trying to fight past the endorphins telling it how great life was in the wake of what her mouth had just done.

"Well remember better then." Lips pecked at my skin again, then she let out an annoyed little sound. "You need to do whatever it is that gets rid of the fur on your neck."

I grunted, adding shaving to my to do list whenever I woke up, "Illyan, that was... very, very nice, but sex doesn't solve problems."

"Neither does alcohol." She replied, her tone becoming serious. "Or smoking, or repressing things, or avoiding them, or anything else. But it does help remind you that you're alive. That people care about you."

That people care about you.

My eyes closed as I breathed, the five words bobbing about in my mental waters. So simple, so quick to say, but... even to someone as cynical and jaded as I'd become, I felt... I felt like I had when Rane had been in bed beside me. Not that I was mistaking Illyan for Rane, or replacing her, but the feeling was similar enough that I didn't have any problems placing it.

"You know I'm attached to you now, right?" I breathed the words quietly.

"Yeah." She exhaled. "Trena said you would be. That you'd go from thinking of me as a friend, maybe a sister, and fall in love the second we had sex. Voya said you'd kill anyone I slept with from here on out."

I considered all of that, then found myself shrugging. Neither of them had been wrong, though I wasn't quite sure I was romantically in love with her. Loved as a friend, yes, that had probably been true for quite a while, but...

The warmth in my chest throbbed as she lifted her head up, giving me a grin somewhere between sultry and cocky. "You're all right with that?"

Her grin grew wider. "Do you want me to do it again to prove it?"

"No. Well, yes, obviously, but not right now." I took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. All of my
problems, and there was a fuck-ton of them, remained, but... she was right. I wasn't dealing with it all on my own. "So... how does someone please an Asari?"

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**Pillar of Strength**

"So." Shyeel drawled the next morning, the pair of us relaxing in the same lounge we'd enjoyed the night before. "How was it?"

I gave her a small grin, leaning back in my chair and sipping from my glass of water. Around us, Eclipse techs and crew members shuffled about, trying to wake up for the morning shift. Our respective partners weren't present, having already eaten before heading down to the engine room to help keep things patched together.

"Good. Very good for his first time with one of us." I offered, trying not to grin as I remembered what we'd gotten up to before our companions had returned to the room.

He'd been a very determined lover, quickly catching on to where to touch me and what to do with his mouth until I'd been little more than a panting mass of tired limbs. Naturally he'd been a bit disappointed when he realized that he couldn't mount me after, I didn't have any lube with, but he'd more than accepted me taking him in my mouth again as a substitute.

And then he'd gone ahead and touched me once again, just to make sure we were even.

My smile faded a little as I remembered the second time he'd pleased me, and the brief link I'd established during the euphoric high. It had been a reflex action, and it hadn't gone to the level of a full meld, but... shit. Beneath the cloud of affection and lust running through him, I'd felt the darkness. The pain. Even in the midst of sex it hadn't left him... and that definitely wasn't good.

She waited patiently for more details, her scarred face twisting into an annoyed scowl when I didn't elaborate. "That's it? It was good?"

"Somehow I don't think I'd be doing that for a while if he knew I was telling you details." I pointed out, shaking off the darker memories and focusing on the better ones. Like the low sounds he'd made when he'd finished, and the way he'd gasped my name.

Her lips pursed, "That's... probably true. He doing better mentally at least?"

"I think so." Some more of my good mood drained out. "I think he got the message that I'm, that **we**, are here to help him... but you know how he is. I'll probably have to repeat it forty more times before he starts to get it. How is Voya?"

"She's Voya." Shyeel sighed. "She knows what I'm doing, but she's tolerating it at the moment. I suppose that's progress."

I grimaced, reaching out to squeeze her forearm in support. *I'd* struggled for months to get Cieran to notice me, and then had to wait weeks to become even slightly intimate with him. Forget sex, Shyeel was probably going to need months of cautious relationship building just to be able to hug Voya without her freaking out.

"You really had to pick her?" I asked. "I mean, she's a good person to have with in a fight, and... I guess we're friends right now, but romantically?"

"I like the determination." She replied evenly. "The focus. And the body attached to them."
I... supposed I could see that, but it was still Voya.

I was still musing on that when Joa arrived, tiredly shuffling through the hatchway. She'd evidently had too much to drink the day before, which didn't really surprise me, her legs carrying her in our direction once she'd noticed the pair of us.

"Morning." The Captain greeted flatly as she collapsed on the other side of the table, several members of her crew quickly darting away to throw food together for their boss. It didn't take them long, bringing her breakfast and water before retreating from her hungover form.

Shyeel let out a snort at the sight, her head shaking. "You've got them trained well."

Joa grunted. "I am the Captain."

"And you like being in charge?" I asked, tilting my head a little.

Aethyta's daughter twitched a shoulder, "I am a pirate, big one." My fingers twitched, curling for a moment before I relaxed them. "So are my crew. It's important to keep the chain of command clear."

"Pretty successful pirate, to own a ship like this." Shyeel remarked. "Where did you operate?"

"Outer Traverse mostly." She spoke in between bites of food, practically inhaling it. "Went after Hegemony eezo haulers, human colonial shipments, that kind of thing. Did a few jobs for Cessa a decade or so ago."

I leaned forwards, a little intrigued. "What kind? Raiding the Hegemony?"

"Twice." A hand waved dismissively. "Mostly just covering her landing forces, I try to avoid ground combat. Problem with a ship this big is keeping enough crew on to keep it running, losing people on a planet never really appealed to me. Bullying freighters into surrendering was much easier, and safer."

"How did you get captured then?" I asked. "I figured they hit you when you were raiding a colony or something."

Her eating slowed as she scowled, then shook her head. "Deceit. We had a few suppliers I liked to work with, for food, spare parts, that kind of thing. They seized one of their haulers, filled it with Krogan, and when we docked to load up... they'd overrun half the ship before we realized what was even happening."

It didn't take much effort to keep her talking after that, getting more of the story out. She and her other officers had realized the hopeless situation for what it was, and had decided to vanish into the crew in the hope that the Krogan were looking for slaves rather than corpses. It had mostly worked out, though they'd lost more than a few people when they'd been sent to other ships, enough had stayed on board to try and prepare things for an eventual revolt.

More interesting were the stories about what they'd done before being taken by the Blood Pack, and just how Aethyta's daughter had survived for the last half-century.

"Nastiest I ever had to get was Katchaka." She mused perhaps thirty minutes later, sipping water as she reminisced. "Independent colony, mostly humans, but we'd gotten a tip that here was an STG research base on planet. They were due to get a big shipment of eezo for some experiment or another, so we sailed in and dropped anchor above the main city."

"Was there actually one there?" I asked.
"There was something there." Joa shrugged, "We started getting pelted with GARDIAN fire once we were in low orbit, and I had to flatten most of a jungle to stop it. Colonists started shrieking at me, I think the frogs were paying them off to keep the base hidden. When the hauler showed up it tried to ram us of all things, and we had to blow its engines apart before we boarded."

Shyeel frowned. "Doesn't sound all that bad."

"Ship only had experimental crap on it, plus a bunch of crazy Salarians that fought to the death to protect it." She glowered, "We had no idea what any of it was, but we found a log showing the eezo was already on planet. I signaled the colony and told them to give it up, they told me to fuck off."

"Wait." I held up a hand gaping at her, "You had a Batarian heavy cruiser parked above them, and they told you to fuck off?"

"Morons right?" Joa sounded disgusted. "Kept saying how I had no right to take what was theirs, that I'd pay for this, crap like that. I was really fucking annoyed by that point, especially since I'd lost more than a few people on that fucking freighter."

"You bombarded the colony then?" Shyeel asked.

The pirate shrugged. "Started with a few of the outer farms, a demonstration in case they missed me taking out the research base. When they didn't give up, I brought us down into the upper atmosphere and started razing the place with our GARDIAN lasers. Got through maybe a quarter of the city before they gave it up."

I winced, feeling a little dark pit in my stomach at the nonchalant explanation. I mean, I could see her point, it had been the height of stupidity for the colonists to not realize their situation, but she'd still probably killed hundreds of people.

Then again... I'd killed hundreds of people, practically all of them in the last year. It was a little different, they'd have killed me back, but then again... the colonists probably would have killed Joa and her people if they'd had the weapons to do so. Was that an important distinction? That they'd been willing to kill, but merely were unequipped to do so?

A few years ago I would have said yes without hesitation, but now...

Reaching a hand up, I rubbed at my face and tried not to groan. Athame's ass but I hated thinking about the... _moral_ implications of what I, what we, were doing. The people we were working with, becoming _friends_ with.

Maybe tonight I'd be the one that would have to spill my guts out to Cieran, instead of the other way around.

"...the plan once we get to Omega?" Joa's voice broke through my surface thoughts, returning me to the conversation at hand. "Should be there in a day or two."

Shyeel shrugged, "I'm assuming they'll at least let you dock at their private setup in Doru, after that we'll have to wait for the _Solar Eclipse_ to discharge her core."

"Could take a while." The pirate murmured. "Think I'll be able to supervise at least the initial repairs?"

"You'll probably have an Eclipse escort." I spoke up. "Sederis won't want anything to happen to you, but I'd assume she wouldn't have any issue letting you stay on your ship while you waited."
She grunted, "What about you four?"

I shrugged. "I think Cie wanted to meet with a few old friends of ours on station, explain a few things to them. His comms were hacked during our last... operation."

"Your romp through Omega's mines?"

My mind played some bad memories, and I turned to glare at Shyeel. The smaller Asari winced a little, "Elissa started talking about rumors, Voya and I thought it best to correct some of it."

Cieran wasn't going to be happy about that, and from Shy's increasingly nauseated expression she'd realized that as well. "How much did you tell them?"

"Just the basics." Joa spoke up, "There's enough holes in the story to fly dreadnoughts through, like just what the fuck happened near the end."

I winced, shaking my head as I pushed myself up to my feet. "If you do end up joining us, you might get more of the story. You'll want something heavy to drink during it."

"I'll look forward to it."

"You shouldn't be." Shyeel murmured. "You really, really shouldn't."

Joa frowned, her lips thinning as she glanced between us. "That bad?"

I grunted, turning away to head to the engine room, at least there I could find something simple to keep myself occupied... I hoped. "You'll learn to hate the word complicated... it's basically a curse for the rest of us."

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**Spectre Office – Secured Communications**

*Shepard, it's Bau. I encountered Saren on X76-B, along with quite a few Geth. I wasn't able to close to engagement range, and had to pull out when Sovereign drew too close to where my team and I were concealed. We are currently en route to Watchpoint Seven, please arrange to rendezvous at that location so we can discuss options.*

*We also need to discuss our target. Saren... has been modified, rather extensively. Killing him will not be as simple as we hoped.*

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**Next up is: ...Sins of the Angel**

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**Chapter End Notes**

And now Cieran and Illyan are very officially together, which is probably a good thing for both of them considering their current mental stability. Unfortunately for the both of them it isn't going to be something they can fix simply, it's going to make for an interesting relationship.
In other news Joa is a pirate who hates her mother, and we get a few glimpses into her side of the story and some of what she's been up to during her career. The next chapter will have the team on Omega, killing time and catching up with old friends...and some not friends.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"Is it a bad sign that I feel far more comfortable in this armor?" I asked as we stepped out into Doru district, a new armored coat flaring around my legs as I walked.

"Probably." Voya exhaled, tugging at her own. "I'm surprised Shaaryak had these waiting for us."

Illyan let out a snort. "I'm not. You remember her speech about how we had to look respectable and crap?"

The Quarian let out a groan at the memory. "Keelah, what a stuck up bitch."

I smiled a little nostalgically at the complaining, though the grin faded as we started moving through the Eclipse compound. As comfortable as the light plating and heavy coat was, as appropriately stylish as the dark navy and silver coloration was, it also served to immediately identify us as us. They at least had enough professionalism to refrain from gaping and pointing, but I could feel a million eyes on my back as we moved. From the way Voya kept shifting closer to Shyeel and I, she could as well, and didn't quite care for the feeling.

Of course we had a different situation to deal with when we reached the enclave's exit, a Salarian officer moving to block our path as he politely held a hand up.

"Apologies, Blades." He bowed his head, "Commander Jaroth believed it best to offer you a warning before you departed. There is a new vigilante operating on station, one that has begun to prove... troublesome."

I felt an eyebrow go up in surprise... then felt my brow furrow as I worked out the time-line as best I could. He was... on time? Early? No, on time, the problem lay in the fact that Shepard was still alive. Maybe they'd had some kind of falling out, or had been forced to return to C-Sec for one reason or another.

Regardless of the reason, the fact that he was here made things a little more complicated... though for once not unbearably so. It wasn't as if we intended to linger on station for one, and I didn't think that we were in his targeting parameters for another.

"What is known about them?" I asked, trying to sound bored and uncaring about the news.
"Turian, believed to be male, largely a sniper." His broad lips twitched, "Primarily has been going after independents and the lower level gangs, but recently has begun expanding his target selection. He's hit dealers we protect in the lower levels, and struck several of the other large gangs over the last month and a half."

Illyan took a half step forwards, a frown audible in her voice. "The Talons?"

The Salarian shook his head, "No, we haven't heard of any hits on them yet."

"Well that's something." Shyeel exhaled. "You haven't managed to kill him yet?"

"Not for lack of effort." The Eclipse Officer all but growled. "He is... unusually skilled for a vigilante, and seems to have been able to convince the common rabble that he fights for them. In either case, consider my warning delivered. After all, it would likely displease our Mistress if you were to die here."

Voya let out a little snort, but let me continue to handle the talking, "Consider us warned, we'll be careful."

Not that we'd really need to be. I hadn't really met Garrus, never interacted with him, but I felt fairly confident in believing that our little group was outside of his usual target zone.

The Salarian dipped his head, recognizing the dismissal for what it was, and got out of our way.

Behind him, several guards in heavy armor waved us out of the enclave, and I found myself glancing around on reflex. Several figures lurked in alcoves above the main street, and I could see flying drones flicking around on erratic patterns.

"He really does go after them?" Illyan asked across our private comms once we'd cleared the gate, entering the general chaos that was Doru. "I don't remember all the details."

"He did. Does." My shoulder twitched in a shrug. "They bring in half the drugs that end up on station, if he wants to cut down on that they're as good a target as any."

Shyeel let out a quiet grunt. "You think he'll bother us? Or Red?"

"Doubt it." The Talons were the closest thing to a humanitarian group that Omega had. Not that they were paragons of virtue or anything, but they didn't conscript or enslave people, and they actually gave a shit about the people that paid them protection money. "Still, keep your eyes on the horizon."

"Will do." The scarred Asari drawled, "So, how long do we have, and where are we going first?"

I flicked my attention her way. "You weren't listening at all this morning, were you?"

"I know we're visiting the Talons, some doctor, and that you've got a pointless briefing to attend at Afterlife." She summarized, "I just don't know the order all that crap is happening in and if the news changed anything."

I grunted, somewhat mollified. "It hasn't. If Athame decides to fuck us over again-

"Which she will." Illyan grumbled.

"Which she probably will," I sighed, "And we run into him, we pull back first chance we get. We've got enough shit going on without getting involved in that mess."

Shyeel nodded, and Voya stretched her arms out with a tired sounding groan. "And if he tries to
"attack us?"

"Same plan, we retreat or drive him back if we can't." My lips pursed a little. "Check the local net for a pattern to his strikes... now you've got me paranoid."

The Quarian muttered something about surprises, but got her omni-tool online and started looking up reports from what networks that we had access to. While she did that, Shyeel spoke up again. "So, the rest of the plan? Timing?"

I shrugged as we turned a corner, half-watching the crowd quickly parting before us. They did point and stare, though none were so bold as to approach, and most quickly shook themselves and moved on with their lives. "Talons first, then Illyan and I are off to watch Aria berate her vassals. You and Voya get to go talk with Mordin Solus and try and get a copy of Glitch's VI matrix, then we all meet up on the Solar Eclipse by the start of third shift."

The scarred Asari shook her head, "You really want to bring that thing back?"

"I think that I want options." I replied. "If nothing else it would be good to have it able to secure a fall-back position or a line of retreat, even if we don't fully bring it into fights."

"I suppose I can see that." She allowed, though she still sounded doubtful. "Still, you remember what happened before it went down? We still don't know what your old lover did to it. Athame's ass, Voya doesn't even know."

Said Quarian looked distinctly uncomfortable at the reminder that Rane had been a better coder than she, "I still don't think it was sapient... but she'd definitely started going beyond standard VI routines."

I shrugged, "Only in combat... and like I said, haven't made up my mind either way."

"And," Illyan chimed in, "That's assuming the Salarian you sold it to didn't wipe it clean entirely."

"Assuming that." My right shoulder rose and fell. In all probability he had, Mordin might have been half crazy but if Glitch threatened his patients he'd have destroyed or reprogrammed it entirely. Most likely the latter. "Still, since our backup copy was corrupted, I want to check. And it'll let him take a look at Voya."

"I'm fine."

Shyeel let out a growling sound, "No, you aren't. The infection is persistent and you need to be looked at by an actual doctor instead of just a medic."

Whatever Voya was about to snarl in reply was cut off by a racking cough, which more or less proved our point and ended the argument. She still made a show of grumbling as we got moving towards the nearest bank of lifts, but none of us took her seriously.

I smiled a little as she her sails stilled, speaking only once I was sure she was out of insults and our chosen lift was hauling us upwards through the station. "Any news on Archangel?"

"Basic math says he's due for an attack any shift now." She exhaled heavily inside her mask, "Aria is keeping track. He and his team are averaging a hit every three local days, but that's the only pattern they have figured out. Everything else seems to be random."

"Why do you think he's here already?" Illyan asked, her arms crossing as her helmet shifted in my direction. "I thought he wasn't supposed to show up until after Shepard ended up killed."
"That was before Aethyta blew the timeline to crap." I reminded her. "I'm... not really sure, but I don't know how much it matters in our case."

"It will matter if he ends up dead before anything happens." She pointed out. "He's important right?"

There's no Shepard without Vakarian. I winced at the memory of the line, and found myself nodding. "Yeah... he is. I'll see if Aria can keep us updated on what he's doing."

"So much for not being involved." Shyeel sighed, quickly holding up a hand to forestall my retort. "I get it Cie, we can't just let him die, but it's just another thing."

Voya flicked her gaze between us as the lift shuddered to a halt, opening to reveal the downtrodden slums of lower Tuhi. Distant gunfire was tuned out, the noise nothing but the usual sounds of Omega, while the crowd that had been waiting to use our ride promptly scampered aside at the sight of us.

"Why not just pass it off to the Old Bitch?" The Quarian raised a hand, palm up as we got moving once again. "Assuming we don't have to kill her on Illium."

I frowned, tilting my head to show consideration. That was an angle I hadn't considered, though I probably should have. She'd have far more of a reason to keep him alive, that was for sure. Liara would be infinitely more likely to survive if someone with Garrus's skills was fighting by her side.

"Assuming that... It's an idea." I allowed, "A workable one, even. We'll have to see what assets she still has... hm."

Illyan hung her head with a groan, "Cie... I don't like it when you make that sound."

"What kind of sounds do you like him-" Shyeel's voice broke off in a hiss of pain when Voya kicked at her ankle, the Quarians' gleaming eyes narrowed in a glare. The Asari seemed to slump a little beneath her partner's irritation, and kept her mouth shut rather than finish the question or try to protest.

"I was thinking," I spoke into the awkward silence that followed, glancing around a bit as our pace slowed. "Bringing Vakarian's presence here to Shepard's attention might be warranted, especially if he's about to get killed. Somehow I doubt that he told her where he was going."

Voya took a skipping step to catch up to me, pointedly staying close to my right side. "You think things have changed enough for her to survive?"

"Who knows..." My head hung a little bit as I sighed, my posture slipping for just a moment to show just how bloody tired I was of trying to think about this crap.

Illyan had tried to limit her criticisms, as she always had in the past, but her conscious evidently wouldn't let her keep quiet about everything now that we were together. Despite her careful wording, and even more careful timing, it was abundantly clear that she thought it was past time I stopped repressing crap and actually thought about what was happening beyond my immediate mission.

Of course, the problem with that was that I was stuck trying to think about things that I'd purposefully been avoiding for months and/or years.

A hand rested on my left shoulder, Illyan offering her silent support as my legs stopped, leaving the four of us standing in the middle of the grungy street. I nodded slightly in thanks, blowing out a long breath before I spoke, "Truth is, I have no idea how she was killed to begin with. The Collectors did the act, but the how is unknown given that the ship was under stealth."
"Eh." Voya shrugged. "That part isn't really our concern, is it? Even if she does end up dead, those Cerberus assholes will just put her back together."

"Assuming more things don't end up changed." Shyeel, as usual, took the more pessimistic view. "They might not think that they need her."

I held a hand up as Illyan started to speak, cutting her off before she could let out more than a syllable. "We can talk about this later, let's stay on mission."

My three friends glanced at each other, then around as they realized we had an audience staring at us. They couldn't hear what we were saying thanks to our helmets, but a few of them had started to creep closer to give it a shot. Of course, as soon as they realized that we'd noticed them they backed away and desperately tried to look like they hadn't even seen us.

We got moving again after that, falling into a silence that avoided being awkward only because of the general noise of Omega. It lasted perhaps five minutes, broken only by Voya's occasional cough, before Shyeel sighed and spoke again.

"I don't think we should bring Shepard into this." She rolled a shoulder as I glanced at her, "At least, not anytime soon. Maybe after she trashes that Reaper and we're sure that we aren't all about to die, but even then I don't like the idea of her coming out here."

I grimaced at the very idea of Shepard showing up on Omega... it sure as fuck wouldn't be anything like the games. "Can't exactly disagree with that. You think we just leave it to Aethyta?"

"Assuming she doesn't force us to try and kill her or something."

"Something else to avoid." Voya's eyes narrowed. "If we did, T'Soni and Shepard would come after us."

"Yeah." Another grimace pulled at my face, "Let's hope she doesn't push us to that point."

Illyan let out a quiet sound as she stepped around a twitching addict who'd been trying to crawl out of an alley. "What would it take?"

"Her not giving Trena back." I replied promptly. "We'll need some contingencies for that."

"Her not giving Trena back." I replied promptly. "We'll need some contingencies for that."

My girlfriend let out an almost weary sigh, "I really don't want to fight that old bitch... I still remember that vid you had about her and Vasir tearing apart those True Sons."

Voya leaned forwards a bit, her eyes revealing her frown. "What vid?"

"Recording." I shrugged, "From our Illium days. She's strong biotically, viciously so, but she doesn't have much stamina."

"Which won't matter if Vasir is there." Illyan pointed out as we approached the open area where we had once fought the True Sons alongside Ayle, covering the Talon's backs as they'd stormed the base just beyond. "I've never seen anyone move as fast as she does."

"We'll-" I was about to say that we'd figure something out, only to find myself diving to the left on pure reflex as a sniper rifle thundered far too close for comfort, an explosion sounding at more or less the same moment. Illyan slammed into me a heartbeat later, both of us taking cover inside of an alley while Voya darted into a doorway across the street. Shyeel had vanished entirely, either flashing away biotically or using her active camouflage unit.
"Shy!" I snapped as my pistol appeared in my right hand, "Stirep!"

"Something just detonated... lot of smoke right in front of the main entrance." She reported somewhat snappishly, more gunfire punctuating her words. "Whoever it is is above us... shit, sniper just took out a Talon officer. Fucking impossible shot."

I closed my eyes as my fists clenched, "Athame you are a fucking whore."

"We back off?" Voya asked, her rifle held tightly in her hands as she stayed in her own bit of cover. "Or you want to help them drive him off?"

"Back-"

"Cie." Shyeel snarled, cutting me off. "Red is out there."

Of course she was. Of fucking course she was fucking out there fighting fucking Garrus who should not have fucking been going after her in the fucking first place!

"Move up!" Pushing off with my good leg, I broke into a quick jog and yanked a grenade off of my belt before throwing it up. "Illyan!"

She'd been easily keeping pace behind me, and deftly caught the small bomb as she followed. My rear camera caught her bouncing it twice in her hand before hefting it up and hurling it with a bit of biotic assistance. The flashbang streaked upwards before detonating in a brilliant flash of white and a burst of thunderous noise, enough to make me wince even with my helmet automatically adjusting for the effects.

Voya quickly caught up as well, though her breathing was audibly labored as we emerged into the open and got a better idea of what was going on.

There was maybe half a dozen shooters, all of them as far up as they could be and still get good sight angles on the Talons, though their concealed figures vanished entirely as they reeled from the flashbang. The gang members were shooting back wildly, and largely badly, probably disoriented by the burning shuttle that had crashed itself across the street ahead of us.

Red became briefly visible through the billowing smoke from the wrecked vehicle, shouting orders that became a shriek as Shyeel appeared via a biotic charge and tackled the Turian woman back into cover just before there was another thundering roar that had to be from Vakarian's sniper rifle.

I fixated on the flash. He was four stories up, maybe a full block down the broad open space. As coldly furious as I was, I knew that I couldn't kill him, and forced myself to not start throwing overloads and incinerates in his direction. Instead I flicked the side switch on my pistol, steadied my grip with both hands, then fired a concussive round in his direction.

Considering how terrible my aim generally was, I doubted it actually hit him or was all that close, but it would hopefully get his attention.

"Cie, we need to get to-" I jerked my left hand up, wordlessly telling Illyan to be quiet as I stood out in the open, waiting to be noticed. I heard her swallow heavily across our comms, her entire body practically quivering as she fought down the urge to do something.

Probably to hit me and haul me into cover.

It didn't take Garrus or his people long to recover, several shots striking the ground around me, and then smacking into the barriers worked into my coat and armor as I opened my omni-tool, setting my
comms to broadcast openly as I ignored the shots.

"Archangel." The shots sputtered to a stop as I spoke, which at least was a tell that they could hear me. "Piss the fuck off."

There was a very long pause, during which the Talons realized that no one was shooting at them anymore. Reinforcements that had been pinned inside the gate promptly swarmed out, rushing to take up positions around where Shyeel was probably still holding Nyreen in place.

A soft click preceded my HUD informing me that I had a private communications request, and a synthesized voice echoed in my helmet. "You think that I won't kill you, mercenary?"

"I think you don't want me or mine to tell her that you're here." I replied flatly. "I can't imagine that she would app-"

A concussive round of his own slammed into my chest, alarms shrieking in my helmet as my primary barriers collapsed from the sheer force of it, and I staggered as I wondered what the fuck kind of gun he was using.

Illyan didn't give me a choice after that, seizing me by the shoulders and throwing me behind a raised platform that might have once held a garden if the dead plants were anything to go by. Her heavy frame promptly landed on top of my legs, and a hand grabbed my helmet to keep me pinned.

Gunfire promptly began lashing out again, but it didn't last for more than a few seconds before it began sputtering to a halt. Voya's voice echoed across the open courtyard as the last shots began to tail off, "They're pulling back."

I grunted and tried to get up, only to get my head shoved harder into the metal floor as Illyan made it clear I wasn't about to be standing.

"Not until your barriers recharge." She supplied, her voice flat and something close to furious. "Athame's fucking ass Cieran, what the fuck was that?"

I winced a little. "He didn't kill me."

"He fucking could have!" She snapped. "First fucking Ganar and now this!? And now he fucking knows that we know who he is!"

Instinct told me to shut the fuck up before I said anything else to piss her off... well, piss her off further. Ten or eleven seconds passed as my armor recharged itself, and I tapped the ground when my protection was back online.

Illyan only reluctantly allowed me to stand, and very pointedly kept her tall frame in between me and where Garrus and his team had been. Trying to ignore her hovering anger, at least for now, I cautiously got my legs moving, heading towards where I could see Voya standing sentry while Talons began to rush past her, and then right on past us.

"They're going after him." She supplied when we got nearer, her tone making her opinion of their chances clear. "This is apparently the fourth time he's hit them."

"The fourth... Athame's fucking..." I could only slump, my head tilting wearily. "Where's Red, and Shyeel?"

"This way." She waved a hand, turning to lead us past the burning shuttle. More Talons remained in cover, rifles up and their heads on swivels as they waited for another attack to show up. It was more
professional than I was used to seeing from them, though they'd always been at least a step above most of the other groups on station.

Avoiding several men and women who'd begun working on putting out the fires, I saw Shyeel standing next to Nyreen, the latter's hood finally lowered as several of her officers stood around them.

"-patrols out another three units." She was instructing, giving me a quick nod as she saw us arrive but continuing to issue orders. "Kenlar, I want you to talk with Jaroth, see if we can get more sentry drones."

A Turian male shifted uncomfortably, "He's going to gouge us on the pricing."

"We need them." His Commander growled. "We can't keep losing sentries. Get to it."

The assembled subordinates straightened, saluting her in the Turian fashion before scattering and starting to shout orders of their own.

"He's going after you personally." I spoke before she could greet me, or say much of anything else. "Why?"

"The spirits alone know." Nyreen actually closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I thought we were allies... or at least, not enemies. That changed last month, but I have no idea why. Come on, we should get inside before we talk further."

I nodded, and the four of us silently followed as she headed towards the open gates.

Coming back to the Talon's headquarters was... nostalgic. The familiar hustle and bustle of gang members moving around on their business, the familiar rooms and hallways. More than a few locals stutter-stepped as they saw us, quickly waving and calling out greetings as we followed their leader deeper into the base.

I nodded politely in return, my worry over Illyan's anger and Garrus's actions fading a bit. Beside me, Voya sighed, almost sounding content as she glanced around, seeming to find as much enjoyment in returning as I did.

Still, we'd never been to Nyreen's personal office. It turned out to be just as austere and unassuming as I might have assumed, with nothing but a simple desk in one corner, with a plain holo-table dominating the center of the room.

"I suppose I should say that it's good to see you again." She offered once Shyeel had shut the door behind her, "Though your timing leaves something to be desired."

"Apologies." I dipped my head to the left as I reached up, pulling my helmet off in between words. "We only heard about Archangel when we got here. How long as he been active?"

"Not quite a year." The Turian woman sighed as she settled into the chair behind her desk, her talons quickly working to pull a bottle out from a drawer. "We've worked with other vigilantes before, tried to help them out where we could. Information on worthwhile targets, warnings about mobs hunting them."

Voya growled quietly, "And he turned on you? What an asshole."

Nyreen waved a hand. "Not quite. He turned down our attempts to reach out to him. Politely even. Like I said, I have no idea why he'd decide to eliminate me, especially since his main focus has been
clearing up a lot of the scum down in the lowers."

I grunted, lifting a hand to rub at my jaw. "Any changes in his behavior?"

"More vicious, maybe." A glass clinked as she poured herself a drink, throwing the amber liquid back in a smooth motion. "My main question is why he didn't kill you."

To my right, Illyan pointedly crossed her arms, the creaking armor making me wince slightly. Of course Nyreen hadn't missed that. "I... have a good idea as to who he is. I considered the odds low... but I also didn't think he'd bother you."

Her head snapped to me. "Who is he?"

Dammit. I didn't particularly want to tell her... but I owed her for the time she'd allowed us to basically live within her compound, and for how few questions she'd asked at the time. "Garrus Vakarian. Former C-Sec, used to run around with a Spectre. Shepard, specifically. But I have no idea why he's here, and I doubt that she would approve if she knew."

Nyreen's mandibles twitched once. "That's why he backed down. You threatened to inform her."

I spread my hands apart, "More or less. If you can threaten him with that, he might back off from your operations."

"Assuming you don't just want to kill him." Voya added, her tone almost considering.

"I don't." She shook her head, and poured another drink for herself. "He's done plenty of good, especially in Kima and Gozu. I can't afford to send people down there, and he's given hope to a lot of people. I'd be fine with him still operating on station, so long as he stopped trying to kill my people."

"And you?"

Nyreen shrugged, sipping from her alcohol before changing the topic. "As I said, it is good to see you. I'd hoped to speak with you after I heard about your adventures in the mines, but you had departed before my people could get in touch with you."

"We had a mission." I replied, "Which we'll be leaving to complete as soon as the Solar Eclipse is done discharging."

She nodded slightly, her eyes flicking between the four of us before she seemed to sigh. "The kid is dead, isn't he?"

Illyan flinched visibly, and I felt myself wince as well. "Yeah. Redcliffe."

Her eyes closed tiredly. "I rather liked him. Naive, but... he was a good soul."

"Yeah." Illyan spoke quietly. "Is his girl still...?"

"She was on sentry duty last week." If anything, she looked even more exhausted. "Escorting a shipment to Doru, we were trading with the Eclipse. Dust and Red Sand for weapons in from Illium, Archangel decided it shouldn't happen."

We didn't need to ask what had happened to her as a result. There was an irritated sound from Voya as the Quarian leaned against a wall, her voice low. "I'm starting to reconsider our need to leave him alive."
Illyan shifted, as if she wanted to agree but couldn't quite bring herself to be on the same side as Voya.

Shyeel, who hadn't really known the kid, at least not like the three of us had, shook her head and brought her omni-tool up. "I don't mean to be rude, but we don't have all that much time Cie."

The Talons leader glanced at me, "Aria summoned you as well?"

"The goddess alone knows why." I sighed, not at all looking forwards to what was coming. Especially with the further dampening of our collective moods. "Still have enough time to catch you up on war news, if you're still curious."

Nyreen was, and we spent most of the next hour catching her up on what had actually happened in the various warzones that we had been involved in. The mood remained somber, even after she had a runner bring us some liquid refreshments of our own. Once we'd caught her up, she provided some information of her own. Jarrick's old girlfriend was dead, but the various Lieutenants that we'd known all remained alive and in reasonably good health.

I was thankful for that much. I hadn't thought of many of them in quite a while, and we'd been allies more than friends... but it was good to hear that they were all right. And that they likely would continue to be, if Nyreen was able to force Garrus to back off.

"I do have one more favor to ask." I spoke as the time grew short, "If you don't mind."

"It depends on what it is." She replied honestly.

My head dipped respectfully, "Nothing major, just that we keep up with the information trading. I'd like to know just what Archangel is up to, as much as you know. I've got contacts in T'Ravt's organization, as well as the Eclipse, so I should be able to get you a better idea of what's going on with the war in return."

A single talon tapped on her desk a few times, then she nodded once. "Agreed."

Bowing in the Batarian way to show my thanks, we exchanged a few more pleasantries before we departed, heading out to handle what he had to.

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**Pillar of Strength**

"I still can't believe you did that." I growled quietly as we settled into our seats, as far up and in the back of the auditorium style room as we could. It was barely a quarter of the way full, even with twenty plus of Aria's subordinate Warlords and their own guards present. Most were Batarian, though here and there Turians and Asari sat sequestered amongst their own kind.

Of course, I didn't really care about that, since I had an asshole sitting on my right to remonstrate. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Illyan..." He sighed as he leaned back, "Still? You've been berating me since we left the Talons' base."

"Yes. Still." I snapped back at him. "Because that's twice in three days you've done something suicidally reckless. Athame's ass Cieran, I just got you, I don't want to lose you already."

It was a very, very low blow and I knew it... but the jerk deserved it. He had no idea what it had been like to have to just stand there and wait, praying continuously to the goddess that Vakarian
wouldn't just kill him for the temerity of what he'd been doing.

Cieran went utterly still, his breathing not even making him move. When he spoke again, his voice
was barely a whisper. "I'm not suicidal."

"You're not acting like you aren't." I retorted tartly, not about to pull him out of the water yet. "Admit
it, you were just pissy because he did something you didn't think he would."

Even with his armor I could see him flinch at both comments. Unfortunately he didn't have the
chance to try and reply, with the Queen of the station making her arrival as the assembled crowd of
lesser Warlords and pirates sensibly shut up.

Aria more or less strutted her way down the stairs, Leska Sederis and a Batarian wearing the white
uniform of T'Ravt almost unnoticeable as they trailed behind her. Once she reached the bowl at the
bottom of the room, several holographic images flared to life one tier up, revealing the other major
warlords who were at least nominally allied with her.

Gormack, the old Salarian lounging on something out of focus and looking wrinkled and bored. To
his right was Cessa, covered in black armor, her helmet held under an arm as she glowered directly at
Aria. The final member of the trio was Die Waffe, the rotund human looking far less so than I'd
imagined, his body shifting in and out of focus as he paced.

"Right, let's get this shit over with." Aria spoke into the silence that followed, her damnably lithe
body prowling about the circular space she occupied. "Good news first. Leska, that's you."

The prim and proper daughter of a psychopath stepped forwards, though she took care to stay just
one step up from Aria. "Our hit and run raid on Zadith Ban was highly successful. In addition to
killing Ganar Iraz, a fission bomb was smuggled aboard the planet's primary space station. The
detonation did not destroy the entire facility, but has rendered it largely unusable."

"You can confirm that?" A tan Batarian growled, rising to lean forwards from his place on the
second ring. "That Ganar's spawn is dead?"

Leska waved an arm in our direction, "Commander Kean executed him aboard his own flagship,
which is now docked in Doru."

Cieran tapped armored fingers on his armrest, clearly unhappy to have already been dragged into
this. "He's dead."

The Batarian turned, all four of his black eyes narrowing. After a few breaths he dipped his head in
what I thought was a respectful fashion, then turned back to Leska. "Assuming their leader is dead,
why not launch an invasion yourself?"

"Because I told dear Jona not to." Aria supplied, her movements slowing before the unnamed
Ha'diq. He in turn seemed to wince at her attention, quickly sitting his ass back down and saying
nothing. "The Eclipse has reached its zenith, as has dear Yan's little empire."

Both Leska and the Admiral representing T'Ravt looked less than thrilled about that declaration, and
I couldn't help but groan quietly as I realized what was going on. She was asserting her dominance
over the other Warlords, first by telling Sederis not to invade as she'd originally planned, and now by
ordering something else.

"I have something different in mind for Ganar's capital." She almost purred the words, letting them
hang, as if daring anyone to ask her to hurry it along.
To my intense surprise, someone did. Multiple someones, even.

Cessa’s purple skin remained twisted in annoyance as she spoke, her lilting voice emitting from an unseen speaker. "Aria, enough with the theatrics. Get on with it."

"I must agree." Die Waffe growled in agreement, my translator shifting a dark, rolling language into almost guttural Thessian. "We have little time for speeches and games. Who are you sending there?"

If Aria was annoyed at their temerity, she didn't show it. Then again... could she? The two weren't subordinate to her, and were extremely powerful Warlords in their own right. Her control over them was one of agreement and technicality, not outright power. But still... she could make their lives extremely shitty if they pissed her off.

"Goddess but I hate politics." I muttered as quietly as I could. Cieran absently patted me on the arm in response, our argument temporarily put aside as we both suffered through the discussion that followed.

Aria was, for lack of a better term, declaring a competition. Any of the lesser warlords who wanted to go after Zadith Ban were welcome to, provided that they actually coordinate with one another. Her people would be available to liaise, and to ensure that there was minimal infighting. Whoever ended up controlling most of the planet at war, or campaign's, end would be given control of the garden world.

And thus, most likely, be considered a greater warlord in their own right.

The potential visibly excited nearly all of her subordinates, though most tried to look as though they could care less. The discussion about the details of the operation took nearly an hour, and eventually lead to another round of warnings to routinely search their warships and colonies for Leviathan orbs before Aria all but ordered Cieran to tell everyone what he knew about them.

My lover exhaled heavily, then rose to his feet to better speak, quickly launching into a quick explanation of what the orbs were and what they did. He avoided revealing anything about himself, trying to play it off as if it had been nothing but terrible luck that had involved us in the Matriarch's schemes.

Considering how terrible our luck had been lately, it was entirely too believable.

Interruptions came quickly and often, mostly from people asking just how the fuck it worked... which he didn't really have an answer to. Once he was finished deflecting and ignoring repeat questions, he sighed audibly. "What other questions are there?"

"What the fuck is this even about?" A Batarian in green armor rumbled, not bothering to stand. "Why are they fucking with us?"

"Easy answer is that I have no idea." He supplied, "But if it is Matriarch T'Ravt working with them, I think we can safely assume that there's some kind of long-term plan involving the Republics."

"Or at least her Isolationist movement." Leska spoke up as well, "That is the primary reason that my mother is stopping offensive operations, she desires that we be prepared for any strike that may come from that direction."

Cie nodded. "It's likely that, whatever their plans are, that prolonging the war is a potential aspect. I don't think it's safe to believe that they'll give up just because they couldn't infiltrate Omega."

The Ha'diq snarled silently, but nodded minutely as he spoke again. "How aggravating. If I had not
seen Aria's evidence, I would have never believed this. I will ensure my ships remain clear."

Others muttered or grunted in agreement, though I thought as many as half of them didn't look particularly convinced. I couldn't particularly blame them for being skeptical, all things considered, but I figured that fear of Aria would at least keep them alert.

The rest of the meeting was as droll as the first half, mostly consisting of Aria's subordinates bickering amongst themselves about how to proceed with their invasion; combined with them speculating as to what other warlords might try and jump in as well.

It eventually came to an end, everyone waiting for Aria to vanish before practically fighting over who had the social standing to depart in what order.

Cieran and I got out fairly early on, mostly because he just didn't care about the glares he got as he shouldered his way past a pair of Batarians who'd been silently glowering at one another. One of their bodyguards tried to get in his way, only to think better of it when he saw me looming behind.

"Well." I murmured once we'd departed the broad room, following the hallway back to Afterlife proper. "That was a waste of time."

He shrugged noncommittally. "We learned her plan for the rest of the war."

"Sit back and let everyone else deal with it."

Another shrug. "It's got its merits. More combat experience for groups who haven't been fighting much, lowers combat losses for herself, Sederis, and T'Ravt."

I supposed I could see that. The pair of us fell quiet as we passed some of Aria's personal guard, likely there to make sure no one tried to kill each other while they were here. We moved past them, and past the set beyond them, and then past a final pair of bored Asari in commando leathers as we entered the club.

Cieran, as I could have guessed, wasted little time in heading towards the nearest bar. I seized him by the back of his coat before he could quite make it, instead dragging him to a small booth set into an alcove.

"We aren't done talking." I informed him as I forced him to sit, though he wasn't really resisting all that much. "I want some answers."

"Illyan..."

"Cieran." I replied, crossing my arms as I loomed over him. "Twice in three days. A reason would be nice."

There was a long, heavy sigh as he lowered his head a bit. "I don't have one. If I did I'd tell you."

Some, if not all, of my simmering anger drained away. "Cie..."

"Illyan." He spoke my name again quietly. "Can we not do this right now? I honestly... I don't bloody know and I need to work through that."

I bit my lip, hearing the pain in his voice. "Promise me that you won't ever order me not to protect you again, and I'll let it go. For now."

Cieran sucked in a breath, but nodded slightly. "I won't."
"Good." I reached out a hand, "Come on, let's get back to the ship. Time to go home."

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Secure Communications, Eclipse Routing

**J. Sederis:** We have your daughter.

**A. T'Voth:** I am well aware. The exchange will proceed as we discussed. Bring both of them to the warehouse in two days and you'll get yours back.

**J. Sederis:** Kean and Leska will be handling the exchange.

**A. T'Voth:** I don't care who you send. T'Laria will have an explosive collar around her neck. It will only be removed once both of my daughters are safe.

**J. Sederis:** The same for yours. Joa will have hers removed-

**A. T'Voth:** Her name is Lyre.

**J. Sederis:** Whatever. Hers will be deactivated first. Once you have deactivated Gears', we will do the same for Metheri.

**A. T'Voth:** Only if Kean is given the controller rather than Leska.

**J. Sederis:** ...fine.

**J. Sederis:** You know I am going to kill you for this.

**A. T'Voth:** I know you better than you know yourself, Mortar. You can try.

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**Next up is: The Water Surges...**

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**Chapter End Notes**

And Garrus is up to crap and annoying Cieran, who in turn is making Illyan furious with him. In war news, the fighting is shifting away from the major warlords and instead moving towards their lesser subordinates. Overall I'm not terribly thrilled with all of this chapter, but it hints at a few things to be discussed soon and later, and keeps the plot moving.

The next chapter will have everyone back at home on Illium, having a lovely little conversation with a Spectre, and getting ready for the prisoner exchange, which will occur during Illyan's section.

As far as moving forwards, we've got two chapters to go in this particular Saga. After its done, we're going to get four interlude chapters, each of which is going to come from a different character's point of view (none of which will be Cieran). This is partially to make up for the fact that Saga Four won't have a secondary POV, due to the time-frame it occurs.
Remaining saga name teases:

Saga Four – The Wild Hunt

Saga Five – War of the Demons

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"You are both right and wrong." Ghai's lyrical voice echoed in our shared mental space, her head cocked to one side as she regarded me. Or rather, as she looked around inside my mind.

I tried to ignore the entirely fucked up sensation of memories welling up and then fading away without me doing anything to cause it. "What do you mean?"

"The mental assault you suffered definitely changed the Matriarch's imprint on you." She murmured, stepping a bit closer, then moving to the left as if that would help her see better. "The damage is... different."

"Lessened?" I asked quietly.

"No, definitely not." Her head shook once, "I think it was attempting to indoctrinate you, but it was rushing through the process and that damaged portions of your mind. Nothing as severe as what you once had, or you and Illyan would have noticed."

My lips pursed a little, trying to ignore the fact that Ghai could easily examine my memories of what Illyan and I had done together. "But it also damaged what the bitch did to me? Is that why I dreamed about Ashen?"

"Most likely." A blue hand flicked out, a memory of my adopted mother appearing. It was short, simple, nothing but her bustling around a simple kitchen as she prepared breakfast, her lips moving as her strong voice ran me through the proper way to strip down a pistol.

We both watched until it the scene faded away, leaving only Ashen herself, standing properly as she regarded me fondly. The expression looked natural on her features, though I still felt no real emotion upon seeing her.

"Of all the possible memories that could have come back." I exhaled, shaking my head a little. "A casual morning breakfast is outside what I expected."

Ghai gave me a wan smile. "Expecting something more incendiary?"

"Considering my usual nightmares, yeah." My lips twisted. "Probably being too hopeful, information on Krom, the Matriarch, or even Shepard's minder would have actually been useful."
"That earned me a slight shrug. "Does that change how you feel about her?"

"I now have all of two memories of her... so no, not really." I admitted. "I feel like I should, but the fact that I don't isn't something that's giving me any new issues. There's more immediate, and recent, crap to worry about."

"Good." She exhaled, a brief bit of concern creeping across the meld before she shook herself. "Back to the original point. You'll likely have a few memories shaken loose, and that might affect you. In that you are correct."

My lips pursed as I worked out where she was going, "But you don't think it's affecting me already."

"No." Her head shook once. "It might have unsettled you, but it wouldn't be enough to push you into something you wouldn't normally do."

Grimacing, I dropped down to a knee, then sat down on my ass and rubbed at my face. Not looking around might have been childish, but it helped me ignore the fact that I wasn't actually sitting on anything but darkness. "Right... so why the fuck did I do all of that?"

"Easy answer?" Ghai asked as she walked closer, drawing her own legs beneath her as she sat as well. "Frustration and anger, built up over far too long without many good releases. You've been fighting in a war for over a year, with far too few actual breaks. I would be far more surprised if you weren't having at least a few difficulties."

I looked through my fingers at her, though I couldn't bring myself to deny her points. Hunting Krom for more than a fucking year, and we'd had next to no progress. Yes we'd killed his partner, but we'd had to suffer through a lot of shit to make that happen. And no sooner had we gotten that cleaned up, all this shit with Aethyta had started, and then we'd found out Garrus was going after the fucking Talons and...

By the fucking goddess, that was just the shit that had happened after Redcliffe. That shit show had been nothing but combat missions and stressful situations, and afterward we'd had all of a few weeks of leave to try and get a handle on things. And since I'd spent most of said leave helping Ayle organize the PMC we had founded, it hadn't exactly been a relaxing vacation either.

Closing my eyes, I exhaled heavily. "I don't even remember the last real vacation I took... and I kill people on an almost daily basis. Probably a bad combination."

"Yes." She murmured. "Especially as you remain sane enough to find the latter to be both annoying and stress inducing. I know you won't take an actual break, but I do believe that you should be working on equipment more often, or spending more time in Illyan's arms."

"That's your advice?" I asked tiredly. "Tinker and sex?"

"Tinker and talk." She corrected quietly. "She's more than earned your trust, and you hers. You need someone besides myself and Voya whom you can speak with, especially given Voya's... outlook on life."

"Yeah... I think Shyeel is working on that." For whatever good it would do. Well... that was perhaps unfair, it was more of a question of time. If she was serious about being with Voya she could probably help her, but it was going to take a while. "And I do talk with Illyan."

Ghai nodded approvingly, "Then I can only state that you should continue to do so, and to not expect immediate improvement. Change takes time. Trust her, and do not become angry when she stops you from doing anything stupid."
"Already promised that." Sort of, but it was close enough to count in my opinion. "So try and slow things down a bit, spend more time building things, and more time talking with Illyan... and have her stop me whenever I try and do something reckless."

Her lips twitched a little. "Perhaps when you do something unusually reckless. You have quite the long history of decisive action if you think it required. Your various charges on Redcliffe, or even here on Illium."

I winced. "I was usually in power armor."

"That is a significant difference." She gave me an almost grave nod. "But you are usually far more conscious of the personal danger when you are not within such a machine. Lately, that has been shifting. Not just recently, you did much the same against Balak on Xentha."

"Fair point." And it was. "Anything else you want to talk about? Any subliminal commands? Am I indoctrinated?"

"No, not that I can see." Her voice remained solemn, "But minds are... difficult things, Cie. I can't be certain. I must agree with Shaaryak's opinion; You are most likely going to remain very vulnerable to indoctrination moving forwards."

"That's a problem." Fingers drummed on my own knee. "Considering that Krom might be working with them."

It was her turn to grimace as the darkness around us began to shift, the meld ending as she pulled her mind away. "Then I can only tell you to be careful."

I nodded, closing my eyes and waiting until I felt the actual floor beneath me once again. I opened them only once I was sure that I was the only one in my head. Flinching a little at the bright light spilling in from the room's windows.

Across from me, Ghai let out a tired, rasping groan as she slouched slightly, eyes fluttering.

"You all right?" I asked, quickly leaning forwards to plant a hand on her shoulder.

"Long." She replied, chest heaving a bit as she took deep breaths. "Fine, moments."

My lips pressed together into a line, and I pointedly kept a hold of her shoulder. It took her longer than a few moments to recover, more like four or five minutes before she nodded and started to get up. I helped her, earning me a look somewhere between grateful and annoyed, an expression that grew more severe when I pointedly guided her over towards a table holding water bottles.

"If you tell me that you're fine again," I spoke as she opened her mouth, "I will hit you."

Ghai exhaled irritably, but grabbed some water and started drinking. While she was occupied, I brought my omni-tool up and started going through the three thousand different messages I'd received during the hour long session we'd just finished.

The two days we'd been home had been hectic in the extreme, to the point where I hadn't been able to do anything but collapse into a bed at Sederis's mansion sometime well after midnight... and then wake up far too early to help everyone deal with whatever the next crisis was.

The primary issue was, of course, the prisoner exchange. It was supposed to occur in a warehouse in the Industrial Zone, which had set off every alarm that Leska and I had. Especially when we'd checked the address and realized it was the same building that had seen the start of the second True
Sons' conflict. I wasn't entirely sure what the symbolism meant, but knowing Aethyta it would just annoy the crap out of me, so I was trying to focus on getting everything else setup. Leska was, thankfully, insistent that Aethyta make the first move if a hurricane did start up.

Of course that meant we had to triple-check everyone that she and Nynsi was allocating to guard duty, just to make sure that they could follow orders and be trusted not to fuck shit up. And even once we'd picked out the four squads that would actually stand guard, we'd had to debate and argue where our reinforcements would wait for a signal.

And when I wasn't arguing with Nynsi and Leska, I was arguing with Nynsi, Ayle, and Joa, working out just how we would use the Reliant... and who would pay for the repairs and how we'd recruit a new crew for her.

And when I wasn't dealing with that, I was speaking with Ayle alone, reliving some unpleasant memories as I recounted what had actually happened inside of Omega for her before moving on to what we'd done during the rescue mission.

And when I wasn't dealing with that, I was speaking with Joa on her own, trying to work out just how she would split away from her mother after the exchange.

And when I wasn't dealing with that, I was trying to get a hold of Shepard and Chang, neither of whom had been responding to my messages... until I'd been with Ghai.

I pursed my lips a little, checking Amy's first. It was half-happy that I was still alive, half-apologetic that she wasn't going to be available for a transmission until tonight. Replying that that was fine didn't take me as long as I'd hoped, and all too soon I found myself glowering at Shepard's message.

"What?" Ghai rasped when she saw my expression. "News?"

"Shepard." I replied flatly. "She wants me to contact her immediately."

My mind-healer grimaced, forcing a full sentence out. "So much for resting before."

"Right." The words came with a sigh, "I'll meet you at the shuttle pad. One hour right?"

She nodded, waving me off as I got moving. Exiting Ghai's room, I turned to my left and started walking briskly, joining the general chaos that had replaced the place's usual quiet tenor. Officers of every branch of the Eclipse were present, rushing in every direction as they tried to help manage both the ongoing crisis as well as the ongoing war effort.

Yellow clad line officers in armor trying to catch the attention of scantily clad 'officers' from the Evening Eclipse, while brightly attired engineers from the Morning Eclipse bitched out naval officers in their plain uniforms. Here and there, Asari in the gold of Sederis' personal guard cruised like sharks, bubbles of empty air forming around them as they strode along on their own business.

I earned free space of my own, which at least let me make decent time towards my own rooms. They weren't far, thankfully, and currently empty. Illyan was most likely entertaining Erana... or smothering her with sisterly affection.

Collapsing at the room's console, I quickly flicked through the familiar authorization routines before requesting the connection be made.

"Kean." Shepard's face appeared a few minutes later, her scarred visage looking tired and wan. "About time."
"About time?" I replied irritably, "I've been trying to contact you for a week."

"With how many times you drop out of contact, despite promising to provide me with intelligence, you don't get room to bitch."

I twitched a little at the reminder. "None of those occasions were willing on my part."

"Which is why I haven't taken it personally. Yet." She let out a tight breath, visibly forcing herself to relax. "Let's just get this over with. What did you want?"

"Aethyta is on Illium."

The Spectre went still, then started cursing. "Motherfucking son of a... for how long?"

"I don't know." I admitted. "It's a prisoner exchange, she took one of Sederis's daughters to force her to release Metheri, and to force me to rescue one of her other daughters. Assuming the entire thing doesn't blow up this afternoon, she'll probably be gone by evening."

"Dammit." She muttered darkly. "Shit."

I rolled a shoulder, unable to resist speaking again, "I did try to tell you this a week ago."

"It wouldn't have mattered." Her military-short hair barely moved as she shook her head, "We've been playing tag with Saren and his Geth for the last month, this is the first chance I've had to properly contact anyone."

Grunting, I fought down the urge to ask just how that was going. "That was one thing. I was also hoping to talk with Jacqueline, specifically about the hacked message she received from me."

"She got your apology and the actual message." Shepard leaned out of screen, returning a few breaths later with a flask that she took a pull from. "I don't think she quite believes you, but I don't think she wants to kill you either."

I grimaced, not feeling particularly surprised. "And she doesn't want to talk with me?"

"No." Hands quickly screwed the cap back onto her drink as she set it aside, changing the topic back to what she cared about as she did. "The other daughter you mentioned, you have a name?"

"Lyre T'Voth, goes by Joa. Went pirate after Benezia fucked up her life." I summarized. "You want a report or something?"

"Yes." Her dark eyes closed as she exhaled, "On everything that happens at this exchange, anything that might tell me where she's holed up. I promised Liara..." She seemed to remember who she was talking to mid-sentence, stopped, and then collected herself. "I want a report on her, any agents she has who are present, and both daughters you've interacted with. The only information I want from you in the future will be encounters with her."

My chin dipped as I nodded, thinking that over. If nothing else, her and Liara hunting for the old bitch would annoy the crap out of her... and that was more than enough reason really. "Simple enough."

From the way Shepard scowled, I hadn't done a good job of hiding my ulterior motive, but since I was agreeing to do what she wanted there wasn't much she could say. She cut the connection without a farewell, leaving me to lean back in my chair and exhale.
Jack had at least gotten my apology, along with the *actual* message I'd tried to send. Still, it would probably take her a few weeks to work through her response, and even then... well, I doubted she would leave Shepard to come back to us. Still, I'd rather not burn that bridge if I could avoid doing so.

A soft knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, followed by Nynsi's voice. "Cieran?"

"Come in." I replied, turning the chair but not bothering to rise.

My fellow Commander and ex walked into the room, wearing a familiar set of heavy armor. She'd repainted it in our corporation's scheme, adding the Batarian rune for her house on the left, where my own armor bore the image of a charging cheveliar.

"Ghai informed me that the Spectre contacted you." She spoke the words evenly, giving me a polite dip of her head. "Another issue?"

I shifted my own in turn, "Only in that she isn't available to ambush Aethyta for us."

"I see." She replied. "Disappointing. Still, I believe that we are prepared in case anything untoward happens."

"Yeah." Blowing out a breath, I reached up and ran a hand through my hair. "Are we set to get moving?"

"Not quite yet." A shoulder plate shifted as she shrugged. "I merely wanted to talk with you about a few things before we departed."

That didn't surprise me overmuch. "Omega?"

"No, Shyeel informed me of what happened, quite succinctly." Nynsi shook her head, "This is... me wanting to ensure that you are all right. Illyan told me that you have been having attacks, and that your sleeping habits remain abominable."

I pursed my lips slightly, "Is... that all she told you?"

"Cieran, please." She scoffed, a tinge of amusement making her lips curl. "The only thing surprising about your relationship is how long it took to begin."

"Ah." I offered, shaking my head a little as I pushed myself to my feet. "So you don't mind?"

There was a tiny shrug, "I will not lie and say there isn't a part of me that does, but the rest of me is quite glad that you have someone who will properly care for you. Provided you can control her... adventurism."

"She has so far." Which wasn't saying much, considering how we'd been together for less than a month. I tried not to grimace as I ruthlessly shoved those particular worries into the back of my head, turning the topic around. "And I'm all right as far as your original question went."

Arms crossed her chest as four dark eyes narrowed, head tilting to make her irritated disbelief abundantly clear.

I could only sigh and shake my head, "I've got some issues, but that's what Ghai and Illyan are for. After this crap is done with I think we'll be taking some time off, probably go back to Xentha and finish up on some projects that I started. Ghai says that should help, at least a little."
"For how long?" She asked, looking at least somewhat mollified by the explanation.

"Probably until we hear something about Krom." I admitted, "With the war turning against Ganar, he'll have to turn up sooner or later. If he doesn't... figure a month on Xentha, then we'll relocate to Omega."

Nynsi narrowed her upper eyes in thought, turning slightly so that she could wave a hand towards the door. I got moving even as she spoke again, her body shifting to walk with me. "I suppose that is acceptable, but I would like to... talk with you as well. More often than we have been."

I started to nod, paused, frowned, and then sighed. "Ghai recruited you."

"As well as the Eclipse medic you have worked with, and I believe a few others." She admitted without any trace of shame. "She believes that reminding you that you have people whom you can speak and confide in to be very important."

"I have-"

"You have one person whom you entirely confided in for most of a year," Her smooth voice cut me off, "And that person is hardly a bastion of stability herself. Forgive us for worrying over you."

Sighing yet again, I opened the door and politely allowed her to exit first. She gave me a quick smile, more than aware that she'd won, and then schooled her features into icy superiority as the pair of us plunged back out into the corridors.

Making our way to our assigned shuttle-pad took nearly ten minutes, mostly because it was on the other side of the bloody complex. We moved in a comfortable silence, though it was slightly weird to walk directly beside her rather than a half-step behind as I once would have.

"Commander." Chen brought a fist up to salute Nynsi as we arrived, giving us each a nod in turn. "Kean."

"Chen." I replied, glancing around the open space. He'd brought two squads with, the usual mix of Batarians and Asari in heavy armor. The only thing real difference was the propensity towards Shaaryak-Redcliffe carbines rather than the old eclectic mix of weaponry, and the navy and silver having replaced the solid black that Xerol had favored.

My own team was already present as well, the armored coats making them stand out despite the fact that we bore the same coloration.

"Cie." Shyeel yawned openly from where she was leaning against a shuttle, Voya snapping her omni-tool closed beside her. "We ready to do this?"

"Soon as Ghai gets here." I replied easily, giving Nynsi a polite bow that she returned, then moving over towards where my companions were loitering.

"Good." The Asari Reyja'krem replied, her eyes closing.

I glared at her, not that she could see it. "You don't get to be tired. Voya, hit her."

The Quarian snorted, but did so, smacking her partner lightly across the scalp and making the woman swear. While the two of them promptly started bickering about the fact that Voya had done what I asked, I turned as Illyan stepped away from the shuttle.

"How was your session?" She asked as hands reached up, tugging at various bits of my armor to
make sure it was all secure.

"I might have some built up frustration about not so much as seeing Krom yet."

My tall lover snorted, "I'm sure *that* was difficult for her to figure out. What about the whole... mental attack thing?"

"She agrees with Nynsi and Shyeel." I gave her a wan smile when her lips pursed, "I might get some memories back, and that might affect me a bit, but it probably wouldn't take much for them to turn me into a meat puppet."

"I guess we'll just have to be careful then." She didn't look particularly happy as she stepped back, "What about the rest?"

"Conversation." Ghai's rasping voice spoke before I could, "Admissions."

I turned to see her walking out of the mansion towards us, wearing her old black armor with a pistol on her right hip. "With plenty of people apparently."

"Friends." She replied as she approached, "Important."

Illyan snorted, stepping up behind me and resting her chin on the top of my head as if I was just a convenient perch for it. "Who all did you contact?"

Ghai merely smiled, looking all too amused as I tried to step away only for a pair of strong arms to wrap around my neck to keep me in place. After a few wasted moments of struggling, I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax back against her armored body. Our old friend kept grinning as she shook her head, stepping aside to walk over to engage Nynsi in conversation instead.

"We need to get moving." I spoke quietly, intending for only Illyan to hear me.

She hummed softly, "I know, just wanted to see what Shaaryak's reaction would be."

I could only groan. " Seriously?"

"Yup." There was a quiet chuckle. "I'd rather not have to deal with a jealous Commander, especially since the whole emotional thing would make things kind of awkward."

"Yeah." I glanced that way, watching Nynsi speaking with Ghai and Chen. Her upper eyes noticed me looking at her, and seemed to roll ever so slightly before focusing on her subordinate again. "I think she sees through your cunning plan."

"She would. Bitch." Illyan sighed, reluctantly letting me go as our temporary good moods deflated beneath the weight of reality.. "So.. Erana's got Ethy, Ghai is here, almost time. We doing this?"

"Yeah." I repeated, stepping away from her and glancing around at the assembled group. The Eclipse team would be bringing Joa and Metheri, despite the former's protestation that she would rather accompany us. I'd argued for that as well, but both Leska and her mother had put their feet down and informed me that we would be doing this their way.

It had been a reminder that Trena might have been my friend, but more important was the fact that she was Jona Sederis' daughter.

"Nynsi, Chen." I raised my voice, drawing everyone's attention towards me. "Let's get this over with. Everyone on the shuttles."
It was a rather tense warehouse, to absolutely no one's surprise. The ambiance didn't help much either... the place was filled with dust and the burned out wrecks of aircars, along with a pair of heavy haulers that had been crudely shoved aside.

But really... it was the bloodstains on the ground that really made me grimace and wish I could at least be holding onto my gun.

Aethyta and her people were already waiting inside when we arrived, setup around the interior in a fashion that insured that they could catch us in a cross-fire as we were stuck standing around near the entrance. Though at least the hanger sized doors would let us bolt if we had to, I didn't doubt that the surrounding buildings would have plenty of snipers and heavy weapons ready to tear into us if the situation called for it.

"Thirty nine..." Shyeel murmured as we moved, the four of us, plus Ghai, escorting the two sisters who spent as much time glaring at each other as they did looking at anything else. Leska walked alone ahead of us, while Shaaryak had taken personal command of one of her teams behind. "Forty guards, as agreed. Twenty on either side of us."

Cie offered a quiet grunt, his arms shifting as if he dearly wanted to draw a weapon before he forced himself to relax. "Make sure everyone deploys appropriately."

"They are." Voya replied.

I spared the rear view on my HUD a quick glance just to confirm that. Sure enough, both of Shaaryak's squads were following us inside, spreading out to either side and keeping plenty of space between them. The Eclipse soldiers were less visible, remaining outside and deploying to protect the shuttles as best they could.

My eyes returned to what was in front of me in time to see Aethyta T'Voth walking forwards, and I couldn't stop a soft gasp as I got a better look at her features.

"Lost an eye, plenty of damage from warpfire." Cieran murmured. "She's limping too."

"Yeah." I shook my head, forcing myself to examine her professionally. She was wearing old and worn commando gear, with a rifle's handle sticking up from her left shoulder. But given how badly she looked, and the way she was walking, I moved on to the Asari next to her.

Tela Vasir did not look like crap, her lips curled in amusement as she openly examined us in turn. I stopped counting how many weapons she was carrying after I realized it was more than seven, and again shifted my attention to see Trena's tiny form trundling along behind them.

"No helmets." I spoke up, trying to provide something worthwhile. "Think that lowers the odds of an ambush?"

"Slightly." Shyeel and Cie spoke more or less in unison, all of us slowing to a stop as Leska Sederis held a hand up. She was wearing a helmet, along with a golden suit of armor that her mother had to have given her.

For several long breaths, no one spoke, our two groups simply glaring at one another across the open space. Then the High Admiral of the Eclipse raised her voice, letting her clipped tones carry, "Aethyta T'Voth. Your daughters, unharmed, as agreed."

"Leska Sederis." The old bitch called back, her voice strong even if her body didn't look to be.
"Your sister, same."

The ostentatious helmet dipped slightly, "Kean. Deactivate Lyre T'Voth's collar."

I fought the urge to snort, or fidget as Cieran made a show of slowly pulling a controller from his belt. A flick of a single button turned the lights on Joa's collar from red to blue, though that was all it had done. We'd made sure to disable the explosives in hers, unlike Metheri's.

"Disabled." He called out, just to make sure it was clear. "She will be sent over second. Metheri, get going."

Voya and I shifted aside, letting the artistic bitch walk past us. Still, I had to give her her due, she strode off as if she didn't have a bomb around her neck, her chin held confidently upwards as she crossed the no-man's land between both groups.

No one relaxed once she had made it, the Spectre taking her by an arm and pulling her behind the scorched hulk of a van.

"We send both across at the same time." Aethyta growled into the tense silence, "Collars will be disabled on agreement after."

"Agreed." Leska replied, waving a hand for Joa to get moving. She did so far more reluctantly than her sister, her lips set in a grimace as she took a few cautious steps past us. Trena did much the same across from her, both of them slowly accelerating in time with each other.

"Calm." Cieran murmured across the comms as they reached the halfway point, "Stay relaxed."

Voya let out a growl, and I realized that his remark had mostly been directed at the fidgety woman as she shifted her weight.

No one shot once the two prisoners had moved past each other, or when they reached their respective sides. Trena stopped moving beside Leska, crossing her arms and glaring back the way she'd come as she waited for the collar to be deactivated. On the other side, Joa did much the same, sans the narrowed eyes.

The old Matriarch carefully pulled out a slave control stick of her own, holding it up to make what it was clear. "In three. Two. One."

Both she and Cieran flicked them in turn, Trena instantly reaching up to rip the thing off of her neck as Leska moved in between her and Aethyta. The sudden movement made a few of the white and red clad figures across from us tense, but none drew their weapons.

I was breathing a sigh of relief when Joa gave her mother a single, spiteful glance, turned pointedly away, and started walking right back the way she'd come.

"Lyre!" The snap was one of command, but when her daughter didn't stop, her tone became furious. "Kean!"

Joa called back before Cie, or any of us, could reply. "Thanks for sending them to save me, mother, but I've got a ship to repair and shit to take care of."

I could only grimace as Vasir moved up, clearly ready to drag her back. More than a few of the guards reached for their weapons, our own soldiers doing much the same as the tension racketed up. "Cie..."
"Not the plan I worked out with her." He growled silently, clearly furious with the pirate as a hand lingered near his pistol. "Very much not."

"Lyre." Aethyta called once more, again to no effect. "Joa!"

Her new name made her stop a few paces away from Leska, who was pushing Trena back towards us. "What?"

"We have to talk. Privately."

Joa opened her mouth, clearly ready to respond with a negative, but snapped it shut when Cieran abruptly moved forwards and clamped a hand on her shoulder. I couldn't hear what he said, but it made her face twist as if she was smelling something unpleasant. When he merely shook his head, she swallowed, then turned back and rose her voice.

"Fine." She called. "Get rid of your guards, and we'll send ours out."

Aethyta took a step forwards, "I said privately."

"I'm not going anywhere with you without an armed fucking escort." Joa snapped back. "Kean and the Lancers come with, you can keep your bloody pet Spectre if you want."

No one spoke for several long breaths, then Aethyta jerked her head into a nod. "Clear out."

Her people didn't look happy at the order, but began cautiously backing away all the same. Nynsi growled across our comms as our own troops remained in place, her voice unhappy. "Cieran..."

"We'll be fine." Cieran seemed to sigh. "I've got a feeling as to what this is about."

The highborn woman exhaled heavily into her mic, "Which would be?"

"Personal for that family." He replied evenly. "Take the unit out, get Ghai and Trena home."

She let out a muttered curse, but started snapping orders all the same. While she did that, Leska turned and escorted Trena back towards us, Ghai enveloping her bondmate in a tight hug before she could let out a word.

"Are you sure about this?" Sederis murmured quietly, slowing to a stop beside Cieran. "They'll have people around us."

"We'll take it elsewhere. I know a place." One of his shoulders rolled. "We can handle it, just leave us a shuttle."

There was a slight pause, and then an even slighter nod, before she was moving again, shooing Ghai and Trena forwards as she did.

"Wait, I'm not fucking going-" The latter, predictably, tried to protest, only for her bondmate to grab her by the throat with her prosthetic hand and start dragging her away.

I couldn't help but snort at the familiar sight, though the moment of levity lasted only until I turned around to see the old bitch striding in our direction. Joa likewise shifted position, moving to stand a bit between me and Cieran, where either of us could cover her if a storm broke out.

"Kean." Our old boss growled.

"Aethyta." He replied almost softly, making me blink at the absence of heat. "Forever?"
Her eyes blinked rapidly, her mental currents visibly thrown off. Eventually, her strong chin twitched as she frowned, "Fine. I've got crap to tell my daughter, but once we're done... you and I have shit to work out."

"Yes." My lover murmured as he turned, motioning for us to get moving. "Yes we fucking do."

Secure Message; Silver Blades Servers

Ayle,

Going to have a discussion with Aethyta about crap that's been going on, then we'll be returning to Xentha. We should be on world for at least a month, unless any leads on Krom come up. To answer a few questions you had in your last message:

No, do not let him into my workshop. For that matter, don't let anyone outside of the old guard in there.

No, we didn't get a copy of Glitch, Solus reprogrammed it after it tried to kill him for the fourth time.

Yes, I'll talk with Shyeel about helping Mirala train a few biotics while we're there.

Cieran.

Next up is: The Storm Arrives

Chapter End Notes

And Aethyta has returned, and things have to be discussed. Cieran also got in a badly needed healing session, though how well he'll be able to try and recover will remain to be seen. The next chapter should prove to be... interesting.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Aethyta snarled as she reeled, her back slamming into the bar before her arms snapped up to catch my follow-up strike that was aimed at breaking her jaw. Light flickered around her forarms as she used her biotics to compensate for the muscle she'd lost over the last year, her mouth set in a snarl. "You fucking lied to my face!"

"Yes!" I snapped, surging forwards and using my trapped arm to shove her harder against the counter behind her. "You would have fucking tried to meld with me to confirm it, and I would have fucking died!"

"And Nezzy," Her entire body seemed to twist, and suddenly I was the one with my back to the bar, barely getting a hand between my throat and her free hand. "Might have survived!"

"Might!" I growled the key word in her phrasing, tucking my right leg up and back until my foot was pressed against the wood. A hard shove was enough to push us both back into the open, the pair of us circling one another as we broke apart.

"Benezia." My opponent growled as she paced just outside of my reach, my own legs carrying me in a similar motion. "Would have done more to save the galaxy than you ever fucking could."

"Benezia." I parroted back. "Was a fucking racist old bitch who would have given the galaxy to the fucking Reapers to try and save the Asari."

Blue lips pulled back a heartbeat before she rushed me again. I tried to avoid the rush, but the dust covered tables didn't give me any real room to maneuver, and she hit me in a high tackle that took us both to the ground. Chairs clattered as we hit them, both of us cursing the other as we wrestled and fought to end up on top.

I was stronger, but she had experience and biotics, and ended up straddling my chest as she threw punches at my face, each blow hammering at my armored forearms as I jerked them up to protect my eyes and mouth.

Her attempt to shove them aside gave me a chance to seize a wrist, twisting her forearm hard enough to make her growl as I tried to lever her off of me. Unfortunately I missed my grab at her other arm, letting her get a solid hit onto my left eye before I could buck her off of me.
Curling my lips in pained fury, I surged after her, rolling to a crouch and slamming a fist into her gut as she tried to recover. The blow was enough to double her over, her hands hitting the ground to catch her... and leaving her own face wide open.

"You got Twelve fucking killed!" I snapped as I grabbed the back of her crest with one hand, breaking her nose with my other fist. "Nearly got us killed! Would have fucking murdered us without even talking about it!"

It was her turn to snarl, purple blood running from her nose and a cracked lip before she jerked a hand up, her biotics flinging me into the wall a good two meters behind me. Even with my armor protecting most of my body, that hurt rather significantly. As did bonelessly hitting the ground when gravity did its usual thing.

Then it was my turn to be ranted at as an armored boot slammed into my side, driving me sideways as Aethyta ranted. "I could have planned shit! Protected Liara! Had more shit in place to stop that fucker from getting off of Noveria!"

I managed to catch the third kick, twisting and pulling to make her fall to the floor as well. Unfortunately she elected to drop on top of me rather than beside me, and we again began shoving and grappling on the floor.

"You would have fucking killed me." I growled, briefly managing to get a grip on her throat before she slammed my arms away. "I wanted to survive. You're not denying that you would have killed me."

"I wanted to protect my daughter." She snapped back, trying to grab my hair, probably so that she could slam my head into the ground. "You're not denying that you should have found a way to tell me."

We both managed to get proper grips on our targets at about the same time, her fingers seizing my hair near my scalp, my own wrapping around her throat. I was squeezing and she was hauling my head up when two more sets of arms appeared, grabbing us both and locking us in place.

"That's enough." Tela Vasir drawled casually, as if she wasn't holding back a furious Matriarch as Illyan pried my fingers off of the old bitch's throat. "Come on, you've been punching each other for ten minutes and now you're just repeating yourselves. Let's calm the fuck down."

I could only glare and grimace as we were forcibly separated and hauled to our feet, Illyan cautiously keeping her hands on my shoulders as if she expected me to throw myself forwards once again.

Aethyta let out a ragged breath, waving Vasir off as she glanced around the old bar. Nearly everyone else was seated in the booths, largely to avoid the chaotic flailing that we'd been engaged in, and were watching with various degrees of interest or speaking with each other. Shyeel and Voya had largely ignored everything else in favor of speaking with one another as they drank, while Metheri and Joa had grudgingly sat together to speak about their mutual loss.

"Fine." The Old Matriarch exhaled, turning to head towards the bar. Vasir let her go, shrugging before turning to walk back to the table she'd been sitting at.

"Go on." I spoke quietly to Illyan, moving to follow the elder Asari. "She and I need to talk."

"No shit." She replied, giving my armored shoulder a single pat with her hand before moving back to sit next to our companions once again.

Reaching up, I rubbed at the bruising I could feel beginning across my face, grimacing as my own
legs carried me up to the bar and into the stool beside my old employer. She was dabbing at her bleeding face with a towel with one hand, her other grabbing a bottle from behind the counter and settling it in front of her.

I took it before she could try and drink directly from it, reaching over and feeling around until my hand returned with a pair of glasses. Pouring a measured amount of liquor into each, I shifted one of them in front of her while taking the other for myself. "To a shit year."

Aethyta grunted, clacking her cup against mine before we through the bitter rum back. "Shit year. How did you work it out?"

"Joa mentioned you had another daughter." I exhaled, grabbing the bottle again. "After that it was just putting crap together. Your desperation when you called her names, why you sent us after her in the first place, how fucked up you looked when I saw you... figured you lost someone close to you, probably in a less than pleasant fashion. Since I'm pretty sure Liara is still alive, it seemed like a good guess."

Her single eye seemed to half close as she shook her head, "You always were good at putting pieces together."

I shrugged before lowering my voice. "How did it happen?"

"Abducted her while she was on leave." Blue fingers tightened around her glass as I refilled it, "Right off of fucking Thessia, all so that they could turn her into one of those fucking things and send her after me."

"Dammit." I could only sigh. I still didn't like Aethyta, not like I once had, but... that put some of her actions into a different context. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." She threw more rum back. "The fact that you actually mean that just annoys me even more."

"I seem to have that effect on people." I admitted, thinking of Shepard as I poured myself another drink as well. "So... where is this going? Are we going to progress beyond a fist-fight and try to kill each other, or are we going to cooperate against that bitch?"

"Cooperate." Aethyta leaned back in her seat, pointedly not looking at much of anything. "As much as I still want to kill you for what you did, I can admit your points... and the more people pointed at Cynthi T'Ravt, the better."

Sighing, I nodded slightly as I took a measured sip of rum. "I'm still furious with you about this entire affair, but... shit. You're in position to help save the fucking galaxy, and that's more important than a personal grudge. I won't take orders from you, but I'll work with you."

"I won't ever trust you." She replied evenly, "But I'll work with you. Now refill my fucking glass."

Rolling my eyes, I did so, followed it with mine, and then we clicked them together once again to seal the tentative agreement. We worked our way through those drinks more slowly, both of us waiting for the other to start talking first.

I gave in first, perhaps five or six minutes later. "What can you tell me about what you've been doing? I'm going to assume that you already know everything we've been up to."

"Of course I do." She rolled a shoulder in a shrug, "I also know that you set Cerberus against her, which has been alternatively annoying and helpful. I'm currently engaged in a quiet war against
T'Ravt and her agents, we're fighting over the remains of the Broker network."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Who killed the yahg?"

"I did." Her head dipped over to where Vasir was sitting, "I showed her your will, convinced her to take me and a few of my old girls to his base. We dropped him, but T'Ravt must have had someone in his network because she showed up less than a week later with a small fleet and good sized army. Had to blow the ship and bolt, and that gave her a chance to make inroads."

"Shit." I swore quietly, my initial amusement that Aethyta was the Broker instead of Liara quickly vanishing as I realized that she didn't have the full network under her control. "How much did she get?"

"Most of the agents in the Republics, the Protectorate, and the Hierarchy." A hand rose to shift left to right, "STG realized something was up and evicted nearly all of them from the Union, so neither of us has many eyes there anymore."

Grimacing, I clambered out of my chair and moved around her, letting my legs carry me behind the bar. My hands got to work automatically, grabbing everything I'd need to start mixing proper drinks together. "What do you know about her?"

"I was working out the Leviathan angle about the same time as you were." Her lips twisted. "I don't know if the bitch is worshiping them or just trying to use them, but it doesn't really matter. She's got access to a lot of crap as a result, and she's probably using it to influence politics on Thessia, but that's on my end of things. Did you find anything out from Zero-One before your girl killed her?"

"From her, no." I shook my head, "From the banshee and its puppet master, a little bit. I think the one that I killed was one of T'Ravt's daughters. She... it said that they punished her for fucking up her analysis of me."

Aethyta frowned a little at that, visibly processing that. "Interesting."

When she didn't elaborate, I forced out a breath and clenched my teeth a bit. "Anything on the Reapers?"

"Plenty, nothing you need to care about." Her voice turned a bit flat. "With all the shit you're doing, it's a possibility that you'll end up taken, just like Neshivi was. I'm making sure information gets to Shepard and the Council, that's all you need to know."

My lips twisted, but since that was a very real concern of my own, I couldn't exactly dismiss it. "Fine. On the note of Shepard, I'm sure you're aware of Garrus? What the fuck is he doing on Omega?"

"He went back to C-Sec after Noveria, applied for Spectre candidacy with Shepard's backing." She replied, apparently feeling the topic safe enough to speak on. "He had some kind of altercation with the Executor and several of the other Turian candidates and vanished for a month before showing up on Omega."

So the same as my implanted memories, more or less, just with the wrinkle of Shepard not being dead. "You know he was going after the Talons?"

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. "No. Not exactly his usual targets... I'll make inquiries."

"And make sure he survives." I added, glancing down as I finished mixing everything, watching as I poured the white liquid into tall glasses. "Omega is on a war footing, if he keeps going after the
larger groups... he'll get caught sooner or later."

"I'll put people in place." A hand rose to accept the drink when I passed it to her, her eye widening a bit at the first sip. "You've gotten better at this."

"Plenty of practice." I took a sip from my own Moonrise. "So. Information exchange complete?"

"Essentially."

My head dipped. "Now what?"

"We go our separate ways." Aethyta replied. "And continue disliking one another, but we share information when it becomes relevant."

"What kind of information?" I asked in return, "I'd rather not have a repeat of this shit just because I didn't think you needed to know something."

Her voice lowered in irritation. "Then you'd better just fucking tell me everything, shouldn't you?"

"Because I can trust you to do the same in return." I retorted, setting my drink down with a heavy clatter. "So let's actually be fucking realistic here."

An upper lip twitched away from teeth, a bit more blood welling up as she cracked the scabbing. "If I find anything about the bitch that involves you, or the Terminus, you'll be told."

Fingers drummed on the counter as I considered that. It was probably as good as I was going to get... and it wasn't much of anything. I couldn't trust her to tell me even that much, even if she gave me her word. Athame's ass, especially if she tried to give me her word. Really, all I could assume was that she wasn't going to be directly trying to kill me anymore. A definite victory, to be sure, but as far as gathering more information about what the Matriarch was up to... I wouldn't get much of anything.

But on the same measure, could I afford to not give her whatever I found in return? She was a cantankerous, conniving, untrustworthy old bitch... but she would fight the Reapers, and the Leviathans I supposed, with everything she had. For Liara's sake, even if not for her own.

"Fine." I sighed, suddenly feeling the exhaustion welling up as I shook my head. "I'll let you know if I find anything on her, the Leviathans, or the Reapers while I'm hunting Krom. Maybe he'll have some answers, or at least a few leads."

Her weathered features pulled into a scowl. "Your word on that?"

"Yes." I muttered the word, and she sat back with an openly satisfied expression. "Turn down the gloating would you? We both know I'm going to give you data and you aren't going to give me shit in return, you don't have to advertise it."

"I will give you what I think necessary, especially if it means that your little company can help me kill the bitch that murdered my daughter." Aethyta all but snarled the words, "And I will do whatever it takes to make sure this fucked up galaxy keeps spinning, so that what family I've got left will have better lives than I have."

"I suppose I'll just have to trust that." I spoke slowly, cautiously, trying not to stare at the dark motes of light appearing and vanishing along her forearms.

Her single eye narrowed, something dangerous appearing in it as she leaned towards me... then faded as she clenched her scarred fists, her aged body slumping somewhat as her chest heaved. I had no
idea what the fuck that was about, and even less of an idea of what to say in response, so I settled for cautiously taking another sip of my drink and trying to think calm thoughts as she worked through her shit.

"You... all there?" I finally asked once she'd opened her eye again, a slightly shaking hand grabbing for her own drink.

"Sometimes." She replied quietly, "Turns out fighting your old bondmate, her new lover, a giant Yahg, and then having to kill your own husked daughter does a lot of shit to someone."

"I can believe that." I murmured. "Shit, here I thought I was the most fucked up person I knew."

Aethyta gave me a wan smile, though it was a pale shadow of what it had once been. "That remains debatable."

I snorted, not really agreeing but not about to state that aloud and start another argument. So instead I asked another set of questions, hoping that her shift in emotion would see her give me something useful. "Did you have anything else? Any evidence that anything is getting past Aria's new anti-Leviathan measures?"

"I know she's executed at least five people who tried to get an orb on station, and my people on her colonies haven't reported any unusual behavior." Her glass tipped back as she took a long drink before speaking again, "None of the other Warlords have seriously been affected, so far as I know. I believe that they were over-focused on taking Omega."

I opened my mouth, but she continued before I could ask, "No, I don't know where they were sending those husks in from, and I haven't found anything that says she's working with Ganar."

"All right." Finishing off my drink, I set the empty glass aside, trying not to show my pleasure at the fact that we were having something like an actual conversation. "Has Cerberus found anything?"

"They demolished one of the bitch's compounds, but it was a minor facility. Nothing major, and no prisoners who knew anything."

I grunted. "Damn."

"Your turn," She replied, leaning in. "What did Aria setup during that briefing?"

Blowing out a breath, I took our empty glasses and got to work refilling them as I talked. Relaying Aria's plan to sic the lesser Warlords on Ganar didn't take long, but going into the additional details that Leska had given me did.

Long story made short, Aria and die Waffe were increasingly becoming aware of the fact that Sederis and T'Ravt were using the war to massively expand their influence and control... to the point where Aria's control of Omega meant far less than it had before the conflict had begun. Worse; everyone liked a winner, and it was entirely possible that some of Aria's subordinates would start shifting their loyalties around if they didn't think that she was the biggest shark in the sea.

Most of them likely wouldn't side with T'Ravt, her preference towards some semblance of order would grate against the kind of people that Aria attracted, but it was entirely possible that some of the Ha'diq gaining strength in vacuum of Zaen's death might attract a few... or that Sederis might decide that her partnership with Aria had run its course.

Just what the fuck her plans were to reverse her fortunes, Leska didn't know, but that she had them went without saying.
"Right now it seems like Sederis is still sticking with Aria," I sighed as I set my half-finished drink down, "At least, according to Leska. T'Ravt probably doesn't want to, but since the bulk of her strength is still died down in sieges in the eastern Terminus, she's not in any position to try anything right now."

Aethyta grunted, fingers slowly tapping as she narrowed her eye in thought. "What about Waffe?"

"He seemed annoyed at her theatrics, but that might have just been an act." I shrugged, "Gormack looked like shit though, and I have no idea why Cessa was involved at all."

"Terminus politics." The matriarch growled, shaking her head irritably. "Dammit. The fallout from this fucking war could take decades to settle into a new round of greater Warlords, and we don't have that fucking kind of time. You'll have to work on that."

I blinked. Repeatedly. "What?"

"You cannot be that oblivious... wait, Athame's ass, of course you fucking can." Air seethed between her teeth. "Everything you've done since the war has started has built on itself, especially with Shaaryak's old efforts, and now with Wong's little documentary starting up. As far as the Terminus cares, you are a warlord kid. A lesser one, yeah, but a fucking warlord all the same."

"Ayle is the-"

"No one apart from you actually thinks that she runs the Blades." Aethyta cut me off with a scoff. "She's probably flattered to shit that you act the way you do, but you are the one who routinely hangs out with Sederis and T'Ravt. You are the one who killed Ganar Iraz, brawled with fucking Balak and won, lead the bloody charge on Redcliffe, and a dozen other missions that impressed some powerful people. Shit, the fact that no one knows what happened in Omega's mines is even working for you, since people are just making shit up."

I flinched a little at each sentence, "That doesn't mean that-"

"It doesn't mean you want it." She exhaled raggedly. "Goddess but I know you've got no desire for that kind of crap, all you want is to kill Krom and then vanish until the Reapers force you to do crap. But that doesn't change the fact that you're in a place where you've got leverage, and you're going to have to fucking use it. A fractured Terminus won't do anyone any fucking good when those machines show up."

It wouldn't, but... "I don't know how to play politics."

"Oh for fuck's..." One of her hands rose to actually slap at her face as she groaned, "Just when I think you couldn't be more in denial. Athame's fucking ass kid, what the fuck do you think you do every time you speak with a warlord? The fact that you're still breathing proves you can play Terminus politics."

"I..." My head shook as I sighed, very much wanting to disagree but being utterly unable to find any arguments that would win against what she was saying. Something else I'd have to talk with Illyan about, and probably Amy when I called her tonight. I knew I was becoming famous against my will, but this was... a bit beyond that.

"Shit." I grimaced, forcing the words out just to get her off my back for now. "If things don't look good, I'll see what I can do."

"Good." She grunted, bringing her omni-tool to life as she checked it. "Right, I have to get moving. You mind if I borrow my daughter for a while?"
"I don't own her." My left hand waved in her direction, "So it's up to her. We can step outside if you just want to talk privately."

Aethyta nodded slightly, stepping off of her stool and walking away without another word. I watched as she approached her two daughters, the pair of them glancing up from the drinks they'd been occasionally sipping from. Joa scowled a little, but forced herself to listen as the matriarch spoke to her. After a few breaths, she gave a grudging nod, and her mother nodded in return before turning back in my direction.

"Privacy." She spoke, loudly enough to make the the muted conversation between my friends go quiet. "Kid, keep me updated. I'll do the same."

I grunted, stepping around the bar as I nodded. I still wasn't sure how much I believed her, especially given her slightly unstable mental state, but at least she was off of my back for now. After the Reaper war... or whatever happened with them, things might change, but for now...

For now I had something like another ally against the Matriarch, one that I trusted slightly more than Cerberus.

My friends rose from their own table, heading towards the door as I moved to follow. I slowed just enough to nod to Joa, and tell her that we'd be just outside, before accelerating again. I was just reaching for the door when Aethyta spoke up again, her voice tinged with an emotion I couldn't place.

"Kean." She waited until I'd turned to glance at her before continuing, "Good job with Wong. Congratulations on that."

I blinked, entirely confused. "You mean with the documentary? That was all Amy."

"No," Her lips curled, her expression becoming almost vicious. "And I'm sure it was. Get out of here, my daughter will be out in a few minutes."

Shaking my head in irritation, I turned back and strode out into the afternoon light, trying to puzzle out just what the fuck she'd been talking about.

"So." Voya drawled, her petite frame leaning against the building. "We aren't killing her then?"

"No," I murmured distractedly. "Her people were occupied." Gravel crunched as I started pacing, my brain unable to let go of her final remarks... and the expression she'd spoken them with. She knew something, and it was something I wasn't going to like. Something that she was taking satisfaction in, probably because she'd decided she couldn't afford to kill me. "I'll explain when we aren't out in public... probably not even with the Eclipse."

Illyan grunted, "That bad? And why are you pacing? She piss you off?"

"Yes, because, and something like that." I muttered distractedly. "Voya, I need an extranet lookup. Emily Wong, anything related to the documentary she's doing, or anything related to us."

"All right..." The Quarian asked cautiously, her omni-tool flicking to life. "Can I get a reason?"
"Aethyta congratulated me for a 'good job' with her, but I have no idea what that means." My lips twisted. "But something tells me I'm not going to like it."

Behind me, I heard my lover groan before she moved forwards to grab my pacing frame. "Cie, let it go. I really don't want anymore shit news before we go back to Xentha. If it's important and involves us, Amy will tell you tonight."

"I'd rather know so that I can-"

"Oh Keelah..." Voya's almost distressed gasp made me shut up, everyone turning to stare at her as she groaned. "That's... not good."

"Voya?" Shyeel asked cautiously.

She sucked in a ragged breath, shaking her head a bit. "It's... shit. Early searches brought up her journalist profile."

I blinked when she stopped, "And...?"

"And..." She seemed to uncharacteristically struggle with her words before groaning. "And there's a picture of her. She's... either letting herself go, or she's... you know."

"No... I don't know." I shook my head, "Voya what is it?"

The Quarian reached up to rub at her visor. "She's... fuck, she's pregnant."

Three sets of eyes exchanged confused glances, then Illyan spoke up. "So... what?"

"So..." Her shoulders seemed to slump in despair as she held her omni-tool up, then flipped the screen so that we could properly see...

See...

...

"Oh." Illyan's mouth moved a few times, but all she could do was repeat herself. "Oh."

Pillar of Strength

"I've been trying to tell you for a while." Amy Chang... no, Emily Wong sighed on the screen, looking more than a little tired. "I didn't know how you'd react, but I thought you deserved to hear it from me. In person I mean, not just by a recording or text."

Cieran could only rub at his face with a slightly shaking hand, "Yeah. I... shit. Sorry, I'm having... a hard time processing this."

"I can imagine." She replied softly, "Is that Illyan behind you?"

"Yes." I replied, shifting to better be in front of the camera, and cautiously placing my hands on Cie's shoulders to let him know I was there. "It's just the two of us."

"All right, but I think I'd like to talk with him al... oh." Her mouth stopped moving for a moment, "You're together now, aren't you?"

"Yes." I repeated once I realized that Cieran's mind was lost at sea once again. "For about a month
"Oh," she seemed to swallow. "That makes this a little more awkward."

Just a little bit. Goddess, this was already the longest serious relationship I'd ever had, and already... Athame's ass, I hadn't even realized that they'd ever slept together until Voya had admitted that she'd known about their two drunken nights together. "Yeah. Just a bit."

"Yeah." The reporter repeated. "Um... right. I'm... I'm keeping it, I made that decision already."

"All right." He managed to reply, "Do you... shit, this sounds terrible even in my head, but do you... what do you expect from me?"

"Cieran..." She sucked in a breath, then let it out. "I don't expect anything, and I kind of don't want anything."

I glowered at the screen, feeling a little nettled on his behalf. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that... you're mercenaries, assassins even." Her head shook, "I mean, I'd like to still consider you both friends, and I think you're as good of people as you can be given where you live and what you do..."

"But you don't really want them exposed to the kind of life we lead." Cieran murmured quietly, and shifted a little at the emotions his choice of words brought up.

We, not I.

"No," she admitted. "And your mission, your corporation, your friends, and... well, you, Illyan. It's all in the Terminus, and... no offense, but Redcliffe was more than enough exposure for one lifetime. I don't intend to go back, especially not with a child."

One of Cie's hands rose, as if he wanted to rub at his face again, then lowered as he forced himself to relax. "I can understand that."

"I'm not saying that I don't want you to stay away forever." She almost rushed to assure him, "Or that they can't know who their father is when they're old enough."

I winced a little. "You just don't want him involved all that much."

Wong closed her eyes as if preparing herself, then shook her head. "No... no, not really. Not on an everyday basis, or anything close to that. Like I said, when they're old enough to understand, maybe we could have some kind of sit down."

"You don't think I'd be a good parent?" Cieran asked quietly, his voice wavering between hurt and relieved.

"I don't think that you could stand staying in one place for that long." She replied honestly, though not unkindly. "I think living on the Citadel or Earth would drive you insane, and that wouldn't be good for anyone."

Which at least proved that she had a pretty good handle on his personality. He nodded slightly, letting out a tight breath before speaking. "All right... so what do we do now?"

"I get to suffer through five more months of this." Wong replied, a weak smile on her face. "I'll keep you updated as to how that goes. After that... well, it isn't as if I'll need money or support."
"So..." He shook his head, "Just leave you to it, and work out when I can introduce myself when they're in their teens?"

"That's..." She seemed to struggle with her words before giving up and sighing, "More or less accurate. Maybe earlier, depending on how things go."

"All... right." Cie murmured, quietly enough to make me wince. "I'll... sorry, I'm still out of it. We'll talk about the documentary thing another time?"

"Yeah, that's... that's fine." Wong nodded slowly, "I'll plan on setting up a call at least once a month, if that's all right. To go over... both things."

"That's fine." He replied, following it up with a casual goodbye before the transmission was cut... leaving the two of us in a very awkward silence.

"Cieran..." I spoke quietly, keeping my hands on his tense shoulders. "You all right?"

"...no." The human admitted, his head bowing a bit. "No I'm not. This is... what do I do about this?"

"She said she doesn't want you involved." I kept my voice low, spacing out my words. "You don't have to do anything."

"I feel like I should. That I have to."

My lips curled a little bit, "That's because you're still a good person."

"I got her pregnant, and now I'm not even going to be involved in the kid's life." He replied. "And... shit, I'm an assassin, a mercenary, and apparently I qualify as a lower level warlord or some shit."

"I heard." It had been hard not to; Aethyta hadn't exactly kept her ranting quiet. "And yeah, you did, but it was her choice to sleep with you. It's not as if you forced her into it, and it's not as if you were the one saying you didn't want to be involved."

"But I don't." The words were barely a murmur. "I don't want children... at least, not with all this shit going on. And Amy... Emily Wong isn't exactly the person I'd have...oh fuck. The Reapers. What the fuck is going to happen when they show up?"

I flinched at the reminder. "Amy's smart, she'll find a way to keep them safe. And I know you don't want a child, but if she'd demanded you be involved, would you find a way?"

"I... don't know."

"You would have." I spoke confidently, tugging at his shoulders to try and get him to stand up. "You might have demanded she move here in return, but you would have tried. And you'd be a better parent than your mother was."

A sucked in breath at least confirmed that I'd found at least one of his concerns. "You think so?"

"You'd have taught them how to help you build things the moment they could understand you." I grinned a little as he finally got my message, shakily rising to his feet. "Maybe you'd make them a tiny suit of power armor to go to school in."

Something like a strangled snort came out as he turned around, followed by a surprised sound when I enveloped him in a tight hug, his face pressing into my neck as I held him. "Hm?"

"Just making sure you don't think I'm going to leave you over this." I murmured, shifting my chin a
bit to avoid getting any of his fur in my mouth. "And that you know I think you're a good person."

"Even though part of me is massively relieved to not be involved in my own child's life?" He asked quietly.

It was my turn to snort softly, "And another part of you hates that part. I said you were a good person, not perfect..

Nobody was, least of all me, but now wasn't the time to talk about my own troubles with what I'd done, what we'd done, why we were doing it.

Even if all of that was murky as shit... the core of him was something that hadn't changed. He was still the same person who'd helped Erana and I settle in to life at the mansion, who'd protected and helped her. Who, even years after her death, was still determined to avenge Rane'li, to the point where he had a hard time caring about any other mission.

Who'd put up with my flirtations and teasing for years, grinning as he gave as good as he got. Who'd always given me a choice about what to do, never once demanding that I do anything... even after I'd sworn a bloody oath of submission.

I exhaled quietly as I continued, "And you can also occasionally be an asshole, but I kind of like that about you."

"As good of people as we can be, given where we live and what we do..." Cie exhaled as he repeated Amy... dammit, Emily's words. "And seriously? You like that about me?"

"Yeah." I breathed softly, feeling his warm frame pressed against me as I closed my eyes. I really did... especially when he started in on the vicious sarcasm, his lips curling as he mocked whatever idiot had annoyed him. It made his pale green eyes glint if I had the right angle, and threw his sharp features into flattering relief that always made me want to...

"Illyan..." He spoke almost hesitantly as a hand started to drift up and down his back, the other sliding up to tangle itself in his soft fur. "Seriously? That's what got me into this situation."

"I'm not human." I reminded him, feeling his breathing quicken as I pressed my body even closer to his. "And I'm not drunk, so you won't have to worry about that. Actually, you shouldn't be worrying about anything at all if I'm doing things properly."

"Illyan..." As usual, he tried to protest. "We've got things to do, and we should tell Voya and Shyeel-"

"We can do that later, once you're relaxed and not so stressed out." My fingers tightened in his fur, making his mouth open in a quiet sound of discomfort. "Now. I did grab some lube from my room, which means we can do this properly."

"Properly?" He asked, his entire body practically thrumming in my grasp. I don't think he'd ever admit it, but I was reasonably sure that he liked me taking the lead more. Not quite dominance games or anything, but he certainly seemed to respond to me simply informing him how it was going to happen.

"I'm going to throw you onto this bed," I murmured, shifting my chest a bit to make sure he could feel my breasts, "Then climb on top so that you can watch my abs flex and my tits bounce while I ride you."

I felt his arousal grow as I spoke, grinning at the effect just a few blunt words could have on him.
"You... are impossible."

Pulling a bit, I smirked at him as I forced his head back enough for our eyes to meet. "Yeah, and you love that about me."

Any further protests or comments was cut off when I shoved my mouth against his, all of the crap we'd gone through disappearing beneath the heat of our bodies. It wasn't a permanent solution, or anything close to it... but for a while, he wasn't in pained, wasn't stressing over what Aethyta had told him, wasn't freaking over what Amy had.

For a while, it was just us.

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**Nos Astra News Tonight**

In war news, the situation remains calm in the spinward Terminus, with the Eclipse and die Waffe's forces settling into something close to peace-time routines as the fighting continues to shift to the outer reaches of the Terminus.

The anti-spinward Terminus remains a combat zone, and we cannot recommend travel for any reason outside of the Maferath cluster. Lady Warlord T'Ravt maintains her sieges of nearly a dozen blood pack colonies, though she has successfully repulsed the assaults on four of her own worlds. We will continue to provide updates as systems become safe for travel and trade.

The situation in the rimward and coreward clusters remains confusing, with lower tiered warlords taking increasingly active roles in the fighting. Zadith Ban is believed to have been assaulted by no fewer than five separate Ha'diq, we are still waiting for confirmation on who is involved in that operation.

*In other news, Volus investments rose once again...* 

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**End Saga III: Return to Sender**

Chapter End Notes

And here we are at the end of the act, with two long-held guesses confirmed about Amy Chang. We also get a few answers out of Aethyta, though Cieran at least doesn't quite believe that she's telling him everything for reasons both good and bad. Still, at least she won't be trying to kill him.. probably.

For those hoping for Joa to get more characterization, don't worry, this was merely her introduction. She will be getting far more screen time in Saga IV, and we'll finally start meeting some of the Silver Blades who aren't members of the old guard. (For a further tease, the name of interlude 8 should be a bit of a hint as to who might be involved in the next saga).

Speaking of interludes, we'll be heading into them now, of which there should be four. As I said, each will be from a different character's point of view (none of which will be
Cieran). Also, yes, they will all be named in German (and mine is terribly rusty), so apologies in advance if I didn't quite get them correct.

Interlude V: Lieb Freunde (Scaled Perspectives)

Interlude VI: Mechanische Störung (Silent Witness)

Interlude VII: Gesellschaftstanz (Renegade Son)

Interlude VIII: Höllenhund (Branded Survivor)

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer. Every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude V: Lieb Freunde

Date: 06-11-2184

Location: Silver Blades Complex, outside of Asariel, Xentha, Terminus

Scaled Perspectives

Ghai cautiously closed the door to Ethanya's room, leaving our daughter to take her afternoon nap... hopefully. I really would have preferred her figuring out how to walk a lot later in life... things had been so much easier when crawling had been the extent of her mobility. But on the bright side, it at least tired her out rather quickly when she got a little too excited in scrambling around.

"At least she hasn't figured out how to use her biotics yet." I sighed quietly as my bondmate backed away from the door, turning to walk down the short hallway with her. She wasted little time in stepping close to me, wrapping an arm around my waist as she held me against her side. "Athame's ass, I'm really not looking forward to that day."

From her grimace, she wasn't either. "Fast..."

"Yeah..." Shit, it didn't feel like two years already... "Did you want to get some food?"

"Later." She murmured as we entered our tiny living room, the hand on my side directing me towards the couch. My attempt to sit on my own was cut off when she held me more tightly, hauling me down and into her lap as she sat, both of her arms sliding around my chest to make sure I wasn't going anywhere.

"Ghai." I murmured her name as her forehead leaned forwards to rest against mine, her breathing low and shallow. "I'm still right here."

"I know." She rasped softly. "I'm making up for lost time."

"Oh." The sound was barely out before warm lips were pressing against mine. It started off slow, it usually did, then quickened as I shifted my body to plant my knees on either side of her legs. I was just wrapping my arms around her neck, and feeling her hands slide down to start grabbing at my ass, when someone cleared their throat loudly.

We both froze, then I slowly pulled back to glare at her. "I told you to lock the door."

"Liar." She growled back. "I told you."

"No you fucking-"

"Hey now." Shyeel spoke from behind me, her voice amused. "As much as I don't mind watching your kinky foreplay, Ghai is twenty minutes late for her meeting with Ayle."
My bondmate blinked rapidly, frowned in thought, then twisted her lips in a snarl. "Dammit."

My eyes narrowed further as I tried to eviscerate her with my eyes. "A meeting?"

"Oh don't start with that shit." The scarred Asari behind us audibly rolled her eyes, "You two have done nothing but have sex, sleep, have more sex, dote on your daughter, and then find a new place to have sex since we left Illium."

I twisted around to shift my glare at her, even as I very reluctantly moved my ass off of Ghai's lap so that she could get up. Shyeel proved to be as immune to my anger as my bondmate, simply leaning casually against the wall as she smirked at us. "You're not telling me I'm wrong."

"I was a fucking hostage." I growled, "Can you blame us?"

"Didn't say that I did." She replied easily, "Just saying you don't have room to bitch about having to take a break and actually do some work. Not that this is even real work."

Fingers brushed against my jawline before Ghai leaned down to kiss the side of my crest, pulling back with a regretful sigh. "Back tonight."

Pursing my lips, I forced myself to nod as she turned to go. "What's it about?"

"Jobs." She sighed quietly as she headed towards the door. I could only watch her ass and hips as she left, leaving me alone with Shyeel.

"Jobs?" I repeated.

"You think Ayle's just going to let you stay here without doing something?" She asked in return, shaking her head. "Nothing major, I think she just wants Ghai to help train some of the Asari she's got."

Grunting, I leaned forwards, resting my elbows on my knees and trying to push my frustration aside. "What's wrong with the bloody Ardat-Yakshi? She leave already?"

"No, I think she's actually planning on staying full time, but she's getting a bit overworked." Her shoulders rolled in a shrug as her head dipped, "It's not like Ghai would be going anywhere, she'd be staying nice and safe here at the compound."

I pursed my lips a little. It was an impressive base, especially considering how quickly it had been thrown up, but Aethyta and the Matriarch had fucking assets that wouldn't care about that kind of thing... still, it was better than nothing. "What about me?"

"You get to take over Cieran's workshop." A hand waved vaguely in the direction of the Lancer's Lair, "She thought you'd do some good there."

"Let me guess, he's got about fifty fucking projects that he's fine just tinkering with, but ul Massa wants something we could actually manufacture?"

"More or less." She shrugged again, "He's in there with Voya right now, if you want to test the waters."

Humming softly, I glanced down the dark hallway, trying to balance my desire to go hang out with Cieran against the fact that my daughter wasn't likely to sleep for as long as I'd like. "Where's Erana?"
"Asariel. Ilyan is buying her stuff to make up for dragging her here." Shyeel frowned, then seemed to sigh. "I can stay if you're worried about Ethy being alone. She sleeping?"

"Right now." Pushing myself to my feet, I lifted my arms above my head and stretched, "She shouldn't be up for a few hours, she spent all of last night watching shows."

"Care if I raid your food?"

"Not like I fucking paid for it." I snorted, pushing my hands into my pockets and giving her a mildly thankful nod as I head towards the door as well. "She likes to pretend she doesn't know people, so call me if she freaks out on you."

"Will do." The taller Asari drawled, already heading towards our small kitchen. Leaving her to it, I stepped out into the hallways, shutting the entrance to our quarters behind us. The hallway was empty, which didn't really surprise me, and I took my time walking as I tried to remember how to get where I was going.

Thankfully, getting out of the officer's complex was easy enough, since it was basically just a two story brick of an apartment building... albeit one with gun emplacements on the roof.

Outside was far less calm, with most of the open space currently occupied by men and women of several species suffering through calisthenics drills as officers shouted and cursed at them. Despite the cool temperatures brought on by the nearby ocean, many had stripped down to as little as they could get away with.

Which I thought was monumentally stupid as I tucked my bare arms closer to my chest, but at least I got some eye candy as a group including bare-chested maidens in tight shorts ran past me.

I was occupied enjoying the show when a shadow fell over me, rather literally, and a deep voice boomed out a laugh. "Trena! It's been a while!"

Jerking a little in surprise, I blinked and glanced up to see Dietrich beaming down at me, his wild mane of black fur as untamed as ever. Like Cie and the others who'd survived Redcliffe, he was wearing a thickly armored coat that hung down to his ankles. He clapped me on the shoulder before I could dodge, nearly making my fucking leg buckle. "Still tiny I see!"

"Dietrich." I grunted, rubbing at my shoulder as I glared up at him. "Turn down the fucking volume would you?"

That drew another laugh, but he lowered his voice to something more suited to casual conversation. "How are you, my friend?"

"I'm alive, and not a fucking hostage anymore... so things aren't bad." I admitted, turning to head towards the main building. He moved to follow, his longer legs easily matching my strides. "What have you been doing? Training assholes to use power armor?"

"More or less." One of his broad shoulders rose and fell. "They have today off to rest, we depart on a mission tomorrow. Anderfels."

I grunted. "T'Ravt wants to break the siege?"

"I believe so. The remainder of the unit will be following over several weeks, we simply drew the short straw." When I simply glanced at him in confusion, he laughed again and elaborated, "We drew lots as to who would go first, between those of us confident in the completion of our training regimens, and I was the unlucky loser."
"Ah. Ayle is going too then?"

"With the second wave, yes." He nodded again. "The Kithans will be in command in her absence, at least if Cieran is absent as well. The trainees will be staying, as well unit five, so you and your daughter will not be defenseless."

"That's..." My teeth ground together as I fought down the urge to say that wasn't fucking necessary... but it really fucking was. Athame's ass, Vasir had taken me in broad fucking daylight on Illium, right out from under the Eclipse's umbrella.

A few hundred trainees and recruits wouldn't stop her, but they'd make her fight for it, and I'd learned a little bit about the bitch during my time in her penthouse. She hated open fights with a holy passion, and if there wasn't a quick and clever way to do a mission, she'd just shrug and leave it until the situation was more to her liking.

Of course, that left a few hundred other fucking ways that people could try and get to her, me, or Ghai... but soldiers would be more useful against those without Spectre level talent and gear.

"Thanks." I settled for muttering.

"You are one of us." He replied simply. "Though we need to get you a proper coat."

"I have one somewhere in our room." It was my turn to shrug, "Didn't feel like wearing it."

"You should." Dietrich offered seriously, his pace slowing a bit as we neared a guarded entrance to the main building. "Everyone knows what the coats mean, it will help them recognize you."

"The fact that I'm actually wearing clothes makes me stand out as it is." I snorted, waving a hand back at the bodies sweating despite the cold.

He boomed out another deep laugh, "Mirala's influence. A few of her recruits complained of the temperature, so she wore nothing to the next practice session and ensured that they did the same. It has since become fashionable to show disdain towards the weather."

My initial response was to snicker as well, then my brain caught up with who had started the trend. "Ayle let her? I mean, considering-"

"She has controlled herself so far." The broad human didn't have any issues knowing what I was talking about, "Ayle's orders are to treat her as if she was anyone else unless her actions warrant otherwise."

I grimaced a little. "She's trying to get her loyalty."

"Yes." He admitted freely, "But Mirala does not mind the manipulation. She has admitted to enjoying the freedom, and the relative lack of paranoia about who and what she is."

"And if she consumes a trainee or some shit like that?"

His dark eyes narrowed, and his deep voice lowered to something almost subsonic. "Then she will die, by my hand if Ayle or Cieran do not reach her before I."

Oddly enough, that made me relax a little. "Good. Sorry, those... people have a reputation in my species."

"It is fine." A large hand waved away my words, "Many of the recruits have had similar issues, we
haven't exactly made her condition a secret. But I have held you long enough, will you be at the officer's meal tonight?"

"Depends on if Ethy is willing to behave or not." I replied honestly. "I love the little shit, but goddess... I could have done with her taking more after her mother sometimes."

There was a final laugh as he turned away, shaking his head as he called back to me. "I understand. I will ensure to speak with you both before I depart, at the very least."

I waved to his back, turning towards the doors and the two patiently waiting Batarian sentries. "...have you two been holding the door open this whole fucking time?"

One of them shifted his feat awkwardly, "Yes ma'am."

"Fucking why?"

"You're... one of the old guard, ma'am." His helmeted skull dipped even further to the left, "You deserve our respect ma'am."

Athame's fucking ass... "Tone down the subservient shit, it's annoying. And straighten your fucking neck out."

"I... um," He tried, I'd give him that much, but couldn't quite get his head back to neutral. "I will try, ma'am."

Grimacing, I shook my head and got my legs moving again. Shit but I seriously hoped that that wouldn't be how everyone acted around this fucking place. To my further annoyance, the temperature didn't rise once I got inside, even after the door slid quietly shut behind me. Probably the fucking ape's influence, he always preferred things a bit colder than I liked.

It didn't take me long to reach the thick blast doors that cut off my friend's lair from the rest of the building, then bit my lip as I reached to touch the keypad. After a few moments of hesitation, I shook my head and backed away, turning to follow the corridor farther, hoping that I was remembering Illyan's instructions correctly.

I couldn't go through the front door. The memorial hall had been hard enough the first time, when I'd had Ghai with me... shit but I was a coward.

Taking the first right that I ran into, I followed the wall on that side until I found a pair of doors leading to separate restrooms. If you weren't looking for it, you'd probably never notice the bit of extra space between them, and if you hadn't had your palm-print keyed to the system, you'd need heavy explosives to blast through the hidden door.

Making sure it closed behind me, I strolled down the short, dark space until I emerged into a kitchen containing a little Quarian bitch, her odd legs hanging off of the counter she was sitting on as she ate something.

She must have finally gotten over whatever sickness she'd picked up because she didn't have her helmet on, or a suit at all. Instead a simple pair of shorts exposed her fur covered legs, while strips of cloth covered her tits but exposed even more sections of skin and bristly white strands.

"You." Her upper lip twitched as wide eyes narrowed, her forked tongue briefly appearing to lick something from her lips. "What do you want?"

"To find the ape." I replied, not really feeling any desire to get into an argument for once. "See if he's
got the time to show me the crap he's working on."

Voya seemed to frown at the response, clearly having suspected a crack about the fur on her head or something similar. While it did look ridiculous now that it was short; all spiked up as if she'd just electrocuted herself... I didn’t really want to start brawling with the bitch.

"He's in the workshop." She eventually spoke, her feet hitting the ground as she pushed herself off the counter-top. "Come on."

Grunting, I followed the alien woman out of the kitchen and past a living area filled with the kind of comfortable, second-hand crap that the ape preferred. Bypassing it, and several shut doors that I thought lead to their bedrooms, we moved through one that was sitting open, entering the personal fucking armory of Cieran Kean and the Silver Blades' Lancers.

And it was almost fucking clean. What the shit?

"Illyan?" I asked aloud as I stepped inside, noting the almost spotless floor and the general lack of debris that I always associated with the ape building something... or with me building something.

"After she tripped for the fourth time inside of an hour," Cieran spoke without so much as looking up from whatever he was working on, "She picked me up and threw me out. Said I couldn't come back until I had a dozen recruits to clean it up."

I couldn't help but snort, following Voya until she split off towards a smaller workbench resting against one of the walls. Not bothering to watch her further, I leaned around the sitting human to get a better look. "What's that?"

"Rifle." He replied, carefully settling an omni-forge into the crude framework he'd obviously done himself. "Going for something like a lighter Kishok."

"Huh." Reaching around, I managed to grab another chair and plant my ass in it, scooting a bit closer before glancing around the rest of the room. A suit of power armor loomed in one corner, with all of the mods Shaaryak currently produced neatly organized on either side of it. Moving right to left after that were weapons displays, each holding a wide variety of lethal instruments.

Several containers of Shaaryak's carbines sat beside a shelf loaded with tree BSA light machine guns; which in turn was next to a rack holding no fewer than five different submachine guns. Sniper rifles leaned against lockers, while different pieces of body armor were organized by the body part they were supposed to protect."You're not lacking for fucking options it looks like, this just for fun?"

"It helps me destress." He spoke quietly, settling back into his seat as he shrugged. "A lot of that is from Nynsi, more is from Aria. Part of her reparations for the crap we went through on Omega."

I pursed my lips together, glancing over to where the Quarian bitch had her head down, clearly focusing on the sniper rifle visible on her own table. "How are you and Ghai doing?"

"Better." He admitted, finally glancing in my direction. "I mean, I still can't sleep for crap, but I'm not feeling as shitty as I was last week. If I had a few months I might make a full recovery, but since I don't have that kind of time... I'll settle for even incremental improvements. How are you and Ghai doing?"

"She's fine." I grimaced a little, but he didn't need to hear about how clingy she'd gotten after nearly losing me for a second time... or how much I clung to her in return for the same bloody reasons. "I'm good. It wasn't like I ever thought the bitch would actually kill me, it was more just fucking boring than anything else. Then hearing that you were dead, then you weren't, then you were rushing off to
Zadith Ban... fucking sucked."

The ape winced slightly. "Sorry about that."

"Not your fucking fault." I waved a hand dismissively. "Ghai told me about the shit you went through. Fucking shit show."

"Yeah." There was a sigh as he turned back, returning to his work even as he kept talking. "It's given us a few new problems, but we're working through them. It could have been a lot worse...we got lucky."

"Yeah." I repeated. "Did you want to talk about it?"

His hands paused as he glanced at me, the fur above one of his eyes lifting. "You want to talk about Omega instead of asking about my sex life?"

"I figured I'd start with the crap, then move onto the good shit after." My lips twitched a little when he snorted in amusement, "But since you're offering..."

He gave me a wan grin, "I'm offering that it remains none of your fucking business, and Illyan knows better than to tell you details. If you're asking about Amy Chang, that's a little more complicated."

"You mean how she doesn't want you involved all that much?" When he narrowed his eyes a little, I simply shrugged. "Illyan thought I should know. Have you talked with her again?"

"After we got here." The chair he was sitting in creaked as he leaned back, sighing audibly as he reached up to rub at his head. "But we only talked about the documentary and how she's doing. I tried to hint that she should interview Shepard about the whole Reaper thing when she can, see if I convince her to get off the Citadel at the very least."

"That's something... but you really should have talked about the kid ape."

He shrugged in a vaguely helpless fashion, "When and how I can meet them is irrelevant if they don't survive the Reaper attack. Everything else can be worked out after we all live through that bloody mess."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Procrastinating?"

"Prioritizing." He corrected. "Scales... Trena. I've got that issue, the fact that the Matriarch is working with the Leviathans, the fact that the Terminus has to hold together for us to have a chance against either them or the Reapers, the fucking war, my own less than great mental health, and the asshole that is Krom... something has to give, and the kid hasn't even been born yet."

Lips twisted a bit as I digested that, but I couldn't fault his logic. "Shit, all right, I get it. I'm guessing your focusing mostly on yourself right now?"

"I won't do anyone any good if I can't get through a mission without having a panic attack." Cieran let out a slow breath, shaking his head a little. "They aren't exactly fun."

Wincing, I hesitated, then reached up to rest a hand on his shoulder. "Ape..."

"It gets hard to breath, and my hands start shaking." He kept talking, green eyes closing as he breathed. "I can't focus on anything but the anxiety, the feeling that everything is fucking wrong."
A hand appeared on his other shoulder, Voya appearing silently, her expression softer than I'd ever seen it. "Keelah... We're all a little fucked up at this point, Cie."

"I know," He reached up to touch each of our limbs in turn, "Sorry, didn't mean to make all this about me. We all needed the time off."

I bit my lip, glancing between them before carefully pulling my hand back. "How's Illyan?"

"She's... struggling with the morality of what we do." His body shifted a little, unconsciously adjusting itself to a Batarian posture I didn't recognize. "More so than usual. And she doesn't like sleeping in the dark."

"Me either." Voya shook her head tiredly, surprising me yet again by openly admitting that kind of thing. "Shit, it's like I can still see that glowing bitch sometimes... Shyeel can't fall asleep unless I'm nearby, and even then I've got to be awake."

I winced. "Someone has to be on watch?"

"Basically." The Quarian shrugged. "I don't mind. At least she's not as ridiculously clingy as you and Ghai are. You know your leg's been bouncing for the last three minutes?"

...shit. Lifting my right over top of my left, I used the weight to slow the motion, focusing on a breathing technique that my bondmate had taught me until the muscles relaxed. It took a few minutes, during which I could hear the pair of them continue to talk, mostly about some of the shit they were going through. Nightmares, mostly, but it had the familiar tones of people who'd already discussed the topic until it had drowned in the shallows.

So they were mostly just talking to let me know that they were still around.

"All right." I admitted reluctantly, once I had everything locked down again. "So I've got some fucking issues too."

"Everyone does." Cieran shrugged a little, his eyes once again focused on his pet project as he inspected an acceleration rail. "But... I think we're good on our sharing quota for the day. You want to help me on this, or you want to get started on a new launcher for Illyan?"

I cocked my head a little, "A tech launcher?"

One of his arms waved vaguely to the left, "Sort of. Designs are on a tablet over there, it's an LMG with two tech launchers rigged to either side of it as a heavy weapon. I had one built for her, but we lost it early in the whole Omega thing. I was going to make her a new one, but if you want to handle it..."

His voice trailed off when he realized that I'd already gotten up, quickly walking over to the area he'd indicated. "How'd you rig the trigger?"

"Had three." He called back, "One for each of the systems. It was pretty crude."

"Three fucking triggers?" I shook my head, "Shit ape, crude barely covers it. Always needing me to fix your crap. Now where the fuck is this tablet?"

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**Citadel News Network**

*In entertainment news, Emily Wong's documentary on the Terminus Conflict released its second*
episode for public viewing yesterday, to moderate levels of interest. Where the first section highlighted the background of the conflict, this new segment began exploring the personal side of the conflict by introducing members of a mercenary group, as well as several officers of Warlord T'Ravt's forces.

While those critics who have reviewed the piece all agree that it was very professionally done, there remains little appetite outside of certain demographics for a show focused on the Terminus. Still, downloads are up twenty-three percent over the first installment, possibly showing an increased level of interest.

Next up is Interlude VI: Mechanische Störung

Chapter End Notes

Not much new in this chapter, but I thought it was important to show that Cieran and the others are at least trying to take Ghai's advice, and to actually talk about the myriad of psych issues that they're suffering through. I don't intend to turn this into some kind of angst story, obviously, but given how much they've been through... their mental states, and the fragility of them, is something that needs to be touched on and not brushed aside.

The next chapter will be from Voya's point of view, and will occur roughly a month after this one.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude VI: Mechanische Störung

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude VI: Mechanische Störung

Date: 06-30-2184

Location: Tortuga Station, Anti-Spinward Terminus

Silent Witness

"I am sorry, honored Reyja'krem." The young Batarian male bowed his head deeply to the left, his posture one of supplication. "But he isn't here any longer, he departed nearly a week ago. We attempted to track his vessel, but all we know is that it its first jump took it towards the rim."

"Dammit." Cieran exhaled, a hand rising to run across his visor. "Do you know what he was doing here?"

"We kept our distance," Our host continued, his voice contrite. "There are few of us of the true faith on station, Reyja'krem. We couldn't risk losing anyone."

"I understand." The human gave a slight bow that made the alien male actually flush and tuck his head farther to the left, "I am not judging, Krom is exceedingly dangerous, and you were right to protect your own. Do you have any guesses? Movement patterns?"

Crossing my arms, I leaned back against the apartment's wall, sighing as I closed my eyes and tuning out the Batarian's stammered assumptions. Of course we'd missed him... Keelah, how fucking typical.

We'd been enjoying our rest, such as it was, when we'd gotten a message from a Batarian priest on this stupid station, indicating that he'd seen Krom in the docks. While not quite trusting the message, we'd decided to accept the risk and gotten moving as quickly as we could, meeting up with Joa on Omega. She'd been all too happy to give her ship a bit of a shakedown run, and to let her still growing crew get some valuable experience.

And she'd been even happier to try and impress her new Commander. Cieran hadn't exactly been thrilled when Ayle and Shaaryak had decided that Joa would become his subordinate, but he hadn't exactly been able to argue either. They, after all, already had large unit detachments to command, and were still struggling with expanding their operations.

He'd just had the three of us, even though he'd been perfectly happy with that division of labor.

Still, he'd accepted the increased authority better than I'd thought he would, probably because we now had our own ship with which to chase rumors with. Of course, it would have helped if it hadn't taken us nine days to make both legs of the fucking trip.

As much as I liked being on my home-world, we really needed to shift our operations to Omega. The
time it took get from Xentha to the relay was just too fucking long considering what we were trying
to do.

"Give your father our thanks." I returned to the actual conversation at hand as Cieran dipped his head
slightly to the right, "Tell him that if he ever needs assistance, our corporation will be available.
Reyja'krem Ayle ul Massa on Xentha would be the best person to contact, she commands the branch
there."

There was more flushing and stammering thanks, even as the kid's body language screamed that he
was either in awe of Cieran, or that he was utterly infatuated with him... I couldn't tell, and didn't
really care.

We got moving after that, filing out of the tiny place and out into the wide corridor that passed for a
street. Nearly a dozen of the 'new' Silver Blades Marines promptly snapped to attention from where
they'd been standing guard outside, their heavy carbines drawn and ready.

"Any luck, Commander?" Their leader, another Batarian male named Vishin, asked politely as Illyan
closed the door behind us. He wasn't bad, as far as the new guys went. A veteran from Redcliffe
who'd fought in the Eighty-Eighth Xenthan, he'd missed the capital front but been involved in the
messy fighting on the southern continent.

At least he wasn't in fucking awe of us, unlike the recruits that made up his marines.

"No, he's already gone." Cieran exhaled through his teeth, his shoulders shifting as he forced himself
to calm down. "Annoying, but not really surprising."

"But severely fucking annoying." I couldn't help but mutter. "Ruined our first date to drag us to this
decrepit place."

"I told you that you two could still go hunting." He replied absently, his irritatingly long legs carrying
him away. His big idiot easily kept pace, but Shyeel and I had to rush to keep up. Vishin and his
marines quickly fell into formation behind us, their armored boots clattering on the decking as they
followed. "We knew this was a low percentage run."

Shyeel scoffed on our behalf, "Like we'd let you two run off without us. Illyan would just stare at
Cieran's ass, he'd try to argue with her, and you'd just end up doing nothing but-"

"I get the picture." He cut her off with a sigh, "Vishin, you can take the squad back to the ship. Tell
Joa to be ready to depart, we should be back in a few hours."

The Batarian raised his voice, "Yes, Reyja'krem. May I ask where you will be?"

"Krom apparently spent some time on the upper decks, I want to see what's up there for myself."

"Very good sir." I watched on my rear-camera as he held up a fist and made a quick motion, his
subordinates breaking away along with him as we passed a bank of lifts. A group of locals, almost all
of them human, quickly scattered away from their armored bodies, throwing racial slurs as they did.

"I really don't care for this place, boss." Illyan rumbled as we kept going, following the flickering
neon signs towards the exclusive elevators that would take us up. "I mean, it's better than the last
station we were on, but still."

"That's not exactly a high bar to hit." He replied with a shrug, utterly ignoring a pair of sneering
pirates outside of a bar. "At least they're reliably rude. I'll take that over the fawning we get on
Xentha."
"I wouldn't." I offered, "At least that can get amusing. I doubt anyone on this station is impressive enough to even take a trophy from."

"This far from the front lines?" Shyeel shook her head, "Probably not... but hey, at least we know that we've got a ready made spy network available to us."

"Ready made rumor network." Cieran corrected, lifting a hand to shift it from side to side, "Important distinction."

I could only sigh, "Because you don't want to put them in danger, right?"

"They're civilians who happen to respect Ayle, Nynsi, and I because of the positions we hold, and their significance as far as the Pillars are concerned." One of his armored shoulders shifted as we slowed down, approaching the brightly lit lifts and the well armed guards lingering around them. "We can talk about that later, let's just focus on figuring out what the fuck Krom wanted on this station before we get out of here."

Shrugging, I reached over my back shoulder my right hand, drawing my carbine as the big idiot and Shyeel did the same. Cieran didn't bother, but I noticed him flexing his fingers and forearms, his usual routine if he was considering activating his gauntlets.

The guards noticed our guns, our armor, and the logos... and most of them shifted awkwardly as we drew closer, though the leader stood his ground.

"The upper decks are for authorized personnel only." The Turian planted his feet and straightened himself, as if looming over Cieran would help. "Look for employment elsewhere, mercenary."

To my surprise, he actually did stop moving instead of just walking through the idiot like I thought. His head cocked to one side as he regarded the Turian, "You recognize the symbols, right?"

"You aren't on the list." The guard repeated stubbornly. "Who are are apart from that is irrelevant."

"Uh huh." His head shifted in the other direction before he shrugged and flicked the tech panels to life around his fists. The guard was reeling before he could even draw his weapon, his subordinates flinching with each crackling detonation.

Fifteen or so seconds later, he casually stepped over the unconscious body, his posture shifting to an angry prowl as he moved towards the lifts.

I could only sigh in disappointment when the rest of them scattered out of our way, following everyone else into the elevator before pushing the button to take us up.

Shyeel laughed quietly, brushing the back of her hand down my forearm. "Cheer up. We'll be back on Xentha soon, and we can finally go hunting while these two are stuck at that gala thing."

Illyan let out a pained sound at the reminder, which made me grin. "I thought we were getting out of that..."

"Ayle is still on Antiva, so no." He replied, though he sounded about as happy as she was. "I tried to get Faras to go for me, but Ayle made them go the last time and they didn't enjoy it."

"It's not like we will either. Can't you order them to do it?" The tall Asari whined.

"Sorry," he sighed, "I already told T'Ravt we'd be attending."
"Athame's ass... please tell me I don't have to wear a dress at least."

I shuddered at the very idea, "Keelah, please tell me that as well. I don't think I could handle the sight."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean!?"

"I think it's obvious." Hefting my gun up to rest it on my shoulder, I waved my now free left hand at all of her. "Why would anyone want to see that in a dress?"

"Plenty of people would." She growled back, trying to step around Cieran only for him to neatly block her. "I'm more than attractive enough to wear one."

"Then why," I drawled, letting the wicked amusement bubble into my voice. "Are you so worked up about this?"

"You little-"

"Enough, enough." Our leader groaned, reaching up to plant a hand over the bottom half of her helmet while the other rubbed at his own. "If you two absolutely have to do this, at least wait until we're back on the ship."

Illyan muttered a few things that were probably insulting, to which I simply tilted my helmet back as I pointedly looked away from her.

"Honestly." Shyeel sighed as the lift slowed, the console beeping cheerfully as we arrived. "I get this is how the two of you show your affection, but I'm starting to agree with Cie in how annoying it can be."

I wasn't sure which of us was more annoyed at the implication that we felt affection for each other, but the doors sliding open forestalled any vitriol that we might have directed at her for the statement.

The upper decks of Tortuga station were far more well kept than the lower levels, probably out of some pathetic desire to emulate Omega's layout. Corridors and streets were reasonably clean, and well armed and armored bouncers stood outside of the various gambling dens and restaurants. A few of them started at the sight of our distinctive armor, but none of them tried to stop us as we calmly walked down the main avenue.

"So..." My maybe-girlfriend asked after perhaps two minutes of watching locals stare at us, "Where are we going?"

"If he was up here, he was either meeting with someone, or looking for someone." Cieran replied, his torso turning left and right as he scanned either side of the street. "Either way it wouldn't have been in one of the main rooms, not with Aria's bounty on his head. Someone would have spread the word, more than just a couple of Batarian civilians..."

Shyeel grunted. "Makes sense. So we're looking for a dive, or a place that doesn't really advertise."

"Yeah." His tone turned musing, "Or an oddity."

I could only sigh and think that it was going to take us hours, since practically every third establishment fit the first criteria. Still, moving in and out of them didn't take as long as I'd feared, mostly because the locals proved to have enough sense to realize that annoying the people who had a heavy cruiser parked outside was a low-percentage move.
The fifth lowly lit bar proved to be a gathering place for local freelancers, who were all too quick to recognize us and know why we were there.

"He was askin' 'round," A swarthy human grunted from his chair, a grease-stained hand rubbing at his almost pointed chin. "Lookin' for people willin' to sign on wit' 'im. He 'ad a few takers, but most of us ain't that stupid. Didn't get more 'an a couple."

Cieran grunted, "Did he say for what?"

"Some mission, said it won't in the 'erminus even." The merc shrugged, "Think he 'ent to tha pit when he 'ouldn't get enough ta join."

I cocked my head and frowned, "The pit?"

"It be 'own the street." A hand waved, "They got mechs and AI and crap, have 'em fight for sport. Can buy 'em too."

Our human leader twitched his head in a nod, a hand flicking to toss the man a credit chit before he turned and got moving again. We quickly fell in, not needing to ask where we were going next.

"We'll get what he bought, and how many." Cie exhaled as we exchanged the dark bar for the bright lights of the corridor once again. "Then get out of here. Voya, you'll be on counter-tech duties once we're on our way back."

I nodded, "Assuming he bought anything at all, shouldn't be too hard."

"Can't imagine him leaving empty-handed..." His tone turned musing, "Why would he be going outside of the Terminus though?"

"Probably lying." I twitched a shoulder to shrug, "It's not like anyone would willingly join him for a mission in the Terminus, not with the war going against Ganar, and with Aria's bounty still on his head. If he could con them into thinking he was going elsewhere, he'd at least have a chance to convince them."

"Fair point."

Illyan stepped past me, a long arm reaching out to rest on his shoulder as she guessed what he was actually worried about. "He's not going anywhere Cie. Ganar would never let him flee."

"He'd probably kill him if he tried." Shyeel mused, "Which wouldn't be terribly satisfying, even if it would solve the whole finding him problem."

Cieran snorted, shaking his head in bemusement. "I'm in this for him dying, who kills him doesn't really matter to me and you know it. Still, I'll admit that being able to interrogate him would be nice."

I grimaced inside my helmet, "Assuming he's still sane without that bitch to keep his brain in order."

"Assuming that." He agreed.

"Not much of a loss." Illyan muttered before slowing down, her head cocking to one side. "Think that's it?"

My eyes rolled, "No, I think they just have a giant neon sign saying The Pit for-"

"Voya." Cieran and Shyeel groaned, more or less at the same time, stopping me from finishing the sarcastic remark. Not quite in time, from the way Illyan's fists clenched, and I felt my lips curl in a...
smirk.

So fucking easy...

The four of us crossed the street, the pair of bouncers outside not doing more than glance at us as we went through the broad entrance. Inside was a small entrance hall, with what looked like betting machines along one side, and vending boxes along the other. Two more guards, in much heavier armor, were standing beside either side of the next set of doors... and unlike their fellows, they actually moved to block our path.

"Tonight is a closed show." One of the Batarians rumbled, though he bowed his head to the left as he said it. "Our sincere apologies, Reyja'krem."

Cieran grunted, dipping his a few hairs to the right. "If you know who I am, you know why I'm here."

The man's discomfort increased visibly, his head dipping a bit more before he managed to arrest the motion. "Yes, Reyja'krem."

Armor shifted as Cie crossed his arms, the rest of us spreading out a bit behind him as he made a small motion with his right hand. "Get me whoever knows what he bought when he was here."

"...yes, Reyja'krem." He very slowly brought a hand up to his helmet, making sure to keep his voice loud enough to make it clear that he was calling for the place's owner rather than calling for backup.

"Competent." I spoke aloud when he went quiet, "What are you doing in an ancestor's cursed dive like this?"

"Usually slow, and not really dangerous." He muttered quietly, clearly unhappy to be discussing it, but equally too intimidated to refuse. "Easy money."

A coward then... or someone with more sense than us. Well, me, at least.

While the other settle in to wait, I wandered over to the betting consoles, flicking a finger across one. There was evidently four rounds planned for the evening, each of which pitted various machines with grandiose names against one another... though oddly they all seemed to be legitimate. Mech on mech only, no throwing out slaves just to make a mess and get the crowd going.

Unless that was just something they saved for weekends or something.

My head turned around when the main doors slid open, another Batarian emerging, though he was far more thickly built than his guards. "Sacred Pillars, this had better be... oh, just lovely. I knew I should never have talked to that fur covered asshole."

"What did you sell him?" Cieran didn't waste time, as usual.

"Nothing." The man snapped. "I know that chenethic is on Aria's hit list, even out here I don't break the One Rule."

Cie sighed before speaking, twitching his left hand in a few short gestures that made me smile as I read the choppy sign. "You turned him down flat?"

"Yes." He all but snarled, "Now could you get out of here? I don't need you scaring away my clients."
My friend didn't need to say anything... he didn't have to. Pushing off with my left leg, I darted past him as my hands blurred to my belt, drawing a pair of weapons as I closed the distance on my target. He had enough time to yelp, all four eyes widening enough to show the white around the black, and then I was slamming him against a wall, a blade against his throat while my other pointed at the nearest guard.

The latter proved to be largely pointless, given that Shyeel and Illyan had also moved in, their rifles not quite pressing into the men's necks.

"If you had turned Krom down flat, he would have killed you." Cieran spoke into the tense silence that followed, his voice tired. "Probably in a way that would have given your extended family nightmares. So let's skip the lying and get to the part where you're useful."

Lips peeled back from sharp teeth, as if I wasn't holding edged metal against his flabby neck. "Let me go, and I'll respond. If you kill me, you won't get anything."

I rolled my eyes and pushed my dagger a bit closer, watching a thin line of red appearing to slide down the blade. "I won't kill you, keshin, I'll just take an eye or three."

"No." The remark drew a snarl, "You won't you little fur covered bitch."

The doors slid open in time with his insult, revealing... a massive slab of moving metal, a heavy combat mech crouch-walking before straightening its brick-like body to tower over everyone present. It was a Batarian model, with thick limbs and a thicker torso, a box head sweeping over the scene as it leveled both of its arms at Cieran.

"My newest model." He all but laughed as I tensed, "Lich model machine guns attached to each wrist, redundant power supplies, and the single most vicious VI I've ever seen."

"Priority targets detected." The mech droned obediently. "Requesting orders."

"Call off your bitch, mercenary." My captive spat, covering my visor in flecks of liquid, "Or I'll have you all killed."

Cieran didn't reply.

"Kean, did you fucking hear me!?

"Yeah." He murmured, his tone absent. That made it my turn to blink, and I risked a quick glance over my shoulder.

I expected to see him about to have an attack, or something worse, instead... Instead he was just standing their, tilting his head one way, then the other, in a way that was so un-Batarian, so un-Cieran, that it seriously weirded me out. "Cie...? You all right?"

"Hm? Yes, fine. Just apologizing to Athame for some of the crap I've given her." He shrugged and shook himself, his body language returning to its normal ridgity. "You, guard. Head inside and get us the list of what he sold to Krom."

The guard, who still had Illyan's gun shoved into his throat, turned his helmet to stare at Cieran, then at the combat mech, and then right back at Cieran.

I couldn't blame the guy... I was pretty sure all of us did the same look back and forth.

"Illyan, let him go get that done." Cieran continued, as if nothing unusual was happening. "Voya, go
ahead and kill the asshole. Glitch, go to standby mode."

"Don't you fucking-glrk!" Blood shot out as I swept the blade, stepping aside quickly enough that most of it missed me. I let the twitching body drop, stepping aside as he vainly tried to close the wound.

Which let me focus more intently on the mech, my mouth working a bit as the indicated guard took off to get what we needed. "Glitch?"


"They replaced both arms, the left leg, and the paint scheme." Cie mused as he stepped closer to the mech, then lifted a hand to trace the right leg. "But it's still got that limp in the right leg, and you can see where they didn't quite paint over the silver on the chest."

I cocked my head a little, squinting my eyes and then snorted when I saw the vague lines. "Keelah, there it is... how did it end up here?"

"Probably salvaged, I'm betting that ass bought any wrecked mechs he could find for sale."

The one guard remaining shakily dipped his head, drawing our attention his way as he spoke. "Y-Yes Reyaj'krem. He b-bought quite a few wrecks from Redcliffe. I think this one was salvaged by local citizens."

"Explains why we didn't get told." Shyeel shook her head, stepping up beside Cieran. "No one in T'Ravt's group would have kept it, not after the last time her people screwed us over."

My lip curled at the reference to what had happened to Jacqueline, "No. They wouldn't have."

The scarred Asari shifted a bit, clearing wincing as she realized that she'd upset me, then awkwardly cleared her throat and tried to change the topic. "So... we've got Glitch back. What's next?"

"Make sure they didn't modify its matrix too much, and fix up some of the crap they did to it."

"Clarification." The mech thrummed again. "The incompetent one was unable to modify my core programming. Directive Three. Only core programmer Rane'li, priority target Voya'chi have such authorization."

I narrowed my eyes, "What are directives one and two?"

"You do not have authorization."

Cieran exhaled, then repeated my question. "What are directives one and two?"

"You do not have authorization." The mech repeated in turn.

He groaned, "Who does? Rane?"

"Core Programmer Rane'li has such authorization." It confirmed. "Please direct such inquiries to her."

Reaching up a hand, I rubbed furiously at my mask as I sighed. "I'll see what I can do when we get it back to the ship."

"Right..." Cieran sighed as he shook his head, "Well, if Krom bought a few homicidal mechs, at least we've got ours back."
Cie,

We've landed safely on Antiva, though truthfully I can't say that our presence is really needed. The local forces are already rolling the Krogan back, we're being assigned to help clean up flank and deal with a few Scarlet Tears platoons that are causing some havoc.

I can't say that I'm thrilled at the news that you have found Glitch. I'll admit it had its uses, but the thing always worried me. Do you remember how many allies its nearly killed? Still, it is yours to utilize as you see fit, I just want to remind you of the danger.

I expect to be done on this planet within a few weeks, a month or two at the outside. If you could pass on a message to Illyan, please tell her that I am intrigued by her proposal.

Ayle

Post Note: No, I'm not explaining, and if Illyan has any sense, she won't either. It's nothing that will harm anyone, so don't stress about it.

Post Post Note: No, it's not sexual.

Next up is Interlude VII: Gesellschaftstanz

Chapter End Notes

And as promised, Glitch has returned. Also a little bit of drip feeding of information as to what is going on elsewhere, but the interlude is mostly just an interlude. Next chapter will have a brand new point of view that should (hopefully) be fun, and it will take place on Xentha.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Renegade Son

I always hated the grand balls that the Lady liked to throw. I mean, sure, there was a lot of very attractive people to ogle, but none of them really wanted to spend any time talking with a bloody cadet. Not that I was the only one of those present, my brother and a dozen or so other third years were around somewhere, but they were at least old enough to pass for very young officers if one ignored the symbols on their uniforms.

Me? Not so much.

"Magnus." I could only sigh as mum found me leaning against one of the room's walls, a hand rising to run along the edges of her crest. Like me she was wearing the dress whites of the Academy, though hers had the obvious demotions showing her past as a fighter pilot, and current occupation as an instructor. "Hiding by the wall again I see."

"You know this isn't my thing." I punctuated the comment with a small sip from my juice, "I don't get why mother insists on us attending."

Koliva MacKinnon gave me an understanding smile, stepping closer and resting a hand on my shoulder. Mum was a bit shorter than me, at least after my last growth spurt, so she had to reach up to do it. "You know why, you just don't enjoy it as much as your brother does. Which is a shame, because you're far better at making connections than he is."

"That's because he's an idiot." I pointed out with a slight grin.

"Be nice, he is your brother." She paused a beat, "Even if he is a little challenged when it comes to tact."

The laugh came out before I could stop it, and she beamed at me before giving me a little tug. "Come on, go wander around. Even if all you do is listen, at least you're learning."

My laughter faded a bit, but I nodded and dutifully replied. "Yes mum... you know where mother is though? I'd rather not see her glaring at me."

She rolled her eyes but smiled as she did it, reaching out a hand to take my drink away, which would at least let me excuse myself to get a new one at some-point. Mum was considerate like that. "She was with the Lady, last I saw. Now get."
Bringing my now free hand up in lazy salute, I forced my legs to carry me away from my comfortable wall and its attendant beverage stand... and plunged into the broad swathe of beings mingling with one another in the ballroom.

Step one, leave my comfort zone, complete.

Step two, find someone to talk to so that I could say I'd done so... work in progress.

It didn't help that nearly everyone formed themselves into little cliques, with each group only interacting with one another when they wanted to try and impress someone, introduce allies to one another, or to pick verbal fights with old rivals. The entangled Xenthan politics on display might have interested me if I hadn't had to suffer through similar events every few weeks, over the course of the last five or six years.

"Let's see..." I muttered to myself as I kept my head on a swivel, trying to analyze the various groups as I walked. "There's the Lady and mother, along with the major Ha'diq... no, just no. Naval clique glaring at the Army clique, no thanks, they'd try and get me to say what side mother supports..."

Bypassing all three groups, I tried to stay on the outside of the main crowd as I tried to find my brother and the older cadets. He wouldn't be thrilled to have his little brother around, which I just felt awful about, but at least I'd be able to participate properly in the conversation.

And if I got bored, I could always needle him about his 'secret' crush on Juria ul Shavi.

I was so focused on locating the boar that I wasn't paying nearly enough attention to where I was going, something that I paid for when an elbow slammed right into my face.

My voice broke when I yelped, arms flailing as I landed on my ass. I felt my face flush at the general rumble of laughter that sounded as everyone turned to look at me. Grinding my teeth at the embarrassment, and to stop myself from saying anything stupid to people who were very far above me on the societal totem pole, I didn't notice the broad blue hand in my face until its owner spoke up again.

"Kid, you all there?" The Asari asked politely, reaching down to grab my shirt and haul me up to my feet in an insane display of casual strength. "Sorry about that, didn't know you were behind me."

"I... it's all right." I managed to inform the pair of breasts in front of me, a dark, silvery dress revealing more than a little of her decolletage. My brain caught up with my hormones after a few seconds, and I realized that I was upright... and my head was barely at the level of her freaking tits.

Craning my neck back, I stared upwards at the tallest Asari I'd ever seen. She had pleasantly balanced features, right on the edge of being merely good looking rather than being gorgeous. No familial markings marred deep blue skin... but her lips were set in smirk that indicated she hadn't missed what I'd been staring at initially. "You sure?"

"Yes." Swallowing, I took a step back as she finally let go of my shirt, forcing myself to actually take in the rest of her. In addition to being tall, she was seriously built, and had legs that seemed to go on for kilometers where they emerged from the folds of silvery fabric. "I'm sorry, I... I really wasn't watching where I was going."

"I assumed," She still sounded entirely too amused, her accent the crisp tones of Illium. "Most people don't run into other people's elbows on purpose."

"I..." Really liked those legs. And those breasts. And I was having a very hard time thinking of anything else, though I managed to reply in her language. "I'm sorry, I was trying to... um..."
She barked out a laugh at my awkwardness, "Goddess but you're adorable."

I felt myself flush again. Adorable wasn't a word I wanted associated with me, especially coming from a gorgeous titan of an Asari. Channeling my mother, I forced myself to straighten up before giving her a slight bow, apologizing appropriately. "I'm sorry, I was looking for the other cadets present, and wasn't watching where I was going. Please accept my apologies, Miss...?"

"Illyan." Her head tilted a little, as if she was equally amused that I didn't know who she was. "Illyan T'Donna."

"It is good to meet you, Miss T'Donna," I bowed again, trying to keep my voice even and my eyes above her chest. "My name is Magnus MacKinnon, second year cadet."

"I know who you are kid."

I couldn't help but blink a few times. She knew who I was? The confusion was enough to break the thin veneer of icy calm that I'd managed to scrape together, "Um... you do?"

"Yup." She drawled, broad arms crossing her chest as she cocked her head in the other direction. "You've got the sames eyes as your brother."

How in god's name did my brother know a beautiful Asari like this? And why hadn't he bragged continuously about it? "You... you know Alexis?"

"Alexis?" T'Donna sounded confused for a moment as she frowned, then there was a soft snort. "Oh, the stupid one? No. Heard about him, but I've never met him personally."

I blinked again. "If you don't know him, how do you know that we've got the same... oh. You... you know my half-brother, then."

"You could say that." Again that seemed to amuse her for some reason, blue lips twitching at the edges. "You look a lot like him, actually. Younger obviously, and minus the fur around your mouth, and the stuff on your head as a lot shorter."

It was a fight to not self-consciously touch the short-cropped hair on my head, "I got tired of it getting yanked on in sparring practice."

There was something like a wince, "Cieran almost blew my knee out the last time I tried that. Mostly we spar in full armor though, so it's not really a problem."

She sparred with him? She was close enough to... oh. I shook my head, smiling in self-deprecation, "Right... silver dress, and the accent. I really should have figured that out. You work for him then?"

"I'm in his cadre, and one of the Lancers." T'Donna replied, looking a little put out. "You really didn't know who I was?"

"Mother doesn't really want us digging into his life very much." I shook my head, "I've seen a few clips of his fights on the extranet, and I've had to do a lot of reading on Redcliffe for our classes, but I don't really know much about anyone else besides Commander ul Massa."

She frowned a little, then her smile returned in full force. "You want to change that? Meet him in person?"

"I..." I hesitated. I mean, he was my brother, but he was also close to twice my age. And mother would lose her shit if she knew, she didn't want us getting sucked into the crazy shit he seemed to
continuously get involved in. Then again... mum had told me to go meet people, and if mother didn't happen to like it... well, that was just too bad.

"Sure." I nodded once, "Who else is here?"

"Just me and our new ship captain, her name is Joa." T'Donna turned, beckoning me to follow as she got moving. I hastened to chase after her, though she kept her strides short enough that I didn't look too ridiculous following her. "They're chatting with a few of the officers we worked with on Redcliffe."

Some of my confidence faltered at that. Meeting my assassin-slash-mercenary half-brother was one thing, meeting some of the legends who'd fought through that hellish campaign was something else entirely.

T'Donna seemed to notice my steps faltering, because she snapped a massive arm out and wrapped it around my neck. As much as I disapproved of being dragged along like an unruly kid, the position left me shoved against her side... and whatever perfume she was wearing smelled as good as she looked.

I managed to shove my hormones aside as we neared one of the corners of the room, the only one with lighting that didn't seem to quite illuminate the entire stretch of space. It left things ominously dim compared to the brightly lit dancing area, and the swath of territory where the Lady held court... and sure enough, it was filled with people far, far higher on the planet's social totem pole than I was.

Commander-General Kaste was speaking with Admiral Xendi, while Colonel Kaste was using her arms to describe some kind of formation to a trio of Majors who were clearly hanging on every word. And just off to one side, surrounded by a trio of Batarian Colonels all proudly bearing the campaign's awards... was my half-brother.

"Cie!" The statuesque woman sounded like she was about to start skipping in sheer happiness, "Found one of your brothers!"

Cieran ul Kean broke off the conversation he'd been having with one of the Colonels, an oddly short Batarian woman, frowning as he watched her take a final few steps before all but shoving me out in front, like I was some kind of prize that she was presenting.

I'd seen pictures and vids of him before, in person... he was a lot less buff that I'd thought he would be, a little paler, but maybe a little taller. He was wearing a well tailored trench coat over top of a dress uniform of his own, though the primary color was a blue so dark as to be nearly black, accented with silver lines. If nothing else it made him severely stand out against the white of the Lady's officers.

Thought the hair helped with that as well. It was long and brown like mother's, with most of it tied back in a loose ponytail. The remainder had been tied into a pair of braids, each of the long bundles hanging over his shoulders, matching the far smaller sections woven into his goatee on either side of his mouth.

The one thing the vids had gotten accurate was how he held himself... I'd have thought he was wounded, or wearing some kind of brace if I hadn't known about his Batarian fixation. He barely shifted even when he breathed, his chin was perfectly level, and he turned his torso rather than his neck. It was a little odd to look at, but I'd been dealing with Batarian roommates at the Academy for two years, so it wasn't nearly as disconcerting as I'd thought it would be.
A hand rose to run through his goatee as he sighed, shaking his head a little and flicking his eyes to
the Asari who'd brought me here. "Illyan... why?"

"Because you should talk with him." She announced, stepping around me and quickly moving over
to stand next to him. "Obviously."

He gave her a mild glare that made him look like a bearded, male version of our mother, and I
couldn't help but shudder at the mental image that that comparison brought up. "Illyan, you know
that I really don't care about that family, right?"

"Weren't you the one to yell at Voya about needing to spend time with Haro?" Blue arms crossed her
chest as she looked down her nose at him. "I'm pretty sure you were. I can call her if you need a
reminder, I'm sure she'd be thrilled to tell you all about it."

I had no idea who they were talking about, but cautiously cleared my throat all the same. That had
the effect of drawing nearly everyone's attention to me, and all three Colonels looked entirely too
amused at the scene they were watching.

I felt my heart lurch a bit in panic at the scrutiny, and fought to keep my voice even. "I... um, I didn't
mean to interrupt anything."

"I'm sure it was her fault." My brother exhaled, narrowing his eyes a bit further at the Asari in
question. She merely scoffed in return, taking a few more steps until she was standing behind him.
Then... she draped her arms over his shoulders, resting her chin on the top of his head as if he was
just an oddly shaped piece of furniture.

Oh god... had I been perving on his girl? I was dead. I was so very, very dead.

Then again... could he blame me? He had very good taste... shit, I had to get my stupid teenaged
hormones under control before they got me shot.

Kean sighed, as if being used as a chin-rest wasn't anything unusual, then shook his head a little as
he spoke, "Your name was... something Latin. Magus?"

"Magnus." I corrected absently, trying to kick my punch-drunk brain into motion. "Sorry, I'm not...
really used to talking to people like this. It's good to meet you."

He arched an eyebrow, tilting his head a little to the right, making T'Donna's move in the same
motion. "Is it?"

"I think so." I gave him a small smile and shrugged, "I mean, mother doesn't want us to talk with
you, I think that earns you a few points at least."

That earned me a small snort, and a hand rose to beckon me closer. "Stop standing in the open,
you're drawing attention. Nara, if you could excuse us?"

Letting out a nervous breath, I nodded and took a few steps forwards until I was more in the clique's
combined bubble. While I did that, the Colonels politely bowed their heads to Kean before moving
aside to speak quietly with each other, at least giving us the illusion of privacy. "Thank you."

He rolled a shoulder in an Asari style shrug, then seemed to glance up at the woman still using his
skull as a chin rest. "So, what do you want us to talk about?"

"I dunno." She replied cheerfully, "He's your brother, not mine."
"Athames fucking ass." His eyes closed as he sighed. "Why do I like you again?"

"You really want me to answer that in public?" I felt heat in my cheeks once again, and to my embarrassment she noticed. "Aw, look at him, turning all red. Do you have a girlfriend? Boyfriend?"

"I... no." I admitted, "Neither. A few dates but nothing that worked out. We don't really get much time for that kind of thing."

T'Donna smirked down at me, "I bet the second one is a lie. Got any preferences?"

"Illyan," My brother sighed, "He's sixteen."

"Seventeen." I corrected at once, "And... I mean, I like Asari. And Terminus Quarians. The guys more than than the women, though they aren't bad either."

The tall Asari blinked a couple of times, "Really? Not other humans? Is it a family thing or something?"

"I..." I'd never really thought of that, and I shifted my attention to Kean. "I mean... Alexis is always looking at pictures of Batarian girls when he thinks no one is around, and our mother is really into mum... huh. Genetic?"

He snorted, tilting his head a bit in what I thought was the pose for bemusement. "Seems like it might be. Mum? You mean MacKinnon's bondmate?"

"She's not out father, and calling her Koliva is a little too disrespectful considering that she teaches us." I shrugged. "Seemed like a good compromise, and it was easy for me to say when I was four years old."

"Can we get back to the fact that he likes Quarians?" Illyan cut in, "Quarian guys even, because we happen to know one who's single, and I could totally-"

"No." He actually jerked away from her, shaking his head furiously. "No, Illyan. Voya would murder you."

"But it would be-"

"I don't care." I fought not to laugh as he glowered up at the much taller woman, half expecting him to shake a finger in her face like she was a little kid. "Don't even think about it."

"Can I ask?" I managed to get the words out without doing more than smiling, even if it was pretty hard to manage.

"You can ask," Kean growled, still glowering at his apparent girlfriend. "Just don't expect an answer."

I couldn't help but snort, feeling far more relaxed now than I had been when I'd first been dragged over here. Which had probably why the tall Asari had directed the conversation that way, to break the awkward tension with something she'd known would amuse me even as it kept Cieran's irritation directed at someone who wasn't me.

Her and mum both... and the Lady, obviously. Probably most Asari, come to think of it. So easily thinking in the long term and defusing awkward social situations before they even happened.

"So..." I asked into the silence that followed, "I mean, I know a lot about you from the vids and
reports, but I don't really know anything about you personally."

He regarded me frankly for several moments, then sighed. "Illyan, you really are going to call Voya if I don't talk with him, aren't you?"

When she only grinned in reply, he seemed to groan before nodding and waving for me to start asking questions.

The next two hours was... surprisingly cordial, especially when I worked out that the best way to talk with him was to invite him to respond in kind. Trading information and questions, making him feel like he was gaining something out of the conversation rather than just suffering through me interrogating him about the things he'd done. He mostly asked about the Lady, specifically what I thought about her and how she'd set the Academy up.

Once and a while T'Donna would slip in a question about my side of the family, though Kean always quickly shifted the conversation away from that after a few sentences. Not that I could really blame him, Alexis hadn't made a very good first impression, and knowing mother, she'd left an even worse one.

For my part, I mostly stuck with clarifications, getting the actual stories rather than the exaggerated rumors, but eventually I moved off of his past and asked about the various planets he'd been to. Both he and Illyan seemed bemused to learn that I'd never been off of Xentha, launching into tales about some of the other worlds they'd campaigned on. That particular conversation had roped in several of the other nearby officers, earning me introductions with some fairly prestigious officers.

One of them had been Commander-General Kaste himself, the gruff old Turian asking me a few polite questions about the Academy before temporarily borrowing my brother for a muted conversation in a corner.

"Athame's ass..." Illyan was shaking her head when he returned, just as I finished retelling an incident where mother had found a few pilots trying to sneak back into the Academy after a brothel run. "Seriously sounds like you dodged an entire hurricane Cie."

"She's not that bad." I tried to defend her, even though I knew it was a herculean task. "I mean, mum says that she really does care about us, she just doesn't know how to show it thanks to what her parents were like."

"She's a bitch." Cieran shrugged laconically, clearly not about to accept any excuses... not that I could really blame him. "I'll admit you're more tolerable than I thought after meeting her and your brother, but that just means I'm willing to give her bondmate some credit for raising you well."

"Speaking of," The Asari cocked her head a little, "Why are you less of an ass than your brother?"

I could only groan at the mention of Alexis. "He let his last name go to his head. As soon as the other first years realized his mother was the Academy Head... it didn't take long for it to start spiraling. Mother cracks down on him hard when he crosses the lines, but that just taught him how to be an asshole while not breaking any of the rules."

There was a grunt as Cieran shook his head, "Figures. I almost hate to ask, but what did her bondmate see in that frigid bitch?"

I bit my lip, trying to find the right words to describe their relationship. "They... compliment each other. I don't know how to say it better than that."

His eyes unfocused briefly as he mulled on that, then he shook his head once. I expected him to
change the topic away from our family once again, only for his omni-tool to flick to life. He glanced down at it before grunting, "Illyan, we've got to get going."

She pouted visibly, "Seriously? I finally get you to meet with your family for a few hours and now we've got to leave?"

His arm lifted up, "It's the old fish, I need a secure line."

T'Donna's lips pressed together, then she nodded before glancing at me. "Don't be a stranger kid. As a matter of fact... why not come out to the complex next weekend?"

"Illyan..." My brother closed his eyes before exhaling, then visibly elected against arguing with her about it. "Fine, fine."

"Um..." I hesitated before lurching into a question of my own, "Do you think I could bring my brother with? He could really, really use some advice about asking a Batarian girl out."

Kean just kind of stared at me. "What."

"And... um," The look unnerved me enough to blurt out my ulterior motive, "It would be funny to see him get beaten up a bit. He's really cocky about his hand to hand skills and it would be nice to see someone make him shut up."

T'Donna stared at me, then her lips curled slowly. "You know, I think I like him boss."

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**Xentha Communications Server 1985B-7C**

*MacKinnon, C: Why is my son's right arm broken, along with his nose?*

*Kean, C: He's an egotistical moron, and our medics put everything back together.*

*MacKinnon, C: I see. Only one arm?*

*Kean, C: Magnus paid me to go easy on him.*

*MacKinnon, C: Paid you?*

*Kean, C: Yes.*

*MacKinnon, C: In what?*

*Kean, C: Does it matter?*

*MacKinnon, K: Goddess, must you two act like this? You're family.*

*Kean, C: We're related by blood, that's not the same thing.*

*MacKinnon, K: Yes, it is. I'm not asking for love, I'm not that naïve, but could you at least be pleasant with each other?*

*Kean, C: …*

*MacKinnon, C: …*

*MacKinnon, K: Athame's azure, it's like you're clones of each other... Fine, fine, Be as rude as you
like, just please take care of Magnus when he is out there.

Kean, C: Illyan believes him to be adorable, I doubt she'd let anything happen to him.

MacKinnon, C: And yourself?

Kean, C: I find him to be tolerable. As far as safety, he is my guest while here.

MacKinnon, K: Thank you... Can I ask why he had a hickey on his neck when he came home?

Kean, C: You can ask.

Next up is Interlude VIII: Höllenhund

Chapter End Notes

And we finally meet the rest of Cieran's family, sans his Asari half-sister (who is far too young to attend this kind of event). This one was a little description heavy, but it struck me that I haven't really described either Illyan or Cieran from an external viewpoint in a very long time, and it seemed like a good time to refresh everyone on the both of them.

Next chapter will occur after a significant time skip, and will setup the next saga as well as taking a peak inside of Shyeel and Voya's developing relationship.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude VIII: Höllenhund

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Branded Survivor

I let out a long, tired groan as I crawled into the cabin's bunk, collapsing beside Voya as my shaking arms gave out. "Ow."

She let out long sigh at my drama, though her voice was as tired as I felt, "Keelah, seriously? You only fought four rounds, stop being so dramatic."

"All of mine went to time." I groaned into my pillow, too tired to bother lifting my head up. "None of yours did."

"Then you should have..." Her words were broken by a long yawn, "...fought better. And I still fought seven rounds with Cieran."

That was because the two of them had the most frustration over the constant leads that we'd been chasing around the Terminus. Krom, the fucking asshole, had spent the last two months bouncing around the rimward Terminus, working with both Blood Pack and pirate groups to harass Die Waffe's shipping and colonies.

Yet despite our best bloody efforts, we'd never quite managed to catch him.. or even engage him.

We'd missed him by mere hours on more than one occasion, showing up in the aftermath of whatever chaos that he'd caused. Twice we'd actually gotten there in time to engage his forces directly, even if he himself had been gone, interrogating what few survivors that Voya and Glitch left. They, almost universally, didn't seem to know much, but we'd learned a few things.

One, Krom was definitely becoming unstable without Zero-One around to calm his mental seas. A few of our captives had admitted to seeing him execute Vorcha over trivial or non-existent offenses, and his targets were increasingly less military oriented and more directed to just causing as much damage as he could.

Two, Ganar knew about number one, and wasn't providing his pet assassin with any additional Krogan for his missions. That at least explained the desperate and low-tiered freelancers that Krom seemed to increasingly be bringing on. He still had plenty of Vorcha fodder, but it was increasingly being backed up by a trio of heavy combat mechs along with desperate mercs.

Three... all of us were getting heartily sick of just barely missing the fucker. Hence all of us sparring with one another after the last exercise in frustration, trying to burn off the furious energy by
pummeling each other.

My irritable thoughts about both the fights, how sore my body was, and how annoyed I was about the situation were interrupted by warm fingers trailing down the back of my right forearm.

Groaning again, I dutifully hefted my head off of the pillow, blinking a bit at my partner. She was wearing as little as she could, as she usually did to bed, little more than binding bandages around her breasts and athletic shorts that hung to just above her knees. It was a combination that left plenty of fur...hair covered skin on display, along with stretches of taught muscle in the open space on her stomach and throat.

"Touching?" I asked softly.

"I believe that I am exhausted enough to tolerate hugging." She replied, her forked tongue briefly appearing as she licked her lips. "Perhaps even kissing if you behave."

It was all I could do to not immediately lurch across the bed and shove our mouths together. I could count the number of times she'd let me kiss her over the last several months with a single finger. Even cuddling was restricted to such times when she was in a proper frame of mind to accept being clung to.

I'd known that I'd have to be patient with her because of what she'd been through... but I was starting to hate myself for how hard it was. Goddess, I was over five hundred years old, yet here I was, acting like a sex starved maiden just out of her first century.

Pushing those thoughts, and my urges, aside, I carefully shifted closer. Her arm slid out, leaving space for me to slowly rotate myself so that I was laying directly beside her. Pressing my face into the side of her neck, nuzzling through the soft hair there to find the feverish-heat of her skin, and wrapping an arm around her waist was another cautious exercise, occurring over the course of several minutes.

Voya let out a soft, mewling sound when her own limb eventually wrapped around me, holding me in a loose grip. I exhaled into her skin as I listened to her thrumming heartbeat, fighting down the urge to let my hands wander up or down.

"I still don't understand why you're tolerating this." She murmured after five or ten minutes. "Keelah, you could walk into any cabin on this ship and ask for sex and they'd fall all over themselves."

"We've had this conversation, at least seven times." I replied softly.

There was an almost dainty sniff. "I don't recall any such talk, much less seven of them."

Pursing my lips, I resisted the impulse to bite her skin. "That's only funny when you do it to Cieran."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The hand on my back slid up, a long finger flicking against my crest. "Now tell me why you like me again."

Sighing, I ignored the blatant contradiction and did so, "You've got enough determination for seven people, which is beyond impressive considering what you've been through. You don't let anyone tell you to do something you don't actually want to do, and you're utterly vicious in a fight. And your body is-ugh!"

I grunted as I was abruptly pushed away from her, a lithe body following as hands seized my wrists and held them tightly to either side of my head.
"Um... Voya?" I swallowed as a curtain of white hair fell over our faces, her wide, glowing eyes narrowed to slits.

"I'm trying to decide if holding you down makes it easier." She replied, her voice low, and I felt her fingers tighten further. "I think it does."

"Oh." Normally I wasn't one for being the bottom, except on occasional occasions, but if it helped her I wasn't about to complain. Especially when she slowly leaned down, flicking her tongue out to let the edges touch my lips.

My heart thrummed a little as I opened them, darkness falling as my eyes rolled shut. Her long tongue flicked into my mouth, somehow both tentative and bold in the moments before our mouths were properly together. The kiss started slowly, hesitantly, with me staying submissive and letting her set the pace.

I was entirely unprepared when she abruptly shifted into an almost feral aggression, a long growling sound my only warning before her body was pressing hard against mine, her hands yanking my wrists above my head so that a single set of fingers could seize both of them and hold them down. Her free hand snapped down between us, groping at my chest and trying to get my athletic bra out of her way.

I tried to say her name, to ask just what the fuck had gotten into her, but her mouth swallowed my attempts to say much of anything. Her warm fingers got the fabric out of the way a heartbeat later, and had just started to properly squeeze and pinch when someone pounded on our bloody door.

Voya all but flew off of me, kicking me hard in one thigh as she did, her eyes wide and panicked as I yelped and flinched.

"What the fuck was that?" Cieran's voice came across our intercom.

"Nothing!" Voya snarled towards the door, her breathing still heavy as she refused to look anywhere near me. "What the fuck do you want?"

"There's a situation, need you both out here."

"Are you clothed?"

"Yes!" She snapped, "Stay the fuck out there!"

The tiny light winked out as he stopped holding the button down, and I let out another groan as I stretched my sore leg out. Focusing on the pain helped me not think about how suspicious Voya had sounded, and what Cieran probably thought we'd been doing.

What we'd come very close to doing, though very much not in the way I'd thought it would happen.

"Voya?" I asked when she got off the bed, her movements sharp as she yanked a drawer open to grab clothes. "What in Athame's name was that?"

"Nothing." She growled, not looking back at me. Her hair swished from side to side as she shook her head, the stiff strands rustling as she yanked pants on. "Get dressed."

Pursing my lips, I briefly considered pushing the subject before thinking better of it... and then I thought better of it again. Grimacing, I hauled myself up and swung my legs over side of the bed, fixing my bra as I did.

Pursing my lips a little at her behavior, I hopped to my feet and took a single step in her direction. "Voya, when I hugged you from behind last week you had to fight the urge to deck me or tear my
throat open. Our second kiss goes on for twenty seconds and you're practically trying to rip my
clothes off."

"I..." She almost hissed, "Shyeel."

I cautiously padded closer, but I took care not to touch her. "Voya."

"I... dammit. I liked being on top all right? It's been a very long time, and when I had you pinned
down I just..." Her hair rustled again. "I..."

"You knew I was helpless?" I asked quietly. "That I couldn't hurt you?"

Her gray fists clenched, her head lowering as she continued to refuse to look at me. "Yes."

"That turned you on?"

This time it wasn't a word, just a twitching nod.

"Oh." I pursed my lips, trying to work my brain around that, and how to work with it. If it turned her
on... I felt a small thrum of arousal run through me as I remembered her almost desperate aggression.
If that was what I could expect, I could definitely let her run things for a while, at least until she
could handle me taking a turn. "Should we find some restraints then?"

She whipped her head around fast enough that her hair actually lashed across my face, her mouth
hanging open as she gaped at me. "What?"

I blinked back at her, "I mean, isn't it obvious? If you tie me down then you'll definitely know that I
can't do anything without your approval."

Voya tried to say something, her lips moving, but the only thing that came out was a kind of
strangled noise.

"No pain or weird crap though." I had to make sure she knew that, shuddering a little as I
remembered my one attempt to have a threesome with Jacqueline and Marcus. Goddess but I hadn't
been on nearly enough drugs to make that crap fun. "We'll need some kind of safeword... what do
you think of 'Trophy'?"

"I..." Her skin actually started to flush, "I..."

More pounding on the door reminded us both that Cieran was still waiting, and probably getting
impatient about it.

She sucked in a breath, "We need to finish getting dressed."

I merely gave her a little smirk, then took a pair of steps away from her, my back hitting the bulkhead
of our cabin. Languidly stretching my arms above me, I held them together as if they were tied
together, and lowered my eyes a little. "You sure?"

Gleaming eyes stared at me, flicking up and down when I thrust my chest out a little, then closed
firmly as she clenched her fists. "Shyeel... just get your ass dressed."

Still grinning, I let my arms drop and walked over to my own clothing drawers to do so. A few
minutes later we emerged to find an annoyed Cieran leaning against a metal wall, glowering at the
both of us.

"I don't want to know." He spoke before we could say anything, "Unless it was Shyeel saying
something stupid again, in which case feel free to tell me."

I glowered up at him, crossing my arms. "Seriously? Right to assuming I said something asinine?"

His head shifted a little as he made a show of considering that, "Hmm... considering the trail of things in your wake, yeah, pretty much."

Voya didn't snicker as she usually would have, but she did smile a little as I huffed. Cieran raised a brow at the reaction, but shrugged when I shook my head. Waving a pale hand, he got moving, the pair of us walking beside him.

"So..." The Quarian asked, giving me a final glare. "Considering that it's our off shift, what the fuck is this about?"

"We have a call from someone I don't want to talk to." He replied, green eyes narrowing. "I wanted you with to watch and give me your opinions when its over with. Joa and Illyan will be there as well, along with Vishin."

I grimaced, the good mood I'd worked myself into at finding Voya's weakness fading as I realized that he was being entirely serious right now. "Who?"

"An asshole." Cieran all but growled as we reached a small staffroom, unusual for the fact that a pair of marines were standing guard outside of it. Both Batarian men all but broke their necks as they bowed to him, and kept them low until after we'd passed as well.

Inside was a long holographic table, with Joa and Illyan on one side, both looking somewhere between furious and disgusted. The leader of the ship's marines sat on the other, the Batarian male furiously smoking from a pipe as if the act was the only thing keeping him from flying into a rage.

Voya and I sat on his side, settling into our chairs while Cieran remained standing at the head of the table, his expression utterly cold and remote. "Put him through."

Joa's upper lip twitched away from her teeth, but she flicked a few commands onto the table. An image of a human male dutifully appeared in the air above it, reclining in a simple chair with his hands steepled before his chin. He wore what looked to be an expensive suit, casually ruffled, and had the features of a human at the late edge of their prime.

It wasn't until I saw that his eyes were artificial, glowing a bright electric blue, that I placed just who the fuck it was.

"Cieran Kean." The Illusive Man greeted him casually, "I was beginning to wonder if you were going to take my call."

"Jack Harper." Cieran replied, with far more ice in his voice. "Can we skip the false pleasantries?"

If the leader of Cerberus was surprised to hear his actual name spoken, he didn't show it. "As blunt as your reputation suggests."

Cie simply crossed his arms, pointedly remaining silent as Harper reached off camera, retrieving a glass with amber liquid and taking a slow sip before speaking again. "Ever since your discovery of our team on Xentha, I have been investigating Cynthi T'Ravt in the hopes of discovering just how she infiltrated my organization. During a raid one of her facilities last month, we discovered the location of a mansion complex on an Asari colony that is being utilized as a base for some kind of operation."
"Your point being?"

The glass shifted as the hand that held it tilted it slightly. "That we have a common goal in discovering just what was done to you, and her other experiments."

"Possibly." Cieran replied, doing a passable job of not looking terribly interested. "But I have higher priority goals at the moment."

"Yes, your hunt for the assassin." Harper's eyes seemed to gleam more brightly as he leaned back, "That is actually why I elected to contact you personally. My agent on world has been monitoring their communications, and has discovered that a certain individual is due for an attempt to repair the damage to his mind."

I flinched and jerked my attention to Cieran, who had done his Batarian-style-turn-into-a-statue thing. As tells went, that was fairly obvious one... and from the small nod that the terrorist allowed himself, he wasn't so moronic as to miss it.

"I thought you would be interested." He offered artfully, "He is due to arrive in twelve days. I believe that a partnership, temporary of course, would be advantageous in this matter."

Cieran finally sucked in a slow breath, green eyes half closing as he forced himself to calm down. "You said an Asari colony. You mean in the Republics themselves, not in the Terminus."

"Yes." There was another tiny nod. "Obviously you cannot openly attack a Council world, but if there was a... less than reputable organization, willing to take the blame for such an attack for a few minor considerations... you could be free to act."

Shit... shit, shit, shit fucking Athame's unholy fucking shit, this is not how I wanted today to go. From the way Cie's teeth were grinding together, he was about as happy as I was. "What kind of considerations?"

"Mutually beneficial ones." He assured us with all of the sincerity of a Volus salesman, "I am sure that discovering just what this Matriarch is up to is as important to you as it is to my organization. I desire to obtain copies of whatever research is occurring there, and any actionable intelligence that can be provided by yourself."

Our Commander let out a tight breath, placing his hands onto the table as he forced himself to remain calm. "You wouldn't send us alone. You want a team with on the ground."

"And in space." Another pointed sip from his liquor punctuated his words, "I will be dispatching a flotilla to the world, with or without your support."

"Then why the offer?" Cieran asked quietly, his head tilting before he nodded. "You need the assistance... you can't afford to send all of the assets you would like to, can you?"

"I have more operations in play that merely this one." He deflected with a minor shrug, "Your involvement would allow me to reallocate my forces to more appropriate venues."

A finger tapped slowly on the table as Cieran stared back at him, "Give me a few minutes to converse with my companions."

Harper nodded once, not wasting any words before Joa flicked another button to freeze the call... and promptly rose to her feet to glare furiously at Cie. "You can't be considering this. I know those goddess-damned assholes, you can't trust anything that son of a bitch just said."
He regarded her blandly, then glanced over to Vishin. The Batarian male blew smoke out of his open nose, then shook his head slowly. "As much as I loathe the idea of associating with them, Cerberus is capable, and the Pillars possess numerous sayings about the wisdom of coordinated action against mutual foes. I would agree, Reyja'krem, but I would also expect treachery."

The glance shifted to Voya and myself. I shared a glance with her, then shook my head, "As much as I really, really hate to say this... I have to agree with him Cie. I'd want to confirm with the old fish that this facility is actually there first, and I'd expect them to try and do something to fuck with us... but we can't keep just barely missing him."

"Our pursuit hasn't exactly been subtle. Sooner or later we'll fuck up and he'll ambush us." Voya agreed, "With whatever is left of Ganar's fleet."

Cieran let out a whistling breath between his teeth, nodded, then moved his attention on once again. "Illyan?"

His lover twisted her face in a grimace. "If the old fish can confirm whatever he tells us, and if you can convince me we'll be ready for whatever they try and backstab us with... I'm still at a maybe. It's Cerberus."

Fingers drummed on the table again. "Everyone but Joa can go."

So we were going to do this... and he didn't want the rest of us to hear her shrieking at him as he talked her down. Grimacing, I rose from my seat, Voya and Illyan doing the same, while Vishin was already halfway to the door.

He excused himself once we were outside, already preparing emergency training activities as he strode off. For our part, the three of us headed in the opposite direction, walking until we got back to Voya and I's room, with Illyan inviting herself inside along instead of heading down to the executive suite that she shared with Cieran.

"So." The tall Asari sighed, leaning against the door as Voya collapsed into the room's bunk. "Attacking a Republic colony... this is going to be awful."

"It wasn't like we could avoid it forever." I sighed, carefully moving to sit on the floor beside Voya's resting place. "Everything the Old Fish told us about that bitch made it clear we'd have to do something like this, if we wanted to go after her."

"Yeah, well... I thought it would happen farther out than this." She sighed. "If we fuck this up..."

"We'll complicate things for Sederis, and have to avoid Illium for a while." Voya waved a hand, her tone dismissive. "Hardly anything unusual."

"I was more thinking that a giant fucking fleet might show up and pummel us." Illyan countered, "Depending on where this colony is."

I rolled a shoulder in a shrug, "Can't be that far away from Illium, Krom is a wanted man in Council space. I doubt the Matriarch wants to risk anyone who works for her being seen with him."

"Maybe..." She sighed, shaking her head. "Voya, you think you can help work on Glitch with me tomorrow? We'll need it fully tuned up, and I'm guessing Cie will be focusing on our gear."

"Assuming Joa hasn't killed him." The Quarian sighed, a hand waving vaguely over my head, "Sure. Now get out of here, I want to sleep."
Illyan glanced at me, a smile playing across her face, "Is that a code word for something else or-"

"Oh shut up." I could only groan, "It's too late for me to tolerate you riling her up. We'll see you in the morning."

Our friend rolled her eyes, bringing a hand up in a mocking salute before departing. I stayed on the floor even after the door had closed, letting my head hang a little as I just breathed. Shit but Illyan was right, this was going to be a mess. A massive, fucked up mess that would make a hurricane and tsunami combination look positively benign.

A hand fell over the side of the bunk, three fingers coming to rest on my shoulder. "You think we should talk him out of it?"

"You think we could find the asshole again?" I asked back. "Before the war ends? Ganar's fleet is all but gone, Zadith Ban is overrun, the sieges on T'Ravt's old worlds are breaking..."

"I know." She sighed, giving my shoulder a tiny squeeze. "Aria's pets will find him sooner or later, and once Ganar is dead... that asshole is going to vanish. Assuming this isn't him trying to do so right now. If he could get to the inner colonies of the Republics..."

There wasn't any need to finish the sentence. If the Matriarch could get Krom that far, we would never be able to get to him. Not even Aethyta could, not if that bitch had taken that section of the Broker network. If there was even a chance that the Illusive Man wasn't just fucking with us...

"We're going to need like seven plans instead of the usual four." I groaned, already dreading the meetings that were going to come.

The hand on my shoulder flicked a finger out to touch my face, "Turn the light off and come to bed. We'll deal with that tomorrow."

Blinking, I twisted my head up and glanced at her. "Just to bed?"

Her skin darkened around her eyes and nose, "Yes. Just sleep. After we kill Krom... I might decide a celebration is in order."

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Next up is Saga IV: The Wild Hunt

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Chapter End Notes

And the interludes have now passed, along with a few months worth of time. The next saga will begin with the team rendezvousing with their Cerberus counterparts, and then will cover the entire attack on the Matriarch's complex and the complications that are sure to arise from such a course of action. Another note; moving forwards, things are going to begin occurring at a very rapid pace, with large amounts of action as the situation... devolves.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it
only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"Are you sure about this?" Illyan asked, her voice a low thrum thanks to my head's position on her chest. A single hand was slowly running through my hair, her breathing as slow and relaxed as my own. "Cie?"

"I'm awake." I yawned, shifting my head a little to press my lips into her blue skin. "And no, I'm not."

"Good." Warmth wrapped around my shoulders as she shifted her arms, hugging me against the front of her body. "I'd be worried if you were."

"You really need to work on your ability to reassure me." I sighed, moving a little bit so that I could plant another kiss on the top slope of one of her breasts.

"None of that." A soft grunt of pain came out as fingers pulled on my hair, dragging me up a bit, "We have to get up soon, and I'm plenty reassuring."

"Having sex with me before battle doesn't count."

She snorted, hugging me a little more tightly before relaxing. "Pretty sure it does, and I'd love to reassure you some more, but our alarm is about to go off."

Meaning we were only an hour out from the rendezvous, and that we had to get up and be ready to meet with the Cerberus ships waiting for us either politely or violently, depending on how they handled things. Or, more accurately, to hold Joa's leash to make sure that she reacted politely or violently only as appropriate, instead of just defaulting to blowing the terrorists ships apart. But while all of that was incredibly important... Illyan's body was pleasantly warm, and extremely comfortable. All the more so because I'd actually slept without interruption for once, and there was a vocal part of me that didn't give a shit about little things like Krom and Cerberus. It just wanted to resume that blessed relaxation, preferably for the next several eternities.

"How long until it goes off?" I yawned, pressing my head into her neck as I closed my eyes. She had the oddly sweet smell of Asari sweat, mixed with a bit of sex, a combination that I'd begun to grow rather fond of.

"Three minutes..." There was a deep sigh. "You're not getting up for three more minutes, are you?"
I merely made a humming sound, my breathing already beginning to slow down. Naturally, it felt like I'd barely begun to drift when a speaker began to blare ringing notes that made me flinch and curse tiredly as Illyan let out a pathetic groan of her own.

Throwing the sheets off of us with extreme reluctance, we disentangled ourselves and shuffled to the small bathroom attached to our cabin. The shower was just large enough for the two of us to fit, while being just too small for any extracurricular activities. All in all, that was probably a good thing, since it let her help wash my long hair faster than I could have managed on my own, while preventing any real temptation to do anything else.

Fifty minutes later we were departing our room, clad in armor repainted to a matte-black with no markings or symbols, and lacking our usual heavy coats. Much as we had on our raid to rescue Joa, we'd taken a few extra precautions to disguise ourselves further, with her armor properly modified to hide her feminine body and instead present the appearance of a tall human male.

My own disguise was going to be more behavioral... it was going to be a bitch to let myself relax a bit, and to not react with Batarian posturing, but I thought I could manage provided I was able to focus.

"Our main problem is still going to be Voya." Illyan shook her head as we walked, picking at her modified chest plate. "I know Cerberus has worked with Trophy Takers before, and that you took away her knives and made her swap her necklace decorations... but she's still fairly distinctive."

"Not much else we can do." I grimaced as we approached the bridge, "It's not like we can leave her behind."

"Yeah..." The wistfulness in her voice made me roll my eyes as we entered the organized chaos of the vessel's command chamber. Joa and her fellow pirates were now clad universally in the dark navy and silver of our corporation, with rank markers based on Batarian runes decorating their shoulders.

Unlike the auxiliary bridge, the primary one was very Batarian in nature. The bridge crew sat in three depressed sections, to either side of and in front of the captain's chair, giving her an excellent view of all of their displays and the primary view screen located on the front bulkhead. Currently, the last was only showing a rolling display of numbers, counting down until our emergence from FTL, while officers shouted out that their departments were cleared and ready for action.

"Cieran." Joa greeted distractedly as we arrived, Illyan staying near the back of the room while I approached the Captains' throne. "Morning."

"Joa, same." I replied, exhaling as I took a position on her right. "How are we doing?"

"Still not happy about this." Light purple lips curled a little, "I understand your reasoning, and I'll go along with it, but if those fuckers so much as twitch I'm going to scrap them."

"Good." She blinked and glanced at me when I nodded sharply, "What? I don't trust them either, and I'm not about to order to you to wait until they make the first move. If you truly, honestly believe they're about to stab us in the back, don't bloody hesitate."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, then she shook her head tiredly and returned her gaze to the front. "Every-time I start to get disgusted with you, you do something that makes me like you again. Goddess but you're irritating."

"Thank you." I replied with a bemused grin.
Joa snorted. "That wasn't a compliment, ass. Still, you sure that you don't-"

"We aren't having fight-sex, hate-sex, or any other kind of sex." My arms crossed my chest as I blew out a breath, trying to focus on the banter rather than the rolling numbers. "And be honest, you want Illyan more than you want me."

"Who wouldn't?" She asked reasonably, her fingers twitching slightly on their armrests before she forced them to remain still, the very picture of a calm Captain not about to rattle her crew. "But she said I'd have to convince you, and probably replace your blood with alcohol for it to happen."

I rolled a shoulder, glancing to my left and nodding as Shyeel and Voya arrived, both nodding back before moving to join Illyan behind us. "Both of those things are true."

There was a quiet grunt from the Asari, both of us going silent as the number approached zero... and then flashed to a field of stars.

"Contact, contact!" A Turian flanged, his eyes locked on his display, "I've got six ships, fifty thousand kilometers out... one light cruiser, a destroyer, and four frigates... They're flashing the approved IFF signals."

"Keep our shields up. Fen, I want our starboard at fifteen degrees to the cruiser." Joa snapped at once. "And give me a slow approach burn. Mari, open the preset channel and send the signal."

"Sending." An Asari maiden reported promptly, her fingers flashing across her console. "Waiting... receiving, its Cerberus. They're requesting permission to dispatch a shuttle to liaise with the Commander."

Joa grimaced, then glanced at me. I pursed my lips as I thought about it, then nodded. "They won't betray us just yet. Not until they've gotten what they want."

"All right. Clear hangar two, tell Vishin to expect guests. Inform our... allies that a single shuttle-craft may approach, and if that cruiser even starts to turn bow-on to us I'm going to consider it a declaration of intent."

"...they agree." The communication's officer sounded surprised, actually turning around and glancing at us. "They're saying the flagship will turn its engines to us in a sign of good faith, if it'll calm us down."

I blinked a little as the Turian on sensors confirmed that a few breaths later, "They're all shifting to show their assholes to us Captain, one shuttle is already moving our way... and they're keeping their barriers down."

"Keep ours up." Joa replied promptly, shaking herself a little. "And don't bother responding to that, just tell them they're expected."

"Yes Captain."

Sucking air into my lungs, I let it out in a slow breath and fought to not to let it whistle between my teeth. "Try not to start any fights."

"Where's the fun in that?" She asked, only to roll her eyes and nod exasperatedly when I merely glared at her. "Yes, yes. I'll avoid blowing them apart provided they behave... unless you change your mind and shoot whoever they send."

"Depends on who they send." I replied wearily, turning away and heading towards the door.
companions fell in around me as I moved, the four of us heading towards the nearest lift. "Voya, stop glaring at me."

"Do you have any idea how wrong this feels?" The Quarian growled, a hand continuously touching her vastly reduced necklace. All of the Krogan shards were gone, leaving just the teeth she'd taken from the SIU agents on Xentha. "And my knives?"

"I think she's going to actually murder you this time." Shyeel confided, "After the mission, naturally."

"That could be an amusing fight to watch." Illyan mused, "The two of you actually going at it without Cie holding back... We could sell tickets, maybe broadcast it on the extranet."

The smaller Asari snorted, "We could probably pay for another cruiser."

I could only sigh as I pushed the button to open the lift, stepping inside, "Enough you two. Voya, I know, but we have to at least try to look the part."

There was a vicious sounding sniff, her helmet tilting back and away to make it clear she was glaring up her nose at me as she stepped inside. The two Asari laughed and followed her inside, the amusement lasting until the elevator reached the appropriate deck. Our strained banter faded and vanished as we headed down a short corridor before waiting outside of the appropriate hangar.

We settled into a quiet silence, filled only with occasional checks of our armor and sidearms while we waited for the terrorists to arrive. It didn't take them very long, the small console next to the door flashing and updating as the out doors first opened, then closed, and then pinged when the air had finished pumping back in.

Inside we found a Cerberus Kodiak settling onto the ground, more or less surrounded by a unit of Vishin's marines in full armor rigged for vacuum. If the rifles clutched in their hands wasn't deterrent enough, Glitch was looming in a corner, the mech's baleful red eye locked onto the shuttle along with both of the light-machine guns built into its arms.

I frowned at the sight of the latter, raising my voice. "Vishin, how the fuck did you get Glitch to obey you?"

"I didn't." The Batarian shifted in obvious discomfort, tilting his head to the left. "It just showed up on its own. I thought you'd sent it, Reyja'krem."

"Keelah..." Voya snarled, splitting away from the rest of us to stomp over to the towering mech. It actually seemed to shuffle from side to side, its head moving as if it was trying to cringe at her approach.

"That thing isn't just a VI." Illyan muttered as her rival began snarling override commands punctuated with plenty of swearing. "I don't care if its pretending to be one or not, this independent crap is happening more often Cie."

I grimaced, turning away to focus on the shuttle as its engines shut off. "And it's scared of her."

"That too." She exhaled heavily, "Which would be funny if it wasn't fucking terrifying."

Shyeel let out a quiet sound, "Its still loyal though, and useful in a fight... but I really wish Voya could crack the core functions."

"Same." I murmured as the shuttle's door began to slide open, a hand falling to my pistol as two sets
of legs became visible. The marines lifted their weapons in a clear threat as the occupants became visible, relaxing only slightly when it was clear that both of them were in uniforms rather than armor.

I recognized both of them. Oleg Petrovsky stood tall in the center of the door, the Russian male in a full Cerberus dress uniform and not looking at all bothered by the reception. The same could not be said for Miranda Lawson on his left, her own officer's uniform clearly tailored to show off her genetically enhanced body. Her eyes were practically twitching as they flew around us, categorizing and analyzing everything as her fingers flexed, clearly fighting down the urge to summon her biotics to protect them.

"General Petrovsky." I greeted him simply as he stepped down the ramp, raising and then lowering a hand, the marines obediently lowering their guns in response. "I see Harper is taking this more seriously than I thought."

"Commander Kean." He replied easily, "The matter is a serious one, for the both of us. Anything but our best would be an insult and a mistake."

Forcing my hand away from my weapon, I crossed my arms and glanced pointedly over his shoulder. "Should I expect Kai Leng to appear?"

Petrovksy smiled slightly, "Operative Leng is occupied, unfortunately. Operative Lawson is an extremely accomplished field agent, and will be commanding our portion of the ground team."

Said Operative stood a little straighter, staring haughtily at me and clearly not caring for what she saw. I met her stare for a few moments, then pointedly returned my eyes to her superior, "All right. Staff room?"

He dipped his head, "It would be convenient."

"Your pilot stays on board. Vishin, check the shuttle over, full scan." I instructed as I stepped aside, lifting an arm to waive for the two Cerberus officers, "This way, General."

The broadly built man gave me a chill little smile, bowing his head and getting moving. Lawson followed in his wake, while Illyan, Shyeel, and I fell into an escorting formation around them. Voya caught up as we left the hanger, moving quickly and purposefully down the empty corridor until we reached a room originally intended to brief shuttle and fighter pilots.

Nobody elected to sit in the tiered seating, Voya and Shyeel taking up spots against the wall near the entrance, while Illyan and I stood with our guests in the room's open space.

"All right." I elected to begin rather than wait for them to do so, "We confirmed with the Shadow Broker that Matriarch T'Ravt has a mansion complex on the planet, and that one of her daughters is currently present. She's supposedly a mind healer of minor accomplishment, so that's a few factors in your favor."

Petrovsky eyed me without expression, "Then you are committed to participating?"

"Yes." And fuck was that word hard to say. "With the caveats that I already provided to your boss."

Lawson stirred, her accented voice rolling off the list. "Civilian casualties to be kept to a minimum, discovered data will be shared between both groups, and you will have overall authority on the ground."

I didn't look away from the General. "That work for you?"
"Yes." He replied easily, tilting his head in a nod. "Provided you are willing to allow me to take command in naval affairs."

Joa was going to lose her shit, again, but I couldn't make those demands and not expect him to have some in return. "All right. You have the details on our target?"

"Of course. If you do not mind?" When I shook my head, he stepped over to the room's lectern and pulled a data drive from a pocket. He gave me a grim little smile when I simply waved for him to insert it, "Ah, removed from the internal network. Of course. Operative Lawson, if you would."

Miranda stepped forwards as the wall display flashed to life, a two-dimensional image of a mansion and its surrounding landscape promptly appearing. After a moment, the picture split apart into a map of the grounds and a wire-frame blueprint of the main building. "This is the familial mansion, located one hundred kilometers outside of Benihi's only major city. Based upon its size, we can expect between thirty to forty guards. I have-"

"Double that." I interjected, stepping up and tracing the image with my eyes. "No, triple it. These plans are inaccurate."

There was a started pause, her eyes blinking and then narrowing. "You are basing this on...?"

Reaching up, I tapped two separate locations with a frown. "These are both hangars large enough to fit... six, no, eight shuttles each. This building isn't nearly large enough to warrant that much shipping, it's barely the size of Nynsi's, even with five floors, and her hangar being able to hold six shuttles is fairly wasteful as it is. There has to be an underground section, not on the official designs, and probably a very extensive one."

Miranda pursed her lips. "While that will make the encounter more difficult, I believe it reinforces the plan of approach I have drawn up."

I turned to regard her, "Which is?"

Placing her arms at the small of her back, the operative fell into an-rest position as she outlined her plan. "The nature of our target as Republic world necessitates that we move quickly and efficiently, but also remain ready to pull out should the situation turn. Even minor delays could lead to Asari or even Turian warships arriving to deal with us. Our first priority has to be the shutting down of interstellar communications and the destruction of any fleet assets in orbit."

"Not hearing anything I disagree with." I exhaled, "But also nothing that isn't perfectly fucking obvious. How do you intend to block communications? Destroy the system's buoy?"

Petrovsky nodded, "One of our frigates will be detailed for that task, yes. We also have specialized equipment on board my flagship which should be able to jam most of the colonial communication grid, hopefully delaying any militia response to your operation."

Meaning that they probably had EDI finished and on board. Shit, I'd have to warn Joa about that... movement made me glance to my right in time to see Voya vanish from the room, evidently having come to the same conclusion and not being willing to wait. Probably a good thing.

"Our last report," The General continued, having also watched Voya depart with every sign of calculating interest, "Indicated that there are two warships present, a pair of Gracewind class frigates. Once they have been removed, I will shift the vessels into a low orbit holding pattern above the primary colonial zones to safeguard against any attempts to leave the planet."

I found myself nodding slowly. "Threat on the frigates?"
He shrugged a shoulder, the motion subtly wrong with his head remaining still. Shit but I'd spent too much time around Asari lately. "They are older models, so I would rate them as a minimal danger. I am confident that they can be disabled or destroyed with the assets we have available. Provided that they do not simply rabbit to FTL."

Shyeel spoke up at that, a grimace audible in her voice, "How long would we have before they could return with reinforcements?"

"Perhaps four to five hours." Petrovsky replied soberly, "The disadvantage of operating in a system with a mass relay."

"Athame's ass... right, Lawson." I waved a hand at the image, "Assume we've only got four hours to do this. Go."

She did so, quickly detailing how many forces Cerberus was bringing with, and how she planned to use them as well as our own. She'd had to guess at our numbers, but hadn't let it affect the overall scheme.

Essentially, she wanted a two pronged attack. Our team would breach the eastern hanger, her team the western one. Both groups would secure said facilities and leave sufficient guards behind to sabotage or otherwise disable the shuttles to prevent anyone from escaping. While they were doing that, the primary teams would advance into the building proper.

The Cerberus team would make a straight line towards a room that would supposedly contain the building's primary servers, while our group would instead fight our way into the residential quarters on the second floor to try and locate Krom. Once we had captured him, and they had retrieved their data, we would pull back to our hangars and depart. Nice and simple.

"All right, it's a good start." I nodded in what I thought was a congenial fashion, only to see her bristle in response. "Needs a few changes."

She seemed to restrain herself, then twitched her chin into something like a nod. "What do you propose?"

I started to frown at her intransigence, then wanted to kick myself as my brain caught up with just who it was that I was talking to. This wasn't the third game's Miranda, or even the one first foisted off onto Shepard. This was the proud, touchy, genetically perfect Cerberus cheerleader being forced to deal with pirates and aliens, and obviously there wasn't anything wrong with her plans. Definitely nothing that people like us could notice... or, more likely, someone like me.

Never mind that the first plan drawn up for an engagement was never the one you actually stuck with... especially when someone you didn't trust had been the one to draw it up in the first place.

In either case, there wasn't anything technically wrong with her plans... they were just overcautious and clearly setup in such a way that she would have minimal interaction with us, and maximum ability to cut bait and leave us to drift in the stormy water the moment she had what she wanted.

"First issue, if you want to double cross us, make it less obvious." Reaching up, I tapped the hangar we were supposed to go into. "Both teams will enter via this hangar, and both teams will leave people behind to defend our shuttles. Petrovsky, do you have any fighter-bombers? We'll need to bring down the other one from the exterior so that they can't just take a shuttle out."

"A single wing." He nodded once, "Sufficient for the task."

"Good. Second issue, there's no need to get to the servers directly, your team in the garage can hack
in from any consoles there. They should be able to at least get some data from those." I rolled a
shoulder, "Assuming it's not all on a secondary network in the hypothetical basement."

Miranda just stared at me, "And if it is?"

"We'll get there. Third issue, our core teams aren't splitting up. We're going to do this by the SIU
playbook." I shifted my hand and tapped the stairwell nearest to the hangar, "Leave guards here,
here, and here, at each stairwell and at whatever entrance to the basement we find. We clear the
ground floor in the process. Then we start working our way up, in reversing sweeps of the building,
floor by floor."

She frowned, "Doing what?"

"Killing everyone." Petrovsky replied soberly. "The sounds of combat on the lower floors will
radiate upwards, growing louder as you work your way up. It builds up the terror of the defenders
and saps at their morale, making the fighting easier as you progress."

Lawson's expression grew nauseated as he explained, clearly fighting back far more vicious words
than she uttered. "How... very Batarian. I had thought we were to spare civilians."

"I severely doubt that there will be any civilians inside." I grimaced as I shook my head, "Assume
that anyone inside is hostile unless they're obviously restrained or imprisoned. Once we reach the
top, if we haven't found Krom or the bitch's daughter, we'll have to try and investigate the
basement."

"Assuming there is one." The Operative retaliated.

I shrugged, "Assuming that, yes. Still, your best odds to get any actionable intelligence is to locate
any member of the family present."

"Our people are more than talented enough to retrieve the data we need from-
"

"A purged system." I rolled my eyes, "I was being polite when I said they might get some data,
T'Ravt isn't an idiot. The main network is going to be killed the second we breach the hangar, if not
as soon as we take out their ships in orbit."

Petrovsky frowned as Miranda glared, his voice pensive. "You are sure about this?"

"It's what I would do."

There was a tiny grimace on his face for a bare heartbeat before he schooled his features again,
"Then it would seem our objectives are even more closely aligned than we originally believed. She
will undoubtedly keep Krom close to protect her."

"Definitely possible." I exhaled, glancing at the two Asari present. Illyan looked unhappy about the
entire affair, while Shyeel was keeping her expression impassive. "Thoughts?"

My lover merely shrugged, properly, while the shorter Asari spoke, "They're going to try and run, as
soon as they realize that the battle isn't going their way... probably for the city. We'll need a plan for
that. What kind of colony is it?"

"Fairly young, by Republics standards. It is not even a century old." The General replied, "But fairly
high population. Any pursuit into the city would be exceedingly dangerous, the planetary militia will
likely be on alert and mustered."
Miranda nodded firmly, "All the more reason to not pursue, we cannot afford-"

"To waste time or be caught, I know." I interrupted her again, mostly because I knew it would piss her off even more. Goddess but her prickliness was getting very annoying, very quickly... and I was starting to wonder just how many operations she'd planned before. Had her prior missions been this kind of open fighting, or mostly spy work? Probably the latter, knowing my luck...

Pushing those thoughts aside, I shook my head once and refocused on the here and now. "Which is why we'll have to run them down quickly... or get to where they're going before they get there."

That drew another scowl from Miranda, "Meaning what?"

"Meaning that Krom is a wanted assassin, so they won't be able to flee to the militia headquarters or any governmental structure." I mused aloud, turning and pacing a short meter. "If it was just the daughter, she could do that... or vanish anywhere in the city. But Krom will be nervous about being on a Republic world... and he won't trust her, even if he's unstable."

Petrovsky caught on quickly, his tone musing. "He will want to depart, or have the option to do so... and the city only has one cosmodrome."

"We could still lose her." I admitted, "But that's where he'll go. If we capture him but not her, I'll allow you on board to supervise an interrogation."

He nodded once, "Agreed."

Another hour of discussion came and went as we went more in depth on each of the various stages of the plan, plus some extra time spent throwing an additional pair of back-up plans together for when something inevitably went wrong with either our initial attack or our secondary pursuit idea. The pattern more or less remained the same, with Miranda becoming increasingly standoffish and unhappy at our proposed ideas, while Petrovsky remained congenial if heavily guarded.

Of course, as the discussion began to slow as the final details were resolved, the real question became whether or not to let them return to their ship at all. Or rather, whether or not to allow Petrovsky to return... or to keep him as a guest for the duration.

"All right." I sighed as everything wound down, "Lawson, get back to the shuttle and brief your team. I want the flotilla to hit FTL in one hour."

My exact wording didn't go unnoticed, the Operative going very still as the General looked amused. "And I am not to return?"

"As much as I dislike the notion of holding someone hostage," And I found myself strangely relieved at the intensity of said dislike, "I don't trust either of you. I'm basically the walking antithesis of everything your organization stands for, and I don't doubt that you both have orders to kill me if it becomes convenient."

From Miranda's expression, she'd have killed me even without orders. "If you believe that you can-"

"Operative Lawson." The General cut her off smoothly, "Return to the Suffren. I trust the good Commander's honor that I will be released upon the completion of the mission."

"You have my word." I bowed my head, "Shyeel, Illyan, escort him to the bridge, and make sure that Joa doesn't shoot him. Lawson, come on."

She needed a firm nod from her superior before her perfect ass got moving, all of us filing out into
the hallway before getting moving. To my intense surprise it took her more than a single heartbeat after Petrovsky vanished into a lift with my companions before she started speaking.

"You were entirely correct you know." Miranda stated primly as we walked, "You are the antithesis of Cerberus, of everything it stands for. What humanity might sink to."

I made a humming noise, but otherwise didn't comment.

Apparently taking that as an agreement, she continued on, "Look at you. You don't speak a human language, you don't even walk like one of us, and from the reports I've read, you certainly don't think like a human being any longer. Doesn't that bother you?"

I rolled a shoulder and dipped my head in an Asari shrug, "Not really. Have you ever planned an operation before?"

"Of course." She looked more than a little nettled at the question. "I have successfully completed more than a dozen operations."

"Fought in an active warzone?" I asked.

That drew a blink. "I have been engaged in more than one firefight."

"I don't mean a little brawl on the Citadel, or on Earth." I elaborated, keeping my voice even, feeling more confident in my guess that most of what she'd done had been far more low key than this kind of brazen assault. "I mean an actual war. Days upon weeks upon months of unending combat."

"I...no," Another blink became a frown, "I have not, but I am aware that you have. How does that relate to your life decisions?"

Decisions. As if I'd had a choice in what I'd become. Sure, technically I suppose I'd had options... I could have stayed on Illium and died when the Matriarch came for me. I could have let Krom get away with shit. I could have tried to cling to something as esoteric as 'being human' when I could count the number of other humans I knew on both hands.

Or... I could have adapted, doing what I had to do to stay alive, to stay reasonably sane, to keep my friends.

I wanted to be annoyed at Miranda, to be angered by her bitchy superiority. On some level I very much was... but it was hard to keep that fire burning because I knew that she could grow beyond it. With Shepard's help, sure, but the potential was there. And shit... she was the one who revived Shepard.

Not that I knew that the Spectre was going to end up dead with the changes to the timeline, but it struck me as a horribly stupid idea to pretend that it couldn't happen. Which meant... shit... which meant that I had to keep her alive, and preferably not make her even more of a racist bitch who might do something like shove a control chip into the Spectre's brain, or use some kind of hypnotic conditioning after her body was repaired but before she truly awoke.

"You really don't get it, Frankenstein." I sighed as I slowed to a stop outside of the hangar door, noticing her head rock back as if I'd just struck her. "I'll tell you what, when you've made your own choice, we can talk about mine and how what I've been through affected them."

Her mouth worked a few times as her unblemished skin reddened, "What did you just call me? What choice?"
"It suits you, doesn't it? And the simplest of choices," I replied, reaching out to tap the controls to open the door. "Do you follow in your sire's footsteps, and become the next mad doctor in the castle? Or do you become the monster and choose your own fate?"

The furious flush to her face vanished as her eyes widened into something like horror, her voice lowering. "How... how do you..."

My left arm rose, gesturing to the waiting shuttle, and the marines still standing guard around it. "I'll see you on the surface."

Turning my back to her, I strode away without another word, feeling a wave of exhaustion crest over-top of me before slamming down. Dammit but I hated this complicated verbal dancing crap... Shit. Kai Leng I could have fucking worked with. I wouldn't trust him, he wouldn't trust me, and we'd both have plans to kill the other the moment we had our respective hostages. And he probably would have spoken all of seven words during the entire bloody mission.

But no... instead I was stuck with someone who irritated me on an entirely different level. Someone who I couldn't even properly retaliate against, and would even have to try and keep alive. Someone who would probably talk constantly, especially since I'd just gone and openly revealed that I knew about what she was.

The anger and annoyance that I'd had a hard time building when face to face with her obligingly surged in her absence, making me clench my fists as I boarded a lift to take me back up to the command deck.

I was still silently fuming at Athame and the universe in general when I returned to the bridge. Illyan was waiting just outside of it, moving to stop me from entering, her face concerned.

"Cie," She kept her voice low, "You all right?"

"No." I growled, "Lawson of all fucking people... I tried to stay calm, tell her to think about shit, but I don't know if it's going to work or make things worse... and we have to keep her alive, and it's all just... Athame's fucking azure."

There was a single laugh as she stepped forwards, wrapping her arms around me and pulling our armored bodies together. "Oh Cie. So bloody predictable."

I forced a ragged breath out as her chin fell on top of my head, "What's that supposed to mean this time?"

"It's Cerberus." She replied easily, "A pack of racist assholes, which is always something that leaves you in a foul mood. Lawson being here just made it even worse, I'm actually kinda surprised you kept calm enough to try and get through to her."

"I had to make the effort." I muttered, forcing myself to keep breathing, focusing on that and her scent, letting both of them calm me down. "If she dies or ends up even more hardcore... Athame's ass, who knows what would happen to Shepard if she still ends up dead."

"I know." A broad hand reached up to gently rub the back of my neck.

I enjoyed that for all of a few heartbeats before something else struck me, "Shit... I just realized something. She tried to reach out to me about my humanity... you think she's going to think I'm trying to make her like me? Fuck, that could-"

"Cie." Fingers pinched my skin, making me tilt my head back on reflex to try and alleviate the

I snorted quietly, reaching up to brush her arms away, some of the turbulent emotion fading as I close my eyes and focused. It took a few long breaths, but I managed to find the cool calm once again. "Right... right, we'll worry about that later. For now, let's get this crap over with. Joa handling Petrovsky all right?"

"He was still alive the last I saw." She replied as she turned, the pair of us breezing into the bridge proper.

Sure enough, the General remained breathing, standing politely off to one side and not saying anything as Joa prepared her ship for battle. I briefly considered walking over to question him before deciding I'd had all of the conversations that I could stomach with anyone wearing that uniform, and instead moved to stand beside Voya near the back of the room. Illyan rolled her eyes in bemusement at my choice, and instead actually tugged on Shyeel's arm before striding over to loom beside Petrovsky.

Shaking my head at the sight, I turned to see Voya glance up at me, then return her eyes to her omni-tool as I settled to lean back against the wall beside her. Her voice was low when she spoke, "We're good on the electronics warfare front... barely."

I fought not to grimace, replying equally as softly. "That close?"

"Something was trying to slip in." She confirmed. "We reset the main communications receiver, and then isolated it while it was cycling. They can listen to what we broadcast, but nothing worse."

"Petrovsky didn't seem surprised at being taken hostage." I exhaled, "I'm betting he was relying on EDI to be his ticket off the ship if we didn't keep our word."

A black, forked tongue briefly appeared as she licked her lips, "You think he just had the one plan?"

"No." I admitted. "We're taking Glitch with us to the surface to protect our ride off planet."

She blinked rapidly, "Does Illyan know that?"

"...no." I admitted more painfully, "Can you go and get it ready? Run a few more checks as well."

There was a quiet grunt as she nodded, "If nothing else, watching it tear them apart when they try and betray us will be fun... wait, I can take trophies if they do right?"

I rolled my eyes at her predictable question. Even if I said no she'd do it anyway, so I simply murmured a bemused affirmative. If nothing else it seemed to buoy her spirits slightly, and she strutted out of the bridge looking far more content than she had since this entire debacle had begun.

Of course, I realized the problem with sending her to handle that a few minutes later... I'd deprived myself of my distraction.

The next hour passed with predictable slowness. Illyan and Shyeel spent all of it interrogating the General, who looked entirely at ease as he replied to their murmured questions and replied with his own. None of the three ever looked upset or angry at anything the others said, so I took that as a win and left them to it. Instead I mostly hovered around Joa's command chair, listening to the preparations and trying to learn through observation.

Eventually it came to an end, the final Cerberus frigate reporting in ready as the air grew thick and
"All ships ready Cie." Joa exhaled as she leaned back, "In the formation the General instructed. We're ready to unfurl our sails and get this over with."

"Right..." I nodded once and let out a tight breath of my own. "Let's do this."

"General?" The Captain asked, "Give the word."

Petrovksy nodded, stepping past her and smoothly approaching the communications terminal. The Asari officer fought to not visibly recoil at his approach, opening a channel for him and then leaning away as if he was diseased.

"This is the General, all ships execute FTL jump on my mark... Mark."

The view-screen flickered, then updated as the Cerberus ships began vanishing. Joa held us back until the cruiser had made its jump, then nodded and barked out an order of her own. The heavy ship didn't so much as shudder, but the screen faded to black before a new timer appeared, rapidly counting down our approach.

"All right..." Joa glanced at me, "You should get to your shuttles, I'll keep the General alive, provided his fleet behaves."

"I'll hold you to that." I replied, "I gave him my word."

Her eyes rolled, "You would. See you when this is over, and try not to wreck the shuttles. They're brand new."

I couldn't help but snort as I turned away from her, "I'll do my best. Illyan, Shyeel, let's get this over with."

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**Internal Log File 1989-755-1002-Z7**

*Recorded conversation*

*Aria T'Loak:* And you're sure that these projections are correct?

*Myself:* I can only be certain that they fit the data I have available. I must therefore recommend caution, Ganar may have additional warships sequestered away that he could utilize.

*Aria T'Loak:* Sufficient numbers of them to breach the external grid?

*Myself:* Certainly unlikely, but possible.

*Jona Sederis:* You didn't put your ass on that couch by playing shit safe, Aria.

*Aria T'Loak:* I had less to lose then and you know it. And don't think that I've given up on discovering just why you've suddenly lost any ambition to take my station.

*Myself:* I still recommend that you kill her, to be safe. Leska Sederis is far more-

*Aria T'Loak:* Enough.

*Myself:* Yes, mistress.
Aria T'Loak: If I hadn't felt the honesty, the fear, in that meld... what does Jona Sederis fear?

Jona Sederis: Not ever seeing your face between my thighs again, for one.

Aria T'Loak: Cheeky bitch. You know I'll find out sooner or later, I always do. Is it related to the Leviathans and that bigoted bitch on Thessia?

Jona Sederis: Stop asking, unless you want me to stop dancing and go steal one of your whores for the night instead.

Aria T'Loak: Playing dirty already? Fine, keep your damned secrets, and move your tits around a bit more. Elder, get back to the campaign updates.

Myself: The Zadith Ban campaign progresses on schedule, the Batarian thing known asul Yesh remains the most likely to seize the capital city along with its industry. Your plan of weakening the lesser cretins warring against him by enticing the attack on Zadith Ban worked entirely as intended, he will likely emerge victorious within the next six months and be well on his way towards succeeding Zaen as the ruler of those clusters. In regards to Yan T'Ravt-

Aria T'Loak: Skip that prissy bitch's campaigns. Gormack?

Myself: We have tacit agreements with most of his senior officers, they will transfer their flags upon his death. Even assuming those who renege, I estimate a minimum forty percent increase in the size of the Black Fleet, with an outside chance at a sixty percent increase. Additionally, the Drell thing called Krios has accepted your offer of payment and will reply when the job is done.

Aria T'Loak: Good... that's all for now. Jona, that's enough gyrating, get your naked ass over here.

Jona Sederis: You think I'm going to let you top just because I danced for you?

...End Recording, core orders are to not become involved in physical affairs. Shutting down cameras.

...analysis routine running...

...seven percent chance that the Mistress convinces Sederis to serve her sexually without violence.

...care algorithm executing.

...medical supplies ordered to private lift.

...addendum order: bearers have strict orders to not ascend.

Next up is Loose the Volley

Chapter End Notes

Pretty sure I warned everyone prior, but just to reiterate, there won't be any side character povs in this saga. Instead the Cieran sections will be a bit longer, and the post-
chapter sections will all be recordings of conversations that should help highlight the current state of the war a bit better than what Cieran has been paying attention to.

In this chapter, we see just who Cieran is working with, and the rather conflicted feelings that arise as a result. Also, no one trusts each other and everyone expects this to blow up... so in that the characters are entirely agreement with all of you. :)

For those who missed it, there is a new poll on my profile concerning a possible side story or expansion to TWF, please check it out. Additionally, TWF-Einherjar has been updated with an organizational chapter concerning the Silver Blades. Feel free to read it, or to ignore it, its merely supplementary.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I clutched to the strap dangling from the ceiling, the magnetic strips in my boots working with my grip to keep me locked into place as the old shuttle dove through the atmosphere. Its eezo core was doing what it could, but the chaotic maneuvers our pilot was putting it through to disguise where we were landing was pushing it to the limit.

Forcing my breathing to remain even, I watched as my HUD flashed and updated. Number scrolled down as our altitude decreased, more data coming in from the vehicle's systems to also provide the status of the other five plunging downwards with us, along with the eight Cerberus fighters already racing towards our destination.

"Kean, it's Joa." Her voice rang smoothly from my speakers, "What's left of the second frigate just crashed into a desert, a few escape pods are away but all made planetfall before the Cerberus ships could catch them. The frigate they sent did confirm that they took out the FTL buoy before the emergency transmission hit it."

"Sounds like good news." I replied, grimacing as the shuttle bucked around me, "What's the bad?"

"You're still on a time limit. A Volus freighter was in orbit and rabbited for the Relay." She replied grimly. "Petrovsky is sending his destroyer and the frigate that hit the buoy after her to try and blast them on their relay approach, but neither of us are confident."

"Well shit." Illyan muttered, "Really wish my new toy was ready Cie..."

I fought back a grimace. The amount of running around we'd had to do had seriously cut down on the amount of time I'd hoped to help scales work on that particular project, along with several others. Trena was doing what she could on her own, but she had to split her time between fiddling with them, watching over Ethy, and occasionally helping Ghai and Mirala work with the Asari recruits that we were picking up.

Forcing out a steadying breath, I nodded once. "We knew that was possible. Start a clock, we leave in four hours regardless of the situation."

"Clock is running." Came the prompt reply, "I'll keep you updated if our sensors pick up anything else. Reliant out."
Grunting, I cycled through our comm channels, "Lawson, you hear that?"

"I did, it certainly complicates things." There was the quiet sound of her taking a steadying breath, "I'm patching Saber One into the line, they're making their run."

A cocky young man promptly affirmed that, "We're hitting it in two waves, then splitting out towards the city to try and lure any militia aircraft away. First strikes launching now... now... now." Several heartbeats passed before he let out a sharp sound of approval, "Good hits, good hits. Hangar is burning, repeat, hangar is burning."

I half closed my eyes as I nodded, listening as he ordered his wing to pull back and observe the second flight's attack. More missiles and bombs drew a volley of war cries from himself and the other pilots, confirming that they'd done an excessive amount of damage to that side of the mansion. Miranda quickly cut them back out of the channel, muttering something about professionalism as the fighters tore off towards the nearby city to play tag with their Republic counterparts.

"Right." I spoke, keeping the line open as I mentally wished them good hunting, "We hit the ground in sixty seconds. I want your shuttle and mine to breach the hanger directly. Supporting shuttles will land outside the main doors and form a barricade. We'll clear the hanger while they watch our backs."

"Affirmative."

"Glitch, take center on landing and clear the initial target zone." Twisting my neck around, I stared up at where the machine was looming near the door. "Then defend the shuttles and obey Captain Vishin's commands."

"Orders confirmed." The mech replied, somehow contriving to sound disappointed despite not changing its flat tones in the slightest. "Secondary target Vishin's orders will be complied with."

"Voya, Shyeel." I glanced their way, "I want you both to cloak and head for whatever door they're defending the most, setup to blindside anyone trying to go through in either direction."

They both gave me sharp nods, Shyeel reaching for her rifle as the shuttle leveled off, while Voya grabbed her pistol in one hand and flicked her omni-tool online with the other. Illyan let out a soft sound as the pitch of the engines changed, "We're covering Glitch then? I'll take the left."

I felt my mouth twitch a little as I pulled my submachine gun into my hands and expanded it, "Just because my left side always gets shot doesn't mean you always need to stay on that side."

"Obviously it does." She replied cheerfully, hefting her carbine up and rolling her shoulders a little, "Ready to be done with all of this?"

A slow, heavy breath came out as I nodded. I was more than fucking ready to drag Krom to Aria and be done with all of this crap.

"Approaching!" Our Turian pilot shouted back, her voice filled with force calm, "Taking small arms fire!"

Illyan glanced back at me, then took a step forwards when I jerked my head into a nod. A long arm reached out and slapped the door controls, the metal sliding aside to reveal a sunlit garden flashing beneath us as the engines howled. Tracer fire flashed past, and then the shuttle's engines reached a roar as we all but slammed to a stop just as the nose entered a cavernous room.

"Glitch, move!" I shouted as the sound of gunfire became audible, Shyeel and Voya's outlines
flickering to blurs as they darted forwards and leaped outside.

The mech followed them, its flat feet slamming to the ground in time with an electronic scream blaring from its speakers. Illyan and I were dropping the meter to the ground right after it, my head whipping around to analyze the hangar even as the mech started blasting away at defenders who were already shifting to focus fire on the obvious target.

There was a half-dozen armed Asari present, all taking shelter behind various pieces of heavy equipment, and perhaps twice as many Asari who looked to be support staff and pilots. Both were bailing away from the expensive shuttles that they'd been trying to prepare, throwing up biotic barriers as they fled towards various exits.

I snapped my eyes back down as a burst from a rifle splayed across my chest, hammering my barriers down an appreciable bit as I surged forwards to take cover behind Glitch's bulk as I fired back at the woman who'd shot at me.

She stoically accepted the light rounds splaying across her upper torso, keeping her own aim steady as she put a second burst into my right shoulder and arm. Letting out a curse, I shifted back entirely behind the advancing mech, flicking my omni-tool to life as I did. A few breaths later I had an overload loaded and programmed, and I darted back out to fling it at where she was still crouched.

The blue disc flared out in a casual arc, and I ate another pair of bursts that left my barrier light flashing before it impacted her. She recoiled viciously, diving to the ground before any of my own shots could find her visor or neck.

"Shit!" Illyan cursed as she likewise ducked behind Glitch, rounds still nipping at our legs and bodies where we couldn't keep them fully protected, "Hey, the fuckers are finally here!

Flicking my eyes to my rear camera, I watched as another black shuttle roared down, spinning flank-on to us as the door slid open. Miranda and a half-dozen men and women in similarly armored bodysuits dove out, firing light arms and flinging grenades as they did. They only dropped one of the Asari defenders in their initial volleys, but the extra explosions gave the remainder a new distraction to worry about.

"Glitch, advance! Engage close!" I shouted, getting my legs churning as the mech obediently shifted from being a firing platform to a lumbering mass of metal rushing towards the guards trying to hold us away from the interior doors.

The guards didn't panic, trying to withdraw in some kind of reasonable fashion; biotic barriers springing up as they tried to protect their front from us and their left from the Cerberus team. That lasted until Voya and Shyeel materialized on their right, the latter firing her rifle while the other tossed a more incendiary device.

Seeing and hearing two of their number burning to death, probably combined with Glitch all but about to trample them, broke the remaining three's morale.

One got away, vanishing in a biotic charge through the doorway, probably shouting for reinforcements into her radio.

Glitch got the other two, forgoing the use of its wrist mounted guns in favor of simply of beating them both to death. One was luckier than the other, being punched directly into a wall and dying more or less instantly. The other lasted a little longer, with the mech repeatedly slamming her into the ground until the screaming stopped.
"Marines!" I snapped as the last scream faded, trying not to notice how the mech looked disappointed that its plaything had expired. "Get in here and detail a squad to secure the room, Glitch!"

"Obeying." The mech intoned, still carrying the broken and bleeding body in one massive paw as it turned and lumbered back the way we'd come.

"I..." Miranda spoke as she moved beside me, members of her team joining mine in checking the other-side of our exit before moving through. I couldn't see her expression through the thin helmet she wore, but I from her tones it was somewhere between aghast and nauseated. "What is that?"

"I don't really know anymore." I admitted, "Come on, we're on a time limit."

The two of us plunged through the doorway after our personal teams, just before the two neat columns of Cerberus troopers and Silver Blades marines, the two groups almost indistinguishable thanks to the unmarked black armor. At range, at least. Up close, or a still image, would have made the differing armor patterns noticeable.

Of course, the fact that Miranda's team was all in skin-tight bodysuits, and that my team was all in light plating, should also help to obscure things a bit. Ideally, once Harper claimed responsibility, any observers would simply believe that multiple cells had been active rather than multiple organizations.

"Follow the main plan." The woman on my left spoke as Illyan and an unnamed man took the lead, "Split by fire team and head to your assigned stairwell."

There was a chorus of clicks from her people as we raced down the plain hallway, tastefully decorated in simple paintings of what I assumed to be Thessian landscapes. It didn't take us long to hit resistance once again, with Illyan and her Cerberus partner all but throwing themselves backwards as several gouts of warpfire and tracer rounds flashed out from the corner we'd been about to take.

Growling, I pushed my way forwards, snapping as I did so. "How many?"

"At least half a dozen." Illyan reported promptly, "Setup on the far side of the entrance hall."

Meaning they would be at least a reasonable distance back from where we were. "Two nullification grenades, throw them bioitically. We rush in after detonation, take cover where possible. Voya, Shyeel, cloak and move up the right side."

"Heiko, Inoue," Lawson snapped the moment I'd finished, pulling a grenade from her belt just as Illyan did. "Same on the left."

Two of her people nodded quickly, bringing their own omni-tools up to trigger active camouflage suits that looked to be at least as good as the ones that Aria had given us. While they, plus Voya and Shyeel, faded from view, the rest of us put the basic plan into motion.

Flashes of blue light accelerated the tiny bombs that Illyan and Miranda tossed around the corner, hopefully countering the enemy's own ability to throw them back at us. Two sharp cracks later, and we rushed into the open to find out, more conventional grenades already being primed and thrown from both teams as our legs churned.

The thundering roar of automatic weapons in an enclosed space answered our arrival, along with a few flashes of biotic power that revealed a least a couple of the guards had managed to avoid the nullifier's effects.
It was far larger than I'd thought it would be, but the guards had setup too closely to our entrance. Two of them went down to the volley of stun and fragmentation grenades, while the remainder darted back and took cover in small alcoves clearly meant for just that purpose. At my snapping orders, we pursued cautiously, doing much the same at our end and returning each of their bursts of fire with blasts of our own.

Our infiltrators handled things from there, using their concealment to get behind them before opening fire, catching the guards in a cross-fire that saw them swearing as they tried to deal with the new problem. Another pair died before they could, their barriers and armor failing against the firepower we were throwing at them from two directions, but the remaining three dove into another side hall and slammed the door shut behind them.

Shit... That already made it twice that they'd realized their situation and retreated rather than standing and fighting like less-intelligent enemies would, and their barriers were damned strong on top of that. This was going to be a long fucking fight if they were all equipped and trained as well as the first two groups had been.

As Shyeel called that we were clear, for now, I lifted a hand to my helmet, activating our commlines as I stepped out from my alcove. "Entrance hall secured, enemies still on this floor. Unit four, you're released to clear it and find the entrance to the basement. All other units sound off."

"Stairwell two, secure." An unfamiliar man replied in a thick Asian accent.

"Stairwell three," A Blades corporal growled almost at the same time, "Secure."

"Hanger still sealed up." Vishin added. "Unit one, report."

The deep cracks of our usual carbines heralded the next report, a female Batarian breathily cursing before speaking, "Sorry sirs, there were... things, coming down it."

"Define." I snapped, a bad feeling growing in my gut.

"Batarians, nude, armor worked into their bodies and enlarged arms with omni-gauntlets... also implanted right into their skin." She sounded nauseated, not that I could blame her.

Shit... "Confirmed, start working your way up per the primary plan. Lawson, we've got problems."

The Operative had started towards the front of the room, but stopped and looked back at my words. "What are they?"

"Variations on the husks that the Geth have been using." I half-lied, getting my feet moving, "Be alert for any signs of their tech, or anything that looks like a black orb. They can seriously fuck with your head, so shoot first, ask questions later."

She clearly wanted to ask a few, but forced herself to nod and start barking orders as our little gang got moving towards our own target stairwell near the back of the room. The service door was already open, a pair of Cerberus operatives bouncing up the stairs, with Voya and Shyeel already following them.

"Cie..." Illyan muttered quietly as we let Miranda and another woman move ahead of us, "If-

"Not here." I murmured back, "Remember."

Her shoulders rolled in discomfort, but she nodded and moved into place behind me as I took the stairs two at a time. The unfortunate part of working with Cerberus, when we knew that EDI was
around, was that we couldn't risk saying anything to each other that we didn't mind them knowing.

Since that list was a goddess-damned small one... we really couldn't talk about anything besides the mission.

"Contact!" Shyeel snapped above us, her rifle booming out rounds as a lighter weapon began snapping out rapid bursts. "More Brawlers!"

Stretching my legs out, I went from two steps at a time to three, and flew up the stairwell and plunged into the hallway it connected to. Gunfire was roaring up and down it in both directions as the depressingly familiar shapes of Leviathan-husked Batarians rushed towards us. Bounding along at their feet were similarly modified Vorcha, running on all four legs and letting out whistling shrieks as they approached.

I didn't have time to snap orders, nor did Lawson, both of our groups doing everything we could to keep the things from getting into close combat with us.

Incinerates flared out from myself and two of the Cerberus operatives, detonating in bright flashes of orange light and setting smoldering fires. Singularities from Illyan forestalled the rush from one direction, while Miranda deftly used her own powers to hurl Brawlers into each other, their misshapen bodies tumbling as they fell in the confined space.

The lack of any ranged opponents set off my paranoia after my fourth mine went out, and I found myself jerking my head up, then left, and then back the way we'd come as I tried to work out where the ambusher was going to show up.

My eyes had just fallen on the stairwell when the blur of motion flew up it, the Stalker slamming bodily into me with enough force that my back rebounded off the wall that had been a good meter behind me a heartbeat before. The impact stunned me, my reflexes becoming sluggish as I tried to jerk my head out of the way before the omni-blade protruding from its right wrist imbedded itself in my skull.

If not for Voya, it probably would have managed it.

The petite Quarian actually pulled her entire body off the floor, then abruptly went horizontal as she slammed both of her strong legs into its side. The stalker's too long limbs kept it upright, but it still stumbled and slammed its fist into the wall rather than my head.

Regaining my wits, I snapped my left arm out and caught the thing's wrist before it could twist away or try and deploy an omni-shield, slamming my submachine-gun into its gut as I did. Maybe five rounds exploded through the thin body before it twisted out of my grasp with a shriek, not looking all bothered with the wound.

Illyan finished off just as it tried to bolt, a long arm snapping out to seize it by the neck just as it was about to dive for the stairwell. Actually dropping her gun, she brought her other hand around to seize its chin, hauling it against her before twisting her arms in a sudden jerking motion.

"Drell." Miranda sucked down deep breaths as the last shots faded away, turning to stare at the lanky corpse. "Legs modified, extended..."

"Has some kind of camo unit as well, and a hard-light shield built into its left arm." I informed her, shaking my head again to make sure that I wasn't concussed. When the world didn't spin and nausea didn't rise, I blew out a sharp breath of my own. "We need to keep moving. Shyeel, Voya, take half the Cerberus team that way. Illyan, you, you, and you, we're going this way."
The terrorist operatives were professionals who'd probably seen some fucked up shit in their time, but I had to repeat myself to get them to shake themselves free from staring at the corpses around us. Their leader finding her ice-queen voice and cutting out commands to obey what I'd just said got them moving, and in short order Illyan and I found ourselves moving down the hall with Miranda and two men in tow.

"There was nothing in your dossier about those." Miranda predictably complained as we slowed, checking each room as we moved past by means of me or Illyan flinging an incinerate mine inside to detonate within them. Most seemed to be office spaces or storage rooms, but it didn't hurt to be sure.

"Good." I muttered as another mine detonated, "I'd rather not have your boss have an open book of my life."

"You aren't surprised they're here." She pressed, "Why didn't you warn us-"

"I'm not surprised, but I didn't know." I interrupted her impatiently, "I'll give you a threat analysis later, we have to keep moving right now. They can be killed, just like anything else."

Her body language practically screamed that she wanted to strangle me, but she jerked her head into a nod just as Illyan threw open another door and promptly slammed it shut again.

"Cie!" She all but snarled as the expensive wood reverberated from the force of it, "The rest of you! Back off!"

Sucking in a breath, I promptly halted, grabbed Miranda's shoulder, and then backpedaled. She let out a very un-Miranda like curse, her people only slowly stepping back with us.

"Orb?" I guessed.

Illyan twitched her head in a nod, breathing heavily as she hefted her gun up. After three long exhalations she used her knee to hit the doorknob, some automatic system swinging it back open in response. Her finger started to pull the trigger, then froze as her entire body started to shake.

Cursing, I was stepping forwards when she let out an almost animalistic sound of pain, her weapon bucking in time with it. Glass shattered somewhere in the room, and she promptly collapsed to a knee, her armor visibly heaving with each breath.

"Athame's... fucking..." A hand flailed at her helmet as I rushed forwards, helping her yank it off just in time for her to throw up on the floor. I tried not to flinch as the sight of blood dribbling down from her nose, and from a single tear-duct. "Oh goddess..."

"Take point," Lawson ordered as she appeared beside me, jerking her head towards her subordinates, "Hold the corner while we inspect the room."

They quickly nodded, darting around us and giving the open doorway a wide a berth as they could. While they got into a guard position at the end of this particular hallway, I held onto Illyan's shoulder and flicked my comms open again. "Confirmed Leviathan presence, we just destroyed an orb. Be fucking careful about opening any room. Re-confirm orders, all staff are to be executed."

A chorus of confirmations came out, followed by Vishin staying on mission, "Unit four is still looking for the sub-level entrance sir. Any sign of the targets?"

"Nothing yet." I replied, glancing up as Miranda cautiously approached the room, her pistol up and ready as she poked her helmet around the corner. "Lawson?"
"A large quantity of shattered glass... I believe it was mounted in a device that lowered it from the ceiling, above a restraint chair." Her voice became nauseated once again. "Christ, they're like Geth pillars aren't they? They were using it to forcibly indoctrinate people before experimenting on them."

A brief flash of memory came with her words, of being strapped to a bed and staring upwards as something happened above me. "Yes... anything else in there?"

"Two medical cabinets with automated medical suites, nothing else of note."

Grunting, I leaned down a bit closer as Illyan closed her eyes and groaned. "Illyan?"

"I'm... fuck." She shuddered again, "Athame, that was horrible. I could fucking..."

I winced. "Can you make it?"

"I... yeah," Broad hands flailed around before grabbing her helmet, and I helped her shift back until she was sitting on her haunches, the protection hiding her bloody face from view as she quickly pulled it on once again. "Sorry boss."

"Don't." I ordered quietly, pushing myself to my feet and offering a hand to help her do the same. Her hand had just grabbed onto my wrist when my radio crackled again, Voya's tense voice echoing behind my ears.

"Lead, we've got an issue. We made it up a floor," Her voice was seething, "It's a dedicated prisoner wing. We've got Batarians and Humans locked in cells, records show they're waiting their turn to be modified."

My mouth was opening to curse, only for Vishin to beat me to it. "More bad news. Unit four found the way down, but I don't think we're going down. They had enough time to see a pit filled with feral Vorcha before they slammed it closed again."

"Athame's ass." I managed to get the oath out, trying not to grunt as I hauled Illyan's massive frame to her feet. "Are they breeding them down there or something?"

"Might be, said it was basically a cave, not actual walls." He paused, "I had them seal it and resume looking for another way down sir."

"Good thinking." Exhaling, I nodded to Miranda and motioned for her to get moving, the three of us heading towards her men. For her part, Illyan was moving far more slowly than usual, though her long legs still let her keep up a reasonable pace. "Shyeel, you have to make the call on the prisoners. Are you sure of the data Voya hacked?"

There was a very grim pause before she replied, "We'll recheck it. Are we just releasing them or taking them with us if they're clear?"

"Latter." I couldn't imagine the Matriarch just letting them get away to tell people about what they'd been through; She'd have measures in place to deal with any escapees.

"I thought we were killing everyone." One of Miranda's people murmured as we joined them, the five of us starting down a shorter hallway. It was brightly lit, with broad windows letting sunlight illuminate several more doorways, along with a marine and an operative moving in from the other end.

"We're killing all of the staff, prisoners don't count." I countered tersely, not sure if the remark was supposed to be a complaint or not. "Get in position to check the next room."
They did, taking up a place on either side of the door before Miranda used her biotics to fling it open in time with me tossing an incinerate inside. There was a feminine shriek that cut off abruptly as it detonated, Miranda's pistol barking once just to make sure whoever it was didn't get up.

"Civilian." She reported flatly.

Grunting, Illyan and I moved past them, with my lover trying to not look like she was leaning against the wall as she took up a position beside the next room. My left leg lashed out once she was in place, another mine flicking out to explode even before I had a good idea of what was inside, resulting in a small table being blown in half and another scream as the Asari hiding beneath had her back scorched.

She flailed, throwing herself into the corner of the small conference room and throwing up a weak barrier that barely caught the burst I fired at her skull.

"D-don't you know who we are!" Her voice rose to something like a screech as I corrected my aim, "The Gods will-"

The protection stopped rounds one through five, but the remaining half-dozen tore their way through her upper chest and left her corpse to slump over, purple blood smearing against the wall behind her as she did.

"Gods." I muttered, already turning to follow where Miranda's team was about to clear the hallway's last room.

"Priority target!" The same Batarian woman who'd first encountered the indoctrinated husks howled on the open channel, "Floor four, stair four!"

I was sprinting before I was even aware that my body was moving, pounding past the startled Cerberus team, past the equally startled members from the other team at the end of the hallway. I actually slid on the hardwood flooring when I tried to take the corner, only distantly aware of Illyan's violent curse as she labored to catch up with me.

"Status!" The word came out as a snarl as I rushed to the nearest stairwell.

"Both targets!" The woman shouted over more gunfire that I could hear echoing down as I reached my first destination, "Mixed guards, we're pinned down!"

"Hold position!" My legs burned as I raced upwards, turning at each landing, "En route!"

It took a subjective eternity for me to climb up the two floors, the sound of combat rising with each step that I took. Illyan filled the channel with furious curses at my behavior, punctuated with Miranda's irritated attempts to shut her up long enough to get a proper sitrep of what was going on.

Exploding out of the doorway marked for the fourth floor, I paused just long enough to orientate myself, then set off down the hall stretching directly ahead of me, heading for the first intersection, where I intended to go left and hopefully find myself behind the main fight around stairwell four.

Instead I all but ran into the member of the T'Ravt family present, her statuesque frame stepping out in time for me to get a good look as I took the last several steps.

She was as tall as her mother, and shared the same aristocratic features and fashion sense. A dark dress hung off of her tall body, clinging just enough to make it clear that she didn't have armor on beneath. Nor was she armed, though the swirling of blue-black light around her forearms made her weapon of choice clear enough.
"I said pull back!" Her shout was barely audible over the echoing chaos of indoor battle. "The mansion is lost! We have to get to-"

My left fist, blue tech plates gleaming around my omni-gauntlet, slammed into her chest before she could finish the order. The detonating panels shattered at least a few of her ribs, and blood flew from her mouth as she reeled away with a wheezing scream.

Not about to give her any chance to recover, I slammed the grip of the weapon in my other hand across her face, sending her spinning to the ground. Twisting the wrist of that hand, I flicked my omni-tool to life with my other and then triggered my net launcher.

Her body began to twitch and writhe as the submission net set her nervous system on fire, more rasping cries of pain emerging as I twisted my head around to get a better idea of what else was going on.

I did so just in time to see the flash before a concussive round obliterated my shields, my body diving on reflex as light rounds struck at my armor. Miranda barely got out of my way, somehow having managed to catch up, nimbly jumping over my careening form.

Shaking my head as I rolled into a crouch, I was rising to my feet when the bodyguards showed up in a flurry of biotic power.

Once again I was sent stumbling back from the bow-shock of biotic charges, while Miranda merely let out a grunt of effort before jerking aside as an Asari-shotgun blasted threw the air she'd just occupied. Then she and a guard in skin-tight commando leathers were engaged in close combat, their lithe bodies twisting and weaving as they tried to line up their weapons or biotically enhanced blows.

Meanwhile, the other two guards weren't idle. One was frantically tearing at the net torturing her mistress, while the second bounded around the fighting women to level her shotgun at me. My rounds joined the rest of our team's, her barriers collapsing and her aim going wild as Illyan and the Cerberus men arrived.

A breathy curse preceded a hand being slammed forwards, a shimmering wall of blue light snapping into place as more gunfire sent ripples across its surface.

"They're retreating!" There was definite pain in the Batarian woman's voice, "Mechs are staying back to keep us pinned."

The commando fighting Miranda ducked a punch during the report, seizing the modified woman's arm before using the leverage to twist her in a quick circle and send her stumbling in our direction.

She recovered quickly, spinning aside to clear our fire-lanes again, but her opponent had already thrown up a barrier of her own. All five of us started shooting, Miranda and Illyan tossing in a few biotic attacks as well, but all we managed to do was make the two enemies alternate who had their fucking protection up.

Behind them, I saw guard three along with two other figures manage to grab the T'Ravt, hauling her out of sight. Following them was...

"Hey Eleven!" Krom actually fucking waved as he jogged past, his armor much the same as his dead lover's; A middle-weight selection, dark but for the hot-rod flames decorating his limbs. "Enjoy the chase!"

"Athame's fucking azure." I spat the word as I triggered an overload in time with Illyan and Miranda both hurling gouts of warpfire from their hands. The combined blasts brought down the shield, and
made its owner shriek in pain, but her personal protection absorbed the limited gunfire from the remainder of our group before her partner flared her own protection out.

"Again!" Miranda snapped, not noticing or ignoring the way that Illyan was visibly unsteady from throwing as much biotic power around as she had so soon after what she'd gone through down below.

Still, she game rolled her arm around, clearly ready to send more power out when both of the commandos managed to back step into the hall, then flash away as they joined the general retreat.

My lips curled back in a snarl as I broke into a lurching run after them, more than ready to fucking end this once and for all.

Whipping around the corner, I managed to see the ass of one of the Asari as it vanished through what looked like a hole in the wall. Sprinting after them, Miranda pushing herself to keep up with my longer strides, we reached it just in time to see explosive charges blast open the far wall, dust and sunlight temporarily making my visor go haywire.

The whine of an aircar's engines powering up had me cursing again as my HUD adjusted, revealing a pair of luxury vehicles that had evidently been hidden in this for an emergency like this one.

One of them was already hovering, its engines thrumming as it began to accelerate out into the open air. The other's doors were flung open, the two commandos struggling to get their exhausted bodies inside.

Miranda took the one on the right, the Asari's barriers unable to block the pull that yanked her out of the driver's seat. Illyan's rifle thundered over our heads, executing the downed target before she could rise, leaving just the one...

… who flung herself out of the open hole in the wall, her biotics sputtering to slow her fall as she vanished.

"Shit..." My lover groaned, "...of course they had a way out."

"Of course." I felt my fists tighten around my gun before I forced them to relax, walking forwards towards the idling vehicle. Behind me, my rear camera caught Illyan heaving out a long sigh and shaking her head before moving to follow, "Lawson, can you drive this?"

"Surely you're joking." The woman protested. "They'll be headed to the city, a city filled with angry Asari militia"

"No, they'll be going to the spaceport." I reminded her, "We put our secondary plan into motion. Now, can you drive this stupid thing, or do you want to leave empty-handed?"

Her visor betrayed her stare, one of her hands rising to tap the side of her helmet, "Nathanial, status of the local network."

"Largely purged." The man assigned to her half of the hangar team reported at once, "We're grabbing what little is left, but it's not much. The mercenaries are pulling the omni-tools from the dead."

But the odds of them having much of anything was low, and from Miranda's furious body language she knew that.

"It can only fit four." She snapped as she angrily strode around the vehicle, "Grigor, you're with us.
Jin, rendezvous with team one."

"Boss..." Illyan murmured as we reached the other side of the car, a broad hand stopping me so that she could climb into the back, "You sure about this?"

"He's here." I replied, "I'm not letting him go. You up for this?"

"Not like I'm letting you go alone." She countered, heaving herself into the back with a long groan, "Let's get this tides-damned-crap over with."

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**Silver Blades Communications Log 178-9B**

*Shaaryak, N:* I understand your desire for the war to not occur until the Terminus situation has resolved itself, but tensions are rising beyond my ability to control them.

*Sederis, L:* I am aware that you're ability to control the rebellious factors remains limited, but my mother insists that you make the attempt.

*Shaaryak, N:* Inform her that I am doing so, but that civil war is likely to begin before the year is out regardless of my efforts.

*Sederis, L:* I shall. Now, onto the data. Do you have the exact numbers I requested?

*Shaaryak, N:* We can likely expect bloodless takeovers of the majority of the Dark Rim colonies, unfortunately the same cannot be said for the Edge sectors. Any forces dispatched from the Temrinus will likely have to fight a campaign across them to reach the core worlds.

*Sederis, L:* And said core worlds?

*Shaaryak, N:* Khar'shan is going to be a warzone, but will likely remain in control of the loyalist forces. Of the class A worlds, our last projections indicating perhaps a third will attempt to either join us or secede outright. The remainder will be evenly split between loyalists and war-zones.

*Sederis, L:* I am assuming that those worlds without active Ha'diq are more likely to join you?

*Shaaryak, N:* Are more likely to dissolve into chaos, actually. The elder Ha'diq are those most easily converted to our cause, and often have political connections to class B worlds.

*Sederis, L:* Ah, of course. And said class B colonies?

*Shaaryak, N:* They are more difficult to get accurate data from, unfortunately. Projections indicate that we may draw upon a third of the Hegemony's total worlds within a month of the declaration, plus or minus ten percent.

*Sederis, L:* Meaning that you will require our fleets and armies to have a reasonable chance of pulling this off, even if Balak is able to deliver a sizeable portion of the armed forces.

*Shaaryak, N:* That is unfortunately correct.

*Sederis, L:* Very well. I will attempt to speak with Cessa about allowing us to stage at least one battlegroup in her territory, to begin the push down the galactic edge if nothing else. Have you given any thoughts to my other offer?

*Shaaryak, N:* While I can admit the political advantages, I am afraid that I have no passion for your species.
Sederis, L: Nor I yours, but I do enjoy your company.

Shaaryak, N: And I yours, but that does not mean that I intend to invite you to my rooms. Additionally, if you could please have the Evening Eclipse cease its efforts to seduce our officers, Ayle and I would be appreciative.

Sederis, L: How appreciative?

Shaaryak, N: Cease at once, and we will not inform Cieran that you wee not already attempting to subvert and absorb our corporation.

Sederis, L: And you believe him to be a threat to me?

Shaaryak, N: I believe that he has the Lady Warlord's attention, and that she could make your personal life rather unpleasant, especially if I were to include a few annotations of my own.

Sederis, L: ...You have been speaking with his mother then.

Shaaryak, N: I find it amusing that the Lady's personal life is truly nothing like she makes it seem. It would truly be a shame if she discovered that her lover has no qualms about taking others to her bower.

Sederis, L: It... would be, yes. You can expect the situation you referenced to be resolved within the week.

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**Next up is: Trampling Hooves**

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Chapter End Notes

All hail the return of Krom, and the much-anticipated battle that may or may not occur next chapter. In other news, Cieran is predictably tunnel-visioned, T'Ravt isn't quite an idiot, and Miranda is exasperated.

In other news, you have my apologies for how long it took this chapter to get out, I've been terribly scatter-shot this week. Bits of this chapter, bits of this story's epilogues, bits of long-term outlines, bit of this saga's fifth chapter...

In better news, I managed to avoid a work assignment that would have driven me insane with stress in exchange for a nice easy project that should give me plenty of time to finish this story before Andromeda comes out. I'm hoping to have a new Strange Bedfellows as well as the next chapter of this story done by Monday.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"We're taking an outward route, low to the ground." Miranda reported a few minutes into the flight, trees and rolling hills scrolling by beneath us. "It will cost us some time, but they'll likely be slowed by the militia."

I grunted, shifting my armored form around a bit as best I could. I'd had to jam the seat forwards to let Illyan sit somewhat normally, but I wasn't exactly short either. "You think they'll want answers?"

"I would." She replied simply, "But if nothing else, it might divert a few cabals towards the mansion and make our own job easier."

"True." Bringing my omni-tool up, I patched us back into the main channel. "Joa, Petrovsky. Shyeel brought you up to speed?"

"She did." Joa grunted. "I'm shifting us into a high orbit to accept the shuttles, the good General is sending a frigate down to glass the place once everyone is out. They're also tracking your target, they're headed right for the city."

I pursed my lips at her barely disguised anger. "What's the issue?"

"Fucker wanted US to come down." She growled, "As if I'd fucking bring us into atmosphere for him to cripple."

"It would make retrieving the prisoners a simpler process." Petrovsky cut in, his voice smooth and calm. "And forgive me for being nervous about the need to use our shuttles as well due to the altitude we remain at."

"Joa will ensure that nothing happens to your shuttles or your operatives," I fought down the pointless urge to run a hand down my helmet's face, "Just make sure that all of the prisoners are let off on the Reliant."

"I've got people in place to make sure." Joa spoke again, "And they'll make sure no one else gets off those shuttles either."

I couldn't fault her for the paranoia, but in the interest of keeping some kind of working relationship with Miranda I merely grunted and told them both to keep me updated, and to have shuttles ready to pick us up as soon as we completed our objective. Once that was done, I cut the line and glanced at
the driver, "Lawson, how long do we have?"

"Forty minutes." She reported at once, "They'll get there at least ten minutes ahead of us."

Illyan let out a tired grunt behind us, "Let's just hope that they get stalled for at least that long then."

"More." The male operative next to her, Grigor I thought he'd been called, mused in a low Slavic accent. "Ideally we should find a hanger they own, and setup within."

I grunted in agreement, "Good thinking. Lawson, how's your hacking?"

"It's acceptable." She shook her head, "Good enough to bypass civilian codes. If they aren't jamming communications in the city I can link to the Suffern, we have a dedicated team aboard."

Meaning EDI, and if she needed a lack of jamming that meant that Cerberus didn't have their quantum entanglement crap full fleshed out yet. Which was good in a way, but also extremely annoying right now. Even if they weren't jamming everything, the kind of connection she was talking about would be very noticeable.

"Right, let's hope for that then. Illyan, you doing all right?"

"My everything hurts." She reported simply, her helmet rolling back as she groaned. "Athame's ass but if I never see one of those things again..."

"What was said thing?" Miranda asked, "And don't tell me that those were Geth husks, they were nothing alike. In either case they're documented as using some kind of pillar to corrupt humans, not orbs."

Closing my eyes, I let out a long sigh as I realized that my impulsive desire to chase Krom had left Illyan and I stuck in the same car as Miranda Lawson for the next half hour plus. Behind me, Illyan sensibly shifted in a way to make it seem like she was about to fall asleep, wordlessly informing me that I was on my own.

"It isn't Geth technology that Shepard's seeing." I said finally, "It's Reaper tech."

"Reaper." She muttered the word with an audible frown, "Several of Commander Shepard's reports made claims about things called Reapers."

"All true." My head shook, "Or at least, true as far as I know."

Miranda was silent for a few breaths. "Explain the differences between the opponents the Spectre has been encountering, and those that we did."

"Hers are Reaper tech. The ones back there were modified with Leviathan tech." Lifting a hand, I shifted it back and forth. "Think an organic version of Sovereign, like a giant shrimp with a literal god complex. Matriarch T'Ravt seems to be working with them."

"Space... shrimp?" She stumbled over the term, "Christ, you aren't joking, are you?"

"I wish I was." And wasn't that the fucking truth. "The Reapers are easy, they want to kill everyone, but I have no idea what the Leviathan's short term plans are."

"Long-term?"

My left shoulder rolled as I dipped my head in a shrug, "See the god complex remark."
What followed was a fairly quick and terse discussion about the Leviathan's, and specifically just how little we actually knew about them. I was initially cautious until I remembered that Aria was openly putting an anti-indoctrination research group together on Omega, and implementing more active defensive measures as well. It would only be a matter of time before Cerberus got at least some kind of report on the subject.

And, as Aethyta had told me, the more guns pointed at that fucking bitch and her 'gods', the better.

I gave her the short descriptions of the various types of Leviathan-husk that we'd seen so far, along with the nicknames that we'd come up with during our time in the mines... though I avoided telling her that story as much as I could.

"The Banshee you encountered." She shook her head, "It was that powerful?"

"I would sooner run than try and fight one again." I admitted. "The fucking thing toyed with us and didn't even seem bothered about it. Athame's ass but I was lucky to kill it."

"How?"

"Got a slave collar around its neck, disrupted its barriers enough for me to shoot it." Various body parts throbbed in memory of the pain I'd suffered during that ordeal. "Getting close enough to do that wasn't... exactly fun."

"I can imagine."

"No." I retorted flatly, the echoes of those bloody screams in my head. "You can't."

The next five minutes passed in a kind of predictable silence after that comment, Grigor having elected to join Illyan in catching what rest he could. If nothing else that proved that he was a career veteran, or else he was simply intelligent enough to fake sleep.

"How long?" I inquired as the quiet dragged on, lights beginning to appear in the distance as the sun set far behind us.

"Six minutes." Miranda replied, the engines behind us quieting somewhat as she slowed our breakneck rush, "Dammit, this is a civilian model, we won't have any warning if someone picks us up."

"Keep us slow and casual then." I offered, fighting the urge to fidget or otherwise look around for other aircraft. "Maybe shift us a bit more to the north, as if we're just coming in from one of the towns out that way."

She nodded, swinging us around a bit and briefly accelerating before once again throttling back as we drew closer to the outskirts. Behind us, our companions finally stirred again, rolling out their limbs and hefting their weapons into their laps to check them over.

"All of this information." The woman driving lowered her voice as she dropped us down to nearly ground level, gliding into the city as if we were just another bunch of rich idiots ignoring whatever measures the militia had doubtlessly put into place. "Was implanted by Matriarch T'Ravt?"

"For the most part." I replied shortly.

She seemed to hesitate, "Including the data on our organization?"

So that's where this was going... she wanted to know exactly what I knew about her, and probably
about a specific young woman on Illium. Assuming she was on that planet by this point, and that she hadn't convinced Oriana's parents to move in advance with the war on.

"If you want to know what I know about your past, Frankenstein, just ask about it."

My head shook a little as I told yet another half-truth. "It's lacking in hard details beyond the obvious."

Her voice turned sharp, "Define the obvious."

"You've been genetically engineered to be eye candy, and have some massive father issues since he was the one to orchestrate that." I summarized, "Given just how fucked that is, even by my rather jaded standards, I would recommend hunting him down and killing him... but that's just me."

Illyan let out a strangled noise, desperately turning her laugh into a cough.

"Also," I continued before Miranda could say anything, "You've got some deep-seated confictions about the whole thing, in terms of wondering how much of what you are and what you've done is actually you instead of just your genes."

The woman's hands twitched violently at my off-hand remarks of some very personal shit, her voice was low and something close to arctic, "And Matriarch T'Ravt was the one to tell you all of this?"

"If by tell you mean branding it into my skull while also wiping out who I was before that, yes." I nodded agreeably, "Are you now better motivated to hunt down and torture that bitch's daughter to find out what she knows?"

Miranda's voice was little more than an annoyed Australian growl, "I am beginning to dislike you, Kean."

"Good. You fight better when you're angry." I echoed Jack's words, reaching down to draw my hand cannon from its holster as we casually flew threw the colonial streets. There were very few people out and about, but we were hardly the only other people ignoring the automated alert that had started to blare from the car's systems. "I don't think that they're used to pirate attacks here."

Seeing that his superior was still stewing in silent fury, Grigor spoke up from his place behind her, "This colony hasn't been raided in nearly a century, and you know proud bl...Asari can be."

"...fair." The man admitted grudgingly, "I was on Watson during a raid in the Blitz, half the civilians didn't listen to the alarms until Batarian warships were setting down inside the city."

My lover let out a low sound, a simple acknowledgment that he had spoken without offering anything further.

Shaking my head a little, I inspected the heavy pistol in my hands, making sure that a concussive round was charged in the secondary barrel, and that the various systems were online and functional. "Frankenstein, how long to the spaceport?"

"Approaching the parking structure." Miranda replied tersely, "And I do not care for that nickname."

"I know." Leaning forwards, I watched as we glided around a corner, drifting above several cops in the process of arresting several other people. One of them seemed to point up at us, but ideally we'd be parked before they got another squad out. "We find the first service corridor we can and get
inside, then you'll be on the first console. We'll cover you while you find our target hangar. Illyan, Grigor, stick with rifles and stun grenades. No civilian casualties."

"That include the constabulary?" Grigor responded promptly, "Or the militia?"

I grimaced a little. "For now, yes. They'll want us alive, and that'll limit their options. We start shooting to kill, they'll respond in kind."

"Probably." Illyan leaned forwards as the car entered a small opening on a building's second floor, the dimly lit space revealing several dozen other aircars in the manner of airport and spaceport parking lots across the galaxy. "How many guards you think they have?"

"Two in the car," Miranda replied brusquely, "It was the same model as this one, but if they do have a ship here there might be more. Plan of attack?"

I grunted as we settled into an empty space, throwing the door open and speaking as I got out. "I pummeled the bitch pretty well, but her biotics might cause some issues. You're on subduing her again. You two will take out the other guards, then help me in getting Krom down. I'll delay him until you're free."

Illyan nodded as she stepped out beside me, audibly groaning and shaking her long legs a bit. "How are we escaping after we get them?"

"Frankenstein will find us an easily steal-able shuttle while she's digging around in the network."

It was hard to tell over the sound of our armored boots hitting the floor, but I was pretty sure that I heard Miranda's teeth grinding together as we got moving.

Thankfully it didn't take us long to find an employees-only service corridor, and Grigor was able to prove his worth by deftly bypassing the security system faster that I could have managed. After that we spent a few minutes quickly jogging down the empty hallway before coming across a pair of dark rooms with open doors.

One proved to be a break-room, complete with vending machines and abandoned snacks, while the other was a small office of some kind. We piled into the latter, Illyan and Grigor taking up guard posts near the door while I looked over Miranda's shoulder.

For once Athame hadn't elected to screw us; whoever owned this room, and its console, hadn't had time to shut her system down before she'd darted out to respond to the initial attack alarm, and so we had full access without having to try and establish a link to EDI. Plus it made it easy to freeze the relevant security cameras, the operative adding in a timed purge of the recordings to help obscure things a bit further.

"Red-Water Limited." Miranda announced after a few quick checks of the registry, "That's one of their familial corporations, hangar seven... registered has having a single pleasure yacht docked. Havindan class, crew of seven."

"Probably the ship she used to get here." I offered, narrowing my eyes in thought. "Might have taken any bodyguards with her to the mansion, to safeguard her from Krom."

"Possible." A few more finger flicks scrolled the screen too quickly for me to read, "We should still be on alert regardless. Here, hangar ten is showing five light shuttles owned by a travel agency. Fast models, we could stay low to the ground until Saber wing could cover our ascent."

"Good, mark the paths and lets get moving." And hope that we weren't already too late while we
were at it.

Miranda did so, though she avoided saying anything further. Probably trying to avoid giving me any other easy openings to rile her up further... or maybe she really did hate me. Not that the notion bothered me all that much, honestly it had felt good to annoy the crap out of her and generally be an ass. Goddess, I so often forgot how I enjoyed doing that to people.

We followed the hallway for several minutes, then descended a simple staircase that lead us to an underground corridor that ran laterally beneath the main hangars. It was likely intended to give mechanics easy access to the various facilities, without needing to bother the citizens coming and going with their presence. Regardless, it made it simple enough for us to reach another stairwell leading to our target hangar, with only a pair of startled Asari servicewomen slowing us down.

They'd been sitting on the stairs, eating food and openly bitching about the alert when we'd rolled over them.

I'd hit one with a concussive round before she could even stand, probably giving her a concussion, while Illyan had tackled the other via a biotic charge before quickly choking her out. We left them there, not wasting the time it would take to tie them up, and instead rapidly ascended until we stood on a small landing in front of another closed door.

Grigor quickly hacked the alarms, then manipulated the sliding metal to open it a crack and cautiously glancing out. "No one in sight, main doors closed, engines still down... I don't think they're planning on leaving this way."

"They wouldn't be." I murmured in reply, "It's Krom who's going to want to get off world, and with T'Ravt fucked up he's already got a hostage..."

"Unless he simply left her with the militia to treat," Miranda cut in, "To avoid dealing with her further."

"He's smart enough to do that," I allowed, "But he's also a vindictive little psychopath, he'll have her with him. Come on, we'll engage them in the main concourse, it should be empty with the alerts."

That earned me three nods, my fellow human male sliding the door open the rest of the way before we cautiously moved into the hangar. No alarms shrieked as we ghosted our way to the entrance to the spaceport proper, the other doorway thankfully close by and as equally easily bypassed as the last few had been.

After that we found ourselves in a broad corridor, lit only by emergency lighting and utterly devoid of people. Storefronts and restaurants catering to travelers were universally empty, with only a third of them properly locked down. The rest had likely had employees with more sensible priorities concerning getting out of the building and going somewhere safer.

I had just opened my mouth to direct everyone when a few of the lights flickered from a low blue to a brilliant white, the sound in time with a heavy door beginning to open, letting bickering voices come through in turn.

"...this idiocy." T'Ravt's daughter all but snarled the words, pain coming through every word. "We should have taken the Huntress's offer and remained at headquarters."

"So that they could shoot me?" Krom replied, his voice dry. "What a brilliant plan. Jeff, if this stupid
bitch opens her mouth again, shoot her."

"My fucking pleasure boss." Another man replied, "What are we going to tell the crew?"

"That we're hunkering down on-board until the pirates leave." His voice was growing closer, but only slowly. The wounded Asari had to be slowing them somehow. "I'll handle them, just keep this thing alive until we can deliver her to Ganar. He's got some questions for the"

"My mother will kill-" A gunshot made her shriek in agony.

"It's just a hand." The man who'd been told to shoot her laughed, "You'll fucking grow it back blueie... unless Ganar decides to eat you."

"Tie it off." Guard number three spoke, his voice far more tired than the others. "Don't want her bleeding out."

"Yeah yeah... boss, you sure you're doing all right? You've got that leg twitch thing going again. Need your meds?"

"They're on the ship." Krom replied shortly, "Let's get moving, Eleven won't have given up that easily. The sooner we're mobile the better."

I shrank a little farther back as the footsteps resumed, this time with the only sound being the pained groans of an Asari. The two guards entered sight first, hauling the young T'Ravt on a hover-stretcher between them. Both of them were in functional, if dated, armor, but had modern rifles and shotguns of human manufacture on their backs. For the daughter's part, the luckless woman was leaving a trail of purple blood from mangled hand, and was visibly tied down and had a slave collar wrapped around her neck.

She was also thrashing her head around in pain, and her eyes widened in shock as she saw me lurking in the shadow, the sound of agony becoming a scream of alarm. "He's here!"

Both guards promptly dropped her, going for their guns even as all of ours started blasting at them. The asshole who'd shot their own prisoner drew the bulk of our fire, his barriers giving way within a heartbeat, followed quickly by his armor breaking beneath the barrage. He went down in puffs of red mist, his gun belatedly expanding only as he hit the ground. Unfortunately his companion only drew fire from me, my heavy pistol not able to break his shields before he threw himself backwards and out of my line of sight. Cursing, I stepped out at the same time as Miranda did, her SMG up and tracking in time with my own weapon.

Krom hit her low, moving with shocking speed despite his armor. Miranda let out a shriek of pain as blood flew, reflexively diving backwards and away from the man who'd nearly disembowled her with a long blade.

"Grigor, help her!" I snapped as I shifted my aim, flicking a button before slamming a concussive round into Krom's broad back as he arrested his momentum and went ot pursue the woman collapsing onto the ground. "Illyan, take the spare!"

The assassin whirled around at my voice, his right hand departing his blade's hilt to snap an omni-shield to life just in time to catch my next shot before it could hit him in his own gut. Then he was rushing towards me like a medieval man at arms, shield up and blade held evenly, ready to thrust as
he closed.

Darting to my right, I fired one handed at his legs to try and slow him, firing up my omni-tool with my other hand. The overload made him snarl, but the wild shots at his legs only revealed that he'd added tech armor to those limbs, the gleaming panels turning aside the heavy shots as he surged forwards.

I barely had the time to activate the gauntlet on my left hand as he fell into a lunge, frantically parrying the blade and holstering my pistol to free my other hand. The omni-shield around his own spare arm flashed brightly, momentarily polarizing my visor before a fist slammed into it.

Instinct had me twisting to my right, and I felt a brief sting along my left arm, accompanied by a frustrated growl from my enemy that became a pained rasp when I snapped my right arm out in a quick jab that detonated against his shoulder, cracking his armor and making him step back and jerk his blade up to an en garde position.

We stood there for a few moments, sizing each other up as Illyan and her target blasted away at each other somewhere behind me... and then we both rushed forwards.

Krom's sword cracked through the air as he whipped it around, my right arm snapping up to deflect the blow with the tech-plating around my gauntlet. He let out a snarling curse as I lunged inside his guard, snapping my other fist out in a quick jab that detonated against his helmet and saw him recoil away.

My attempt to pursue was warded away by a quick pair of crossing slashes from his monomolecular blade, forcing me come up short as I quickly parried the attacks. He used the delay well, pulling back another two steps and clearing his head, throwing a quick thrust as my right shoulder that I jerked away from. I realized too late that it was a feint, the blade already pulled back and being spun over his head before he heaved it down like an axe.

Jerking both of my arms up, I got them in an x-shape above my head just in time to catch the blow between them. The raw strength behind his attack still slammed me down onto one knee as I snarled at the strain, my HUD flashing as the tech plating barely held against the impact.

An an answering snarl came from my enemy as he shifted a hand from the hilt to the flat back of the blade, increasing his leverage as he tried to drive it through my arms and then through my collarbone. I let him push my arms down further, then twisted my entire upper body and swung my arms to throw the blade away.

He'd put too much of his strength into it, his chest slamming into me as he stumbled forwards. A startled curse was all he had time to utter before I surged upwards in a tackle, heaving him onto his toes before driving him to the ground. His blade went skittering away as he hit, but that gave him two free hands to seize my chest plate with before heaving himself into a roll.

I hadn't had time to set my legs, or arms, to prevent the motion, and was flung free. Hitting the ground on my side, I rolled twice before converting the motion into something that got me into a crouch as I went for my pistol again.

He'd done the same with a massively modified Predator, and we both rose and started shooting as we got our asses moving for cover.

I had fully charged barriers, but he evidently preferred phasic rounds because I felt impacts against my armor despite the protection. One got through that level of defense as well, leaving a stinging agony in my right side, but nothing I couldn't push through.
Krom wasn't so lucky. His tech plating caught my first two shots, but my third caught him in his left shoulder and drew brief shout of pain. I was about to shift direction, to close on him, when he abruptly dropped his pistol to fling a fragmentation grenade in my direction.

I dove behind a decorative fountain, the thing exploding and sending water cascading over me as the grenade went off. Knowing better than to stay still, I scrambled up, fired two more shots to keep him honest, and managed to get behind another column just as a second grenade killed my barriers entirely and blew a small chunk from the tower of stone.

"God-damnit eleven but you're fucking persistent!" Krom shouted across the hallway as he put a few rounds into my cover, probably out of sheer annoyance.

"What the fuck did you expect!?" I snapped back, bringing my left arm up with a wince of pain and triggering an incinerate. He must have seen it coming, because he snapped his omni-shield to life again to catch most of the blast. "How's your head doing without that bitch to keep it together!?"

His reply was a furious sound, followed by more gunfire that had me snap my left arm and head back to safety. The angered response at least gave me time to glance to my right in time to see Illyan execute the remaining guard, her carbine snapping up before she quickly jogged laterally to flank Krom.

I shifted to my left as she started shooting, drawing a grenade of my own and throwing it even as Krom wisely abandoned his compromised position and made to retreat further down the concourse.

The frag grenade send him tumbling to the ground with a curse, his legs frantically working as Illyan and I both rushed directly for him.

He managed a single snap shot that ricocheted off my helmet before a gauntlet hit the pistol, blasting the thing out of his hand. I followed that up with a vicious kick at his head that bounced his helmet off the floor and left him stunned as I planted my other foot on top of him.

"Cuff him." I snarled as Illyan arrived, already reaching for said equipment. Krom's arms were bound in front of him a few breaths later, while he was still too stunned to put up much resistance. A second set around his legs were harder to get into place, but shoving my gun into his throat got him to stay still long enough for her to lock them into place.

Only once he was secured, and we'd ripped his sniper rifle, omni-tool, and extra grenades away did I step back and stare down at him, feeling my heart hammering wildly. We had him.

"Drag..." I needed a long breath, to calm myself, "Drag him with us. Grigor! How is she?"

"She'll live!" The man called back, " Didn't pierce anything vital, but I'll need help moving her."

Swearing quietly, I left Illyan temporarily to jog ahead, poking my head around where the man was working on patching Lawson up. He'd removed her helmet, or she had, probably to force medicine down her throat, revealing a face that was more than a little pale. Krom had caught her in her left thigh, cutting at an angle that went up and across her groin before ending just below her right ribs, leaving her black bodysuit glistening with her own blood.

Lawson's breathing was thready, but her eyes were open and focused as she actually helped Grigor hold her wound shut while he applied medigel and patches to seal it closed. "Did you capture him?"

"Yeah." Illyan spoke up as she arrived, metal clattering as she dragged Krom along the floor by his legs and left him next to the Asari still stuck to her stretcher. "Targets retrieved."
"My mother-"

"Oh shut the fuck up." Krom groaned before T'Ravt could start, "The bitch wants him dead and my mind wiped, again. Him giving you to Cerberus to torture to death won't change shit.'

The wounded Asari gaped at him, clearly aghast at how calm he was... and I found myself frowning as I stared at the bound man, who simply shifted his shoulders a bit as if he was getting comfortable on the floor. Nevermind the cuffs around his wrists and ankles, and the blood leaking from his broker shoulder pauldron.

"We need to get moving." I snapped, not liking the implication at all. "Grigor, get her up. Illyan, drag him, I'll haul the bitch."

Grigor snapped his helmet around, "I need a few more-"

"We don't have the time." I cut him off, "Something is wrong here, this was too fucking easy."

"Take your time, eleven." Krom drawled, actually crossing his legs and sighing contentedly. "They're already on their way. Thanks for killing those two assholes by the way, saved me the bother of clearing out the witnesses."

Yeah, this wasn't going to fucking be good. Miranda evidently agreed, because she visibly clenched her jaw and got to work on standing. Grigor let out a curse and hefted her the rest of the way to her feet. A bit more blood dribbled out from the top of the wound, where it hadn't been sealed yet, but she didn't let out so much as a sound.

I found myself incrementing her toughness level several degrees as I got moving, grabbing the stretcher and staring to haul it behind me as Illyan reached down to grab Krom's legs.

She'd just straightened up behind me when the situation changed, and not in our favor. Looking back over my shoulder to watch as as she started to drag Krom, that left me able to see the two figures that calmly walked out of the main entrance in the distance, both pausing to glance around before locating us.

I felt my heart stop at the sight of them, the waves in my brain going utterly still as a goddess-damned pair of red-clad Justicars began to glow with biotic light.

Logic assaulted me almost at once, drawing a cold fury along with it.

One, we were fucked if we tried to fight them. Even one of them would probably have been more than the four of us could handle if we were healthy. With Miranda lamed, Illyan exhausted, that left just me and Grigor to fight.

Two, Grigor and I would last only as long as our nullification grenades did... of which I only had two left, no more than twenty seconds total. That wasn't anywhere near long enough for Illyan to get Miranda out of here, leaving all four of us very dead.

Three, tying into those two facts... I could only think of one way to get out of this, a way to stall the red-armored agents of Athame long enough for the four of us to maybe get to a shuttle, or back into the tunnels to try and get back to the parking structure.

Four... that method would cost me all of the vicious excitement, the hope, that I'd just begun to feel. We'd still have the omni-tool we'd taken, but that was hardly anything against having him. It was a goddess-damned awful plan, but in those panicked heartbeats, I couldn't think of a better one.
"Drop him!" I shouted at Illyan, letting go of the stretcher before snapping my hands down to my belt. "Help them run!"

She must have seen them in her rear-camera, because she staggered her way into a sprint as I primed the two Batarian incendiary grenades I'd had on me, throwing them at our prisoners as I turned to follow her.

Every step drew a curse from my lips, but neither my own voice or the cracking sound of fire blossoming could stop me from hearing Krom's mocking laughter.

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**Shadow Broker Network; Com-Log TSZ3-5693-1938-84C**

*Agent Snow*: Broker, I have the analysis that you requested on the Traverse.

*Shadow Broker*: Dispatch it at once, proceed with a summary.

*Agent Snow*: In short, the region is destabilizing once again due to political factors. The Hegemony has already begun to abandon some of the worlds they took after the Blue Suns incident, and the Alliance is likewise withdrawing from their buffer zone.

*Shadow Broker*: Where is the 5th Fleet going?

*Agent Snow*: Preliminary reports from my agents indicate they're headed home in accordance with the Withdrawal Act. Typical humans ignoring the raging storm simply because it does not conform to what they want to believe.

*Shadow Broker*: The Hegemony force?

*Agent Snow*: Currently spread out above the Dark Rim colonies, but infighting has already started.

*Shadow Broker*: Breakdown of forces.

*Agent Snow*: Perhaps a third are commanded by conservatives, and will likely withdraw to the Edge colonies within the month, regardless of what Admiral Nik'shan orders.

*Shadow Broker*: Provide confirmation on that. Will the remainder join the rebellion?

*Agent Snow*: I'm less certain, but only because I remain hesitant to state that the Traditionalists and Liberals will be able to cooperate well enough to manage anything more than a flash of lightning.

*Shadow Broker*: Hatred is a powerful motivator, and the High Patriarch has earned more than his share of that emotion. Give me the names and political allegiances of every *Ha'diq* in the Dark Rim by next week.

*Agent Snow*: It will be done, Broker.

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*Next up is: Bared Blades*

Chapter End Notes
So close... yet so far. Next chapter will cover their attempt to escape that which is hunting them. Hopefully everyone enjoyed the fight, brief though it was. Expect more action in the next chapter though of a different kind.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
We ran for our fucking lives while the Justicars flashed to the two burning assholes, of whom one was still laughing his ass off despite being on fire. One of the red armored figures quickly ripped off what little clothing T'Ravt had left and started batting at the flames, while the other vanished in another biotic blur before re-appearing before some fire-fighting equipment built into a wall.

Snapping my attention back to what was ahead of me, I saw Illyan lengthen her stride before ducking, seizing Miranda from Grigor and hauling the wounded woman into a bridal-style carry. That increased our pace significantly, and we flew down the corridor before sliding to a stop in front of the door for hangar ten.

We'd just gotten through the entrance when an alarm began to scream in the ceiling, howling as yellow lights flashed in the walls.

"Shit." I snarled as a new thought occurred to me, "The main doors will be locked down, can you hack that? Lawson!"

"She's out!" Illyan snapped back at me, one of Miranda's arms dangling bonelessly in front of her. It had taken a lot to beat her pain threshold, but apparently getting yanked into Illyan's arms and then bouncing as we'd run had done it. "New plan boss!"

"Underground again!" We all immediately turned to our left, Grigor stepping out in front of us to slam his hand against the controls. Fingers deftly twisted through an override before the door slid to the side, letting us stagger down a stairwell.

By silent acclamation, we got moving back the way we'd originally come in. The aircar wasn't going to be a great escape vehicle, but it was better than fucking nothing. Bypassing the still unconscious staff, we made it as far as our original stairwell before a dull thud made my shoulders tighten. A quick glance at my rear camera caught a flicker of blue just as we left the main corridor and started up the stairs.

"Go!" I snapped, jerking to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, slamming a hand against the door controls. The door hadn't even closed before I was manipulating my tech launcher, ejecting a single primed overload set to a timer. One gunshot was all it took to shatter the control panel, letting me shove the tiny grenade into the interior before I turned around and got my ass moving again.
Sparks exploded out the wall a few seconds later, the lights around the door snapping off as the mine did its job. I was about at the mid-stair landing when I heard something slam hard into the metal behind me, sparing a single glance at the rear-view on my HUD to see a burning blue pinprick appear in a corner of the door before beginning to move laterally.

"Fucking biotics." I gasped, remembering Shyeel doing something similar to a fence once... but that had been a fence. The Justicar was fucking using her fingers like a goddess-damned welding torch to cut through a fucking thick door... and it probably wouldn't take her all that long.

Lengthening my strides as best I could, I pounded up the rest of the stairs before entering the darkened hallway, passing the office and break room as I tried to catch up with the others. In the distance ahead of me, I saw them vanish into the garage, their disappearance occurring at the same time as yellow and red lights began to flash across the doorway.

Someone, Grigor probably, promptly began shooting, with more weapons joining the cacophony a few heartbeats later. Cursing as fluently as my burning lungs would allow, I pushed my aching body to try and get to the garage as quickly as I could.

Exploding into the open space, I found myself more or less in the middle of a one-sided firefight. Two Asari in copy uniforms were taking cover behind civilian vehicles, their own car in the background flashing its lights behind them, both of them firing Acolytes at Grigor who was retaliating to keep them pinned down while Illyan got Miranda into our vehicle.

Snapping my pistol up, I fired off two heavy rounds of my own, slapping the door controls behind me to force the Justicar to waste a moment getting it open. That out of the way, I got my aching legs moving again, trying to get to the damned car so we could try and get out of here.

I was about half-way there when the door slid open, revealing a red armored figure as she practically leaped through the opening, her faceless red helmet whipping around before locking onto my back. Her armor was similar to the scaled number my memories had Samara in, albeit actually practical in the sense that it covered her entire body and didn't leave her cleavage hanging out.

That was all the time for observation that I had before she blurred, flashing forwards to slam into my back, hands going for my neck. I twisted on reflex, wrapping my right arm around hers to lock her in place as we fell, my left desperately going for a grenade on my belt.

We hit the ground in a shower of sparks and a clatter of armor, rolling as we struggled. Blue began to shimmer around me as she called on her power, the warpfire around her forearms beginning to burn through my neck guard and chest plate. Not bothering to do more than prime and drop a nullification grenade, I ignored the burning dark energy and slammed my left hand into her forearm to pop it free.

That drew a surprisingly dark curse from the woman, but my attempt to twist my way free was frustrated by the leg that snapped out around my waist to lock me in place, her biotics surging to increase her mass to leave me trapped on the ground on top of her.

The tinny crack of the grenade changed the situation in my favor. She went from a stupidly powerful and experienced biotic to someone who might have been five six, and who I probably had at least thirty pounds on.

Calling on all my experience in-fighting with Asari, I slammed my arms down on the leg still wrapped around me, throwing my back into her gut and then pulling her thigh up at a sharp angle. The Justicar didn't scream in pain as I hauled her leg past its natural limits, but she did let out a breathy sound before using her arms and other leg to shove me off of her before I could tear anything.
She rolled to an awkward crouch as I did the same, clearly favoring one leg as she reached back to yank a Disciple from her back. She was fast, Athame's ass but she was fucking fast. The round slammed into the center of my chest even as I fired my net launcher, even though all I'd had to do was raise an arm.

My barriers collapsed as I fell onto my ass, scrambling back even as the burning fibers of the net snapped around her. Everyone else I'd seen hit with a submission net, everyone, had screamed in agony when trapped by one. The Justicar merely let out a rasping curse as she went down, throwing herself into a roll that carried her behind an aircar before I could even think about grabbing my pistol to start shooting at her.

Snapping an arm out, I grabbed my hand-cannon before flailing my way to my feet, letting out a pained huff as my chest ached. The cops fired a few rounds my direction, but they were as inaccurate as my own return fire as they darted to my right, clearly intending to help the Justicar work her way free of the net.

Grigor shoved me into the back with Miranda the second I got close enough, taking shotgun as Illyan gunned the engine and got us airborne.

"I need you to patch her!" The Cerberus male snarled as he slammed the door shut, "I have to coordinate with the Suffern if we're going to evade this crap!"

Jerking my head into a nod, I was turning to try and look at Miranda when Illyan whirled the car around towards the exit and punched the throttle almost at once. We cleared the exit a few heartbeats before blue light exploded behind us, the vehicle shuddering as its engines fought against the biotic pull trying to haul us back.

The Justicar was strong, but I doubted more than a handful of living Asari could pull down an moving aircar, and she wasn't one of them. Illyan jammed her thumb down on the accelerator, and we were abruptly back out over the colony, diving for the ground before being thrown backwards as she tore off at street-level.

Trying to ignore the frantic motion of the car, and Grigor snapping open a comm-line and demanding a vector out of the city, I shifted around to grab Miranda and get a better look at her injury, ignoring the general pain of my own wounds as I did... and all of the implications of the shit that had just gone down.

"Bleeding again... shit." Half of the patches had given way, revealing pulsing muscle and sending more blood down her lower half. Thankfully our companions up front had thrown their medical supplies back here, and while I was no corpsman, I could at least bind wounds.

Miranda came to as we neared the outskirts, blinking blearily as I fought to hold her skin together with one hand while I applied a medi-gel lathed patch with my other. "Kean... airborne?"

"Yes." I replied shortly, grimacing as the vehicle jostled around us, nearly badly enough for me to lose my grip. "Don't bloody move."

She ignored the order, shaking hands reaching down to pinch the skin around her ribs to make it easier for me. That let me at least get it into place, my hands holding it tightly against her as the adhesive got to work. "Last thing... I remember were... Justicars."

"Two of them." I confirmed, a flash of cold anger spiking despite my efforts to focus on what I was doing. It was an effort to hold my tongue on my suspicions, but I managed it. "We'll worry about that in a minute, for now we need you patched up."
"Two inches or so left." I answered, carefully pulling my hands back before prepping another patch. "I need to tear your underwear a bit more to get this patch into place."

"Just... do it." She exhaled, her head rolling back a bit as she tried to keep her breathing even.

I did, ignoring what lay just below the wound in favor of what actually mattered. Carefully wiping up the blood as best I could, I got the patch into place as she held it shut, her body shuddering a little as I carefully let go. "Closed. You need anesthetic?"

"No." Miranda shook her head once, making my eyebrows go up. "Need... a clear head. Where... are we going?"

"East." Grigor called back, "Saber team lured the militia fighters southwest, but we've still got four patrol cars and a civilian model following hard behind us. We're trying to get far enough away from the city to call in the shuttles."

Her lips pursed. "Plan?"

"Two shuttles are headed down to pick us up, and provide cover fire." I replied, grimacing as something clanged against the back of the car. Illyan promptly threw us to the left and then dove, trying to dodge more of the incoming fire, "Justicars have a fucking open-topped car and are shooting."

"I'll put up a-" Reaching out a hand, I shoved Miranda back into her seat before she could even try. "I will tranq your ass if you try to use biotics." I snapped at her, my brain shifting currents to try and figure out what the fuck to do now.

"If you've got a bloody idea I'd love to hear it Cie!" Illyan snapped, abruptly throwing us to the right as something clanged against the back of the car, "We're already loosing coolant!"

"Time until the shuttles?" I demanded.

"Too long!" Grigor replied, "We need to shoot back! Land?"

"Not this close to the city." Curling my lip, I swore then turned to my window, drawing my pistol. Miranda had enough time to gasp before I blasted it with a concussive round, blowing the entire thing out. "Frankenstein, hold my legs."

She stared at me in something between shock at what I'd done, and fury at the nickname, but shuffled over as I heaved my upper torso out of the window. Wind promptly began to buffet and bounce me as I tried to focus on what was behind us. The four law enforcement vehicles were easy to spot with the flashing lights, but the Justicar's vehicle was far less noticeable in the dying light.

Grimacing as we abruptly ascended, then dove, then weaved as Illyan tried to make us a hard target, I felt Miranda wrap her arms around my thighs as she stopped me from being pitched out of the vehicle.

Shooting wouldn't do me any good, not with my general level of accuracy outside of short-ranged fights. Holstering my pistol, I brought my omni-tool up and shifted my ass to make sure that my tech launcher wouldn't throw the mines into the car with us. Locking onto the car took too damned long, more sparks flying from glancing hits from our pursuers, but eventually my HUD flashed as the systems managed it.
Overloads began streaking out into the darkness, exploding in flashes of artificial lightning as the Justicars abruptly threw their own car into wild evasions to avoid the mines that would probably cripple their civilian vehicle.

It didn't stop their pursuit, but it made their accuracy terrible enough that we managed to limp on for another fifteen minutes before our ride reached its end.

"Losing it!" Illyan snapped as the engine began to make thready sounds, the eezo core fluctuating badly as she put us into a quick descent. I hurriedly scooted back inside, Miranda dragging me with what strength she had left. "Looks like a river ahead, forest. Going to land there."

"Just get us down alive!" I replied, "Grigor!"

"Shuttles are closing!"

Miranda shuddered a little as another jostle nearly threw me on top of her, her voice thready as she fought down a moan of pain. Cursing, I reached down to where the medkit had spilled over on the floor, grabbing a hypo. Before she could stop me, I jammed the painkillers into her exposed thigh, plunging the drugs into her system.

Her eyes fluttered and began to dilate almost at once, and I ignored her slurred cursing in favor of grabbing her shoulders and bracing my feet against the seats before us in the moments before we hit the ground. Illyan kept us fairly even, fluttering the dying engines enough to make us skip along the ground to bleed speed before we hit the ground a final time and slid to a final stop.

I followed Grigor out of our side once he'd thrown the door open, blinking in confusion as I saw a dozen or so young maidens scattered around the clearing, along with modern tents and other various bits of camping equipment... emphasis on the young. They didn't look like they were done growing yet... and stepping forwards a Matron with the bearing of a teacher.

Athame's motherfucking azure... we'd landed in a goddess-damned camping ground, next to several rapids with the Asari-version of kayaks nestled up on the shore, and it was complete with some kind of high-school field trip.

"Are you all... all... oh goddess." The teacher's voice trailed off as Illyan emerged from the other side of the car, hauling Miranda's bleeding form in her arms once again.

"Hostages?" Grigor asked quietly.

"They're all biotics." I reminded him, my head already snapping around to try and find our pursuers, and our shuttles.

One of the latter roared overhead a breath later, one of its doors visibly open as it slalomed threw the air, a heavy machine gun spitting out tracer fires and making police vehicles abruptly scatter. Another came down in a hard combat dive, mud and water splattering from the riverbank as it settled into a low hover maybe fifteen meters away.

If we'd just had to deal with the law enforcement, we'd have likely gotten away clean, with minimal annoyance.

Unfortunately, there were also two Justicars who didn't care about little things like their vehicle getting shredded by large-caliber rounds.

It hit the river in an explosion of fire and water, drawing screams from the little girls that became awed gasps as the two Justicars slammed into the ground, having bailed out early and used their
biotics to slow their descent.

I found myself irritated at the sight of both of them. That meant they'd either killed Krom, which I
would have appreciated, or more likely, saved his worthless ass and then foisted him off on the
militia or cops so that they could hunt us down.

That momentary sense of annoyance was all I had time for before the situation became little more
than a chaotic hurricane.

The five men and women in the shuttle that was our ride promptly began shooting at the nearest
Justicar, the taller of the two, who obligingly returned fire with a rifle of her own, looking
unbothered by the shots hitting her barriers. She moved laterally as her strong voice rose, ordering
the innocents to retreat to the forest as quickly as they could.

While she covered the children, the other had locked onto me, again, and had fallen into a full on
sprint as she sought to close the distance.

This was about a worst-case situation as far as fighting someone at her level went. Our only cover
was the car and the shuttle, and I knew that she was more than fast enough to take us out before we
could cross the distance. Then again, we didn't have to kill her, just slow her down enough to escape.

"Grenades!" I shouted, flinging my last nullifier right at her with one hand, following it up with a
stun grenade that I lobbed more towards the school-children.

Our opponent deftly blew both of mine towards the river with a flick of her hand a pulse of biotic
power, but couldn't react quickly enough to also deflect Illyan's nullifier or Grigor's frag. The
combination left her diving to one side, firing her shotgun in a suppressing fashion and trying to
make herself a harder target as I started firing measured shots at her as I walked towards the shuttle.

Grigor elected against shooting back, instead moving back to grab one of Miranda's arms to help
Illyan move the stumbling woman more quickly. While they were the easier target, the Justicar
seemed fixated on me, my barriers collapsing once again against her specialized weapon. Cursing, I
increased my pace, switching to one-handed shooting as I started throwing incinerates in her
direction to try and throw off her aim further

"Medic!" Vishin called out as we approached, shouting over the roar, "Up front! You two out of his
way!"

"Get her inside!" I snapped, switching my aim to the other Justicar as she finished herding the
students aside and got moving in our direction, getting into a better position. One of the Cerberus
agents in the shuttle went down in a spray of blood, someone hauling her back inside before taking
her place. "Athame's fucking-shoot above the students!"

The few agents and marines on board quickly shifted their aim, understanding what I was going for.
Rounds began to explode into the trees where the little girls were hiding, and the reaction from the
tall Justicar was immediate. She flashed backwards to stand amongst them, slamming both of her
hands out to raise a curtain barrier around them.

While that left one lawful-good idiot occupied, there was another to be concerned with... and I once
again found myself being flattened by a charge once her biotics had returned.

The Justicar fired rapidly with her Disciple as she loomed over me, drawing shouts and yowls of
pain from several throats before turning the weapon towards me. I kicked out with my legs before
she could execute me, sending her small frame to the ground with another low curse that was cut off
when I lashed out again with my right leg to smash my boot into her helmet.

Scrambling up to a seated position, I lunged for her and shoved her gun barrel away from my forehead before she could pull the trigger. Her follow-up act of dropping the thing to smash her helmet into mine caught me more than a little off-guard, and I recoiled as she followed that up with a pair of quick jabs at the puncture wound in my arm that sent pain blossoming up and down that side of my body.

Instinct returned in time for me to activate my gauntlets, deflecting a warp-fire wreathed fist aimed at my throat. Half of the tech plates shattered from the blow, and I lost most of the ones on my other forearm blocking a second punch.

Illyan came to my rescue as the Justicar bounced to her feet faster than I could scramble upright, hitting the much smaller Asari in a rudimentary charge of her own. She slammed the butt of her rifle across red visor hard enough to drive her opponent down to a knee, then twisted to deliver a vicious kick that sent the Justicar rolling away.

My lover stepped back as I finished rising, putting several heavy rounds into her target's legs, lifting an arm to push me towards the shuttle as I shook my head to clear it.

The motion meant that I only had a fuzzy image when the Justicar flung a hand forwards, a gout of hellish-blue warpfire screaming out to pour over Illyan's head and shoulders. She let out a yowl of wordless pain and tried to fling herself to one side. The Justicar saved her the bother, bringing her other hand around in a striking motion, sending a biotic throw that slammed her against the shuttle and left her to collapse in a boneless heap on the ground.

At the sight of her dropping, flickering bits of dark energy still burning its way through her helmet and armor... I took temporary leave of my senses.

The Justicar snapped around as I surged towards her, covering the short distance in a few long strides. Her attempt to throw me aside washed off of my slowly recharging barriers, letting me slam my right gauntlet into her cracked visor to shatter the thing entirely.

This time she did snarl in pain as fragments tore at her face and eyes, flinching back and letting me get in several additional strikes. Punches hit her chest, shoulders, and then the thigh I'd tried to hyperextend.

The last must have actually hurt her, because she let out a high-pitched sound of pain... and then it was her turn to lose her shit.

Her biotics lashed out chaotically, shattering what was left of my barriers and sending me flying through the air to land in a splash of water and mud near the rapidly moving river. I had enough time to blink and glance around, my everything hurting as I tried to sit up before the Justicar appeared above me in another flash of blue light. One of her slim boots slammed against my chest, keeping me pinned as she reached up to yank her helmet off.

"You." She rasped, audibly in pain as the features of a hard-bitten Matron appeared. "Are an abomination before the goddess. Do you have any final words before you find peace?"

I inhaled sharply, half-hating myself for what I'd seen, half-desperately hoping this would work. "Yeah. Fetch bitch."

Then I yanked my pistol out and fired a concussive round in a single motion, praying to Athame that it would hit my target.
I knew that it had when a pair of young Maidens, both nude, both evidently having snuck away from the main group for some private time, were flung backwards from where they’d been clinging to each other in fear just down the riverbank. Both of their flailing bodies vanished into the rapids with splashes of water, and the Justicar's eyes widened in horror before she shoved off of me and vanished in a flash that saw more liquid explode upwards as she dove in after them.

Gasping for air, I heaved myself up, staggering towards the shuttle. They'd already hauled Illyan inside, and as soon as they saw me upright the vehicle abruptly began to hover sideways to get closer to me.

Vishin and Grigor helped to haul me inside before quickly moving to help the medic secure Illyan and Miranda, along with three other wounded or dead forms. That left me free to reach a hand up, holding tightly to a strap as we lifted off, looking down as we began to ascend... meeting the glare of the Justicar as she heaved two girls onto the bank before glaring furiously up at me as the door closed.

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**Shadow Broker Network; Citadel Embassies Recording**

_Provisional Councilor Udina:_ I can't believe the hypocritical bullshit!

_Councilor Sparatus:_ I suspect that is an exaggeration.

_Udina:_ Fine, I can't believe the _continued_ hypocritical bullshit.

_Sparatus:_ It is depressing to state, but you get used to it.

_Udina:_ I may not have the opportunity. The secession movements are increasing with every month that we are not promoted to full membership, and with the continuing refusal to do anything about the Geth. Never-mind the god-damned Hegemony.

_Sparatus:_ If you can continue to be surprised at Asari and Salarian intransigence, I can only remark that human short-sightedness remains so unbelievably vast as to be almost incomprehensible.

_Udina:_ Personally I am more than aware that it would destroy our economy, and likely lead to a war with the Hegemony that would leave us both little more than failed states. I am not a moron like most of the fools in Parliament.

_Sparatus:_ I am aware, that is why I am here. Dealing with the current crisis is the most viable means of increasing Asari public support beyond Tevos and the Thirty's ability to deny you a full posting.

_Udina:_ I have already given Shepard all of the support available to me, and you won't release Fleet assets.

_Sparatus:_ Do not refer to me in that statement, not when I have an offer for you.

_Udina:_ ...Very well, what do you have?

_Sparatus:_ Although it hasn't been done since the rebellion, Spectre's do have the authority to command Citadel forces in battle if the state in question is willing to assign them.

_Udina:_ I am aware of the protocol, I have had to deal with Anderson's constant lamentations over High Command's refusal to assign further units to Shepard... what are you offering?

_Sparatus:_ General Adrien Victus was due to be assigned to a routine patrol, if the Alliance was
willing to shift a task force from the Third Fleet to guard Relay 387, his forces could be seconded to Shepard and Bau.

_Udina:_ I have no authority over military matters, give me a moment to pull up the relevant data... according to this, that relay is already within that fleet's assigned patrol zone.

_Sparatus:_ Is it? What a remarkable coincidence.

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**Next up is: Returning Home**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Sorry for the shorter chapter, but I didn't feel like throwing in more filler fights just to lengthen it... and this was just the right spot to end it. Next chapter is probably going to end up longer as a result.

In the good news, they seemed to have gotten away. In the bad news, Illyan's status is unknown, so is Miranda's, and Cie seems to have pissed off a Justicar. Next chapter is going to have a lot of resolution based on everything that's happened over the last four chapters.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
I stood on the bridge of the *Reliant*, my arms folded behind my back as I stared at the view-screen. Right now all it showed was the bow camera's viewpoint, an endless field of stars punctuated by far away nebula and the burning orbs that were stellar clusters. In normal situations, I might have even found the view soothing... as it was, it didn't even take the edge off, to the point where the bridge was utterly silent behind me.

Or maybe it was the fact that I didn't have most of my armor on, accommodating the medigel patches and bandaging around the wound in my side and left arm, leaving me bare above the waist except for the war gauntlets I'd kept on. The appearance of my scarred and battered body had drawn more than a little attention, combining with my long hair to have at least two of the Batarian women on duty staring at me more often than their screens.

Still, if nothing else, the silence made it easy to hear the door hiss open, several pairs of booted feet echoing as Petrovsky arrived, likely with an escort of our marines. I could only assume that they'd also brought Lawson with when I heard the quiet whir of a hover chair drawing closer.

Not turning around, I simply listened to them approach, speaking when I was sure that they were nearby. "Lawson. Did you know about the Justicars?"

There was an almost hesitant pause before her weak voice replied, "No. If I had, I would have requested anti-biotic specialists for my team."

I considered that for several breaths, then nodded slightly. I believed her, at least in the case of the latter. She might have tried to disguise who they were, but she would have had them. And her reaction to their presence had seemed entirely genuine... but I'd wanted to ask one more time, just to make the separation between her and her superiors clear.

"General," I continued, "You had questions."

"Yes." Petrovsky replied smoothly, "I cannot help but notice that we have already been traveling longer than required to reach the rendezvous point."

"Yes." I nodded once, "We are proceeding at a slower speed."

"...may I ask why?"
One of my bare shoulders twitched, sending long hair shifting. "You can ask."

An awkward silence followed, the General clearly not knowing how to respond to my blasé attitude.

"Kean." Lawson spoke up hesitantly, "Your casualty report?"

My eyes closed as I let out a ragged breath, "Illyan is still in surgery. Five marines dead, seven injured. Yours?"

"Four dead, nine injured." She replied, "Far less than my projections... there were far fewer guards present than I believed."

And far, far less than I had, even with the addition of the husked forces present. "We will discuss that in a few minutes. First, I wish to continue to speak with the good General about his and Harper's repeated efforts to betray us."

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage." The General spoke calmly, "None of my measures were put into place given that you did not break the agreement first."

The technicality infuriated me on an almost primal level, and I had to fight not to clench my gauntlets into fists. "Would you care to explain the presence of the Justicars?"

"I'm afraid that I am not an expert on Asari-"

"Shut. Up." The words snapped out, and I needed several more deep breaths to return my voice to something close to level. "Justicars are celebrities. If your agent on planet didn't report their presence, they are so grossly incompetent as to warrant execution."

"I do not-"

"Further." I cut him off again, some of the cold anger bleeding out into contempt. "Benihi is a backwater colony with a minimal, low-abiding population. So unless a dozen Ardat-Yakshi decided to start a cult there, there is no reason for a Justicar to be present, never-mind two."

"What are-"

"Meaning." Armor creaked as my fists clenched. "Someone tipped off the Order. Someone who knew we were coming."

Miranda sucked in a pained breath, "It could have been Krom..."

"Yes, because he would want to be on a world with the perpetual threat of execution hanging over his head. He's unstable, not a fucking moron." One of my arms rose to forestall her next comment, "My... apologies Frankenstein. My anger is directed at Harper and Petrovsky. You don't have the temperament for a betrayal, even if your own plans likely worked into theirs."

"Kean." Petrovsky cut in, his own voice hard. "What are you insinuating?"

My right arm waved vaguely, even though I still did not turn to face them. "Several things. Your primary plan was simple... if I'd followed Lawson's concept, it would have been easy to have your fighters destroy the hanger with our shuttles, leaving us trapped for the Justicars. They wouldn't have bothered interrogating or arresting us, leaving your involvement hidden."

"Your proof?" He asked.

"You had to have known there was little chance I would go with her plan, but why not make the
attempt?" I rolled a shoulder, "And the time it took me to concept a new one with the pair of you gave your pet AI more time to try and infiltrate our ship's systems."

There was something, maybe a heavy inhalation from Lawson. She was a bitchy ice queen, but cold-blooded betrayal wasn't something she took to easily. She'd probably been kept in the dark about her superior's intentions, just as she often had been in the game.

Or she was surprised I knew about EDI... one or the other, if not both.

"I'm assuming that your secondary plan relied upon your ships." It was a fight to keep my breathing even as I continued, "If Joa had followed your orders and entered atmosphere, you could have easily taken out our engines and left this ship at the mercy of the Republic's fleet... and again, left us trapped for the Justicars to deal with. It's also why there is a large fleet waiting for us at the main rendezvous point, one powerful enough to easily disable or destroy us."

Petrovsky made a musing sound, "Interesting theories. Your proof?"

"Joa." I raised my voice, "If you could."

"Sensors, give us the actual bow view." The Captain raised her voice, sounding viciously pleased as she did so.

Ahead of me, the screen flashed and updated... and Miranda let out a pained sound at the sight of a Terminus dreadnought, its white paint gleaming against the darkness of space as it sat surrounded by a field of debris. Against its bulk, the attended supporting fleet was hardly noticeable, except for the tiny flashes where they captured or destroyed escape pods and evacuation shuttles.

Personally I was assuming the former, the bitch commanding the freshly completed Blood Tide didn't strike me as the type to bother with prisoners.

"Two extra cruisers, an additional destroyer, and four more frigates. All destroyed." I remarked as the sensor data began to appear, identifying the wreckage for what it was. "Plus all of your initial ships excepting the Suffern... I would assume that was most of Cerberus's available warships, I can't imagine that Harper will be pleased."

Petrovsky actually stepped up beside me, his eyes wide as he stared at the data. They closed slowly as he took in a deep breath, a calming motion of his own. "You gave us your word."

"Yes. I did." I replied coldly. "That you would go free. That I would work with you to achieve our objective. I fulfilled my end of the deal, and I will allow the pair of you and your flagship to depart... Even though I have the evidence of your own fucking betrayal right there."

The General spoke into the quiet that followed, his voice filled with forced calm. "I had emergency measures in place, in case of betrayal, yes. As did you. We would both have been fools not to be prepared. Those ships were merely to be present in case you refused to release me."

My curled fingers clenched more tightly at the flat lie, the already weak wall of resistance within me cracking. "No, they weren't, and we both know it."

Petrovsky stared at the data for a few moments longer, looking at the remains of his fleet before turning around and taking several steps back. "I would appreciate it if your people turned over copies of the omni-tools you retrieved from the colony, and then allowed us to depart... assuming that you actually do intend to keep that part of your promise."

I let out a slow exhalation, ignoring his request and his insinuation entirely. "Everything you do is
calculated, measured. The Justicars were a factor you would not have relied upon, but the remainder of these plans... were yours. Meaning you have made a significant miscalculation when it came to allowing yourself to be kept on this ship."

I could practically hear him frown, then there was the soft sound of a boot scuffing the floor as he stepped back, recognizing the tensing muscles in my back and arms as my self-control disintegrated. "I am your guest, Commander."

"Guests." I stated quietly. "Do not attempt to murder their hosts."

And then I was twisting around, hard light cracking to life around my gauntlets as I surged towards the older man. He tried to get his hands up into some kind of stance, tried to step back away from me, but managed neither before my right fist connected with his jaw.

It broke audibly as the tech platting detonated, his scream of pain becoming guttural as he recoiled. The sound shifted to a wheeze when my other fist connected with his ribs, he must have had armor beneath the uniform because I heard the characteristic sound of shattering plates rather than the his ribs cracking. I followed it up with a strike to his other side, then stepped to my right before lashing out with an armored boot to drive his knee sideways.

He went down without a sound, his lungs evidently having run out of air. An arm tried to rise to block the follow-up his instincts knew were coming, but that just gave me a new target. Seizing his wrist and forearm in both hands, I hauled him onto his belly before planting a foot onto his shoulder. A pull and twist ripped the limb out from its socket, and I was rewarded with another muffled scream.

My lips twisted in a wordless snarl as I shoved him away, his body limply rolling onto his back. A twist of my fingers deactivated my gauntlets as I approached him, the footfalls and his moans the only sound in the room.

All of my fury at what had happened on that planet, at being forced to abandon our mission, of watching Illyan go down beneath the Justicar's biotic assault, all because this stupid fucking asshole and his goddess-damned boss couldn't cooperate for one fucking day! It had even been in their fucking best interests to bloody work with us, but hey just had to fucking give into their goddess-damned compulsion to betray everyone and every-fucking-thing!

We'd had the fucking son of a bitch! If we'd known about the fucking Justicars, or if they hadn't been present, this could have been over!

Kick number one was aimed at his face, shattering teeth. Numbers two through five were into his ribcage, each growing progressively more vicious until I was rewarded with the sound of more bones breaking.

"If..." The snarl came out as I stepped back, even though I had no idea if he was coherent enough to hear me. "I had not given you my word, I would throw you out of an airlock you treacherous fucking keshin."

Spinning on a heel away from him, I spared a single glance for Miranda and almost immediately regretted doing so. She looked horrified, her eyes wide as she stared at me, her wounded body shrunken back in her chair. Grigor stood beside her, holding the plasma bags refilling her system, his posture cringing as two marines kept guns against his helmet. Four more stood in a loose circle around them, their body language varying between shock and satisfaction.

"You... weren't involved." I closed my eyes, trying to force the turbulent waters into stillness before I
snarled at her as well. When I realized that that wasn't about to happen, I jerked myself into a turn before stalking back towards the front of the room. Staring out at the dreadnought, I pushed my my arms behind my back once again, clasping my left wrist in my right hand to try and forestall the trembling rage.

"Frankenstein..." Pausing, I let out something like a snarling sound as I held back from saying anything more vicious, "Get that... thing off of this ship."

"What about the data?" She asked quietly. "An equivalent exchange was part of the agreement."

It had been, and if nothing else she had a quad for asking despite what I had just done in front of her. Then again, this was the same woman who'd calmly held her own guts closed so that they could be bound closed, and who'd also refused painkillers before hanging onto my legs as I dangled outside of a flying fucking aircar.

I might have loathed the organization she was involved in... but she'd more than earned my respect personally.

"I am no longer interested in any data you can provide." I growled, not so much as turning around. "I have no faith that it is hasn't already been modified, and I am keeping the information we retrieved as repayment for the attempts to betray our agreement."

There was a very long pause before she spoke again, "I... understand. We will return to our ship, with your permission."

I'd already told her to get lost, so I merely twitched my head forwards slightly. No one spoke as footsteps clattered and echoed, the marines probably grabbing the bleeding mess that was Petrovksy before hauling him behind Miranda as they pushed her out.

The quiet hiss of the door heralded another wave of absolute silence, broken only by the low hum of electronics and the careful shifting of the bridge crew as they maintained the ship's systems. Perhaps five or ten minutes of it passed, my anger not abating as I stared at the broad image before me.

The silence broke with a feminine sigh, Joa's voice cool as she snapped at her officers to start FTL prep. Their resulting chorus of system checks and readiness alerts obscured her approach, and I glanced back as she spoke.

"If your girl hadn't made it," The ship's captain kept her voice low as she moved to stand beside me, "Would you have still let them go?"

"Lawson." I replied flatly, "Wasn't involved."

Dark eyes narrowed, "And the male?"

My fingers twitched as my upper lip pulled back, "Would have been taken to Xentha, to be introduced to Mirala."

The Asari pirate's eyes lidded as she regarded me, "You are much hotter when you let your anger out. And without a shirt on."

"Joa, I'm really not in the mood for that." I replied tersely.

"Just saying." She gave me a grim little smile, flicking her eyes up and down me before spinning on a heel and strutting back towards her command chair. I followed her slowly, feeling the pain of my wounds bleeding through the painkillers thanks to the shit I'd just done. "Your mother is still holding,
by the way."

I grunted, slowing to a stop beside her throne, "Let her through."

Ahead of us, the main screen flickered once again, showing my mother's cold features as she sat in a command chair of her own. "Ul Kean."

"MacKinnon." I gave her a tight nod. "Congratulations on the promotion. How did target practice go?"

"Well enough." The Lady Warlord's newest Admiral allowed, "Not quite the shake-down run I had in mind, but I will admit that it was quite satisfying."

I snorted quietly, "Careful, you sound like you're close to having an emotion."

A dark eyebrow rose as her lips pursed, "You will hold up to your end of the deal?"

"Assuming Ayle doesn't kill me for agreeing, yes." She was bound to be less than pleased for agreeing to hold training exercises with the Academy's upper years for the next five years... but we'd needed the back-up, and Leska's price had been higher. "I'll talk with her when we return to Omega and put her in touch with your bondmate."

"Very well."

"If there is nothing else, my battlegroup will return to Xentha."

Tilting my head once, I motioned for the signal to be cut. Whatever officer was responsible for that did so, the main screen flipping back to the default view. Joa promptly started snapping out orders to get us back to the pirate relay we'd used to get here in the first place. It took a few minutes to wait for the Cerberus shuttle to clear our shuttle bay, but it had barely exited our proximity before Joa gave the order to hurl us into FTL.

"Should be back on Omega in ten days" She informed me as she settled in her chair, stretching out and yawning openly. "Illium in five, we'll discharge at one of the Eclipse stations there. You want to wait for us or catch one of their ships?"

"We'll wait. I don't think that Ayle will be on Omega until around then anyway." I felt my shoulders slump slightly as my energy continued to wind down, "After-action briefing in your wardroom in an hour. Have someone question those prisoners, make sure they aren't going to die before we get to Omega. In the meantime, I'm going to go check on my people."

Joa grunted, "I'll handle it. See you in an hour."

I dipped my head politely before turning, walking out of the bridge. A shadow detached itself from the wall just outside of the door, a petite Quarian falling into step beside me as I slowed my pace for her shorter legs.

"You did a number on him." Voya remarked, her wide eyes flicking up to me. "That's not much like you."

"We had him." I hissed air between my teeth, "And fucking Harper was behind those Justicars being there, I fucking know it."

"You're sure?" She asked calmly, keeping her voice level. It was an old routine between us... logical thoughts always worked to calm me down, from either anger or stress, and she'd been with me long enough to know it. Even if I'd already done the thinking part, stating it aloud gave me more time to
"Yes." Crossing my arms, I started yanking my gauntlets off before I gave into the urge to hit something else. "It would have solved all of his problems. We'd be dead, we'd be identified, he pins the whole thing on us and conceals his involvement. And if we prove to be competent enough to pull the mission off, we probably never even know that those two were in the city."

"Leaving us with no idea that he'd tipped them off." Her head cocked to one side, forked tongue briefly appearing to lick her lips. "And if we'd had Krom captured... they would just need him, since he knows everything you do."

I nodded with a small grunt, tucking one gauntlet under an arm while I worked on the other. "About what I assumed. Figure Harper had the Justicars as his ace in the hole, with Petrovsky's military solution as the main plan. Gives him T'Ravt's daughter, Krom, and lets him kill us as a known security risk, only after getting some use out of us. If I hadn't known about EDI it probably would have bloody worked too."

Especially with the size of the goddess-damned flotilla they'd assembled. Athame's ass but I hadn't even imagined Cerberus would have a fleet hat size... if we'd come back alone, we'd have had no chance of making another jump to FTL before they could have taken out our engines, even without EDI compromising us.

Voya's upper lip curled, likely as she worked out just how the AI could have left us drifting and helpless, waiting to be boarded by Cerberus troopers before being blasted to pieces once they retrieved their targets. "That thing would have enabled them to accomplish whatever they wanted."

"Easily." I muttered. "We need defensive VI's on this ship, shit we should have thought about that."

"We were kind of busy setting up your mother to ambush them." She reminded me. "And harassing the old bitch to give us everything she had on that colony, and she didn't know about the damned Justicars either."

"And I'm going to bitch her out over that." My lips twitched slightly as I finished getting my other gauntlet off. "I'm guessing they got to the colony only after we'd left, so she wouldn't have been able to warn us, but the notion that she didn't know that they were en route is..."

"Worrying." Voya hissed the word.

"Yeah." I agreed softly, glancing down at my hands and finding them to be relatively stable. "Thank you."

The petite Quarian gave me something close to a pleased smile before turning her head forwards again, falling silent as we kept moving. We stopped at my quarters just long enough for me to get out of the rest of my armor and to pull basic fatigues on. I'd intended to depart that way, but Voya had all but threatened me at gunpoint to make sure that I took a brief shower and downed more painkillers.

I thusly arrived in medical fifteen minutes later, my still wet hair tied in a loose ponytail, nodding a greeting to the tired Turian doctor sitting near the entrance.

"Commander Kean." He rose to his full height, giving me a small nod. "Doctor Itherius, formerly from Xentha. A pleasure to meet you."

"Same." I tilted my head a hair to the right and forwards to acknowledge him, making a mental note to talk with him again later. With how often we got wounded, it would be prudent to know him better. "Report?"
"The wounded are all expected to make it." An arm waved as he turned, his pace slow as we neared the neat rows of medical beds. Voya elected not to follow, instead settling in next to the door to wait. "Lancer T'Donna has bruising in the back of her skull from impacting the shuttle, I want to keep her overnight for observation but she seems to have evaded any brain damage."

A slow breath of relief flowed out of me, "The warpfire?"

"Her left eye was too damaged to be saved, her visor shattered from the strain. I removed it and cleaned the area, she should be able to regenerate it within a few weeks." His mandibles flickered, "There was significant burn damage, but her armor blunted the worst of it. She will have permanent burn scarring on her shoulder and scalp, unless she elects for cosmetic surgery later, but there wasn't any major tissue damage."

"Is she awake?"

"No sir," He stopped, nodding towards the final bed on the end, Illyan's large frame visible though half her head was wrapped in bandaging. "She's sleeping off the surgery to remove her eye. I will let you know as soon as she awakens."

"All right." It was hard not to go over to her, so instead I focused on the other beds. "Everyone else?"

"Three with minor wounds, four more severe." The Doctor turned, nodding slightly towards one of the beds. "Unit Commander Aya ul Vessen, lost her left forearm, and she'll need cybernetics in her right leg and right arm. She also... lost one of her eyes."

That explained the utterly dead expression on the young Batarian woman's face, her three remaining dark orbs staring at nothing in particular while a plain bandage covered where her lower left one would have been.

It took me a few breaths before I realized that the Doctor was staring at me with an expectant expression, and a quick flick of my eyes to Voya had her rolling her eyes before pointedly nodding at the girl. More casual glances revealed the other wounded, those who were awake, all watching me while trying to make it look like they weren't.

I really wasn't in the mood to be a morale booster, not with the simmering anger still lurking beneath the surface waves in my mind... but I was the commanding officer, even if it was Joa's ship. It was, unfortunately, my job.

Fighting down a sigh, I carefully stepped forwards, moving over to lower myself into the chair next to the bed. She didn't seem to even notice me until I shifted the seat a little, turning her chest a little so that she could see who it was.

Her pale maroon skin lost even more color, her throat working as she immediately dipped her head to the left. "Honored Reyja'krem."

"None of that." I admonished reflexively. "Commander or Reyja'krem if you can't use my last name, but leave off the honored crap."

Her three eyes blinked several times, "But... I mean... I..."

"Do you prefer Aya or Vessen?" I asked, seeing that she wasn't going to have an easy time of that. Lowborn then, most likely. Midcaste tended to have an easier time adjusting to my blasé attitude about my title.
"...Aya, honor..." She swallowed and corrected herself, "I mean, I prefer Aya, Reyja'krem."

The more she spoke, the more familiar her voice seemed. "You were the one to locate Krom, weren't you? And the one who first reported the indoctrinated?"

All of her eyes lowered, her head shifting tiredly to tuck her chin against her neck as she leaned it to the left in shame. "I am sorry, Reyja'krem. We couldn't."

"You got those wounds fighting him off, didn't you?" I interrupted quietly, reaching out to grab her chin and pull it back to a neutral position. "Did you destroy his mechs after we pursued him?"

"I..." Her expression became complicated, her lower eye locked onto my hand as I let go of her chin. "Um..."

"Did you?"

"We... we did, honored Reyja'krem."

I felt my eyebrows go up. The mechs that Krom had been with weren't anything on Glitch's level, but they'd still been gladiator machines run by vicious programs all the same. "How many of you were there?"

She swallowed, "My half-unit, we-"

One of my hands rose, my own posture shifting to show surprise. "You took out all three of his mechs with just the five of you?"

"I... yes?"

"Huh." I cocked my head to the left, dipping it forward in respect that turned her skin from pale to practically bleeding as she flushed. "Most impressive. We need to come with some kind of awards or medals... consider yourself at least getting a month's leave for your unit."

"But..." Her mouth moved a few times, "Reyja'krem, we didn't... didn't stop him-"

"I didn't stop Krom either." My eyes closed as I forced down a surge of anger at the memory, "I can't hold you accountable, catching him wasn't your objective. In either case, my Lancers and I didn't stop him, and that was our actual mission."

Aya didn't seem to know how to respond to that, simply swallowing and clearly still more than a little confused at my praise.

"When we arrive on Illium, I want your unit to remain." Shaking myself, I slowly rose to my feet. "Ayle and Nynsi keep hinting that they want me to create new Lancer detachments, or at least have a larger organization. If you and yours are good enough take out Krom's guards, you're more than good enough for more specialized assignments. Get patched up then take some leave, we'll discuss your new post in a month once I figure out what it is."

Her mouth worked open, then closed, then open, then closed, "But... I'm...my eye..."

"Think on the Pillars of Knowledge and Strength before you worry too much over it." I replied, giving her polite and respectful bow of my head. "Recover well, I'll talk to you in a month, Unit Commander."

By that point the poor girl was so out of it that she could only tilt her head by reflex as I turned away,
walking calmly back towards Voya and the Doctor only after looking back to see if Illyan was still asleep. When she proved to be, I sighed and waved for Voya to follow as we got moving.

"We don't need another Rane." Were the first words out of Voya's mouth, coming out before the door had even finished closing behind us.

I rolled my eyes, "I know what I'm doing, and I'm better at shooting people down."

"Good." She narrowed her own wide, glowing orbs at me. "Because we don't need another Rane."

"Yes, yes. I just thought that Ayle wants me to do more, and Vessen needed the morale boost. Win-win. Did they really take those mechs out?"

"And only lost one person during that fight." She confirmed. "Shyeel wanted to talk with you about her, but that shouldn't be necessary now. What are we going to do with them?"

"Probably keep them as a supporting unit for us." I mused, "That'll give us more than just Glitch to take a flank or stop Krom from bolting the next time we find him."

Voya let out a quiet sound, "And after we're done with Krom?"

I grimaced. "Depends on what the fuck we're even doing. I'm trying not to think that far ahead right now... where is Shyeel, anyway?"

"Wardroom, going over Krom's omni-tool." She lifted her chin, "Which is where we're going now."

One of my eyebrows went up, "We are?"

My companion gave me a small shrug, "You can go sit in your cabin and brood for twenty minutes if you'd prefer."

"I wouldn't be brooding. I'd be smashing a punching bag to pieces." I corrected her, "Or building a bomb or something."

"For you, both of those count as brooding." She stated, "I didn't listen to you tell me shit I already knew just to see you stew some more, so stop being a bosh'tet, shut up, and move your pale ass."

I did, though I rolled my eyes a little. The latter earned me a sharp pain to my unwounded side when she punched me, turning her prim little nose up even further as we walked. Five minutes of that resulted in us arriving at the senior officer's wardroom, finding Shyeel and Vishin already present.

Waving for the Batarian male to stay seated as I dipped my head in response to his own tilt, I collapsed into a chair and let my eyes fall closed.

"Wake up." Joa admonished a few minutes later, a hand smacking the back of my head as she walked past.

I glowered out her bleary outline as I opened a single eye, having been just about to drift off and not at all pleased to be knocked out of that pleasant state. "Excuse me?"

She rolled her eyes, "Wake up person whose hot-ass girlfriend I want to sleep with, and whose own attractiveness is rising nearer to a level where I'd consider having sex with him as well."

The fingers on my left hand twitched as I opened my other eye so that I could glare at her. "I want you at the sparring room tomorrow morning, I don't think we've evaluated your hand to hand yet."
"I'll look forward to it." The ship's captain replied with a grin that faltered when I gave her one of my own, already wondering just how much pain Voya could put her into. From the way the Quarian preened a little where she was sitting next to Shyeel, she didn't have any issues working out my less than subtle plot.

"I still need some time on this." Shyeel drew our attention before Joa could ask why I was smirking, her scarred visage still locked on the omni-tool she was fiddling with on the table. "Recap first?"

"Fine." Correcting my posture to something less uncomfortable, and less potentially insulting to Vishin, I nodded to him. "Captain, go ahead and start."

He obligingly began recapping everything that had happened after we'd departed the hanger. They'd had to repulse two attempted attacks from the local guards, both of which Glitch had fought off on its own, before helping the other team scavenge what they could and escort the former prisoners to our shuttles. Vishin had honestly, if abashedly, admitted that the worst they'd really had to deal with was keeping Glitch from killing the Cerberus agents.

His subordinates hadn't been so lucky. Vessen's unit had gotten off the worst, with her wounds and three dead total; thanks to having the shit luck to run into the indoctrinated before anyone else, and then right into Krom's gladiator-mechs. Still, that they'd come out as intact as they had spoke further to the young woman's skills, and Vishin didn't have any problems with me deciding to second the unit for side-operations in the future.

Once I'd admitted that I currently had no idea what said side-operations would be, I just wanted the option open, he'd given me a small grin. Vishin, at least, had started to relax in my presence, unlike most of the other Batarians on board, and my casual attitudes seemed to amuse him.

From there, we'd moved onto Voya, who'd elaborated on the state of the prisoners that we had rescued.

"Thirty-two Batarians, twenty-four humans." She stated succinctly, "All taken from independent colonies in the Traverse over the last twelve months. All due to be... processed."

Joa grunted, "They stable?"

"Pleased to be alive." Voya shrugged. "If nervous and unsure about who we are and what we're going to do with them."

Everyone glanced at me, and I shrugged in turn. "We'll let them loose on Omega, or Illium. Whichever they prefer to get off on."

The ship's Captain nodded, "Works for me. Mind if I ask for volunteers? We're still short on crew."

I waved a hand in permission. "Anything interesting about the naval engagement?"

"No." The purple skinned Asari shrugged, "Neither frigate was expecting combat, we took them down quickly. As for the Cerberus fleet, the data the Blood Tide sent indicated that they showed up already inside knife range. Credit to your mother for good positioning... and a lot of worries about how Cerberus pulled off that tight of an arrival spread. One cruiser went down to repeated broadsides in the opening seconds, and most of the rest didn't last much longer. A few ships managed to recover and rabbit to FTL, maybe a third of them total."

Voya leaned forwards onto the table, looking decidedly unhappy that there'd been even more ships, and that they'd gotten away. "Chances they'll make it?"
"Likely." Joa mused aloud, "They're probably pulling back to an empty system, goddess knows there's enough of them around us. They'll discharge on whatever rocks they find, then wait a few days to make sure we're gone before they slink back to the relay."

The Quarian licked her lips, glancing at me. "Think they'll come for revenge?"

I mulled over that for a few breaths. "Yes... but it'll be subtle, long-term. Harper won't know how many of his agents I'm aware of, and that'll make him wary of sending his elite assassins. Probably why their main plan relied on EDI... they must not have thought I knew about her. He'll want a freelancer, or to bring someone new in and assign them to it."

"Which will take time." Vishin nodded slowly, "Still, it couldn't hurt to alert the other Commanders sir."

"Handle it... and put a report together on the agents you worked with." I added, "Second it to Ayle and Nynsi, and recommend they give it to their Senior Captains."

"Yes sir." He replied, already making a notation in his omni-tool. "Are you going to go over your own encounter, sir? We were only there for the end."

I grimaced at the reminder of the stunt I'd pulled to save my own ass, and felt another ripple of anger as Krom's mocking laughter ran through my head. Still, it wasn't something I could avoid talking about, so I launched into my own recap starting with when we'd split up on the second floor of the mansion.

Shyeel looked up when I finished, her expression enigmatic. "You blasted two teenaged maidens into a raging river?"

"Yes." I admitted, drumming the fingers of one hand on the table, making a mental note to talk with Illyan for more than a little while on the subject. "It was the only thing I could think of to stay alive for a few more seconds."

She eyed me for a few breaths, then nodded once, accepting the statement and not passing judgment. "Think Krom survived?"

My fingers continued their drumming, "I'm assuming they both did, but we'll confirm with the old fish. Personally I'm betting that the crew of that yacht came out once the shooting stopped, and convinced the cops to let them bring T'Ravt aboard for treatment. Krom would have gone with if the locals didn't recognize him... he or the crew probably had an excuse or alias for him even if someone did."

Blue lips pursed. "And then?"

"Either they're already his people, or he'd kill them and take the ship back to the Terminus. He mentioned wanting to bring the bitch to Ganar for some reason."

"He wants to interrogate her." Shyeel murmured, flicking through what looked like messages. "This omni-tool... shit, it's a cheap model, probably meant to be disposable, but it's got some useful data on it."

Voya half-closed her wide eyes in annoyance, "Paranoid keshin, probably keeps switching models to make sure no one can steal it and learn too much. We should do that."

I grimaced at the hassle, but couldn't deny that it made sense. "We'll see. Shyeel, what do we have?"
"Messages from an unknown sender, probably the Matriarch, offering Krom a deal. Her daughter puts his brain back together, he repays her with..." She frowned, eyes flicking back and forth as she read. "The location of eighteen and nineteen."

My hands rose to let my finger tips touch each other as I processed that, my anger finally simmering into the deeps as curiosity about this puzzle replaced it. "Now that is interesting... what about Ganar?"

"Like I said, he wanted to interrogate either the Matriarch or someone close to her. Whoever Krom could get a hold of... ah, here it is. She's been feeding him information on targets, but that information dried up a while back and he's not happy about it." Her head cocked to one side. "Time matches when the old bitch did her thing."

Meaning that the Matriarch had been paying or subverting the old Shadow Broker into supporting Ganar with intel, but she hadn't been able to secure the Terminus portions of the network after Aethyta had killed the Yahg. With the war turning against him, Ganar would want every advantage he could get his hands on, and losing his intelligence sources probably had him furious.

Well, more furious than usual.

"Anything else in there?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Notes to the employees that you killed, mostly about their pay and plans about when and how to betray T'Ravt's daughter."

Which would probably be interesting reading if not terribly relevant anymore. Of far greater import was the notion that Krom knew where two more of us were... and the Matriach did not. That was interesting... very, very interesting.

Joa flicked her eyes as I fell silent again, her eyes narrowed. "You want to explain some of this crap to those of us not filled in on your background?"

"No." I admitted, "But we'll have to go over it. Free up your tomorrow afternoon, and make sure to bring a bottle of something strong. You'll need it."

She blinked, "I will?"

"It's the kind of data that we'll kill you for, if you reveal it." Voya admitted, her smile not at all friendly. "Your mother would do worse."

More blinking came from the pirate, before being followed by a glance at me. "Kean?"

"There's terms to knowing it." I sighed. "And yes, if you run around screaming about it... this isn't just Terminus politics. We'll talk about it tomorrow, for now, let's wrap this crap up."

The rest of the discussion passed quickly, largely focusing on our plans for the trip back to Omega. Voya and Shyeel would be going over all of the other omni-tools we'd taken from the dead, trying to find out anything else even if we weren't confident. If nothing else, we might find something we could give or trade to Aethyta. Joa would obviously be running her ship, while Vishin would make sure his people were recovered while he worked on his reports.

I, being the upstanding Commander that I was, would likely be doing as little as possible so that I could take care of Illyan... and probably tinker with my equipment when she didn't need me.

Everyone began filing out once we were done, excepting Joa, who pointedly eyed me in a silent
request that I remain. Sighing, I stayed seated as well, waiting until Vishin closed the door behind him before speaking again.

"What do you want?"

Joa quirked her mouth a little, an expression of displeasure. "This is... starting to sound a bit beyond what I thought I was getting into."

I stared at her, then couldn't hold back a snort. "That is a severe understatement. You want to quit?"

"Shaaryak would skin me alive, after how much she put into this ship." It was her turn to drum her fingers on the table, "And you have some powerful allies who could make life difficult for me if I did."

"I wouldn't send anyone after you." I stated simply. "I'm not into forced servitude."

"I know that, and that you wouldn't, but your allies do not share your odd sense of honor." She countered, "And... shit. My sister and mother told me that a storm was coming, something worse than anything I'd seen before."

"Likely true." I admitted quietly. "Based on what I know."

Silent staring followed that, the quiet lasting for several breaths before she spoke, "In your honest opinion, on your word, am I better staying with you, or heading for the dark rim?"

I didn't do her a disservice by replying right away, making it clear that I was actually taking the time to think about her question before exhaling. "Staying. There isn't a place in the galaxy that will be safe, better to have the knowledge and allies that staying will give you."

A single finger tapped up and down repeatedly before she nodded slowly, "And you'll give me the full details tomorrow?"

"Provided you agree to the terms we set before hand." I nodded, "If I wasn't exhausted, I'd do it tonight."

Her demeanor shifted, the serious expression fading into her usual sultry amusement. "We could definitely do it tonight, and I could learn things in a more pleasant fashion."

I stared at her for a few moments, "Even without Illyan present?"

"She's obviously more attractive than you," She rolled a shoulder in a shrug, then reached up to cup her own chest. "She's got these, after all. But I've always been a scar girl, and you have plenty of those... I always like to hear the explanations as I trace them with my-"

"Enough, enough." I sighed as I rose from my seat, "Athame's fucking ass... it's like having Trena around again... shit, you two are never allowed to talk. I'll see you in the training rooms in the morning."

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**Internal Log Files; SR-1 Normandy**

Shepard: Are you sure?

Bau: As sure as I can be, given how many false leads we've had, but given how many Rachni have been seen on the world, it is only logical that the Queen is there.
Shepard: And Sovereign is already on its way... along with Saren and a giant Geth fleet. Exec, can we wait for Victus and still beat them there?

Pressly: Negative ma'am, we're closer but that... Reaper can cover a lot of distance. We'll be lucky to get there at the same time as it.

Shepard: Dammit... all right, get us moving. That Queen is the only being who knows how to get to the Mu Relay, we are not letting Saren or Sovereign get to her. I want the ground team suited up and ready for a combat drop, our objective will be to find her and extract her. Bau, are you coming with?

Bau: Of people will be prepared, and I can leave a corvette behind to direct the Hierarchy's forces. Better they show up later than never... that is a human saying, yes?

Shepard: Close enough. You want to tell the Council, or should I?

Bau: Do you intend to actually speak to them, or merely cut the line when they start bickering amongst themselves again?

Shepard: I take this shit seriously, all I ask is the decency that they do the same.

Bau: Make the call while I transfer back to my own ship, I'll see you on planet.

Next up is Interlude IX: Calm Before the Storm

Chapter End Notes

And here we are, at the end of the the fourth saga. The next interlude will take place as the ship returns to Omega, and will set up the last saga while also covering Cie's continuing issues with what went down on Benihi.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Interlude IX: Calm before the Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Interlude IX: Calm before the Storm

Date: 11-16-2184

Location: Approaching Omega, Sahrabarik System, Terminus

The five days of the trip back to Omega passed largely in a tired blur. Joa and Illyan were largely responsible for that... the former hadn't taken all of the information well, and had ended up downing the entire bottle of brandy she'd brought with as she tried to process it. She'd ended up drunk enough that Illyan and I had to let her sleep on our cabin's couch so that the crew didn't see her staggering around.

I'd woken up when she'd worked her way into our bed, but had been too tired to do anything about it. She hadn't done anything worse than end up with her face alternatively buried in my hair or Illyan's chest, though she had kicked both of us in her frantic scramble to get up in the morning, bolting to the bathroom where she'd emptied her stomach repeatedly.

After that, she hadn't quite avoided me, but she'd clearly wanted her space and time to process everything that had been dumped on top of her. I'd respected that, since it let me spend more time with Illyan. My lover had come out all right, despite losing her left eye, and had been grimly amused that all of her new warpfire scars were on her left side... just like mine.

Of course, she'd also made sure to have Voya beat the crap out of me in the sparring ring every single day, punishing me for the tunnel vision I'd let myself fall into on Benihi. Discussions on me losing my temper with Petrovsky had come after that, though they'd been less severe. It wasn't as if we hadn't expected them to betray us, that had been the point of having my mother's shiny new battlegroup waiting after all. It was more the fact that I'd definitely put an even larger target on my back for the Illusive Man to shoot at, and revealing that I'd known about EDI had likely been a mistake in hindsight.

Illyan had also been the only one of my friends to be visibly unnerved at what I'd done to evade the Justicar, even if she had admitted that she couldn't think of anything else I could have done. Melding with me, and touching my own feelings on the subject, had forestalled any anger, and lead to tired, emotional sex... along with a demand that I anonymously donate more than a few credits to the school whose students I'd nearly drowned, once we figured out what it was. I might have come close to breaking entirely, but Illyan at least remained a decent person, and she seemed more determined than ever to help make sure that she could still consider me one as well.

Personally I remained unsure about that... especially given my recent actions, but I wasn't going to stop her from trying. If nothing else she seemed to be able to draw out a few flecks of my old sarcasm and cutting remarks, which seemed to arouse her even if no one else was particularly happy about it.

Arriving above Illium had slowed those particular discussions, thanks to our renewed extranet access.
adding a whole new set of issues that we'd had to deal with.

Most personally to me... I was now officially a father, thanks to a small message from Emily Wong showing her in a hospital room with a tiny figure in her arms. The image was... conflicting to look at, to say the least. My emotional turbulence had shifted to something close to horror when I'd realized that she... that they were still on the Citadel, and obviously wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. Six hours of debate had eventually resulted in me transmitting what information we'd learned to Aethyta in exchange for a Broker team being moved into position to keep them as safe as possible against what was about to happen.

The need for that particular action came from the news reports that a massive battle had occurred above the old Rachni home-world between the Turians and the Geth. In the wake of the engagement, Sovereign was reportedly being seen making a straight-line for the Coreward Terminus, with Alliance vessels in hot pursuit even as the main Citadel Fleet had begun to consolidate around the Citadel proper.

"Sounds like they finally found the Mu relay." Shyeel spoke in between bites of breakfast, the four of us plus Joa in the latter's wardroom for an impromptu council of war as we approached the relay that would take us to Omega. "Nothing in the news about them locking down Shepard though."

"Maybe they're not as idiotic as they're implied to be." I mused, swirling the water in my glass around a bit. "The Council, that is."

Joa snorted. "They're politicians, so I wouldn't bet on it. More likely this Shepard is smarter than the one in your head, and just never wasted her time by going to the station."

I rolled a shoulder, "Definitely possible. Either way, that's her problem, not ours. For now, let's focus on getting everything touched up. You've got your supply list?"

"Civ has it," She nodded, referring to her Turian first officer, "He'll get it to the Eclipse when we dock. Where are you lot going?"

"Afterlife." I replied with a grimace, "Scales will be there along with a few new weapons she's been working on, along with Ayle."

Voya frowned, setting down her fork, "What is she doing here? I thought she was on Anderfels?"

"Her regiments still are, but the campaigns are winding down." I shrugged once again, "At least, according to her message. Aria wants to negotiate with her about acquiring a few of our forces for some kind of raid."

The Quarian had opened her mouth to reply when there was a low buzz from the room's intercom, followed by the XO's gruff voice. "Captain, Commander. We just cleared the relay... I think you should both come to the bridge. There's a situation."

Joa was on her feet before the end of the word 'bridge', and I was only a few heartbeats behind her. Thankfully whoever had designed this ship hadn't been stupid, and it took us less than a minute to jog the short distance to the bridge, emerging into an audibly confused room.

"Ma'am." Civ quickly rose from the Captain's chair, his blue-painted mandibles twitching with suppressed emotion. "There is a lot of fleet movement currently occurring, along with automated broadcasts from Omega."

"Details." Joa snapped in reply, quickly taking her seat as I took my usual position on her right side. "Who's moving, and what does the broadcast say?"
"The Black Fleet... almost the entire Black Fleet is in motion, heading for Relay Omega Five." He nodded towards the main screen, which was currently displaying a chaotic mess of movement around Omega as Aria's war fleet moved. "Further, the Golden Armada is clearing Relay Omega Seven even as we speak."

I snapped my eyes towards that particular part of the map, frowning as the icon for Leska Sederis's flagship vanished as it left the system, the rest of the Eclipse's local fleet following it. "And the message?"

He glanced at me, "That only authorized shipping may approach Omega, the station's defenses are active and will destroy anyone who isn't on the access list."

"What the fuck..." Shyeel muttered behind me, "Is Aria leaving?"

"Looks that way." Joa replied quietly. "Omega Five leads to the coreward Terminus, Seven is the first leg towards Theodosius and the Dark Rim... and it dumps you right in the middle of what territory Ganar's got left."

I half closed my eyes as currents of thought raced around in my brain, then let out a quiet curse. "Shit... Athame's fucking ass Aethyta..."

Said woman's daughter glanced up at me, frowning, and then seemed to remember what we'd just been talking about as she started swearing as well. "By the motherfucking..."

Illyan stepped up behind me, resting her chin on my head in what was rapidly becoming her go-to position of affection. "Cie?"

"Aethyta must have had someone on the Citadel." I murmured back, "Someone who grabbed the Mu relay's location when Shepard sent it to them. Since the Citadel Fleet obviously isn't going anywhere... the old bitch decided to send her daughter reinforcements from somewhere else."

Her chest sucked in with a breath, "Goddess... what does Aria get...oh. Ilos."

"Ilos." I exhaled. "And all of its Prothean technology, something that could keep her ass on its couch for centuries even with T'Ravt and Sederis's... well, T'Ravt's expansion. The Sederis's are apparently still allied with her if Leska is moving in concert."

Joa grunted. "You think they found Ganar?"

"Maybe..." I half closed my eyes in thought, only for Shyeel to speak up from behind us again.

"Or Leska is using herself as bait." She blew out a long breath of her own, "If there's one thing that old asshole likes it's fighting Asari powerhouses, reminds him of when he was young."

And Leska was most definitely a powerhouse... shit, from what I'd heard she had nearly as much power as her mother, and far superior control. But that didn't change the fact that Ganar was supposedly a walking supernova of dark energy who was far older than her, with far more relevant combat experience.

"Send a line back to Illium." I rose my voice slightly, "Route it to the Eclipse headquarters under my name, I want to know if Ithiri is present or if she's with her sister."

"Yes Commander." The Asari at the communications system responded at once, quickly composing said message. "One moment... we have permission to approach the station, instructions to dock at the Eclipse section of Doru."
"Civ." Joa stated simply. The Turian promptly stepped forwards from her other side, raising his voice as he called out orders to begin a casual approach to the station. While he did that, his Captain shifted her attention back to me. "I'll get the ship ready to move again as quickly as I can, and discharge what little we've built up. If Leska draws Ganar out..."

"Good chance that's where Krom will be." I finished for her, nodding. "Right, we'll get our shit done in Afterlife as quickly as possible and then get back to you. See if you can harass what's-his-name... Jaroth, he might know where exactly the Armada is going. How long do you think it will take?"

"Considering we might be showing up in the middle of a battle?" She grimaced. "Give me two shifts to repair the laser scoring on the starboard side and replenish our missile bays."

Sixteen hours... I nodded again, stepping away from Illyan and waving for her and the others to head to the door. "That's fine, we'll take a room in Afterlife and see if we can't raid Aria's armory again. Let us know if you get it done faster, but don't skimp on shit."

"Will do." She replied, already drawing up her omni-tool and flicking her eyes over reports even as she lowered her voice further, "You trust us not to leave you?"

"I trust that you don't want to give up staring at my girlfriend's ass." I murmured back. "And you want revenge on the Blood Pack. After Ganar is dead I'll worry more."

Her lips twitched in something like genuine amusement, "I never said I wanted more revenge than I already achieved when you killed his spawn."

"Nope." I drawled, "But you're not denying that you do."

"True." Joa flicked her eyes back to her data, settling into her chair a bit more, "Get out of here, and take care of Illyan's ass would you? I'd rather not see it blown off before I convinced you to let me take her clothes off."

Rolling my eyes, I batted at her crest as I turned away, "Keep in contact."

She replied something affirmative sounding, already lost in her spreadsheets as we drew closer to the massive station. Leaving her to it, I followed my companions out of the command center and into the hallway, all four of us heading towards the nearest lift.

"You know Cie," Illyan mused once we'd reached it, descending towards deck two and its airlocks. "Joa really does like your scars..."

"No," I replied simply.

There was a quiet snort, "Oh come on, you can't say that you haven't-"

"No, Illyan." Reaching up, I lightly whacked her on the face with a palm. "Voya, if she brings up the idea of a threesome with Joa again, hit her somewhere painful."

"Gladly." Said Quarian purred.

My lover let out a heavily disappointed sigh, but dropped the subject... for now at least. It was entirely probable that she'd bring it up again the moment that we were alone, both to try and make me seriously consider it as well as teasing me with ideas of what two Asari could do to me instead of just one.

Personally I thought, was hoping, that talking about it was just her way of excising the awkwardness
I knew she felt at being in a relationship with just one person over several months. This was already the longest such thing in her century and a half of life, and as much as she liked me, we didn’t have to meld for me to know that she was having a hard time with the whole exclusivity thing.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be with me, so much as it was that the habits of five or six decades of sleeping with someone else every other night was a bitch and a half for her to break.

The conversation turned towards shop talk after that, mostly us wondering how badly Krom had been hurt by what had happened, and how we could best counter him the next time we ran into him. I’d thought that by engaging him at close range we’d be able to avoid his skills as a sniper, but I really hadn’t expected the sword and omni-shield combination.

The four of us ended up waiting outside of the airlock for twenty minutes until the lights flashed to indicate that we had docked with the station. Exiting the ship let us inside of the Eclipse’s main docking center, the cavernous hangar feeling incredibly disconcerting thanks to how few people were moving around the usually bustling center.

Trusting that Joa would handle any discussions with the locals, we cleared out and headed for Afterlife. Our collective mood shifted into something darker and more paranoid as we did, all of us noticing the furtive movements of the general population and their readily apparent nervousness.

"They aren’t taking Aria being gone well." Shyeel murmured as we reached the central district, "You’d think we were about to be attacked by something."

My upper lip twitched, "Don’t say shit like that..."

Voya snorted. "You want to check and see how many ships she left behind now?"

"Both of you stop it." Illyan groaned, "I wanted to be able to relax and get a few drinks, stop winding him up."

The Quarian woman snickered, "Too late."

"No, it's not." Illyan countered, stepping closer to me. "Cie, just a few drinks and some food. It's Aria, she wouldn’t have left her station if she thought it could seriously be attacked."

I mulled over that, glancing up at her helmet and knowing by instinct that she was giving me the most pathetic expression that she could muster up beneath the armor. "...fine, we’ll talk with Trena and Ayle first, assuming they’re still waiting for us and didn’t decide to go with."

"Trena wouldn’t have." Illyan shook her head at once. "But I suppose Ayle might have tagged along with Aria."

"Trena wouldn’t have gone with Aria, no," I shrugged, bringing up my omni-tool to check for messages but not finding any. "But if Ithiri was with Leska she might have gone with them."

"Without telling us?"

Voya let out a snort as we drew nearer to the club, a hand falling to her pistol despite her jovial tones. "That bitch would forget to breathe if her bondmate didn’t remind her to do so."

"Please don’t pick a fight with her." I grimaced, finding the grip of my hand cannon as well. Afterlife without an eternal line outside was even more disconcerting than the mostly empty Eclipse hangar had been, even though the usual Elcor bouncer was present and in his partially powered armor.
He took a single lumbering step forwards as we drew closer, his back-mounted machine guns tracking us before lowering as he recognized us. "Sincere disappointment: I see no assassin in chains, mercenary."

"Came close, set him on fire but the ass snuck away." I summarized. "We need in to talk with our people before we head after Leska and Ganar."

"Brusque acceptance: Enter, mercenary. The Queen has ordered that you may come and go as you please."

Bowing my head slightly, I lead the others inside to be further weirded out by a club that was all but empty and devoid of music. Only a few tables around the first bar were occupied, almost entirely by people bearing Aria's markings. Off duty guards mostly, but I saw a few Asari and women who I thought would have been dancers on a normal day.

If nothing else it made it easy to find our friends, Dietrich waving a massive arm at us from a circular booth off to one side. We headed over to join them, Ayle standing to allow Illyan to settle in next to Dietrich, while Shyeel and Voya sat across from him, with the Quarian pointedly taking the spot on the end to stay as far from where Trena was sandwiched between everyone else as she could.

I elected to remain upright as well, standing beside my fellow Commander and Reyja'krem, frowning as I noticed Trena's furious scowl as she watched Illyan pull her helmet off, revealing the plain purple eye-patch and still raw burn scars. "What the fuck ape?"

"Justicars." I sighed, reaching up to pull my own headgear off, settling it onto the table next to Voya. "Didn't you read the report we sent?"

"Yes." She growled, still glaring at me, "Still, what the fuck. You have the stupidly, goddess-damned luck to get Illyan in your bed, and you let that kind of shit happen to her!?"

I eyed her, then sighed and shook my head and turned to the woman beside me. "Ayle."

"Cie." She replied, amusement in her dark eyes as she sipped from a dark drink. "You don't care to sit?"

"Rather talk with you alone first," I admitted, "If you don't mind."

"I do not." Her lower eyes flicked over to Dietrich, "Feel free to get everyone drinks, and to catch them up on the campaigns."

He nodded, everyone getting settled in while Ayle and I paced a few meters away before taking a high-top table fairly far off from anybody else. A human waitress, for once in actual clothes instead of stripper-wear or just her skin, took our orders and quickly returned with drinks.

We held them in salute to each other before taking sips, and I started speaking after I'd taken a good bit of rum. "Your successful campaigns, or my fucked up mission?"

"They were hardly anything of note, we largely acted as supporting forces to campaigns that were already in their closing stages. As for your own, I have already read your report, along with the separate one that Illyan sent." She smiled when a muscle in my cheek twitched. "Are you all right?"

I exhaled, taking another small sip of rum. "As all right as I ever am."

All four of her eyes narrowed, her head tilting to the right as she made it clear that that answer was unacceptable.
"Fine." I allowed, "I might have had some anger issues over what happened."

"Something tells me that your use of the past tense is inaccurate." She replied blithely. "Try again before I decide to hit you."

I started to scowl, forced my self to exhale, then shook my head, "I'm talking with Illyan, she's made it clear what her response will be if I lose my head again."

"No sex?" She guessed.

"She wouldn't torture herself like that." I snorted, "More seeing how many sparring rounds I could last before losing consciousness, every single day for at least a week."

Ayle let out a breathy little snort of her own, "Ah, that sounds more like her. It is a shame Thul isn't here, she could have added lectures to her threat."

I smiled a little at the idea. "He would have enjoyed that."

"He would have lectured you anyway." She agreed, her smile fading slightly as she returned to business. "I'm assuming that you will be preparing to head off immediately, assuming that Krom is near Ganar and that Leska is successful in drawing him out."

"Yes." I nodded once.

Maroon lips pressed together for a moment, then she nodded as well. "You will be on alert this time, prepared to not lose emotional control. I have no objection."

My eyes rolled, and I bowed my head subserviently, "Why thank you, Commander."

She lifted a hand as if to hit me, then sighed and lowered it, her posture shifting to inform me that I just wasn't worth the bother of her anger. "I assume you have already worked out what Sederis and Aria are doing?"

"More or less." I quickly summarized my thoughts on the matter, and they drew a nod from her.

"Essentially accurate, though Leska is not acting at random. She pursues intelligence on Ganar's last known location, where the remainder of his fleet was last seen." Ayle supplied, "And because I'm assuming that you will ask, Ithiri is with her, along with three of their half-sisters."

I lifted an eyebrow. I'd known that Trena wasn't exactly alone in having Jona Sederis as her father, but I'd never so much as seen any others. Which, considering how many enemies said father had, was probably intelligent for all parties concerned. "Oh? Where'd they come from?"

"Ithiri officially closed both of the Thessian branches last week, evacuating their members before the Matriach could hit them or try and force any laws through that would leave them trapped." She let out a whistling breath between her teeth, "Evidently they were acting as cabal leaders under assumed names. Leska was confident that the five of them could take Ganar, and were given a portion of their mother's elite commandos to ensure they could make it through his own escorts."

"Assuming they don't just blow his flagship apart."

There was a nod, "Assuming that."

I grunted, "Where's Jona?"

Her lips twitched back to show me her sharp canines, "She is assumed to be with Aria, but I cannot
confirm that. She has not been on Illium since you went after Aethyta's daughter.

Another bloody mystery... lovely. Taking another long sip from my drink, I shifted the fingers on my left hand to drum them on the table. "We'll... worry about that later. I want to stay focused on Krom right now."

"Sensible, for you at least." She continued to grimace. "I am stuck waiting to negotiate with someone who is no longer here, and I have no idea when she will return."

I winced, "Anyone else here besides Dietrich?"

"Half a dozen of his people, plus their suits." The Batarian woman shrugged, "He insisted on bodyguards for myself and T'Laria."

Which was again, rather sensible, considering that I wasn't quite sure how stable Aethyta was and whether or not she'd go after Trena again. Plus there was always the threat of the Matriarch, which seemed all the more real than it had been just a few months before.

Ayle and I spent several more minutes talking, the topic shifting and meandering as we drank, with her bringing the conversation back towards what had happened on Benihi, not so subtly attempting to make sure that I was all right. Well, by Batarian standards is was extremely subtle, but I had to stop myself from laughing or rolling my eyes when she tried.

She eventually just gave up dragged me over to everyone else, and then went ahead with blunt questions about exactly what I'd done and why I'd done it. Trena, typically, had had her own comments about me blasting two girls into a river, and just as typically, been horribly confused as to why I hadn't beaten Petrovsky far more than I had.

Her comments had entirely derailed the conversation as Dietrich started laughing, and he wasted no time in bringing up several stories about Trena and some of the shit that she'd done on Xentha. That had lightened the mood considerably, and we spent nearly an hour laughing, talking, and finally relaxing as friends. Things returned to business only once, when I questioned Ayle about what defenses Aria had left behind, and learning that there were several cruiser flotillas present to supplement the station's massive gun batteries.

Eventually we'd broken up, heading to the in-club suite that Aria had given to Ayle before she'd departed, the place having more than enough rooms to fit us as well... along with the crates holding our new toys. Trena promptly lead me over to the latter while everyone else broke apart to head to their rooms.

"Illyan's." Scales thumped one metal case with her foot, "Spare parts in the one next to it. I went with just one launcher instead of two ape, but there's still two magazines with a switch to adjust the type. Tests went well, trying to work out a less fucked up way to put one together so the bitch on Illium can build them."

I lifted an eyebrow, "They light enough to use for people who aren't Illyan?"

"No." She scowled. "Well, yes, but they're still heavy as shit. Figure they can be used by the power armor units, or as heavy weapons."

Snorting, I crouched down next to the other crate, flicking it open to find my old project inside. "It work?"

"Of course it fucking does. Rate of fire is slow, but at full charge it does some serious fucking damage." My old friend moved over to look down at the boxy weapon she'd finished for me,
"Basically a light Kishok, that's what your goal was right?"

"More or less." Reaching down, I hefted the gun up and checked the weight. "Bayonet attachment?"

"In the other box, flash-forge model so you're not relying on a spike of metal." She grunted, clearly remembering some of the make-shift crap we'd had to use on Redcliffe. "Detachable scope too, assuming your aim isn't shit anymore. Plus schematics and parts for when you want to tinker."

"Thanks scales." I murmured, meaning the words as I put the rifle back down. "It'll be good to have with the next time we fight Krogan."

"Welcome ape." Trena replied, reaching out to rest a hand on my shoulder. "Look... shit. You doing all right?"

I sighed, "Everyone's been asking me that since we missed Krom."

"You are kind of fucking obsessed." She pointed out with a snort. "And there's that crap you did after."

"I wanted to live, first. He fucking pissed me off, second. And yeah, I know I should have held my temper, and I'll be more cognizant in the future."

Trena grunted as I stepped back, "I'm not judging, ape. It wasn't like you intended to kill those girls, you knew there were Justicars there and that they'd save them."

The unlike me went entirely unsaid. I still didn't know how Trena had passed her Eclipse initiation... she'd never volunteered the information, and I'd never asked, but I knew that it still haunted her even centuries later.

"And that asshole deserved worse anyway." She snorted, "Fuck, if the crap in your head is right, you did the galaxy a favor by weakening their damned fleet a few years in advance."

"Assuming that all stays on track." I sighed, reaching up to touch her hand for a moment before pushing myself to my feet. "Anyways, we can talk about that crap later, for now I just want to get some rest before we start planning out our next move."

"You're not going to get any rest." Trena rolled her eyes as she turned away, "You're going to be fucking Illyan senseless and you bloody well know it."

Rather than waste time trying to deny that, I gave her back a sheepish grin as we separated to head to our respective rooms. Illyan was already in the luxurious bed within ours, her clothes and armor pointedly left in a pile beside the bed as her single eye tracked my approach.

I cut her off when her mouth opened, my voice exasperated, "If you ask me how I'm doing, I'm going to hit you... and Ayle already revealed that you told her about crap."

She gave me a sheepish grin as I approached, throwing the blankets back and sitting up, utterly unconcerned with her own nudity. "Sorry Cie, but... I just wanted to remind you that there's people besides me that you can talk to."

My response got lost in my brain as she stood up, padding over before reaching out to start tugging at my armor. "Illyan... you're doing this on purpose."

"I'm doing what on purpose?" She asked, carefully pulling my chest plate free from the black
"Distracting me..." I closed my eyes to stop staring, "So that I don't yell at you again."

"Hmm." The tall Asari hummed as she stepped closer, her breath warm as she leaned down to ask the question into my ear. "If I am, is it working?"

My response was to reach up and place both of my hands on the sides of her neck, turning my head just in time to find her lips pressing against my own. It didn't take much longer to get all of my armor, and clothing, off and for the pair of us to make our way to the bed.

An hour or so later found us in an unusual position, with me on my back and Illyan's head resting in the crook of my throat. Given our respective heights, the fact that the bed was as large as it was was the only thing that allowed her to rest on me instead of the other way around, most of her long body laying off to one side as we held each other.

I exhaled and closed my eyes, trying to chase away the few flickers of emotion and sensation that didn't belong to me. "That was... almost a full meld."

My lover made a humming sound, "Yeah... sorry, I kind of got caught off guard when I finished that last time."

"It's fine." I assured her, reaching down to trail my fingers along her arm. She obligingly flexed it, letting me feel the cords of muscles beneath her textured skin. "Just... didn't expect it."

Her one eye glanced up at me, the dark blue iris barely visible in the dim lighting of the room. "It's not fine, I know you don't really like it. I was just in your head."

"I was startled." I sighed, "It was... definitely odd. Not in a bad way, just... warn me next time."

She blinked once, "You sure?"

I hesitated as I thought about it. "Not as an every-time thing, but... if you really want to."

Illyan pursed her lips, then shifted her head a little to place them against my skin once. "I'll... think about it some more. I mean, it's better for me if we meld, but I don't want to make it bad for you."

That drew a snort. "Seriously? You think that would make it bad?"

"I am pretty good..." She grinned up at me, "Guess that's a fair point."

Reaching up with my left hand, I flicked her on the nose once with two fingers. "Don't get cocky, even if it's true."

She gave my chest another soft kiss before scooting her body up so that she could better press her face into the side of my neck. "How long do we get to sleep?"

"Eight hours." I supplied, reaching down to yank the blankets up over us. "That'll give us four or so to plot things out with Ayle and Trena before Joa's ready."

"Sounds good." My skin tingled as she yawned against it, a strong arm and leg each wrapping tightly around me as she pulled me even closer. "Night Cie."

"Night." I yawned in reply, using my omni-tool to kill the lights entirely before relaxing in her grip, wondering which of us would wake up first... and just how we'd wake the other if we did.

Unfortunately for both of us, a mere six hours passed before a horrific shriek began to rise from every intercom in the room, the station's general alarms howling that it was under attack.
Chapter End Notes

And here we are, moving into the last saga. Some bits in this chapter may seem a little repetitive, with everyone worrying over Cie... there is a reason for that, beyond what they told him. I'm assuming at least a few of you might work out what it is, but it'll be stated more obviously later. In the meantime, at least he and Illyan got some time to themselves before the next chapter, where things are going to get interesting. Oh, and the Battle of the Citadel is finally occurring 2 years after it should have.

For my usual teasing amusement, here are the chapter titles for the final Saga (in order): Old Monsters, Fallen Angels, Vent Breach, Amon Amarth, Approaching Beginnings, Hail to the Warlord

As there are six chapters, we're going to be rotating through Cie's companions as secondary points of view, with each of them getting their sections in two chapters.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Date: 11-17-2184

Location: Afterlife, Omega, Sahrabarik System, Terminus

The entire fucking station shuddered as our small group bounded into the main area of Afterlife, tugging coats and armor into place as we ran. Above us, the lights predictably flickered in time with the shudder, something which I took to be a rather bad sign.

I focused on the area where Aria usually held court, finding a collection of beings shouting at each other around various consoles that looked as though they’d risen from the flooring. Hurling myself up the stairs, I ignored the startled guards as I flew past them in favor of snarling, "What the fuck is going on!? Geth?"

"Ganar." A deep, basso rumble replied. I blinked and found myself regarding the leader of the White Tigers for the first time in years, the bear of a man shifting to regard me. His ebony skin had a few more wrinkles, and he’d trimmed his previously wild beard, but otherwise he didn't look any the worse for wear. "Kean."

"Bern." I replied belatedly. "What the fuck was that explosion? Who's in command?"

"Captain ul Rathun is trying to direct the defense from his command post in Zeta," He replied calmly as I moved to stand beside him, Ayle moving up on my left while everyone else hung back a bit. "The officers here are coordinating with him. The blast was mass driver four detonating when it attempted to fire. Sabotage."

"Sacred Pillars..." Ayle breathed as her eyes locked onto a holographic display showing the system, including the ships appearing. "How many more cannons are available?"

"Three." Another shudder beneath our feet made him grimace, "Two."

"Stop those assholes from firing!" Someone screamed, "And get mechs to inspect the lines! Why isn't Elder responding!?"

"Something isolated his core!" Another of Aria's officers shouted, her voice panicked, "We're also losing power to batteries three through seven in zone five! Something took out the power station!"

"Get a unit to re-route it!"

"You do it, I've got to stabilize our comms so we can call Aria back!"
My lip twitched in disgust as the bickering continued even as more damage and sabotage reports came in, "Bern, get the fuck in there and coordinate this."

"Tried." He glowered at the assembled idiots, "They refused. Gangs are subordinate to Aria, not the other way around. They won't accept my orders, or yours."

Ayle's lips peeled back, and she was clearly about to stride forwards to make her own attempt at it when all four of her eyes widened. "That dreadnought..."

Blinking, I narrowed my own gaze to pick out the symbol above the distant table. It didn't take me long, and I felt my own gut roll as the image flickered and updated to display the ship's trajectory. "Bloody Krogan is going to ram us, isn't he?"

Bern let out a furious curse, stomping over to a pair of his subordinates and shouting at them to run down to Fumi and Tuhi, to spread the word that the station was about to be boarded. For her part, Ayle snapped an arm up, her omni-tool flashing as she tried to contact the Reliant, only for static to respond. "By the fucking... you want to go down there, or do you want to handle this?"

It was my turn to peel my upper lip back, "Dammit. You've got more large unit experience than I do, get Dietrich and his people to their armor and see what you can do as far getting the crew armed and organized. I'll try and figure out what the fuck is going on and get you updates."

Ayle nodded sharply, turning and shouting for Dietrich to follow her. After a moment's hesitation, I snapped for Shyeel and Voya to go with her. The guards quickly scattered, wisely letting them pass just as easily as they'd let us in in the first place.

That left me with just Illyan and Trena, both of whom stepped closer as Bern likewise returned, his two people vanishing after my friends.

"They've taken out the buoys, all three of them." Scales snarled as she stepped closer, getting a better look at the map. "We can't call Aria or Leska back... shit, they're both in standard FTL by now, they won't even fucking realize there's no communication until they get to their targets. It's going to be fucking days before-"

"Captain!? Captain!?” Another shout rendered us silent as we paid attention, "I've lost the line to Zeta!"

"The lift is gone!" Someone else shouted, "Sensors show detonations along the entire tunnel!"

"Who's in command!?"

"I'll do it!" The sole Asari present snapped, having sensibly lost her patience. "Gara, get all of the gang leaders up here to receive defensive orders. Loth, take three people and find out what in Athame's fucking name is sabotaging our guns!"

No one looked particularly happy about her declaration, but when she flared her biotics and rested a hand on her gun, they got their asses to fucking work.

Taking the first statement as an invitation, Bern quickly ambled forwards, shoving his way to the display table and planting his armored fingers on it. I joined him after a moment, my companions following as we got a better look at the situation.

Ganar's fleet, what was left of it after years of war, had shown up in a tight battle formation around Relay Three. They'd smashed both of the heavy cruisers lingering nearby, and then split up to scatter across the system. Some elements had taken out the com buoys, while others had engaged the
various patrols and what local shipping had elected to offer resistance. Most of the remaining defensive fleet had pulled back around Omega, trying to supplement their firepower with the station's considerable defensive guns.

But right now less than half of those guns were shooting, and the massive symbol that was Ganar's flagship and only dreadnought was on a direct approach, assault transports following tightly behind its bulk while frigates flared out in a hemispheric formation to protect them further.

"They'll hit Doru." Bern rumbled after a few minutes, everything continuously updating as ships moved and probabilities increased. "Most of Aria's troops are in Zeta, cleaning up after whatever happened there, and almost all of her personal guard departed with her."

I closed my eyes as I let out a tired, exasperated curse, "You're telling me that the gangs and general population are the only things in place to fight him on this side of the station?"

"Yeah." The Asari who'd declared herself in charge stepped forwards, leaning her hands the table's controls. She was a Matron who'd copied Aria's tattoos, though her skin was a deep blue, and her features rather plain. "That's why I want them all up here, will take a while but it can't be helped. I'm sending everyone we have down to Doru right now, try and spread the alert generally."

"You can't just broadcast it?" I asked.

"In this District, sure." She shook her head tiredly, "Elder and its AI chorus managed routing through the rest of the station, you have no idea how fucked everything is after centuries of unplanned building... and that's without the gangs jamming each other, people just fucking with equipment, and the goddess knows what else. We might be able to patch in Tuhi and Fumi if we had a few hours, but without that crazy AI..."

I grimaced, "What's wrong with it?"

She rolled a shoulder. "It's not responding to our requests for information; I think something cut off the core."

"Someone killed them?" Bern rumbled.

"No, but they wouldn't have to. The AI's are isolated out in the main cavern for safety's sake, in case they go rampant. All Ganar would need is someone who could destroy the guards and activate the fail-safes to disconnect their hardlines." There was a tight grimace across her features, "I figure that's what they did, because our only warning before the attack was someone screaming for help from the barracks whose job it is to protect that place."

Meaning that they'd been on station before the attack had begun.

Meaning that they had probably been on station for far longer than that.

Meaning... I might have been very, very wrong as to just who had given Aria the location of the Mu relay.

"All of this was planned then." I murmured, "Shit, they were waiting for Aria to leave for Ilos. They wanted her to leave, and they had to give her something big enough she'd take her fleet with. And they made sure to get people on station in advance to start fucking with crap."

The officer scowled, "Probably, but that doesn't bloody matter. We have to contain the attack until Aria can return with the Black Fleet."
Bern gave her a long look, "Contain Ganar himself?"

"He's one man." The slight bite of her lower lip betrayed her nerves before she swallowed, "A stupidly powerful man, yeah, but he's just one guy. He can't be in multiple places at once, and we can overwhelm him, ambush him, that kind of thing."

"I like the ambush concept." I admitted, nodding back towards Trena and Illyan. "We did a lot of turning aircars into flying bombs last year, we might able to help with that."

"Would be a fucking good thing to hit them with if they get up this far." Scales nodded. "Last resort kind of crap."

"Yeah... yeah, I'll probably take you up on that, Commander." The officer blew out a breath, visibly forcing herself to remain calm. I tried not to grimace, and made a mental note to try and show my support for her authority as much as I could when the other gang leaders showed up. "Alpha Bern, your people are mostly close combat right?"

"We are." He allowed, "But against Krogan..."

"Maybe harassment then?" She asked, "Hit them from side-alleys and go for their Vorcha and any pirate allies they've got."

Bern pursed his dark lips, his intelligent eyes still tracking the approaching dreadnought. Just a few minutes now, unless the ships desperately trying to pour fire into it could pull off a miracle. "Perhaps in lower Fumi, that is a maze we know fairly well. If I can coordinate with Red, we might turn it into an in-depth position."

She shook her head firmly, "I want to hold them in Doru for as long as we can. Have back-up plans ready, but we've got to hold the docks or else Aria won't have a good way back on station."

Because she'd either have to fight her way through Doru, which would leave us in a potentially shit position, or she'd dock with Zeta... which was again isolated from the rest of the station and thus pointless.

"We've got a cruiser docked," I double-checked the display and confirmed that the Reliant still showed as secured inside of the Eclipse's mammoth hanger. "Commander Massa is heading down to rally the crew and the Eclipse... theri compound could work as hold-out location."

"Vic," She turned, snapping a mousy looking human male, "Get one of the dancers, no, get all of them to their armory, then set them up as runners. First thing is to get down to the Eclipse and liaise with... Massa? Commander Massa about securing the defenses around the compound. Open all of the emergency lifts for them, but make sure the closure charges are primed in case we need to blow them."

He hesitated, saw Bern and I glare at him, then nodded and got his ass moving.

I nodded slowly, starting to like the girl. She was nervous as fuck, and clearly not a natural leader, but she wasn't stupid. I could definitely work with not stupid. "We'll need someone to get Elder back online, or a communications chain through this damned maze, but first, you have a name?"

She blinked, then flushed a little. "Oh right, I'm Lieutenant-"

The sniper round went through the left side of her head and out the right before I could learn who she was, purple blood and viscera spraying through the air as she went down. I hit the ground at about the same time as her body, Trena and Illyan likewise diving into cover and yanking their
helmets off of their belts. Bern was a beat slower, but at least got down.

Aria's people weren't quite up to the task. Two more were hit quickly, the unseen sniper hitting their lower halves to leave them screaming in pain rather than killing them outright. It definitely lowered the morale of everyone else, and made it hard to communicate until I got my helmet into place. "Where the fuck is he!?!"

"Near the VIP level I think!" Trena shouted back, pulling her carbine from her back as I pulled my new rifle from mine.

"Illyan! Flash-bang right above us!" I snapped, shifting myself into a crouch behind the holo-table. Two long breaths later, a flash of white light and noise blossomed above us, and Trena and I both popped up.

She found the target before I did, firing off a four shot burst into the shadows four levels above us. I jerked my gun in that direction, priming the charger as I settled the back of the weapon against my shoulder. A trigger pull later sent a flash-forged spike screaming upwards, blowing apart a piece of the railing and revealing a dark-clad figure diving backwards for safety.

A moment later the garish VIP door slid open, two armored figures storming out with guns raised, and started shooting at our sniper.

A moment after that, one of their heads was flying over the railing, and the other was screaming obscenely as he died.

A muscle in my cheek twitched. Violently.

Bringing a hand up, I dialed my speakers up to their loudest level. "Athame's fucking ass but you really fucking annoy me!"

Krom's laughter cracked out his own speakers, "Sorry about killing your new friends eleven, but you know how it is! Love to stay and chat, but I've got a reactor to destabilize!"

Snarling, I jerked my weapon up and fired again, knowing it was pointless even as I saw him dart through the open door and vanish. I immediately turned to start moving towards the nearest stairwell, only for Illyan to clamp a hand on my shoulder as she stood, locking me firmly in place.

I glowered furiously at her through my visor before half-closing my eyes, accepting the wordless chastisement and running through a quick chain of logic to calm my stupid ass down. One, he was four levels up, meaning he'd be long gone before I even got to that platform. Two, he was a psychopath, but he wasn't stupid. He'd have precautions for being followed. Three, shit had to be handled here, and with the poor Asari Lieutenant dead... once again we didn't have anyone in command.

Nodding once to show her I wasn't about to run off, I snapped my head around before I found a Turian carefully standing. "You! Sound the fucking alert and get guards on the upper levels! And seal the goddess-damned building! And find someone with some fucking authority!"

He twitched a violent nod before scrambling away, his talons running across the controls as he started shouting orders to those effects.

The following forty minutes were some of the most awful of my life, not least of all because I was stuck standing around, unable to do more than watch as the situation continued to deteriorate.

We at least had working communications, cameras, and sensors in the local district, but that merely
let us track Krom as he linked up with a team of people that Bern identified as freelancers, desperate ones at that. Their little group promptly murdered their way past several patrols we tried to route after them before vanishing into the warrens, probably heading lower down the station.

About the only good news to come out of that were the few images we caught of Krom, showing a man who was clearly not moving well; his injuries from Benihi were obviously plaguing him badly.

Ganar's flagship impacted when the first gang leaders began to show up, the station again rocking violently as the massive warship slammed its nose into the main docking ring. The impact destroyed more than a few of the sensors in that area, and it took a while to link with the remaining allied ships outside before we got a clear image of assault shuttles forcing their way in.

There wasn't really any good news on that front... there were enough defensive guns left to destroy a few of them, but far more made it than didn't, likely disgorging Krogan and Vorcha into Doru.

The gang leaders showing up posed another problem, as each and everyone of them demanded to know who was in charge, and all I could do was point at the body we'd laid along a booth. Half of them had immediately tried to act like they were now in charge, which painted a dim picture of what was coming, while the others instead shoved their way to the table to get a better idea as to what was happening before starting to bitch at each other and trying to establish their place in the pecking order.

"All right." I raised my voice after Jaroth and Red had showed up, having been the last major leaders to arrive. Better than a dozen gang leaders stood around me in a broad group, all of them going quiet as I spoke. "You should all fucking know by now, but Ganar's here and they've already boarded in Doru. We're all fucking dead if we don't cooperate, but Aria's people are mostly stuck in Zeta except for these low ranked staff, meaning it's up to us to do something about this."

Huntress Chiek, the bitter faced Matron who ran the Cresting Wave, frowned. "Where's the rest of Aria's commanders?"

"The ones who aren't in Zeta are dead or commanding their warships." I supplied, "Runners and reports have come in saying there's been a rash of suicide bombings across the upper levels, all aimed at taking out the people Aria left in charge."

"Athame's azure." She growled. "More of those tranquil fuckers from that crap in Zeta?"

"Probably." I grimaced as I nodded. "But how and why don't really matter, we need to organize and figure out some kind of fucking defense."

There was a general mutter of agreement from the more experienced leaders, and the Salarian leader of the local Eclipse fixed his massive eyes on me, "We need a consolidated leadership. I will be willing-"

"Oh hell no!" A human male so covered in tattoos that I couldn't tell his race, snarled at the mercenary leader. "Hell no am I following a drug running frog."

"Who do you propose instead?" Boss Juyl of the Hunters of Shadows growled in return, the Batarian man showing off his sharp teeth. "The racist in white over there?"

Bern glared daggers at his long-time rival, but refused to rise to the bait. "The more time we bicker, the more ground we lose. We must decide quickly."

"Why?" The other human snapped, "So Ganar is here, so fucking what? We stay out of his way and let Aria deal with it when she gets back."
Jarroth sneered at him, "And when he takes this club, and seizes the environmental controls?"

I felt myself flinch in time with several others, glancing at the Turian I'd ordered around earlier. "That possible?"

He nodded tightly, "Yes... the defensive controls are scattered to stop them from being brought down easily, not that it helped, but if you control Afterlife you could shut down the airflow to the core districts, and close the water mains that go down to the lowers."

Meaning everyone in Afterlife, Tuhi, and Fumi would be sucking vacuum, and everyone below Doru would be killing each other for drops of water.

The argument really got into swing after that revelation, with the various gang leaders quickly dividing into three groups. Jaroth had some support, as did Chiek and Bern, while Juyl seemed more occupied in reminding everyone why none of them were qualified. Probably trying to angle himself as the compromise candidate, which might have worked if he wasn't such an obvious ass about it.

My fists started to clench after the tenth minute of wasted time, Illyan tugging me away from the table and speaking quietly across our comms. "This isn't working Cie...why the fuck isn't Red stepping in?"

I glanced in the direction she was looking to find the Turian woman leaning against a wall, her hood up as she watched the debate with every sign of disinterest. "Go check on scales, I'll talk with her."

"Got it." She nodded, quickly moving off towards where Trena was trying to help the remaining staff figure out just how many troops they had left and how to seal Afterlife against any more attempts to infiltrate the stupidly massive club.

While she did that, I strode over to Nyreen Kandros, keeping my voice low as I approached. "Red, fucking go establish yourself."

Her hood shifted as she turned to regard me, "You think they would listen to me?"

"You're the only gang leader who's sort-of sane." I growled, "You have the best organized and equipped group on the station, which means you're probably the most qualified, and that's what we need right now."

Her mandibles twitched once, "They wouldn't respond well to my leadership style. Why not you?"

I blinked at the shift, "Me?"

"You are at least as qualified as any of them are," She seemed to shrug, "After what you've been through. Why not declare yourself in charge and get to work?"

"Because I'm not bloody experienced in this kind of fighting." I shook my head tightly, "Urban combat on a bloody space station isn't something I know anything about. Athame's ass, even that tattooed fuck probably has a better idea of how to fight a large-scale battle in a three dimensional environment than I do."

The Turian version of a whistling snort came out of her, "I highly doubt that. I won't run the defense, Kean. I cannot. Go handle it."

I actually started to bring my hands up before fighting down the urge to strangle the stubborn bitch. Athame's fucking ass, this was about her thing with Aria, not about her capability to command or her goddess-damned leadership style. Turning away from her amused mandible flicking, I stalked over
to the nearest railing and tried to ignore the shouting match that had begun between Jaroth and Chiek.

Shit, I shouldn't have fucking sent Ayle to the Reliant. She would have been better in this kind of situation than I was, and I could have at least handled organizing the crew. Probably not as well or as quickly as she could, but I wasn't going to bloody achieve anything here.

Movement down and to my left made me snap my head in that direction, a hand falling to my pistol before I recognized a pair of dancers, now in light armor, racing down some stairs before jogging to the front door where the Elcor bouncer was looming as a sentry.

I felt myself frown as my eyes shifted away from the two Batarian women, focusing instead on a shrouded room on the main level. Something massive seemed to shift in the doorway, as if someone was standing within and had noticed my attention.

"Oh." I breathed quietly. "Now that is an idea..."

Turning back, I waited another long minute before confirming that absolutely nothing was going to happen without at least half of the idiots killing each other. Since that would entirely fuck any chance we had... I sucked in a breath, then abruptly let it out as I realized that I'd nearly called the title rather than the name, and that would have ruined this before it even started.

"Raik Vol!" My speakers cracked at my shout, and the bitchy argument behind me abruptly went silent. "Get your fucking ancient ass up here!"

For a long moment, there was nothing. Then the shadow in the doorway below shifted to reveal a huge Krogan wearing black robes and walking with the aid of a quarter-staff sized to his massive frame. Absolute silence reigned as he moved, the only sound the heavy thudding of his feet and the deep \textit{clang} that came each time he planted his stave.

"Human." Jaroth hissed as Patriarch began ascending the stairs, "What do you think you are doing?"

"What your collective incompetence has made necessary." I replied flatly.

Any response he, or the others, might have had was forestalled when the Krogan reached our level.

I'd thought that Chek was large... or the various berserkers that I had fought... Raik Vol, former master of Omega and the Terminus, was a bloody \textit{titan}. Even the obvious stiffness with which he moved didn't belay the incredible power that he seemed to exude. His golden eyes had flecks of eezo blue within them, obvious thanks to their size as he glanced around at the collection of people staring at him.

Goddess, and this was him as a bloody old \textit{cripple} after Aria had thrown him down. What the fuck had he been like at his most powerful?

What was Aria really like, if she'd beaten him? If she could still keep him around like a bloody pet?

"It had been a very, very long time," His voice was as incredibly erudite as it was impossibly deep. "Since any dared say that name in this place, Commander Kean."

...and he knew my name. I wasn't sure if that was good or bloody terrifying. "These aren't normal times. You know the situation?"

"Of course." He shifted his head to better look at me with a single eye, blinking it slowly. "You are declaring yourself leader then? Do you wish my advice?"
Mutters of anger promptly broke out behind me again, several gang leaders making their disapproval known quite clearly.

"No." I inhaled sharply, not turning around. This was either going to go well... or it was going to kill me. "I'm declaring you the Warlord of Omega."

And just like that, absolute silence fell once again.

Patriarch continued to stare at me, but I thought he seemed to be as equally surprised. "What foolishness is this, human?"

"None of them is superior to the others, except probably Red and she won't do it." I kept my voice even as I spoke, "We need someone to organize the defense before Ganar can take this station and do whatever the fuck he's planning. Maybe he wants to sack it, or kill everyone, or take it for himself... whatever it is, letting him do it isn't something we can allow."

The old Krogan blinked once, his tone utterly noncommittal as he spoke again. "All true."

"You know Ganar, better than anyone else here. His tactics, his power, his style." I continued laying out my case, "You have more combat experience on Omega than anyone living. You're the only logical choice left."

His upper lip twitched back to show me teeth the size of my fingers. "You want me to defend Aria's throne for her? To lead the defense of an absent Queen's territory, then to slink back into my hole when the battle is done?"

"No." I crossed my arms, calling up everything I'd learned about Krogan from the games, from months and years of fighting them. "I want you to defend your fucking throne from your old rival, and when Aria gets back, I expect you to bloody spit in her face and dare her to take it from you."

Patriarch narrowed his eye. "And then be beaten again for my temerity."

"No." I repeated, my tone becoming cold. "She wouldn't let you live this time, not if you defy her in front of us, in front of Omega. She'll kill you, and if the goddess likes you enough, you might die on your feet like you fucking should have two centuries ago."

He said nothing once again... just staring at me.

Behind me, there was a scoffing sound from Jaroth. "Give it up human, that old beast has nothing left to give. I will lead the defense and-"

My right hand blurred as I turned, then snapped back as my hand cannon blew a hole right in the annoying son-of-a-bitch's head. Everyone promptly scattered back as his body hit the ground, staring at him and then me in various degrees of shock.

Turning my back on them, I kept my gun up and leveled it at Patriarch, who still hadn't fucking moved. "I am out of bloody patience for this fucking bullshit! Get your fucking ass over to that goddess-damned table and start giving fucking orders!"

The Krogan stared at the pistol in my hands, then let out a grunting sound. I blinked as he did it again, his entire body seeming to shudder before his maw peeled back and booming laughter started to echo around us. I was entirely unprepared when his staff flickered out, slamming into my gun with the force of a cannon, knocking it from my grasp before he effortlessly twirled the stick around to bring it down on my shoulder, driving me down to a knee as I gasped in surprised pain.
"You have a quad human!" He boomed, still laughing as he strode closer to me. "I accept your offer and reclaim my station, rise and stand as the krannt of Raik Vol!"

Shaking my head and hissing in pain as I reached up to check my shoulder, surprised that it hadn't fucking dislocated, I rose on twitching legs in time to see him stomp his way past me.

"Like hell am I following that old thing." Tattoos snarled defiantly as he approached, standing his ground on the other side of the table. "Your time is past, Krogan."

Raik Vol negligently flicked a hand forwards in response, and the gang leader abruptly shot straight up into the air before suddenly reversing direction, slamming into the floor with a hideous cracking of bones.

More silence followed as everyone turned to stare at the Krogan, and then at me as I recovered my gun and limped to a position behind the Warlord. Energy began to crackle around him when no one spoke, nearly black flecks of power rolling around his huge body in a clear challenge.

"Warlord Vol." Red spoke up from where she remained leaning against the wall, having not so much as twitched during the entire display. "I'd recommend against killing any more of them. We're short handed enough."

"Kandros." The Krogan turned slightly, "You accept this?"

She bowed her head deeply to him, "The Talons will defend this station and its people. What are your orders?"

Bern shifted a little uncomfortably before echoing her sentiments, Chiek quickly following suit. I watched as the remaining gangsters and mercenaries bowed to the old Warlord, his staff thumping the ground in time with each acceptance of his authority.

"Before we begin, there is something I must do." He rumbled, turning to stare at Aria's sprawling couch. "Such a waste of space."

A single hand rose, then flicked forwards... and a bloody wall of biotic power slammed out in time with the gesture, picking up the entire piece of furniture and sending it tumbling to crash into a bar below us.

"Much better... now, to the business of war."

Silent Witness

Gunfire roared as a continuous howl of noise, punctuated with the sharper sounds of explosives and the high pitched shrieks of the wounded and the dying.

The butt of my carbine pushed against my shoulder as I fired single rounds down the long street, dropping Vorcha as the scrambled forwards at the bellowed orders from the Krogan behind them. The many, many, many Krogan behind them.

"We aren't going to hold this intersection!" Shyeel shouted across our make-shift communications grid, "There's a good fifty Krogan on approach!"

Brother Orun, the luckless member of the Brotherhood of the Fallen to draw coordination duty for this sector, replied in harried tones, "Confirmed, set the charges and pull back to the next block. The Wave has a cabal en route to reinforce you."
"Where the fuck is Cieran?" I hissed as I dropped behind the trashed ground-car I was using as cover, collapsing my rifle and bringing my omni-tool up to activate the mines we'd laid across the street. "I thought he was bringing a platoon of Talons and two cabals!"

"Commander Kean and Huntress Chiek are trying to stem the rout in sector seven!"

Keelah... if they'd had to route two of our senior leaders over there... that fight couldn't have been going well for us. Not that this one was either.

"Pull back!" Shyeel shouted, rising and started to retreat. "To the next barricade! Fall back! Move, move, move!"

Our forces, a mixture of Brotherhood, Eclipse, and civilians who'd decided to join the fight, didn't need to be told more than once. They all got their asses in motion, firing wildly over their shoulders as they got moving. I joined them, watching in my rear-camera as Vorcha howled and began sprinting at the sight of us fleeing. Deeper cries came from war-varren as Krogan released them, the slathering animals bounding after us.

The mines started to take care of them before they got anywhere close to us. Most of them were pop-up types from Aria's stockpile, each of the devices flinging a high-explosive up in the air before showering the ground with a ludicrous number of fragments that turned our pursuers into little more than hunks of bleeding meat.

Others had been set into the walls rather than the street or debris, and had directed their own explosives sideways when the few intelligent Vorcha had tried to avoid the street in favor of the cover offered by the buildings.

"They slowing!?!" Shyeel called back as we neared the next set of make-shift defenses. Like the last it was mostly scrap metal and wrecked vehicles hastily assembled into something like a wall, with fire steps crudely cut or welded into place by conscripted civilians and Eclipse engineers. Still, it was fucking better than nothing.

"Yes!" I shouted in return, watching as the Krogan quite sensibly slowed down, distantly shouting for more Vorcha fodder to clear any mines that remained before they moved up.

If nothing else that gave us a few minutes to catch a quick breather, get some water and food into us before the next fight started. I was just about to collapse behind a convenient bit of metal before Shyeel called for me again, waving me to join her further toward the back as everyone else began to get to defensive positions.

"What now?" I sighed as I shuffled over, "I had a good spot that some Batarian is sitting in now."

Shyeel threw her helmet back to tell me she was rolling her eyes, leading me over to a building before dropping onto her ass, Groaning, I settled onto the ground beside her, grabbing for my canteen while she started up her omni-tool.

"We've got communications again." She exhaled, "Goddess knows for how long though. It let me get an update."

"How bad is it?" I asked before flicking my tongue out to open the induction port, sliding a straw in before guzzling down some water.

"Worse than we thought." My girlfriend slumped a little more, "We aren't the only one with fucked up ratios. Everyone is reporting nearly as many Krogan as Vorcha, and that's seriously screwing with the defense. We outnumber them by an order of magnitude, but those fuckers don't go down easily."
Especially to the basic equipment that most gang members used, or the crap gear that civilians tended to own. "How long until they reach the core lifts?"

"Another shift, maybe two." She shook her head before shifting her arm so I could see a tiny map of the station.

Doru being what it was, a giant circle that was fifteen levels deep, the fighting was understandably chaotic. Right now it looked like there was open battle on eight floors, with the main thrust being aimed towards the core and the lifts that were still hauling more defenders up from the lower districts. Losing those lifts was considered inevitable by our new leader, but he wanted to pack as many troops into lower Fumi and Tuhi as he could before it happened. Hence why Cie and that Chick bitch were desperately trying to slow down the attack on level seven that was driving in that direction.

Our little detachment was one of a dozen on the 'left' flank of the fighting, trying to protect the Eclipse's enclave and its massive hanger complexes. The Krogan had already overwhelmed the old Blue Suns depot that Aria's people had taken over, and two of their cruisers had managed to smash the larger independent docks before succumbing to the sporadic defensive fire... and that really just left where the Reliant was docked as the only place Aria could easily land her own army.

"What's the plan?" I asked quietly as she closed her device, her helmet hitting the wall behind us.

"We keep delaying them as long as we can, let Ayle get the defenses as good as she can build them." Shyeel exhaled, "Then we go back up and join Cie and Illyan."

To hunt either Krom or Ganar. "Anyone seen the big targets?"

"Not since last shift." She rolled a shoulder in a shrug, "Vol says Ganar is probably acting as a proper general right now, he won't get involved until he thinks he has to. And no one's reported seeing Krom since he helped take that depot."

I sighed, taking another sip of my water. "Keelah, nothing's ever simple for us, is it?"

"No..." She agreed quietly, "There's a sniper position a half-block back, I want you up there for the next fight. Take my Kishok and hit any Krogan that look like they're directing the waves."

"Sure. You still running command?"

"Unless one of the officers came back to life, not sure who else will." There was a long groan as she pushed herself to her feet, "Come on, let's get setup."

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Next up is Fallen Angels

Chapter End Notes

And so the invasion of Omega has begun, finally bringing us close the events teased at the start of Vengeance so very long ago now. From the start of this chapter we have ten standard days (in story terms), before the final fight... should be a fun little ride. Pretty sure the next chapter's name spoils just who will be showing up, just like this one's did,
hopefully everyone will enjoy how it all goes.

No news segments or other sections for this saga. Just like Cie and his friends are stuck in the dark, so are all of you until it's all over. ;)

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
The next two local days were a predictably awful grind... in many ways it felt like being back on Redcliffe again, though without the trust that I'd established between myself and the other Commanders. And also without the benefit of having a fully professional army around us... that was proving to be a major issue.

We'd learned quite a bit about Ganar's attacking habits by bloody experience, though we hadn't yet come up with a good counter. Well... we had counter plays, the main issue was the lack of disciplined troops with which to implement them.

The 'Emperor' used Vorcha and pirates the same way as any other Blood Pack Warlord at first glance, sending them in wave attacks against targets before following them up with members of his own species. The difference was that Ganar actually bothered to learn something about how his cannon fodder was dying, noting strong points and weak points and adjusting his battle plans on the fly to compensate.

Athame's ass, the fucker even adjusted his people's weapons loadouts if he figured out a particular solution... we'd lost most of Doru's sector eight when he'd realized the gang holding it clung too tightly to a static defense and didn't adjust at all if enemies got close to their flanks. He'd hit them with a couple of well armored Krogan up front to hold them in place, and then flanked them with flamethrower equipped Vorcha.

His immediate subordinates seemed to be trained in the same style, though they didn't seem to be quite as skilled at it. If nothing else, it did make it easy to tell what battles the old asshole was personally directing. He rarely needed more than one attack with a couple of pitifully armed Vorcha to figure out how to utterly wreck our defenses. His subordinates tended to prefer two or three strong pushes before they rolled in for a final impact.

According to Vol, the ideal solution was to be as polymorphic on the defense as Ganar was on the attack. Continuously adjust where our strong points were, launch sudden counter-attacks after his fodder had hit us, or suddenly pull back in between waves to leave his specialized attack to strike at nothing but air. The Talons were having some success with that, as were the Eclipse... but the rest of the more organized gangs had had to be broken up to give some spine to the civilians and local bands.

And even then, using the right tactics didn't always help when thirty or forty Krogan just overran the
poorly equipped defenders anyway. If we'd had the troops we'd had on Redcliffe, this invasion would have already been over... but we didn't. We had gangsters and civilians with crap weapons and worse armor going up against well armored, well trained, and well armed soldiers... and I really wasn't used to being on this side of that particular comparison.

Athame's fucking ass but it sucked... especially when a good chunk of our opposition was fucking Krogan. At least with the Scarlet Tears, once you got their barriers down even a crap civilian gun had a chance of killing them.

Krogan just got bloody annoyed.

"We've stopped them in sector two." I announced as I tiredly surmounted the steps in Afterlife, my legs aching along with the rest of my body. "Sealed throughways four and six to blunt any approach, they'll have to come through five. Kandros is fortifying the gate, and Bern's finished his prep in Tuhi."

"Very good." Raik Vol rumbled from where he was staring at a hovering display of the station, with the image zoomed in to best show Doru and lower Tuhi. "And Chiek?"

"Playing tag with Ganar Bushin in sector twelve, last I heard." I shook my head, "Morale is starting to drop, especially with the civilians."

"To be expected." He mused, sounding unconcerned as he continued to stare at the map. "That so many stood and fought in Doru at least delayed Ganar's taking of the lifts... they have done enough, do nothing to the deserters."

I shrugged, not having been planning on doing anything to them even if he had ordered me to. "How's the fleet?"

"It remains uncertain as to my authority, not that it matters." Vol seemed to shrug, "What remains of the Pack forces have already offloaded all of their troops and then withdrawn. Likely to attempt to occupy the Eclipse by dying gloriously."

Which wouldn't delay them for an overlong long period of time, but they might take a few of Sederis's ships down with them. Not that they would have done any good sticking around here anyway, there wasn't much left of Aria's defense force, and the only other Warlords who might have sent forces to help were Die Waffe and T'Ravt.

Both might have been allied to Aria... but I knew that neither of them would show up to help. At least, not until Ganar had exhausted himself seizing the station, after which they would have their chance to take it for themselves. Well... that was true for Die Waffe at least. T'Ravt likely wouldn't move in even then, nearly all of her military muscle was already occupied in her own campaigns.

"Al right," I blew out a breath, "What's next for us?"

A gold and blue eye flicked in my direction, "Your team?"

I glanced over the railing, looking to where they were currently collapsed in a booth, tiredly removing their helmets and waving for food and water to be brought over. They were hardly the only ones, Afterlife had become both our headquarters and our recovery zone, with those of us that Patriarch considered his 'elites' coming and going on an as-needed basis.

"No major wounds." I reported. "No sight of our principle target either, but we did eliminate three more Scarlet Tears."
The living titan nodded slowly, "Any change to the pattern of attacks?"

"No. Still two waves of chaff, then the actual impact."

His massive brow lowered as he processed that. "Too predictable... Yulaz is not directing the battle there, nor does he harass Commander Massa. She has easily repelled those strikes upon the Eclipse hangers for a full shift now."

I grimaced, "He's preparing something."

"Yes." There was a slight nod. "But it will be more than one thing... Yul always enjoyed coming up with clever little attacks to supplement his blunt strikes. The first will be... here, in Tuhi. He'll dispatch specialists to infiltrate these zones, probably by the using the warrens. They'll be ordered to seize these buildings, giving them enfilading fire against anyone retreating upwards via lift one."

My eyes closed as I exhaled, already knowing where this was going. Vol was evidently a sincere believer in need-to-know information, the only reason he'd tell me that Ganar was about to attack a place was if he wanted me there to blunt it. "When?"

"The last attack ended thirty-three minutes ago, and given their previous pacing..." A clawed hand rose to rub at the cracked skin on his jaw, "You may rest for three hours."

Bringing two fingers up to my visor, I flicked them in his direction in a casual salute before turning and heading for the stairs once again. Going down them wasn't nearly as bad as coming up had been, and I wasted no time in trudging over to collapse beside Illyan.

She got my helmet off for me just as an exhausted looking Batarian male dropped off four glasses of water, plus a few plates of food and a tiny box of pills. I pocketed the last, we'd need them when we were about to leave, then joined everyone else in wolfing down the small meal as quickly as I could get it into my mouth.

Once all of it was gone, we got up and shifted to the floor, the same waiter who'd brought us food handing us a pair of key-cards for the private rooms nearby.

"What time are you rotating back out sir?" He asked as he took our dishes

"Three hours." I informed him, pushing my way to my feet and trying not to groan. "We'll have our omni-tools set."

"Very good sir." His head dipped respectfully as he turned, a whistling sigh escaping him as he caught sight of three Talons asleep at a table nearby. Leaving him to take care of them, I followed Illyan over to a concealed doorway, stepping through into a tiny room once reserved for people who could afford paying the dancers for... a bit more than just dancing.

It had a reasonably sized bed that occupied most of the space, along with a sink and a cabinet that had been filled with various medications. The sexual crap had obviously been left in place, but most of them had also had medigel and ointments for those who enjoyed more violent play, and all of that had been raided and sent to the medics and what doctors we'd been able to conscript.

Mordin was amongst the latter, having moved his clinic up from Gozu to Cala, and was apparently being sent the more critical cases.

"Three hours." Illyan groaned as she collapsed into the bed, not bothering to remove her armor, her helmet set on a tiny table "That's all we get?"
"Yeah... then down to Tuhi to head off a possible flank attack." I exhaled as I dropped down beside her. Being close to each other while we were both covered in armored plating was anything but sensual, but we still pressed as close as we could as she rolled onto her side so that we were facing each other.

"Sounds fun." She let out a massive yawn as she reached a hand up, tracing the scars around my left eye. "You doing all right?"

"Still alive." I reported, leaning forwards to kiss her for a bare moment before pulling back and letting my head drop onto a pillow. "You? How's your eye?"

"Still regenerating... so feels weird as shit." She admitted before yawning again, the motion scrunching her eye-patch a little. "Sleep now?"

"Sleep." I confirmed as I closed my eyes, not bothering to turn the lights off.

Three hours passed in as many seconds, and we shuffled out of our room to find Voya and Shyeel doing the same next to us. We left the keys with the first waitress we passed, to be given to the next group who had a few hours to use an actual bed, and then the two Asari and I pulled our helmets on before we headed for the exit.

From the club, it was a short walk to the nearest bank of secure lifts that took us down into Tuhi, my omni-tool up as I checked for new while we dropped.

"No major shifts." I reported after a few minutes of poking around what passed for our communications network. It was improving, and stabilizing, as it was worked on, but it remained far less than it could have been with Elder running things. "Ayle and Trena pushed back another attack on the Eclipse compound, but the Pack also threw back an attempt to get to the AI core."

Shyeel let out a quiet grunt. "They pushed us hard for more than a local day, figure even Krogan need a break to consolidate and eat. Probably already getting ready for another push."

"Probably why Vol gave us anytime at all to sleep." I agreed with a slight nod, fighting down a yawn and shaking my head before remembering the stims we'd been given. "Drugs?"

Shyeel predictably declined, but Illyan and Voya both nodded. Pulling out the appropriate colored pills, the three of us downed them just as the lift reached the lower reaches of the slaver's district. A cabal from the Cresting Wave lowered their weapons once they realized who we were, the Matron commanding the little group moving to talk with us.

"Still just skirmishing right now." She answered my initial question, "But its picking up. Kandros has been sending more wounded up the other lifts, she's said she's going to wait out the next push and pull the Talons out of Doru all together."

I pursed my lips and exhaled. "That's going to take a while, we're going to have to hold these lifts."

"Against what? We control all the lifts we didn't seal shut, it's not like..." Her voice trailed off before she sighed, "Like they've got someone who can guide them through the warrens. Athame's ass, that's why you're here then?"

Shyeel grunted, "That's right. We're securing that building, you might want to shore up your position from a direct approach."

"Will do, thanks for the warning." We all exchanged quick nods before breaking apart, getting to our respective jobs.
The lift banks were set against the core spire of Omega, seven of them all in a neat row. Only the one we'd taken went directly up, the other six only went down to Doru at this particular station. There was a broad, empty space around them where people could normally line up to wait their turn, with two streets connecting the area to the rest of the district.

One was the tunneled road which the cabal was currently moving towards, which the six Asari would have a fairly easy time holding given the lack of any cover within it. Our own direction wasn't quite as good of a situation, occupied as it was by buildings and possessing a much higher ceiling.

Our particular target was the building on the nearest corner, and was the only one in sight that occupied the full three stories from the floor to the 'roof'. Which, as Vol had noted, made it the ideal fire-base from which to either attack or defend the lift bank.

"Right, let's clear this thing before we get setup." Keeping my rifle on my back, I pulled my SMG off of my waist instead, holding it in my right hand bringing my omni-tool up with the other. "Should be abandoned but check your fire."

Voya grunted, hefting her pistol up with both hands. "Grenades or cloak?"

"Doors are closed, one flash-bang."

She nodded, "I've got it."

We all spread apart as we approached the derelict structure, looking like it might have once been something similar to our old home on this station. A storefront on the first level, advertising general goods, then with living spaces or possibly apartments on the floors above.

Splitting part, Voya and I took the left side near the door controls, while Illyan and Shyeel got setup on the other side. It didn't take me more than a few tries to override the simplistic controls, letting the Quarian to throw the grenade inside.

Punching the button to open it all the way the moment the white flash exploded out of the open slit, we all stormed into the room, our HUD's automatically adjusting to the dim lighting inside. Apart from some shelves still holding containers of preserved food and cashier's console, the place proved to be empty.

Carefully checking over the place didn't take that long, and we quickly moved up to the next floor. It proved to hold three small apartments, all looking as if their owners had cleared out in a hurry. Probably during the general flight down into the lowers when the fighting had first begun.

Omega's people weren't stupid, after all. Well, not wholly stupid... everyone with any sense knew that if Ganar was here, he was going to try and get to Afterlife sooner rather than later. Those interested in survival had thus sensibly fled in other direction, swarming into Cala and then down into the three lower districts from there, leaving more than a few businesses and homes empty as a result.

While this was good in the sense that it meant fewer people getting in our way when we turned their homes into defensive outposts, it was also bad in the sense that we weren't likely to have any warning when the Pack opened exits from the warrens.

Floor number three held the low-class version of a high-class apartment, occupying the entire level, and proved to be just as abandoned as the levels beneath it.

"Right, Shyeel, you stay up here with me. Voya, Illyan, trap the lower floors." Reaching down, I quickly disconnected my tech launcher from my belt and passed it to my lover. "Use your judgment
for the types, just leave me a dozen of each. Frags are fine, keep the rest of your grenades."

"Got it." Illyan nodded as she accepted it. "Voya, you thinking remote or trip beams?"

"Beams below." Voya cut in, pulling her Viper from her belt and setting it on the room's bed alongside her pack, the rest of us quickly tossing our own packs there as well. "Remote a set at the top of the stairs so we can clear it on command."

I nodded in time with her opinions, and then she and Illyan were moving back out of the room, the stairwell echoing with their passage as they headed down to get to work. While they were occupied, Shyeel and I quickly checked around the apartment to find sight-lines as well as an alternative exit if we needed it.

We found our escape route in one of the bedroom windows, there being only a short drop to scaffolding on top of the neighboring building's roof. After that it was a simple matter of using my war gauntlets to blow open the armored windows in the living and dining rooms, giving us a few options for shooting into either the street or in the direction of the lifts.

"Afterlife." I spoke into my radio as we finished, hoping that the grid was still up. "This is Kean... Afterlife, respond with confirmation code."

"This is Afterlife." A young Batarian man sounded as if he'd just run a marathon, but he was at least intelligible when he spoke again. "Uh, confirmation code 279-AD."

I exhaled, forcing patience into my voice. "We're at our assigned position, I need a sitrep of Doru's sector three."

"Right... one moment sir."

Silence reigned for nearly a minute before Raik Vol's gruff voice echoed around my ears. "Kean. Kandros is currently being attacked by a mixed group of freelancers and Vorcha, Krogan are observing and supporting at a distance. The engagement is slowing, she is preparing her pull back. Expect company within the half hour."

"Expecting contact in the next thirty," I confirmed, "Will hang around through the Talon's pull back regardless."

There was a deep grunt as he cut the line, having given the information I needed... or at least, the information that he had that I needed.

"Well, at least we aren't down there." Shyeel murmured, settling into the window she'd picked and idly resting her Kishok on the sill before glancing through its scope. "That cabal is setting up all right, should hold against anything but a horde."

"There's a few of those going around." I grimaced as I walked over, glancing over her shoulder to see the Asari in question using their biotics to yank massive sheets of metal from the walls and floor to build themselves a little fort. "Huh... clever. How's your hands?"

"Fine, long as I take my drugs once a week." She exhaled audibly. "Better than taking them everyday. Starting biotic exercises when I wake up on normal mornings."

"Getting any touch for those back?"

Shyeel rolled a shoulder, "Some. I can nudge things around without it hurting, so that's progress. How are you doing?"
"Same as ever." I sighed, shifting so that I could lean against the wall. "Illyan hasn't noticed anything, but she can only do shallow melds."

My fellow Reyja'krem glanced up at me before returning her visor to the window. "Yeah, makes sense with how young she is. Still, probably a good sign that she hasn't found anything either way. You notice anything off with her?"

"No."

I pressed my lips together a little. We are all more than a little paranoid about indoctrination, especially after Illyan's encounter with the orb on Benihi... and how close I'd been to it. As far as I knew, the Leviathans actually needed an orb present to affect people, but that information could very easily be wrong. "We'll both need time with Ghai when this is done."

"Yeah... lot of that going around." Shyeel murmured before shaking her head, "Let's get off this depressing shit. How are you and Illyan doing?"

Resisting the urge to ask just who else she thought needed to talk with Ghai, I was pretty sure that the I knew, I rolled my shoulder in a shrug. "She hasn't slept with anyone else yet, even if she keeps trying to convince me to have a threesome with Joa or Ayle. In private as well as public I mean, it's not just teasing."

There was a snort. "She would. You going to?"

"Not really comfortable with the idea." I admitted before changing the topic away from that awkwardness, "How are you and Voya doing?"

"I can hug her without her freaking out, but only from the front." It was her turn to shrug. "Honestly I'm more... no, not bringing that up."

I let out a slow breath, "Shyeel..."

She shook her head once, "I'm learning my goddess-damned lessons, keeping my mouth shut for once."

"Wonders never cease."

Something like a growl came out of her throat, "You really are a shit sort-of-friend, you know that right?"

"I try." I replied modestly before letting my tone become serious, "I want you watching over the Wave, Illyan will take the main window, and Voya will look out over the other street. I'll support all three of you based on the situation."

She grunted, nodding sharply. "We should have brought demo charges with, open some more holes in these walls."

"Add it to the list of crap we should always carry," I exhaled. Said list was starting to get pretty damn long considering it now included materials to build tech-traps out of, along with a good number of grenades for everyone and enough food and water to last us a week in case shit like Zeta happened again.

Paranoia was prudent, but it also weighed a lot, which was the only reason I'd avoided grabbing a combat drone or a deploy-able turret to help cover our flanks. Sometimes speed and mobility was far more important than being prepared for every single little eventuality. Of course that went hand in hand with the fact that there was only four of us, but I'd wanted to leave Trena with Ayle to give her a solid biotic she could trust.
Illyan and Voya returned a few minutes later, for once not bitching at each other as they came back up the stairs. They quickly took up the positions I indicated, the four of us settling in to wait for something to happen.

I expected to have fifteen or twenty minutes of crushing boredom, filled with rising hopes that no one would show up and we could go do something more worthwhile... followed immediately by enemies showing up and destroying said hopes.

But for once it didn't seem that Athame was going to drag crap out.

We'd been waiting for all of three minutes in companionable silence before Voya let out a sharp breath, shifting her weapon as her scope fed her visor targeting data. "Incoming; a dozen Scarlet Tears three blocks down."

I promptly moved over to the other window overlooking the neighboring building, hefting my rifle up as I narrowed my eyes. "I see them... moving in good order, from cover to cover. Right, let's get this started, tag the back ones, I'll try and suppress the front."

"Got it." Her Viper shifted as she adjusted her position, then began snapping out rounds in a steady rhythm.

My new rifle fired far more slowly, building the charge and flash-forging the projectile taking a few moments. Still, each round thundered out to send shrapnel flying from the metal street, and I did manage a two direct hits that made one of the red-armored figures stagger, and the other tumbled to the ground in a heap.

The Scarlet Tears might have been a bunch of collective psychopaths, but they weren't stupid. It took them all of three seconds to realize where the fire was coming from, and to start working at suppressing us while they tried to shift to the side of the street we couldn't get line of sight to.

Our barriers and armor turned aside the few shots that found us, or deflected away the bits of plaster and other crap from the walls as the incoming fire stared blowing holes in it for us.

"Shit." I snarled as I saw more motion coming out of a doorway several buildings down, informing me that it must have held another exit from the countless tunnels and ducts that ran through the station. "More of them. Vorcha... shit, Krogan!"

A carnage round came in at about the same time as my last remark, blowing a fist sized hole in the left wall and making me swear as I flinched back. Dust filled the air before my HUD filtered it out, revealing Illyan already hefting her heavy weapon to the new firing point and starting to blast away at the oncoming attackers.

Staggering back to my window, I took a long moment to observe what the fuck was going on. The commando unit of Tears was down to seven or eight members thanks to Voya being far more accurate than I was, but there had to be a good two dozen Vorcha plus three Krogan reinforcing them.

"Shy!?" I shouted as I took aim at one of the Krogan before he vanished beneath the line of the building below us.

"Wave are engaged!" She snapped back as her Kishok let out a thunderous snap. "They're trying to come up the tunnel as well!"

Shit. This was far fucking more than I'd thought we'd be dealing with... bloody typical. "Voya, shift to the front, mines and grenades! Illyan, keep them honest!"
They didn't need to be told twice, Illyan continuing to fire long bursts that forced the enemy to stay on a fairly predictable path, which in turn let Voya and I start utilizing our equipment with some degree of success. Incinerates began to sail out from our launchers as we directed their course, flashes of fire quickly starting to work over the Vorcha despite the fact that most of them seemed to be actually wearing armor.

The situation got worse as they got closer, increasingly getting under our guns, dull detonations echoing from below us as the first over-eager attackers tried to enter the first floor and ate high explosives for their trouble. Risking sticking my head out of my window, I jerked it back before dropping one of my two fragmentation grenades to blow apart a Tear and two Vorcha.

If nothing else the combination of having bombs dropped on top of them, plus the obviously booby-trapped store, seemed to make them draw up short to actually think crap over for once. Two of them tried to throw their own grenades up at us, only for Illyan to deftly flick them with her biotics. The rest followed one of the Krogan has he smashed his way inside the building beside us, shouting for everyone to regroup with him to come up with a plan.

"I hate it when they actually think." Voya snarled as the last target vanished, leaving fifteen or so corpses in the street. "Makes shit so much more annoying."

"Speak for the goddess." I groaned in reply, hating the additional reminder that these members of the Blood Pack weren't nearly as predictable as I was used to, "Shyeel, how's the Wave doing?"

"Talons are starting to come up, but they're getting pressed!" She returned before letting loose another round from her gun. "Shit, I need to get down there to support them from a better angle."

"Go." I snapped.

The Asari hefted her gun up before raising a boot and planting it in the window sill. Her outline briefly blurred with blue-light before she flashed away, slamming back into existence somewhere down below.

Trusting Illyan and Voya to watch the front, I hopped over to where Shyeel had just been and took a quick look for myself. Sure enough, there was now a good dozen people in red and black supporting the Asari in their swirling paint scheme. Shyeel had arrived near the lifts, which were flashing to show they were hauling more people up, and even as I watched she settled onto a knee and resumed shooting.

"Rate of fire is... not good." I grimaced, reaching up to open my comms, "Shit, what the fuck are you shooting at?"

"Tears." The scarred Reyja'krem reported flatly. "Maybe thirty of them, they've rigged up aircars and they're pushing them forwards as cover."

I blinked a little, "They armored them?"

"Yeah, and got them hovering to make them easy to push." She snarled. "Fucking competent assholes, I think they've got a pair of heavy guns they want to get close enough to shred anyone coming up the lifts."

Aforementioned 'anyone' proved to be the first groups of wounded gangsters, Nyreen quite sensibly getting her most vulnerable people away from the heavier fighting down below as she retreated. Of course that left them to stumble, limp, or be carried behind what little cover the Cresting Wave had thrown up, all of them clearly disturbed to be thrown into another firefight already.
"Have the worst cases sent-" Our building shuddered in time with a dull roar of noise, entirely interrupting my attempt to get some of the wounded out of the way. A few heartbeats later, more tech mines began going off in cracks of noise, but these were clearly on the floor below us rather than the ground level.

Athame's fucking ass... they'd gotten up onto the second floor of the building beside us, then blasted their way through the walls to try and get into ours.

"Demo charges next time..." I growled as I stomped over to the stairwell, swapping my rifle for my heavy pistol and spinning up my omni-tool once again. "Could have brought this whole bloody building down."

More traps went off in quick succession, Vorcha snarling in time with at least one of them, and then the first person managed to get to the stairwell. The Scarlet Tear died messily, the overload I'd had ready ripping away his barriers to let my oversized cannon blow a pair of holes in the Turian's armor.

His body had barely begun to tumble back before a pair of Vorcha had tried to rush me. One ate a round with his teeth, while the other managed to wildly fire an SMG that stitched my barriers down more than a little before I put two rounds into his chest.

A dull alarm flashed across my HUD as the hand cannon began venting heat, and I shoved it back into its holster while the fingers on my left hand primed an incinerate. Throwing that forwards when a massive head risked a quick glance around the second floor landing, I ducked back as I heard the Krogan let out a pained snarl after the detonation.

His shotgun boomed through the space I'd occupied, tearing a pit out of a wall and making me grimace as his feet began to thunder on the stairs.

"Voya! If you could!" I called back.

The following explosions were...rather loud, and rather inflammatory. I quickly took several more steps back as the burning liquid from a Batarian napalm grenade sprayed out to ignite the expensive wood flooring, barley cognizant of the sound of a huge body tumbling down stairs.

"Voya." I spoke her name as a curse as the glow increased, making it clear that the flames were already spreading beyond the initial blast.

"Denying them the use of the building." She snapped back, "Thank me later, escape now!"

I could only swear and spin around, following as she and Illyan raced for our pre-planned escape window, the three of us bailing out of the burning building.

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**Branded Survivor**

I could only gape as smoke began to billow out of every level of the building I'd just been in, fire flicking within the windows as it rapidly began to spread. Voya and Illyan must have pooled their incendiary grenades and set them to remote, and then forgotten to tell Cieran and I about their little plan.

Shaking my head, and trusting that they'd gotten out, I returned my focus to the problem in front of me.

The Scarlet Tears were rapidly closing the range thanks to their mobile shields, the cars floating side-on towards us with makeshift armor plating absorbing too fucking much of the firepower we were
trying to throw at them. Grenades and biotic attacks had blown one of them to pieces, and left another stuck on the ground, but that still left a pair relentlessly heading our way... and those small victories had come at the expense of all of the grenades that the Cresting Wave girls had had on them.

Letting out a long breath, I settled my scope onto the current idiot manning the LMG laid out on the vehicle's front. The heavy rifle whined as the charge built up, then let out its distinctive crack as the harpoon was released to tear the top half of the asshole's head off.

That was the third gunner I'd killed, and this time they seemed to get the message, with no one moving to take his place just yet.

"Rotate the barrier!" The huntress running the cabal shouted, two of her maidens quickly switching places to keep the barrier protecting the sight-lines to the lift intact. "I want a coordinated warp-strike on the right car in ten!"

"Talons!" I barked, "Focus right, keep them pinned down! Overheat!"

The gangsters rushed to obey, their guns snapping out a flurry of rounds to try and cover the Asari as they settled into better positions to throw out biotic power. The Tears, unfortunately, refused to be cowed.

Instead they started flinging grenades of their own, one nullifier making a pair of maidens shriek, and several flash-bangs polarizing my visor even as the less-protected Talons reeled back from the effects. Those enemies still stuck behind the destroyed and disabled car promptly began a barrage of their own, pinning down those lucky enough to have escaped the grenades.

Swearing violently, I was rising from my crouch and reaching for my two incendiary grenades, intending to try and at least make them think twice about rushing us, when the situation changed.

One of the Tears abruptly went down to a sniper firing from behind, and then another. A third dropped a heartbeat later, and their oaths of confusion were loud enough to be heard even over the gunfire. More conventional fire began to sound off a few breaths later, and jerking my scope back up to my helmet revealed figures rapidly approaching the Tears from behind.

A lot of them looked like former slaves or other lower tiered trash, but they moved with the trained discipline of soldiers; from cover to cover, firing tight bursts from secured positions and sprinting when in the open. Amongst them were a much smaller number of figures in mixed armor, and seemed to be acting as commanders.

The shock of the attack forestalled the Tears attempt to rush us, giving everyone time enough to recover and leaving the Krogan's patsies stuck between two sets of people who wanted to kill them.

It didn't take us long, especially with whoever the fuck was sniping from the other end of the tunnel. From the rate of fire, I was guessing there had to be at least two to three of them, firing in tandem sequence... and all of them were bloody good shots. At least at my level, probably a bit better. I stopped bother trying to shoot after the third time my target dropped before I could fire, shaking my head in bemusement.

The call began as the last Tears fell, leaving only sporadic gunfire coming from where Cie and the others still held our flank. "Hold fire, hold fire!"

Leaving them all to negotiate with whatever low-district gang had just showed up, I collapsed my Kishok and drew my pistol as I started jogging back towards the side-street.
Our old building was very much burning at this point, and automated fire-fighting equipment on its neighbors were clearly the only things stopping them from going up as well. I was about to flash forwards to try and locate the fighting when it emerged from the fourth doorway on my right, Cieran tumbling out in a combat roll just in time to avoid a Krogan trying to blast his head off with a shotgun.

The massive alien let out a snarl, pursuing his smaller target and thrusting with the flash-forged bayonet at the end of his shotgun.

I could only roll my eyes as Cieran promptly did his usual thing when a Krogan was that stupid. His gangly body neatly dipped aside, a single hand pushing the weapon past him as he stepped inside the Krogan's guard and jammed his hand-cannon into the vulnerable spot its neck... and then he was half-coated in orange blood as he jumped back to avoid the twitching corpse.

"Cleared!" He shouted into the building.

A single gunshot preceded Illyan calling back, "Clear!"

Relaxing slightly, I slowed my jog to a walk and rose my own voice in turn, "Cie, clear on our side!"

"Good." His head seemed to shake as he turned over to face me, his long legs getting moving as our friends emerged from the building. Neither looked injured, but they were clearly as tired as I was abruptly feeling. "Come on, let's go see if anyone has some explosives to seal the warren entrances with, we're out."

Nodding, I turned as he got close enough and walked with him back to the lift bank, the area becoming increasingly crowded as more Talons exited from the various elevators and were quickly directed to get out of the way.

Our apparent allies had evidently sent a few medics on ahead to help out, beings in ragged clothing but carrying the appropriate supplies quickly starting to tend to the various wounded.

"Casualties?" Cie asked as our pace slowed, "And who are they?"

"Three Talons and one Wave girl dead, two and two wounded, not including the Talons coming up." I reported, "And no idea, they had good timing though, fight was about to get seriously bloody."

He grunted, then shifted his direction to head towards the tunnel. "Voya, Illyan, find some bombs or enough grenades to get the job done, I'm going to go figure out what the fuck this is."

His lover and my girlfriend waved and nodded to show that they'd heard, our little group splitting up as I elected to follow him.

The apparent leader was a Turian male, though he looked somewhat awkward and a little nervous as the cabal's huntress craned her neck back to look up at him while they conversed. Said Asari noticed our approach first, and gave us a tight nod.

"Blades, thanks for the assist." She waved a hand at the big guy, "This is Sidonis, they brought up a bunch of volunteers from Kima."

"Sidonis?" Cieran actually groaned at the name, reaching up hand covered in Krogan blood before thinking better of rubbing at his helmet. "Of bloody course it is."

The Turian's mandibles flicked even as I tried and failed to place the name, "I don't think we've ever
"No, but I know your boss." My friend exhaled tiredly. "Get him."

Sidonis twitched his mandibles several more times, shifting his weight awkwardly as Cieran kept his visor locked onto his eyes. After several long breaths of that awkwardness, the crowd behind him seemed to part in order to allow another Turian male through.

This one as about the same height, but clad crest to talons in blue and black armor. He held a massively customized sniper rifle in his hands, maybe a human-built Mantis, though the design seemed off to me for some reason... it looked like it actually had some kind of a magazine, which didn't make any goddess-damned sense at all.

"Kean." Whatever voice-muffler he was using needed some work, because his utter disgust came out just fine. "Of course you're here."

"That's my line." Cieran crossed his arms across his chest, "You actually going to fucking help defend the station, or were you just hoping to break open Tuhi's slave pens in the confusion?"

I realized who it was as he spoke again, answering the question with one of his own. "Why would we help one slaving Warlord against another?"

"Because one's probably going to kill everyone on this station as a fucking message to the other." Cie snapped back at him, "I'm sure the freed slaves will love their few days of freedom before they asphyxiate or die of dehydration."

Archangel didn't seem to react to that, but several of his nearby 'soldiers' glanced at one another or shuffled awkwardly. "What are you talking about?"

Letting out a breath, I risked interjecting myself into the conversation. "Afterlife was the old Turian command center, back when this rock was first inhabited. It's got the environmental controls for the three upper districts, and its lower levels have equipment that manages the water mains running down the core. Ganar takes it, he can kill damn near everyone outside of Zeta in a matter of days."

"Shit." Sidonis breathed, his mandibles flaring wide. "And you think that's what the attack is about? Ganar sending Aria a message?"

"I think he knows he lost, and he's trying to take as many people down with him as he can." I replied flatly. "If he happens to do it in a way that lets him take on Aria, all the better."

Archangel seemed to process that, though his visor never left Cie's. "That's why that old Krogan is command... he's your best chance at holding out."

"Our best chance." Cieran countered irritably. "Or are you really saying you aren't going to get involved in something that will kill everyone on this bloody rock?"

The armored Turian was silent for a few heartbeats, then casually walked forwards until he was almost looming over us. To Cie's right, the huntress started to lift her weapon, only to freeze when the human snapped an arm out to keep it down.

"I've heard a lot of stories about you, Kean." The sniper kept his concealed voice low, almost subsonic. "Things you've done, people you've murdered."

"Maybe we can trade notes sometime." Cieran countered flippantly, "See who's got the better they-deserved-it ratio. Fifty credits says me."
"Two hundred on me." He countered in turn before returning to his original speech, "Point is, you're a murderous ass, but you're supposed to be good to your word. That shit about Afterlife true?"

"Yes." There was a slight nod, "You think I'd have cared about protecting Aria's turf if it wasn't?"

"I think that you're an assassin. A professional murderer. A monster." Archangel lowered his voice further. "I think that I should have killed you instead of letting you walk away. Maybe then the citizens of Benihi wouldn't have suffered."

I sucked in a breath, and Cieran went utterly still. "Who the fuck told you about that? It was less than bloody month ago."

"You're nothing more than a creature of the Terminus." He continued as if Cie hadn't spoken, "You preserve the rule of monsters stronger than you, letting them continue to rape and pillage, to enslave and-

My eyes widened in horror as I lurched to my right entirely on reflex. I barely caught Cie's arm before he could level his pistol at Vakarian's head, desperation giving me the strength to haul it down before he could pull the trigger.

Shit got understandably tense at that, with the huntress and Sidonis snapping their weapons to point at each other while everyone else scattered farther away from us.

When Cie spoke again, each word was cold, bitten off with fury. "If you ever accuse me of aiding and abetting slavers or rapists again, Archangel, I will fucking tear your heart out and send it to Shepard in a fucking box."

Archangel didn't look terribly bothered by the threat, or the emotion behind it. "If you weren't right about having to work together, I'd think I'd like to see you try it, murderer."

I had to struggle to keep Cie's arm down again, his anger only seeming to grow. "I think the fucking ice you're standing on is too goddess-damned thin to be throwing shit around, vigilante. You heard about Benihi? I've heard about some of the shit you've been doing on this station."

It was Vakarian's turn to go still, hands clicking more tightly around his rifle.

"The Eclipse? The slaving shits who live in Kima? Fucking whatever. But then you went after the fucking Talons and the bloody Brotherhood. The only Athame-cursed gangs that actually try to be civilized, who actually care about the people in their fucking territory." Cieran snarled the words, his tsunami of words gaining momentum. "If I'm a fucking murderer you rate serial killer at the fucking least you hypocritical piece of shit."

This time it was Sidonis who had to stop someone from doing something stupid, the bare-headed Turian diving between his boss and Cieran, his voice a bare mutter as he pushed Archangel back before he could lift his rifle.

"Cie." I muttered in turn, "I know he's a fucking ass, but we bloody well could use someone as good as he is."

His helmet shifted, letting him meet my visored gaze with his own. He didn't nod so much as twitch his chin, but at least he let me get his hand cannon back into its holster. I still didn't let go of his arm however... I didn't feel like taking the risk.

"We'll fight." Archangel's voice made us both look over to see the Turian turning away, letting his subordinate push him back towards the very awkward looking crowd behind them. "But we're
fighting for what few innocents there are on this spirits forsaken station. I won't take orders from you, or that old monster you've dragged out."

"Whatever." Cie snapped back. "At least we can fucking admit that we're monsters and don't hide behind fancy fucking words. If you get over yourself, report to Afterlife."

Vakarian didn't deign to reply to that, instead striding away with every sign of suppressed fury. After a couple of breaths, his people started to follow him, the platoon sized formation of armed ex-slaves dutifully following.

"All right..." Illyan dragged the words out, making us both glance up as she and Voya returned, both holding bags probably filled with explosives. She flicked her helmet to the retreating group, and then to where I still had both of my hands clamped around Cieran's gun arm. "What in Athame's name did we just miss?"

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**Next up is Vent Breach**

Chapter End Notes

This saga could easily be twice as long, but a lot of it would just be filler engagements that reinforce what everyone already knows about the core character's mental states. Case in point, this chapter feels rushed to me despite being one of the longer ones. Oh, and Cieran and Garrus don't like each other very much. News at eleven.

We've got two more chapters until we reach the events of the prologues from Vengeance and this story, which will compromise the entirety of Cieran's POV for chapter five as a refresher. Shyeel's POV for that section will be suitably lengthened to make sure you all have new content to read regardless. Just four more chapters... then four epilogue chapters... we're very closed to the end now.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
The next three local days passed in a kind of violent routine as we adhered to Patriarch's battle plan. It wasn't a plan that would allow us to win in the long term, none of us seriously thought that we could given the relative quality of our forces, but it was hopefully one that would allow us to lose slowly enough for Aria to get back and handle this shit.

To accomplish that goal, he'd pulled out a lot of very old strategies that the Council had come up with during the rebellions. Rather than trying to stop the attackers cold, like Ayle and the Eclipse were being forced to do, we were instead utilizing a kind of three-dimensional defense in depth.

The core goal was to lure large groups of the Krogan forward, allowing them to extend themselves before cutting off their flanks and rear-lines and encircling them. Omega's own design worked well in that regard, with the open courtyards and streets acting as almost perfect kill zones once the lower buildings were sealed up to prevent easy entry. It still took bloody forever, goddess-damned Krogan, but at least we'd been able to start killing them in something like reasonable numbers.

That part was mostly being handled by the White Tigers and the Shadows, Bern and Juyl working surprisingly well together considering how much they loathed one another. In a way it probably had actually helped, since they'd had years of conflict to learn each others preferred strategies and capabilities.

Still, given their relatively low quality of gear, they were being heavily reinforced by the Cresting Wave. The Asari group was useful beyond their low numbers simply because they had the more modern weaponry than most other gangs, and biotics on top of that. As a result they typically took center position when it came to eliminate the 'pockets' of furious Krogan.

All of that had worked well for one shift, and worked tolerably for three more, and then Ganar had finished making his own adjustments. His attacks had gotten more sporadic, more carefully planned out, and with his Krogan spreading out to reinforce the their entire line rather than concentrating in easily noticed groups. It heavily slowed down their advanced upwards, but it had started to shift the fighting more towards the slow slog that Krogan did best.

"It is time to begin phase three." Raik Vol rumbled as he paced a circle around the map of the station. "Ganar adjusted as I expected, now it is time to take advantage of the dilution of his forces."

I exhaled and nodded slightly, glancing at the other two gang leaders present. Nyreen had her hood
down, her mandibles twitching as she watched the old Krogan pace. Her relationship with him had been strained after he'd openly used her full name, but she hadn't allowed it to affect her professionalism.

Eldest Brother Kith stood on her other side, the Brotherhood's leader certainly living up to the title of 'eldest'. He was easily the oldest Turian male I'd ever seen, his skin mottled and his plates cracked, and even walking seemed to cause him pain. Despite that his eyes remained quick and intelligent, and age hadn't dulled his mind any.

"My people are prepared." The old man spoke, his flanging voice quiet, "Those of the faith are likewise ready to begin their resistance."

I grimaced a little. "Lot of them are going to end up dead doing this."

"They will join the ancestors with honor." He lifted his chin, "We will give Ganar much to concern himself with behind his lines."

Nyreen's mandibles twitched twice, the only sign of displeasure that she allowed herself. "The Talons are in position and ready to begin the counter-attack, assuming that Kean's people are ready."

"They are." I confirmed, "Dietrich and Glitch are waiting in the target zone, just waiting on us to get down there."

Ayle hadn't been thrilled to let go of the insane mech or the power armor units, but she'd agreed that the plan was solid enough after it had been laid out for her. And in either case, the fighting around the Eclipse's den had definitely decreased as Ganar had pulled his heavier attackers away from it in favor of bolstering his push towards Afterlife.

Which was unfortunately sensible of him. Taking out those docks would have made Aria's return far more difficult... but not nearly as difficult as she'd find things if she returned to a station filled with a few million corpses.

He'd left enough people in place to make it difficult for the Eclipse to launch any kind of counter-attack, and had personally lead an attack that had resulted in the destruction of the main lifts connecting those docks to the upper districts. We still had a few smaller ones, sufficient to move small groups up and down, but moving the entire Eclipse detachment was out of the picture.

"Good." Vol slowed his movements, planting his staff as he regarded the map with one eye, "Go over the plan once more."

"Simple strike and fade." I supplied, though I knew there wasn't going to be anything simple about it once we got started. "We're setup in lower Fumi, and we'll follow the main streets towards Tuhi and engage the Blood Pack in zone thirteen. Once we've breached their lines, we'll advance hard towards lift bank nineteen with the goal of destroying it to deny Ganar the easy route into Fumi."

"While Kean's team is focusing on that," Kandros stepped forwards, lifting a hand to trace our route with a single clawed finger. "We will be supporting his push and spreading out along these lines. The Eclipse engineers we brought up will sabotage and trap suitable buildings as we progress. Once the lifts are destroyed, we will begin a controlled withdrawal."

"Good." The Krogan nodded once. "Kith?"

The old Turian croaked out his part, "Once we have your order, our people and those of the faith still in Doru will begin our attack on the Krogan's back ranks. Our focus will be on the siege around the Eclipse zone, with the goal of weakening sufficiently to allow them to attempt their own attacks."
Vol shifted his head to regard him, "And the lessers?"

Kith shrugged stiffly, "The Eight-Zero Demons will move when I give the word, but the Blood Arrows had fled to Cala."

The Warlord didn't look surprised in the least at the news, "The Sons?"

My lip curled in disgust, and Kandros let out a low, furious sound. Kith flicked his eyes in our direction, his rasping voice sounding amused when he spoke again, "The True Sons are prepared to engage the enemy, they will be attempting to secure sector nine."

"Good. They are incompetent, but tenaciously so. They will buy us time." Vol flicked his chin towards the door, "You two, to your jump-off points. Kith, to your command chapel. I will alert you when the push has begun."

Twitching my jaw in something like I nod, I turned away and got moving, Nyreen easily keeping up as the pair of us headed down the stairs.

"Can't believe those little shits are still around." I growled the moment I was sure we were out of Patriarch's hearing. "I thought you'd wiped them out."

"So had I." She sounded at least as irritated as I was. "Apparently more than a few managed to flee to Kima and have been rebuilding in that cesspit of a district. When this is over-"

"Just give me a time and tell me how many troops you want." I let out a hissing breath between my teeth, "Shit, if we have to scour Kima from top to bottom we bloody will. I really, really don't want to have deal with them a... shit, fourth time."

The Talon's leader gave me the Turian equivalent of a bemused grin, "Assuming we survive, I'll take you up on that."

Snorting, I shook my head as we exited Afterlife. A trio of Talon lieutenants I didn't know were waiting for Nyreen, the Krogan and paired Turian males falling in behind her, while Illyan pushed herself off the wall she'd been leaning on to walk on my right.

"We go for the operation then?" She asked, tossing me my helmet.

I caught it and hauled it over my skull, "Yeah. Voya and Shyeel head down already?"

"Yup." Illyan spoke as she checked to make sure her heavy weapon was secure on her back, "Figured it would be good to have Voya there to keep Glitch in line."

"Can't argue with that." Especially given that Glitch was... well, Glitch.

None of us were sure about the extant of the thing's sapience, though its intelligence didn't seem to be a constant. It definitely fluctuated, peaking during battle, and decreasing the longer we kept it out of a fight. We had managed to locate two of its core rules, though they hadn't been terribly surprising. One was to be an almost obsessive-compulsive bodyguard for me during any engagement, while the other... Well, it was harder for us to work the exact code, but it seemed to be the cause for its fear of Voya.

Rane had probably intended it as an amusing little thing to tease the Quarian with. Still, it was proving useful, as any order Voya gave it actually seemed to stick... for a while, anyway.

Departing the area around Afterlife, the six of us headed down the main street until we reached the
specific lift bank that would drop us down to Fumi. Nodding to the guards currently on duty, one of
the few squads of Aria's people still left, we packed into the paired elevators waiting for us.

A few minutes later and we were back in what had once been our home, the familiar stepped
building of Fumi looming over us as the arch of Omega's central cavern stretched out high above. On
reflex I flicked my eyes up and to the right, eventually finding the tall hotel five levels up, the heart of
the Talon's operations in this district... and which stood less than a block away from Ironhold.

Half closing my eyes, I let out a slow breath and forced my gaze to turn to the massed army waiting
for us. Talons were packed into the street, into doorways and alleys, divided up by squads with
officers shouting orders to double-check equipment and to get ready to move out.

The sole exception to the tightly packed formation was the area directly ahead, where eight oversized
figures loomed over the only two figures who felt secure enough to stand near them. Or rather, to
stand near Glitch and it's macabre necklace of trophies. I had no idea where Voya had found the
Geth heads to replace those lost on Redcliffe, but the Krogan crests and shattered Scarlet Tear's
helmets were all obviously recent acquisitions.

"Cie." Dietrich's deep voice boomed from his armor's speakers, the bulky power armor shifting as
we approached. "Madame Red. Any updates?"

"Deet." I replied with a nod, "No. You ready?"

He hefted the massive rifle in his suit's right hand in reply, clanging it against the combat shield
bolted to his left. "We're good. Let's get this shit done."

"Kandros?"

The Turian woman nodded in response to my question, raising her voice, "Talons! We're moving
out!"

Our make-shift army clattered to its feet in response to her words, the gangsters falling in behind the
wall of steel made by Dietrich and his unit as they took point. Nyreen began speaking into her helmet
as we moved, getting the formations waiting on other levels to get going as well. She and her inner
circle fell back slowly as we moved, eventually pulling aside into a burned out shop that had been
converted to serve as her command post.

"One block to go." I muttered across the private line I shared with my companions, debating
weapons before pulling my submachine gun off my belt. "Everyone stick behind the power armor,
no unnecessary exposure until we hit close combat. Voya, you're running Glitch, keep it on plan."

"I'll handle it." She assured me, "Can I have the big idiot to funnel crap in front of it?"

Illyan let out a sufficing sound of pure irritation, but shifted from my left over towards Voya all the
same. Shyeel switched places with her, keeping her carbine up on a shoulder we jogged along. "Let
me guess, cover you?"

I rolled a shoulder, "If you don't have anything better to do. And checking out Voya's ass doesn't
count."

"Eh, it looks better out of armor."

It was Voya's turn to let out an annoyed sound, turning her helmet to make it clear she was clearing
at the pair of us. Well, at me mostly, Shyeel was probably just a secondary target.
The words brought a bark of laughter as Dietirch joined the line, his voice merry. "Shyeel? With Voya? When did this happen?"

"None of your-"

"Few months back." I interrupted the Quarian's attempt to stop the conversation.

"Does Haro'chi know?" He asked conversationally, even as we began to pound past the civilians and Talons assigned to defend the front line just ahead, all of them piling out of our way. "I am assuming not."

"If you tell him I'll cut your fucking dick off." Voya hissed.

"I will keep that in mind." Which meant he was going to tell him anyway... which meant the three of us were going to have to stop Voya from making real on that threat. Joy. "Contact ahead, let us get to work."

There was a chorus of clicks as he patched in his unit into our private channel, almost at once swallowed by the heavy sound of their cannons booming out rounds. Shifting a bit to the right, I managed to see in between Dietrich and the suit next to him. As usual, the Blood Pack hadn't bothered to erect many defenses of their own, relying instead on whatever they could quickly throw together to discourage raids while they prepared attacks of their own.

Few Krogan were on the front, leaving picket duty to the Vorcha. The power armor ahead of us didn't leave many of the viral aliens for us to deal with, the four of us and the Talons behind merely executing the few crippled survivors as we moved past them.

We made it a good block or so of easy progress before we encountered the Krogan, who began spilling out of the buildings that they'd been resting or preparing in. Others stayed inside, supporting those who preferred to get up close and personal, and the neat advance quickly devolved into the chaotic brawl of urban combat.

A freelancer in ragged clothing went down screaming as my Watcher stitched a burst across his stomach, the sound ceasing when I put a single round through the Batarians's forehead. Jerking my head around as he expired, I cursed when I saw Shyeel dive out of the way of a Varren, taking two long strides and kicking the thing before it could get its jaws around her leg.

"We're at marker two!" I shouted into my comms as we both shot the thing, reaching out with my left hand to haul the Asari to her feet. "Say again!"

Nyreen had to shout back for me to hear her, even with my bloody helmet, "I said all attacks are on schedule! Continue the advance!"

"Confirmed!" I replied, twisting my neck around to find Illyan and Voya.

It didn't take long, the pair of them keeping up a steady stream of tech mines and biotic attacks to funnel enemies towards Glitch. The mech seemed to be enjoying that, both of its light machine guns were glowing red as it let out another electronic shriek, one foot keeping a prone Krogan pinned for a trio Talons to kill.

Moving in that direction, I fired at whoever Shyeel picked out as we jogged, my lighter gun combining with her heavy rounds to put down a Scarlet Tear who was trying to get behind one of the powered suits, freeing that Blade up to finish killing the Krogan they were wrestling with.

"You three, with us!" I shouted as we got closer, "Glitch, advance and secure the next corner! Watch
We got moving in a tight little ball, advancing up the right side of the street. Dietrich's unit continued to push up the center in good order, rotating his suits to make sure none of them took too much damage. That was too late for one, a Batarian male named Jorsh had lost his weapon and had instead fallen back to use his body and shield to protect medics ferrying the wounded back.

Ahead of us, Glitch blared a siren sound as it abruptly rushed ahead, ignoring Voya's epithets and orders to stop. The reason for its impromptu charge became immediately apparent as it abruptly slammed to a stop as something struck it from the front, driving the massive mech backwards a good meter as sparks flew from its feet.

"Oh fucking shit." I cursed as I realized what was happening, the Berserker becoming visible as it heaved Glitch to throw the machine onto its side. "Focus fire!"

The enhanced Krogan snarled and lifted an arm, our rounds slamming into a blazing omni-shield. It let out a titanic roar as it bulled forwards, hefting a Claymore in one hand and firing as it came onwards. Illyan took a round, her barriers shattering as she dove aside with a vicious oath. A second round hit one of her legs as she scrambled back, making me curse as I moved forwards to draw his attention away from her.

It definitely seemed to work, his helmet snapping towards me as I closed. The massive shotgun swung in my direction, firing a round that slammed into my barriers and sent my HUD screaming as they collapsed. In better news, the Krogan dropped the overheated weapon, reaching an arm back to draw a second Claymore from his back.

I dodged right forcing him to twist his omni-shield to absorb the heavy burst I tried to put in his side. That left him open for the Talons and Voya, who began to hammer his front with rifle fire while Shyeel fell back to haul a still-swearine Illyan away from the fight.

The Berserker snarled as its sparks flew off of its barriers, flailing an arm in my direction and forcing me to dive forwards. It started to bring its shotgun after me only to roar in fury as Voya flashed past its other side, one of her knives slashing at the thin protection around its wrist. Claymore number two promptly tumbled to the ground on reflex as it spun around in the other direction, biotics surging with the motion to wash over the Quarian.

Her weakened shields shorted out from the broad push even if it didn't do more than make her stumble. But that tiny motion cost her time that the Krogan used to wreath his fist in warpfire, and he reared back to slam his fist right into the petite woman's skull. She probably could and would have dodged, but was saved the bother when Dietrich arrived.

The power armor propelled shield slammed into the Berserker's helmet in a shockingly loud clash of metal before he could deliver the punch, sending him crashing into the building and forcing me to flail once again to avoid being crushed as it staggered towards me.

I hadn't known that Deet had added an omni-bayonet to his suit's oversized cannon, but I found out when he rammed it into the Krogan's gut to pin it to the building. It had enough time for a single defiant roar, flaring with light as it tried to summon its biotics, and then Dietrich yanked his trigger and held it down.

"Berserker down." He reported almost casually, stepping back to allow the practically bisected corpse to collapse in a pool of blood and viscera. "Andy, Muraz, take point. Ulli, take a unit of Talons and cover the street ahead while we head for the lifts. Cie, you good?"
I grimaced tiredly as I rose to my feet, "Still alive, keep rolling forwards. Shyeel, how's Illyan?"

"Not walking for a bit." Came the prompt reply. "Most of the shot missed, didn't breach her armor, but she twisted something in her damned ankle trying to dodge."

"Cie, it's Red." Kandros cut off the conversation, "Abort the mission. Repeat, abort."

I blinked. "What?"

Raik Vol's impossibly deep voice boomed out instead of the Turian woman's, "Ganar has begun an attack of his own. Your group is to return to upper Tuhi at once to secure the upper markets."

"We're right at the fucking lifts!" I countered.

"Fumi is now irrelevant, he has poured his prime units into Tuhi." The Patriarch snapped back at me, "I need every fighter in that district to slow his push! Aircars are being sent via shafts, Kandros will direct you."

Three hours of fucking fighting our way towards our goddess-damned target... and suddenly it was entirely fucking pointless right when we were at our objective. That was just fucking typical.

I could only swear as he cut the line, "Athame's motherfucking ass... Dietrich, hold the advance and start pulling back!"

"I heard him." He sounded about as happy as I was, his team slowing to a halt. "Going to take us a while to get back, we'll cover the retreat."

"Agreed, we don't have any trucks to carry you regardless." Kandros let out a whistling sound of anger, "Kean, get your team to the courtyard two hundred meters back, cars are dropping down the shaft above to ferry teams up."

"Got it. Glitch!" The enormous mech finished heaving itself to its feet, its boxy head turning to regard me. "You're staying here and protecting Illyan."

My lover let out a furious sound, "I'm going with-"

"You can't bloody walk, much less run." Shyeel spoke before I could, "The only place you're going is back to Afterlife after a medic checks your legs."

"Glitch," I narrowed my eyes, "Confirm escort order."

"Order confirmed." It intoned. "Priority target Illyan to be escorted to medical personal. Bodyguard routines enabled."

Illyan kept cursing as we started to move, shouting after Voya and Shyeel to watch my left side as two of the Talons who'd been with us carefully got her up onto one leg. I could only roll my eyes in tired bemusement as we jogged back the way we'd come, dodging shuffling Talons as we did. Most of the gangsters didn't seem to be in that big of a hurry to abruptly change directions, not that I could really blame them. This had been billed as our big offensive, the thing that would really slow down the Blood Pack's ascent.

To be suddenly told to pull back, right when it had seemed like we'd won the bloody fight...

"They can't stop Cie." Voya growled as we moved, "Look at these bosh'tets. They won't be any good in another fight after this."
My lip twisted as I found myself entirely agreeing with her, snapping my comms back open. "Kandros, fuck what Vol wants, we're resuming the mission. Dietrich, prepare to continue the advance once the Talons are rallied. Take out the goddess-damned lift bank as quickly as you can."

There was a startled beat before the Turian woman spoke, "Kean?"

"We need a fucking win, if we pull back now morale is going to be shot even if we hold onto middle Tuhi." I elaborated, "Your people look like they're dead on their feet and are about to stop caring."

"They might not obey." Dietrich warned quietly, "Not so soon after being told to stop."

"They will if Kandros gets her ass down here and leads it personally." I exhaled, "She can have her subordinates manage a controlled withdrawal on the other levels, and commit her reserves to Tuhi with me."

"That's far less than Patriarch is demanding, shit is apparently pretty bad over there." She reminded me.

"Patriarch hasn't fought a bloody war in over a century, and he's a fucking Krogan." I snapped back, "I don't think he really understands the notion of morale all that well anymore, if he ever did. You can phase reinforcements over into upper Tuhi as the other units pull back and after this group finishes their objective."

"It would allow us to pull nearly everyone out of Fumi." Another voice cut in, a Talon officer whose name escaped me. "Especially if we keep the Eclipse engineers and set them to sealing the other levels ma'am. It would secure the District and let us commit more to Tuhi over the long term."

Kandros seemed to hesitate for a too-long heartbeat. "Do it. I'm en route to the main advance, managed a controlled withdrawal on the other levels. Redirect the sapper teams and reserve forces accordingly."

"Ma'am."

The main comms quickly became flooded with orders and chatter as the various groups once again began adjusting orders on the fly. We ended up reaching our target courtyard at about the same time as Nyreen and her personal guard made it there, the Turian woman snarling at idling Talons to get their asses in gear and head back the way they'd been shuffling.

Seeing their boss, her hood down and weapon drawn as she headed towards the front, seemed to rally them, thank the goddess. The unseen Talon officer, I finally recognized his voice as Lieutenant Hetherus, seriously helped with that. He kept up a steady broadcast of the revised plan, letting all of the Talons know what was happening and their part in it.

"Never thought that keshin would amount to anything." Voya remarked as we clambered into an aircar, the vehicle promptly shooting upwards once we'd gotten the doors closed.

"Right?" I remarked, glancing around the metal shaft as we rose, seeing a motley assortment of other vehicles rising and falling as they ferried troops upwards.

Behind us, Shyeel leaned forwards, her voice curious, "You two know him?"

"Was a Talon Lieutenant back when we worked on station." I replied, "Was kind of a dick. Seemed sort-of competent but I didn't really care for him... he's come a ways."

She let out a humming noise of interest before returning to business, "What's the plan?"
"Voya?"

The Quarian nodded, bringing her omni-tool up and quickly patching into the make-shift network. 
"...shit, Ganar's already advanced upwards three levels. The Tigers crippled the main lifts, but there's 
enough secondary ones that he's starting to get Krogan into the mid and upper levels. Patriarch's re-
routing defenders to blunt the main advance... we need to clear the Hesilo Markets."

I grunted, "More lifts there?"

"Yeah, the largest set that connects mid-Tuhi to Afterlife's district." Her long fingers flicked over the 
glowing panels. "Ganar's got a team fighting that way, but the Shadows and some civilians are 
slowing them down."

"How many Talons will we have?"

She rolled a shoulder, "Thirty or so to start with, more as the other reserve units can make it."

I grunted. That was far less than I'd hoped... but since I'd been the one to cut the numbers down, I 
couldn't exactly bitch. We'd just have to make do, and at least it would be a defensive fight. Those I 
was far more confident of my ability to command.

"Right." I exhaled as the vehicle reached the top of the artificial shaft, slewing sideways to settle on a 
landing platform already filling with gang members as they clambered out out of their own vehicles. 
"Let's get this done."

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Pillar of Strength

There was something uniquely horrible about watching a battle without taking part... it was kind of 
like watching a clawball game, in a demented way. You got to feel the mixed hope and excitement, 
listen and watch as your side made its preparations, got its plans in order, and then feel that sickening 
sensation in your gut as everything you cared about was thrown into a storm and dragged right to the 
fucking deeps.

Just, you know, with the added cost of knowing that people you cared about could be dying.

Honestly the trip back to Afterlife had been easier than actually being inside had been. At least while 
I'd been hauled along by medics and then stuffed into an elevator, the worst I'd had to deal with was 
my own imagination. Once I'd been carried into the command center, I'd been rewarded with the 
knowledge that my imagination apparently wasn't nearly as sick as reality.

Juyl was dead, butchered personally by Ganar in the lower levels of Tuhi. Huntress Chiek had barely 
escaped that encounter with her life, her daughters hauling her broken body down to Cala in the 
hopes of finding a doctor who could save her.

Bern and his Tigers were doing what they could, but the Shadows had routed when their boss had 
gone down, letting the Blood Pack surge upwards in rapid order. We'd lost nearly ten levels inside of 
an hour before the vanguard had smashed into the hasty defenses that Cieran had erected around the 
Hesilo slave markets.

That den of depravity had abruptly become the single most valuable piece of territory on the station, 
thanks to its numerous street connections and consolidated bank of lifts. While the latter could be, 
and had been, prepped for demolition, the former meant we stood to lose all of middle-Tuhi if we lost 
it.
And there were a lot of other lifts in that section, normally used to move 'product' from the secured pens to the various markets.

"Your mate fights well." Patriarch rumbled to me as the battle entered its fourth fucking hour. Tiny symbols moved and flickered as units reported taking and giving ground. "He is tenacious on the defensive... every meter of ground is claimed as his own, and he does not give them up without spilling Krogan blood."

"Yeah... he's had a lot of practice at that kind of fight." I exhaled, shifting a little in the chair I was stuck in. Talking to the ancient Warlord wasn't my idea of a fun time, but he'd insisted that I remain nearby. "He's not my bondmate though, I'm... a little young for that."

That seemed to amuse him. "Truly? Your stature is that of a warrior matron, I would not have said you are younger than four centuries."

"Not even two." I muttered, feeling more than a little self-conscious about that. Knowing that I was mature for my age and liking it were two different things, "Do you... do you think they'll hold?"

"I was... wary of his adjustment to my plans," The old monster allowed, "And it nearly cost them in the opening hour of the battle. Now however, I am reasonably certain that Hesilo will hold for at least the remainder of the shift."

I grimaced at the remainder. The first hour had been the worst, with the Krogan actually making it into the market square proper before a counter-attack had driven them back nearly a block. Cie was still all right, at least, all right enough to continue giving orders and trying to direct the battle, but I had no idea if Shyeel or the little bitch was wounded... or even fucking alive. "And after that?"

He rolled a shoulder in a small shrug, the motion still huge given his size, "After that, it will depend upon my old friend. I doubt that he will continue to push directly, at least for now. He will consolidate his advancements first, and that will take time. Then he will either resume the direct push, or he will re-route towards Aria's private docks."

"Her... what?" I blinked.

A massive lip twitched as the map adjusted itself, highlighting what were labeled as private warehouses and a water treatment plant. "This area is not what it seems. It is where Aria's personal yachts come and go."

There were more docks? Glancing around to get a better idea of where they were, I grimaced as I realized that they were in the lower zone of Afterlife's district, and very near to Tuhi. "Why aren't they stupidly heavily guarded? Shouldn't we have tons of people there? And why didn't you tell us about them?"

"You did not need to know." Raik Vol shrugged again, "Secrecy was Aria's defense, it allowed her to summon her colonial governors with minimal fuss."

I swallowed. "You... think Ganar knows about it?"

"I believe that he soon will, if he does not already." A clawed hand rose to rub at his broken chin, "Yes... that is where the next battle will occur. Aria will return soon, and if she can land there, she can slay Ganar even as her army arrives in Doru."

My throat worked as I swallowed again, "You... think Ganar himself will lead that attack?"

"Yes." He repeated. " Summon your Commander Massa, warrior maiden. I will need her for this
battle. I will be recalling Kean and your power armor detachment soon enough, you may await him in your quarters."

"You're sending us against Ganar?" I blurted. "I mean... we're good, and Cie is very good, but he's..."

"You will be taking all of Aria's remaining troops with you." He assured me, "And the planning will be exquisite. And, if my next conversation goes well, you will have further assistance in bringing down my old friend. Now leave, warrior maiden, I have a... delicate conversation to plan."

**Next up is: Amon Amarth**

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Chapter End Notes

Mostly a setup chapter for the next one, and a little short as a result. Apologies for that. The first battle alluded to in the prologues will be occurring very shortly, and we'll finally get to see the Krogan's would-be Emperor in battle.

After that we'll have the prologues put together... and then the final battle. Should be fun. :)

As for the last chapter... the fact that some of you sided with Garrus, some with Cie, and some seemed to agree with both made me happy that I crafted that conversation as I'd intended. Their relationship moving forwards is going to be interesting given the noted similarities between them, conflicted with their vastly different viewpoints. And the fact that they can both be serious pricks at times.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"They're coming." Shyeel announced as she flashed back into the hanger, panting a little from all of the biotic movement that she'd been doing over the last couple of days. "Front ranks should be here soon. Mixed Vorch and war Varren, no sign of Tears or Krogan yet."

"They'll be here soon enough." I exhaled, willing the various stimulants in my body to do a better fucking job. "Ayle, you in position down there?"

"Of course." She tried to sound nettled, but it came off as something closer to grim. "The barricades are in place, Dietrich's unit is established on the left. We have the main doors covered."

"Good, thanks. Cellidia?"

"Exterior defenses are online." The leader of what was left of Aria's forces responded from where she was sitting in the hanger's control room. Ayle had taken most of her people down to the hangar floor, but we'd left her an oversized squad for her own part. "I've got turret controls. Service corridors are welded shut but still being watched in case your old buddy shows up."

Which he probably would, and at the worst possible moment on top of that. "Right, remember to hold fire until the Krogan show up, I don't want Ganar knowing about your guns until their shooting him personally."

"I remember." She assured me.

"Good." I repeated before grimacing, "Archangel, you set in the rafters?"

There was a very long period of absolute silence, and I had to swallow a few choice words about the asshole up above me. I had no fucking idea how Patriarch had convinced him to join this particular fight, but whatever he'd said had only gotten him to show up; His attitude remained entirely fucking annoying to deal with.

A muscle in my cheek twitched as I spoke again, "I'm not giving you a bloody order, I'm politely inquiring if your ass is where you'd said it would be."

This time he responded, his voice more than a little nettled. "Settled in with good sight lines on both entrances. Your Quarian picked out a good position."
Beside me, Voya bristled visibly, tilting her head back to glare upwards. "I've got a name asshole."

He predictably ignored her, just as he had ever since he'd confirmed that she was the same person who'd gotten into a bar fight with Tali all those months ago. Then again, he'd basically ignored all of us in favor of picking out the best spots for his own plans, only talking to me when it was absolutely required. "We won't engage unless Ganar arrives."

"Right." I replied tiredly, cutting him out of the line before I got too frustrated and said something that would cause him to leave early. "Everyone ready up here?"

"We are on this side." Illyan rolled a shoulder in a shrug, nodding down the upper level that we were standing on. Beyond her were two cabals from the Wave, two dozen rifles and carbines held loosely as they psyched themselves up for the fight.

Glancing to my left, Voya nodded in turn and waved towards the equal number of Silver Blades marines that Vishin had been able to get here in time. He himself was absent, having had to take joint-command along with an Eclipse officer in order to maintain those particular defenses.

"Joa, Scales, you're the last to sound off. How's level three?"

"We're good up here."

"Can really only get angles on the front door though, stupid thing doesn't go all the way around."

I grunted, "I know, do what you can and pace your biotics."

"Not my first firefight Cie." Aethyta's daughter admonished as she cut the connection, her voice still slightly audible as she shouted for her own people to be ready, Trena echoing the orders with far more cursing. Not that they really needed to be told, all of them were old veteran members of her crew who'd fought in more than one ground engagement during their time as pirates, and we'd broken open one of Afterlife's armories to equip them all.

My attention was drawn down to the hangar floor as the last of our pickets returned, two Asari in Aria's colors sprinting through the broad doors before flashing into cover.

"Cellidia, shut the doors." I ordered as I pulled my rifle free from my back settling it onto the railing, "Make them take the time to get them open. Everyone watch your fire, don't want to set off anything early."

A chorus of radio clicks and muttered confirmations sounded as lights flashed, the ware-house sized doors sliding across the floor to clang shut. The ominous silence in the wake of the echoes didn't last for very long, something ringing against the other side just loudly enough to carry across the entire room.

Blowing out a breath, I shifted my right shoulder, grimacing at the soreness that radiated as I pulled my rifle more tightly against me.

"You all right?" Voya muttered.

"Sore." I admitted quietly. "Fucking Krogan just had to fall on me. You?"

"Swimming in antibiotics, left arm is still sore as fuck, and I should probably be sleeping for the next week... so as good as can be expected." She blew out a long breath, "How's the big idiot doing?"

"She's fine." Illyan muttered, shifting her heavy weapon around a bit as we waited for the demo charges that had to be coming. "Thanks for asking."
"You sure? I mean, you twisted your bloody ankle. Vicious injury like that, you're lucky to be moving around at all."

"One of these days I'm going to break you you little bitch..."

There was an amused little snort, "Cieran wouldn't let you."

"Oh yeah?" Illayn retorted, a challenge in her voice. "I bet I could convince him now that we're together."

"Going to whore yourself out just to try and cause me pain? How very you."

"Quiet." I ordered softly, the mental timer in my head getting closer to zero as I tuned out their usual pre-fight bickering. "Everyone... Get set."

My friends fell silent, Shyeel finally shaking herself and returning to stand on Voya's left from where she'd been catching what rest she could against the bulkhead behind us. The four of us stood in a line along with a small army, ready and waiting to see just how well stage one of Patriarch's scheme would work.

From Voya's mutters to her ancestors, I wasn't the only one silently praying that it didn't blow up in our face. It had more than enough potential considering that we didn't even know the full goddess-damned plan, beyond our specific role. Which, on the surface, seemed simple enough; we were to delay and drag the fight out for as long as possible to force Ganar to show up personally.

The problem with that was the whole 'Ganar showing up' part. Aside from the few preparations of my own that I'd cut together with Ayle and Cellidia, Patriarch's orders had been to sit back and support whatever play that he and Garrus had come up with.

Given the utter lack of trust between myself and that specific Turian... none of us were terribly confident.

The cutting charges flared brilliantly a few breaths after Voya finished her murmuring, the devices burning neat lines directly up each side of the massive doors and along the entire bottom stretch. For several moments it simply sat there as the molten edges smoldered, then more blasts went off in sequence and set the thing to crash inwards with a roar of noise.

Gunfire promptly began to scream in both directions, Ayle and Dietrich's forces pouring rounds out into the broad street beyond as the Blood Pack's forces retaliated in kind. They were, unfortunately, remaining intelligent for now, and staying far enough back that none of us on the upper levels could engage them as well.

"They have mobile barriers erected, and shield pylons." Ayle reported after perhaps forty-five seconds, her tone brusque. "At least a full platoon of Scarlet Tears."

I exhaled, fighting the urge to rock back and forth impatiently. Fifty mercenaries wouldn't be enough to force the issue, this was just the opening salvo in what was probably going to be a very long day.

"No Vorcha or Krogan?"

"No. No freelancers or pirates either, leaving the front door to the professionals."

Grunting, I ran through a few quick mental comparisons of the plans we had on tap, then nodded once. "Ground and second floors, stay with plan one. Joa, Trena, shift half your team down to help watch the service entrances."
Joa hesitated audibly, "You sure about that-?"

"Ape's right." Trena cut her off, "This is a big noisy assed distraction, and Ganar hates to waste those. You lot with me, get your asses to the stairs."

Tuning them out, I focused on trying to keep my arms loose as the fighting below started to settle into the steady rhythm of professionals firing weaponry at the precise rates to avoid heat issues. Our power armor, plus Glitch, would have normally given us an advantage, but the Tears had evidently brought with a few heavy weapons of their own. Heavy fire seemed to focus on our right side, Ayle and Dietrich coordinating their own counter-fusillade to suppress the guns hammering at the armor's barriers.

The anticipated flanking attacks kicked off around fifteen minutes in, more breaching charges blasting open two of the sealed service corridors both on our level, and the one above. I almost felt bad for the bloody Vorcha who tried to surge through to attack us; they gave us something to kill.

There were a good three dozen or so of them, which didn't matter at all thanks to the tiny space they were trying to attack us through. Butchering them took all of a few minutes, after which Wave girls with light machine guns setup at the entrances to the thin hallways. From the high-pitched war cries and hissing screams that followed, they were enjoying the shooting gallery that resulted.

Below, the Tears only made a single push forwards, trying to use the cover provided by a variety of smoke grenades and thrown jammers to cover their advance. Two of them got close enough to throw omni-drones inside, the devices lasting a matter of seconds, but that was probably enough for them to transmit how many of us they could detect.

"Wave one finished." Illyan let out a ragged breath, the sound pure stress and irritation as the battle slowed. Random shots still cracked out in both directions, but it was desultory at best as the attackers pulled back to reconsider their options. "How long until the second?"

"If Patriarch is right, and Ganar's doing this personally... not very long." I shifted my gun onto my shoulder, "Ayle, everything still set down there?"

She let out a hissing breath. "Few minor wounds, two dead. Could have been worse, are we going to stage two?"

A clicking sound came out of my mouth as I thought on that, "Not directly. Illyan, tell those Wave girls to set the mines in the halls and pull back. Main groups stay in position for another wave."

Cellidia chimed in at that, "You want me to activate the minefield as well, or leave it dormant?"

"Keep it offline, we'll trigger that on wave three, that's probably when we'll get the big guys."

Anything she could have replied with was swallowed up by the heavy barrage abruptly resuming, our own guns replying in short order.

Wave two turned out to be a slightly more determined variation of the first, at least at first. The Tears advanced up right to the edge of the doorway thanks to a combination of omni-shields, armored aircars rigged up as mobile barriers, and extensive use of covering grenades. Those of us on the upper levels promptly began to hammer them the moment they entered our line of sight, and the mercenaries wasted little time in pulling back just far enough to avoid the extra firepower.

While they wore at Dietrich's suits, and caused casualties to start mounting in Ayle's team, the Vorcha resumed their attempts at pushing through the various supporting hallways. The combination of assorted mines and booby-traps, plus the Cresting Wave girls made that effort little more than
suicide, and they gave up on that avenue after all of twenty minutes.

Things seemed to slow down after another hour of long-ranged combat, and we were in the process of rotating the tired troops from the bottom level with those of us from the upper decks when Ganar revealed a flaw in our logic.

We'd been operating, and defending, as if his goal was to take the hangar from us.

Ganar wanted the hangar... but unlike us, he didn't need it intact.

I had no idea how many charges they used to blast their way through the wall, or how many biotics were worked to exhaustion to weaken the structure. Considering the thing was reinforced to contain potential blasts from crashing shuttles and yachts, probably an obscene amount of both had been involved.

One moment I was taking a step down the stairs, leading a dozen or so of the Wave down to replace Ayle and a similar number of troops and opening my mouth to order stage two put into motion. The next, everything was ringing and Ayle was hauling me off the ground that had been several meters below me, throwing the both of us into cover.

"-coming!" Dietrich's amplified voice thundered through the fog in my brain, "Focus right, focus right!"

It took me a few moments to recover my wits, shaking my head to try and clear the odd flickering darkness. It took me a few more moments to realize that it wasn't anything wrong with my skull for once; the hangar's main lights had shorted out from the blast. Dull red emergency lighting made the flaring gunfire and biotics almost painfully bright.

"Turrets!" I rasped as I got upwards and realized just what in Athame's name we were dealing with. "Get them fucking powered up!"

"Re-routing power!" Cellidia replied harriedly, "Hold!"

I didn't know if we could. What looked like nearly two dozen berserkers were clambering their way through a gaping hole in the hangar wall, their deep throated roars of challenge easily audible over the gunfire as everyone blasted away at them. Biotic barriers swirled around maybe a third of them, while the others wielded omni-shields or more conventional slabs of metal to protect their already thick armor as they replied in kind.

"And activate the damned mines before the Tears rush us!" Ayle added, a foot kicking my rifle in my direction while her own carbine thundered out four round bursts.

Grabbing the weapon, I heaved it up and joined her and everyone else in shooting.

I'd barely done so when the situation developed from 'confused' to 'chaos'. Those berserkers with biotics abruptly lowered their barriers, let out an almost synchronized roar, and then vanished in biotic charges that carried them to the upper levels. Those of them without eezo running through their veins howled their own war cries a few heartbeats later, then lowered their heads and rushed directly towards us.

There wasn't anytime to wonder where Illyan was, where any of my friends but Ayle were. The battle became little more than tumbling blur as the Korgan charged.

Five or six of them probably died to our combined fire before they reached us, and we could all hear the dying screams of Vorcha near the main door; proving that the minefield was active and doing its
job. But that still left more than enough to slam into our barricades even as Dietrich's deep voice bellowed an order to counter-charge.

Glitch screeched somewhere in the distance as I vaulted the barricade, moving at an angle to avoid the berserker that smashed into it a few heartbeats later. Ayle had dived to the right at the same time, and we both started shooting into the thing's back as it put on the breaks and tried to whirl around. Its shields must have collapsed during the rush, deep spurts of orange blood shot out with each of Ayle's rounds, and my flash-forged rounds blew out a massive chunk of flesh along with armor plating.

Anything else would have found those wounds fatal, but they just pissed the massive creature off. Heaving its bulk around, its shotgun sent Ayle tumbling backwards as her shields collapsed, as second round shattering her prosthetic arm at the elbow.

Dropping my rifle as useless in this kind of fight, I drew my hand-cannon in a smooth motion and started firing. The Krogan reeled as the rounds found their mark, the weak armor around its neck that had been exposed by the angle. It managed to turn to face me, tucking its chin and taking my fourth shot to the thicker plating around its forehead, as it lifted its cooling gun.

Ayle didn't give it the chance. Snarling in fury, and with her shortened right arm sparking and leaking fluid, she lunged in and jammed a pistol into its throat to finish it.

Stepping forwards, a blur of motion on my rear camera had me duck a moment before another of the Krogan swung a massive war-hammer through where my torso had just been. Flicking my war-gauntlets to lift, I flung my left arm back and caught it in a knee, the tech plating blowing out the joint and sending it to crash down with a roar of pain.

Unfortunately this one wasn't as stupid as other Krogan, and immediately twisted its weapon up to knock my right arm away before I could shove my oversized pistol into the neck or the weak plating beneath his chin. Letting out a pained curse of my own at the impact, I threw myself forwards in a quick roll and flung an incinerate back at him as I came up.

The explosion took him in the chin just as he was leveraging himself up to his feet, cracking his armor and infuriating him further. Twirling his melee weapon, he lunged on his good leg and brought it crashing down towards me. The extra bit of momentum he'd given it gave me enough time to stutter-step to my right, a second mine blasting off most of his helmet entirely.

I had enough time to see a single red eye begin to burn before I put a round from my pistol through it, the corpse tumbling backwards with a crash.

"Sitrep!" I croaked, trying to make any kind of sense of the chaos still around me. Ayle had managed to get maybe seven or eight of Aria's riflemen, plus a trio of Wave girls, and form up a make-shift redoubt in one of our back-up positions.

"We've lost level two, except for the control room." Shyeel gasped, "Fell back to three, dropped the two that made it up there."

"Cie!" Dietrich's shout came as his scorched and battered armor appeared, his gun roaring as he put down a wounded Berserker. "Half my suits are down, most of the turrets are blown, and we've got Tears and armored Vorcha incoming! We need to vent!"

I didn't bother questioning the call, even if it had been our emergency option. "Cellida! Vent the hangar, all hands brace!"

The order was echoed across our radios, and I was reminded that Garrus was hear at all when I heard
him shouting for his people to activate their mag clamps and hold on. Opening the main doors would kill all of the Vorcha and Varren, and probably the dozen plus berserkers I could see rushing towards us around our own defenses, climbing over the fallen forms of Dietrich's people. Turrets had risen from the floors and from armored boxes beneath the various walkways, and they looked like dropped their fair share of wounded targets, but most were little more than scrap now.

In short, we were desperate enough to skip stages two through four in favor of our ultimate panic-button.

Ganar Yulaz personally killed Cellidia before she could push said button.

One breath I could see her in the armored control booth, about to haul down on a lever, the next... the next, the entire goddess-damned thing exploded outwards as a biotic shockwave tore through it, the wall behind it, and kept right on going through whatever the fuck was behind that.

Everything sputtered to a stop when the Krogan Emperor made his appearance. He was in almost plain armor, colored a deep burgundy and utterly without any decoration or marking. A biotic maul was clamped in his left hand, the haft resting on his shoulder, while his other held a Claymore shotgun in a pistol-grip. It was hard to tell, but I thought he had a grenade belt around his waist as well, filled with various discs and canisters.

And even from a distance... he was at least Patriarch's titanic size, if not larger.

"The Silver Blades. The last of the Wave. And..." His voice boomed out, sounding as oddly cultured as Patriarch's, while his helmet tilted back to look straight up. "Archangel. An excellent warmup before my duel with Raik."

Then he was gone, and someone high above us was screaming in pain.

That's not fucking hyperbole, I meant it fucking literally. One fucking heartbeat he was there, the next he'd flashed directly upwards four fucking stories to land on a support pylon, gut-shot one of Garrus's people, and then flung the Turian woman to let her flailing body slam into the ground all before anyone had even realized he'd bloody moved.

The unpleasant sound her shrieking body made when it hit the ground was evidently the signal for shit to continue, because his berserkers let out excited cries and rushed forwards once again. Unfortunately their master's sheer presence seemed to install some level of tactical sense into the idiots, and instead of rushing forwards and letting us get this over with quickly, they instead began to fan out and fire in steady rhythms.

While that kept more of us alive than a rush would have, it also left us with a large number of enemies who were, sadly, much easier to kill in close combat than they were when they were fighting intelligently.

"Six!" I shouted into my comms as I frantically started shooting with one hand and triggering incinerates with the other, "Plan six! Fall back, fall back!"

The hangar was useless now, the main docking equipment was little more than melting bits of wreckage where the Krogan had blasted their way in. Even if it wasn't, we didn't have a chance of holding, not with how divided and confused things remained.

"Grenades!" Ayle shouted as everyone began backpedaling, barely needing the order to retreat. "Use them up! Consolidate, consolidate!"

"Glitch!" I bellowed as fragmentation and incendiary bombs began going off, "Cover that team!"
Somewhere above us I heard Ganar's distinctive voice let out a challenge that was answered by a booming sniper rifle. The lack of more biotic explosions bringing the roof down on us at least seemed to prove that the vigilantes had brought anti-biotic weaponry, for whatever good it would do them. That was all of the attention I had to spare for Vakarian's fight before I was again consumed in our own engagement.

We'd been divided into two groups, more or less. Three of Dietrich's suits, plus Glitch, were covering a mixed squad nearer to the wall, while our own detachment was stuck closer to the massive openings.

"We're bailing ape!" Trena's shout came as a volley of carnage rounds announced Vorcha having finally made it through the mine field, their armored bodies moving into the hangar in good order. "Last ass is out on level three, all your girls made it!"

I coughed in response, picking myself up from where a carnage round had deposited my ass on the ground. Even despite the situation I felt a little nettled that she'd had to say it like that, though the emotion faded quickly as I managed to get back to my feet just in time for several lighter rounds to hammer at the light plating across my chest.

Letting out a wheezing curse, I turned and got my armored coat in a better position to protect my unshielded body. Firing off a concussive round to dismiss two Vorcha who'd gotten too close as they tried to flank us up the right side.

An Asari went down after throwing out a singularity to deflect three disc grenades away, and I grabbed one of her shoulders to haul her back while a Batarian Blade got her other side. The Wave girl gamely cursed and kept firing her sub-machine gun as we hauled her along, our position consolidating around the hallway we'd marked as our emergency exit out of here.

"Wounded first!" I shouted, helping pass the maiden back before ducking behind a suit of power armor that looked as if it was about to simply fall apart around its driver. "Everyone out of the suits, use them for cover!"

The pilots and Dietrich obliged, turning ponderously in place before blowing out the emergency bolts to blast the front armor free. The heavy exoskeletons collapsed sideways or backwards, our assorted men and women quickly moving up to keep firing, covering the pilots as they grabbed their small arms.

Only Glitch remained upright, the mech's broken necklace dangling off a shoulder as it kept up steady bursts of fire from the back ranks. It would only barely fit through the halls, and would have to come through last, but I wasn't about to leave the psychopathic mech behind again.

"Ayle!" My left fist rose, throwing out my last incinerate to knock a Berserker back on his huge heels. "Go, coordinate the pull back at point one! Make sure the mines are primed!"

Her helmet dipped in an exhausted nod, and I swallowed a curse as I realized that she'd been hit again. Blood trickled down her good leg as she limped back, a Turian in our armor colors grabbing her and helping her move into the hallway.

"We give the wounded sixty more seconds!" I kept barking orders as I fired measured shots, flinching away from a near-miss from a carnage round. "Wave, keep those grenades back, Blades, focus fire left, more cover on that side!"

Our barrage put down one Berserker when he got impatient and tried to rush us alone, and kept the others back. Biotics continued to swirl and make the air shimmer as more Scarlet Tears arrived and
drew close enough to try and flush us out of our position with grenades. Some of the red armored
mercs went down to our scattered fire, and they took their own pounds of flesh in return. An Asari
went down, her helmet shattered, along with three Blades and one of Deet's pilots.

My mental count hit zero as the pilot died, making me curse as I snapped out the order, "Time to go!
Everyone out!"

"Leaving so soon?" Krom's voice taunted as a sniper round tore out the throat of the first Blade
who'd risen to flee. "Come on Eleven, stay and play with us."

"Shut the fuck up." I hissed, shoving and motioning for everyone to keep moving.

"I quite agree." Metal screeched as the Emperor joined the conversation, his body slamming to the
ground just outside of our makeshift barricades. His armor was blackened and cracked, and it looked
as if he'd suffered more than a few wounds... not that that stopped him from lifting his shotgun up
with one hand and blasting a Wave girl before she could flash into the hallway. "Must you always
run your mouth?"

My lip pulled back in a snarl as I whipped a nullification grenade at him, the harsh crack didn't do
more than make him roll his helmet in bemused disdain before he simply surged forwards. Our
rounds slammed into shielding and armor, or else somehow missed his massive bulk entirely as he
bobbed and weaved impossibly fast despite his size.

His biotic maul whirled out with almost casual grace, crushing the chest of a Blade as the Batarian
frantically tried to back away, our retreat turning into a route with only Dietrich, Glitch, and I
standing our ground as we tried to cover everyone else.

"You." Ganar spoke conversationally, pointing his maul at me even as his shotgun send a splatter of
red blood up from Dietrich, the grenade he'd been priming going off a moment later. My old friend
gone down without a sound, his body abruptly jerking as someone in the hallway pulled him with
biotics to get him clear.

A quick twist and flick of the Krogan's wrist sent a pulse of biotic energy into Glitch, slamming it
backwards into the bulkhead, the mech slamming face first into the ground as it bleated out
automated warnings of system's failure.

"You killed my son." He continued as my pistol overheated after wasting its fifth round into his right
arm, his protection easily withstanding both those shots as well as the overload that I'd flung at him.
"And you did it easily."

I felt my mouth go a little dry as he stopped moving, almost looming over me despite being a good
three meters away. His biotics were obviously returned already... which meant running wouldn't do
me any bloody good. He'd turn me into a red smear on the ground before I got more than a step or
two.

"He was overconfident." I replied to him, hoping that he'd keep talking long enough for me to come
up some kind of bullshit plan to get out of this. " Didn't even have a helmet on."

There was a snort that was practically tectonic in its depth. "Yes, he was. I allowed his mother to
coddle him too much... a shame. You also defended the markets against me, did you not?"

"Yes." I swallowed shifting my left foot a little. He didn't react... then again, he didn't really need to.
Twitching my hand towards the incendiary grenade on my belt did bring a slight reaction, his gun
shifting vaguely towards me in a clear message.
He wanted to talk before he killed me... but if I tried anything he'd go ahead and end it before I could make a real effort.

"You blended Batarian and Asari tactics quite well for a Human, normally I expect to find little of worth in your kind." Ganar mused, "The offensive battles of yours seem less skilled when I reviewed them, but I suppose everyone must have their specialty. I almost regret not being able to see the full extent of your plans here."

I moved my foot further, cautiously taking a single step towards where Dietrich had left a trail of blood. Ganar's only reaction was to turn slightly to continue to track me. "Not that it would have helped, I didn't expect you to burrow through the wall."

"A not illogical gap in your preparations." He almost sounded as if he was trying to reassure me, "To any other invader, risking this hangar's destruction would be insanity given its strategic position. I do not hold it against your acumen."

"My..." I couldn't help but blink. "Acumen?"

"Of course. You are a worthy adversary, or as worthy a foe as a human could be." The patronization in his tone made me twitch a little. "If I am victorious against Aria, I will ensure that your memory as a defensive leader is held in high regard across my new empire."

"Oh." My throat went even drier. "Thank you."

He bowed his head. "You are welcome. Now, are you prepared to face the long sleep? Or should I wait for your Asari companions to haul you away from me? If the latter is true, I am afraid that I will have to kill them sooner rather than--"

Three things happened in stunningly rapid succession. First, a pair of biotically propelled grenades screamed past either of my shoulders. One detonated with the harsh crack of another nullifier, while the other exploded in white light and noise.

At the same moment I registered them going past, my unshielded body was seized by nothing at all, brilliant blue light flaring around me as I was abruptly hurled off of my feet to tumble back down the hallway. Ganar's shotgun found me somewhere in that process, I could hear armor cracking and a flash of pain in my back, but I hit the ground alive and not screaming in agony.

The screaming came third, as Glitch let out a furious electronic shriek and surged upwards to bull rush the Krogan Emperor. His shotgun roared, and I looked up in time to see it blow one of the mech's battered arms off of its body. That didn't seem to bother it in the slightest, its bulk slamming into the just smaller alien and driving him backwards as its remaining limb began to slam into Ganar's had and shoulders.

"Ape!" Trena all but snarled, grabbing my stunned body by the arms as she frantically hauled me farther back. "Get your fucking ass up! I've got him, detonate one, det one!"

My last image of the hanger was a flash of orange light obscuring Glitch as it was thrown back, its gun roaring as Ganar let out an almost exultant warcry and threw himself at the machine.

_Silent Witness_

"Dietrich is still unconscious." Shyeel reported as she set her drink down, the four of us the only living souls in Afterlife's VIP zone. "They don't think he'll wake up before..."
Cieran closed his eyes and sank back in his chair, his voice little more than a tired rasp. "Ayle?"

"Will need cybernetics in her other leg as well." The branded woman replied, her eyes closing. "But she'll make it. You all right?"

He shrugged a shoulder, the motion making the bandages around his chest tighten. "Armor's a lost cause, but it kept me alive. Runner is bringing my back-up set up."

Shyeel grunted softly. "You want the full casualty figures?"

"No." I spoke before he could, my hair rustling as I shook my head. I would probably get sick from having my helmet off in this place... but you had to still be breathing to be sick, and I didn't think that would bother any of us for much longer. "We lost, we don't need the shitty details."

Illyan bowed her head a little from where she sat next to Cieran, a broad arm pulling his chair a little closer so that she could rest her cheek on his forehead. "Think we've got any hope boss?"

He didn't open his eyes as he sighed, "If... if Patriarch is right, Aria should be here in the next local day. We hold... hold Afterlife that long, maybe she can find another way on station."

The big idiot exhaled heavily, making his fur shift a little. "So.. not really. How long do we have?"

"Day." Shyeel offered quietly. "Maybe less. Right now its just his usual forces trying to push this way, and Patriarch's re-routing everyone he can to slow them down... Ganar hasn't been seen, maybe Glitch hurt him somehow or Archangel did more than we thought. Vol figures he'll want to get some food in him and let his regeneration heal him up before he comes after the club."

Glitch... It was my turn to close my eyes and shake my head. I'd started to like the homicidal program, and something told me we wouldn't be able to find it in a random scrapheap this time. Rane'li probably would have approved of how it had gone out at least, giving its artificial life to save Cieran.

Keelah, when had I last actually thought about Rane'li? Or Thul? Or Callada? Or Jarick? Or... any of the others?

"What's the plan then?" My maybe-girlfriend spoke again, breaking me from my morose thoughts.

"We're off the line until the fight gets here." Cie blew air out of his nose in a long exhalation. "Help coordinate in the control center, but mostly get healed and rested up for the last brawl. If... if we can, I want to take Krom out."

I perked up a little. "Kill him? Not capture for Aria?"

He nodded firmly. "Kill the son of a bitch on sight from here on out. He was with Ganar in the hangar, so he'll probably be involved in an attack here as well. He won't be direct about it... shit, maybe he'll try and come through here. We'll-"

A blue hand covered his mouth as Illyan sighed, "Cie, we can plan later. Sounds like we'll have a little time at least. We should rest."

"Illyan." He sighed in turn as she moved her hand away, "Right now I want to stay occupied and-"

She shut him up again, this time with a kiss deep enough that I felt voyeuristic just seeing it. Shyeel smiled faintly when I looked away from the two idiots, her expression bemused.
"The orgy starting already?" Joa's voice carried across the empty dance floors, and I twisted my neck around to see her and the little bitch shuffling their way in our direction. Both had at least had the good sense to bring bottles of alcohol, dropping them onto the table as they arrived.

"There won't be an orgy." Shyeel admonished as she took one, deftly twisting the op off. "Cie and Voya aren't into that kind of shit."

"Neither am I." T'Laria groaned as she collapsed, "Two others, max. After that shit just tends to get weird."

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed a bottle that turned out to be Turian brandy. Not bothering with a glass, we'd have had to go over to the bar to get one, I took a small pull directly from the bottle before speaking. "Can we not talk about that kind of crap?"

"What else is there?" Illyan replied, her voice going quiet. "You want to talk about who we should leave messages for? Maybe remember everyone we'll be joining?"

I flinched a little, and took a longer pull from my drink. "...fine. Just not the weird sex crap."

"So... I know who we're all going to be with." Joa interjected after an awkward pause, taking a sip from a bottle of rum before passing it to Cie. "Where you going Trena?"

"Not sure yet." Her shoulders rose and fell, "There was a Wave matron who looked lonely, and she had a fantastic rack."

Cieran let out a snort. "You've never changed, have you?"

"Asari ape." She gave me a wan smile, "We don't much care for change, even relatively young idiots like us."

"Yeah." He shook his head, smiling as he glanced at Joa. "Where are you going then?"

The old bitch's daughter rolled a shoulder and fluttered her eyes at him, "Wherever your scarred chest and her strong muscles are."

His eyes rolled though the smile didn't fade, "Walked into that, didn't I?"

"You did." She replied, "It's also happening."

"Joa..."

I shook my head as she actually held up a finger, wagging it in his direction. "No, Cieran. Situation, fucked to shit. If this is it for... all of us, I'm not letting this go. And I will bloody damned burn my way through whatever door you try and hide your ass behind."

Trena and Shyeel both started laughing at his increasingly flustered expression, and even I couldn't keep a small grin off of my lips. Illyan had evidently been talking about his preference for... strong-willed women, and Joa was wasting absolutely no time in establishing herself.

"It'll be fun Cie." Illyan assured him, "Joa, come over here and make out with him for a while. That usually gets him to stop thinking."

Joa, to my lack of surprise, promptly did just that. Hopping to her feet, she strutted her uniformed ass around Shyeel and I towards an increasingly red-faced Cieran... who seemed like he really wanted to say no, but couldn't make his mouth actually form the words.
"Well then. Have fun with that shit ape." T'Laria shook her head as as the pirate literally pounced on him, his chair rocking a bit as she wrapped her arms around his neck and practically attacked his mouth with her own. "I'll plan on seeing you all next shift."

"Should be in the control center once we wake up." Shyeel hefted her bottle up in salute, her body tiredly rising after she took a final drink. "Voya, you want to find a room before these three just have sex in front of us?"

Cieran managed to disentangle himself long enough to tell her to fuck off before Joa grabbed his mussed hair and hauled their lips back together.

"Don't think he's quite ready for public sex just yet." Illyan shook her head, her eyes utterly intent on where her friend was making out with her lover. "I'll get them to a room."

"Good." I muttered, "Because I really don't need to see that happening."

"You're just jealous." She countered as I stood up, "You still want him."

My eyes rolled as I gave her a rude gesture with both hands, turning to follow Shyeel towards the nearest room. "Stop fucking projecting, it got old a long time ago."

Shyeel let out a huffing little laugh at the comment, opening the door for me and closing it behind her. The room was much the same as the ones in the main club, though a little larger and with a call-station intended for the exclusive guests to be able to order drinks or whores as they wished.

And just like the ones downstairs... it had a small cabinet next to the bed.

"Voya, we don't have to do anything." My partner murmured as I walked over to, biting my lip a little as I pulled the door open. "Not if you aren't ready, even with... everything that's happening."

I felt my forked tongue escape my mouth, running over my lips a little. "I... dont' know if I am, but that pirate bitch had a point. If not now... when?"

Reaching down, I picked out the handcuffs and turned to face her, a small thrum going through me as her eyes locked onto them. It had been a very, very long time since I'd done this willingly... and as nervous as I was, the idea of her laying out beneath me was hardly unpleasant. Especially... especially now.

"Now..." I let out a small breath between my teeth, "Strip and lay out on the bed."

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**Next up is: Approaching Beginnings**

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the long delay. I got stalled on this one early on when I didn't like the original tactics being used, and so had to change it up quite a bit. I also got distract with TWF, along with outlines for the coming stories. In better news, Chevalier and Hellhounds are now both fully outlined at the chapter level, and Twilight and Götterdämmerung have outlines to the operational level.
In terms of this chapter... we got to see a little bit of Ganar, and the remaining questions from the prologues should be cleared up at this point. The next chapter will have both of the prologues put together as Cieran's section, mostly as a refresher and to establish where they happened in the timeline. The secondary POV will be Shyeel, and will be longer than the usual secondary section in order to compensate for the lack of other new bits.

And then... we'll be onto the final chapter of the saga.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"Another." Trena grumbled, glaring at her empty bottle as if it had just betrayed her. Working her pipe around in her mouth, she breathed out a cloud of vanilla scented smoke before clarifying her request. "Good shit this time ape, not this swill."

Rolling my eyes, I reached across the deserted bar and grabbed the first drink my long arms could reach. "Wine from... somewhere on Thessia. That good enough scales?"

"Whatever." Wasting no time in grabbing it, she promptly took a long pull straight from the bottle. "Not bad."

Grunting, I settled back onto my stool and tried to enjoy my own alcohol with a bit more restraint. Although... honestly I had no idea why. Guess I just wanted to face my death reasonably sober instead of being hammered when the time came.

"How many levels now?" It was an expected question. She knew the first thing I'd have done when I woke up from our very brief rest period would be to check with the Warlord to see what had changed.

"None." Exhaling, I took a slow sip of some kind of rum. "They're on this one now. Ten blocks away and closing fast on the main run."

Her little blue nose flared. "Two hours. Maybe three."

"Assuming the Eclipse and the Brotherhood can hold the side tunnels and streets." I reminded her quietly. "If either of them collapses we're done for inside of an hour."

She winced a little. "Yeah. Athame's... how'd I let you talk me into this shit?"

Raising an arm, I punched her shoulder hard enough to hurt through the armor. "Don't start that crap. I didn't even want you with."

"Asshole." She glowered at me, but didn't offer any further contradiction. "What do we have to defend the CIC?"

"Same shit we had before we got a break. The five of us for the upper levels, Nyreen and the Talons covering the main doors, a few cabals from the Wave down below." My left shoulder twitched. "So
enough to make them know they were in a fight."

Trena glanced over at a couch, where a woman was curled up beneath a ragged blanket that wasn't large enough to hide the twitching prosthetic hand, nor the dull reflection on a metallic leg.

"She's not standing on the firing line with us." A longer sip from my drink made my throat burn furiously, "Unless it gets that desperate."

Which it would, and we both knew it. Thankfully she had enough sense not to say anything on that, shifting to another topic as if I hadn't spoken. "Nothing from Archangel?"

My lips twisted at the mention of that particular Turian. "No one's seen him since he lost half his team trying to take out Ganar. Could be hurt, could be dead, could be biding his time."

Not that him being here would really help regardless. Don't get me wrong, Vakarian was pretty fucking good at killing things, but he'd already took his best shot and missed. And either way, we were running out of bodies. We'd held longer than we'd had any right to, something to which I at least partially credited myself. Egotistical or not I was damned sure we'd have all been dead more than a week ago if I hadn't done what I had.

Would have been nice if it had been enough though.

"Last transmission said the Black Fleet is clearing the relays as we speak." Me, and everyone else with a brain, had already done the math a thousand times since we'd heard that bit of news. "But they still have to cross the entire system, moving around Sahrabarik, then dock with the station, then fight their way here to relieve us."

And they'd have to. Ganar wasn't an idiot, he'd have the largest detachments he could afford guarding the closest hangers to the command center. The fact that we'd fought like demons to hold onto them in the first place wouldn't help matters, since that had ended up leaving them utterly trashed. Disembarking was going to be a massive pain in the ass.

My friend bowed her head slightly. "That's longer than two or three hours ape."

"Yeah." I didn't doubt that Aria and the army she'd taken with would be able to take the station back once they returned, but it was probably going to be a long and bloody campaign before she took her throne once again. "You get a message to Ghai?"

"Why do you fucking think I'm drinking right now?"

I let out a slow breath. "You could make it to Doru scales. We still hold the lifts, you'd have a straight run to the docks. Most of our crew is still alive, they could get you back to Illium."

"And live another seven or eight centuries knowing I left you here?"

I shrugged laconically. "Yup."

A blue fist promptly smacked my shoulder, nearly knocking me from my seat. "Go bother someone else ape. Let me know when it's time to head back to the line."

Snorting, I slid off the stool and onto my feet, but made sure to grab the wine she was drinking just before she could take another long gulp. "No more scales. If we're going to die I'd rather it not be because you were so drunk you immolated us with your biotics."

Ignoring her muttered comments about my parentage, which were accurate enough that she winced
after she said them, belatedly realizing how close to the mark she was. Waving her off before she could apologize, I moved behind her as if I was going to head out of the bar.

Then I took a deep breath, turned, and slammed a fist into the back of her head. My best friend’s skull promptly bounced off the bar before she collapsed sideways, saved from a long drop to the floor only because I grabbed her by her arms.

"Joa!" I winced as I gently lowered Trena to the ground, I hadn't meant to hit her quite that hard. "Get in here!"

Armored footsteps quickly sounded, a purple skinned Asari wearing light armor in the same navy and silver paint scheme as mine appearing as she dropped to a knee. "Goddess, I think you over did it Commander."

My lips twisted as she carefully inspected scale's skull for fractures, only relaxing when she nodded to show that she was all right. Well, as all right as someone could be after being knocked unconscious. "I think so too. And I told you not to call me that, we've fucking slept together."

"We did both, but I would have liked to have done it more than once." The former slave pointed out, the white swirling tattoos that covered her face gleaming in the red light. She hesitated before continuing, biting her lip for a moment. "You sure about this?"

"Yeah. Get her home, the ship is yours after that."

"Cieran... you don't have to..." Her head bowed slightly. "No. You do, don't you?" Not waiting for me to reply she turned and waved a hand to beckon two more people over. "Get her downstairs, and make sure to get a disruptor on her neck so she can't try and bolt."

"Captain." The human of the pair nodded, her midnight skin blending in with the dark light. "Beal, grab her other side, I got this one."

The Asari nodded, and between the pair of them they got Trena upright, her feet dragging slightly on the ground as they hauled her back down the hallway that they'd come from.

"She won't thank you for that."

"No." I waited until they were out of sight before lowering my head. "But her bondmate and her daughter will."

"Probably." There was a quiet sigh before a hand reached out to cup my face, her armored fingers trailing through my goatee before reaching the scar that ran vertically down from my left eye. "Going to miss you Commander."

My lips curled a little before I stretched my own arm out, grabbing her chin and pulling her close. Our mouths met for a brief moment, her breath warm on my face, and then I pulled back. "One for the road. Get going Joa."

Sliding her hand up, she ruffled my long hair. "Save me a seat at Athame's bar Cie. And if she doesn't have one, you should get one started."

Snorting, I pushed myself to my feet. "I will. Now get."

She did, giving me a last glance over her shoulder before accelerating to catch up with her people. Which left me alone, having just sent away the last help we could have drawn on, along with my
best friend who would flip her shit the second she woke up. But she'd be breathing and able to do so, able to go back to Nos Astra and take care of her daughter like she should. And that's what mattered in the end.

Sighing, I turned away and left the bar, heading up one darkened ramp, across an empty dance floor, and then clambering along a small stairwell eventually saw me on a platform overlooking Afterlife's main floor. Not that Aria would recognize what we'd done with the place in her absence. Barricades covered the main doorway, fashioned from tables and chairs hastily welded together after we'd made sure they were mostly bulletproof. More had been cut into pieces to reinforce the railings around the upper floors, giving our people at least some cover to hunker behind.

Anyone coming through the front door would walk into a massive crossfire, which would make nearly anyone but our current opponents think twice. Since I and everyone else trying to coordinate the defense knew better, we'd kept a tiny stash of biotic nullifiers on hand. There wasn't enough of the small grenades to do more than break up one or two rushes by the fucking berserkers Ganar loved to use, but if we were lucky most of them would be dead during the fighting just to get here.

Of course, that assumed Ganar was an idiot and didn't keep them back in reserve. And two and a half years of fighting that asshole made me sure that, no matter what his many other failings, a poor tactician he was not.

Not that I'd be on the main floor. When the time came, the companions that I had that were still breathing would be up near the entrance to the VIP lounge. We'd sealed the doorways but that wasn't anything that a few explosives couldn't resolve. If they came through we'd need people up there, and if they didn't we could still join the main cordon.

It was a decent enough plan. Problem was... there just wasn't enough of us left. We could probably hold off one or two waves. Maybe. But they'd take their pounds of flesh in the process, and when Ganar himself showed up...

Shaking my head, I shifted my gaze a bit. Below me and on the left, on the ledge where Aria's couch had been before it had been broken in half and thrown onto the bar below, a small knot of gang leaders and advisers were trying to coordinate the battle raging just a few station blocks away. One, Nyreen, saw me watching and gave me a tired nod before turning back to an Eclipse commando as the exhausted huntress pointed out something on their holo-table.

I waited a few moments to see if whatever it was was critical, stepping back from the edge when it merely provoked shaking heads and tired gestures elsewhere.

Shuffling back, I ended up collapsing in a booth with a clatter of armor plating. There obviously wasn't a stripper on the table in front of me like there would have been less than a month ago, which was rather disappointing. A distraction would have been nice.

"Then again, Ghai did say I shouldn't seek distractions to help repress crap anymore." Ignoring the fact that I was muttering to myself, I leaned back as best I could, trying not to groan as I forced my aching body to relax for once. "But at least she and Ethy aren't here."

"Talking to yourself again?" An exhausted voice asked rhetorically before a slim form dropped into the chair on the other-side of the table, gleaming eyes barely visible behind her armored helmet. "Not a good sign."

"Voya." Electing not to respond, I asked a question I already knew the answer to. "He gone?"

The Quarian's helmet shifted, looking away. "Yes. Never woke up."
Closing my eyes, I tried to feel... something. Maybe I was just too tired. Maybe I'd already lost too many friends. Maybe I'd already accepted it. Shit. More crap for Ghai to help me work through if Athame granted us a miracle. Which she wouldn't. Damned bitch. But at least Ghai would put her skills to better use, treat people who weren't monsters like us. "Dammit."

"That leaves just the five of us to cover the entire third floor." She reminded me quietly.

"Four. Plan went off without a hitch, Joa took scales." My head dipped to one side as I brought that shoulder up in a little Asari shrug. "What else can we do? They need everyone on the front doors."

"We could leave, catch up with them." I gave her a slit-eyed glare that was apparently severe enough that she shrank back a little bit and averted her eyes again. "Just an idea. We could make it to Doru and the ship before it leaves."

"One." I brought up a finger. "Krom is here, so no. Two, if he or Ganar gain access to the control center they could kill half the people on this station. Three, they could also turn the big guns upstairs against Aria's ships. Four, if we bolted and Aria does win this, we are very, very dead for doing so."

"She might kill you anyways, for what you did."

That was a distinct possibility. I was at least fifty percent responsible for the fact that her couch was now in pieces and stained with booze. "We'll worry about that if we live that long."

Voya held up both of her three fingered hands in acquiescence. "So... we guard that floor, hope Krom does his usual sneaking flank thing, and kill him. Then we can die contentedly when Ganar smashes our heads open with his stupid hammer thing."

I mulled over that for a moment before nodding. Ideally we'd have taken Krom alive to give to Aria to torture to death, but since we were going to die anyway... why not just get it over with ourselves? At least we'd get a bit of pleasure before the eternal night. "Sounds about right."

"At least it's simple." She seemed to exhale. "And at least I was able to go back to Xentha for a while. I'd forgotten how much I missed the Old District."

"It was... an experience." That was about the only word I could think of that encapsulated what that particular place had been like. Taking a slow breath of my own, I let my head loll backwards. "Was good to see Nos Astra again too."

"That was... an interesting trip." From the sound of her voice she was as uncertain about my hometown as I'd been about hers. "Then again, it's been an interesting war, hasn't it?"

"It has." Interesting. Terrifying. Depressing. Infuriating. All of the above. "Few more hours of it to go, then it'll be over. One way or the other."

Voya bowed her head slightly, her fingers entwining as she breathed. "One way or the other."

We sat in silence after that, the pair of us trying to get what rest we could as we waited for the signal. She kept her head bowed, quietly murmuring as she asked her ancestors for guidance and strength in the fight that was coming. A little ritual that she did before every fight.

As for me... I closed my eyes, relaxed in the way Ghai had taught me, and lost myself in memory.

Our first mission as a team on Denara. Meeting Shepard on Carastes. That stupid eezo freighter where I'd first well and truly lost my shit, followed up by the battle in the blizzard on Starkhaven, all leading up to that first encounter with a berserker on a dead rock of a planet.
Several months of quick operations, almost always done with a maximum of caution and explosives. Truly getting to know everyone on the team, becoming friends with Shyeel, Thul, and Jack, while Voya and I clung to each other through the nightmares in private.

Then shit had started to really descend into the raging depths... Kirkwall. Antibaar. Redcliffe. All three of those goddess-damned worlds had cost me friends, or people who could have become companions. Slaver-hating Marcus, Jack and all of her fury. Then Hesh and Ullak, dying to protect Ayle. Jarick's loss to that traitorous asshole of a General, followed by...

Mirala's team of fugitive demons, just trying to survive.

Callada and her drawling Nevosian accent.

Thul and his infuriating pleasantness.

In hindsight we hadn't given ourselves enough time to recover after the last campaign, especially not with everything that had happened before. We should have stayed longer on Illium, and gone to Xentha to discover the truth of my parentage far later than we had. I think we'd tricked ourselves into thinking we needed to stay active... that I needed to keep moving.

Still, it was less what had happened in Celthani, and more of what had happened on this cursed station after. Learning the truth of the Leviathan's involvement had not been worth the shit we'd had to live through to discover it. Even if I had gotten together with Illyan as a result.

And there was fucking Benihi, and Cerberus... we'd made it out, but it had been a massive goddess-damned risk. Way beyond what I should have tried, even if it had come so very fucking close to working. If it had... Athame's ass, if it had, maybe we wouldn't have been here when Ganar had launched his death or glory invasion.

I was lost in the chaos of what-if's and maybes when a clatter of armor and a tired, almost whistling groan made me crack one eye open as my meditation was fucked up by the new arrival. It took my brain a few moments to disentangle itself from the memories it had been lost in, but when it did my irritation grew from a glower into a full-on glare. "Vakarian."

Garrus Vakarian, aka Archangel, leaned slowly back in the chair he'd appropriated at our table. His massive sniper rifle was extended and leaning against his side, dark blue armor pitted with impact marks. Though his full helmet concealed his expression, I could still tell he was grinning at me. "Sorry, did I disturb something? Praying to the Asari goddess? Thinking about naked Batarian women?"

I couldn't help but snort. "Stop sailing in my waters Turian, remember it's my job to be the sarcastic asshole."

"Must have missed that memo." He shook his head, glancing to where Voya was slumped over on the table's other booth. "Surprised you're still alive after the hanger."

"Same." I grunted back, the moment of levity already passing away. "Lost too many there."

"Same." He replied, his voice lowering. "Never seen a Krogan move like that before."

"Yeah." I let out a slow breath between my teeth, raising a hand up to run it through my oily hair. I needed a bloody shower. And sleep. And a naked... my head shook a little. I needed a lot of things, none of which I was going to get in the next couple of hours. "Surprised you came back."
"Shouldn't be." Garrus shrugged with a quiet clatter of armor. "We'll die with everyone else if Ganar gets his claws on the environmental controls."

I snorted. "Fair point."

He seemed to eye me through his visor, then turned to glance at the heart of the club. "What's the plan?"

My left shoulder rolled. "Take as many of them with us as we can."

There was a dry chuckle. "That much I assumed."

"We're covering the upper levels, focusing on the entrance to the VIP zone." I waved a hand in its direction. "The others are on sentry duty right now. It's the only obvious route that Krom or anyone else can take to flank us. Setup some token mechs in there to make it less obvious that we'll be waiting for him."

The Turian nodded slightly. "He won't try the lowers?"

"Cresting Wave has kill-zones setup at three of the doors and they sealed the rest of them." I shrugged again, "Besides, I don't think Ganar would let Krom get that far away from him at this point. He'd probably make a run for Doru and the docks if Ganar tried to send him anywhere near them."

Garrus considered that for a few breaths before exhaling loudly enough for his helmet speakers to emit the noise. "We'll setup on level four. Good sniping angles to support you and the main floor. Only five of us left, but we'll do what we can."

I eyed him for a few breaths, then shook my head tiredly. "And it would let you shoot us in the back if the opportunity came up?"

"You think that I would?"

"Yes." I retorted bluntly. "Right now we've got the frenemies thing going, which I'll admit is kind of a Terminus tradition, but you don't exactly like me."

"No." He admitted, his tone equally as blunt. "But right now you're the far lesser evil. If, by some miracle, we pull this off, you've got my word that I won't shoot you. Today, anyway."

My lips pursed slightly as I considered that, then I nodded and sighed as I realized that that was going to be as good as I was going to get. Athame's azure, considering the crap I'd thrown in his face the last time we'd spoken in person, it was better than I could have expected. Assuming that he wasn't lying at that moment of course. Garrus was a practical kind of man in his own way, especially after nearly two years on this bloody station. His conscience might twinge a little when he pulled the trigger but at the end of the day he'd still do it.

"How long do we have?"

Grunting at the question, I glanced at my omni-tool. There weren't any flash-updates, and given that no one had come running to wake us up... "Hour, probably less. You'll know when it's time."

The Turian nodded and rose with a tired sounding grunt. "I'll get my people setup."

Raising a hand, I gave him a moderately mocking salute with two of my fingers as he departed.
Voya waited a few breaths before stretching her arms up and above her head, revealing the heavy pistol she'd concealed beneath the table while 'sleeping'. When she spoke her voice was tired, but alert. "Hypocritical asshole."

"No argument." That had been one of the many things I'd called him to his face, but it had probably been the one that had infuriated him the most. "You all right?"

Glowing eyes narrowed to slits behind her visor. "We're about to die." She left off the 'you-fucking-idiot' but her tone said it for her.

"You're free to try and make a run for it after Krom is dead, if you want." I offered calmly.

"Don't make me shoot you." Her voice lowered to a growl. "You know that I would."

I snorted. "I know. Come on, we should go make sure the others are still alive up there. See if we can get setup."

Voya let out a quiet grunt, sliding out and standing as I did. She took a few extra breaths to holster her weapon and stretch, her petite frame arching slightly as she groaned. "You sure? You could keep talking and then I could shoot you in the leg. It would make me feel better about our imminent deaths."

My eyes rolled as we turned, heading towards the nearest bridge that would carry us across the main floor and over towards where the other survivors from this debacle were waiting. "If you did you'd have to patch me up afterwords, or get someone else to do it. And then you wouldn't have anytime to find a private room to-"

There was a low snarling sound before an armored boot lashed out at my leg. I avoided getting my knee kicked in sideways thanks to an awkward hop to the side, but accepted the punch she tossed into my side. "I told you to never bring that up in public!"

Grinning to myself, I held my hands up in surrender. "I know I know, can't tease you one last time?"

"No." She growled, visibly considering making good on her threat to shoot me before turning away. Tossing her head once to make her disdain perfectly clear, she strutted angrily away. Which was perfectly fine with me. She fought better when she was pissed off, and if we were going to have any chance of surviving this we'd need to fight at something beyond merely 'better'.

The thought made me frown, then firmly shake my head as I realized where that mental current had gone. I couldn't think in terms of things like survival... that ship had sailed. We weren't walking out of this, it was stupid to even think like that.

We'd have to fight at our best to make sure we took Krom out before Ganar. The man was a sadistic fuck and a complete asshole, and coming from me that definitely meant something, but he wasn't unskilled at fighting. Nor was he stupid. There were better than even odds that not only did he know we'd be trying to ambush him, but that he'd have some fucked up counter-play in mind.

Which I was also perfectly fine with. I had a few things hidden inside my own harbor, things that Vakarian being here could help with.

I hoped.

"Hoped a lot of things, this last year Cie." I reminded myself quietly, glancing down at where Nyreen was holding court. There were fewer officers now, and even as I watched a pair of junior Talons were bringing their commander her helmet and rifle. An Asari wearing the armor the Cresting
Wave clasped hands with the Turian before turning away and heading for the lower levels.

As if she could sense me watching, Nyreen turned, staring up at me. After a long moment she gave me a tight nod before returning her attention to her subordinates. Barked orders began to fill the air, gang members who’d been sleeping and catching what rest they could began rousing themselves and bustling into purposeful motion. The few members of Aria’s guard who’d survived the initial attack quickly joined them, directing the commotion as best they could.

I let out a slow exhale, then nodded firmly. Yanking my helmet off of its strap on my belt, I pulled it up and over my head. The HUD flickered over the visor slits as it synced with the rest of my armor and weapons.

"Cie, you there?" Voya’s voice echoed from the speakers behind my ears, all traces of her annoyance with me gone. "Something just tripped the initial perimeter alarm in the VIP zone. The mechs are active."

"Confirmed." I grunted back, the flashing alarm making itself readily apparent in the corner of my vision. "Set them to plan three until losses hit forty percent, then go to plan zero."

"On it." She replied promptly, "You joining us?"

"Yeah." My legs were already moving, accelerating to a quick trot as I headed to where I could see her and the others. "Let's get this over with."

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**Branded Survivor**

Everyone grouped around the main control center for the final briefing, the sounds of battle growing beyond the usual background hum of Omega. Our attention should have been on that, or on our respective leaders as they made their final speeches... but instead all of us were staring as an ancient legend heaved himself out of Aria’s private chambers.

"It's a little tight around my hump." Raik Vol chuckled, an armored hand reaching up to adjust his armor. His other clutched a traditional biotic war-hammer, using it in replacement of his old staff to help him limp forwards.

"Can't believe she kept that shit around." I muttered, shaking my head a little. "Think it's any good?"

"Better than nothing." Cieran let out a whistling breath between his teeth, the typically Batarian sound making me smile a little. For some reason it always amused me when he did that. His voice rose as he called down the Warlord below us, "Vol, any changes to the plan?"

"Yes." The Krogan’s massive head dipped once, "Ganar has made a mistake in his arrogance, he has announced his intentions to do battle with me personally."

"And..." The White Tiger’s leader, Bern I though Cieran had called him, shook his head. "That's a mistake how? NO offense but I'm pretty sure he could kick your crippled ass."

"I am not a helpless whelp, especially as Imperial law allowed krantt to stand beside the challenged in such a duel." Patriarch let out an almost amused huff. "Ganar has lost his own through the war, what family he once had lay dead, his companions passed on or scattered. He will come for me, and I will fight him."

Cieran shook his head beside me, "And the small problem of his army?"
"His army will be fought by ours, they will hold the final defensive line but allow the Emperor to pass. He will come, and I will battle him in the ancient ways." Vol turned slowly in a circle, regarding everyone who still remained. "Kandros. Bern. Archangel. Kean. I have already announced your names to him. You wills stand with me."

The human's hands clenched around the railing. "There's an issue with that, old monster."

Vol nodded sharply, turning to stare right back up at him. "Yes, Krom will certainly attempt to interfere. Your own krantt will be responsible for dealing with him, all others must be sent to hold Okeer's pets away."

"I'm not going to--"

"Kean!" The bellow made everyone rock back a little, real anger in the Krogan's voice making me swallow. "They are your krantt, do not dishonor them by believing they cannot accomplish that mission without you. They are strong, they are worthy, and they will bring your target to you. You are needed here."

I glanced at Cieran as he simply stared downwards, his head shaking once before he spoke quietly. "Shyeel?"

"We..." I half closed my eyes and sucked in a sharp breath, "We can take that son of a bitch, and whoever he brings with."

"Might not leave him alive though." Voya murmured, her hands falling to the hilts of her knives. "I know you don't mind, just felt like reminding you."

"And once he's dead," Illyan finished, "We'll come out here and help. So you'd better fucking survive at least that long, least you can do for us taking care of this for you."

Cie let out a tired little snort. "Yeah... right, I'll try and keep that in mind. You should get going, he'll be trying to infiltrate the upper levels to snipe us if he can. Shyeel, you're in charge. Use your best judgment with the mechs, and keep these two idiots alive."

I snorted, shaking my head and stepping closer, our armored bodies clattering a little as I gave him a tight hug. "I'll do my best, but you know how they are."

A huffing sound came out of his helmet, one arm reaching around me to return the gesture before we both stepped back. Voya opted for a gentle Turian kiss, the foreheads of their helmets touching for a long moment before she stepped back, letting Illyan haul him into something like a death-grip that made him start swearing even as she laughed.

And then he was moving towards the nearby stairwell, and the three of us were heading up towards our own fate.

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**Next up is: Hail to the Warlord**

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**Chapter End Notes**
So yeah... I know I promised that Shyeel's section would be long, but the more I thought about it the more leaving it short and sharp seemed more appropriate. Sorry for the relative lack of new information in this one as a result, but rest assured that the next chapter will be up very soon.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Pillar of Strength

I settled on calling my heavy weapon 'Spitfire' around when I blew two combat mechs apart in a furious barrage of incinerate mines and armor piercing rounds, the continuous flashes of explosions making the living members of Krom's team curse as they dove behind whatever cover they could find.

"Where the fuck is Eleven!?!" The asshole's voice snarled from somewhere near the back, the fucker letting his pawns die first. "Everyone spread out and call eyes on the main target! He's up to something if his whores are the only ones here!"

My lips curled into a grin... that faded more or less the same moment as one of the still active gladiator mechs put a shotgun blast right into my right breast. Alarms shrieked as my shields collapsed, and I hauled myself down with a gasping curse of my own.

"Illyan!" Shyeel snapped from her place farther down the main bar, "You all right!?"

"Shields down!" I called back, "Need a minute!"

"Voya, cover her!" The smaller Asari ordered as she shifted a bit down, then jerked up to fire tight bursts from her carbine. "And set the mechs to plan zero!"

"Done!"

I tried not to flinch as the remaining dozen or so security mechs, our mechs that was, let out whistling electronic shrieks and started rushing forwards as quickly as they could. It was a far cry from Glitch's piercing howls, but the sound was familiar enough to remind me that the psychopathic machine was probably gone for good this time.

As my HUD flickered and updated with my recharging protection, I hefted myself up as the impromptu charge moved past us. It was a motley collection of machines; aged Krogan tripedal bots lumbering alongside spindly human models, everything that Aria's people had managed to scrounge together in the short time we'd had.

The cacophony coming from their speakers was met by Krom's remaining gladiator bots, the half a
dozen mechs abandoning cover in favor of trying to close with the oncoming enemies.

"Focus on the freelancers!" Shyeel called as the men and women in question shouted furious orders to try and get the mechs back into place. They were evidently wasting their time, the things were already following their arena programming and trying to showboat their way through melee.

Ignoring that unfolding chaos, I hefted Spitfire back into place on the bar and settled my aim on a Turian woman at the same time as she saw me pop up from cover. A single flick of my finger set it to load from the overload magazine as I pulled the trigger with another, the rounds and disrupting flares of electrical energy tearing apart her defenses in short order.

She went down in a nauseating display of blue blood, but not before her own rifle had once again dropped my own shields down to nothing, with at least one cracking through my left shoulder pad.

Cursing in pain, and knowing I couldn't afford to drop back down again, I poured what little energy I had into a protective barrier just in time to catch a thundering round from Krom's oversized rifle. The feedback sent pain racing up my left arm, my entire body spasming as I frantically flared my biotics to throw more power into the protection.

That turned out to save my life as the second shot slammed into a wall of dark energy a few centimeters from my left eye. The flash of the impact was followed the station swirling around as my barrier shattered entirely, my everything screaming in pain from the sensation.

"Illyan's down!" Voya's snarl sounded like it was coming from the other side of an ocean, "Last freelancer dropped, but we're running out of mechs! Plan!?

"Four!" Shyeel shouted from an equally far distance, my brain slowly coming across the fact that I was laying on the ground and twitching slightly. "Plan four, support me!

Four... oh. That was bad. Ayle and Cieran always had plan fours that went something like 'fuck-it, shit's bad, kill-everything.' Which meant Shyeel and Voya were about to do something stupid... which meant they needed me off of my ass and up and fighting.

Glass from fallen and shattered bottles cracked as I forced my arms to obey my commands, getting onto my hands and knees. Putting one heel on the ground was a little easier, as was planting the second and rising to a crouch. By the time I'd grabbed onto the bar and hauled myself upright I felt more like I'd just spent two days sparring with Cie and Voya rather than like I had when we'd crawled out of Zeta.

Spitfire had skittered too far down the bar, so I settled on drawing my pistol, a pale copy of Cieran's oversized cannon, and leveling it on the wood panels. The last of our mechs dropped beneath the wrist-mounted omni-blades of the last gladiatorial machine as I focused my eyes, and I promptly began shooting before the enemy could finish its exultant declarations.

The already cracked armor shattered under the heavy rounds, and the thing went down in a quiet clatter... turning the fight into a three on one in our favor.

A blur of light snapped my head around to the left in time to see Shyeel sprinting along a line of tables, Krom's distinctive armor appearing from behind a booth he'd been using for cover. Voya appeared on the other side of the room, pistol in one hand, knife in the other, as she easily vaulted a railing before rushing towards him as well.

Grinning savagely, feeling some of my pain fading away beneath the emotions, I leveled my pistol at Rane's murder and started snapping off measured shots to cover them.
My smile vanished when the first on-target round snapped right through him to blow out a decorative glass fixture on the wall, the hologram fizzing out at the disruption.

Shyeel abruptly shifted direction back the way she'd come, "Behind me!"

I snapped my head around to see Krom fall into a clawball slide, sparks flying from his armor as he slid along the ground before he snapped himself into a crouch facing her. The Reyja'krem blurred in a flash-step, angling herself to appear atop a booth to his right.

She'd no sooner flared back into reality than she was flung into a pained tumble, blood and worse appearing as Krom's round tore into her left side.

My mouth opened in horror as she slammed into the booth's cushion and vanished without a sound beneath the table. He'd shot her with a bloody sniper rifle, operating entirely on reflex as she'd emerged from a goddess-damned biotic charge. It had been a fucking impossible shot.

I had time to think about the insanity of that shot because my body had flipped over to autopilot even as the mental currents swirled around in confusion in my head. A hand slammed into the bar as I vaulted it, my feet hitting the ground as I moved to get close enough for my limited biotics to burn the son of a bitch.

He hit me with a concussive round before I could get half-way, clearly having expected my shielding and barriers to be far stronger than they actually were. It saved me from taking a similar round to the stomach, but still flung me back against the bar I'd just left, my body slamming into the ground once again.

I expected to feel a stab of pain when his next shot hit my skull or something else vital, given that I was helpless on the floor, but instead I heard him let out a violent human oath as steel rang on steel. Jerking my head up, I felt my eyes widen as Voya went at him with her daggers, the blades flinging his unwieldy weapon away before clashing against his long sword as he frantically drew it.

He parried a pair of cuts, then slammed his free hand into her chest and sent her stumbling back, just enough of a motion for him to assume a proper stance before the two of them were engaged once again.

Staggering to my feet, I fought down the familiar, irritated awe of watching her fight in close combat. I was decent at that kind of thing, and better than Shyeel even without my size advantage. But Cieran and Voya were in an entirely other galaxy when it came to up close and personal fighting, and I bloody well knew it.

And Krom, apparently, was up there with them.

A gleaming omni-shield the size of a buckler formed around his left wrist, blocking and parrying her cuts and thrusts, letting him focus on tight lunges and feints with the long blade in his other hand. He never once risked a heavy blow or a deep lunge, nothing that would let her break his grip on the weapon.

Shaking my head, I forced my legs to get moving as Voya whirled and danced, trying to get inside his guard to cut at his weakly armored joints and visor. The pair were little more than dark blurs highlighted by the occasionally sparks from impacts, and if I even got close to them I'd have lost pieces of my body in short order.

So instead I angled to get behind Krom, where I could shoot him without risk of hitting Voya, or just throw a gout of warpfire up his ass.
The assassin must have noticed my approach, because he let out a violent oath... and then did something stupidly insane.

Blocking Voya's right blade with his own, he purposefully missed the thrust coming from the other side. The Quarian was too far gone in her fury to realize what was happening, and gleefully buried it in his side. Krom's snarl of pain was at once followed by his left arm grabbing Voya's wrist, twisting it free of her weapon and leaving it stuck in him.

And leaving her with only one small weapon, and much too close. She managed to block the slash that would have slit her throat, but she couldn't dodge the punch that slammed the omni-shield into her visor. The blow rocked her head back, sent her stumbling, and left her open for the follow-up cut that lashed across her right thigh and sent her to the ground screaming.

And then... then it was my turn to do Cieran's thing, and to utterly lose my goddess-damned shit. Krom turned just in time for me to slam my taller frame into his, my biotics having carried me to him without a conscious thought on my part. He let out a surprised, strangled noise as I grabbed his sword arm in both hands, twisting him around with it before driving my massive boot into his ass and pulling.

The sword crashed to the ground as his limb dislocated, his body falling to his knees. The motion nearly hid his other hand going for a pistol or grenade on his belt, a danger that I solved by kicking him in the back of the skull hard enough to bounce his entire torso off the ground.

"You Athame cursed piece of rotting fucking driftwood." I snarled, only somewhat aware of the words coming out as I grabbed his dazed frame. "Fucking escape from this shit."

Heaving him off the ground, I hauled his only slightly struggling frame over to a railing that divided a sunken section from the area next to it.

Then I slammed his neck against the metal as I hard as I could.

It didn't break the first time. Or the second. I was reasonably sure it did on the third, or maybe that was just his armor falling apart. In either case I still heaved him up and then slammed him down two more times just to be sure.

When I dropped him, he was utterly still.

"Keelah..." A pained gasp made me whip my head around to see Voya groaning as she finished tightening her belt around her leg, "Bitch. I wanted to kill that fucking \textit{keshin}."

Letting out a wheezing laugh, I turned and felt exhaustion crash over me. I was against or past my biotic reserves, such as they were, and my body was telling me it was near the point where it was just going to drop regardless of what I wanted.

"We all wanted to." I groaned, turning to look to where Shyeel had fallen. "Voya... Athame's ass, \textit{Shyeel}."

A hand weakly waved from under the table as the wounded woman tried to drag herself out a bit further, her entire body almost convulsing from the effort.

I stumbled more than once as I tottered over to her, dropping to my knees and grabbing what medical supplies I had on my belt. I had no idea how much use they'd be, her breathing was badly labored and I could see... a lot of things you shouldn't on a person who's still living.
"Illyan!" Voya's voice was of someone repeating herself, the petite woman awkwardly hauling herself over and grabbing her own medigel and patches. "I'll patch her closed, Cie needs help!"

"I..." Shyeel's eyes fluttered closed as she gasped, and I shook my head. "You can't fix her alone, I should-"

A sound roared in through the open door far behind us, and I felt my heart slow to a stop as a Krogan's victorious scream flowed across us.

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**The Silver Blade**

Krogan evidently don't believe in pre-fight banter, even before an 'official' duel or whatever the fuck this was supposed to be.

Ganar had simply rolled on through the open doors, the fighting audible far behind him, then locked his attention onto Raik Vol. The old rivals had stared at each other for all of three heartbeats, and then skipped right to the part where they tried to kill each other.

Which made it a fucking good thing that we'd taken a few minutes to come with some kind of plan, including a few ideas about what to do if the ancient asshole showed up in his power armor instead of the lighter wear that he'd used in the hangar.

Garrus slammed a concussive round into the Emperor's shields as he rushed forwards, the Turian firmly secure on the third floor where he'd be able to continue to hammer our target. At roughly the same time, that impact was joined by overloads thrown out by Nyreen and I as we darted out to either flank, scattering wide enough to avoid being hit by the biotics that were already beginning to boil out from both of the greater Warlords.

The two Krogan impacted one another with enough force to buckle the deck plating between them, the hafts of their eezo-laden war-hammers crashing together as each strained to throw the other aside.

Flinching as almost black light rolled in between them, I kept triggering my mines, adding in a concussive round of my own as we fought to drag down Ganar's barriers. Nyreen did much the same on the other side, while our sniper kept a slow but steady barrage up.

Patriarch let out a deep roar as the Emperor shoved him back, the old master of Omega cautiously retreating, focusing entirely on defending himself rather than counter-attacking. He had to save as much of his old body as he could, letting us play the slasher-fish to his shark. Only once we'd wounded Ganar, slowed him, lamed him, would Vol move in for the kill.

That would have been a lot fucking easier if we could have used nullifiers of any kind... but without his biotics, Vol was an old, crippled man, and there wasn't anyway we could avoid catching him in their effect as well.

It didn't take our solitary enemy long to work that out, and our probable plans, and to realize that we were down a man.

Letting out a challenge of his own, Ganar feinted a heavy strike to force Patriarch back another step, then abruptly flung a hand in Nyreen's direction. The biotic shockwave tore a trench out of the main platform and flung the woman away. Her own biotics flaring as she scrabbled to avoid being pitched down to the lower levels.

I had enough time to curse before the Krogan spun in a tight circle and flung a wave of power in my direction as well. A mere push rather than anything more destructive, the sheer power behind his
biotics still did a number to my shields... and sent more than a few tables and chairs hurtling my way.

Dodging the former but getting hit by the latter, I went down with a curse of pain as I rolled with the impact. Using the motion to bounce back up to my feet didn't stop it from hurting, though flinging another tech mine at the ass and triggering a concussive round in the same motion at least let me feel like I was still contributing.

Not that it fucking seemed to matter. His shields visibly shorted out, sparks flying as impacts began to rain against the armor proper. That lasted until another furious melee exchange with Patriarch sent Vol stumbling back long enough for Ganar to throw more power around.

Garrus barely avoided a massive table flung up at him, while Nyreen and I both ended up more or less behind him after we both stopped shooting in favor of sprinting out of the way of more shockwaves.

"Not working!" She cursed as Patriarch tried to take advantage of his enemy's distraction, managing a glancing blow that tore off a few sections of armor over Ganar's hump but doing no real damage before his faster opponent was again in position to hold him off. "He's wearing us out!"

"Shields are down!" I snapped back, shifting my launcher to fling an incinerate that hammered at the Krogan's back. "Use your fucking grenades and get moving again!"

Not that it would matter, he'd simply divert some of his endless fucking power to his own protection sooner rather than later, and we'd have to wear him down all over again. Our only shot was to him as hard we we could now to crack his armor and actually do some damage to his real body.

My legs got moving again, skipping over the damaged flooring as I circled to my right, expecting Nyreen to do the same on the other side to maximize our chance of our attacks finding a weak point.

I didn't expect her to try for martyrdom.

The Turian woman moved directly towards Ganar rather than away from him, her long legs letting her bound along in several long strides before she leaped. Patriarch must have seen her coming, because he abruptly shifted to an all-out offense, a bellow resounding as he whirled his hammer and drove forwards.

For once that seemed to have been something the Emperor didn't expect, and he let out an audible curse as he fell back, on the defensive for once. Garrus and I tried to contribute as well, only for our shots to impact biotically reinforced barriers around the struggling combatants.

And then Nyreen Kandros landed right on fucking top of the suit of power armor, holding herself in place with one hand while she primed her grenades with the other. all of her fucking grenades.

"Don't-!" I have no idea who tried to say it. Myself, Bern, or Garrus... but whoever it was didn't get to finish the sentence before she pushed the last button.

Blue-white light exploded out from the biotic grenades, something that might have been whatever was left of Nyreen flying out of sight to crash down in the lower levels. Patriarch was sent stumbling backwards, his barriers unable to fully protect him from the blast. The shockwave also disrupted Bern's camo unit, revealing where he'd been crouched, waiting to hit Ganar from behind.

That moment seemed to have come as the Emperor fell to his hands and knees, the entire back-half of his power armor suit nothing more than shredded metal and sparking systems.

The leader of the White Tigers let out an enraged roar, shoving himself upright as he drew short-
barrelled shotguns with each hand. Cursing, I hefted my pistol up and forced my legs into motion as well, both of us rushing to get behind the prone target. Patriarch likewise shook himself and let out an almost excited cry as he heaved himself forwards, another heavy round from Garrus blowing away Ganar's left shoulder pauldron.

Bern got into position faster than I did... and that killed him.

Flashes of light accompanied emergency bolts blowing the limbs and chest plating away, the Emperor surging upwards with a furious snarl before he vanished in a blur of biotic motion. Patriarch's hammer swing did nothing but crush loose plating, Bern's shotguns doing much the same.

And then Ganar was suddenly back, slamming a fist wreathed in warpfire into Bern's helmet. The big man went down instantly as the dark energy tore through him, his corpse tumbling back as I frantically pulled a grenade free from my belt.

He flashed forwards again before I could throw the nullifier, slamming into Patriarch and using the bow-shock of his charge to drive him back a good meter. Ignoring the round that Garrus slammed into his helmet with the opening, he stooped over and seized his biotic-maul from the ground, twirling it in one hand before rushing forwards.

I could only curse as I was once again denied the chance to cut out his biotics for a few crucial moments, and could only fling an overload and fire a few heavy rounds from my pistol as the melee duel resumed.

But this time... this time Ganar wasn't slowed by his armor. This time he wasn't holding back.

Just like he had in the hangar, he moved with impossible speed and grace for his size, avoiding Raik Vol's counter-strikes and lashing out with his weapon and biotics. Patriarch could defend himself against the latter, his own reserves were far from inconsiderable... but Aria had crippled him long ago, and it was showing.

It happened after their third furious exchange of whirling hammers and streaks of dark energy, with Vol tiredly over-committing to an attack. Ganar's slab-sided melee weapon hammered Patriarch across the helmet and drove the old Krogan to the ground. A second blow to his chest flung him away to crash against a bar, his armor shifting as he heaved for breath.

Ganar hefted his maul up to finish it when I reminded him that I was still here. My nullifier cracked at his feet, and I followed it by rushing in and firing a point-blank round into the weak armor around his right hip.

Orange blood flowed from the wound, but I had no time to enjoy the tiny victory, diving forwards to avoid a kick that would have caved in my chest. An incinerate snapped out with a gesture as I came up, fire cracking around his torso as got my legs churning.

The Emperor immediately moved to pursue, then staggered as Garrus finally dealt a real wound of his own. Archangel's monster rifle tore into the Krogan's side, making him physically stagger and curse.

His biotics returned quickly, far too fucking quickly, and a slight shift to his posture was the only warning I had to dive for the ground as he flashed forwards. I avoided the blow from his maul, but caught his armored boot before I could scramble upright. The impact flung me a good meter, and left me a sitting target for the power roaring down his right arm.

Or it would have if Garrus hadn't flung a nullifier of his own, Ganar letting out a frustrated curse as
he shifted and broke into a weaving sprint back towards the wreck of his exo-suit. We both tagged him once more each, breaking apart more of his armor and leaving more wounds to dribble blood down from his chest.

For one goddess-damned second, I had fucking hope. His personal shielding must have failed, leaving him with merely his biotics for protection... we had four more nullifiers between us, enough to get this shit done.

Ganar reached his objective as his barrier snapped up, stopping the sniper round that would have torn into his helmet, though some of the heat from my incinerate still bled through to scorch his armor. I flung my second of three nullifiers at the same time as he grabbed the fallen armor and, with *one fucking hand*, heaved the blown-out chest plate in between him and us as a massive shield.

A shield that did its job when Garrus fired an experimental round that merely rang off the metal plating.

"That..." He growled across our comms, "*Is really fucking unfair.*"

"Yeah." I gasped, trying to force air into my aching lungs. I'd been doing nothing but all-out sprinting and it was definitely catching up with me at the worst possible time. "Will do what I can."

My legs got moving again, carrying me to the right as I tried to flank around the protection, to hit him with my last grenade or open him up for Garrus to do so.

Unfortunately Ganar continued to learn from his mistakes, and clasped his maul to his belt before seizing his shotgun from the wreckage. The first round blew out my protection and forced me to abruptly change course before a second shot could hit me directly.

While I avoided instant death once again, I stumbled as my burning legs hit a broken patch of the platform.

The biotic throw hit me like a runaway dreadnought, my back slamming into the drink rack of the bar below Aria's throne, the travel so fast my brain couldn't process it as more than a confused blur. Said confusion only grew worse as I realized that I was now on the ground behind said bar, covered in spilled booze and surrounded by broken bottles.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear gunshots continuing to sound, blasts tearing apart metal as the fight went on.

I knew how my limbs were supposed to work, but getting them to actually do what I wanted proved to be more difficult in reality. My first attempt left me on the ground again, and informed me that my helmet had cracked somewhere in the process. I could tell because I could taste both rum and vodka on the ground.

Spitting out that combination, and getting the wrecked headgear off, took a while longer, as did getting up to my hands and knees.

The sounds of gunfire had stopped by that point, and I had just figured out how to get up to one knee when something massive crashed to the ground on the other side of the bar. Thundering footfalls revealed just who'd won the fight, and I closed my eyes as I listened to Ganar walk.

"I am sorry it came to this, old friend." His deep voice was pained, both physically and emotionally. "I had hoped to free you from your torment, but not like this."

"It was always going to end this way." Raik Vol replied, his tones much the same. "I... would never
be your krannt. Too much pride in these old bones."

"I said that I had hope," Ganar rumbled back, "Not that I expected it. Are you prepared?"

Patriarch sucked in a massive breath that I could hear from meters away. "I have been ready since little Aria ripped my second heart out and showed it to me. She will kill you, you know. She is already coming... and even T'Sharea would have bowed to her."

"We will see." There was a long, respectful pause. "Take the long sleep, Raik Vol, Master of Omega. Know that your name will be called when the final hammer falls."

"Goodbye... old friend."

"Goodbye."

A single shotgun blast rang out, and I closed my eyes as I exhaled. I could only stay in place, sagging in exhaustion as Ganar let out a roar that shook the remaining bottles behind and above me, his victorious call reverberating in my bones.

It was over then... or about to be.

Groaning, I grabbed at the bar and heaved myself up the rest of the way. The sound made Ganar turn away from where he stood over Patriarch's corpse, his one remaining eye blinking at me. Vakarian had evidently done a number on him... his helmet was gone entirely, along with his right eye. Athame's ass, his entire crest was cracked on that side, and I could see even more deep wounds slowly leaking blood down from his chest.

His lip actually pulled back in an amused grin as he saw me, "You are tenacious, aren't you?"

I tried to say something witty, but could only cough and gasp for more air. Something had to be broken in my chest, because each breath was taking far too much energy to both draw in and let out.

"Do you wish to die now?" He took a step in my direction, cocking his massive head, "Or wait to witness me battle your queen?"

I sucked in another painful breath, and considered shooting him for the stupid fucking question before realizing that I had no idea where my pistol was. Turning tiredly to my left and right didn't reveal anything but bottles of alcohol, and I found myself grabbing the nearest on reflex.

Illium Rum... Vessialis Distillery. My favorite.

Ganar laughed as I picked it up, turning away and limping towards the stairs. "By all means, enjoy a final drink. I believe that I would speak with you first regardless, simply allow me to deal with this station and I will return-"

The bottle smashed over his head, shutting him up even as the effort made me stagger a little. Athame's azure but I was out of it... and definitely wounded internally.

"Kean." The Krogan Emperor sighed, "Cease, please. For your own sake. You were a worthy foe, for a human, there is no need for you to suffer before the end."

I glared at him as best I could, which probably wasn't much. He merely shook his head again and turned to head towards the way up once again. Forcing more air into my lungs, I lunged to my right and grabbed the other bottle that I'd seen, throwing the ryncol at him as well.
He ignored it as the useless attack that it was.

Which meant he didn’t look back to see me spin up my omni-tool and fling an incinerate at his back.

His biotic protection stopped the actual impact from doing that much to his remaining armor... but it didn't do shit to the heat from the small explosion. The ridiculous Krogan booze ignited at once, a small fireball consuming his upper torso as he roared in pain and surprise.

And then there was another blur of motion that resulted in my back hitting the drink rack, though this time I was having an even harder time breathing thanks to the hand wrapped around my throat.

"Fine!" Ganar roared in my face, his back and crest still fucking on fire as he did, "If you wish to die, then I will send you on!"

His mouth opened more widely, and I realized that he was just going to fucking bite my head off. Shit, if I’d known he’d be doing that I might not have gone with that plan... I’d been hoping for something a little less nauseating. Definitely something with a better view than a Krogan's gullet.

That was about all I could see right before I was abruptly airborne once-a-fucking-gain, though this time Ganar made the trip with me. We both slammed into the ground in the middle of the open space near the bar, groaning in agony as we did.

He recovered more quickly, because of course, and surged back to his feet just in time to catch Patriarch's war hammer to his face once again. His crest cracked audibly and he went down hard, falling backwards as his biotics sputtered to try and protect him.

"Fuck... away... from... him." Illyan snarled, as she dropped a nullifer at her own feet. The end of the massive war-hammer hit the ground as she used it to stay upright, purple blood openly running down her nose. Her other hand was shaking badly, but she managed to grab her pistol off of her belt and drop it next to my hand.

I blinked at her for several moments then let out a pained laugh with more than a little crazy in it. "What... took... you?"

"Some asshole... with a stupid name..." She smiled weakly, nearly falling over as she tried to take a step. "Can we... move this along though?"

Right... getting my fingers around her pistol took a few breaths, and she dropped another nullifer as Ganar tried to gather his concussed wits... or maybe she'd actually caved in his skull with the second impact, in which case she'd more or less already killed him.

I contemplated saying something witty for all of a heartbeat before just pulling the trigger. The round tore into the Emperor's remaining eye, his body twitching as I fired three more times just to make sure.

We both stared as the reflex actions slowed... then stopped, Illyan falling to the ground as her legs gave out.

My hand let go of her pistol as I sagged, the pain rolling in through the adrenaline. "You... get him?"

"Yeah..." She murmured, shifting to her side with a pained sound, her eyes flecked with burst vessels. She'd overdone her biotics again... even more badly than the mines from the thready sound of her voice. "I got him... broke his neck."

"Good." I let my eyes closed tiredly, feeling the familiar darkness rising, the slight chill in my limbs.
The memories of a crashed ship on Korlus swirled up and then vanished... though this time at least I knew a friend was beside me. "Thank you."

"No problem boss... no..."

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*End Saga V: War of the Demons*

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Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand that was a thing.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Epilogue I: Recovery One

Date: 12-22-2184

Location: Omega, The Terminus

I woke up when Trena slapped me as hard as she could across the face. The pain made me jerk, and medical equipment nearby began bleating insistently when she hit my other cheek with her backhand, then followed the hits up by wrapping her fingers around my throat.

"You unbelievable, goddess-damned, motherfucking asshole." Scales snarled as her grip tightened.

My only reply were low, choking sounds that were covered up by the increasingly rapid beeps of whatever was monitoring my heart-rate. Ghai waited until she was sure I'd gotten the message before she pulled her bondmate off of me and into her lap, Trena's struggles only stopping when Ghai's prosthetic hand grabbed her by the back of her neck and tightened.

Coughing and gasping, I looked at the two of them sitting in a chair next to my bed, then glanced around the rest of the room. Standard hospital fare with a side helping of Omega's distinctive architecture. Looking down at myself proved to be less revealing, a thick blanket covering me and the half-a-dozen tubes that looked as if they were inserted into my body at various points.

"You've gotten a full working up over the last two weeks." Trena growled, "Courtesy of Aria and that crazy Salarian doctor."

I tried to croak out a word, shook my head and glanced around before I found the water straw resting on my left shoulder. Reaching up with a hand revealed a pair of lines going into my elbow, probably pumping in medication, but I ignored them in favor of getting some deliciously cold liquid into my mouth.

"How bad?" I managed once I'd spent nearly a minute alternating between drinking and clearing my roughened throat.

"Bad." Ghai murmured, "Accumulation."

Some of Trena's anger seemed to fade as her nose flared, "Athame's ape... you've managed to avoid real wounds over the last two years, but all that little shit's been building up. Ganar pounding on you made it even worse, even ignoring the fact that he damn near crushed your chest. You've been in and out of shit for a few weeks now."

That sounded bad, but I was drugged enough to merely process it and then move on to what I'd actually asked. "I meant everyone else."

Scales snorted quietly and shook her head, "Your little bitch made it, nasty cut and an infection, but
she's already pulled through and is limping around."

"Illyan? Shyeel?"

Her mirth faded, "Illyan... overdid it, again. She went into shock and was out for three days before they brought her around again. She'll live, and they don't think there's long term damage... but she's going to be done fighting unless she can learn to do it without her biotics. She does that shit again and she might sterilize herself, or burn out her nerves, or just fucking never wake up."

I swallowed a little, but focused on the part that she was still alive. "Shy?"

"Also alive, goddess alone knows how.‖ Trena bowed her head a little, "She was touch and go for most of a week, and she's not going anywhere for a while. Aria's docs are cloning a few new organs for her, machines are handling some of her systems right now."

Air whistled out between my teeth as I sank back into the bed, my eyes closing as utter relief rolled through me, the raw emotion better than any drug.

"Kandros is alive." Ghai murmured softly, "Sort of."

I blinked my eyes back open. "She lived through that?"

"If you call losing both arms, her mandibles, an eye, and one of her legs to be still living, and that shit's just the fucking surface.‖ Trena rolled a shoulder, "She'd have died on impact if the Wave girls watching the lower levels hadn't caught her. They managed to stabilize her after, but she's going to need a lot of cybernetic shit to even function. Probably not going to be out of this bloody place for months."

That was... good, I supposed. Living was always good, but I had no idea how Aria would react to the news, or how Nyreen would handle surviving a battle she'd definitely planned on dying in.

"Aria?‖ My throat was already dry again, and I tiredly took another sip of water. "The war?"

"War's over.‖ Scales shrugged again before launching into a quick recap of what had happened while I'd been unconscious.

Aria's people had evidently spent their trip back from Ilos rigging her flagship's escape pods into something like assault craft, letting tear her way directly into the upper levels the moment the ship was close enough. She'd actually landed at about the same time as the 'duel' had begun, and had promptly began massacring her way towards Afterlife.

Emphasis on the 'massacre' bit... her personal guard had apparently had been unable to keep up with their mistress, which hadn't bothered her at all. At the time of Ganar's arrival in the club, there'd been forty-seven berserkers still leading the attack.

By the time Ganar had fallen, all forty-seven of them were dead, and Aria had torn her way into the club not more than five minutes after I'd killed the Emperor.

"Seen some of the videos of it.‖ Trena groaned as she settled into her own chair, having evidently grown tired of Ghai's lap. "Probably the biggest reason no one's saying shit about her not being the one to drop Ganar."

"Krom?‖ I asked, shaking my head a little to try and ward off the exhaustion. "She pissed?"

"Not happy.‖ Ghai admitted, "Not getting paid."
"But you and Illyan get to live, for what you did during the fighting." Trena quickly added, "Voya finding the fucker's omni-tool helped, he had a lot of shit on there that everyone's still going over."

I was pretty sure that I opened my mouth to ask what they'd found, blinking my eyes as I did. But when I opened them again I was again massively thirsty, starving, and neither Ghai or Trena was present. Instead Joa was lounging across both of the room's chairs, one foot twitching in time to the rapid beat from music on her omni-tool.

"Joa?"

She blinked and glanced up, purple lips curling in a smirk. "Look who finally dragged himself out of the deeps."

I tried to glower at her, shaking my head to try and clear it a little. "What the... how long was I out?"

"Just two days this time." Her music cut off as she swung herself around, smoothly rising to her feet. "Hungry?"

"Obviously." I exhaled, feeling myself waking up properly his time, without the same slightly drugged haze that I'd felt before. A quick glance downwards confirmed that at least half the tubes were out of me, which hopefully boded well.

The former pirate left without another word, but returned within a minute with a tray full of food. I devoured the small meal, not really bothering to taste any of it. Joa simply watched on in bemusement, handing me a glass of liquid when I was done.

"I'm supposed to tell you that everyone's stuck in some kind of meeting right now." She supplied as I washed the food down. "Technically I should be too, but since neither Massa or Shaaryak is actually my Commander, I told them both to fuck off."

I stopped drinking in favor of glaring at her.

Her lips twitched. "I politely told them I wasn't their goddess-damned subordinate."

That was moderately better, and I grunted. "What about?"

"Re-organizational crap mostly, with Ganar officially dead a lot of crap is bobbing around, ready to be seized. Oh, Gormack was assassinated five days ago... probably by Aria from how much of his fleet joined her overnight."

My right shoulder twitched, showing how much I cared about an old Salarian I'd never met.

"So...lots of chaos?"

"A lot and not much all at the same time." She waited until I'd finished the water before taking the glass away, following that up by hopping up and onto my bed to sit with her back to my torso rather than taking a chair. "That shit's for later though. T'Laria figured you'd want to know about Krom first, but only after I told you everyone we care about is still breathing."

That was less relieving than it had been earlier, or two days ago apparently, but it still left me exhaling and nodding in silent thanks. "What about Krom?"

"Well, for starters he was indoctrinated and severely fucked up." Her joviality faded, reminding me of her mother as her tones became serious. "From the... call it a journal he was keeping, the Matriarch picked him and his bitch up on Illium after they joined up with the True Sons. From what his notes say, they were there trying to find you, and then trying to get off world when they realized..."
you were safe enough from that bitch."

I frowned a little at the implication. "He wasn't in control of himself? He had an orb on him?"

She shifted her head back and forth. "Kind of, and no. They were apparently the test subjects for long-term shit that didn't rely on the orbs. That old bitch mucked around in their heads a lot, but it didn't always work. They'd bonded at some point, and that let them resist commands if they were away for long enough, and if they were together. That's how he was able to write any of what happened down."

"If you tell me he was actually a good person-"

"No, total and complete fucking asshole." Joa quickly interrupted me, "He killed your girl just to make sure you were suffering as much as he was, some kind of Krogan inspired philosophy about making you both stronger."

Any sympathy I might have started to feel promptly drowned. "What else was there?"

The story that came out was a mixture of simple and complicated. Krom and Zero-One had evidently managed to resist for the year leading up to the war, and then the first few months. Then they'd managed to break free long enough to spring Eighteen and Nineteen from a research compound on the Republic colony of Nevoni. The twins, whoever the fuck they were, had gotten away, but Krom and his partner had been taken again.

Matriarch T'Ravt had figured out that the sociopath's deep bond was allowing them to pool their resistance, and had promptly separated them as a result. Krom had gone to Redcliffe, while Zero-One had been fucked around with, mind-raped, and tortured a bit more to try and figure out where Eighteen and Nineteen had been sent.

Or maybe just for kicks, Krom's logs apparently started to fracture into inane ranting about me, T'Ravt, and the galaxy in general around that time. A few months later he'd managed to find some kind of drug cocktail that stabilized his sanity, sort-of, even if it did nothing for the Levithan's influence that he succumbed to whenever an orb was nearby.

"Good news is that T'Ravt never figured out a good way to maintain long-term effects." Joa continued, "Bad news is that she did work out how to 'weaken' a mind to the point where Krom couldn't even tell if he was being controlled or not anymore. Worse news is that she was definitely the one who talked Ganar into this whole war situation."

I grimaced, a sinking feeling in my gut even if I'd more or less expected both bits of news. "Any idea why for the latter? Why the fuck do those shrimp want the galaxy to be weaker?"

The purple skinned Asari grimaced, "Krom thought there was something in the Terminus, something she doesn't want anyone to find."

"That doesn't remind me of anything." I shook my head, "What the fuck."

"Ilos." A cutting voice made Joa flinch, and made me go very still as Aria silently walked through the doorway to my room. The Queen was in shockingly casual attire, nothing more than white silk pants and a loose shirt, but the clothing did nothing to dampen her edge. "Captain, get out."

Joa gave me a quick look, bit her lip, then nodded. Leaning forwards, she picked me on the mouth before I could react, then was sliding off the bed and departing. Aria watched her go, then flicked a hand out to shut and lock the door.
"Aria." I greeted as politely as I could considering my position in a hospital bed.

"Kean." She replied, "Relax, I didn't pay for all the shit that went into you just to kill you now."

I blinked a little. "What?"

"Mordin says you needed a lot of work, you humans apparently don't recover well from events like what you've been through." One of her shoulders rolled in a shrug as she moved to stand at the end of my bed, planting her hands on the small rail there. "You can read up on it later. For now, we have more important things to talk about."

"Krom?" I guessed.

"Jaime Kerensky." Her chin dipped once, "Was mine to kill, and you knew that."

So that's what his actual name had been. "We didn't... really expect to survive."

"I can well imagine, considering that you also gave my station to that old fool, forced my people to bow before him, and even allowed him to defile my couch." I flinched at the first two, then blinked at the last. Aria let me sit in confusion for a few long breaths before shaking her head, "You also killed Ganar Yulaz, and made sure I didn't come back to an empty and useless station."

I swallowed, "What's the plan then?"

Her cold eyes met mine, "Your Silver Blades are to be given territory in Doru, befitting your station as a minor Warlord. My people will reach out to you in regards to tithes, when and how much will be paid."

My mouth opened and then closed as I tried to process what reality I'd just ended up in. "What?"

"You will be given a selection of the Blood Pack vessels that surrendered to form the core of your own fleet, find crews for them." She continued as if I hadn't spoken, "Your territory will include docking stations sufficient to service them."

I kept right on gaping at her. "What?"

Aria kept right on going in turn. "I expect you to answer any summons I dispatch, and to reply promptly to messages that I send."

I'd have bloody well done that anyway, I wasn't suicidal. "I... expected, you know, something else. Why are you giving me territory and ships?"

Her eyes flicked away from mine, becoming distant. When she spoke again, her voice was odd, almost concerned. "Ilos... was not what I expected. What Jona expected."

I frowned. "Meaning?"

"Meaning it was a Reaper graveyard." My mouth dropped open in shock as she continued, "Hundreds scattered across the system itself, as many or more on the surface. We couldn't even guess how many had decayed into the system's gas giants or sun. All inert, all ripped apart by something."

That... was different. That was so very fucking different that I could barely even comprehend how fucking different it was.

"Athame's ass." I breathed quietly. "That's..."
"Not anything like what that bitch put in your head." Aria finished for me, inadvertently revealing that Sederis had told her far more about me than I'd ever revealed on my own. "I fucking know, and you and I are going to have more than a few meetings going over everything we found there."

"Yeah... sure..." My mental currents were swirling chaotically as I tried to work them around what I was being told. "I'm a war asset, aren't I?"

She nodded once. "You are a capable enough commander, according to those of my people who survived... and Ganar has proven that you are more than slightly lethal on your own."

"That was-"

"I am aware that you were merely one of five, and not the strongest of them... but the commoners on this station won't care about that little detail. The human who thinks himself Batarian, your name will not be forgotten anytime soon." Aria turned away as she spoke, slowly walking back towards the door. "You will be released in two days, after which expect my summons to discuss what we found at Ilos."

Oh... right. I'd fucking killed Ganar Yulaz. My minor celebrity status was probably going to bloody explode, and I'd barely been able to tolerate it when only Batarians had really been in awe of me.

I shook my head sharply as Aria opened the door, forcing a final question out. "Nyreen, is she going to make it?"

The station's Queen paused in the doorway, not turning back as she replied quietly. "She briefly awoke this morning, and convinced me that severe restitution was not in order for your actions. I would thank her, if I were you."

I could only swallow and stare as she departed, the door hissing closed behind her.

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**Next up is Epilogue II: Concluded Stories**

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Chapter End Notes

A bit of the recovery bits and setup for that which is coming in the future. Next chapter will have the team getting back together, with a little more news but far more reflection.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Chapter 43

Epilogue II: Concluded Stories

Date: 01-16-2184

Location: Omega, The Terminus

Four shot glasses rose and fell back in the privacy of the Executive's cabin on the Reliant, the door locked and sealed even against Joa's intrusion.

Three of us set the small cups down quickly, while the fourth glared at hers before turning to scowl at her girlfriend. "You said you put rum in this."

"I lied." Voya replied unrepentantly, already grabbing a bottle to refill the others. "When you can walk on your own, you can drink. Until then, enjoy your water."

Shyeel's scowl deepened as she sank back in her hover-chair, the machine quietly whirring as it supported her battered body. Natural regeneration combined with advanced medical technology, and expert application in the form of Mordin Solus, meant she was already well on the mend... but even with all of that it was going to be a bit before she was close to combat ready again.

"What about him?" She jerked her chin in my direction, "Half of his fucking ribs were shattered and he gets to drink?"

"More like a third." I corrected her as I accepted the second shot, electing to sip this one instead of just downing it. "And my ribs are armor plated now."

"They've got a nano-weave around them." Illyan corrected me.

"Same thing." I replied dismissively, shifting to lean against her side as I did. Her free arm wrapped around my shoulders on reflex, "Honestly I feel better now than I have in a long fucking time, my left leg isn't constantly sore anymore for one."

Shyeel's expression softened a little, and she nodded. "They replace anything vital?"

Illyan shook her head on my behalf, "Mostly that crazy Salarian just repaired and reinforced everything that was already there. Skeletal lattices and muscle weaves, he won't break quite so easily anymore. He wanted to replace his eyes too, but I told him to fuck off."

Voya snorted, "You actually like those tiny things? They're the color of dying grass."

"At least they don't glow in the dark." She retaliated with a smirk, "Even if yours do make it easy for Shyeel to tell when you're looking up at her in the dark."

The Quarian's left cheek twitched. "I really do hate you, you know that right?"
"I hate you more."

I smiled a little into my drink, "Going to miss your bickering."

Voya's eyes lowered slightly, her hair rustling as she shook her head. "There's... things I have to take care of back home. It's been a very long time since I've talked with the Elders, and they need to be briefed on what's coming."

I couldn't really argue with that need, or the fact that Voya was the best person to do so. "And you're all right with staying there after?"

"Not really." Shyeel admitted, "But Ayle is right. We're going to need more elite teams, and keeping them all on Omega doesn't make much sense. At first, anyway. Once we get them trained up, we'll be back, and fuck whatever she says."

"Once the next war is done with you mean." Illayn grumbled quietly, finishing off her second drink and shaking her head. "Just finished one and another is already getting started."

"We aren't getting involved." I reminded her, "I don't care that Nynsi and Ayle are."

She glanced down at me, "So is Sederis."

"Good for them." The shoulder against her side rolled in a shrug, "If they want to try and clean out the Hegemony, that's their right, just like its ours to sit around Omega and fucking relax."

"Which is why we aren't going anywhere for a while yet either." Shyeel added, flicking her gaze to Voya. "At least until that giant party Aria's planning to celebrate her victory."

Voya shrugged, not looking terribly bothered by that statement, though her lips did curl a little as she glanced at me. "Do you even know how to relax? And building weapons doesn't count."

I blinked. "Since when?"

"Since I'm going to be keeping you in bed whenever we aren't drinking."

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" I elbowed her in the side, which merely made her snort and shift a hand to grab the back of my neck. I hissed in discomfort as she tightened her grip, then said nothing at all when she used the leverage to put me in a better position to press our mouths together.

There was a sound of disgust from Voya, and something more amused from Shyeel.

I ignored them both in favor of focusing on what her tongue was doing, and letting myself relax against her broad form.

"See?" She asked when she pulled back, "That is relaxing, especially when you taste like rum."

"Doesn't he always?" Shyeel asked in turn.

"Mostly, but sometimes-" "Conversation over." Voya growled, slamming her bottle of Turian liquor down after refilling her glass. "We just won, fucking won everything, and I refuse to let it devolve into you two talking about crap that Cieran and I would rather you didn't."

Illyan snorted, "What do you want to talk about then? Not shop talk either, going to be enough of that soon."
Glowing eyes narrowed, then looked down a little, as if she'd remembered something. After a moment, I did as well, and let out a slow breath as she spoke again. "Glasses on the table. Yours too Shyeel, you can have rum for this."

The scarred woman blinked, but followed our lead as we put our glasses back down. Our friend quickly filled them all, then set the bottles aside and frowned down at the little cups of liquid. It took her nearly a minute, though none of us bothered her or said anything as we waited.

"Thul." She said finally, taking her glass, tilting it in salute to no one in particular, then throwing it back. "That crazy bosh'tet always knew how to make you feel better, even if he also made you kind of want to kill him."

Shyeel snorted softly, reaching down to take her own. "Callada. Always up to join me and Cie in fleecing idiots from their money in cards. Didn't always think before she spoke, but she was there if you needed her."

"Yeah..." I smiled at the memories of simpler times, then carefully hefted my own shot of rum. "Dietrich. If you needed loud, boisterous company, he was there and ready to mix whatever kind of drink you wanted. He'll fit in with the others in Valhalla."

"Jarik." Illyan offered quietly after I'd downed my drink. "He was a good kid... ready to help with whatever you needed, cook whatever food he thought would make our days a little better."

Voya wordlessly refilled the glasses once we had set them down, and again we went around our little circle, remembering everyone we'd lost.

Marcus, toasted for his burning hatred of slavers and his utter infatuation with Jacqueline even with her being... well, her. Hesh and Ullak were remembered for the utter loyalty to each other and to their Tarath'shan, and the times we'd all teased them about the obvious bite marks on their shoulders. Trisren and Dorvahn, the original Blades, the friendship they'd offered and everything about them that we missed. Glitch, the machine's remains damaged beyond any hope of repair, and the thing's utter love of violence and battle.

"Rane'li." Illyan murmured finally, her smile becoming sad as she glanced at me. "I do miss her Cie, even if you'd have never let me be with you both."

I opened my mouth to reply to that, then closed it when I realized that there was really nothing more to say. Instead I just lifted my glass once again, everyone else following suit as we finished our little ritual.

"Well.." Shyeel drawled as Voya pointedly took the bottles away, her eyes watching the Quarian's hips longer than was actually necessary. Considering that her wounds made sex impossible for now, the ogling seemed somehow masochistic to me. "That was a thing... let's brighten things up, when in Athame's name are you two going to leave this ship?"

Illyan groaned and rubbed at her face, "Never. Never sounds good."

There was a snort from the smaller Asari, "Oh come on, it wasn't that bad."

"It was worse than bad." I corrected her irritably. "We couldn't go more than five meters without being propositioned five times."

"That bothered me less than the goddess-damned staring." Illyan shuddered. "Can't say I'm not a little used to that, but Athame's ass..."
"Shit will calm down eventually." Voya spoke as she came back, dropping into her seat. "You were left alone in Afterlife."

I snorted, "Because Aria made it clear that we aren't to be fawned over, she wants that shit saved for herself."

The Quarian shook her head bemusedly. "She's that bad?"

"She's worse." My shoulders fell as I sighed, "I would rather have to deal with Sederis and T'Ravt at the same time than with her. She always has to have the last word, always has to have control of the conversation, and always tries to make it seem like she knows more than you do."

Illyan grimaced, "Even when we both know she doesn't."

Voya blinked, "Wait, you go up there with him? Aria lets you?"

"She has the assist for the kill on Ganar," I shrugged, "And Aria's aware that I tell her everything anyway. If you two want to listen to her bitch about the latest theories on Ilos feel free to come with the next time she calls me."

"No." Grey lips twisted as she shook her head, stiff strands of hair clicking against each other. "The less I have to deal with that bitch, the better. If you didn't have to, you wouldn't either."

Since I couldn't exactly deny that, I merely shrugged.

Glowing eyes narrowed. "You just wanted us to suffer as well, didn't you? Fucking keshin."

Since I couldn't deny that either, I shrugged again and smirked a little. "It was worth the attempt."

"Was it?" Voya growled, "You're healthy enough for a spar or five... it's been a while since I kicked your ass. We can see how well your new body handles pain."

My lover made a huffing sound of amusement, "Goddess but I'm going to miss this. And seeing you two beat on each other. All the sexual tension and denial..."

I joined the petite woman in glaring at her, my voice annoyed, "You're still on about that?"

"Always." She replied with a grin. "Your face gets all pinched and she looks like she just smelled vomit... yeah, just like that."

Growling, I tried to push myself away from her only to be hauled back with little effort on her part. A very brief struggle preceded my head ending up in her lap with my body reluctantly stretched across the rest of the couch, my eyes narrowed as I kept glaring up at her.

"Are you sure you need her alive?" Voya asked darkly, one of Shyeel's arms thrown in front of her to stop her from getting up. "You've got options now, can always just replace her with someone far less annoying. Maybe a Batarian girl."

"There's days when it's tempting." I muttered, glaring at Illyan.

She merely rolled her blue eyes in bemusement, a hand shifting to run through my loose hair. "Hey, if you want to invite a new third along, I probably wouldn't mind. Joa might get a bit jealous though, she seems the type."

Shyeel perked up a little at that, "How is that going by the way? Nice and awkward?"
"Yes." I supplied at the same time that Illyan said, "No."

My fellow Reyja'krem snorted out a laugh, "Let me guess, she's way more into Illyan than you?"

"No, that would probably be less awkward." I admitted, "It's more that she seems determined to show us both equal amounts of affection. I think she's hoping to be able to sleep with the both of us individually on top of together."

"Well..." Shyeel shook her head, "She did just lose her favorite sister not all that long ago, probably wants some comfort. And sleeping with subordinates is never a good idea for a ship's captain, no matter what organization you're in. You two are attractive and not terribly dangerous from her perspective."

"More or less what I got from the meld." Illyan nodded slightly, "Cie's just awkward about it because he's Cie. Trena says she'll move on in a few weeks, couple months on the outside."

I pursed my lips, "And you trust Trena? Also, when the fuck did you talk with her about this?"

Blue cheeks darkened a little, and she ignored the second question entirely. "I trust Trena to have an unnaturally good idea how a relationship will go."

"The little bitch is rather good at reading that kind of thing." Voya grudgingly allowed, "Although... now I have to wonder what she thought about the two of you?"

I frowned a little, trying to think back on the few conversations that scales and I had had lately. "I don't think she's said. Illyan?"

A shoulder rolled, "She said she'd already told me, but I honestly don't remember. It might have been on Redcliffe... lot of crap I did my best to forget from that place."

"Illyan..."

She glanced down at me, shifting her free hand to brush against my face. "Hey, you don't get to yell at me about repressing things, remember?"

I sighed and shook my head as best I could in my position. "Still not."

The hand covered my mouth before I could finish. "Cie, that's what I've got you for. And these two short idiots."

Said short idiots both let out annoyed sounds at the reference to their average heights.

I tried to reply to that, but she didn't move her hand. After a few moments of trying to get my muffled voice past her skin, I settled for nipping my teeth at her palm. The pain made her flinch a little and narrow her eyes, and then the hand in my hair was covering my mouth as her other slid down to my chest and stomach.

"Hey!" Shyeel snapped, "No foreplay while we're still here."

Illyan stopped herself from reaching down further, but only just. "Then you two should probably get going."

"Typical." Voya muttered as she rose, ignoring my narrowed eyes and mental signals telling her to hit my lover, and that there had been more I'd wanted to discuss. "We'll see you two for that meeting next shift, make sure to shower when you're done this time."
Shyeel turned her chair around easily enough, the thing floating forwards with only a minimal bit of a push from Voya. The pair were only just reaching the door when Illyan was hauling me into a seated position in her lap, easily batting my hands away before pulling me into another deep kiss.

I went along with it for a little while, breaking apart for air and ducking my head to avoid her second effort. "Illyan, what the fuck is this-"

"Because I want to." She interrupted me impatiently, grabbing my chin and shifting me so she could kiss and bite at the side of my neck. "Stop complaining."

"Not complaining." I protested, shuddering as she bit down a bit harder. "Just... Athame's ass, I wanted to talk with them about... what we'll all be doing..."

"Time for that later." Her mouth moved against my skin, "Time for us now. It's finally over, we're both alive, and I want to make the most of those things."

I felt myself sag a little, my eyes half-closing as I realized, again, that she was right. It wasn't my first realization that our, that my quest was finally over... but each time the thought seemed to sneak up and hit me over the head with raw relief and emotion.

Letting out a breathy little sound, I batted her hands away and pushed myself out of her lap and onto my feet. She had enough time to frown at me before I grabbed her shoulders and pushed her sideways, following her down onto the couch with myself on top.

Krom was dead, Ganar was dead, and the war that we'd been fighting for two years was over. Even better, we were still alive... so were Shyeel and Voya, and Ayle and Trena, and Ghai and Joa. We'd lost friends along the way... but we hadn't lost everyone, and we'd gained new companions along the way. Their losses would always hurt, but we'd avenged their memories, and would always honor them as we slowly moved on with our lives.

We could do that... because we were still fucking alive, and it was definitely time to make the most of that.

Next up is: The We-won-the-fucking-war Party

Chapter End Notes

And some private time for Cieran and this three friends, finally getting the break that they've been waiting for for a very, very long time. A little melancholy thanks to remembering everyone that they lost to get to this point, and the fact that they'll temporarily be splitting apart for a while, but relieved thanks to this chapter finally concluding.

We're only two chapters away from the conclusion to this fic, though in reality the next epilogue is going to be the last actual chapter. Epilogue four is merely a short recording of a conversation between Cieran and Aethyta to leave you all pondering about a few more things. All of the mysteries remaining/being dragged up in these last few chapters will definitely be explored in AR:VI.
In terms of Chevalier, I can't say when I'll begin working on it. It's fully outlined, and will be about the same length as Terminus (with the same 2 act, interlude act from a single side-pov format) though it will cover about two years worth of 'story-time'. My goal is to finally finish Strange Bedfellows before I really get started.

I won't say I'm taking a break from writing, because I always say that and always fail to. Assume AR: VI will begin posting sometime in March, April at the very outside (depending on how much of my life Andromeda consumes).

Lot of reviewers asking about the Reaper graveyard and throwing out theories... going to be a lot those being thrown around in story too. Glad that seemed to intrigue everyone, ;)

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifeblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
"Only you would openly berate one of Aria's DJ's into putting this kind of music on," I couldn't stop the grin as I moved casually across the floor, the Warlord across from me laughing in genuine amusement as we moved about in an upper-class Batarian waltz. My navy 'dress' coat billowed around my legs as her white dress did the same about her own, the colors off-setting surprisingly well as we moved.

The movement was one of the few dances that Nynsi had drilled into me all those years ago, and the rust was definitely showing on my end. Not that the Lady Warlord minded taking the lead when my steps faltered, which was at least preventing my from embarrassing myself.

"Leska would have." Yan T'Ravt replied, shifting a little to keep pace with my sharp strides. "Though Ithiri may have attempted to murder her for doing so."

I snorted as we moved closer to one another, hands on each others upper arms and shoulders as we changed course. "And then Jona and Aria would have gotten involved, and this party would have come to an unfortunate end."

"Indeed." She grinned as her head dipped to the right, silently assuming the dominant position and smoothly driving me backwards. "On that note, have you seen the eldest Sederis lately?"

"She was dragging three of Aria's dancers to a private room last I saw her."

T'Ravt let out a prim little snort and shook her head. "I should have known... Ah, while I have you captive. Your mother sends her regards, and compliments you for having the tenacity to survive."

"I'll have to send her a thank you card." I mused as I slowed and planted my feet, tipping my own head in challenge that saw her gracefully retreating as I pursued.

"Dark lips curled in amusement as we reached the center of the floor, her own steps ceasing so that we were again standing practically on each others toes. "So long as whatever explosive lays within is not lethal."

I could only sigh in disappointment as my hands found her shoulders, our determined strides resuming. "Whose idea was it to leave the trail for me to follow on that? I'm assuming it wasn't hers, and I still can't work out a reason for you to have done it."

Her smile remained, "By the process of elimination, that leaves only a single individual, does it not?"

"Koliva really wants us to be some kind of family?" My head shook a little as we parted again,
drawing back several paces to challenge one another with posture once again. "Athame's ass but she's really determined if she burned favors with you."

"I owed her for actions in the past, and your interaction with your blood-kin continue to amuse." The Lady replied as I conceded, lowering my head to the left and allowing her to circle to my dominant side. "It cost me little enough to allow it."

That was probably true enough, all she'd had to do was ensure that old data was left out where I could find it. Having it stored at the Academy further upped the chance I'd have encountered my mother or half-brothers. And since she'd already established that I wasn't allowed to kill any of them, there hadn't been any real risk either.

I was opening my mouth to ask about Koliva, I still didn't know much about her despite the occasional over-protective message concerning her children and reminders that I was welcome to visit them whenever I was next on Xentha, when our dance was interrupted by a new arrival.

"I do believe you have taken her away from me long enough, Cieran." Leska Sederis purred, her Eclipse uniform clinging to her body as she strode forwards.

Snorting, I turned and gave the Admiral a slightly theatrical bow that set titters off in the audience surrounding the floor.

"Leska. Lady." My legs carried me back as the two gave me a smirk and a nod respectively before turning to face each other.

The pair promptly set off, competing for the lead with every step. Leaving them to it, I departed the dance floor to mixed applause and laughter from the assembled upper-crust of the Terminus.

Afterlife's upper levels had been reserved for those of means from the various armies, or those who had impressed their warlord's in some way. So while it was still quite full, for once I didn't have to shove and elbow my way through the crowd.

"Niish moves Cieran!" A very drunk Elissa Themes called, the Eclipse Captain sitting in the lap of a human Talon. "Should ditch the coat so we can see your ash shake next time!"

I gave her a rude gesture with both hands that nearly made her fall over with laughter, her equally intoxicated date belting out his own laughter as I walked past them, looking around in bemusement as I did. As I headed back towards Aria's throne, from which T'Ravt had dragged me away, I kept my head on a swivel, looking around the wild mix of beings present ignoring the many people blatantly trying to get my attention.

The Lady Warlord's officers in their bright white uniforms mingled beside Aria's people and their worn, casual gear. Eclipse agents in gold and yellow conversed with representatives from Cessa's little empire, while die Waffe's officers drank and laughed in uniforms that struck me as almost Soviet. The Iron King himself was even present, holding court near a bar and booming with laughter as he shared drinks with Ithiri Sederis and one of Aria's Admirals.

Here and there I could see members of the Reliant's crew in their dark uniforms, along with a mix of Talons and Cresting Wave Asari as the surviving gangsters celebrated being alive. I nodded to those who I recognized, which universally seemed to cause the attention on me to swing to them as those around them demanded to know how they knew me.

Those who did laughed as they caught sight of my obvious retreat towards the safety of Aria's throne, Ayle shaking her head even as she lead a starstruck Captain Vishin past me and towards a private room.
"Taking advantage of my subordinates already?" I called after her.

"Of course!" She called back, her grin amused as she reached up to touch the man's cheek. He obediently dipped his head to the left, letting her lean over and bite at his neck. Catcalls and howls began almost at once as she used that grip to pull him through the door, her hands already pulling at his pants.

Laughing, I resumed my trek through the crowd, rolling my eyes when I caught sight of a topless Trena feeding Ghai some kind of desert in a booth, Joa recording the entire thing as she laughed and joked with a few of her officers. Many of the latter had their own company, male and female members of Aria's group in various states of undress as they supplied them with food and drinks.

On the booth behind them, two of Dietrich's surviving suit pilots watched as the third danced on the table for them, the Turian woman laughing as the Human and Batarian male both drooled. Behind them in turn were Voya and Shyeel, with nearly a dozen Terminus Quarians surrounding their table and visibly hanging on every word of a story being told.

Bypassing that little knot, I entered the calmer area near the stairs, with several of the other minor Warlords present, along with the newest Greater Warlord who was busy looking stunned to have been invited at all.

I made sure to give Ha'diq Shaka ul Yesh, highborn exile and conqueror of Zadith Ban, a polite bow of my head as I walked past. He belatedly returned it when his date elbowed him sharply in the side, the beautiful Indian woman giving me an amused little grin as she did. That pairing definitely seemed like it had a story behind it, and I made a note to talk with them when I was reasonably sober.

Leaving them behind, I headed up the stairs and past the few guards actually on duty, bowing my head appropriately to Aria as I approached. Apart from the Queen, only Illyan and Nyreen were present. The former had elected to hide from her new-found fame up here, while the latter wasn't really in any shape to be anywhere else.

"Kean." The Queen greeted me, her mouth twitching on one side, "Fleeing from the common rabble again?"

"Obviously." I replied with a grin brought on by the rum I'd already imbibed, dropping myself next to Illyan on one of the side couches. "Hey Red, good to see you out and around."

Nyreen Kandros looked over from where she sat next to Aria, her new prosthetic limbs still a little jerky as she moved them. Her similarly artificial mandibles remained still, taped to her plates while her body continued to heal. "I'm hardly up, or around."

"You aren't in a hospital bed anymore." I pointed out as I leaned against my lover, the Asari quickly wrapping an arm around me as we settled back. "That's not nothing."

"True." She allowed, glancing down at her new arms and legs. "Aria keeps saying the same thing."

"Then perhaps you should actually listen." Aria tilted her head towards me, "Given that everyone else has stated the same."

"You'll probably have to repeat it a few dozen times." I advised, "She's kind of stubborn."

The Queen snorted, her mood entirely good for once. "I'm more than aware, though I'll admit it's nice that I'm not the only one who's become annoyed by it."

Snorting, I reached over the end table on my right and grabbed the glass I'd left behind. Tilting it
back revealed a distinct absence, and I lowered it with a frown. "Illyan... why is the rum gone?"

"What rum?" She asked guilelessly. "I don't remember any rum."

Turning around, I glared up at her sheepish expression. "You could have at least sent someone to get more rum after you finished it. Give me yours."

"She drank it." Aria revealed, "About ten seconds after you departed."

I pursed my lips and tightened my glare up a bit. "Illyan. Rum. Fetch."

Her mouth opened, then closed. "Wait, you mean send someone to get us more rum, right?"

"No, I mean go down there and enjoy everyone staring and pointing as you refill my glass."

Reaching up, I pushed the arm around my shoulders away. "And bring a bottle... no, two bottles."

"Do I have to? ...I could go down on you in apology."


My lover muttered a few uncomplimentary things as she heaved herself to her feet and got going. I spent a few moments admiring the sight of her walking away, particularly how her uniform clung to certain parts of her body, then turned back to the amused Queen and her own companion.

"What were we talking about before T'Ravt dragged me away?"

Aria rolled a shoulder, "I was remonstrating you for trying to talk business at a party."

Ah, right. I'd been asking about the Talons, and Nyreen had admitted they were being folded into Aria's forces... sort-of. She evidently wanted them to become a first-attempt at creating something like a police force for Omega, to whatever extent that the station could support that kind of thing. Aria had quickly shut that down, as well as making it clear that we weren't to talk about that, about the Reapers, or anything besides pleasure today.

"How are your enhancements?" Nyreen asked into the paused that followed, glancing down as Aria slid an arm over her shoulders. The Turian woman looked like she couldn't decide if she wanted to collapse into Aria's side, or flee from the touch, and settled for remaining still. "Mordin told me he had to do quite a bit of work on you as well."

"Weird." I admitted as I watched their silent interaction, "Didn't realize how much pain I was tuning out until it was gone. I feel great physically, but he keeps reminding me that I'm not all that 'upgraded'."

If Shepard's game rebuild had been the cost-is-no-obstacle option, combined with the ability to do a lot of work on a dead body, I'd more or less gotten the ultra-cheap version. Still expensive as fuck mind you, but it wasn't a full body rebuild. Most of what Mordin had done had simply been to fix up the damage I'd started suffering ever since I'd arrived, my body accumulating injuries like a boxer or a hockey player as I kept getting battered.

Redcliffe had been the worst in that, since I hadn't had the same access to advanced medical tech during the capital-front campaign.

"Little bit stronger," I held up a hand and flexed it a little, "Should be a little more resistant to long-term damage in the future, which I'm definitely grateful for. How about you?"
"It's going to take a while." She admitted, holding up a metal hand and mimicking my motion as she regarded it with one natural, and one artificial eye. "At least I kept my right leg, or else it would have been worse in terms of just walking around. Right now it's a lot of adjusting my depth perception."

I blinked, "Really?"

"Turian eyes are harder to replace." Aria supplied casually, "Something to do with how their brains interpret the information, it takes longer for the software to adjust."

Huh. More crap I hadn't ever imagined learning.

"Actually," The Queen continued, shifting her attention fully to me, "I was hoping you would agree to provide a few of your weapons for her."

"Cane?" I guessed. When she nodded, I did as well. "Pistol or tech variant? Few of the former in our armory on Xentha, can have them shipped out."

"I don't need-"

"That will be fine." Aria cut her off, "Consider it a minor favor."

I nodded, making a mental note to send a message to the Kithan's to have those loaded and sent on the next ship headed this way.

Nyreen exhaled, seeming to accept it, then asked me a few basic questions about the design. I replied easily enough, the three of us largely relaxing until Illyan returned with our drinks. She managed to maintain her pout at having to go downstairs for all of three minutes, after which her hands busied themselves in playing with my hair as we relaxed.

We were allowed to enjoy the relative pace for fifteen or twenty minutes before Aria and her own partner turned their conversation to one merely between each other, their voices becoming low as they spoke. Though the Queen didn't so much as flick her eyes in our direction, I got the message regardless, and we reluctantly got back up and headed for the stairs.

"So." Illyan asked as we took our time walking down. "Who are we bringing with?"

I hefted up the bottle she'd brought for me, carefully inspecting how much was still within."Ask me that when this is gone."

"No, because you'll just agree to whatever I say so long as I keep touching you." She grinned. "I think Themes was checking you out before, or maybe that Colonel from Redcliffe. She here?"

"She is," I allowed, "That doesn't mean I want either of them with."

She nodded mock-soberly. "Ah, we just going to stick with Joa then?"

"No! We don't need anyone with-"

"We don't need them with, but it's fun." Illyan countered with a grin. "Admit it, you liked it when you were taking Joa while she was-"

I smacked her in the stomach, which only made her laugh. "This is because I made you get me a new drink, isn't it?"

"Maybe."
"If I take you to a private room right now, will you stop?"

"Probably, but I reserve the right to invite Joa if she's available and if you're still awake after our second or third time."

I could only snort, "Determined much?"

"You know it." Her hands grabbed my shoulders as we got to the bottom of the stairs, nearly making me drop the bottle as she pushed me against the wall. Her rum flavored mouth was on mine a breath later, both of us tuning out the general sounds of amusement and encouragement as we kissed.

We broke apart as we ran out of air in our lungs, the Asari pressing her body against me with a wicked smile on her blue lips. "Ready to celebrate being alive some more?"

"Yes." I murmured back, leaning forwards to bite at the skin on her neck. "Now stop delaying and find us a bloody room."

Next up is: The Neverending Story

Chapter End Notes

Just one chapter to go before this story reaches its conclusion... as I said last chapter, it's a very short recording style section that is already complete. Soon as this chapter hits twelve or so reviews I'll go ahead and throw it up as well.

Massive thanks to everyone who went and checked out The Blocked Writer's story, he's a little panicked over the volume of responses but also thrilled. :)

Going to go ahead and put in my usual end-of-story request in regards to the Tropes page here. It could again do with some updates considering another full story has passed. Remember that if you don't have an account, you can always PM me here with trope ideas and I'll be happy to add them on your behalf (and credit you in the history section). And though I hate asking for advertisement... a rec in the ME fanfic section would be amazing as well.

Please read and review, criticism is welcome, flames not so much, as usual. Reviews are my lifblood as a writer.. every-time my email goes off with a review it makes me want to write more, so please take the time to leave one. Guests can leave them as well, and it only takes a minute, so please. Even if it's as simple as "I enjoyed it, please continue."

Thanks, Kat
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't own the Mass Effect.

Epilogue IV: The Neverending Story

*Transcript of conversation 01-17-2185*

*Cieran Kean:* What do you want old fish? I'm hungover as shit, have a million things to be doing right now, and-

*Aethyta T'Voth:* It happened, Kean. The SR-1 went down over Alchera this morning.

*Cieran Kean:* ...what? How?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Still working on the why, but I'm pretty sure that bitch was behind it. If one of her people could get a one-time beacon on board the ship, a single pulse would have been all the Collectors needed to get a shot off.

*Cieran Kean:* Which would breach the armor and bring the stealth systems down... Athame's fucking ass. She has agents on the Citadel?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Everyone has agents on that stupid fucking station.

*Cieran Kean:* Shit... Shepard?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Dead, as per your implants, along with her first officer and half the bridge crew.

*Cieran Kean:* Liara? Korolev?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Both alive, you can tell because I'm not on Thessia personally killing that whore.

*Cieran Kean:* -snorts- You think she's trying to push things back on track?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Too early to tell kid.

*Cieran Kean:* Fair point. What do you want from me? I'm not exactly in a position where I can investigate her for you.

*Aethyta T'Voth:* You know someone else to lead the fight against the Reapers and Leviathans? Maybe you want to be the one to lead a fucking team through the Omega-4 relay?

*Cieran Kean:* ...shit. Do you know when its all going to happen?

*Aethyta T'Voth:* Cerberus already roped my daughter and Korolev into helping them get the body, it's being sold to the Collectors in the station's deeps sometime in the next two weeks.
Cieran Kean: Right. I'll keep my core team on station, give me a warning when they're on their way and I'll burn a favor with Aria to watch for their ship.

Aethyta T'Voth: Once Cerberus has the body, take Liara and the human to your compound on Xentha and keep them there. That bitch won't be able to touch them there.

Cieran Kean: And... what, keep them prisoner for two years? Get killed by Shepard when she wakes up for doing so?

Aethyta T'Voth: I'm sure you can talk her out of it. Just keep them fucking safe, and out of the damned way.

...communication ends.

Cieran Kean: Elder, you heard that?

Myself: Obviously, respected human-thing. I record and monitor all of your transmissions on station at my mistress's order. She was also listening.

Cieran Kean: Lovely. Tell Aria that I need to meet with her immediately.

Myself: ...done. About this subject?

Cieran Kean: Yes. I also need to know where Archangel is holed up, and yes, I know that he's alive and that she knows where he is.

Myself: ...she is amused by your request, and wishes to know if you intend to follow the old bitch's orders.

Cieran Kean: She knows full well the answer to that question. I'll be in Afterlife within the hour.

End Another Realm V: Einherjar

Chapter End Notes

And on that nice little cliffhanger...

We are here, once again, at the end of yet another story. As usual, specialized thanks to The Blocked Writer for serving as my beta, keeping me on track, and yelling at me when I don't quite have things correct. More thanks to GreaterGoodIreland for the story image, as well as creating the TvTropes page. Please take the time to check out both their stories (in particular 'Awake' by Blocked, and 'Outlander' by Ireland. as well as the Tropes page.) In regards to said Tropes page, it could again do with some updates considering another full story has passed. Remember that if you don't have an account, you can always PM me here with trope ideas and I'll be happy to add them on your behalf (and credit you in the history section).

General thanks to everyone who took the time to read and review this story, every new
review is a bit of extra motivation for me to keep working on it, so thank you again.

I will reiterate that my basic plan is to complete Strange Bedfellows before getting into Chevalier, and possibly at least starting on Those Who Fight 6 or starting on one of my two original story plans. Regardless I expect to start posting AR:VI by the end of March or early April. Updates will likely be slow to Andromeda, but I want to have at least the prologue done by then.

Remember that I'm more than happy to talk with anyone, so feel free to PM me with thoughts, questions, or just to chat about the series.

Until I come back,

Semper Victoria,

Katkiller V

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!