Another Realm II: Terminus

by Katkiller_V

Summary

It's been six months since our part in the war against the Blue Suns ended on Illium, but just because we think we're out doesn't mean that our enemies feel the same. Between Batarian politics, strange assassins, and reluctant rescue missions.. it would seem that my life is going to become extremely complicated yet again. Which figures, I was just starting to get comfortable.

Notes

A lot of recapping, reintroducing, bringing everyone back up to speed with the situation and the various characters as well as illustrating what Cieran's life is like circa six months post AR: Arrival. Kudos to The Blocked Writer who has taken up beta/editing duties for this fic, and has helped me greatly by letting me run through various outlines and plans with him.

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 choose. 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."

Thanks, Kat
The Dawn

I don't own the Mass Effect, that belongs to Bioware. For my original characters, see my profile.

This is a sequel to Another Realm: Arrival. Reading that story is highly encouraged before delving into this one.

Another Realm: Terminus

I have no idea why I'm even writing this down. No one would believe me even if I told them the truth.. which might be for the best. Normally it seems that everyone feels the need to get it out, let it off their chests, tell someone that they're from another universe.

Me?

Not so much. I have enough shit going on in my life without trying to convince people that I'm not from this dimension, or that I think I have a good idea of what's coming in the future. As far as everyone else knows, I was mind-raped by an Asari until I lost most of my memories, and that works for me.

I suppose I should start from the beginning, for those of you who missed that part. On March 30, 2015, I went to bed in a hotel in upstate New York where I'd been traveling for work. I, quite naturally, expected to wake up in that same place the next morning. Instead, my eyes opened to a small apartment on a planet I'd previously thought was mere fiction, and that wasn't even the worst of my issues. There was a corpse in the corner, a very enigmatic Asari Matriarch pumping me for information, and my head was pounding. To say that my life had suddenly become very complicated would be understating things to the extreme.

Still, things weren't all bad. The Matriarch, who didn't give me her real name, put me in touch with Trena T'laria, an engineer and former commando who owed her a favor. She, in turn, was able to connect me with a Highborn Batarian named Xerol Shaaryak, who basically ran the small colony of Batarian exiles on Illium. And for a few months, at least, I had a fairly normal, quiet life.. which ended when the True Sons, a front for the Blue Suns mercenary group, made our lives hell. Long story short, Xerol's brother and his wife wanted to kill him for not turning their daughter Nynsi over to them to be married off to the highest bidder, and wanted to kill me for sleeping with said daughter.

The fights that followed were pretty brutal. Without the powered exoskeleton that Trena and Xerol arranged for me to use, I'd have died several times over. As it was, I barely made it through with my skin mostly intact. I was one of the luckier ones when it came to injuries, not suffering more than a few scars and broken bones. Trena, and her lover Ghai, were both crippled, and Xerol himself died in the fighting. But at the end of the day, both of Nyn's parents were dead, and she was the one now running Khar'shan Minor with me as her Harath'krem, which was a Batarian title signifying someone elevated to the Highborn caste. That someone was bound to their liege in much the same way a knight would be bound to a lord in medieval times. And the duties, defending her, advising her, were pretty similar as well.

It was around the end where things started to, well, change. Despite my intentions not to purposefully change anything, it would seem that my mere presence was enough to throw a spanner in the works. Stealing her parent's confidential data right out from under Spectre Tela Vasir's blue nose, Nyn used it to send Zaeed Massani straight after the man who'd betrayed him. And once that was done, broadcast every little secret that the Blue Suns had onto the extranet,
kicking off a war in the Terminus that still hasn't stopped.

But that was there. On Illium, we were able to start putting our lives back together, far from the war fronts. Sure there were a few arguments here and there, but life was going on, and at that point.. I had no idea just how things were going to turn out.

If I had.. maybe I would have done things differently.

To: Nobody at all

From: Cieran Kean

Act 1: The Rescue

Date: 04-5-2181

Chapter 1: The Dawn

I let out a very long groan, trying not to slump into the couch.

There was an amused little chuckle at my sound of pain, a smooth voice nearly echoing in the spacious living room. "Come now Harath'krem, this morning was hardly that rough on you."

Turning slightly, I gave Nynsi Shaaryak a mild glare. My Batarian girlfriend, boss, and Tarath'shan merely gave me a small smile. She was already dressed for the day in a brown suit that contemplated her teal skin very well, and it was slim enough to cling very nicely to her tall, muscled frame.

Seeing that I wasn't about to respond verbally, she continued speaking. "Aethyta had you run, what, a mere few kilometers?"

"Five. And then she let Chen 'teach' me some more boxing, and then she made me go through shooting drills. And then another kilometer."

Her arms crossed, but her tone remained amused. "Which is hardly as bad as some of the days where she had us both working."

I grimaced, "Less the running, more Chen. Apparently he wanted revenge for our last training exercise and she felt like letting him beat on me."

Aethyta wasn't training me every day anymore, neither she nor I had the time to continue that relentless schedule, so she was doing her best to make up for my days off by severely putting me through my paces. Initially the focus had been entirely on bulking my stamina up further, along with improving my marginal weapons skills.

After a good two months of that, she'd started adding in close combat sessions, which had quickly become my least favorite part. Rather than train me herself, which would have been terrifying enough, she'd drafted Chen. The former sniper turned squad leader was shorter than me, but like most Batarian males he was literally bulging with muscles and had a good forty pounds on me.

Which meant he spent as much time giving me black eyes as he did actually teaching me Thondurian boxing. Thankfully he'd yet to break my nose, which I was convinced was more luck than any skill on my part.
Nyn sighed quietly, her arms unfolding so that she could adjust her shirt a bit. "You did rather humiliate him in front of the other squad leaders."

I rolled my eyes, "He's got to learn to react to surprises somehow. We've done it to all four squads, it isn't like we're singling him out."

She tilted her head minutely to the left to accept the point. "But can you honestly say that you are surprised at his reaction?"

A frown grew on my face as I stared at her. "Aren't you supposed to be on my side about this?"

That earned me an honest chuckle before she glided across the distance between us. "I am always on your side, but there are some things that even your eyes should be able to see coming. And besides, there will be plenty of time for me to help you feel better later tonight."

I had the good grace to blush slightly, even as I rolled my single pair of eyes at the first comment. "Assuming you're in the mood after dealing with the Executive Board."

"Yes." She admitted with a sigh, a hand reaching down to run across my cheek. "Assuming that."

Leaning into her touch a bit, my head turned enough that I could brush my lips against her wrist. "Still finding ways to drag out any idea of lessening the embargo?"

"We have an agreement on paper," fingers slid up and into my short cropped hair, a sad little sigh marking exactly what she thought of its new length, "But they insist on arguing every single line of the contract. That the Council is hardly in favor of the concept is not helping my arguments."

"You'd expect quid pro quo to go farther. We did save them from a having a war happen right under their upturned noses." It was a bit weird throwing the Latin phrase into my otherwise Asari dialect, but they didn't really have a saying that worked as well. Well, they did, but it referenced sexual favors, and I wasn't quite ready to go that far in casual conversation.

She grunted before pulling her hand back. "That was six months ago, and their memories are apparently short. Unlike their speeches. I would much rather be on your particular mission today."

"You want to go on a stake-out run?" I shook my head, "I had no idea that they were that bad."

"They are." There was a sigh. "Are you going to stand up and bid me a proper farewell or not?"

"Of course Tarath'shan." Rising to my feet with only a small wince, I politely took her left hand brought the back of it to my lips. "May you have a good and profitable day, with the Pillars themselves supporting your efforts."

"Thank you, my Harath'krem." she tilted her head politely to the right as I reciprocated to the left. Respect shown and given between a lady and her vassal. The moment ended when her lips curled into a smirk. "And now an improper farewell, if you would."

My own curled for a brief moment before my arms shot out to wrap around her waist, dragging her body against mine. She had time for a quietly pleased sound before our lips met, her earthy taste filling me as our mouths moved against one another. Regretfully the kiss lasted for only a few moments before I had to let her go, her lower eyes opening to meet mine even as her upper set was lazily lidded.

"I do adore you, Cieran."

"And I you, Nynsi." Leaning in I brushed our lips together one more time before stepping back. "I
would say dinner tonight but somehow I doubt I'll be back."

A hand waved dismissively as she turned to leave, "Then it will be a late dinner, I will alert the cooks."

I sighed, but knew when not to protest. I wasn't exactly comfortable with the perks that my title granted me, as much as Nyn kept edging for me to enjoy some of them. I'd pushed back as best I could during the few disagreements we'd had on the subject, and we'd eventually compromised. I wouldn't actively seek to use my technical status as a highborn, but in turn I wasn't allowed to protest when she did it on my behalf.

"Nothing complicated then."

There was a short pause as she mulled that over before nodding, "Agreed, but regretfully I have to be going. Try not to become too bored today my dear."

"The same, Tarath'shan."

And with that she glided out the doors, already bringing up her omni-tool to harangue her the mechanics to have her aircar ready. Not that I was really concerned about that. Our chief mechanic was an Asari named Illyan, who probably bench-pressed small shuttles in her spare time. She knew Nyn was her boss, but like the other Asari on staff she didn't demurely bow her head just because Nyn was a highborn and was more than capable of giving as good as she got if she thought that her boss had crossed a line.

Which I thought of as a good thing.

As much as I was in love with her, Nyn definitely had an high-class attitude about her that would have well suited a medieval lord. Puncturing that bubble once and a while had proven to be a good thing for her. She'd remained far more relaxed and at ease than some of the older staff remembered her being before I'd come around, and she'd continued her late Uncle's good relations with the lower caste workers.

Once Nyn had left, I sighed and drifted into our room to shower and then change. While I wasn't expecting any problems, I still made sure to put on some light-weight armor beneath my casual shirt and pants. Always being prepared for trouble had been something that Aethyta had further pounded into my skull, but she'd admitted that I'd pretty much worked that one out on my own during the unpleasantries that had marked my first few months in this universe.

I'd just finished attaching my tech mine launcher to my belt when a short, burly Asari strolled into the bedroom without even knocking.

"Scales." I didn't bother yelling at my friend, it wouldn't have done any good. "Need something?"

"You to be on time, ape." Trena T'laria growled, stabbing her cane in my direction. She barely needed to use it anymore, but seemed to enjoy always having something handy to hit people with. "You're more than thirty minutes late."

"I'm early." I corrected. "Aethyta sent you the notice an hour early to stop you from being late."

Gem colored eyes blinked furiously for several moments before a low growl came from her throat. "That ancient fucking fish..."

I tuned out most of the rant that followed, instead focusing on grabbing my gun and double-checking the safety. The little Watcher-24 wasn't much of a sub-machine gun, but it was a full auto model and I'd managed to attach a few upgrades of my own.
"...even listening?"

"No." My right shoulder rose as my head tilted towards it slightly. I rather liked the Asari style of shrugging, especially with most of the people I knew being Batarian. By doing it to the right I managed to both shrug and convey how little I cared about what was happening.

There was another growl as we started to leave, idly closing the bedroom doors behind us. "Why do I even put up with you?"

"You really want me to answer that?"

"Fucking fur covered short-lived dick."

"Ancient, scale covered oversexed bimbo."

Her fist hit my shoulder hard enough to bruise, and I responded in kind before we both gave each other small grins and kept walking.

"Any idea where she's sending us today?"

My lips twisted. "Nos Irrail. That smuggler is still finding ways to dodge I-Sec and bring in cargo without having to pay the fees. And if she's good enough to do that under the Eclipse's nose, she's good enough to bring in other cargo that's a lot more dangerous."

She grunted as we exited Nyn's chambers entirely, emerging into a wide hallway that was well lit from the floor to ceiling windows. "Her tendrils are curling over that that bitch. Got a cover?"

"Yup."

The spywork that Matriarch Aethyta had me doing, whenever my duties as Nyn's Harath'krem didn't interfere, was interesting and boring all the same time. Trust me, if you think the life of a spy is glamorous, you've obviously watched too many movies or read the wrong kind of books. In reality it's a hell of a lot of guesswork, theorizing, number-crunching, and people-watching. I found the first two to be tolerable, the third intolerable, and the last to be suicide-inducing.

Lucky me, it was that one that we were doing today.

"What is it?"

"Briefing says she already has two teams in place. All we have to do is alert them when she lands at the shuttle-pad to unload her cargo." I nodded slightly to several guards walking the other way, the two Batarians both politely tilting their own to the left in response. "So the two of us and a third person land a speeder there, they drive, get out, shop around a bit, and we wait and watch."

Trena thought that over as we passed through the entrance hall. Nyn had done away with the elegant columns that Xerol had favored, instead opting for a more defensive construction. A pair of raised gardens dominated the interior end of the hall, which would have been a lot prettier if I hadn't known about the auto-turrets hidden within the soil. She'd determined quite quickly that no one would find the mansion unprepared, regardless of how many or few defenders it had, a sentiment that I readily endorsed.

"That should work." she spoke once we'd crossed into the East wing and started to near the garage. "Who did you pick?"

"I wanted Tris, but she's on the Citadel for another rehab session." Tris'ren was the bartender at a
little place named Forever, one of Aethyta's many bars and restaurants. She was also the Matriarch's personal pilot, and had gotten both shot and badly burned getting them both out of Omega with the Blue Suns hot on their tails. She was also a friend of both mine and Trena's, and really the only other agent of Aethyta's that we knew personally.

"I know it's not Ghai, she's at the hospital getting her prosthetic adjusted." her eyes narrowed. "It's Rane'li, isn't it?"

"She volunteered."

Those same eyes rolled in exasperation. "Athame's tits ape. You are not helping yourself at all here."

"I still think you're imagining things." I shot back. "She's never been anything but professional."

"Because she thinks its the best way to go about it." My friend shot back. "I've seen her watching you, don't think I fucking haven't."

"I haven't." I tried to end this particular conversation as quickly as I could. "And everyone knows I'm with Nyn anyway."

And, typically, she ignored me and kept right on going. "With Shaaryak or not, you saved her life, that's big shit to Batarians. A Highborn, even an elevated one, saving a fucking lowborn's life? It's a damned given that she'd want to make it up to you."

I wasn't about to concede the point. "We saved each other's lives. I'd have been dead without her there to shoot that asshole. And what part about me being with Nyn didn't you get?"

"The part where you're thinking like a human." She waved a hand irritably before I could point out the obvious. "You apes and the Turians, all into your exclusive sex shit. No one but you would even care if you dragged her to a closet and told her to strip."

"You would." My voice went a bit quiet at the mental image. "If I phrased it like that."

Trena stared at nothing for a long moment before her face twisted into a grimace. "Fuck. I'm sorry ape, you know I didn't mean it like that."

"I know." A long breath escaped me as I pushed that bit aside. The worst thing was that she was right. Technically speaking, I could drag Rane or any other pretty lowcaste girl to a room and have my way with them, and there wasn't much that they would be able to do about it. Sure they could try and refuse me, but I could more than make their lives a living hell with the authority my title gave me.

Not that I would, as fucked up as my life had become, there were lines that I wasn't going to cross. "Seriously though." she paused as we approached the garage door, her own voice going low. "Taking her with is not going to help."

"You're assuming that she is crushing on me." I gave her a slight shake of my head. "I haven't seen it yet."

There was a soft grunt at that. "Maybe you and Shaaryak claiming each other so damned publicly is helping with that."

"It's supposed to." A hand ran through my hair, "If she's seen as some deviant who only takes human lovers, maybe it will lower the number of other highborn trying to find a way here."
She snorted. "I've heard worse plans. The High whatever still keeping them at bay for now?"

"High Patriarch." Stepping away from her I turned to rest my back against the wall, resisting the urge to run a hand through my goatee. "And sort of. He wants Nyn married off as much as the rest of them, but he doesn't want any highborn getting killed trying to get here either. Or worse, her to get killed trying to get to Khar'shan."

"And going through Council space would just be begging for C-Sec to detain them for some made up fucking reason." Trena nodded, "Buying you two some time at least."

"Some time." I echoed. "Not that we've come up with anything to get her out of it yet. And don't even get me started on those SIU assholes that were here last month. I'm still convinced they were up to something."

Her eyes rolled, "They're fucking Hegemony special forces ape. Of course they were up to some goddess damned shit. We both double-checked everything. Apart from some awkward ass questions about who was sleeping with who they didn't do crap while they were in the walls here."

"We think."

That made her pause for a long moment before giving me a grudging nod. We were reasonably confident we could catch anything that the resting and recuperating Hegemony agents tried to insert into the systems here. I'd become a decent engineer and coder over the last year, and she was fairly skilled at both, but neither of us was an expert. We'd tried to get Aethyta to loan us some of her people to run their own checks, but they were occupied on tasks of their own and couldn't be spared right now. Which really left us with nothing but paranoid thoughts and faint hope.

I glanced at my omni-tool before shaking my head. "Fuck it, we'll actually be late if we don't get moving."

She nodded as my hands pushed me off the wall.

Entering the garage was like walking into a wall of noise, shouting, cussing, metal crashing, and machines grinding all slamming into your eardrums the moment the door slid open. When I'd first started working in the room, back in the first days I'd even taken up residence in the mansion, I'd winced at the noise. These days it was comfortably familiar, like having a favorite chair to sink into at work.

The two of us threaded our way between the mixed species teams of mechanics swarming over aircars and shuttles. Most weren't owned by Nyn or any of her subordinates, instead belonging to midcaste Batarians or Asari from the River District who could afford to have Illyan's crack team of grease monkeys work on their vehicles.

Illyan herself caught sight of us fairly quickly, which wasn't hard to do when you're as tall as she was.

"Kean! Trena!" She jerked her head to the left. "She's fueled up and waiting for you."

Scales actually looked a little put out at the greeting. "The night me and Ghai give you, and that's all I fucking get as a greeting?"

Broad hands settled onto her hips as blue lips curled into a smirk. "I think it was me giving both of you a great night, and I'll give you all the greeting you want the next time you want me between
you two."

"Illyan," I kept my voice firm. "Please don't encourage her"

Her head tossed as she rolled her eyes, "She doesn't need any encouragement boss."

"Believe me, I know." Trena, proving that even several centuries of life wasn't enough for her to grow up, stuck her tongue out at me. "Is my armor ready for tomorrow?"

She glanced over at it. The eight foot tall exoskeleton loomed in its corner, the black armor looking fairly ominous even in the good lighting. From here I couldn't see the mounted chevalier that Nyn had had painted on the chest, but the ancient Batarian runes describing the rights and duties of the Harath'krem gleamed silver down its right flank.

"Barriers check out good for training mode, I'll be double-checking the weapons after lunch."

I nodded. "Thanks. Have a run-down ready for me in the morning."

"Will do boss."

Dragging Trena away proved to be difficult, and grew more so when Illyan started lifting heavy bits of equipment around. She could have easily managed it with her biotics, but apparently just felt like showing off her bulging thews to make my companion drool.

The third member of our party was waiting at the designated air car, and could only shake her head as I pulled Trena along behind me.

Rane'li had coppery-tan skin, and was built like most young Batarian women. Which meant very muscular with a small bust, but just enough curves to make you interested. And like Nyn her pointed ears were almost elfin in their length. Today she was dressed as I'd told her to be, in casual, loose fitting clothes as if she was just heading out for a day on the town.

She'd come a long way from the communications technician drafted to help defend the mansion in the middle of an attack, becoming the youngest squad leader in our reformed little defense corps.

And Trena thought she had a massive crush on me stemming from that fight, where we'd ended up saving each others lives. That I'd sent her and another still wounded fighter to safety when we'd gone after Nyn's father, rather than order her to follow me into the fray, apparently hadn't helped. At least, according to scales. Personally I didn't see it, but then again I was hardly an expert on women. I hadn't been with many in what I was now considering my past life, and Nynsi never bothered concealing what she wanted or how she wanted it.

But for my own sake I hoped she was wrong. As much as part of me liked the idea that a young, attractive woman found me desirable, I was already very much claimed and taken, and content with that.

"Cieran. T'laria." Her lips twerked a bit. "Still can't resist Illyan, I see."

"No." I grunted as I let go of the Asari's arm. "She can't."

"You think she's hot too ape." Trena muttered sullenly, "I know you've said so."

"Unlike you I am capable of looking without touching." A hand rose of its own accord to rub at my forehead. Trena was probably the best friend I had, even accounting fro Nyn, but that didn't mean that there weren't times when I seriously wanted to punch her. "Could we please get going?"
"Fine."

She clambered into the backseat without another word, with Rane'li taking the driver's seat as I rode shotgun.

"So." The Batarian spoke as she started the vehicle up, letting the VI handle the exit from the garage. "You were rather vague on the details."

"Fly us to Nos Irrail, get out alone, you get two thousand credits to buy whatever you want." I shrugged. "Come back when we ping your omni-tool."

She chuckled softly, "So I'm being paid to fly you two across the sea, then to go shopping with your money."

"Not my money," my lips curled slightly, "So don't feel like you have to save any of it."

"Even better." The car had finished booting up and started to glide smoothly towards the garage door as she spoke, "But that doesn't tell me what this is all about. Or what you two will be doing."

"That's kind of the idea girl." Trena made a show of yawning from the backseat. "You know we're working for the old fish as well as Shaaryak. Don't always get to tell you lot everything."

"Fair point." She admitted, her hands rising to take manual control once we'd cleared the structure. A few moments later we were in a smooth climb, the element zero compensators making the ride as smooth as ever despite our rising speed. "Our next stop is Nos Irrail, three hours from now."

"Great." I muttered. "Always forget how long of a trip it is."

"Could have grabbed the shuttle ape."

My eyes rolled. "Why not just hold up giant signs saying 'we are right fucking here'?"

I had to jerk a bit to my right to dodge the cane she tried to jab into the back of my head.

"So." Rane interjected before either of us could start insulting one another, a small measure of hope in her voice. "Is there anything we could talk about that isn't secretive?"

"Your squad's doing better girl. Ready to take on Ghai's team tomorrow?"

There might have been a wince at that. "You mean ready to get our asses kicked?"

"You'll have the ape." Trena shrugged before stretching out across the entire backseat. "You'll have a shot."

"And a draw maybe." Rane shook her head, obviously not convinced in the slightest. "No offense Cieran, but going up against six Asari still pissed that Marn's team has the highest training scores can't possibly go well for us."

"Can't argue with that."

Ghai, despite her injuries, had been put in command of the Asari that Aethyta had recommended Nyn hire. Three were out of work bodyguards, one was a maiden who'd decided the private sector was better than the military proper, and the last wouldn't admit to anything but we were pretty sure she'd been a drug runner in the Traverse. Regardless, all were fairly strong biotics with excellent military skills, and were naturally irritated that they weren't easily dominating our training exercises.
Mostly that was a matter of teamwork. They were all too used to doing their own thing and were only slowly coming around to letting Ghai call the shots. But the few times they had they'd absolutely torn the opposition apart, and I wasn't looking forwards to tomorrow in the slightest.

"You know." I mused. "We have several hours to work out some plans that might help at least. A draw could be possible."

"Ah by the deeps." Trena groaned. "I had to fucking bring it up."

"Shut up and sleep scales. I'll wake you when we get there."

She grumbled something uncomplimentary about me, but smirked when I flipped her off for it. "Whatever. You two have fun then."

I wouldn't say that we had fun, but it was a lot better than staring at the ocean for hours on end. And by the time we arrived in Nos Irrail, we thought we might even have a chance.

Not much of a chance, mind you. But a chance.

Next up is Chapter 2: The Meeting

Author's Fun Fact: Shaaryak Security Forces

As of the start of this story, the security forces in Nynsi Shaaryak's employ are divided into four squads. Two of these have a dozen members each, with the other two having only about half of that. All are very well equipped thanks to the money stolen from the True Sons and Blue Suns bank accounts, with the remainder of that cash being used to heavily improve the mansion's defenses.

The 'premier' squad is Marn's. She was the last surviving squad leader from Xerol's days and has all but a few of the other remaining Batarian veterans. Gruff, scarred, and very no-nonsense, she's used the cash provided to equip her people with uniformly heavy armor. At Nyn's request, they mostly utilize assault rifles and shotguns and train heavily in assault scenarios.

The other 'full' squad is led by Chen, formerly the sniper from first Re'hat Shaaryak's, and then Y'rrich's team. As you would expect, his team focuses far more on long ranged combat, with most of his team carrying at least a carbine if not a full sniper rifle. Despite that, they are likewise equipped with heavier armor, as he is well aware that you can't always rely on distance or speed to save you.

The remaining Batarian squad is led by Rane'li, formerly Xerol's communications technician. Her promotion came from Nyn witnessing her quickly corralling the other survivors from the fight at Sederis's mansion and organizing them into a defensive detail while she and Trena tended to Cieran's wounds. Currently her squad is composed of five lowborn females and one male, all of whom are new to Nyn's employ. Despite all being 'rookies', Rane'li is determined to prove that they are as skilled as Chen or Marn's middlecaste soldiers.

The final unit is a motley group of Asari, led by Ghai. Former bodyguards, commandos, and even a drug-runner, all were recommended by Aethyta for their ability to stay loyal to a contract and their ability in a fight. Currently there are five of them, and their unit feuds rather regularly with Marn's people, each group considering itself the elite.
Chapter 2: The Meeting

The next day, I was wincing as our small group walked through one of the many plazas in Nos Astra. My entire body felt like a giant bruise, worse even that I'd felt after some of my more severe training sessions with Aethyta.

"Have to give it you Kean." Marn rumbled as the pair of us trailed Nyn. The rest of her large squad was loosely spread out around our little trio, calmly escorting her on the familiar path to where Illium's executive board was waiting for Nyn's counter-offer after yesterday's meeting. Nyn and I were dressed in formal clothes that felt stifling, while Marn and her people had polished up the dark armor as best they could. "Didn't expect Rane's girls to put up that good of a fight, even with you."

I shrugged slightly. "We still only won one scenario. And I could have done without them bouncing my armor around like a fucking ball. Sorry Nyn."

My Tarath'shan had glanced around disapprovingly at my language. In her mind there was a time and a place for cursing, and it definitely wasn't in public.

"You might have only gotten one straight win, but you managed to make their wins pretty damn costly." The veteran squad leader countered. "In actual fights they wouldn't have been in any shape to fight again."

"Only in the defensive fights. They handed us our asses when we had to attack them."

Broad shoulders made her heavy armor rise and fall slightly. "What did you expect in that match-up? They've torn everyone apart when in that situation. Even my people got shredded when we had to try and attack them."

It was my turn to shrug. "I didn't say I was surprised. Just hopeful that we could have done better."

"There's always tomorrow's exercise."

"Speaking of," Nyn broke in, "Please inform T'laria that Matriarch Aethyta is interested in viewing your little operation. In particular I believe she wants to make sure that you are actually putting her training to use, Cieran."

"Great." Bringing an armored hand up I rubbed at my forehead. "That's going to make the after-action briefing all kinds of fun."

She chuckled quietly as we started up the stairs that led to where Illium's leaders met and lorded over their word. Note that I didn't say ruled, they actually did very little of that. Instead they enjoyed plenty of finger foods and wine, and spent most of their time bickering with one another about slights that happened decades to centuries ago. Personally I was have convinced that they were dragging their feet on Nyn's push to open limited trade with the Hegemony simply because
they were resentful that she was actually making them do their jobs.

We all paused before the massive glass doors, Nyn taking the moment to make a few final adjustments to her outfit. While she did that, I took in the ostentatious building yet again. It was stupidly tall, and the exterior of the lower area was entirely gleaming glass. Which gave everyone outside an excellent view of the massive fountains and gardens that decorated the first three floors. A statue of Athame loomed beside the entrance, the obvious skill of the sculptor more or less ruined by whoever had elected to add gaudy diamonds and gems to her eyes and clothes.

"How much do you think it cost to make this place?" I murmured low enough for only my Tarath'shan to hear.

"Enough to pay for a small army." She replied equally sotto voce. "Or for a down payment on a battlecruiser."

My lips twitched as I restrained a snort. "Ready?"

"No." It was easy to tell she was restraining a scowl, but she managed to keep her expression a polite mask as her head tilted towards the door. "If you would, Harath'krem.. let's get this over with."

Giving her a polite nod, I stepped up to move through the already opening doors. The interior was slightly more tasteful than the outside, which meant illuminated artwork and statuary that wasn't totally horrific.

The sole secretary glanced up from behind her desk, her blue skin unmarred by tattoos. "Miss Shaaryak, the Board will be ready for you shortly. Your escorts may relax in the gardens, food and drink will be provided to them."

Nynsi tilted her head slightly, and I felt my eyebrows rise as I noticed her keeping it directly even. "Thank you Brai. Marn, I believe you know where to go. Cieran, you will remain with me."

"With respect ma'am," the Asari's tone remained polite but her smile didn't reach her eyes in the slightest. "All of your escorts are supposed to remain."

This time Nyn bristled a bit, her head shifting ever so slightly to the left. "He is not an escort, he is my Harath'krem."

"I'm afraid the executive board does not recognize Batarian titles."

"They do recognize advisers and assistants." She shot back, "And he is both. Perhaps we should call Matriarch Tevos? I am sure that she could resolve this petty issue."

A scowl appeared openly on the Asari's face, obviously not happy about what Nyn was saying. Matriarch Tevos was a distant relative of the Asari Council rep, but from what I'd heard she had none of her cousin's diplomatic tact or calm attitude. Any secretary calling about allowing a visitor to bring a single human assistant along to a meeting would probably consider herself lucky to escape that call with her job.

"Very well." her lips were pursed as she forced the words out. "He may accompany you. The usual elevator."

Nynsi didn't bother responding, simply turning away and striding towards the lifts.

Me, being at least moderately intelligent, said nothing and quickly followed her to the waiting elevator.
Once the doors closed and it started to move I spoke.

"She always like that?"

"Yes." There was a disgusted sound. "She seems to think being the door greeter makes her critically important to Illium's continued survival. The first time I was here I would have shot her if I'd had my guns on me."

Reaching a hand up I gently rubbed her right shoulder, careful not to wrinkle her dark shirt.

She leaned into my touch for a few moments, and I could see her lower eyes closing in the door's reflection. "I just wish all of this would end one way or the other. The High Patriarch has started sending update requests nearly every other day."

"Tell him to fuck off then."

"Cieran..."

"Sorry." I sighed, "I know you can't, but don't tell me you aren't tempted."

"I'm starting to think that you are a bad influence." A hand rose to gently wrap around mine before pushing it back and fixing her shirt. "Remember your role?"

"Stay behind you, don't draw attention to myself, try and keep track of everything." My lips twitched. "Which works out, I don't think I'd be any good at looming menacingly."

She sucked in a quiet breath and let it out in a strangled way, her voice tinged with mirth. "Not without your armor."

The elevator was slowing as we approached the upper levels of the building, and I blew out a slow breath and tried to school my features into bored relaxation.

A few seconds after I thought I'd more or less accomplished that, the doors pinged open to reveal another room opulently decorated with pieces of priceless art and holo-images of prior board members. None of which impressed me nearly as much as the four Asari commandos that were waiting for us.

Each was armored head to toe, and all had their hands on their weapons, relaxing only as they saw that it was just us.

Taking my cues from Nyn, I nodded politely to the guards. Only once they tilted their heads in response and stepped back, two to either side, did she move out of the elevator. Keeping myself just a few feet behind her, I tried not to stare at the commandos as we walked between them.

The reason for their immediate presence became clear as I got a better look at the room. It was entirely without interior walls, being just an open space that stretched entirely across the entire floor. Which meant not more than a dozen yards away was a massive table that had a small number of Asari lazily sipping from drinks as they regarded our arrival with every sign of boredom.

"Ah." The nearest Matriarch turned away after giving us the barest of glances. "Shaaryak has arrived."

"By Athame, you could at least pretend to be interested Dantius." one of the others growled.

"Director Dantius." Matriarch Dantius snapped back. Nassana Dantius's mother was every bit as
morally reprehensible as her daughter from what I'd heard. Not that I knew either of them personally, nor did I desire to.

"Not for much longer if you don't take this more seriously." Another murmured, just loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Can we save your petty squabbling for after the outsiders have left?"

The Director seemed to swell slightly but said nothing else as we approached.

Nyn guided me around the assembled Matriarchs until allowing me to pull a seat out for her near the center of one side. This left the Asari spread out loosely around us. Three at least had the good grace to put their drinks aside and look attentive while Dantius and another still seemed resentful over our mere presence.

"Now," the one who'd murmured spoke up more loudly this time. She, unlike the others, had a purplish complexion to go with a rather significant amount of facial tattoos. "Miss Shaaryak. We have further questions about the trade proposal that you have brought forward."

Nyn tilted her head a few hairs to the right. "Of course Matriarch Ullai."

"We have agreed, in principle, that to allow limited trade between Illium and the Batarian Hegemony strictly through the starport in the Western Reaches, with shuttles also allowed to land at your privately owned facility in Khar'shan Minor." There were a few slight nods at that. "With I-Sec officers from both cities departments acting to ensure that only the goods to be agreed upon will be loaded."

There was a brief moment before Nynsi sighed. "The trade-able goods again, then."

"Regrettably." Ullai agreed. "Tevos?"

Councilor Tevos's relative didn't look much like her beyond similar facial marks. Her face looked as though laughter and smiles were a foreign concept best avoided, and when she spoke her voice was nearly arctic in its lack of warmth. "You continue to press for element zero to be included on the acceptable list. This is contrary to strict Citadel regulation."

"Good." An until then silent Matriarch spoke, her tone waspish. "We don't need to kowtow to your goddess damned cousin on everything we do Tevos."

Tevos barely even glanced at her. "And when the Republics withdraw their defensive fleet, will you still say that?"

"As if Thessia would withdraw the fleet. Without our profits the economy would go into a whirlpool within a matter of weeks."

A tattooed eyebrow rose. "I was unaware that we were so critical. Perhaps you were imbibing your own product while examining the records again."

"Enough." Dantius finally snapped, glaring at the both of them. "Not in front of the Batarian and her human toy."

I tried not to bristle at that, while Nyn's hand found my leg under the table and patted it in what she probably thought was a calming matter. Her own anger made it a bit rougher than that, and I was sore enough that it hurt more than anything, but I gave her the slightest of nods in thanks for the thought all the same.

The other Matriarchs gave their nominal leader grudging nods before settling back in their chairs.
"Now. Besides the element zero, what else was there? Iandanni?"

There was a shrug from the only Matriarch to have yet to say anything. "The vast majority of the list is domestic goods, and the quantities in question are unlikely to cause any issues between us and the Council. The only sticking points remain the eezo as well as military equipment."

Tevos glanced at Nyn. "I thought all military arms were removed."

My Tarath'shan's cheek twitched slightly. "And they were. Only civilian purchasable equipment remains as per our last discussion."

"We will have to review the full list to ensure that nothing excessive could be inserted." The Matriarch glanced pointedly at me, "Powered exoskeletons for example."

"They aren't on the list." Nyn sounded utterly exasperated. "And the updated list has been provided to you all multiple times over the past week. You're saying that you require further review?"

"Yes." Tevos replied bluntly. "We currently have a split vote with one undecided as to whether or not to allow element zero shipments, with three of us in agreement that those amounts will be sharply limited."

She went still. "How limited?"

"Perhaps three standard containers per month." Ullai replied evenly.

Nynsi's mouth dropped in stunned disbelief. "That's less than half of an eezo hauler's capacity."

"It is more than you are currently receiving." Tevos reminded her sharply. "And while I do support this trade endeavor, we must protect ourselves from any possible Council or Republics sanctions."

There was a long inhale and exhale as my Tarath'shan tried to calm herself. "Then perhaps we could establish an interim agreement to allow for trade on everything but the goods you have mentioned. Perhaps those could be added as later modifications."

Ullai nodded slowly. "That might be possible. We will consider that proposal, as well as the controversial items and will summon you again when we have a decision."

Another calming breath. "Surely that cannot take very long. If you could agree on the interim concept now, I could draft the proper documentation and have it prepared for tomorrow."

"That won't be necessary." Dantius spoke up again, sounding as bored as ever. "As Matriarch Ullai said, we will contact you once we have reached a decision."

Nynsi didn't bother politely replying to that, instead standing quickly enough to knock her chair back before spinning on her heel and stalking back to the elevator.

I hastily, if a tad more tactfully, rose and tried not to dash after her quick pace.

She hissed the moment the elevator doors closed. "Not a word Cie, not until we've left this forsaken place."

My mouth, wisely in my personal opinion, stayed shut. It took a lot to get Nyn this wound up. But when she got to that point you either sacrificed someone to her anger, you got the hell out of her way, or I dragged her back to her chambers for a lot of wine and sex until she'd worked her way
out of it. Unfortunately, none of those options were really available inside of the elevator, so I settled for staying as still as I could and thinking quiet thoughts as she seethed.

Of course, any hopes of us making it back to the mansion without incident died the moment the doors slid open at the ground floor, revealing a figure blocking our way. She was an Asari of average height, with light blue skin, and dressed in medium weight armor that had been painted light gold.

Nyn took a half step before freezing as we both realized just who it was.

"Well now." A smile that didn't reach Jona Sederis's dark eyes curled her lips as she regarded us. "What a happy little coincidence."

Coincidence. Yeah fucking right.

"Madam Sederis." She kept her voice even, none of her residual anger coloring it. "We were just leaving."

"You were just leaving." The head of the Eclipse mercenary company corrected her without any hint of shame. "Your alien lover and I need to have a little chat."

I blinked slightly, but kept my tone as polite as I could manage. "No offense Miss Sederis, but you know that anything you tell me I will tell Nyn."

She waved that off irritably. "Regardless. I don't owe her shit anymore, she called in her marker. You didn't, so you're the one who gets it, and then we're even and I'm done with you short lived things."

That took me a few moments to process. I'd honestly forgotten that Sederis thought that she owed me anything. After all, she wasn't the kind of person you just called up when you needed something and said 'hey, remember that time I helped save your life? Mind doing a bit of work for me?'

"I would rather not leave my Harath'krem." Nyn spoke slowly, as if she was working through her thoughts. "Would this conversation take time?"

"Depends on how much of a brain he has underneath that fur." A little Asari shrug followed. "And you can wait outside girl. I already told that prissy little bitch at the desk to fuck off, it's just going to be him and me in here. Now get."

"Cieran.." there was a long breath, "I will be right outside."

Which wouldn't save me at all if Sederis's mental switches flipped into a combination that said 'kill-the-human', and from her tone she knew that as well as I did.

But it wasn't like we could say no either. Mentally unstable or not, the Asari in front of us could probably kill us, Marn's team, and then work her way up the skyscraper floor by floor, murdering everything in her path, without too much trouble.

"Maybe find a bar and some wine." I tried to keep my voice casual, "You could use some after dealing with them."

Sederis chuckled, for all appearances honestly amused, as she moved out of Nyn's way, "You heard him little girl. Go get drunk so he can pin you to a wall later."

My Tarath'shan reached back to squeeze my shoulder firmly before leaving.
And then I was alone with a psychopath.

"Stop standing in the damned lift like a pyjak. It's not going to do tricks."

"Which is a shame." if she was currently amused, I could work with that. I hoped. "Maybe it should learn some. Like stopping at every floor whenever Dantius gets in it."

That got another chuckle out of her. "No. That bitch deserves a very long fall with a sudden stop at the end."

"I don't know her well enough to go that far." I spoke as I exited the elevator, and Sederis started to slowly walk back towards the now empty desk. "I don't suppose I can ask about what this is all about?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was picturing the pretty smear she'd make on the grounds outside." There was a moment of silence before she snapped her head back around to look at me, her expression dead serious. "Right. You did me a favor by crushing that asshole's skull, but he was also mine to kill. So for that, you get this conversation, and after it we're even."

Which she'd already said, but rather than making a smart-ass comment about her repeating herself I moved on. "Thanks."

"Whatever. The Blue Suns have gotten their asses handed to them by me and Aria, plus her little school of warlords I suppose. That's left a vacuum in the Terminus." Her hands rested on the desk for a moment before she heaved herself up and onto it, spinning around until she was sitting on the edge of it with her legs swinging free. "Two groups in particular are moving in to try and seize power. One of them is good for you, one wants your head. Nothing attached. Maybe not the scalp either, they could use that as a separate trophy."

It didn't take a genius to figure out who she meant. "The True Sons? I thought they'd been totally wiped out by now."

"Oh here they are. Racist dicks.. well, they were until my girls cut them off." she almost giggled at that. "But the ones that they hauled off to Omega to train are still there. Traded everything they knew about the Suns to Aria in exchange for her not killing them all. Now they're building up again, and a lot of them are pissed at the people who fucked them over."

"Me and Nyn then." I brought a hand up to my forehead as my head started to throb. "I'd really hoped we were done with those assholes."

"Not even close." There was a growl as she suddenly leaned forwards, her eyes locking onto mine. "They hated ul Shaaryak and his bitch for what they did. But they had their own plans to be rid of them, plans you and your girl ruined. They'll be coming for you, and anyone you know."

Which was just fucking great. So in addition to worrying about what the Hegemony was up to, and helping Nyn calm down after meetings with the old hags upstairs... now we'd have to be looking over our shoulders again.

"May I ask a question or two?"

Sederis eyed me, her head tilting to one side before she nodded brusquely.

OK then.

"You said there was another group. Who are they?"
"The Talons." her lips twitched as she shook her head. "Turian group that used to be one of the largest sand dealers in the Terminus. They got their asses kicked trying to push on the Suns too soon, and someone took out their entire leadership. Now they're reforming and turning all noble and shit."

Huh. Looked like Nyrix...Nyree.. Aria's Turian girl who's name was escaping me had made her move a few years early. More power to her I suppose.

"Do you know if there's any of the True Sons on world already?"

"There were. Now there aren't."

"Oh. Thank you, I suppose."

"Stop thanking me." her voice almost rumbled as eyes narrowed. "It's annoying."

"Yes ma'am. Ah, that was all I had really." If she'd been anyone but, well, her, I probably could have kept my wits about me long enough to ask more and better questions. But at that moment all I wanted to do was get away from her before she decided that I was too annoying to keep breathing.

"We're even then. Get your pale ass out of here."

Tilting my head politely I backed away, careful to keep her in my sight all the way to the doors.

"Looks like you survived." Marn glanced up from where she was seated on the steps, apparently waiting for me. "Come on, your Tarath'shan is in the car already."

I nodded slightly, blowing out a long breath as I tried to calm myself down. "Fuck."

"That bad?"

"She went from giggling like a little girl about cutting people's dicks off to quiet as a statue and staring into my eyes." My body shuddered. "Seriously, does anyone know what's with her?"

"I think she murdered the last mind-healer that her family brought in. That's the rumor anyway."

Which was entirely believable really.

I was grateful when we reached the aircars idling in the small parking area attached to the plaza, and slid into Nyns.

She'd apparently had someone run and grab her a drink, but she quickly set it aside all the same when I collapsed into my seat.

"Thank the Pillars you're all right." A hand reached out to grab one of mine, "I hate dealing with that woman."

"That makes two of us." I eyed her drink. "Do you mind if I? Thanks."

It was plain beer, and honestly wasn't to my taste. But it was cold and frothy, and did wonders for helping me calm down a bit. Once I'd taken a few sips, I quickly and tersely brought Nyn up to date on what Sederis had relayed to me.

She buried her face in her hands about halfway through, letting out a long groan as I finished.

"As if we didn't have enough going on right now. We'll have to alert Aethyta about this
tomorrow, maybe she can watch for any of them trying to sneak on world." There was a pause, "That mission yesterday, did you have any luck catching that smuggler? That would be the kind of person they'd use to slip agents in and out."

"No, no sighting of her or anyone on the list we got." It had been a very long, very boring twelve hours for me and Trena. Rane had enjoyed herself thoroughly, using the Republics money to get plenty of shopping in before spending better than five hours hopping between restaurants and bars. "And I don't know if they'd use her, she's an Asari after all, but who knows."

There was a sigh before she reached out and gently patted my forearm. "We'll manage Cieran. About the board.. I need your thoughts on them while they're still fresh."

"Right." I blew out a breath. "Dantius isn't long for her spot and she knows it, she could have cared less about what was happening and didn't bother hiding it."

Her head tilted slightly. "That much was obvious. What else?"

Rifling through my memories, my eyes lidded as I thought it over. "Ullai. At the start it seemed like she was on your side, but then she was the one who wanted to delay everything while they went over everything again. What are her business interests?"

"Heavy manufacturing and pharmaceuticals."

I blinked. "Neither of those is on the trade list, and there's no way they'd end up there. Why is she stalling then?"

There was a quiet growl. "I don't know. Up until today she was as annoyed as I was about the endless delays. I'll have to ask Aethyta to do some digging."

Which would probably cost her. Aethyta might have been friendly with the both of us, but official use of her spies was something that went a bit farther than her friendship stretched. Not that she wasn't willing to do things for us, but it would probably end up with Nyn having to cover the spies salaries during any time they spent on it.

"And there's Tevos." A hand rubbed at my face as I sighed. "She wants the money that trading would bring her, but she's so damned paranoid about her cousin and the rest of the Council flipping out. Way too paranoid for someone as cold as her. Bets that someone on the Citadel sent her a rather pointed message?"

"No bet." Nyn sighed. "The longer this goes on the less they remember just what we did, and the less support I have. Dantius is the only one who could force the issue, but she has no reason to support me. Especially after my uncle nearly managed to get the others to oust her to begin with."

"So we're stuck waiting for them to deign to treat with you."

"Yes." there was annoyed hissing sigh before she reached out to squeeze my hand gently. "Once we get back to the mansion, I have some paperwork to do in regards to the clothing factories, but after that..

"No." I interrupted her, my head shaking. "You're going to tell the cooks to have a pleasant meal prepared, and then we're going to relax for the rest of the day."

"Cieran." her lower eyes met mine as her upper set narrowed. "I have work to do."

"You also need to relax." Reaching out I trailed my fingers across her cheek, a little gesture that made all of her eyes lid ever so slightly. "Between the board, Sederis, the hegemony, the city, and
the mansion, you're running yourself ragged. You need a break."

"Cieran.."

"Just one night. I'm not saying we should elope to the Citadel for a month. Just one night. Food, drinks, just us on a couch."

Her head bowed slightly as she exhaled. "You are a terrible influence sometimes, you know this yes?"

My lips twitched. "Clawball or films?"

"Who plays tonight?"

"The Reaches and Nos Astra."

"Clawball then." Her own curled into a little smirk. "And pray to the Pillars that Dantius's pet team gets obliterated."

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**Next up is Chapter 3: The Interruption**

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**Author's Fun Fact: Khar'shan Minor Population**

*Today, the fairly small city has a population of around forty thousand, with roughly two thirds of that Batarian and the remainder Asari.*

*Despite those numbers, the amount willing to join groups such as Xerol, and later Nynsi, Shaaryak's security forces has always been very low. It took Xerol over a decade to accumulate the roughly seventy members of his private group, and many of them were recruited from the Terminus or within days of their exile from the Hegemony.*

*This is a result of just who the population is made up of. Most of the Batarians living on Illium are not the hardened criminals of the Terminus, instead being children of other exiles or people removed from the Hegemony for political or superficial reasons. Most of them are content to have a safe place to live and raise their children, and have faith in I-Sec and Captain Vasir's ability to defend them.*

*As a consequence, it would not be an understatement to say that Captain Vasir was as popular amongst the Batarian population as Xerol Shaaryak was. She would actually be more looked to as a leader in the wake of his death than his actual heir.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

So. The Executive Board of Illium makes an appearance, as does Jona Sederis. The former is content to drag their feet on legislation that they are largely ambivalent about, while the latter obliges her strange sense of honor as her mood jumps around a bit. More on the both of them will be coming later, and the True Sons aren't quite down and out just yet.

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
"All right kids." Aethyta leaned heavily back in her chair. "What's this big training event today?"

Nearly everyone of import in our group was crammed into the western conference room, with most of us already in our armor and ready for what was coming shortly.

Nyn was relaxing at her seat at the head of the table, with Trena and I flanking her. Ghai, Marn, Chen, and Rane'li, were spread out around the table, and all but Rane were fairly relaxed. Our youngest squad leader was rapidly puffing on a small pipe, obviously using it to try and cover up her nerves. Between her, Trena, and Marn the entire room was gaining a low, smokey haze that smelled vaguely like vanilla. Which was a huge step up from the smell of cigarettes in my opinion.

Matriarch Aethyta was seated at the far end of the table from Nyn, with Illyan and Tris sitting on either side of her. Despite towering over the older Asari, our head mechanic looked nearly as nervous as Rane, and seemed to be doing her best to not draw attention to herself. Tris, wearing a long sleeved shirt with a turtleneck to cover up her horrific burn scars, looked tired but alert, and was apparently taking notes for her boss on a slim tablet.

"T'laria?" Nynsi waved a hand permissively. Though it was only the morning after, I was feeling pretty good about making her take most of yesterday off. She'd woken up in a better mood than I could remember her being in in several weeks now, and hadn't even risen to Trena's attempts to snipe with her.

"Right." My friend rose to her short height, reaching across the table to hand Ghai her own pipe. Her quiet lover took it in her gloved prosthetic, wordlessly extinguishing it. "Shaaryak here is giving most of the staff the day off to let us do this, so all of you assholes better take this shit seriously."

Someone, Chen I thought, let out a muffled laugh.

"Goal is simple. We'll be splitting you lot into two groups, defenders and attackers. Defenders have to hold out inside the mansion until I-Sec could theoretically arrive. Attackers have to wipe them out. Since we don't have enough people to do that right, 'killed' attackers have to haul their asses outside and then they'll be allowed to get back into the fight." She glanced around the room. "We were only going to do one or two runs, but with the news that the ape brought back yesterday about the True Sons... We're doing this shit all day and into the night, so don't expect many breaks."

There was a rumbling growl from several people at the gang's name, and Aethyta's eyes narrowed slightly. "Sederis?"

I nodded tightly. "She says she killed several of them trying to get on planet, and that they're gunning for us in particular."

Fingers drummed slowly as the Matriarch thought that over. "Knew those racist dicks were still
out there, but I hadn't heard anything about them still gunning for you kids. Someone cut me out of the goddess damned loop again."

"If you could," Nynsi spoke evenly, her head tilted demurely to the left. "Find out what you can about them? I would rather not have to relive either attack on this house."

Aethyta grunted and nodded. "I'll talk to the old hag in charge of Omega's network. She owes me."

"Thank you."

She waved her off with an Asari shrug, "Good on you kids for taking this shit seriously at least. Now, out with the rest of the details T'laria."

"Right, take it away ape." Trena gave me a quick nod, and I brought my omni-tool up. A few finger flicks across the glowing blue panels, I'd ditched the typical orange once I'd finally managed to find the right settings, and the table's projectors flickered to life. A full wire-frame display of the mansion and grounds appeared, with several areas highlighted both inside and out.

"We're going to make this as rough as possible on ourselves." I nodded at the various locations. "The plan this morning is to rotate through in defensive teams of six. Rane's rookies are up first, then Ghai's commandos. Marn, Chen, you're splitting your teams up. The last team that defended will have the next attack off to get some rest."

Marn nodded slowly, "What's the time limit?"

"Standard response for I-Sec is twelve minutes if we put out an emergency alert, but we're running at twenty minutes."

"Six against thirty, and the thirty have unlimited numbers plus twenty minutes to kill them?" Chen shook his head, eyes blinking rapidly. "Not even the Asari are going to hold."

"Athame's ass." Trena shook her head, "We held off more than that for that long with only eight of us still shooting last time this place was attacked."

Our sniper nodded slightly to the left, conceding the point.

"Moving on then." My hand rose to indicate the three different areas inside. "The defenders have to pick one of these three areas. Either the eastern conference room, the garage, or the dining hall. They'll have ten minutes to prepare themselves before we set everyone else in after them. Attack lead will rotate between the participating squad leads."

"What about you, Harath'krem?" Rane fiddled with her pipe slightly, her lower eyes focused entirely on the object. "Which squad will you be fighting with?"

"I will be observing in the morning." I glanced at Nyn, who nodded in confirmation. "As will Trena. We'll be taking part in the afternoon operations."

"Which will be similar." Trena grunted. "Except the scenarios will be different. Afternoon will be extraction. Defenders will be in the east wing and have to escort a vip, that's me, to the garage and hold off the attackers until a shuttle could get out. The Ape will be alternating between helping and attacking you lot. And I will beat the crap out of anyone that lets me get shot. Simulated or otherwise."

Chen gave a low chortle, tipping his head to her. "What if we buy you drinks instead?"
"Good drinks. Not that crap swill that you drink Chen."

"Don't disrespect my booze T'laria."

Trena rolled her eyes, "That swill can't even be called that. The ape could probably install a backup engine in his damned armor to run off that shit."

I sighed and shook my head before trying to get the meeting back on track before anyone else could start. "Work out who's buying drinks in your own time, we've got shit to do. Illyan and her team will be double-checking everyone's gear."

"I'd rather none of you shot each other." The Asari mechanic spoke up, "So try and make sure your training mods stay in place all day. We'll be available if you think there's any issues."

"I would rather none of my people become injured, or worse, during a training simulation." Nyn spoke up again, both sets of eyes flicking around the room. "If any of your people believes even slightly there is a problem with their equipment, remand them to Miss Illyan at once."

She received a quiet murmur of acceptance, which caused her to nod slightly before speaking again. "Then you may begin."

"Rane." Trena grunted. "Get your ass to the hanger, your girls are waiting for you."

The female Batarian rose, tilting her head demurely to Nyn and I in turn, before quickly leaving. Illyan didn't waste any time seizing the excuse to get out as well, her nervousness all the more amusing given her massive stature.

Once they had both left, Ghai stood more slowly, the glove concealing her cybernetic hand tossing Trena's pipe back to her. She gave Marn and Chen a short glance each before heading to the exit without a word. Well used to translating her silence into understandable commands, the pair gave Nynsi respectful looks of their own before following the Asari.

Trena grumbled about something under her breath about being left behind before giving me a nod and limping after them, lighting her pipe back up as she did so.

Which left me with Nyn and Aethyta.

It was the former who spoke up first. "This was a convenient excuse Aethyta, but why are you really here?"

The Matriarch's lips twitched slightly before she nodded. I'd gotten to know Liara's father a lot better than I'd ever thought I would, and even that little movement would have been a wide grin on a normal person. "Your lives are about to get a lot more complicated girl. I'd thought the news I was bringing was bad enough, but this shit with those True Son punks is going to leave you without many good options."

I winced in time with my Tarath'shan.

"Seriously? More bad news?" An elbow rose to rest on the table so I could better rub my head into a hand. "Are the Republics up to something? Sederis not tell me everything?"

"That creature isn't stable enough to tell you everything." Any trace of amusement vanished behind the scowl that the Eclipse's leader evoked. "But no, she's not the current problem. Neither is Thessia. Your problem is Khar'shan."

I glanced at Nyn, my face pulling into a frown.
My lover seemed as taken aback as I was, which was something. "I haven't heard anything that would involve us. Officially or otherwise."

Official news meant it came from the Patriarchs or Merchants councils. The latter of which she was a full member of, given her status as a highborn member of that caste. The former she was only a provisional stand-in, given that she was, well, a she. She and her extended family had enough wealth, property and businesses on Khar'shan to be a relatively major player in Batarian politics even at this distance. Of course, with the good of being kept in the loop came the bad. Pressure from the High Patriarch to side with him over the High Admiral in issues neither of us had the slightest clue about, endless streams of messages from wannabe suitors, and equally inane attempts to curry favor from fourth and fifth cousins that she'd never even known she'd had.

The far more reliable, albeit unofficial, news came from the lower castes that worked for the extended Shaaryak family. Many of them had high hopes of one day being able to follow their highborn leader to Asari space. While Nyn wasn't exactly thrilled about their desire to emigrate, she was too pragmatic to turn down the intelligence and rumors they were willing to pass along to try and keep her favor.

And if they did something particularly noteworthy, she could always contrive ways to have them exiled to Illium. It would cost her some political capital to do so, but right now she still had a decent sized cache of that in terms of favors owed and given. Many of them had been inherited from Xerol, the Batarian way of maintaining those kinds of things through the generations working in her favor.

"Those dicks are probably still trying to figure out what to do about it." Aethtya shook her head slightly, thick arms crossing her chest as she regarded us. "Here's the deal kids. A Batarian cruiser on a covert run in the Terminus picked the wrong time to make a pass over Korlus. It's a scrapheap of a planet, but it's currently the de-facto capital for what's left of the Suns in the Terminus."

Yeah. There was no way this could possibly be good.

A thought that she confirmed a few moments later. "I've got a few agents in what passes for cities on that dustball, and they confirmed the ship made a controlled crash. Before the Suns managed to jam their communications, one of them was able to pick up an emergency transmission from one Commander Balak."

"By the pillars.." Nyn groaned as her shoulders slumped. "Patriarch Balak is going to lose his mind. He just named him his heir last month, given that he hates his eldest son. With him dead.."

"He's not dead yet." The Matriarch shook her head slightly. "The transmission was after the ship impacted, so he and at least some of his people survived. Even the Suns aren't stupid enough to kill someone of his rank when they could hold him hostage instead."

I felt my eyes narrow as I processed that. "The Hegemony wouldn't pay any ransom. You think they're going to send in an SIU team to rescue him?"

"How?" My Tarath'shan glanced between us. "I'm not entirely sure how Balak was able to get a cruiser as far through the Terminus as it is. And last we heard, the Blue Suns still control most of the major relays leading from the Traverse into the Terminus, and the Alliance is guarding theirs even more tightly. Any team trying to get from the Hegemony to that system would have to run a gauntlet to reach him."

"They have the team that you put up here." Aethtya reminded her. "Those assholes are still on planet. They're setup in Nos Irrail trying to keep track of where the Eclipse is sending its people."
"That's a very small team." She hardly looked convinced. "A half a dozen agents against how many mercenaries?"

"An entire army at this point, with three Captains on world and another on his way."

"That's an awfully tempting target." My head shook slightly. "It explains why he was there trying to scout the place out. If the Hegemony or the Eclipse could take Korlus that would essentially end the fight in the Terminus. Against the Suns at least."

It went without saying that the fighting would be going on long after the Suns themselves were finished off. Aria was more or less letting the various warlords duke it out over the spoils while she tried to tighten her grip on Omega itself. Some newscasters and 'experts' were projecting that it would take decades for the fallout to settle. Of course, the Reapers would put paid to that in five or six years. Not that anyone but me actually knew that.

"Got that right kid, but it's already happening. Sederis browbeat two of Aria's dogs into allying with her, they're moving ships and troops into the cluster to get ready for a storm."

"That's going to be a fight." Nyn's voice was quiet. "A war within a war."

"Like we haven't seen since the Rebellions girl. Going to make the Turian and Human's little brawl look like a skirmish."

"I know the SIU is good.." I ventured, not liking the direction my thoughts were going in the slightest. "But a half strength team wouldn't have any chance of getting in and out."

Nyn carefully placed her hands on the table and took a slow breath. "What if they had another thirty or so soldiers, with shuttles waiting on standby to airlift the crew out?"

"It's going to be a warzone." I put as much stress on the last word as I could. "And you want to go there to rescue a Hegemony commander you've never met?"

And besides. It was Balak. His grandfather was tolerable, and had class in his own way. How much of that was because he was very, very old and how much of that was a result of him trying to be polite because he still wanted to see Ka'harial and Nyn marry I didn't know. Either way, I could at least accept him. I hadn't personally met the youngest Balak yet, but I remembered enough from the games to not really have any issues with him dying. I mean, trying to crash an asteroid into a human colony just because humans lived there was bad enough. But sabotaging shit in the middle of the Reaper war? Talk about fucking petty. And obsessed.

"Want to, no. Not in the slightest." She admitted, "But who do you think that the High Admiral is going to contact?"

"You're not Hegemony military, it's not like he could order you."

Skin tightened on her face as she spoke. "With the High Patriarch's approval he could sign a temporary order of conscription, calling my house to aid in the war effort. That would make refusal treason, and give them leave to seize the family's assets on Khar'shan and permanently exile me."

While the latter would hardly bother her, the former would. Despite it being wealth and power that she couldn't use or see from Illium, it was still very much hers. Having that ripped away would be a massive blow to her self-worth as a Highborn Batarian. Which meant it wasn't going to happen so long as she could do something about it. Even if that something meant taking all of us with her on a suicide run into the Terminus.
Seeing me wince slightly in return, and accepting my unspoken concession with a slight nod, she turned back to Aethyta. "If you could... we're going to need everything you know about Korlus."

"Not much to say girl." Broad shoulders rose and fell. "It was a pissant little dump until the Suns decided to try and make their stand there. I can give you the official data, what good they'll do you. You'd have to talk to the Eclipse for their tactical readouts once the fight gets underway, assuming you can get that bitch to accept your transmissions."

"Cieran, perhaps T'laria might know the proper way to phrase our request.."

"You could ask her you know."

Her upper eyes rolled. "Yes. Because we get along so well without you in between us."

Aethyta snorted. "Bring up that mental image and she'll do whatever you want to get it out of her head."

Nynsi groaned as I rubbed at my forehead with a sigh.

"Oh grow up. Young punks, think they're the only ones who think about goddess damned sex." The Matriarch shook her head in amusement before her tone and expression turned serious once again. "You sure you're government's going to force you into this girl?"

"It's Balak's heir." My voice was quiet as I turned to stare at the table in thought. "And that old man has a lot of clout. He could probably get the votes to overrule the High Patriarch if he needed to, and the High Admiral wouldn't have any reason to turn him down."

"No.. he wouldn't." Nynsi sank back into her chair. "He loses nothing by forcing us to act. If we succeed, he retrain a valuable commander. If we fail and I die, the High Patriarch will be forced to spend all of his time dividing my holdings amongst the lower castes."

The Matriarch glanced from one of us to the other. "Riptide on one side, storm on the other. Kid, what happens when you don't like the scenario?"

"Change it." The answer was reflexive at this point, but it took me a few moments after I'd spoken to get what she was after. "Ah... Nyn, you have to call the High Patriarch. As soon as possible."

"What?" All of her eyes blinked rapidly as they flickered from me to Aethyta. "I must have missed this lesson."

"You did. Kept saying to put your business shit on hold for a while and let me pound some sense into you girl."

I waved Aethyta off. "Aethyta, no offense, but not the time. Tarath'shan, if we wait for them to contact us they're going to force you to do it. There won't be anything we can do about that, and we won't get anything. But if you call them right now and offer to help."

That was all she need to nod slowly. "I can request concessions for my aid and appear magnanimous. And powerful. They won't expect for me to have already heard of this, and if I leave my intelligence source confidential."

"Which you bloody fucking will."

To her credit, Nyn didn't flinch at the growl. "..which I of course will, I will appear to hold even more strength. Cieran, call Illyan. And postpone the exercise."
"Yes to the first, not to the second. Have a feeling we're going to need them to have all the training they can get." I winced as another thought came to me. "Actually I'm going to talk with scales and see if we can't ramp this up a bit. She and I both need to get involved earlier."

"Do so." There was a quiet sigh. "I will keep you updated on what I discover. Aethyta, I know we have asked much of you lately, and I wanted to thank you for what you've done. It's entirely probable that this would have blindsided us later today or tomorrow."

Liara's father waved off the words. "You keep letting me use the kid and T'laria, I keep you in the loop. At this point we both owe each other girl, let's leave it without any fancy words or shit like that."

Nyn's lips curled slightly, "As you say. If you could get us the data on Korlus then? Largely irrelevant or not, it's a place to start."

"I'll see what shit I can dig up on the True Sons too." Aethyta growled. "With my luck those racist dicks would try and burn down my bar again."

I couldn't help it. "Fifty credits say they do."

"I just said they were going to. Athame's ass kid. I'm old, not a goddess damned idiot."

"Had to try." Standing up, I politely inclined my head to her, and then more deeply to Nyn. "With your permission?"

She gave me a weary nod of her head, obviously dreading the conversation she was about to have. "Please keep me informed as well Cieran."

"Of course." Tucking my chair in, I leaned over to rest my forehead against her temple and lowered my voice significantly. "A massage and wine tonight?"

"I'll need it." Turning her head, she tilted it back slightly in clear invitation. My own moved accordingly, and our lips met for a brief moment before I pulled back. "And Cieran? For now please keep the information to just T'laria. We can have a formal meeting later, but I want everyone focused on what you and her have put together for today."

"Yes ma'am. Aethyta."

"Kid."

Giving them both a final nod I slid out of the room, and set off at a slow jog towards Trena and Ghai's chambers. Nyn had given strict orders that they be clean, for once, so that they could setup everything needed to run the training operation from there. She hadn't wanted it to all happen in the conference room I'd just left, which was turning about to be a good decision.

"Ape." Trena glanced up at me when I arrived five minutes later, turning away from the holo-image dominating the main table. "You're late."

"News." I grimaced.

"More fucking bad news?" She growled irritably enough that Erana, Illyan's sister and Trena's new assistant, flinched back.

"Erana? Take a walk, please."
"Yes Master Kean." The painfully young Asari gave us both quick nods before gratefully fleeing. Goddess knows she'd tried hard in the garage with her sister, but at the end of the day she really wasn't grease-monkey material. She still did some part time work there, but lately she more or less served as Trena's aide. By which I meant she did all of the paperwork and message sending that my friend couldn't be bothered to do on her own.

Once the door slid shut behind her, I quickly brought Trena up to speed on what had just been discussed. It didn't take long, but by the end of it she'd had to sit down, puffing furiously on her pipe as I wrapped it up.

"So. She's going to volunteer us for a fucking suicide run into a goddess-damned warzone. Just. Bloody. Great."

"Could be worse." Sliding the chair next to her out I collapsed into it, hardly able to believe it either. "She could be getting ordered to do it. This way maybe we'll get bonus pay or something."

"Can't spend shit if you're dead ape."

"Speak for the goddess scales."

Teal eyes narrowed at me. "You didn't even put up a fight, did you?"

"What could I have said?" My head shook. "There's no way it wouldn't end up happening. She'd have to give up everything she's got on Khar'shan if she refused them. Hell, Balak probably would be furious enough to put out his own bounties out if his heir got killed and we let it happen."

"Fucking Batarian prideful shit." She gave me a glare. "You couldn't have fallen for a Turain girl or something? They bite too you know."

A hand nearly rose self-consciously to the thin white scars on my neck, joined by red lines from more recent.. recreational activities with Nyn. "Hey, you accepted the job. You could have gone right back to your own shop and no one would have blamed you."

"Yeah, well.. fuck. Would have been weird not having you and Ghai around all the time. Even if she probably would have moved in with me anyway."

"And you'd miss seeing Illyan lift heavy things for fun."

There was a quietly pleased sound. "Yeah, would suck not seeing the eye candy. I like that phrase, by the way."

"You're welcome." I blew out a breath before turning things back around. "Anything you can think of to shift in our plans for today?"

"Today? No. Tomorrow? Set off the goddess-damned alarms before dawn and make them run through all of it again."

I blinked, but nodded slightly. "All right. We'll have to ask Nyn about the time-frame for this crap once she's done with her transmission. And Athame knows how long that shit is going to take."

She grunted to accept the point before turning back to the holo-image. "Dammit. I was hoping we could be a bit more relaxed about this."

"Yeah.." My hands rested on the table as I joined her in staring at the moving icons. "Rane took the garage?"
"And had the good sense to lock-down the main door." A blue hand waved at the small doors. "She's got two at each interior door, with her and another girl holding back as a bit of a reserve."

Grunting, I glanced around until I found their opponents. Ghai and her fellow Asari seemed to be hanging back, while Marn and Chen's groups were actually spread out through the mansion, only now starting to assemble and move in the garage's direction. "Just started then?"

"Yeah, two minutes in." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Although.. I was looking over their equipment list in the system ape. Care to explain?"

"She asked if she could use them. I didn't see any reason why not."

"Athame's ass ape you are seriously not helping with her thing about you."

"Ghai asked too. So did Marn." I shrugged, not seeing the problem. "And I didn't want Chen bitching again to they all have the upgrades for their defensive runs."

Once I'd gotten my armor intact, my next project had been finding out how to upgrade my techmines. It wasn't as simple as flicking a few switches or downloading a new program to my omni-tool, that was for damned sure.

It turns out that what the games viewed as level one abilities were basically factory spec level stuff. For the most part, you didn't get any better than that. Taking the overload mines as an example, the ability for it to leap between enemies or stun them were specially made modules normally limited to special forces or Spectres.

Or, you know, someone on a rather shady planet and plenty of connections.

Nynsi had been able to get me a few 'samples' of both upgraded incinerate and overload types, and Trena and I had promptly gotten to work reverse-engineering the things. That little project had ended up taking nearly a month, but we now had a decent sized stash of incinerates spec'd to burn through armor and overloads that would toss out a pair of smaller mines on detonating near the primary target. Given our rather limited supply, I was holding onto most of them, but Nyn was hoping to start manufacturing the things full-time in one of her companies rather soon.

"Fine then." Trena grumbled. "You at least limited the number of them they have right?"

"Scales, seriously. Of course I bloody limited it. Only one person per team has 'em."

"Calm your ass down ape." she shook her head irritably as Chen's first attempt on the garage was repulsed, the small icons of his squad pulling back into the hall to mull over their options. "Just making sure you aren't making Rane crush harder on you."

I let out a quiet groan. "She isn't."

"Whatever you say ape."

Shaking my head I kept watching as Rane's team struggled to hold off the attackers. I wasn't sure who had taken command, either Ghai or Marn most likely, but they had opted against wave style attacks. Instead they were applying continuous pressure, forcing the defenders to keep their guns hot as they desperately tried to hold them back.

Rane was doing what she could to alleviate that, rotating her people in and out of the fight and throwing the upgraded mines whenever she thought they were needed. They were managing to hold them back, but to my eyes it looked like it was going to be just a matter of time.
"How's your leg?"

Trena's cheek twitched slightly as her weight shifted. "If this shit is happening I'm going with, ape. Leg or not."

My eyes returned to the image as Chen's icon winked red before he started heading back to the exterior. As his people fell Marn's began to replace them, with the Asari apparently holding back until Rane's people started to falter. Which led credence to Ghai having been the one take command, otherwise Marn would have kept her people back for the final hit.

"You avoided the question scales."

"It's fine ape. I can jog on it just fine."

"For how long?"

"Long enough." There was a muted growl. "You aren't leaving me on this fucking rock to keep me safe. I'm not your damned bondmate, and she'd beat the crap out of you if you tried to keep her out of it too."

"I wasn't going to scales." Which wasn't a total lie. But just because she was coming with didn't mean she'd be on the front lines if I could help it. "Looks like Rane's people are about done."

And they were. They hadn't been able to keep up their rotation quickly enough to cool their weapons and replenish their barriers, and Marn's people had managed to force their way into the garage. Two of her girls were down, and she the remaining three were pinned down near my armor station as the attackers spread out to surround them.

She grunted. "At least Ghai can show them how its done. Should have had them start first to build their confidence up, show them it's possible to hold out."

I winced but nodded as Rane's little group collapsed, and the first round ended with their 'deaths'. "Yeah. We'll have to encourage Rane a bit to make up for that."

"I'll do it, don't need her digging on you any harder. You get back to Shaaryak and figure out what's going on."

"Assuming she knows.." Turning, I made to head back to where I'd just come from. "But hey, at least we won't be around for the True Sons to kill."

"I'd rather deal with them." Trena grunted, leaning in to stare at the now blank image. "And you fucking would to."

"Yeah.. I would. Be right back scales."

"Cieran, wait."

I froze briefly, then turned back to stare at her. "Trena?"

She kept her gaze firmly on the table. "Shaaryak. You sure she's on the mark about this shit? That they'd really drag us all into their crap?"

"Scales.. this is a very bad time to doubt your boss."

A hand waved irritably. "Your guess, right now, of our losses."

My lips thinned. "Fifty percent. And whether or not we succeed is going to be more on the
Eclipse and whatever allies they drag in than on us. Maybe we'll be lucky and they'll land somewhere near the crash zone."

"Assuming they aren't already prisoners."

"Yeah. That too."

There was just enough of a shift so that her eyes could meet mine, "You really blame me for asking now? It's bad enough we're going to be getting people killed because she can't stand losing shit she doesn't even really have. Getting them killed just for shit that she wants would be even worse."

We'd be dead either way, but I still sighed. "Scales.. I'm not going to say I blame you for asking, but you're still asking me if you think the woman I'm sleeping with lied to my face."

Her lips twisted, but she nodded tightly. "All right. Just.. do me a favor ape, look that shit up. For me."

"I will scales, if you promise to cool it off a bit with Nyn. She doesn't need more stress right now."

"Deal. Now get your ass out of here."

Fingers touched my brow in an abbreviated salute, and then I was out the door, heading back the way I'd come.

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**Next up is Chapter 4: The Plan**

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**Author's Fun Fact: Timeline of the Blue Suns War – Part I**

**September 17th, 2180** – Executive Admiral Vosque executes Executive Commander Dal'serah for attempting to sell the organization out to the Batarian Hegemony. Captain Tarak of Omega is tentatively selected to replace him, pending a face-to-face meeting to occur in October between him and the two remaining Executives.

**September 25th, 2180** – Executive Administrator Santiago assassinated by commando team led by Zaeed Massani. The news is suppressed by Admiral Vosque, who brevet-promotes Tarak to Executive Commander in an attempt to forestall a civil war. His message also indicates his willingness to allow Tarak to nominate the new Executive Administrator as a concession to Batarian anger over Dal'serah's death.

**September 28th, 2180** – Confidential Blue Sun information is posted to the extranet by Matriarch Aethyta's network on Illium, supported by Republic spies on Omega. Eclipse mercenary group declares open war against their rivals, quickly joined by Warlord Gormack, Warlord T'Ravt, the Talon mercenary group, the True Son gang, and several Blood Pack groups.

**September 29th, 2180** – Aria T'loak confirms the information as legitimate, and orders her fleet to impound any Blue Sun ship attempting to travel through the Omega system.

**October 2nd, 2180** – Executive Admiral Vosque orders all Blue Sun forces to retreat to his location the Traverse. Executive Commander Tarak orders an evacuation of Omega, less than a quarter of his people are able to escape while he and the remainder are surrounded by Aria's forces.
October 4th, 2180 – First Battle of Omega. Blue Sun fleet attempts to force travel through the Omega system. The core battlegroups are beaten back by Aria’s fleet, but several flotillas escape into the Traverse to join Vosque.

October 5th, 2180 – Aria T’loak personally leads the assault on the Blue Sun headquarters on Omega, and beheads Tarak. Displaying his head in Afterlfie and broadcasting the signal to the station, the remaining Blue Sun forces surrender unconditionally. Most are spared and absorbed into Aria’s forces. The remainder, those directly responsible for actions against her, are executed publicly.

October 10th, 2180 – Captain Ku’ril is assassinated aboard the prison ship purgatory by insiders paid off by the Eclipse and Warlord Gormak. Aria subsequently allows select prisoners to be released on Omega. The undesirables, along with the Blue Sun crew, are still on board when the ship is sent through the Omega-4 relay by auto-pilot.

Chapter End Notes

So. The Act was named the Rescue for a reason, and here we see just who they're going to be trying to save. The next chapter will have more details about what's happening, and obviously the plan about what's going to happen, as well as addressing the fact that the True Sons remain an issue.

The actual rescue operation is going to span.. pretty much the entire act, so be prepared to say goodbye to Illium for a while.

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 4: The Plan

"I'm starting to regret giving Patriarch Balak my word." Nynsi admitted, her posture slumping as we pored over the combined data. "Extremely so."

A bleary eyed Trena glanced up from her tablet, too tired even to formulate a proper glare. "Does that mean I can say I told you so now, or you going to make me wait until we're all fucking dead?"

"Scales."

She waved a hand irritably in my direction, "No ape, she should have looked over this shit before she made any promises or oaths or whatever the crap she did."

"Most of this is from Hegemony scouts and spies, which they wouldn't have given if I hadn't." My Tarath'shan shot back, anger burning away some of the exhaustion. "And you know that T'laria."

Groaning, I could only slump in my chair as the pair of the started into each other yet again. Honestly I wasn't terribly surprised. For what it had been worth, Trena had tried to not set Nyn off when we'd started trying to formulate a plan. But given that we were already tired from the training sessions, and the fact that it was now well after midnight, things had logically gone beyond the point where they could remain in the same room without sniping at one another.

Not that Nyn had had an easy day either. While Patriarch Balak had been flattered from here to Omega that she was willing to try and save his grandson and heir, the military's response had been lukewarm at best. In a reverse of what she'd been worrying about, the High Patriarch had nearly had to invoke the rights of conscription to bring us under his personal control and send us in anyway. What had followed was apparently several hours of tense negotiations between the three of them and some General, speaking for the High Admiral who was personally leading the fleet, before the details had been hammered out.

The good news was that we weren't going to be subordinate to the SIU team on planet. The bad news is that once we rescued Balak, we would become under his command until we got him off planet.

Nyn didn't have any issues with that, she'd been more concerned about the compensation as well as a few provisos that would let us retreat if things looked bad. But I, personally, was very much hoping that Balak would be dead before we got to him. I could well imagine the kind of jobs he'd have for a human who'd dared take a Batarian title.

"Erana." Glancing back at where the equally tired Asari sat along the edge of the conference room, "More tea please. And stimulants."

"Yes Master Kean." She had to cover up a yawn as she set her own work aside, and nearly staggered out the door after realizing that our current pot was empty.
Sighing, I tuned back into the conversation and tried not to wince.

"... you put me in fucking command for a reason girl! You can't do that and then ignore the shit I'm telling you!"

"I'm not ignoring your opinions when they are well reasoned and bloody logical." Nyn fired back, "But when you're acting like a-

"Nynsi! Trena! Enough! " I barked as loudly as I could, cutting my girlfriend off before she could finish the insult, before belatedly adding, "Please."

They both froze, Trena already half out of her chair and shaking with anger, before glancing at me in surprise. I didn't exactly make it a habit to get between them when they argued, largely for my own safety.

But it was late, or early I supposed, and I was fucking tired.

"Seriously, it's past midnight and we still have crap to do. Nyn, I know she's a pain in the ass to deal with, but she is the one you put in command of your security. Scales, you think she's an uptight bitch sometimes, but she's still your boss. I ran a hand through hair that was rapidly becoming greasy with oil and dried sweat, "Can you both please just sit down and help me get through tonight?"

Both alien women stared at me for a few more moments before Nynsi gave me a slightly apologetic nod. Trena grunted something under her breath, but still sat back down with a quiet groan.

"Thank you." Bringing up my omni-tool, I flicked my fingers over a few buttons. Correspondingly, a map snapped to life above the table, mirroring what I'd been looking at on my own tablet. The northern continent that Balak had managed to smash into was the planet's largest, and naturally also had the greatest population of mercenaries. "The biggest issue we're going to have is the Eclipse, I think."

My Tarath'shan flicked her lower eyes to me, while her upper set stayed on the image. "Not the enemy? Or the defensive batteries?"

I shook my head. "The Suns are the Suns, we know what they're capable of. But the Eclipse and their allies are the ones who are invading this place to take it, we're just slipping in while they're doing that. We don't have to worry about the surface-to-space guns because they have to take them out to make a full invasion."

Trena grunted, igniting her pipe in short, jerky motions before speaking. "And the Suns are still the fucking Suns. We know 'em. Even if there's a fuck-ton more there than we're used to."

"The Eclipse again, for dealing with their numbers." My lips twisted, "We won't be able to setup our own base, that's for sure. We'd be picked out and overrun, especially with the crash site where it is."

Balak's brief transmission had given the Hegemony a good idea where he'd gone down. Unfortunately, they hadn't had the good luck to end up in the middle of nowhere. Instead they were barely more than a stones throw from one of the planet's few cities. Typically, this was both good and bad. The bad was that that was a hell of a lot of Blue Suns that would probably object quite strenuously to our rescue effort. But that was also good, in that the odds of him still being alive and free were pretty damn long.

"So we'll have to liaise with Sederis." Nyn grimaced as she shook her head slightly, "Never a
pleasant proposition."

"No choice."

"I know." She sighed, "What else do you have on the enemy?"

"Not much..." I waved a hand at the screen. "Neither Aethyta's nor the Hegemony's intel is terribly
good, the Suns have been jamming the crap out of the entire system and blew apart the FTL buoys
just after Balak crashed. There's at least three Captains on planet, gives them a few hundred
thousand troops plus whatever they can scrounge up from the local population."

"Not much." Trena grunted around her pipe, the smoke curling from her nostrils. "Planet's only
got four major cities."

Nynsi blinked, "Then why retreat there? They had control of several highly populated worlds
where they could have potentially raised an army of millions to defend it."

"Millions of conscripts." I reminded her gently, "Who probably would have turned on them the
second the fighting started."

"And the fucked up terrain." A blue hand stabbed at the picture, "This place makes Omega look
like a goddess damned paradise. Sederis is going to have it rough keeping her partners involved if
this shit bogs down."

Which was something else that was apparently a bit different than I remembered. Korlus was as
planet was a shitty as you'd imagine a place where ships went to die. And that definitely included
the air. The atmosphere was breathable... so long as the weather was clear. You wouldn't have any
problems for short-term exposure, but anyone who spent long periods of time breathing the air
would start having issues. And that was just the start. Smogstorms that could choke out a krogan
while also pumping out enough lightning to fry a shuttle or ten were routine enough that long-term
life was more or less suicidal outside of the sheltered habitats and bases.

"Somehow I don't doubt that she'll find ways to keep them motivated." Nyn's lower eyes glanced
down at her tablet. "She certainly has ways with people. As for transport, T'alaria, how many
shuttles will we need?"

"Six to move all of us. Split Chen and Marn's teams, you and me with Ghai's commandos, and the
ape with Rane and her girls. Gives us decent space for pick-ups." The 'especially after we lose
people' went unsaid. "How many crew did that damned ship have?"

"Two hundred and thirty." Trena and I both winced at the number, but she just gave us a little
shrug. "We can assume that most of them will have either died in the crash or in the fighting that
has followed. Our priority is the Commander, anyone we can't bring with can wait in areas that
the Eclipse has pacified until we can make additional trips."

I blinked. "Trips to where? It's not exactly a short haul from here to Korlus."

Her lips curled slightly at the edges. "From our ship, dear Cieran. We can't be cooped up inside of
shuttles for days on end until we arrive, now can we?"

I had to blink again. "You bought a ship?"

"I have several tours booked for tomorrow afternoon to inspect possible options." There was the
slightest wince. "Even with partial repayment from the Hegemony it will not be cheap, but
perhaps I can start a shipping business to recoup the loss once this is concluded."
"Just make sure it's not a broken old whale." Trena grumbled. "I don't want to spend the trip there fixing a fucking wreck."

"Scales, you're talking to Nyn. You really think she'd buy a flying trash heep?"

My friend considered that for a moment, then gave a snort. "Fine. Don't buy a fucking palace then, shit always goes wrong when they get too damned fancy."

"I will keep that in mind." Nyn's voice was dry. "Now, as to what we will do once we get there?"

"No idea." I admitted. "I don't think we'll know much of anything until we actually land and get intel from Sederis."

"Assuming that bitch tells us anything." A pipe waved, trailing smoke as she gestured in Nos Astra's vague direction. "Fuck, she could keep us out of this entirely."

"In which case I will give Patriarch Balak my apologies." There was another small shrug. "As Cieran has said, without us being able to utilize the Eclipse's pending invasion, this is a non-starter. Will we be able to land near the crash site?"

"Assuming they're competent? Probably not. I'd have that thing surrounded with anti-air weapons, just to keep them from trying to launch their own shuttles if any survived the impact. Or to try and blast holes in it, one or the other." Bringing my omni-tool up again, I highlighted a few area's I'd marked earlier. "These spaces are mostly sheltered by larger wrecks.. I think. They could give us enough cover to land relatively close and figure out what the local situation is."

Leaning in slightly, she flicked her eyes over it and grunted. Before she could say anything else, Erana finally came back. Her eyes were more than a little dilated, giving away the fact that she'd already grabbed a stim or two for herself, but she wasn't shaking as she poured us all tea.

"Erana, have a message for your sister waiting for her. I'm going to need our entire shuttle fleet fully checked out for a combat mission as soon as possible."

"Yes ma'am." There was a pause as the young Asari bit her lip, "Um, is there a time-frame?"

Dark eyes glanced down at her tablet again as she checked something. "Two days. She has my permission to pull in anyone from the shops and yards in the District to assist."

I mulled that as Erana typed up the memo. "Two days for the shuttles. It's at least, what, a three day trip?"

"Yes." She gave a hissing sigh. "And whichever ship I purchase will need at least another day or two of work before we can depart. It will have to be seen if Commander Balak can hold out for that long."

Personally I was really hoping he couldn't, but again, not stupid enough to say that out loud. Instead I took a sip from my warm tea and popped the small pill she'd put beside it. "Either way we'll need quite a few supplies with us. It's not like the mansion is just an hour away."

Trena gave a nod. "Marn and Illyan can handle that. You'll have to work out your own shit though, ape."

"Yeah." Which would be a bit of a nightmare. My powered exoskeleton might have been an awesome piece of equipment that let me survive and contribute in fights that would have normally killed me, but it wasn't invincible. I'd routinely had to nearly rebuild the thing after major brawls, and that wouldn't exactly be an option on Korlus. Everything to keep it running would have to
come with and be setup in such a way that I could carry it with me. "Well. Guess I know what I'm doing for the next six days."

"Only when you aren't helping me inspect the ship. Or assisting Illyan with her work on the shuttles. Or developing a few contingency plans in here with T'laria." I might have twitched slightly as she went through the list, ending it by giving me an apologetic tilt of her head. "The life of a Harath'krem is not a restful one love."

"I'm starting to notice." Another sip of tea let me focus on something besides the small mountain of work for a moment, and I let the liquid linger for a moment to savor the slightly bitter taste. "All right. So assuming the Eclipse lets us ride along, and that they're able to achieve landfall, and they do so close enough to our target, what do we do once we hit the ground?"

"Figure out if Balak is still breathing for one." Trena shrugged, "I doubt we'll be able to raise him on coms, we'll probably have to hit a damned Blue Sun outpost for intel."

"Erana, mind bringing those up?" Trena's assistant gave me a nod and manipulated her omni-tool for a few moments before blue icons flashed to live across the map, damn near covering the entire thing. "Just the ones within twenty kilometers of the crash site, or within five of the landing zone options, and then zoom back in on the target area."

The three of us leaned to in to look at the more detailed scan appeared.

Leaning heavily on her cane, Trena forced herself upright before stabbing her pipe into the hologram. "Here, and here. If we do get a hold of him, this site is the safest. If we can't, we drop here and then move against this outpost. Kill the fuckers there and yank whatever data we can to figure out what's going on. If he's dead or captured, we bail. If not, both give us good paths towards his damned ship."

"Then we at least have a starting point." Nyn gave her a slight nod, "If you could expand options for either route and develop fall back plans?"

"When do I get the ape?"

"The day after tomorrow, at the soonest. He does need to ensure his own work is completed first, after all." I gave her a slight nod of thanks at that. "Ensure that Ghai understands that she will still be the field commander."

Trena's left cheek twitched slightly. "I'm fine girl."

"No. You are not. You will be coordinating the operation from the ship." A hand cut the air between them before Trena could say anything else. "It is not an option. Your back is improved but not to the point where you could fight a running battle, which you can't deny this is likely to turn into. Ghai is more than capable of leading the squads on the ground, and we need someone to act as our control."

My Asari friend gave her a scowl. "Can't you handle that?"

If Nyn had had eyebrows she would have arched them. "And who, exactly, would convince Commander Balak to come with us? He is a Highborn, and from all accounts is quite proud. Do you think he would consent to allow Marn or Chen to guide him away from the battle?"

Trena's teeth ground audibly as she jerked her head in a nod. "Fine."

"Good. Now, I think we've done quite enough for tonight. We will have a conference meeting in the morning to go over what we've just discussed, as well as bringing everyone up to speed on our
new operation." She paused as I shook my head. "Cieran?"

"You don't need me there, or Trena. Let her tell Ghai and the pair of them can get started while you get the others up to speed, and I'll start on my armor." I gave her a slight shrug, "Then send me Illyan and her the squad leaders."

All of her eyes narrowed slightly as she thought that over. "You can work on your own packing, and then assist Illyan. But T'laria, you're still in here with me. I won't take up that much time, and then you and Ghai can begin."

Trena just grunted under her breath before standing, extinguishing her pipe in jerky motions before grabbing her cane and heading for the door.

I just sighed as she stomped out, turning to glance at Erana. "Get to bed."

She gave me a little nod before scuttling out after Trena, noticeably slowing as if afraid that the slightest disturbance might set her off. Which, to be fair, probably wasn't far off.

"You're going to have to stop her when she tries to stowaway on a shuttle again."

"Looking forwards to it." I probably laid the sarcasm on a bit too thick, but she merely gave me a small smile. "Can we go collapse in bed now?"

"I was rather hoping we could do more than collapse." her eyes blinked slowly before her lower eyes traced downwards demurely. "It has been a very long day, and it would be good for us to.. relax before tomorrow."

My lips twitched slightly. "Spirit willing, flesh running on drugs and not much else."

"Then perhaps we should walk quickly." She rose in a single, smooth motion, offering me her hand as she moved around the table.

Taking it, I let her haul me upwards. A strong arm wrapped around my waist, firmly guiding me through the door and into the dimly lit hall. Neither of us is exactly short, and I had to stretch my legs to keep pace with her, so we made it to her chambers fairly quickly.

"Was your conversation that bad?" I couldn't help but tease her a bit as we separated in her living room. She headed towards the bedroom while I locked the rooms down for the night.

"You have no idea. Balak is apparently convinced I'm pining for his grandson. And General Noynix was insufferable enough that I nearly lost my temper in the middle of the conversation."

"At least we weren't conscripted." A quick check to make sure that the doors were locked, and I turned to follow her.

"We nearly were." Her voice was muffled as she yanked her shirt up and over her head, revealing the thick muscles rippling under her skin. The lighter colored plates protecting her spine gave her an exotic flair that I most definitely still appreciated, tired or not. "Noynix wanted us under the military's thumb so that they could keep control."

"Figures." Moving around the bed I yanked my omni-tool off my wrist, tossing it onto a nightstand before starting on my own shirt. "How did his Highness take that?"

"You know I hate it when you call him that." Despite her tone, I didn't miss the way her lower eyes stayed on my chest. Aethyta's training regimen had been pretty good for my physique, and
Nyn had made her own appreciation quite known. I was still built like a rail, but I wasn't a walking skeleton anymore. "The High Patriarch hated it nearly as much as I did. In his posture at least. I still had to accept only the partial repayment on the ship to get us out of that."

Which would at least calm Trena down a bit. Maybe. It still didn't sound like they'd been intending to conscript us to begin with, but as soon as we'd come to their attention the army at least had been all for it. Personally I still hadn't had the time to go through how I actually felt about all this, and the sight of Nyn sliding her pants down definitely meant that it wasn't about to occur tonight.

She didn't miss the way my eyes were focused on the cartilage armor covering her thighs. Shifting her legs a bit, she tilted herself to the left in a very Batarian pose that naturally drew my gaze back up to her flexing abs and strong arms resting her hands on her hips. "Enjoying the view, Harath'krem?"

"Always, Tarath'shan."

Lips pulled back to give me a quick grin before she slid into bed, leaving me to hit the lights before following suit.

Despite her bold words earlier, she didn't quite attack me the moment I settled into her ridiculously luxurious bed. Instead her warmth pressed against my side as she nuzzled her mouth against my neck. Small kisses and nips made my skin tingle, and definitely served the purpose of keeping me awake.

"You know we have to be awake in about five hours." I groaned as she left a harder bite as her nails made a slow trace down my chest.

There was a quiet chuckle before her lips pulled back enough that she could murmur. "Since when has that stopped me from enjoying you for as long as I wanted?"

A soft growl was all the warning I gave her before rolling to my right, easily sliding on top of her. My hands found her wrists, holding her hands firmly near her shoulders as I flicked my eyes between her lidded pairs.

"When I stop you is when that happens." Leaning down I pressed my lips firmly against hers, a quiet mewl all she managed to get out before her body arched slowly against mine. As always with Nyn, the docility lasted for only a few moments before her throat vibrated in a warning growl. From there, things escalated to their logical conclusions.

A half hour later found her head resting on my chest, rising and falling with my breathing as we enjoyed the afterglow of our exertions. Both of our necks and shoulders were sore and a little bruised, but thankfully neither of us had let ourselves get out of hand this time. The last thing either of us needed was Trena or Illyan heckling us first thing in the morning for bandages or exceedingly obvious marks.

"We hardly seem to have time for this anymore.." she mused quietly, only her right eyes open as she looked up at me. "Perhaps you're right about how much I've been working."

"I've been telling you that for weeks now." Reaching down I brushed the back of my fingertips across her cheek and down her neck. "We should take a vacation or something after this."

Nyn gave a quiet chuckle, stretching out a bit so that I could better massage her shoulder. "I think this is going to keep us busy for quite a while Cie."

"Yeah.." I sighed. "It was a nice thought though, wasn't it?"
"It was." She agreed. "Perhaps after Balak is on his way back to the Hegemony."

"Assuming we succeed. And he's alive."

"Assuming that." There was a pause before her tone turned wry, "You can stop hoping that he's dead anytime."

My lips twitched slightly. "I really wish you'd tell me how you can read me so well."

She gave a quiet chuckle and kissed my chest before pushing herself up on one arm, glancing down at me. "Some other time."

"It's always some other time.. and you can't deny that it would make our lives easier if he was."

"It would." Nyn allowed, dark eyes regarding me stoically. "You don't think we should be doing this."

It was definitely a statement rather than a question, and I sighed before rising up on my elbows. She let me lean in and brush our lips together, but was obviously waiting for me to explain myself.

"Nyn.. we're going to lose people on this run. And it's not even on Illium, or against people currently trying to kill us." Shifting back I let myself fall onto the pillow, Nyn following me down a few moments later. "I get that you're getting concessions and favors, and that this is good politically. But I have no idea if we can actually pull it off. And I've lost enough friends for one year."

"So have I." she reminded me quietly, her body pressing against my side as she rested her head on my shoulder. It was basically reflex for my arm to wrap around her and pull her warmth even closer, and her own reciprocated a few moments later. "But we are still far more prepared now than we were under my Uncle."

"With half the people." I sighed. "I don't know Nyn."

"Would you like to stay behind?" There was a grunt as I squeezed her a bit more tightly in remonstration. "I was just asking."

"Well don't." Not that I wanted to go. I very much didn't, as a matter of fact. But on the same token, there was no way that I would just let Nyn go off on this run without me to watch her back.

There was a quiet sigh before lips gently pressed against my skin. "Thank you, Harath'krem."

I had to cover up a yawn with my left hand before I could reply, the stimulants having more than run their course. "For what?"

"Not saying that in public."

A let out a short breath through my nose. "I know how you feel about that."

And I very much did. The title of Harath'krem might have given me the right to advice and guide Nyn, but that didn't mean that I had full leave to question her decisions in public. Trena and I not being happy about the decision behind closed doors was one thing, but if I'd bitched about it in front of the squad leaders sleeping on the couch would have been a best case scenario. Our closeness and feelings for one another notwithstanding, there were a few lines I knew not to cross. In turn, there were a few things she knew I wouldn't stand for either, and we'd achieved a kind of delicate balance in our personal lives.
"So you do. Sometimes I just worry, I suppose." Her hand slid up to tug at my goatee playfully. "You are a human, after all."

"So I am." There wasn't any time to cover up a second yawn, and she echoed it before nuzzling into my shoulder further, her breathing evening out as she started to slip away. I followed her into sleep a few moments later, but as always, the morning came far too soon.

Next up is Chapter 5: The Ship

Author's Fun Fact: The Terminus Warlords

While Aria T'Loak may be the primary power in the Terminus, she is heavily reliant on a client system of lesser warlords. Most of them exchange nominal allegiance to her in exchange for the element zero and other resources she can provide from Omega. That loyalty, however, only stretches so far, a far cry from the empire many in Citadel space believe that she controls.

The warlords most subordinate to her are those that must routinely transition through the Omega system, and would risk running the gauntlet of her fleet and the station's defenses if they angered her. Others, whose territory resides entirely within clusters that allow for them to avoid that system, pay her lip service at best. Some even openly attack her agents if they believe that she is pushing them too far.

Despite all of that, if the Citadel made any motions into the Terminus her core position would ensure that she would de-facto become the leader of any coalition to fight off the attackers. The power of her central location is far stronger than many of her would-be rivals would like, something that was made very clear recently. By blocking the Suns from transitioning through Omega's relays, she effectively crippled them overnight. An organization that otherwise might have survived for years in conflict with its primary rivals instead found itself making a series of last stands in a matter of months.

Terminus Warlords of note: Aria T'Loak (Asari), Gormack (Salarian), Yan T'Ravt (Asari), Zaen (Krogan), Heinrich dem Waffe (Human), Jona Sederis* (Asari), Mikran T'Vaenias (Asari), Ganar Yulaz** (Krogan)


* Head of the Eclipse
** Nominal Head of the Blood Pack

Chapter End Notes

Wow. I'm glad that everyone reads my Author's notes, but I wasn't expecting people to be so worried about Jack. You don't have to be, I'm not going to kill a major character off-screen like that. She is perfectly safe (well, safe as someone like her can be), and is quite probably enjoying the chaos in the Terminus and Traverse right now. Honestly I didn't even consider that she would have been on Purgatory this far ahead of ME2. If she had been, I imagine Cerberus would have tried to buy her on ice long
before Shep showed up.

This chapter had a few major cases of writer's block, plus a major Warmachine tournament and personal events, that slowed it down a bit, and it took me a few stop and starts to get going. Hopefully the finished result works and is a good stepping point for the next chapter which will cover the remainder of their prep before they head out for Korlus. The next chapter will cover the rest of their preparations and the departure from Illium, with the action commencing the next chapter after that.

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
"So.. our new ship is in I-Sec's impound lot?" I couldn't help but ask as we passed the security checkpoint that marked the entrance to said location. "That's not exactly inspiring."

"You said it boss." Illyan murmured low enough so that our escorts couldn't hear her. "Not sure what she's thinking."

"I'm not sure anyone but Cieran really understand how she thinks." Rane'li gave a little shrug, her neck twisting as she tried to take in the structure and it surrounding compound.

Trena didn't bother holding back, as usual. The two officers glanced irritably at her as she snorted loudly. "Guess we'll fucking find out."

The complex itself was rather impressive, and far more utilitarian than most Asari construction. Which I could hardly fault them for. It wasn't exactly a prison, but it still wasn't a place that people would visit for fun.

We were bypassing the main building, which from what I'd gathered was little more than a massive warehouse. But we weren't interested in the shuttles, aircars, or pleasure yachts contained within it. What we wanted was in the bare-bones starport next store, where the bigger ships sat and waited for someone to come claim them.

"So." Taking a few extra steps, I caught up with the officer who was leading us onwards. "I don't suppose it's close?"

"What, tired of walking?" She tossed her head, "This is short term storage human. Smugglers and crap too stupid to sign the right documents or pay the fees. We're heading for the rustyard."

"That.. doesn't make me enthused about the ship we've bought."

The cop gave me a bored look. "And I should care why?"

My cheek might have twitched slightly, and I did tip my head a bit to the right as I fell back. Trena just snorted, and I caught Rane smothering a smile as she quickly looked away.

"Admit it ape, you set her up pretty good there."

I could only dip my head slightly, sigh, and stop condescending her. I had more or less walked right into that one. Especially since both of the officers with us were from the Nos Astra branch, which wasn't terribly fond of us. They were the daughters of the high rollers, the aristocracy of the planet's security. In comparison, Captain Vasir and her officers in Khar'shan Minor were the political exiles, cast out into the small city to stop them from bucking the system. And given that, our reception from the local officers was typically chilly at best.

As we moved further into the parking lot slash starport, the background noise slowly became a
steady thrum against my ears.

It wasn't from people, mind you, there wasn't anyone but us in sight. The larger ships, cargo haulers and bulk freighters for the most part, needed eezo laden docking arms to support their mass against the force of gravity. It was only a low hum, but it was pervasive and annoying as hell.

"You all right ape?"

I quickly brought a hand down from where I'd been massaging my temple. "You'd think they'd fix that. Losing what, five percent efficiency with the noise?"

"Six and a half." Trena and Illyan spoke in chorus, earning them another glare from our escorts.

"What?" My friend snorted. "A place like this that's a few thousand credits a month in wasted power, and a few hundred a year in needing more eezo to replace what you're burning out. Shit, you lot really don't take care of your fucking equipment do you?"

"Not my department." The only officer who'd spoken turned back to frown at Trena. "And why do you care anyway bitch?"

"Because I could make a fucking fortune off you for fixing it. Obviously."

That earned her a glare before the other Asari pointedly accelerated slightly, apparently hoping to keep herself as far as possible from us.

Rane sighed, but her lips were trembling as she fought not to grin. "If you two keep this up they're going to leave us in here with no idea on how to get out."

"Don't lump me in with scales." I protested. "My question was perfectly legitimate, hers was rhetorical and combative."

"Stop talking like your girl ape." A fist hit my arm hard enough to make me grunt.

"Fine. My question was fine, yours was moronic and rude. Better?"

"I will totally kick your ass later ape."

"I will totally hack the door on your room so that Illyan can't get in without setting off alarms."

"Hey!" Our mechanic gave me a wounded look, "Boss! Don't have to punish me along with her."

"See? Outnumbered ape."

"I don't know.." Rane's voice was pensive. "My room is next to yours, and I could do without the noise at night. I think he should."

Trena rolled her eyes, "Just find a different room then, goddess knows there's enough of them in that damned building. Or are you feeling left out?"

"I.." the young lowborn blinked rapidly as her skin darkened, "No!"

"Really? I'm sure Illyan wouldn't mind stopping by after she was done with us, would you?"

"Hmm.." Illyan glanced at Rane, very pointedly letting her eyes go up and down her frame. "I don't know, I don't normally go for Batarians, and you two tire me out. That said, you aren't half bad looking Rane."
"I really wish we could get back to the part where we were cutting you two off." She shifted slightly to her left, trying to get me between her and the two Asari. "And no offense, but I'm ah... Asari aren't my types."

I started a mental clock in my head, waiting for the poor girl to realize what Trena was doing to her.

"So you're saying Illyan's ugly then?"

"Don't put... oh." Her voice trailed off, and when it resumed there was a low growl in each word. "Dammit Trena. When did you convince Illyan to help you?"

She made a show of considering that for a few moments. "Well... about an hour after I realized how badly you need someone to rip your damned clothes off. Seriously, when I met the ape he'd gone a few months without any, and I thought that was fucking pathetic. But you've gone-"

"I don't know why I ever told you that!" Rane's copper toned skin had become almost entirely muddy red by this point.

"Athame's ass would you all just fucking shut up about your sex lives!" We all stopped walking and turned to stare at our escort. She'd stopped in the middle of the walkway, and had one hand's fingers resting on her forehead in a very Asari gesture indicating just how little patience she had left. Her companion looked slightly nauseated, probably an indication that her imagination had gotten a bit ahead of Trena's teasing. "I will answer any of your fucking questions if you would just stop."

Trena merely scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Oh grow up girl. It's not like we-

"Scales." I interrupted quickly as the officer's expression had gotten closer to apoplectic. "Why don't you admire Illyan's ass for a while or something and let me talk to the annoyed I-Sec officer before she shoots you?"

"Please, she's some rich tit maiden, not like she could hit me if she tried."

Rane had to pat me on the shoulder as I exhaled heavily, fighting the urge to rub at my temples again. "Can I ask you to pretend that you didn't hear that?"

There was a low growl, and her still silent partner actually rested a hand just above her holstered weapon. "If she opens her mouth again you can find the fucking ship on your own."

Giving Trena a warning glare of my own, to which she merely rolled her eyes, I then turned back to the officer and gave her what I hoped was a polite nod. "Then let's keep moving. The sooner we find it the sooner you can get away from us."

Dark eyes flicked back to me for a long moment before she gave a very grudging nod and resumed moving, the rest of us hastening to follow. "Finding it isn't hard human, it's getting there. Your boss bought the Yare Noln."

Trena stopped abruptly, "What the fuck is a Noln doing here?"

Seeing that our escorts weren't about to stop for us, I motioned for her to keep moving. She muttered something under her breath before moving as quickly as she could, her cane striking the ground with each step. "What's a Noln?"

Her head shook slightly. "An experimental frigate class. After we met your kind, there was rush in
the Republics' military to figure out if you had any ideas worth stealing. Matriarch Lidanya was particularly interested in the fighter carriers you built out of dreadnought hulls. I don't know all the bullshit details, probably funding fights or something, but she was only able to order half a dozen frigates to prove the concept could work for the Republics fleet as well."

Illyan nodded slowly, "I remember that. Was a big deal about twenty or so years ago when they were launched, all the news pundits thought it was a waste of credits. Didn't help when she brought on a few retired humans to help advise on the project, especially with the trade concessions to the Alliance to get them."

I couldn't help but be intrigued by that. I'd always loved military history in my past life, particularly naval combat. Many hours and days had been spent reading on the great sea battles on Earth, particularly in the world wars.

"What happened then? Wait." But almost as quickly as my interest was piqued, another thought hit me. "It's a frigate? How the hell did she afford a frigate!?"

"She could afford it because it's been impounded for fifteen years and the bosses want it the hell out of here." Our escort snorted, not bothering to look back. "Thing takes up too much damned space. Plus it's been stripped of its main gun and torpedo racks, and I don't think anyone even knows if the laser batteries still work."

My cheek twitched slightly at the news. I'd expected her to have bought a large freighter or something, one that we could quickly convert to hold all of the shuttles we were going to need. That would leave us in a slow, poorly defended vessel sure, but it would serve the purpose of getting us to Korlus and back. Initial excitement or not, this was sounding a lot more like a project that I didn't know if we had the time for. And it wasn't as if a frigate would make a good cargo ship after we were done, which still left me wondering what Nyn was thinking here.

"As for how it got here" An Asari shrug followed. "After Lidanya was transferred to the Citadel's Fleet, they decommissioned all but a few and sold the rest off. The Eclipse bought two, so some Matriarch with more money than brains bought the Yare to protect her trade ships. Stupid bitch bankrupted herself doing it, and got assassinated by a few of her daughters a few months later. Damn thing ended up in legal limbo and got stuck here until they figured the paperwork out."

I grunted. "And eventually they realized how expensive it would be to fix up?"

"Pretty much. The Executor's been shopping the thing to everyone she thought might want it for five years now, explains why she sold it to you lot."

While I was still intrigued with the class's past, Rane was apparently worried about more immediate concerns. "Will it fit all of our shuttles? And what about the engines?"

I-Sec shrugged, taking the second question before Trena could speak. "They're helping keep the thing from crashing, so it'll fly. For a while, anyway."

"Ignore her." Trena growled. "And it'll fit our shuttles. They were intended to hold a squadron plus of fighters to test carrier tactics, fitting six shuttles should take us less than an hour to work out."

"Ah." Four eyes squinted slightly ahead of us as we turned a corner, moving around a badly corroded human ship. "Is that it then?"

"No. Your boss is just standing there with Vasir for fun."

There was a low growl that only subsided when I grabbed Rane's shoulder and squeezed in
warning. Her skin darkened slightly at my touch, but she ducked her head deferentially and let me do the talking. "Then I would say that you've gotten us here and can safely depart."

"Whatever."

Without another word the two Asari turned on their heels and brushed past us. The silent one tried to bump into Trena as she passed, and was nearly sent flying when the shorter Asari drove her shoulder into her ribs to deflect her away.

I sighed quietly, and tried to ignore the muttered cursing as I took in our new ship.

Honestly, she wasn't much to look at.

The hull itself resembled an Asari cruiser, albeit one that had been heavily scaled downwards, more than the flying-wing style frigate that I was used to seeing on the news. It might have been two hundred meters or so in length. I couldn't really tell how wide it was from this angle, but the wing bars looked a bit short and stubby, so I didn't expect them to add all that much to the ship's mass. Most of that looked like it was concentrated in a fin that extended downwards from the circular core, and it was definitely wide enough to contain a multi-level hanger.

While the overall ship might have once been impressive, even my lightly experienced eyes could tell there was a lot of work to do.

"Ape. I thought you said she wouldn't buy a piece of crap ship." Trena muttered as we drew closer to where Captain Vasir was pointing something out on the hull to Nyn. "It's not rusting but fuck."

I winced, unable to offer a good retort there. The top half of the ship was gleaming in the sunlight because the purple paint had all been pealed away. Now that wouldn't have meant much if it didn't also reveal dozens of panels that had been yanked open to remove parts from the vessel. The nearest wing-bar in particular looked like a gouge had been yanked out of it, probably where a weapons system had once been housed.

"Cieran! Good that you all made it." Nynsi turned as she heard us approaching, waving a hand at the ship. She was dressed in her formal business attire, which made me frown slightly. That wasn't exactly what I'd expect her to be in if we were about to start looking at this hulk. "My latest purchase."

"Not exactly thrilled girl." Trena grunted. "Or is it bigger than it looks inside?"

"Actually smaller than it looks." Vasir corrected. "She was designed for a minimal crew along with her fighter wing and mechanics. Should have just enough space for your ground team plus whoever you're hiring to fly her."

Illyan might have twitched slightly. "Is the interior more intact at least?"

"So long as you don't mind the controls that were yanked out along with the torpedos and spinal gun."

"It will get us there and back along with our shuttles." Nyn cut in, her lower eyes flicking between Trena and Illyan to glare at them both in turn. "And its armor and barriers are far stronger than any civilian ship I could have purchased."

"Technically it is a civilian ship."

It was Trena's turn to wince as she glanced at the I-Sec Captain. "They stripped her down that
Vasir shrugged. "Did you expect anything better?"

"More than six point defense lasers would be nice. Please tell me that-"

"T'laria, not now. Captain Vasir, if I could?" Nynsi interrupted smoothly, "I have instructions to give before my meeting with the Board."

"The board?" I blinked at her, speaking over Trena's mutters. "When did they call?"

Her lips twitched slightly. It wasn't much, but I got the impression she was doing her best to suppress a lot of anger that she didn't want to reveal in front of the Captain. "Two hours ago. They have an interim trade agreement for me to review, provided I make myself available immediately to discuss it."

"Ah." Which definitely explained her dress and attitude. "We won't keep you then, Tarath'shan."

She gave us a polite tilt of her head that I and Rane reciprocated. "Thank you, Harath'krem. Once I have finished with that.. business, I will be meeting with several retired midcaste in Khar'shan Minor and offering them jobs as the ship's crew. While I am handling those tasks, I need an initial appraisal and estimate before she is ready to fly. Illyan, you will be inspecting the engines. T'laria, weapons. Rane, the control systems. Cieran, the hanger."

There was a long breath before she nodded again. "Once you have done so please contact me. For now she will be allowed to remain here until we can move her to the docks in the Western Reaches. Harath'krem, if I could speak with you?"

The two of us separated away from the others, who quickly surrounded Vasir to pump her for more information. Once we were a few meters away, and they were deep in conversation, Nyn slumped slightly and leaned heavily onto me.

My right arm wrapped around her shoulders on reflex as her temple came to rest against mine. "Go ahead and ask." she groaned.

"How in the hell did you afford this?" I kept my voice low. "Nyn, this is.. a freaking warship. A beat-up, stripped down wreck of a warship, but still!"

"I had to." There was a grimace. "The Hegemony would only cover forty percent of the cost if it was a combat ready vessel. And no, the High Patriarch wouldn't explain why, and yes, that worries me. All of the money we took from the gangs is gone, as is the entire reserve fund. I also have to lease out our private starport in Khar'shin Minor to I-Sec for the next thirty years. And just to pour some more of my blood into the sand, I have to provide them with a five percent cut of all trade in and out until the Hegemony pays up."

It was my turn to grimace. "And how do we pay for the repairs it obviously needs? Did the Hegemony secure a line to wire out your reserves from Khar'shan?"

"No.. the banks on Khar'shan won't transfer funds without a secure line, and that won't happen through the Terminus even if the war continues to go well. I would either have to personally go there or the Citadel would have to end the embargo." Her tone made it quite clear that neither of those was going to happen.

There was a quiet breath before she continued. "And basic repairs are covered in the purchase agreement, thank the Pillars. Without the trade agreement with the Hegemony I'll be lucky to
maintain any kind of profits for the duration. And even with it.. I don't know what we're doing with this stupid ship after this mission."

"Escorting cargo ships from here to the Hegemony. Then probably having it seized the moment we dock somewhere."

"Please Cie.. not now."

"Sorry." I sighed. "There wasn't a ship we could buy without needing the extra cash?"

"Nothing that wasn't a death-trap, or that would have taken weeks to months before it was usable." Some of her exhaustion faded beneath anger. "The only other ships we could have quickly turned around are sold by people with connections to Dantius, and she's blacklisted me for the 'insults' Xerol and I offered her. As for going off-world, that would have taken even longer."

"Safe to assume that no one would be willing to carry us into a warzone either." My hand shifted to her neck, fingers gently digging into her tense muscles.

There was a quiet groan as I massaged her, her head tipping forwards to give me more access. "Not with Sederis running the attack, and I refuse to put our lives in her hands by asking for her to carry us there and back. I'm hesitant enough that we have to use her as cover and for intelligence once we get there."

"Sensible." Turning my head I kissed her ear softly, listening to her groan as I found a particularly tight knot.

"I even tried to reach out to that asshole Massani." she admitted. "But he didn't respond. Probably on a beach somewhere enjoying my money."

Knowing Zaeed, I doubted that. It was more likely he was on a job in the Terminus, or just hunting down members of his old group for fun.

"A beach does sound nice. Maybe we should find one once we get back."

There was a breathy sound. "Still trying to get me to go on a vacation?"

I gave her a small smile that she couldn't see. "With how stressed out you are right now, I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't."

"I'll be fine Cieran."

"That implies you aren't fine right now."

A hand batted my stomach lightly before she straightened, "I'll have wine and drinks ready when you get home."

"Nyn.." I waited until she turned to look at me, her eyes narrowing slightly as mine flicked between them. "Promise me you'll try and relax when this is done with? You've been running non-stop for week now, even before all of this started."

"Is that official advice from a Harath'krem to his Tarath'shan?"

"It is." I deferentially tilted my head to the left and bowed it slightly. "If she would accept it."

Her lips twitched slightly before she leaned in a brushed them against mine. "Well. It wouldn't make sense to have a Harath'krem but ignore his advice. I will find a few days where we can.."
relax. Perhaps Nos Irrail's beaches."

"Without anyone else. No Trena or Ghai or Marn."

"Just us." she agreed. But her small smile didn't last long before it faded. "But for now, there is still work to do. I will see you tonight Cieran."

"See you tonight Nyn." I kissed the cartilage band near her lips, gave her another polite bow of my head, and then watched as she turned and strode off, her omni-tool already on and flashing with incoming messages.

Sighing, I turned back to the others and let my feet carry me the short distance. At some point Captain Vasir had apparently left as well, because only my three companions were present. Illyan was already moving towards the docking ring leading to the airlock, while Rane and Trena were leaning against the railing and staring at the ship.

"Ape." Trena grunted as I approached. "How's your girl?"

"Tired, annoyed, stressed out." My shoulder rose as my head tipped in a shrug. "Life as usual, these days. Shocking news, she didn't have much choice in picking this wreck."

"Hegemony?"

"Hegemony."

She actually spat over the railing. "She should have told them to go fuck themselves."

"Agreed."

Rane glanced at us, one set of eyes on each. "It's not that easy."

Turning, I frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

Her lips twisted before she ducked her head, quickly turning away. "It's not that easy to say no to those above you. You think I enjoy being called lowborn trash?"

My companion gave a low, dangerous growl that I fought not to echo. "Who?"

"I dealt with it." A hand waved. "And someone else will probably say it anyway. Even outside the Hegemony, caste is everything. The Hegemony is everything. We hear that every minute from the time we're born until we're exiled or die. And sometimes even after. How long did it take me to call you by your name, Cieran?"

It took me a moment to rifle through my memories of admonishing her whenever she tried to use my title when we were working together. "Four months or so.

There was a slight nod. "Picture Miss Shaaryak as me, and the High Patriarch as you. Xerol was a good man, as much as a Highborn can be one, but there was still some things he couldn't shake. Teaching her to respect those above her would have been critical to make sure she didn't cause a crisis during meetings between him and Khar'shan. And I know he had her in the conference room with him when he made his own transmissions so that she would be familiar to them when it came time for her to take over."

"Athame's azure.." Trena groaned. "You're saying he tells her to swim out to sea, she doesn't bother asking how far out?"
"She's more independent then Xerol was.. I think that's your influence Cieran." she admitted. "But I don't know how far that will stretch."

"Dammit.." My chest heaved as I took a slow breath. I was about to ask another question when I noticed that her arms were shaking slightly. "Rane? Are you all right?"

"This.." there was a quiet sound in her throat. "Was hard to talk about. Talking above my caste about Master Xerol.. I'd have been exiled or worse if I'd said something like that to a Harath'krem on Khar'shan."

Giving Trena a glance, we both stepped a bit closer to her, but didn't say anything. We just let her know that we were there and stayed nearby until she'd gathered herself. It took her a few minutes before she gave us a small nod.

"If he told her not to share information with us, I don't know if she would."

I nodded slightly. "But she did just tell me that he was the one who said they wouldn't cover a portion of the costs if it wasn't a warship."

"That's something then." she let out a whistling breath through her teeth. "I think it might.." her tone changed subtly, becoming a bit more formal. "May I offer advice, Harath'krem?"

It was a fight not to wince, but I nodded politely. "Of course Rane."

"Try and ask her for more details on all of this. There might be things she'll tell you that she wouldn't admit to Mistress Ghai."

"Or me."

A bit of her more natural safe appeared as her lips curled. "Especially you Trena."

All three of us smiled slightly at that before I turned things back to work. "So.. Vasir say anything I should know about this ship before we start working?"

Trena grimaced. "They cut it down to full civilian spec. Probably to stop any bitch who bought it from having a ready to go light frigate."

"Meaning?"

"Two laser batteries in each pylon and that's it for weapons." Her head shook irritably. "They fucking yanked the barrier nodes to get it down to civilian level, so our shields are barely better than a damned cargo ship. The armor is intact, not that it was worth much. It would probably cost half as much as she paid if we wanted to get this hulk back to factory spec."

Rane picked it up from there. "But in good news she said the hanger should be ready to accept our shuttles without much work. And the engines are supposed to still be military spec so we can outrun anything after us until we can get to FTL. She thinks we should be able to have it ready to go in our time-frame if Miss Shaaryak can put a crew together quickly enough."

"That's something then." I admitted, feeling a little more optimistic. "Rane, you know anything about the crew she might be pulling in?"

One of her hands rose to rub at her neck. "There's a few old ship captains, midcaste mostly, all retired. It could be any one of them. I don't think it would be hard to pick up a lowcaste crew, the pay would probably be better than they could get anywhere in Khar'shan Minor."
"Which would guarantee their damned loyalty." There was a annoyed sound from Trena. "Wouldn't it? If she makes it seem like she fucking cares, they'd be worshiping the ground she walks on."

A slight grimace was followed by a nod. "A highborn that actually pays attention to people of my level is rare."

"I'm hoping you aren't including me." I teased her gently, hoping she was past the awkward formality she had started to lapse into.

Her skin flushed a slightly as her weight shifted to the right, "You keep telling me not to treat you as a highborn."

Trena rolled her eyes, "He's messing with you girl. You'll get used to it if you keep getting dragged into our shit."

"Oh." If anything her blush grew a little worse, and I had to fight not to say anything as her weight shifted subtly again while her head dipped minutely. "Honestly it's more fun than trying to get my squad to work together, I don't really mind."

"Good." Trena grunted. "No offense to your girl ape, but it's good to have a Batarian around who doesn't have a stick up her ass. Marn's even worse than Shaaryak, and Chen's just an asshole."

I rolled my eyes. "Scales, you promised. And Chen's not that annoying."

"I've been laying off dammit. Bit my tongue and everything. And yes he is."

"He is a bit of a dick Cieran." Rane's lips twitched as she straightened back up, her arms crossing her chest. "And I've heard you complaining about him too."

"All right, so he's an ass sometimes. Most of the time. He's still better than Marn."

"Not hard ape." Trena snorted. "That girl can fight but fuck she's got no personality outside of her scars. All gruff deferential bullshit."

I couldn't really deny that point. I had a working relationship with Marn, but the two of us weren't exactly friends. Honestly I didn't think she had any, and that seemed to suit her just fine. "Right, well. I suppose we should actually get to work then. Rane, go on in, scales and I will be in in just a bit."

"More secret spy business?"

Trena's gem colored eyes rolled. "Apparently. And it's probably going to make us both want to leap off this fucking rail if I'm right."

"See you on the bridge then." She gave us both polite nods before pushing off and heading away.

I didn't watch her go, staring instead at the ship until Trena grunted "She's on board. So."

"So." A hand rose to slap at my face in irritation. "Fuck. Fucking fuck."

"Eloquent, ape. We'll put it on your grave."

"Don't tell me you aren't about to start cursing everyone and everything." Turning, I gave her a mild glare. "Because I'd call bullshit on that."

"Yeah, well. Fuck it then. So the Hegemony does have a hold on her cash, and her head. What
"Yeah, well. Fuck it then. So the Hegemony does have a hold on her cash, and her head. What the shit else is new." she returned the glare in equal measure. "She's a Batarian ape. Your shitty memory isn't much of an excuse with how long we've been in that fucking mansion. Athame's ass, Rane was the perfect case in point. Four months was generous, she practically worshiped the ground you walked on until last month. How in the deeps did you expect Shaaryak to be able to refuse the leader of their little empire?"

"I know." My hand rubbed up and down before I rested it on the rail and tried to order my thoughts. "Damn. I just.."

"Was hopeful for once." She reached up to pat my shoulder softly. "Picked a bad time for that one ape."

I nodded slightly, then groaned again. Reaching into my pocket I pulled out a credit chit and offered it to her. "Speaking of bad timing.. Two hundred, as agreed upon."

Blue fingers deftly removed it, "About fucking time. What gave it away? Besides the constant blushing."

"When she turned to talk to us." My head shook slightly. "All of weight went to her right side to show off that hip while her head dipped and went a bit to the left. If she'd been topless I'd bet her abs were flexing too. Very picture of a lowborn respectfully offering herself to a highborn."

There was a quiet grunt. "You spend way too much time looking at your girl if you picked that up. She was like that for what, a few seconds?"

"Until she realized she was doing it." It was a fight not to groan. "Fuck. How do I shoot her down gently?"

"See if Shaaryak wants company in bed? Don't give me that stupid look ape, it works for me and Ghai."

"I don't share. And neither does she."

"Your loss then." She slapped my shoulder. "Come on then, we've got crap to do if we're going to survive this mess. Work out your sex life later."

"You sound like that I-Sec girl."

Her fist hit my shoulder hard enough to make me curse.

"You say something ape?"

"No." I grimaced, trying to shake the feeling back into my limb. "Lead on scales."

"Fucking right I will."

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**Next up is Chapter 6: The Insertion**

**Author's Fun Fact: Timeline of the Blue Suns War – Part II**

*October 12th, 2180* – Elements of the Hegemony's Second and Fourth fleets engage Blue Sun forces in the Traverse. Several systems quickly fall as the Batarians move in ground forces to seize territory. Despite the initial blitz, Hegemony forces are unused to mass operations and are forced to waste several weeks reorganizing their logistics routes.
October 30th, 2180 – Second Battle of Omega occurs. Blue Sun fleet again attempt to force travel through the system. This time they are met by a combined Omega-Elcipse fleet which decisively defeats them. The remnants begin withdrawing into the Eagle Nebula.

November 12th, 2180 – Having removed the remaining Blue Sun holdouts in her system, Aria T’loak ceases offensive operations against the mercenary group. Her fleet maintains its watch, but her focus turns inwards to manage the power vacuum that Tarak’s death has caused.

November 17th, 2180 – The Citadel Council, at the urging of the Systems Alliance, sends an official reprimand to the High Patriarch of the Hegemony, protesting the advance into the Traverse.

November 20th, 2180 – The Batarian First fleet is redeployed to reinforce the patrols near Citadel space, while the Second and Third fleets launch their second wave. While the Second fleet manages to continue to make gains, the Third fleet is forced to withdraw after Vosque launches a counter-attack with his core battlegroup. After a week of pitched fighting, both sides are forced to pull back and regroup.

December 12th, 2180 – The Alliance begins rotating the Third Fleet under Admiral Hackett into the Traverse to protect its colonies. After destroying several pirate vessels attempting to take advantage of the wartime situation, they settle into patrols guarding the prime relays leading to the Hegemony and the Terminus.

Chapter End Notes

Currently am planning on an every Friday release cycle starting with the next chapter (so it will be out on 7/10/15). Ideally I'll have enough chapters done by then to support a Tuesday/Friday release schedule, otherwise it'll be just Fridays until I can get to that point.

So. This chapter shows off their new ship, such as it is, and reveals just what they had to give up to give it. Some more worries are added both personally and professionally, but they're still moving along in terms of getting ready to go. The next chapter will cover their trip from Illium to Korlus as well as their arrival there, so be ready for the action to start up again.

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 6: The Insertion

All in all, I could live with us being a day behind schedule. I, after all, wasn't particularly
motivated to bend over backwards to save Balak's racist ass. Unfortunately for me, and by
extension Trena, Nynsi more than had the motivation that we both lacked. Even worse, the delays
in selecting the crew for our new ship, plus repairing the sections that had been damaged when
combat systems had been ripped out, had left her on the edge over the last four days.

"Are you sure you don't want to get some sleep?" She and I were lingering in what had once been
the pilot's ready room, waiting for everyone else to arrive. One of her construction crews had been
through, re-arranging the chairs and holographic displays to convert it into something more similar
to the mansion's conference room. This was supposed to be the first on our en-route planning
stages, taking place as the ship made its short FTL hop from Illium to the system's relay.

"Cieran, I'm fine." Nynsi tried to wave off my concern, "We have to go through the intelligence as
quickly as we can, there's only three days until we arrive."

"Three days in which you should be sleeping." I retorted. "Nyn, your eyes are sunken, you're
slouching, and your hands are shaking from the stims you don't think I noticed."

Her lips thinned as she tightened her grip on her tablet. "Cieran-"

"No, Tarath'shan. At the very least, once this meeting is over you get to our cabin."

I had expected her to accept that minor compromise, but instead she merely locked me down with
a four eyed glare.

"Nyn, you just about bit Rane's head off when she asked if you wanted her to setup the unit's
comm frequencies. And yesterday Ghai and I had to pull you and scales apart before you tried to
kill each other." My head shook slightly. "I'm seriously starting to worry about you here."

For a few moments her expression shifted into one I wasn't familiar with, but was quickly covered
by weary acceptance. "All right. Will you be able to relay our decisions to the Captain?"

"I can." Or I could fost the job off onto Marn. Or Chen. Both were midcaste and warriors, exiled
or not. "Thanks Nyn."

Her head tilted slightly, and I replied politely in kind. When she spoke again, there was a bit of gentle teasing in the exhausted tone that made me smile. "Will you allow me to leave our bed at any time in the next few days?"

"It isn't as if I could stop you, but I can think of a few things that might make you want to stay there."

Her lips quivered, but anything she was going to say in reply was cut-off when the hatchway opened to reveal Chen.

"Boss. Kean." he gave us the barest of nods to go with his left-leaning head tilt. "The others are on their way."

"Thank you, Chen." Nyn gestured towards the table and chairs. "We will begin once the other squad leaders and our.. guest, arrive."

Nyn had managed to catch Sederis in one of her more stable moments and make the deal that would, maybe, let us pull this off. The Eclipse's leader had been largely apathetic to our mission until Nyn reminded her that the Suns were likely to be heavily invested in capturing Balak. The net result of that, we hoped, would be that there would be a weak zone near his crash site where the Suns would be more worried about corralling him than fending off an invasion. That was enough to get her to agree to let us come along, but if we actually wanted information and to be able hide behind the Eclipse when shit went bad we had to do more.

The more was our guest and her team, the price we'd had to pay Sederis for the chance to live through this mess.

Personally I didn't mind all that much, even if I had had to bite my tongue to not burst out laughing at the memories of a certain biotic god. After all, the last thing I needed was for her to think I was making fun of her somehow.

As if summoned, Captain Wasea arrived alongside Trena just a few moments later.

I did have to admit that the Eclipse captain was fairly striking in person, and I honestly wasn't sure why more Asari didn't go with the bright red tattoos. She was of around average height, which put Trena's head around her shoulders. The armor was just like she'd worn in game, a dark navy at odds with her organizations usual yellow.

"..a day late. Not that I'm complaining."

"Me either." Trena shook her head minutely. "Keeps us out of the fucking first wave, figure that doubles our chances of living."

"At least." Wasea sat primly into the chair at the far end of the table from where Nyn and I were seated. "Shaaryak. Not a bad ship you have here. Captain's a bit of a tit, but you can't have everything I suppose."

"Captain Thassian is a professional, and I have no complaints over his behavior." Which was a bit of a blatant lie, but such things weren't for outsiders to hear. "Has your squad settled into their quarters without any problems?"

An Asari shrugged her reply. "Some of them complained like maidens at having to share quarters, but nothing that smacking their heads around didn't cure. They've spent too long living it up on that filthy planet, it's about time they remembered how to act like commandos."
"Not like they have a choice." Chen chuckled dryly, collapsing into his own seat. "Everyone on the ground teams is doubled up. If we had to take anyone else on I don't know if old Thassian would have even gotten this hulk off that damned planet."

Marn and Rane drifted in as he spoke, giving Nyn deferential tilts of their heads. Rane, at a nod from me, closed the door behind her before taking her own place at the table.

My Tarath'shan waited until she'd seated herself before nodding firmly. "Now that we are all here, if you could Captain?"

Wasea gave a soft grunt. "Right. The assault steps off in two days, which means we're running behind. Not that that actually matters, it isn't as if we're critical to the boss's plan. If they manage to stay relatively close to the timetable, the fleet should have suppressed the ground batteries and have established at least three landing zones by the time we arrive."

I waved a hand slightly in her direction. "Since that's not going to happen, what do you think we'll find when we get there?"

She gave a small Asari shrug. "Honestly human, I have no idea. Everything I've got says we have more than enough ships to take out what they have left. But for taking out their guns... the planet is a scrapheap with a million and one places to hide surface to space guns."

"So we could get blasted out of the sky if we bring this thing in too close." Marn shook her head slightly. "Perhaps we should deploy the shuttles from further out."

"I'd imagine they'd consider our cruisers and capital ships more pressing targets." Wasea replied drily. "At the very least the primary zone should have the first wave established. Since that's all you lot care about, should be enough."

The scarred Batarian woman twitched slightly at the jab. "What about the landing areas that Kean identified?"

"You're omni-tools have three of them labeled as our primary, secondary, and tertiary landing zones. I'll be staying with you lot until you find your precious Commander. After that you'll make your own way back, while me and my girls go hunting for Blue Sun leaders." She gave an almost vulpine grin at the last.

Chen scowled. "So we're just a way for you to get behind enemy lines?"

Wasea shrugged, her tone utterly unapologetic. "Your boss signed up to be used however Sederis wanted. If you want I'm sure she could find a front-line unit to send you to."

I gave Chen a glare, wordlessly imploring him to shut the fuck up. Given that Trena and Nyn were doing likewise, he flinched back into his chair a bit and tilted his head to the left in submission.

"Do you have any intel on the exact areas we're going into?"

"Nothing more than your own sources." She glanced at me, "The jamming cut out our spies too human, I'll be able to give you an update once we're in system."

"Which means we'll have to adjust when we're prepping to fucking drop." Trena groused.

"Just like old times T'laria." I started slightly at Wasea's words, glancing at Trena who was pointedly staring at nothing in particular. "Anyway Shaaryak, you'll have full access to my team's
"As agreed upon." Nyn nodded politely. "Will you be joining us at meal times?"

"Why not." The Eclipse Captain rose from her chair, "Just tell that decrepit creature you call a Captain to behave itself. Along with the rest of your crew."

My Tarath'shan bristled, but could only nod. As much of an insult as it was for the Asari to remind her just who was actually in charge of the ship as far as Sederis was concerned was, it was also the truth. If Wasea didn't like how Thassian or anyone else on board treated her people, she could all but guarantee that we failed to reach Balak. And quite probably failed in far more important matters, such as surviving.

The last comment more or less set the tone for the next three days.

We didn't kowtow to the Eclipse commando team, Nynsi would never had stood for it, but we didn't exactly offer them any insults either. Instead orders to quietly ignore them whenever possible were circulated amongst both the ship's new crew and our ground team. The end result was that I hardly saw Wasea except at meal times, where she largely stuck close to Trena and Ghai.

The latter didn't particularly seem to enjoy her company, but my old friend was apparently able to keep the peace between everyone. Which was something that astounded me entirely, but I'd long ago resolved not to pry into Trena's personal history. Whatever had happened that allowed her to know an Eclipse commando leader was something that I was probably happier not knowing, and as she seemed happier not telling me about it, it worked out for the both of us.

What bothered me more was that Nyn, while she was at least sleeping proper hours again, was still maintaining an overly full workload. Given that we didn't have any new data to work into our plans as of yet, most of it was related to the finances of the ship we were currently riding in. Anything I'd done to lower her stress levels promptly was tossed aside as she resumed attempting to work out just how much of her yearly income was going to be disrupted, and just what we could do with this to make up for that. The few times I'd tried to follow Rane's advice and ask about the details of her meeting with the High Patriarch, she'd pushed my concerns aside and assured me that there wasn't anything more to say.

Given her preoccupation, and with Trena keeping Wasea occupied, I was more or less on my own. Illyan, my next option to hang around with and assist, was acting as the ship's engineer and thus spent most of her time fretting over the ship's core and drive systems. And while I was a respectable engineer when it came to things like guns and personal armor, that was a far cry from the massive systems that powered a warship. I'd have been more of a hindrance and a help and I knew it.

With all of that being said, I ended up spending most of my time with Rane and Chen.

The former was nervous as hell, something made worse by the Captain's memorandum on smoking. Instead she'd taken to chewing on her pipe nervously, scratching at the metal and wood with her teeth. Chen was more relaxed, and seemed to take great delight in teasing her or me whenever he could come up with a new way of doing so. Still, things could have been a lot worse. With Rane's help I was able to make a few modest improvements to my armor's computer systems, and Chen coerced a a few of his team into double-checking the rigging I'd set up to haul my extra equipment. I'm sure that I didn't do the former's crush on me any favors by spending so much time around her and her team, but she seemed far more comfortable around me than usual. Either she was putting it aside, or didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of Chen or their teams.
Still, the tension on board grew worse as we hit one relay after another, then entered the short FTL cruise that would take us to our target. It came to a head when the general alarm began to blare as we approached the outer system, calling the senior staff to the bridge.

"Have we heard anything at all?" Rane and I had been in the hanger, running a last check on my armor, when the call came out. Our armored boots pounded on the metal stairs as we hauled ourselves upwards. "I mean."

"Nothing since we departed." I shrugged as we exited into the hall that led to the ship's nerve center. "If we did neither Nyn nor Wasea told me about it."

"And here I thought that Harath'krem were supposed to know everything."

My eyes rolled. "I know that you're a smart-ass when you remember I'm not a highborn."

Her cheeks flushed slightly. "I blame T'laria."

"Sounds good." A fist rose and punched the control console, leading us into the packed bridge. "Hear that scales? All your fault."

Terna glanced up from where she and Ghai were going over a tablet's contents. "Probably. Was booze involved?"

"Yes." Rane grimaced, probably at a memory. "I'm never drinking fusionairre's with you again."

Meanwhile, Nyn had spotted me from where she was standing over the Captain's shoulder. Her lower eyes rolled at our banter, "Cieran, please."

I held my hands up in surrender, and quickly grabbed Rane's arm to pull her aside before Illyan trampled her as she raced onto the bridge before almost sprinting for the engineer's station.

The bridge we'd entered was more like something I'd have expected to see on a sea-going warship back home than the Normandy's hybrid human/turian setup. Rectangular in shape, it was essentially an armored box mounted directly below the ship's oval drive core, buried in the dead center of the downward sloping 'fin'. Ostensibly the safest place on the ship, that didn't really mean much as far as I was concerned. The armor plating was thick for a ship her size, but Illyan and I had crunched the numbers on our shields and not liked the results. Still, at least it lacked the structural weakness of windows.

As for the layout, console stations dotted the walls for secondary systems and were manned by lowborn Batarans who couldn't believe their luck at being picked for the ship's crew. A mixture of midcaste and Asari manned the more critical seats in the bridge's interior, with the withered form of Captain Thassian commanding everything from his centrally located chair.

Said Captain gave me a suppressed glare, which grew worse when I pointedly tilted my head a bit to the right. His rheumy eyes quickly slid back to his readouts, pretending that he hadn't been staring at me so that he wouldn't have to offer me a highborn's respect in turn.

Rane's throat vibrated in a low growl, having apparently seen it as well, but let me guide her to the rear of the room where Trena was setting up court around a small projector. Besides Trena and Ghai, Wasea and Marn were also present, and Nyn quickly excused herself from the Captain's side to join us.

"Marn, Rane'li." She spoke as she approached, "Please get your squads prepared for our arrival, T'laria will fill you in on the details. As much as I would like for this to be a full conference, we
don't have the time or the room. If you encounter Chen on your way, inform him as well."

Marn's scarred visage twitched slightly, but she bowed her head to the left. Rane quickly followed
suit, and the pair of women turned to leave as quickly as they'd come.

Our small section of the bridge did feel a lot less crowded without them, and I shifted to stand
closer to Nynsi as Wasea linked her omni-tool the ship's systems.

"Right. At Shaaryak's request we dropped out of FTL just outside of the system's debris cloud and
did a data pull of the network." The Eclipse captain flicked a few buttons, quickly bringing up a
small copy of the Imir system. "If any of you took my or the human's bets that things weren't
going to plan, you're going to have to pay up."

My Tarath'shan grimaced. "How bad is it?"

"Could be worse." She admitted, her dark face pulling her red markings tighter. "The boss had
Gormack smash the picket fleet near the relay and take the refueling stations over Quodis. She and
T'Ravt made their micro-jump to Korlus from there and began suppressing the ground batteries,
that's when the Suns made their move. They hit Gormack and the fueling stations with everything
they had left. Probably had their ships hiding just outside the system."

I shook my head slightly as the story continued. "They had to pull back and defend the stations,
but it cost us most of that salarian's fleet to do it. Better yet, half his ground forces were still on his
ships when they were blasted, including most of his heavier gear."

"Is there any fucking good news?" Trena glowered at the image as it updated, showing the fleets
current locations. Yellow Eclipse icons dominated Korlus's lower orbit, mixed in with purple that
probably showed T'Ravt's smaller fleet. But apart from a green battlecruiser and its escorts
lingering near Quodis, there didn't seem to be much left of the salarian warlord's forces.

"There aren't any Suns ships left, and most of the planet's security fleet fled rather than fight. The
first wave hit the ground six hours ago," Another few finger flicks zoomed us to Korlus proper.
Flashes of orange on the northernmost continent showed where they'd landed, and cross marks
indicated destroyed ground-to-space gun platforms. "And are making good time. First indications
seem to be that the Suns are pulling back to fight in the cities, but the boss is playing it careful. She
hates being tricked twice in one fight."

Which at least meant Sederis was relatively on an even keel so far. Though how long that would
last, I had no idea.

I leaned in slightly, reaching up to brush a hand over our own target zones. "Any news on
Balak?"

"No." she scowled. "Jamming towers are still blocking any transmissions in that zone, and there
hasn't been any success in hacking their networks."

Nyn nodded tightly. "Are there any such facilities near our proposed landing sites?"

"None near the primary, but there should be one within an hour's distance from the secondary." There
was a pause she examined the map in better detail. "And one of our battalions is cresting
over top of a Blue Sun patrol in that area as we speak, so it should be secure to land there."

Trena caught on to what Nyn was thinking quickly. "Then we'll prep to land at the secondary and
take that fucking tower out. Once that's done we can get the Hegemony survivors, if there are any
left, on the comms and see what in the deeps is going on."
Wasea glanced between the two of them. "And if you can't?"

"We attack the nearest Sun outpost and go through their records, assuming that we can't access the ones in the tower. If the Commander is captured, and rescuing him is practicable, we will do so." I tried not to grimace. That was close to what we'd had planned, but I didn't exactly like that we'd be attacking two Blue Sun outposts instead of one. But Nyn had given Patriarch Balak her word, so I supposed we did have to at least make an effort to see if his grandson and heir was still alive. "Otherwise we will withdraw and return to Illium. Is that acceptable?"

An Asari shrug to the right offered slight insult to all of the Batarians present, and I was starting to think that Wasea was doing it on purpose. "Why not."

"All right then. T'laria, Cieran. You should have access to the Eclipse's maps of the area surrounding our target zone. Work out the fastest and safest method from that area to the jamming tower." She blew out a slow breath. "We will be making a low orbit pass before the ship pulls back to a synchronous position above the continent."

"I won't be able to coordinate through the damned jamming." Trena glared at the image. "I could do so from the shuttles."

"The shuttles will be returning to the ship. Ghai will have operational control on the ground until the jammer is taken out and you can assume command." All of her eyes flicked to glare at Trena, and her voice lowered in warning. "And don't even think of stowing away."

Ghai had to pat her lover on the back gently as her jaw clenched viciously.

"Captain Thassian? How long do we have?"

"We're preparing to revert from FTL, Mistress Shaaryak." he croaked out, offering her a low bow of his head as he glanced back at us. "From there it will be forty minutes until we reach deployment positioning."

"Then we had best be going." I stepped back as she pushed off from the table. "Please keep me alerted to any developments on our approach."

"Of course ma'am."

After a few more details were covered, most about which Eclipse commandos would be in which shuttle, Wasea and Trena went on ahead, leaving Nyn with Ghai and I to follow at a more sedate pace.

Once the bulkhead door had closed behind us, my Tarath'shan let out a quiet sigh and seemed to deflate slightly. "We aren't ready for this, are we?"

Ghai, lacking tact as she always did, agreed in her rasp of a voice. "No."

I gave her a mild glare before reaching a hand up to rub Nyn's shoulder. "We'll be fine as long we avoid the main brawl."

"If." The taciturn Asari shrugged, utterly unperturbed as my glare grew more severe.

"If." Nynsi sighed again, a moment of vulnerability that faded as she quickly composed herself. It took a few moments, but when she spoke again it was in her normal, commanding tones. "We'll manage, regardless of what Wasea might want. We will accomplish our mission and then return home as quickly as possible."
"I can get behind that." She gave me a small grin as we turned and started down the stairwell, Ghai accelerating a bit to get ahead of us in the narrow space. "You sure you want to ride down with Marn?"

Warm lips brushed my cheek as an arm wrapped around my waist so she could keep her balance. "You were the one who pointed out that it would not be proper if Ghai and I were on the same shuttle and it was hit."

"I'm not Ghai."

"For which I'm thankful, no offense." The Asari shrugged laconically. "But you are the third in command after myself and her right now."

My cheek twitched slightly as my lips curled in disapproval.

"Oh stop that." Another gentle kiss. "Did you really think that I would give Marn that post? As capable as she is, neither Chen nor Rane'li would follow her willingly and you know it. I know you aren't comfortable in the role, but without T'laria on the ground."

"I get it." And very much hoped that it never came up. I'd done my damnedest to avoid getting responsibility over people's lives, and I very much had hoped that would continue indefinitely. But as she'd said.. I was stuck being the only real person who could take the last spot in our command group with Trena stuck on the ship. Not that I'd actually end up in command of anyone, not unless we had to split up in such a way that Ghai and Nyn both had to stay together.

Or you know, if either of them was killed.

Firmly shoving that thought aside, I turned and gave Nyn a soft kiss of my own as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

She tightened her arm, keeping me from following Ghain into the hive of activity that was the hanger.

"I would consider it extremely rude if you do not survive." Her dark eyes all found my own pair. "Or if you become so injured that I am forced to pry you out of that metal suit."

Sliding my hands around her armored back, I pulled her close until our chests touched. "As if I would insult my Tarath'shan so deliberately."

There was a pleased sound in her throat before a hand grabbed my neck and yanked me into a kiss. Someone whistled and there were a few catcalls, indicating that Ghai hadn't bothered sealing the door behind her. Jerking my left hand free I flipped them all off, holding Nyn close as I enjoyed the movements of her mouth against mine. The calls only grew louder as it went on, and eventually we had to break to breath properly.

My bottom lip tugged as she gave it a gentle nip before releasing me, her teal skin a bit darker as she let out a long breath. "I will hold you to that, Harath'krem. I will see you on the ground."

"See you on the ground love." I let her go reluctantly, the pair of us entering the hanger to more smiles and snickers.

"I'm sure we could pull the damned ship over for a bit." Trena called from where she was standing with Illyan and Ghai. "If you two need some more time."

"Says the woman with a hand on Ghai's ass." I shot back, earning a few more chuckles as people realized just where her hands were.
Ghai flushed a bit, but Trena just grinned before pulling the taller woman down for a kiss of their own. Nyn just rolled her eyes as she headed their way, while I peeled off to where my armor loomed in its corner. A lone Asari was waiting beside it, jumping to her feet as I approached."
"Master Kean, I've got it on standby mode, just like you asked." Erana practically babbled, her young eyes wide. "Um, is there ah, anything else.."
"Your sister will be fine." I reassured her, "And that's everything. You can go talk with her."
"Thank you sir!" she squeaked before ducking around me, almost running to where Illyan was pacing around her shuttle in inspection.
Rolling my eyes and suppressing a smile, I brought my omni-tool up and opened the secure line to the exoskeleton. There was a long hiss from the hydraulics as they pushed the torso armor outwards, a loud clank announcing when the system locked it open.
Giving the painted form of a charging chevalier a fond pat, I planted a foot onto the left knee before hauling myself up onto the shoulders. A half a minute later I had wiggled myself inside, listening as the suit began to seal itself around me.
"Let's see.." I muttered to myself as my fingers slid into the waldo units that controlled the metal fingers. "Engines on standby, good girl Erana. Sensors on.. Barrier power flow is steady.. everything green for once."
Tilting my head to the left, I pushed my chin out to activate the exoskeleton's external coms. "Rane, how's the team?"
Her voice echoed from the speakers behind my head. "We're loaded and ready to go, sending Xan over now."
I glanced up from my HUD in time to see the lowborn warrior finish jogging over, holding up one of her hands as she approached.
"You're clear, Harath'krem."
"Thanks Xan. Go for release."
Her omni-tool flickered to life, armored fingers wiggling for a few moments before my armor shuddered. Deep thunks reached me event through the plating as the clamps holding the suit in place retracted, leaving me free to move.
Taking a full step forwards, I grunted in acceptance at how the legs felt. The left side had a tendency to be tight, no matter how many times Illyan and I spent on the damn motors and artificial muscles. But for now it was loose and seemed to be all right, I could only hope that it stayed that way.
Turning a bit to the left, I reached out and grabbed my main weapon from its rack. The heavy, dual barreled canon had come a long way from our first efforts at converting it into something I could use. An additional brace for my left hand made it easier to aim, and between me, Rane, and Illyan we'd come up with a much improved targeting and burst control system that had massively improved my aim. It still had to be linked up to a cooling feed running down my right arm, but if anything happened to that I still had my old Visage compacted on my back as a reserve.
Once I had the weapon secured in both hands, Xan made a show of twisting her head both ways to make sure there wasn't anyone in my way before waving me to follow.
"All hands, this is the Captain." Thassians' croaky voice echoed as we moved. "Approaching launch point. Hanger, prepare to release shuttlecraft. Engines, prepare for full acceleration."

Trena came on, practically speaking over his last words. "This is ground control. Squad leaders sound the fuck off."

I snorted as Xan heaved herself into our shuttle, quickly scrambling to one side as I carefully brought a foot up and began to haul my massive weight in.

"This is Shaaryak." Nyn spoke first. "First Squad is secured and ready to launch."

Our pilot easily kept the ship level I entered, not letting it wobble more than slightly.

"Marn. Squad two is on our shuttles."

"Chen. Let's go kill some mercs for fun and profit." There was a beat. "And rescuing some highborn commander I suppose."

There was a hissing sigh that I recognized as Nyn's, but a few titters and good natured shoulder hitting from the soldiers around me made me smile a bit.

"Rane." Our own squad leader had shifted to stand at my right, fiddling with the coolant line from my weapon. "We and the Harath'krem are on board and ready to deploy."

"Captain Wasea. My team is prepared to launch."

"Captain Thassian, are we cleared to launch?"

"Your window is in twenty seconds, Mistress Shaaryak. May the Pillars support you."

I blew out a long breath, half closing my eyes as I felt the shuttle begin to shudder and shift as it was released from its docking clamps. A few moments later I barely felt the acceleration as our shuttle shot out of the hanger, plunging down into the atmosphere of Korlus.

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Next up is Chapter 7: The Allies

Author's Fun Fact: Noln class frigate

The Asari built Noln class frigates were a result of rushed decisions, heated political arguments, and compromises that satisfied no one.

After observing how effective the human carriers were in the second battle of Shanxi, Matriarch Lidanya authorized several programs designed to develop similar such ships for the Republics' fleet. Initial plans were for several old cruisers to be heavily modified for the role, later expanded to converting one of the fleet's older dreadnoughts after human advisers were brought in. Their blue-water experience with carriers, namely knowing that bigger was better, quickly convinced the Matriarch to select the largest hull she could spare.

Predictably, political resistance that was already strong increased massively when the change was proposed. Nearly two years of deals and counter-deals eventually resulted in seven frigates being selected for conversion. They would serve as technological testers and training ships until funding could be secured for a cruiser sized vessel.

Obsolete almost upon completion, the seven ships easily demonstrated what Lidanya already
knew: frigates were simply too small to make effective carriers. These problems were made worse by the ship's small size, barely large enough to be called frigates rather than corvettes.

As soon as she was able to force through a construction plan for five purpose-built cruiser-carriers, the Nolns were largely retired. Those outside of the Republic's control were quickly modified to fix their various problems, with the new owners either reducing their armament to make them dedicated carriers, or removing their hangers entirely to make them full combat ships. In both cases they have performed far more effectively than as they were originally built.

Chapter End Notes

So. Condensed the trip down a bit, since I doubt that people wanted to read about people just repairing a ship and then sitting around for several chapters. Here we meet the Eclipse Captain who's along for the ride, and the initial steps are taken to landing on planet. Their plan is still very rough at this point.. mostly thanks to the Suns being competent enough to not let much information get off planet about their defenses and positions. Of course, now that the Eclipse is landing that's going to change but probably not as fast as our characters would like. Also glad that everyone liked Rane's bit.

The next chapter will see the actual fighting start as they make their way to their first objective, and have to deal with Korlus's unique topography. It will be posted Tuesday, 7/14.

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 7: The Allies

The shuttle ride down from the *Yare Noln* to the surface of Korlus ranked as one of the worst experiences of my life.

Here we were, flying down into a war-zone, and my life was in the hands of a pilot I'd never met. Even better, Nyn was in a different shuttle, depriving me of her presence. Even better than that, there weren't any windows for me to try and see what was going on.

Which basically left me sitting in the center of the shuttle, cocooned in my armored hulk, wondering if the next second or so was when someone on the ground would decided that our shuttle needed to get blasted apart.

Around us the shuttle shivered and rattled slightly as it roared down through the atmosphere, but things didn't get really bad until the entire ship bucked around us. My own eezo core hummed as it swiftly adjusted, helping maintain my balance before I could topple into any of the squad seated around me. They weren't so lucky, bouncing off their restraints as they swore and gripped their straps tighter.

"Scales?" I flicked my private line to her open. "What the fuck was that?"

"*Sederis's flagship just shredded a hidden surface battery.*" there was a dark chuckle. "*Even her broadside guns were enough to turn that fucking thing into glass. One less piece of crap for us to worry about.*"

"How close was it?"

"*Be glad you're not landing closer to the damned city.*"

"Great..." Shaking my head, I brought my external mics on to relay what I'd heard to Rane and her people.

"At least they aren't shooting at us." Her helmet shook slightly, fingers loosing their grip on her restraints as she fought to appear relaxed and calm.

"Yeah."

There were a few more shudders and shakes as the Eclipse fleet sent a few more shots roaring down to smash Blue Sun positions, but thankfully their capital ships held back after that one blast. Although that was probably because they'd already destroyed everything their heavy guns were needed for, rather than any kind of concern for the ships and shuttles hauling troops down.

"How long till we're down?" I called out, hoping my speakers carried the sound to the pilot.
A gruff, male Batarian answered a moment later. "We're at forty thousand feet and dropping, Harath'krem. We'll be skimming the wreckage in a few minutes, shouldn't be more than four to clear the Eclipse beachhead and reach the target."

Well at least he was more polite than Thassian. "Thanks. Anything we need to worry about?"

"There's three Eclipse frigates parked overhead." A grim chuckle echoed in the cabin. "Having a field day acting as flying artillery batteries. I'd say the Suns are more worried about them than us."

"Good." I cracked my neck as best I could, resisting the urge to flex my fingers to try and relax my tense muscles. "Rane, I'm first off. File the team out behind me and find cover. If you can't find any, use me, that's what this armor's for."

"Everyone hear that?" Rane's helmet swiveled to take in her five squad members.

"Yes ma'am." They chorused roughly.

She took over the briefing from there, doing a reasonable job of asserting herself as a squad leader. "We've all gone over the details on the different landing zones, and you all know that our target is zone two. After the shuttle is airborne be prepared to move north. Once we've grouped up with the other squads we'll be double timing it to the target."

There was a brief pause as she took a long breath, then resumed. "Our job is to support the Harath'krem. We've all trained in working with him over the last few months for a reason. Xan, you're our sharpshooter. As soon as he hits someone I want a round through their visors."

"Ma'am." Xan hefted her scoped rifle up a bit. "Won't be a problem."

I didn't really doubt that. She wasn't as ludicrously good of a shot as Nyn was, but she wasn't all that much worse than Chen. If I battered someone's shields away she'd be more than capable of finishing them off, which left me free to rapidly switch targets without having to spare the extra shot or two it would take to do it myself. We'd done a good bit of training in that way, but she still wasn't quite up to Chen's ability to rapidly communicate with me on who to target when.

Which is why Rane's entire team would also be 'escorting' me.

"Good. The rest of you cover his flanks. Call out if you need tech mines and he or I will support you. And watch."

The pilot cut her off before she could continue. "Passing over the main Eclipse landing site. Sixty seconds till we hit ours."

"-your backs." she continued as though he hadn't said anything. "Trust me, you don't want to get shot there. Maneth?"

To my right, the smallest woman in the unit bowed her head and brought her fingers up in an intricate pattern meant to represent the five pillars rising from the desert sands. "Pillar of strength, empower our arms. Pillar of heart, let us leave no one behind. Pillar of unity, let no one feel fear so long as one of us does not. Pillar of knowledge, grant us the wisdom to choose our paths well. Pillar of kin, let our ancestors take pride in our actions this day."

A quiet, collective sigh went almost unheard over the engines, but Rane gave her a nod of thanks. "Everyone up, hold tight to the restraints."

"Any contacts?" I called as the shuttle began to bank, probably on its final approach.
"Landing zone is clear, Harath'krem. Opening right side in ten."

Careful not to hit any of the troops standing up and hanging on to the straps dangling from the ceiling, I turned to face the appropriate door.

I'd barely finished moving when there was a long hiss, the sliding wall pulling away to give us our first view of Korlus.

"What a shithole." I muttered, my head shaking slightly.

Rusting metal stretched as far as my eyes could see, highlighted by eerily green tinged lightning as a storm raged somewhere to the north. Some of the nearer hulks were sort-of recognizable as parts of ships, but most were so deteriorated that I could only guess at what they'd once been. I could barely even imagine the actual fighting taking place to the southwest, it had to be fucking hell to fight through that crap.

When I stepped off of the shuttle my flat metal feet sank a good few inches into soil that proved to be mud tinged with colors that were decidedly unnatural.

"Keep your air contained." I advised, grimacing as I began to stomp my way clear of the ship.

"Don't worry about that. Calling it a shithole is being kind, Cieran." Rane muttered just loudly enough to transmit before raising her voice. "Everyone fan out and watch the wreckage line!"

A few disgusted sounds came from her team as they likewise sank into the muck, but they kept their composure and guns up as they filled into a semi-circle around me.

"All teams down." Nyn's heavily armored form leaped down from her own shuttle, surrounded by Ghai and the other Asari. "Shuttles, you're clear to depart."

"Good luck boss." Illyan's strong voice echoed before her shuttle, and the others, titled their noses upwards and began their long climb back to the ship. It took a few moments before the whine of their engines was far enough out that we could all hear ourselves think again.

"Marn, your team is on point, Captain Wasea, if you could accompany her. Cieran, take Rane on their left side, Chen on the right. Ghai's team will be our reserve and rearguard." There was a slow hiss as she pulled a foot free, struggling a bit to get moving. "Captain, how far is the target?"

The Eclipse commando rose an arm to point at something in the distance, "That tower is our target, if this is the right clearing anyway. Shouldn't take long to run into scouts checking out why six shuttles showed if they aren't incompetent. One moment." She turned to the yellow clad Asari around her. They all must have had a private comline because they all flinched away from their boss before hastily saluting. "Right then. Let's get out of this crap."

Nyn's voice was dry. "I quite agree."

Heaving my gun up to free my left hand, I twitched my fingers in the right order to shift my radio frequency to Rane's. "See that opening?"

"Dead ahead, thirty meters?"

"Yup." I was thankful for the whirring motors and the rumbling engine on my back, it made it a hell of a lot easier to move. The batarian women around me weren't as lucky, and it took us a good ten minutes to cross that distance. Needless to say, there was a whole lot of swearing filling the channel the entire way.
The going got a little easier once we were exit the football field sized clearing. Not that the ground got any better, it didn't, but because there was enough wreckage sunken into the mud to solidify it a bit. Unfortunately, the second game had apparently gotten one thing right: it was a pain in the ass to go in the direction you actually wanted to go.

As hard as we tried to go northwest towards our target, most of the ships in this region seemed to have hit the ground in an east-west line. Worse, in some areas fallen bulkheads or pieces of massive ships left us with barely enough room to move in force, making seeing what was ahead of us virtually impossible. We ended up separating by squad occasionally to try and move faster, which left Nyn edgy.

Ghai and Wasea were sure that we need to move fast to overrun our target, even if that meant being a bit more vulnerable. Nyn disagreed, but given that she'd put Ghai in overall ground command she couldn't easily overrule her. All in all, it left me a bit glad to be off with Rane rather than trying to keep the peace between the three of them when we split apart to make better time through the wreckage of what had once been a Turian cruiser.

Of course, any good feelings I had vanished when I turned a corner and ran smack into a Blue Sun patrol.

"Contact!" The lead Sun and I both shouted at more or less the same time, and we both opened fire within seconds of each other.

His assault rifle sent sparks flying from my barriers and made my flinch when some splayed up over my head.

My cannon blew his apart in a pair of shots, and then ripped his chest apart in a mess of blood and viscera with the third and fourth ones.

"Armor! Power armor!" Someone screeched as his body toppled over, another five mercs becoming visible as they promptly started to scramble into cover. "Send for heavies!"

"Rane." I fought to keep my voice lower than my screeching opponents. "I'm moving up, cover me."

The lowborn squad leader had ducked behind me when the shooting had started, while her own people had fallen into the bits of cover offered by a freighter that had nearly disintegrated on hitting the ground. But she hefted her rifle up and nodded towards my rear camera.

"We're advancing! Xan, hang back and cover us. Everyone else up!"

The Suns apparently hadn't thought that we'd advance, which was rather stupid of them really.

A Batarian was the nearest, stumbling to his feet as he belatedly realized that I was already on top of him. I didn't bother shooting him, instead batting him hard into the wall with my gun. He let out a pain filled cry before Rane deftly executed him with a quick burst to his throat. The next two died nearly as quickly, one to my gun, the other to Xan putting a triple-shot burst through her visor. Which just left a single pair, who tried to make a run for it.

"Drop them!" Rane snapped, feeling bold enough to move around and past me as her people likewise ran up to form an impromptu firing line. The mercs made it about halfway down the artificial canyon they'd come through before tumbling to the ground as shards of metal tore into their bodies.

I had to blow out a slow breath as my heart hammered. It had been a while since I'd been in an actual fight, short as it was. Training, even with Aethtya, just didn't have the same adrenaline
inducing effects as the real thing.

"Damn." Rane frantically waved at her people to get back into cover from where she'd knelt behind a crooked metal plate. "When I say move up I don't mean move into a damned line! Stay in cover, by the Pillars you should all know that!

There were a few muttered, almost sheepish apologies as they quickly found their own places, but at least they were all keeping their weapons up and aimed downrange.

Once they'd gotten setup she hefted her gun up to her shoulder and jogged back to me, using my armored form as cover before pitching her voice low. "Cieran, can you raise the other teams?"

My eyes flicked to my comms readout. "Nothing but static."

There was a seething sigh as she forced down more cursing. "All right. Safe to assume they know we're here. We need to link up with the other squads, they should already be making their way through this crap."

"Agreed." Double-checking that my coolant line was still stable, I hefted my weapon up. "Shouldn't be that far to the tower, was getting close before we hit this damned wreck."

"You mind staying in the lead?"

Shoulders shrugged against my restraints, "That's what I'm here for, isn't it?"

"I thought it was to provide amusing commentary."

"Smart-ass." I shot back, before grimacing as I kept my eyes moving over the terrain. "Damned wreckage though. Whatever the hell on the left, Turian cruiser wing on the right. We're boxed in if more Suns show up."

She shifted slightly, taking her own look. "It would take us a half hour to double-back to where the central teams started moving through."

The conversation became moot a few moments later, the echoing cracks of gunfire rapidly becoming a dull roar as the fighters shifted to full auto. I couldn't tell where it was with all the damned shit around us distorting the noise, but I had a pretty good idea.

So did Rane. She slapped the back of my armor before starting forwards, me lumbering along in her wake. "Sounds like someone's already there. All right everyone, we're moving on. Xan. You're still on rearguard. Maneth, you stick with her. Rest of you stay as close to cover as you can without falling behind!"

And with that we were all moving. Rane stayed in the lead for a minute or so, then tactfully slowed down a bit and ducked behind me again with a somewhat sheepish shake of her head.

Things got tighter as we moved further onwards, but not so badly that I had any issues moving. It was enough to make me a bit nervous about running into mercs with missile launchers, but apparently they were all busy with whichever group of ours was attacking their outpost.

I caught a decent sight of the target as we kept pounding along, glimpses of it appearing through the gaping holes in the destroyed ship. It looked like an armored cell phone tower, with the air around it glittering as stray shots hit barriers raised to protect the thing. But it was the base that I was most interested in, a two story structure that looked as if it had been thrown together from whatever scraps were nearby.
Tracer rounds were streaming out of the upper windows, a pair of Blue Suns barely visible behind their light machine guns as they liberally sprayed shots at someone on the other side of the wall. More mercs appeared and vanished on the roof above them and behind make-shift barricades around the outside, cracking off rounds of their own.

Still, things weren't going all of the mercs way. There was plenty of fire being thrown back at them, enough to stop them from trying to advance under the cover of their emplaced guns at least. Though that state of affairs would probably only last until our people's guns started to overheat, or the Suns got capable snipers into vantage points up high.

"Fuck." I muttered, hoping only Rane would be able to hear me as our group started to slow, everyone but me starting to dart from cover to cover and trying to stay out of sight of what was happening around the corner. "That's a pretty good position."

"Can't see crap thanks to you." She shot back quietly. "How bad?"

"Two bunkered guns on the second floor that are pinning down whoever we've got. At least twenty mercs on the ground, more inside." I summed up. "How do you want to do this?"

Her helmet shifted up to the armored block that protected my head. "You're in command, Harath'krem."

Grimacing at the reminder, I tried to work through my thoughts as quickly as I could. "Right. Rane, you're behind me, suppress with tech mines. Xan, you stay in cover and focus on my targets. Everyone else in cover and focus on anyone carrying heavy weapons. And watch your damned heat."

"Harath'krem." A ragged chorus answered me back.

Not really trusting myself to say anything else, I lumbered into the fastest jog I could manage as we emerged from behind the metal wall. As the adrenaline hit my system, I seemingly had all the time in the world to take a better stock of the situation.

We were emerging on the merc's flank, safely out of the window gun's cone of fire. Most of the mercs were likewise occupied with what looked like Marn and Ghai's teams, who were spread out in a wreckage field beyond them. Even as we emerged the yellow armor of our Eclipse allies rose up, already fairly close to the building, and let loose a heavy volley of gunfire and whirling biotic attacks. It wasn't terribly damaging, but it was enough to distract the mercs and suppress them long enough for Ghai, Nyn, and several other forms to leapfrog from their own cover to spots nearer to the building.

Initially the mercs seemed oblivious to the fact that they'd just been flanked, but that happy state of affairs lasted only until I slowed, shifted my aim, and opened fire.

The three mercs I'd targeted shouting in alarm and pain as the heavy rounds slammed into their sides and backs. One tried to stand and turn, only for Xan to double-tap a pair of metal sand grains into her skull.

"More on the flank!" Someone on the ground shouted in alarm, "We're flanked! Inside Inside!"

"Everyone into cover!" Rane snapped as she leaned around me, whipping an overload mine down range. "Move!"

I shifted my aim left as the electrical grenade exploded, shedding the shields from two Turians trying to retreat. Blue blood misted into the air as their bodies collapsed under my fire, but they were hardly the only ones smart enough to fall back. Most of the mercs who'd been outside were
now in full retreat, dashing back to the cover of the tower.

My armor began to slowly move as I worked my legs, firing off short bursts as I tried to keep moving to my left to stay on the enemy's flank. Around me the Batarian women, sans Rane who was moving with me, were falling into what cover they could find. Some knelt behind plates, others were standing besides taller ones, all were being mindful of their guns and firing in short bursts.

Between me and them, plus Rane's grenades and Xan's sniping, we dropped another half a dozen mercs before they could make it to safety. Not about to let us take all of them for ourselves, Nyn and the mixed species of our main force became bolder, and managed a to drop a few themselves before the heavy machine guns forced them back into cover.

"Cieran!" I could barely make out Nyn's scream over the guns firing. Apparently she realized that, because she stopped yelling and started gesturing imperiously towards towards the building and then at us.

"She can't be serious!" Rane had to shout for me to hear her, an incinerate whipping under my arms to scorch a window. "There's seven of us!"

"Yeah!" My mouth had gone dry at the very idea of it. Armored exoskeleton or not, I didn't expect to be able to easily fit into the rickety structure. And like Rane had said, there wasn't exactly a lot of us, and I was pretty sure there was at least three or four times our number inside. "Right, keep going left!"

"You have a plan?"

"Not really!" I admitted, wincing as the mercs finally started to man the windows on our side. Most of their shots were almost exploratory, sending sparks off my barriers as they tried to work out just how durable I was. "Better than staying here!"

"Point! Xan, we need you up!"

"Good spot further down!" Our sharpshooter shouted back, "Long-ass run though!"

"Everyone go full auto so she can move!" Suiting actions to words, I cut loose as I resumed moving. My aim was limited to the doorway, mostly. Even with my new programs and stabilizers moving and shooting wasn't exactly accurate. It was enough to send a pair of Suns scrambling away from the entry. Whatever they'd been trying to setup exploded in a shower of sparks when Rane quickly directed an incinerate into the same area.

The rest of the team enthusiastically echoed us. Their rifles assaulted my ears as they focused on the windows. Maneth in particular got a bit bold, actually standing up and moving with us, only getting back into cover when Rane shrieked at her.

Behind us, Xan pounded past as quickly as she could, long rifle clutched to her chest. Skidding and slipping a bit, she dove into the rusted out hulk of a shuttle.

"She's clear! Cool off!" Rane barked, ducking a bit closer to my back as her people let off.

Eager to pay us back, the mercs quickly took advantage of everyone but me slowing their fire, my barriers starting an inexorable descent as they focused on the biggest target. Still, I wasn't all that worried. We were still a decent distance out, enough to make grenades or carnage rounds difficult for the mercs to employ. And the small arms wouldn't do much but scratch my paint.

One of these days, I don't know when, I'll be smart enough to stop thinking positively like that.
A heavy sniper round rocked me back several inches, drawing a guttural oath as my barriers shrieked that they were down.

"Xan, tell me you saw that fucker!" I snarled as my eezo core corrected for my stumble, keeping me upright as Rane scrambled back before I stepped on her feet.

"Top right window!" Her gun barked once. "Fuck! Nicked him! He's shifted, no angle!"

"Rane, incinerate that window!"

She didn't hesitate, leaning around my bulk so that her omni-tool could dispense the glowing orange disc. But as fast as she moved, it wasn't fast enough to stop the sniper from taking another shot.

The sharp crack of the heavier weapon easily cut through the noise, followed a second or two later by the incinerate filling the window with fire. There was a long, high pitched scream. No matter how many times I'd heard someone being set on fire, it still made me wince and fight not to deactivate my external mics for a while. Thankfully it cut off almost at once, another merc most likely putting their comrade out of his misery.

"Did he miss?" I couldn't spare the time to glance around, starting to shift randomly between the door and the windows, putting quick bursts into each to try and give us as much cover as possible.

"No." My friend's voice carried a wince in it, even if she had to time her words to be in between my volleys. "We lost Yetheri."

My lips twisted as I sent another Sun scrambling away from a window with a pair of shots, slowing to a stop as I did so.

"I can't see much now." Xan shouted from where she'd laid her gun out through the shuttle's shattered canopy. "The Harath'krem is keeping them pinned."

"Move up?"

I grimaced at the idea. We still hadn't seen anyone with grenade launchers or missile tubes, but I didn't doubt that at least a few were present. They'd have needed them to fight off any kind of direct shuttle landing after all. Which probably meant whoever was in charge in there was holding them back, waiting for me to get close enough so that they could coordinate an alpha strike to take me out in one good barrage.

But I was still proof against regular guns at least, unlike the people around me. And on the other side, the heavy guns had to be hooked up to some kind of heavy coolant feed, because the damn things still had our main force stuck trying to carefully advance. I'd have expected the sharpshooters in one of those teams, Marn and Ghai both had one, to have taken at least one of them out by now. But either they couldn't get clear shots.. or they were dead. Either way, it seemed clear that we had to do something.

"Carefully, and let me lead!" Maybe we could hurl grenades into the structure and get lucky. It wasn't much of a plan, but there was no way in hell I was sending Rane's people in there. And the better view I got of the doorway, the more I was sure that I had zero chance of fitting inside.

She slapped my back again to let me know she understood. "We're moving up! Hold position and provide covering fire! I'll wave you up once we're emplaced!"

We were still a good hundred meters out from the structure, and about at the edge of the open
space between the general wreckage and the Blue Suns external fortifications. It looked like they'd been working on making a kill zone, but hadn't had the time to extend it as far as they'd have liked. As it was we'd only have to make a twenty meter or so run to get into the positions they'd abandoned.

As I resumed the advance, I kept up my suppressing bursts as best I could. Behind me Rane was almost hugging my engine cowling, weaving a bit to avoid my legs as the Suns started to realize that I was closing the distance.

Suppressing fire or not, more shots started to send sparks flying from my armor as my depleted barriers struggled to recharge. The incoming fire grew steadily worse as we kept moving, shouts of alarm becoming audible.

"Where are we stopping?"

My gun hundred in a *thud-thud-thud* pattern, executing a Turian who'd gotten too bold up on the roof. As he toppled from the building, I shouted back to her. "How far can you toss a grenade?"

She vanished from my rear camera as she carefully glanced around me. "Fifteen meters ahead, on the right! That bunker thing!"

"Got it!" Twisting to my right, I started moving in that direction. I wasn't exactly fast, but my extended legs were long and ate up distance quickly.

No sooner had we reached the half finished bunker than the Suns finally made their move.

A full squad, at least a dozen, of mercs raced out from the nearest doorway. Most were carrying shotguns or smgs, but in the center of the group was a knot of men and women carrying long tubes that made my heart clench.

"Focus fire left!" Something tore in my throat as I shouted, swinging my gun that way and cutting loose. "Overloads!"

The was a sputtering barrage from Rane's team, but the Blue Suns had timed their attack perfectly. Their weapons were hot from trying to cover us as we moved up, and there wasn't any chance that they'd be good to go for another ten to fifteen seconds.

An eternity in a firefight.

I wasn't fast enough to fall back, and with that many shotguns there was no way I could go with my usual fall-back of charging in. All that left was standing my ground.

"Xan!" Rane screamed as she started to throw overloads past me as quickly as her omni-tool could charge them. "The launchers!"

"Trying!" Our sniper shouted almost at the same time as the Suns leader started barking his own orders.

"Spread out and surround the target! Carnage in volley, team one!"

I fell to one knee, trying to minimize my large profile behind the bunker's external wall. Three mercs fell to their own knees in classic shooting poses, and cut loose. One had aimed too high, probably trying for the armored box protecting my skull, and the glowing shot whipped by. Another shot clipped the bunker, sending shrapnel flying. But the last hit my often battered left side, bouncing me a little against my restraints.
Several shoulder actuators started flashing yellow on my diagnostic screen, but nothing flared red.

Shaking it off, I shifted my aim to retaliate as one of Rane's overloads exploded directly over the trio's heads. Without their barriers I didn't bother wasting more than two shots each, their armor nowhere near the level needed to stop the heavy slugs my gun spat out.

But no sooner had their bodies hit the soiled ground than another barrage of carnage rounds roared in my direction, but this time two rounds for me. I got lucky with the first shot, it hit more or less dead center on my chest. But the second one hit higher up, more or less directly in between my head and my left pauldron. The already battered shoulder plate tore free with a scream of tortured metal, and several motors started blinking rapidly as shrapnel damaged them.

"Fuck!" I tried to redirect my fire to drop this group of assholes as well, but they'd chosen their spots better. Rane's next overload only clipped one, and he ducked into a foxhole before I could get a bead.

Thankfully Xan was able to get one of them before she could make it into her own cover, the human woman toppling as our designated marksman put a round clean through her skull.

"Rane, I'm going in!" Most of the shotguns had to be cooling off now, I hoped, and staying here wasn't looking like a high-survivability option. Even as our squad's fire was picking up, that wouldn't prevent the missile heavies from popping up long enough to start hammering me. Even one would do serious damage without my barriers up, and it wouldn't take more than two or three to kill me. "Stay here and keep them off my back!"

Another slap of her armored gauntlet against my metal back, and then I was off, once again running headlong into danger.

Which, as much as I hated doing it, was probably the best use of the armor I'd made. It was big, it was sturdy, and it was ridiculously strong. And even well trained troops could hesitate when something larger than a Krogan came rampaging towards them.

"It's charging!" The Sun's scream was alarmed, to say the least. "Missiles! Missiles now!"

The heavies popped up at that, four of them in total. Rane and Xan made that three, they must have both been aiming right at where he'd taken cover because an overload and a shot to his neck both happened before he could even swing the tube my way. Another flinched back into cover when one of my wild shots hit her chest.

And then the first missile hit my right leg, quickly followed by a second hitting my waist. My eezo core tried to compensate, but that leg had been airborne as I moved. In short, I spun halfway around like a giant top before crashing into the ground on my side, cursing up a storm as I did so.

"It's down, it's-" Another bark of Xan's rifle cut off the congratulatory shout.

"It's not out!" A smarter merc screamed moments later, "Move up and finish it before it gets up!"

Gunfire started to fill the air around me as I struggled to right myself before more missiles hit me.

"Cover him!" Rane bellowed, having apparently switched to her rifle its snapping fire disrupted her words. "Cieran! Get up dammit! They're on your right!"

Planting my left hand on the ground, I blindly swung my right arm that way. My entire arm shuddered as my gun was torn free from my grasp by a heavy impact, almost coinciding with someone shrieking in pain. Coolant spilled from the torn line as I heaved myself a foot and a knee, just in time to see another pair of mercs trying to rush forwards with glowing shotguns to deliver
the coup de grace.

Xan, apparently determined to be my new guardian angel, blew out the visor of the Batarian on the left. His companion jumped a bit as his comrade fell, pulling the trigger before diving for cover, sending the round into my engine cowling. The sideways hit was nearly enough to send me rolling again, but the thick armor around my power source held without any issue.

"Launchers!?" I screamed the question as I managed to get my other flat foot under me.

"Straight ahead!"

Not bothering to grab my weapon, I shoved off and accelerated as quickly as I could.

The two remaining heavies were about ten meters away, and already rushing to backpedal as they triggered their weapons again.

As close as I was, they could hardly miss, and I slammed against my restraints as alarms shrieked. I didn't bother glancing at the readout, I was still moving and that's what mattered in those few seconds.

The first threw his weapon down and tried to draw a shotgun from his belt. Twisting my left arm across my chest, I heaved it around as I reached him. The blow slammed into his ribcage, sending him flying sideways. His scream was wet and rattling as his lung collapsed, and he curled up fetally after impacting the ground.

My right hand was curled and ready to slam into the Turian when she did something I didn't expect.

Her missile launcher hit the ground as her arms shot straight up in the air and screamed, "Surrender!"

I almost hit her anyway, only barely managing to rein myself in as her words hit home. Around my the gunfire slowed, and then stopped. Glancing around confusedly, I noticed the remaining mercs were likewise dropping their weapons.

"Cieran!" Nyn's voice crackled over my suddenly live radio. "We've lost sight of your squad, are you still alive?"

"Um, yes." My eyes were still blinking in confusion, and I felt my body trembling, the adrenaline not quite worn off yet. "What the hell just happened?"

"Chen finally arrived and helped us deal with the heavy guns. We rushed them once they were down."

"Oh." I hadn't even noticed that the fighting had shifted quite that drastically on the other flank. But then again I couldn't even see it anymore. "Well. Good timing then."

"Indeed." her voice was dry and amused, "Your armor looks some the worse for wear."

Glancing up, I caught sight of her watching from the same window that the sniper had been in. "Could be worse.. we lost Yetheri."

Rane's voice cut in, subdued. "And Maneth. Carnage round."

"We lost three." Marn's gruff voice was suitably solemn. "And the Eclipse lost two as well."
"As he said, it could have been worse." Nyn pointed out, sounding as if she was trying to stay positive. "Wasea is contacting Eclipse command to provide transport out for the prisoners, ensure that they're disarmed. Cieran, you'd better get working on your armor. I'm going to scan through Hegemony frequencies to try and contact the commander."

"Right then.." I waved a metal hand towards the Turian. "This way, if you please."

She shifted slightly. "And if I don't?"

"Guess."

Her helmet glanced at my massive metal fist. "You make a compelling argument, Batarian."

"Human." I corrected as she started to move, joining the other mercs as they started to move. Several of Marn's people led more out of the building, while Rane and her remaining people likewise started herding those outside towards the open space.

"I don't suppose we're going to survive this?" my prisoner kept her voice low as we walked.

I winced at the question. "That's up to the Eclipse."

"I'll pray to the ancestors to accept my soul then." If she was trying to guilt trip me, she was doing a pretty good job of it. I'd been about to kill her, sure, but only because she'd been trying to kill me right back. It was something else entirely to execute prisoners as far as I was concerned.

In the end, I was glad to leave her with everyone else before falling back with Rane's people to huddle around the half-finished bunker. They'd pulled their fallen companions with them, carefully laying them inside it before pulling out their sleeping rolls to cover the bodies.

Rane let her girls handle that while she covered my exit, my armor sliding open as I pulled myself out. I breathed as shallowly as I could before grabbing my helmet from the armor's back, pulling it on before stepping back to start my analysis.

"How long?" she stood next to me as I surveyed the damage, "To repair, I mean."

"A few hours, at least." My face pulled into a grimace. "Fucking left side again."

Her voice lowered a bit, "Mind if we help? I'd rather everyone be occupied right now."

I couldn't blame her for that. I hadn't known either of the dead women all that well, just as acquaintances who I'd worked with and occasionally helped train. For her and her squad, they'd been friends and companions, and the first that they'd lost. They hadn't been on the old teams, hadn't had to deal with the almost total losses like Marn and Chen had. Or me, I supposed.

"Sure. Let's get the gear free from the back.. looks like two actuators, a motor.. and a good bit of my spare plate." Turning my head, I took notice of the metal around us. "And if someone could analyze all this crap and see if any of it could be used."

"Got it." Her own turned to where her people were working. "No thanks for saving your life again?"

My lips twitched. "Thanks for saving my life again."

Her tone turned teasing. "Typical highborn, has to be reminded that you needed us to survive."

A hand rose to my chest. "That hurts Rane, it really does."
"I'm almost positive you'll live through it."

I snorted, but Nyn's voice cut off my next retort. "Cieran.. if you have a moment, we need a high level meeting in here."

"Got a hold of Balak?"

"Yes." her tone made my alarms go off. "We were able to reach the Commander. He's still free and leading his surviving crew.. but there's a problem, and we're going to need some help."

"On my way." I cut the link with a sigh before muttering. "I was really hoping he'd be dead by now."

"Me too." Rane agreed, also sotto voce. "Keep me in the loop?"

"Of course, be right back."

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**Next up is Chapter 8: The Contact**

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**Author's Fun Fact: Timeline of the Blue Suns War – Part III**

December 18th, 2180 – Hegemony and Alliance forces, both pursuing pirates, exchange shots in the Kepler Verge. Both patrol groups withdraw before the fighting can escalate, to the relief of both Admiral Hackett and High Admiral Del'thran.

December 30th, 2180 – Still high off of his defeat of the Hegemony's fourth fleet, Vosque attempts to replicate his success against the Second fleet. A two week running battle ensures. Despite inflicting roughly equal losses, the Suns are unable to to dislodge the Hegemony from their positions protecting the ground forces still fighting to secure territory.

January 5th, 2180 – A second skirmish occurs between Hegemony and Alliance pirate chasers in the Newton system. Admiral Hackett sends private messages to Del'thran, and the two unofficially divide the Traverse into zones of influence to reduce the risk of open war between the powers. Del'thran agrees to keep the agreement confidential to keep the Alliance's Parliament in the dark. The last thing he desires is war with humanity while fighting the Suns on his other flank.

January 19th, 2180 – The reformed Fourth and Third Hegemony fleets, seeking to relieve the recovering Second, launch a series of heavy raids deep into the Sun-held sections of the Traverse. Despite accomplishing little material gains, they are wildly successful strategically. Vosque is forced to abandon several systems entirely to protect his limited shipping.

February 3rd, 2180 – The Eclipse, assisted by several warlords, begins launching strikes against the remaining Blue Sun groups in the Terminus. Most groups surrender after offering only token resistance, and are quickly absorbed.

February 15th, 2180 – The Hegemony's Second, Third, and Fourth fleets launch coordinated strikes. After three weeks of running engagements, they force the Blue Suns to withdraw to defend their remaining class one worlds in the Theodosian Rift.

February 20th, 2180 – The Hegemony cruiser Qwin'tos, commanded by Kaharial Balak, makes a bold run through the Theodosian Prime relay, easily dodging the surprised Suns defensive group. Holding several SIU teams, Balak begins launching raids on the few Sun strongholds still answering to Vosque.
So. We've arrived on Korlus, and the fighting has begun more or less right away. They've hit and accomplished their first objective, but have already begun to take losses and the main fight is still to come. The situation will become slightly clearer in the next chapter, given that they have full communications again.

The next chapter will be posted Friday, 7/17.

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 8: The Contact

"So." False cheer injected itself into my voice as I stared at the information that Nyn was still trying to compile. "We're leaving now, right?"

Four dark eyes glared at me. "That is not amusing, Cieran."

"I thought it was funny." Trena spoke up over the communicator, a small holographic panel showing her sitting in the ship's briefing room. "And he's got a point Shaaryak. There's no fucking way that you'll get to that prick."

Nynsi's lips curled irritably. "I don't want defeatism from either of you right now. Practical solutions please."

My own twitched as my annoyance rose "Nyn. There's a fucking army in between him and us. We cannot fight our way to him. We cannot fly to him. Unless you have another fortune to spend paying Sederis to refocus an offensive in his direction, I don't see how we can do this."

"It isn't an army, Harath'krem." She growled back, "Only a single regiment of Suns."

"The personal fucking guard of Captain Dougal, the only ranking asshole to fight his way past Aria and off of Omega." Trena retaliated. "There's a full goddess damned thousand of them. At least. All fucking hunting for the same goddess damned asshole we are."

If anything that just made Nyn scowl more severely. "There has to be a way. Balak has survived this long, I refuse to believe that he can do that with a ship's crew and we can't."

I started at her, slightly in shock at how she was taking this. "Nyn... listen to yourself. He's lost most of his crew. It's him and less than forty guys right now. And he hasn't had to fight against a thousand plus Suns, he's just had to run away from them."

"So you want to simply turn around and go home?" Her eyes, once split between me and Trean's hologram, again all locked onto me with a severe glare. "You haven't exactly made it a secret that you hoped he was dead to begin with. This must be good news for you, that he's trapped and doomed to die."

Woah. Now, I'd expected her to not be happy about the news she'd laid out, and my opinion on it, but this was above and beyond what I'd been expecting. My voice lowered as I fought to keep my irritation in check. "That was uncalled for, Tarath'shan."

"Agreed." Trena's voice was low and dangerous.

Nyn maintained her glare for a few more moments before seeming to slump. "My.. apologies, Cieran. I didn't mean that."
A long exhale came through my nose as I continued reining in my own temper. "Spit it out Nyn. You know it's a suicide run at this point. You're not stupid. Why keep trying to force this?"

Her head turned slightly, tilting into an expression that I hadn't ever seen on her before: Shame.

"The Hegemony.. will only reimburse us for a successful mission." Each word sounded like it cost her something to say. "I would be further compensated for letting Balak use the mansion as a base for raids against the Suns to both recoup my losses and make a profit. Plus concessions on Khar'shan to the family.. based on our level of success."

I had to bring up a fist to my mouth, biting the armored plate slightly as I tried to keep my composure. It was a near thing but I managed to stop myself from walking over, grabbing her shoulders, and screaming 'What the fuck were you thinking!?'

Trena couldn't do the latter from the ship, but losing her composure? That she could do.

"You mean we aren't even getting PAID for this shit!?" The shriek made Nyn and I both wince. "By Athame's Matriarch's fucking azure! You agreed that if it was impossible we'd pull the crap out! But we fucking can't, can we!? You all but bankrupted yourself on this goddess damned piece of shit ship!"

Nyn's eyes flashed as her moment passed, and her own anger returned. "I'm well aware of my financial situation. I was given two options from the military after Patriarch Balak brought them into our conversation. Accept this deal or have the right of conscription invoked. If I refused the latter, I would have been exiled. If I had accepted it and failed, I would still have been exiled."

"So the fuck what! You've never been to Khar'shan, you're probably never fucking going to that cursed planet! Even better, we're supposed to HOUSE a goddess damned SIU team!? Did you even fucking bother asking what the FUCK they were going to be doing!? I bet you just couldn't stand the idea of losing."

"Trena!" My throat almost tore again from my snap. "Enough, all right?"

Her small image seemed to rock back at my interruption, no doubt having believed I'd be on her side. "Ape?"

"Just.." my hand rose to rub at my forehead. "Enough scales. I'm pissed too, but fighting about this crap now isn't going to do us any good."

My friend stared at me for a very long moment before her head jerked into the tiniest of nods.

"Thanks." I let out a whistling sigh through my teeth, imitating a Batarian expression of irritated exasperation. Across from me, Nynsi winced at the sound, her lower eyes lowering as her head tilted down and a few hairs to the left, lips thinning to show her regret and shame. "All right. Nyn, full financials please. What are the consequences if we leave?"

"The analysis I offered previously was.. the optimistic one." she admitted. "Without the funds from the Hegemony I'll be forced to sell off several interests in the city to Asari business groups to pay off my losses."

A momentary relief came from her words, not that it lasted long. "Not the end of the world then."

There was a pain filled grimace. "Well.. most of them, and the ones remaining wouldn't be sufficient to maintain the current arrangements. The ship, the mansion, our security forces.. and the ship isn't exactly something I'd be able to easily sell to try and keep things as they are."
Trena growled again, but subsided when I tossed the camera a glare. "Fine. So we have to find a way to get him out. Or else we don't get paid, we lose our jobs, and the entire district goes to shit as your little business empire falls apart."

Dropping my hands to the table, I started flicking at the buttons to manipulate the image, trying to push the emotions away and find some kind of inspiration. There wasn't much to work with. A crashed cruiser about forty kilometers away, knots of blue where the Suns were hunting, and the small icon representing Balak's survivors where they were hiding in an old Quarian ship.

"Can we get Balak back on the line?"

"No." Her hand waved at the icon. "The Suns already triangulated his position and are forcing him to move, he'll risk calling again when they've lost them."

"So we can't coordinate easily.. awesome. All right Nyn, practical solutions under protest it is." She drew back a bit as if I'd just struck her. Which in a way I had, just not physically. "Looking at this.. each of these knots are a few hundred mercs, probably company sized. And that's just this group, there's a four more regiments not that far away. Right now they're protecting the main flank, but they could probably spare a few companies to put us down if we give Dougal any trouble."

"Can't fly overhead, we'd be the only things in the air. Can't flank them on the ground. And if we try and sneak in there we'll be in just as shitty a position as he is right now." Trena muttered, sounding just as resigned to this as I was. "Could we take the ship down, ape?"

"You think that Sederis has hit every STS battery? There's about a million fucking places to hide them."

Her face twisted. "And no fucking main gun on this useless sailboat, so we can't even try to hammer them from orbit for you."

"Think the Eclipse would?"

Nyn shrugged slightly, smoothing her features into a mask. "I could ask, but I doubt it. She's made it clear that she isn't all that interested in our mission. And how effective would it be, regardless? Dougal apparently isn't stupid. His troops are fairly well dispersed and would probably become more so if any of the ships maneuvered into lower orbits."

"Hmm.. do you think she could spare a company or so, if it would provide a distraction for her main attack?"

"Maybe.. if she's still stable and we can figure out a way to phrase it right. Ape, I don't like that expression."

Reaching out, I tapped the long furrow that Balak's ship had left on the surface. "How much is left of his cruiser?"

"Ape.." Trena had taught me everything I knew about engineering in this universe, and it took her just a few seconds to realize what I was thinking. "..Even if that damned ship's weapons still work, you're talking about firing them from the damned ground."

"Not if there's torpedoes on its left side." My fingers pointed out that section of the ship. The Batarian cruiser was essentially a long, thin arrowhead, and it's impact had slammed it's right edge and prow into the ground. There was a long debris trail from where it had slid along the soil, and the ship had obviously taken a lot of damage even before the crash. But that left side seemed intact and actually raised upwards, perhaps high enough to get us a sufficient angle to rig up its missiles.
or torpedos to hammer the mercs.

"You want to fire cruiser level weapons, in atmosphere, against targets practically on top of it."
Nyn was openly gaping at me. "Cieran.."

"I didn't say it was a good plan." I admitted. "We'd have to rig up a power source and some way to target them. If we're lucky and there's a missile battery there, it would be easier to rig. But there's no way we could power a Gardian battery. I'd ask Wasea about the Eclipse committing this way first, but if we don't have a choice.. you have better ideas?"

"No." Trena grumbled. "But.. ape.. all right, fuck it. I'll start pulling the specs on that ship."

Nynsi nodded slightly. "I'll speak with Captain Wasea, and see if I can get Sederis on the line to discuss alternatives. Otherwise this will be our course of action."

"We'll probably need our shuttles down here and on standby." I added, trying to work out the rest of the plan. "I mean, we'll make a pair of big fucking blasts and hopefully take out these two groups. That would get our shuttles get in, grab Balak, and then get back out."

"So all we have to do is eliminate the group currently sitting on the cruiser itself."

"Basically." A finger tapped the various spots. "We get the Eclipse to help with that, and we take out that company. They're probably just scavenging what they can.. if we're lucky we can fight them in detail before they can group up. Then use its weapons to take out these companies here, and here. And hope to Athame that they don't swarm us before we can blast them."

"And if they do?" Nyn's voice was quiet.

I gave her a serious look. "We get the hell out."

She winced, opened her mouth to argue, then seemed to wilt as Trena and I both glared at her harder before switching gears. "I don't exactly have anything to bribe Sederis with, Cieran."

"There's a half intact Hegemony cruiser right there." Trena's voice was darkly amused. "I wonder if it's data core is still intact. Even if it's not, it's probably the best salvage on planet right now."

My Tarath'shan's expression became pained. "That's Hegemony property."

"No. It's salvage." I countered, my hands hitting the table's edge a bit harder than necessary. "If Balak was too stupid to wipe it before he bailed, that's on him. And it isn't like they can send someone to try and recover it. We aren't offering her anything but what she'd get anyway."

"So why should she go for it?" Nyn seemed to be full recovered from the embarrassment and shame of her admission. Her spine straightened and tone darkened as she countered my argument.

"Because the Suns might blow it on their own. Because we might have orders to to do that we'll conveniently put aside for her." The Asari was growling again. "Fuck Shaaryak, make something the fuck up or I call Ghai and tell her we're leaving."

Four black eyes narrowed. "That ship is not leaving without my-"

"Nynsi! Trena!" I snapped, cutting her off as my angered simmered a bit closer to boiling. "Not. The. Time."

She seemed to grow a bit closer to apoplectic but also gave me a tiny nod. Trena just scoffed and crossed her arms, but said nothing.
"Seriously.. could you two please just tolerate each other long enough for us to survive this?"
Some of my emotions shifted as brought both of my hands up to rub my face vigorously. "I hate
having to act like I'm ordering either of you around but I don't see how you're leaving me much
choice."

Neither woman seemed to know what to say to that. The holographic Asari shifted, a little
uncomfortably I thought. Nyn's lips thinned, but other than that she kept her own emotions hidden
from me. The silence stretched on until I blew out a slow breath, which did little to calm me down.

"All right.. Scales, a plan of action to hit the cruiser would be nice. Nyn?"

A tiny nod, and when she spoke she managed to keep her tone level, if a bit cold. "I will speak
with Sederis. T'laria, expect the details of whatever forces I am able to leverage and who you can
contact to coordinate our attack. Harath'krem, please send Ghai up and have Marn locate Wasea. I
will have to speak with her as well. Assign someone, I don't care who, to watch the prisoners.
How long will it take to repair your armor?"

"Three or four hours. Maybe less if Rane's team can find armor quality plate around here."

"You had best get started then." The dismissal in her tone was clear. She had obviously regretted,
and been ashamed of, keeping me out of the loop of the details of her agreement with the
Hegemony. But that didn't mean she'd easily forgive me openly snapping at her and questioning
her command ability. In love with me or not, she had lines that were very firmly in place, just like
I had my own. And we'd both just planted our feet on each others, but then I'd gone ahead and
taken an extra step over by openly siding against her with someone she couldn't stand.

It was going to take her a while to get over this one.

Then again, it was going to take me a while to get over it as well.

Giving her a formally polite nod, head dipped a tiny bit to the left, I waited until she tightly
responded to the right before I yanked my helmet back on, turned on a heel, and left.

Half of my job was easy at least, all of the squad leaders were waiting impatiently just outside of
the building's entryway.

"About time." Chen groused. "I was about to offer bets if the two of you were fuc-"

"Marn." I snapped, cutting him off. "Find Wasea and bring her to Nyn. Ghai, get up there and
help her and Trena work out our plan. Rane, what did you find?"

"Um.." she seemed to draw back at bit at my anger. "We've found a few pieces you might be able
to use."

"Get it to my armor. Chen, take command of the prisoner watch."

All but Ghai seemed to be staring at me, utterly unused to seeing me this irritated. The stoic Asari
simply shrugged and moved past, not saying a word as she headed inside. Her movements
triggered the rest, Marn's helmet watching me as she back away before she started calling for her
team to give her Wasea's location. Chen likewise gave me a long stare before shaking his head
before turning, looking to round up his team.

Which left me with Rane'li, who quickly fell in a little behind me after making a short radio call to
her team.

"Cieran?" her voice was wary, which made me feel a bit like shit and did quite a bit to lower my
volatility level. Call it chivalry or stupidity, but I didn't like scaring women. That she was a friend just made it that much worse.

Cutting a bit to my right, my feet carried me down a short ramp into another half finished bunker. Resisting the urge to punch the metal wall blocking my sight of the outpost we'd just left, I more or less collapsed onto the firing step and just stared at the dirt opposite.

"Cieran?" There was a touch of confusion this time, and she hovered on the ramp, probably wondering what the hell I was doing.

"You were right." I manged to get out. "There was a lot she didn't tell us."

"Oh." Feet shifted, carrying her a few steps closer. "And you're angry about it?"

My throat vibrated with a suppressed growl. "She lied to my face Rane. She's all but fucking broke right now. The only way for us to maintain, well, fucking everything is to not only rescue Balak, but to let him use the fucking mansion as a base for Athame knows how long."

There was a hissing intake of breath. "The pillars be.. that's worse than I thought."

I shot her a look that she couldn't see through my helmet. "No. Fuck."

Her body seemed to wince, and I felt another little stab of guilt. "Sorry. It's just.. I thought it would be something with Commander Balak. An engagement to him or another Balak family member. Politics, not.. both politics and money. Did she.. have a choice?"

My nose let out a long breath. "She made it sound like Balak wasn't responsible, that the military was. I don't know if I buy that entirely, but I suppose it tracks. This.. doesn't feel like the old man's style. She says her options were to accept the deal, be conscripted, or face exile."

There was a pause before she spoke, her tone carefully neutral as she took a few more careful steps closer. "To a highborn.. there's only one option there. Her pride would never have accepted the other two."

"I'm aware." This time the growl was evident in my voice.

Something like heat entered her voice. "No. You're aware now. You weren't then or else you wouldn't be angry."

I glared up at her black helmet, the two red visor bands staring back at me. "Fine. I'm in love with her and it blinded me. Happy?"

"No. You're my.." she hesitated for a moment. ".friend and you're in pain right now. Even if," her voice turned delicately tactful. "You probably should have known better."

My shoulders slumped slightly. "Yeah. I just.. I love her Rane, and she lied to me. No twitching, no tiny head tilts, no hitch in her voice. Gave me her best case scenario, lying by omission there I guess. But..she's been saying if it was impossible we could leave this whole time.. and didn't mean a word of it."

"She probably didn't think it would matter. If we'd found Balak easily and quickly, it would never have come up." Her legs bent as she sank into a crouch so that we were more or less level. "Pride and optimism tend to be a poor combination. Especially if she had to admit her own failure at misjudging the Hegemony's reaction to her offer."

"Yeah..."
The visors tilted with her head before she let out a long groan. "By the pillars, you fought with her didn't you? You and Trena ganged up on her and made her agree to what you wanted."

I winced, fighting the urge to glance away. "A bit. And yes, I know that isn't going to help things. We didn't quite take her to task, only because I cut scales off before she could really get going. But I still ordered her around. And might have told her that we'd leave anyway if our newest plan turns out to be a non-starter."

"Not going to help.." she let out a choking sound. "Cieran, I.. you.. you don't talk to a highborn like that normally, much less calling out a leader in a battle!"

"Harath'krem." The reminder made her head tilt a bit to the left on reflex. "Call it confrontational advice then."

"I.. that..you... that.. might work." Rane allowed slowly, obviously struggling to work through the various caste and level prejudices and rules in her head. "She might forgive you if you frame it like that. But by each of the Pillars.. are you sure you should have lost your temper?"

My voice lowered again, and I fought to keep my emotions in check. "See previous commentary about lying. I don't care that she's a highborn or that she's proud. That's not something I thought she'd ever do."

Anger had been driving me entirely up until this point, but as I kept reiterating the thing that had really bothered me the more pain had started to creep in. I loved Nyn. More than that, I was her Harath'krem, a title I tried very much to take seriously. But if she could lie to my face about her financial reality, and cover up just how much of a choice we had in this mission, what else could she not have told me?

Was Rane going to be right again? Was there another agreement in the deal that I didn't know about? Normally I would say that I couldn't imagine that she would hide something like a marriage contract from me, but suddenly I had doubts.

"I'm sorry Cieran." a hand hesitantly touched the back of mine. "Should.. I mean.. dammit."

My lips twitched inside my helmet. "The caste level again?"

Her head bowed, her tone becoming subdued. "Yes.. I'm sorry, it's.. May the Pillar of Heart give me strength, but it's hard to talk to you like an equal. Even now.. and especially including Miss Shaaryak."

"I know." Turning my hand over, I gently squeezed hers. "You're a good friend Rane."

There was a breathy chuckle. "I think Trena would do you more good right now."

"Probably not." I winced at the very idea of Trena being down here right now. "You managed to calm me down a bit, just making me think about this crap. She and I would have just gotten more pissed off and probably done something we'd have ended up regretting."

Well, calm was probably overstating things. But the anger had faded into disappointment and a bit of depression. Don't get me wrong, the darker emotion was still there, it just wasn't quite as overriding anymore. Progress, I supposed.

"True." It seemed only reluctantly that she pulled her hand away from mine, which made me wince again as I belatedly realized that this definitely wasn't helping my plan of trying to turn her down gently. For a moment it seemed like she wanted to reach up and touch my helmet. I could
only guess that it was the caste traditions and laws that she still felt bound to, even in exile, that stopped her. "We.. should get to work."

"Yeah." At least she was the one giving us the excuse to break up what was rapidly becoming an awkward moment. "Back to work, and our new war."

Still, the first hour or so of working on my armor was a bit strained. Rane had apparently realized that I'd noticed her aborted affections, which made her retreat further into lowborn subservience out of embarrassment or shame. I wasn't sure which confused her squad more, that or my own simmering attitude. Either way, after several quiet apologies from her, and irritated snaps from me, things managed to calm down after we finished cutting apart a crashed shuttle's door.

Re-arranging the slabs of metal into a new shoulder plate took me and Rane another half hour, while I let Xan and the other two women remove and replace the damaged motors in that shoulder and the right ankle. By the time we'd hauled the ugly new armor up and affixed it into place, we were both sweating, exhausted, and at ease in our mutual irritation of how annoying it was to work without all of the garage's equipment.

When Nynsi finally came by, around the three hour mark, Rane and I were taking turns ripping out the broken plates from the right leg. While we did that, her people were carefully removing some of few quality patches I'd brought with. Once they'd picked them out, they would match them up to the spots we were working. After I agreed with the pick, the patch would be hammered into place and then locked in with welds.

Rough work, sure, but it was all we could really manage in the field.

"How much longer?" My Tarath'shan's voice was curt, all the more so because neither Rane nor I had bothered to properly greet her when she'd arrived. Which did worry me a bit more, to be honest. I was still annoyed and upset, but Rane not offering her even a slight nod was as good as her declaring her opposition to her boss. Not exactly something a lowborn would do lightly.

I shrugged, handing Rane the armorer's hammer and getting out of her way. "Call it thirty minutes."

"Good. The shuttles are on their way, we will be linking up with an Eclipse force moving on the crash site." It was easy to imagine her lips thinning in irritation. "I could not reach Sederis, but apparently her subordinates had no difficulty believing that we have orders to destroy the wreckage that I am setting aside for her sake."

"Let's just hope she doesn't get involved then."

She continued on as if I hadn't spoken. "Be prepared to move out in one hour. T'laria is working with Captain Wasea to establish our plan of attack, and will brief everyone when we are airborne."

"Understood." My head tilted in the barest minimum of nods to be polite.

Nyn replied in kind, and then strode away towards Marn's unit.

I watched her go for a long moment before holding a hand out. Rane wordlessly handed me the hammer and quickly backed away, letting me take some more anger out.

"Um.." Xan was holding the last plate, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot as she dipped her head to the left. "Harath'krem..?"

"He's fine Xan." Rane supplied as I took it from the sharpshooter's hands without a word.
"Highborn infighting."

"Oh." The sniper seemed to accept that, simply shaking her head a bit before falling back to talk with the other two team members in low tones.

"I should talk with them."

I grunted, spinning the plate in hands and getting it properly lined up. "Apologize for me, would you?"

My friend nodded slightly, her voice a bit strained as she tried for some levity. "You'll owe me one."

That made my lips twitch slightly. "Sure."

She patted my shoulder before turning away, waving her girls over as they huddled up. I doubted she'd give them the full story, but it would tell them enough for them to get the gist. And hopefully ask their forgiveness for my currently shitty attitude.

It didn't take me more than a few minutes to pound the armor plate down, and then to carefully use my hand-held welder to make sure it wasn't going anywhere. By the time I'd gotten that done, the squad had moved back and helped me get all of the tools and excess parts loaded up again.

The first shuttles were carefully swooping in around the time I was hauling myself back into the exoskeleton, and trying very hard not to breathe too deeply without my helmet on.

"How'd we do?" Rane called as the armor sealed around me, fans whirring as the primitive air circulation system got to work.

"One sec." The HUD slowly came online as the engine rumbled from standby to active. "Right. Left shoulder looks good, everything green. Weight is heavier but nothing this crate can't handle. Coolant line is secured.. lost some but should be all right. Right leg's the worst. A few systems are still strained but nothing your team did. Just bits I can't easily fix."

"Will it be an issue?"

"Not if I don't take another rocket to the lower leg." I wished I could knock on wood or something after saying that. "Even then, it should be all right."

I hoped.

"Ape." Trena's voice crackled next to my ears. "Switch to your private channel."

"Go ahead and get loaded up Rane, have to take a call." Her helmet nodded as I flicked over to the line in question. "Scales."

"Tell me you didn't know about this crap."

"I might have strained a few pieces of my armor's frame when I was hammering new plates on."

There was an almost relieved sigh. "Goddess. That's a fucking relief."

My lips twitched. "Just because I didn't side with you entirely doesn't mean I'm not pissed at Nyn."

"Yeah yeah, you love her, whatever. She still left us."
"I get it." I almost growled. "And I just went through all of this with Rane. We can be angry when we get back to Illium and get very, very drunk. Right now, can we focus on living until that point."

A very indelicate snort was her initial response to that, but she followed it up with actual words. "Fine ape. Wasea conscripted one of the reserve units for this run, so at least she's still our contact on their side. We'll be linking up with them five kilometers south of the crash site, using the wreckage to cover our approach."

"Please tell me they're on point."

"Only partially" I could easily imagine her scowl. "Wasea isn't stupid ape. You all are in the center of the formation, moving on the cruiser. She'll have units backing you up and covering the flanks. Once you get inside give me a link through your armor and we'll work through rigging up whatever weapons that piece of shit still has."

"We get that out to Balak? Be easier to arrange a pickup if he knows the plan."

"No shit. Of course we fucking transmitted that out!" An aggravated sigh followed before she forced the words out. "Sorry ape. That's at your bitch of a lover, not at you."

"I can't judge. Almost bit Rane head off myself." I admitted.

"See, why couldn't you have fallen for her? Way less shit going on that way."

The conversation we'd had replayed in my mind. "Not now scales. I didn't exactly improve my position there."

"Athame's.. fuck. I guess you did say you worked through it with Rane. Please tell me you didn't rip her armor off or shit like that."

"Of course not!" My head shook as I slowly started lumbering towards our shuttle as it made its final approach. "Fuck scales. We just talked and it got.. a bit personal. I think she wanted to say or do something but.. Fucking caste bullshit."

"Probably a good thing for her right now." A serious note entered her voice. "Trust me ape, battlefields aren't the place to deal with crap like this."

"Especially when I'm already in love with someone who just pissed me the fuck off?"

"Especially then." She paused for a moment, "Back to business ape. Bringing Wasea on in a minute for some detailed crap."

I sucked in a slow breath as I caught up with the squad, waiting for them to haul themselves into the shuttle before I carefully hauled my bulk up and in. Thankfully our pilot remained as skilled as ever, not letting the craft budge more than an inch or so despite the shifting weight.

"You on this line, human?"

"I'd appreciate it if you stopped calling me that."

"I suppose you did good enough to deserve your name, Kean." She allowed, and I let myself grin as her language rapidly deteriorated to Trena's level. "Damn sight better than half of my commandos. Fucking entitled daughters of whores aren't used to actually using their goddess damned training."
"Could be worse. At least your finding that out now instead of if a Spectre came calling or something."

"... Thank you for that fucking mental horror show. He always such a pool of optimism?"

"Pretty much." Trena chuckled. "Still. He's got a brain, even if one of our kind took bites out of it."

I rolled my eyes as I got settled into the center of the shuttle, the space around me feeling emptier without Yetheri and Maneth. "Thanks scales. You sure know how to cheer me up."

Two snorts answered that, and then Wasea's voice turned serious. "You'll need her to. You're the closest thing to armor that we've got, guess where that leaves you?"

"If I'm on point I need more than Rane's team." Not that I didn't trust them to have my back, they'd just proven that they could. But they were down two people.. and I didn't want to lose more. "Ghai's?"

"Body-guarding Shaaryak to keep her quiet." Trena's growl made it clear what she thought of that. "We've got Chen setting up in a tower near the wreck for sniping duty, with Marn covering his ass."

Which left one person. "Captain Wasea?"

"You'll have a full platoon with you in the initial push. Once it's time to go in, you've got me and my commando team to cover your pale ass."

"Who's taking over while you're inside?"

"T'laria."

I could imagine Trena's wince at that information being told so casually.

"Sounds good." I tried to make it sound like an outsider being given command of an Eclipse company wasn't something to be horrendously confused, and worried, about. A few additional moments of thought made me suppress another wince as I realized that it sounded like Wasea and Trena had more or less cut Nyn out of their command decisions entirely. And wouldn't that just brighten her bloody day up.

It never rains when it fucking pours.

"Any data on the opposition? This Captain in particular."

"Dougal's a bit high strung, but has a rep for being honorable to his contracts. Puts him a bit higher than most of his fellow assholes. Prefers sluging matches to complicated plans." A pause as the Eclipse captain checked over something. "His troops survived getting off Omega, so they won't be walkovers."

I grunted as the shuttle's engines whined, the slow acceleration pressing me down into my restraints as we began to move. "Sounds like we could expect direct counter-attacks by veteran troops then. Not exactly good news."

"What else the fuck is new ape." Trena muttered. "Cutting this link to brief the others, get Rane up to speed. Talk to you when you're on the ground again."

Saying my own farewells, I heard the click as the link dropped. My eyes closed as I tried to get
my mental game back into place.

Get it together Cieran. This bullshit isn't over yet, and you're unfortunately important to it working.

Nodding once, I brought my mic online and started explaining the plan to Rane.

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Next up is Chapter 9: The Commander

Author's Fun Fact: Captain Dougal

The Blue Sun officer who goes only by the name of 'Dougal' is a rarity within the organization in that he prefers to focus entirely on being a mercenary. Rather than spending time setting up rackets, organizing drug trades, or any of the other profit making enterprises that most of the Blue Sun leadership involves themselves in, he prefers to hire out his various units to the Terminus warlords and gang leaders.

This, along with his straightforward and uncomplicated views on combat, have endeared him to the Turians within the Suns, many of whom have little stomach for more criminal affairs. Of the several thousand under his command, over seventy percent were Turian. The remainder were largely human, with a sprinkling of Batarians, most of whom shared his lack of patience for company politics.

Still, his reputation as a mercenary who honors his contracts to the letter, and his insistence that his people do the same, did save many of his soldier's lives when the war began. Three of his four companies were off of Omega, on hire to the Asari warlord T'Ravt for her conflict with the Blood Pack. Rather than ambushing the Suns amongst her people, she offered to let them exit their current contracts, and then immediately re-sign as a new mercenary group. Unsurprisingly, they accepted without dissent.

While it was widely expected that Dougal would likewise defect to join Aria or T'Ravt, he surprised many by remaining loyal to the faltering Suns. Ignoring Tarak's orders entirely when the fighting began on Omega, his simple, mass-assault plan completely took Aria by surprise and enabled the majority of his loyal forces to escape the station and through the relays leading to the Eagle Nebula.

Chapter End Notes

Well. This chapter was interesting to write, as everyone's stress levels continue to rise as the circumstances get a bit clearer. The three principle characters in particular are being affected, as I'm sure you all noticed :). Given where they are, expect things to continue to get words before they get better. The next few chapters will be pretty non-stop as we barrel through the escalating conflict on Koralus and continue to try to get to Balak.

Expect the next update to post on or around Tuesday, 7/21/15.

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 9: The Commander

In the end, Captain Wasea made the executive call to not make a ground assault, instead opting for a direct attack by shuttle landing.

Looking back on it, it was probably the right decision. Given the updating intelligence we were getting about where Dougal's various companies were located, if we'd tried landing on the outskirts and then advancing in he'd have had an eternity to re-route more forces to the fight. Our only realistic option was to launch a rapid blitz and attempt to overwhelm the solitary company protecting the crashed ship before that could happen regardless.

All in all, it was logical. But that didn't mean that I liked it.

"We're making this a hot landing zone."

I couldn't help but wince as Wasea kept a running update of everyone's standing orders. "The target has to be overrun and secured as quickly as possible. Unit four with the Batarians are already down and are seizing objective two."

By which she meant that Marn and Chen, along with eighty or so mercs, had captured the ruined structure overlooking the crash site's right flank. In theory it would give Chen's snipers an excellent place to setup while the others dug in around the place. A more or less ideal position to block any reinforcements from that direction. For a while, at least.

For once, Trena's voice was entirely serious as she broke onto the line. "Unit two has made a combat landing on the opposite side and are under heavy fire. Re-routing three to drop on their left to flank those assholes."

"That's half our reserves before the fight started T'laria." The Eclipse Captain didn't exactly sound thrilled, not that I blamed her.

"The fight's already over if two can't secure that outpost." Trena shot back. "Shaaryak, status of unit five?"

Nyn's normally smooth tones were clipped and lined with frost. "We're holding in our shuttles. We will be ready to make our run to Commander Balak's location when the word is given."

"Good." Wasea grunted. "Unit one, proceed with drop."

Rane murmured a quiet prayer to the Pillars that was echoed by her squad as the shuttle's engines slid up to a low roar.

"We'll be fine." I tried to sound far calmer than I was. We'd done a lot of training in the past few months, but making shuttle landings in a combat zone hadn't been something we'd worked on. After all, we'd had no reason to expect that we'd be on the offensive like this until we'd at least reached similar numbers in our security force as Xerol had commanded. "Just stick close to me until you can find cover. Xan, you know you're job?"

"Anything you target, I drop." The sharpshooter jerked her head in a nervous nod. "Anyone with a tube on their shoulder, I call out and drop."
"Feai, Wathar'i?"

"Focus our fire." The former chorused, seeming to take a calming breath before filling in the rest. "And watch our damned heat."

"While I stick to your back and throw overloads until I'm out." Rane supplied before I could bother asking. "We've got your back Cieran."

"I know." I just hoped that by the time we were done, they'd still all be alive to say that again.

"Thirty seconds!" Our pilot called back, his voice far tenser than it had been on our ride down. "Ready on the right!"

Dutifully turning in that direction, my arms hefted my weapon up as the four Batarian women carefully shifted behind me. They couldn't all use me for cover of course, I wasn't that bulky, but it was better than being in front of me to be sure.

"Fifteen, door opening!"

The words came at the same time as the ship bounced from an impact, my eezo core wobbling frantically to keep me upright. Startled oaths came from my companions, Rane and Feai both grabbing onto my legs to keep themselves up even as the other two frantically seized dangling straps.

"Minor hit! Barriers holding!" The pilot's words went in one ear and out the other as the hatchway slid open, revealing the battlefield.

We were putting down on the cruiser's more intact left side, meaning that the massive shape loomed over us like a cresting tidal wave. In the shade it's bulk offered, streamers of tracer rounds were stretching out from hastily dug positions as the Blue Suns tried to contest our arrival. Even as the door finished sliding away another missile corkscrewed into the air, narrowly missing a shuttle as it deposited a group of Asari onto the muddy ground.

Another hadn't been so lucky, it's boxy frame was burning darkly as a pair of combat medics tried to use it as cover for their triage station. I could only hope that the shuttle had already deposited its troops before the hit, but from the impact angle.. it was doubtful. If we stayed in here the odds of us ending up like that seemed high, and grew higher as more shoulder-launched missiles shrieked into the sky and flew overhead.

"Call it at two meters!" I snapped, taking a half step closer to the edge. "That's as high as I can drop!"

"Five seconds!" My breath was loud in the armored box, the moment seeming to stretch on forever as our shuttle dropped like a stone. "Two meters! Go!"

Metal feet were hitting the decking before he finished the word 'two', and my stomach flipped as I momentarily entered free fall.

Readouts flashed disapprovingly and metal groaned as I hit the ground, legs flexing as best they could to absorb the impact. I still bounced wildly off my restraints, and more actuators shifted to yellow, but thankfully nothing went red yet. As I straightened up my rear camera showed the four armored forms dropping in behind me, stumbling a bit in the loose soil. Xan had barely finished jumping before the shuttle accelerated, banking hard as the pilot got the hell out.

"On the ground!" Taking a few steps to give them room to move, I hefted the large weapon up and let it begin thundering shots down-range. "Direction!?"
"Beacon is set." Wasea's voice was interposed between the deep barks of a shotgun. "We're just on your right. Wait for my call to advance."

"Got it Captain." A long burst forced several distant shapes to throw themselves into a trench. Taking advantage of that as best they could, a few of the Eclipse leapfrogged up to better positions, one waving her thanks as they did.

"Xan, three meters left is your spot!" Rane, meanwhile, had resumed commanding her team. "Feai, Wathar'i, right ahead of her is a trench, get your asses in it!"

"Ma'am!"

As they bolted for cover, I carefully began to creep forwards. I wasn't about to advance on my own, but I wanted to get some kind of cover for my legs and there was a good shard of plating sticking upright about four meters did ahead.

Everything had looked neat from the air. A ragged line of blue where the Suns were entrenched near the ship, facing a solidifying line of yellow where the Eclipse were preparing to rush them. In between had been nothing but a lot of dirt and a few pieces of wreckage. But from the ground it was a hell of a lot harder to get the full picture. On both sides of us mercs were trying to advance from cover to cover, laying down suppressing fire for their fellows as they did so. Across the way, it was nearly impossible to tell what the Suns were doing, little more than huddled shapes and winking lights as they tried to hold their ground.

"How long of a run is that?" Rane shouted, firing a short burst from her assault rifle under my arms.

"At least a hundred!" My own weapon's noise drowned hers, clipping a merc trying to run right to left. He stumbled for a moment, and then collapsed in a heap of limbs when Xan put a round through his head. "Good shot!"

"Thanks!" A sharp intake of breath followed. "Missiles left!"

"See them!" Two Suns had popped up from a foxhole about seventy meters away. Both seemed more concerned with the shuttles still coming in than with me, for which I was thankful.

What I was even more thankful for was that the Eclipse lieutenant on our left apparently decided that keeping me alive to be distracting was important. No sooner had our little unit shifted our fire than I heard her shouting for her people to focus wherever I was shooting.

"He'll set them up! We finish them! Focus fire!" The human woman had lost her helmet at some point, only glowing tech panels protecting her face as she darted back and forth to direct her team. "I need a singularity on that position now!"

She didn't get one, she got two as a pair of Asari glowed with twisting blue light and hurled energy from their finger tips.

If the Blue Suns were screaming as they were dragged into the air to be blown apart by a dozen guns I couldn't hear it.

But that little engagement proved to be the exception, rather than the norm over the next few minutes. The snipers were really the only ones doing any damage, on either side. With the ranges we were fighting at, and the absurd amounts of cover available, it was just too easy for someone to fire off rounds and then duck back before their barriers were drained. Once and a while the Suns would get adventurous and try to move up, and then promptly scatter back as I shifted to dissuade
As the minutes ticked by though, I became more and more nervous. This was supposed to be a fast assault, to take the ship before reinforcements could arrive. I mean, I could understand wanting to attack as a massed group. It would let us overwhelm the smaller force rapidly, without losing people in pointless, trickling attacks. But fuck it was taking too long to setup.

Apparently Wasea agreed with me. We'd migrated to her position during our last movement, and the Eclipse Captain hadn't wasted any time ducking behind me so that she could scream into her helmet. "By Athame's azure! What in the deeps is going on over there!"

A chagrined voice replied. "We're almost in position."

"You've been almost in position for ten fucking minutes! Either get your ass to the line in the next minute or you're dead!"

"Ma'am!"

The Eclipse Captain seethed quietly for a moment, before my HUD pinged as she switched to a secure channel between us. "Once we get inside there won't be room for that monstrosity you're piloting Kean. How long to get you out of it?"

I grimaced at the idea of leaving it behind. Sure, even if someone could get it open they have to hack its operating system and then deal with armor that wasn't properly fitted for them. But that didn't mean that someone couldn't just blast it. Or worse, sabotage it in ways that would be hard for me to spot before I got back into the thing.

Plus, my training with Aethyta notwithstanding, I was far more comfortable fighting from the safety of my armored and shielded cocoon. Getting out of it to fight my way through a wrecked cruiser, relying on the Eclipse to defend something I'd become attached to, very much didn't appeal to me. But that being said, I didn't have much of a choice either. Wasea didn't have many techs with her, and she'd need everyone she could get her hands on if this was going to work.

"Thirty, forty seconds or so."

"Soon as the hold is clear, pop it. Girl, your people cover him. I'll be leaving a squad to hold the bay while we move in, they'll keep it secured for you."

My lips twisted but I got the words out. "Thanks."

"In position ma'am!"

The rear camera caught Wasea checking her omni-tool before giving a tiny nod. "You just saved your life Lieutenant. Unit one, prepare to advance on the target!"

Rane shifted closer to me, double-checking her omnitool and gesturing for her team to get ready to go. My HUD pinged as Trena transmitted down our specific target, highlighting the cargo entrance that the Suns had thoughtfully pried open for us.

Typically, the few moments in between that call and the order to advance seemed to stretch on forever. Eyes flicked over the armor's readouts, making sure that everything was still either green or yellow. The troublesome left leg had a few systems flickering between the two colors, despite a lack of damage, but for the most part I was good to go. Well. As good as I could be under the circumstances.

I almost called Nyn to say.. something. Honestly I don't know what, but my fingers had just
started to shift to bring up our private line when the comm's squealed with Wasea's shout.

"Advance!"

Stepping out from behind the shard of cruiser armor that I'd been looming near, I was entirely unsurprised when I instantly became the center of attention.

Sparks began to fly off of me as metallic grains of sand slammed into my kinetic barriers at stupidly high speed. Gritting my teeth at the barrage, my legs began to push harder, the suit correspondingly accelerating up to a slow jog. I'd thought that I'd be out in front, waving a giant target above my head as the mercs moved up more slowly around and behind me. But then again, I'd never really been in a full battle with a crap-ton of Asari on my side before.

And they had their own variation on the fire and movement concept.

A localized aurora seemed to haze into view as more than twenty Vanguards, including Wasea, hurled themselves forwards. Soil and dirt flew into the air as they covered nearly half the distance to the Suns with those charges, causing shouts of alarm to carry even over the gunfire. Not hesitating for a moment, they ducked into what cover they could before starting to throw down some suppressing fire.

Belatedly I brought up my own gun, the dual barrels thundering as I tried to chip in as best I could. But honestly, the Eclipse were more than handling the situation.

More Asari darted past me on either side, pushing themselves into all-out sprints. One went tumbling to the ground when a sniper found her skull, but the others fell into soccer slides or dove to join the Vanguards. A few heartbeats later barriers began to snap to life, the increasingly panicky shots from the enemy rippling harmlessly across them.

Cutting off my own shots to avoid hitting them, I shifted my focus to not tripping over anything with the suit's flat feet. The remaining, probably non-biotic Eclipse members, broke from cover once the biotic wall was in place. Far from being out in front, I was actually one of the last to arrive at the mid-point. I'd barely made it there when the adepts began to flag.

One by one they dropped, gasping for air and clutching at their heads as the barriers collapsed. Here and there their comrades quickly brought them water, shouting what sounded like encouragement for what they'd just done.

Wasea ducked into her crater after firing off a carnage round, her massive shotgun glowing red. "Kean, you're up!"

Forgetting that she couldn't see into the armored box protecting my head, I gave her a brief nod as I lumbered past her position. She kept shouting orders to her people, but her voice was quickly drowned out as the Suns again began to refocus on me as I moved through the friendly lines.

It started slowly at first, but as soon as I leveled off my gun and opened fire, things got a bit more complicated.

My barriers had mostly recovered by that point, but promptly plummeted again under the blizzard of fire directed my way. That deluge lasted for the first fifteen meters or so, more than enough to deplete my shields, before slackening as veteran squad leaders re-directed their teams to focus on people they could actually kill.

For a brief moment, taking up about another five or ten meters of distance, it actually seemed like I'd make it without any issues. The terrain that the Suns were camped out in was jagged and filled with ship debris, which worked well at covering them, but it also gave them very poor sight lines
as we got closer.

Naturally, that state of affairs lasted but a moment before the Suns finished shifting their troops around.

I flinched, my body jerking to the right and sending my armor into an awkward hop-skip. It probably looked stupid as hell, but the carnage round that had drawn the reaction whipped just over my left shoulder as I moved. That was as far as my luck stretched. Another Sun rose on a fire-step, his shotgun bucking as another carnage shot whipped through the air and hammered into my chest. It drew a grunt and a bit of a stumble, but the eezo core and the various gyros quickly corrected my balance.

The merc had vanished back down, just like the last, and I swung my gun to the right and let loose at full auto and hoped for a lucky guess.

I was half-lucky.

This time two mercs had risen, one clutching a glowing shotgun while another heaved a missile tube onto his shoulder. The latter promptly tumbled back down as my scattered rounds hammered into him, dead or just wounded, I didn't know. Nor did I have the time to wonder about it because the next carnage round ripped into my left side, and was almost instantly followed by a blow to my right shoulder from someone I hadn't even seen.

"Fucking shit!" My finger jerked away from my trigger as I stumbled again, my head nearly smacking into the armor plating around it. As I shook my skull out to refocus my eyes, the hud kept flashing warningly as the damage accumulated.

"Cieran! Keep moving!" Rane snapped out an overload around me, flinching back as rifle fire sent sparks off of my left arm. "We're almost there!"

Flexing my legs, I dug my flat feet into the soil and forced myself to resume moving. We'd gotten close enough that the Eclipse was seriously into the fray now. Shockwaves, warp fire, and conventional shots were ripping through the air as the yellow-clad mercenaries began to give as good as they got. Behind me, Rane threw out another tech mine while her squad members snapped off shots at anyone popping their head up.

Shouts and bellowed orders from the Suns lines grew louder and more frantic as I closed, sweeping my fire back and forth to suppress any more attempts to hit me with carnages or missiles. It seemed to be working, at least none of the mercs in the trench in front of me seemed to want to stand up with the heavy shots I was thundering at them.

I was about ten meters away when Wasea called out another order over the comms, and the Vanguards again made their leaps.

The Captain herself hurtled past my left side, a scream piercing the gunfire as the bow-wave from her charge crushed someone in the trench. There wasn't even a pause in her step as she dropped into the depression, her massive claymore thundering as she killed someone else. Up and down the line dark blue flashes of light snapped and faded as biotic powers did their work.

It started around when I finally made it to the trench itself, my weapon following my eyes as I looked for anyone still breathing and wearing blue. Off to my left, a Turian rose and began to make a dash for the cruiser, his movements drawing my attention. Rane and I both fired off long bursts in his direction, one of my heavy shots blowing a leg off even as blue blood flew from impacts to his chest.
"They're running!" someone shouted. As if that was the signal, the remaining Suns seemed to make a run for the ship *en masse*.

Not many of them made it.

Settling into place, I quickly switched from target to target, trying to keep my bursts short. Rane slid out to my right, and two more Batarian women appeared on my left, focusing their own fire on the people who's barriers I was ripping apart.

And a few minutes later, it was over. On the outside at least.

"Everyone move up!" Wasea was confident enough to haul herself out of the trench, waving an arm expressively. "I want that piece of shit cleared within twenty! Kean! Move your human ass!"

I couldn't help but snort at that, but I glanced around until I found where someone had thrown down a sheet of metal over the trench. It groaned and sank into the soil at my first step, and I hastily cross it before it could break completely under my weight.

"Hurry up down there." Trena's voice carried through my speakers as I moved to keep up with Wasea. "Sederis threw up some drones, one survived long enough to get a good glimpse north of you."

"Let me guess." My cheek twitched. "Dougal is on his way?"

"He's on his fucking way. His company will be there inside of an hour, two more following him up."

The Eclipse Captain's voice carried a wince. "I don't like those odds girl. This group was scattered and not ready for this kind of fight. Dougal's going to bend us over and hammer us till we break."

"So get in the goddess damned ship and turn its guns around!" Trena growled. "Fuck Wasea, don't you dare turn into one of those prissy Thessian bitches who can't deal with a real fight. I beat that shit out of you centuries ago."

A startled beat followed before Wasea chuckled. "Let Athame take me out to sea before that happens."

"That's more like it. I'm directing the flanking units to dig in and get prepped for a fight. Clean that damned ship out."

"And then get my unit dug in around the entrance." She finished, hefting her gun up as we approached the open cargo doors. "Excuse us, assholes to kill."

Besides me, Rane and her team, we had Wasea's personal commando unit filling in around us. Like her, there armor was a dark navy rather than an obnoxious yellow, with the company logo in gold on their shoulders. Trailing behind us were a trio hauling heavy packs, clutching pistols nervously as they tried to stay back as much as they could.

"Kean. That thing strong?"

"Construction model."

"Meaning?"

My eyes rolled. "It can bench press aircars."
"Right. Everyone else, lurk right here and suppress anyone you see. Keep the damned techheads safe. Kean, Callia. You two with me."

I carefully strode forwards, another Asari with a heavy shotgun following in my wake. Unsurprisingly, she and Wasea allowed me to take the lead, and I kept my weapon up and aimed as we approached.

The cargo bay was at a light angle, sloping down and away with the cruiser's cant. Nothing too bad, but I still had to be careful to move slowly to make sure that my eezo core had time to adjust for the odd footing.

At first glance, there wasn't much to see.

"Emptied out." I grunted into my mic. This particular bay had either hadn't had anything in it when the ship went down, or, more likely, the Suns had emptied it out sometime after that. Keeping an eye on the small door at the other end, my legs kept moving, causing deep echoes to sound as the metal feet hit the decking. "And empty."

"Right. My team, we're going in. Kean, you get the Batarian women and the techs, head for the target once you're loose." More boots hit metal as everyone began to pile into the ship. "T'laria?"

"All your teams are reporting progress." Trena's voice had a harried quality as she tried to keep everything coordinated. "Looks like there's a group forting up in the bridge."

"Engines first."

"Turn right out that door. Ape, you're going left."

I grunted, busy hauling myself out of the way as the commandos followed their Captain out of the bay and into the ship proper.

Moving a bit to the right, I leaned back until the engine mount was resting against the angled wall. A few flicks from my left hand brought up the system's omni-tool and locked the legs into place, after which I jerked my chin into the egress button.

By the time the armor finished opening, and I had scrambled down, Rane was waiting patiently next to the armor with my helmet and submachine gun held out for me.

"Thanks Rane." I gratefully pulled the first on, breathing more freely as the tiny air circulators got to work.

She inclined her head slightly, which made me frown at how stiff she was.

"What's.." Oh fuck. I grimaced inside my helmet as I belatedly realized how many Batarians were standing near the technicians. "Wathar'i?"

"Hit on the second run."

"Dammit." Air blew out my nose as I took my weapon. "Wounded?"

A tight shake of her head.

"Fuck." Fingers jerked as I took the safety off. I had no idea what to say. We'd been on this fucking planet for a few hours and we'd already lost three of her people. And for what? "Rane.."

"Cieran.. it's.. let's just get this over with, all right?"
I gave her a slight not, making sure to tilt my head to the left. Her back straightened a bit before her own dipped.

She took just another moment before sucking in a breath and turning to the milling group. "Right, you lot! Get your asses down here!"

Xan and Feai quickly moved down to join us, the Eclipse members following a bit more slowly.

"Xan, I want you to cover the rear. Feia, you're up front with me." I glanced over the mercs. One was a human male, the other two were Salarian. "Which one of you is in charge?"

"I am." One of the Salarian's chirped. "Senior Technician Hetherus."

"Right. You and Rane are behind us. If we get in a fight, I want to rotate between us four to keep our barriers up and our guns cold. Got it?"

"That is an acceptable plan of action, Harath'krem." His voice didn't move as fast as Mordin's might have, but like most Salarians it felt like he was restraining himself from babbling at top speed with every clipped word. "We are to follow your lead unless your orders are inane."

"I doubt that will happen." Rane spoke in my defense. "The Harath'krem is more than capable in combat."

Personally I thought that was a blatant lie, but I wasn't about to contradict her in front of them.

"Right." My omni-tool flickered to life as I brought my communications online. "Scales, you said left?"

"Left until you hit the main port corridor ape. Then right and straight down it until you reach the port side battery." She paused. "Better hurry the fuck up ape, there's a lot of mercs headed to rip your head off."

Blowing out a breath, I turned and stared at the doorway before forcing my legs to start moving. "On our way."

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Next up is Chapter 10: The Warlord

Author's Fun Fact: Timeline of the Blue Suns War – Part IV

February 27th, 2180 – The Hegemony Second fleet is pulled from the line for rest and refitting, the Third and Fourth maintain a blockade of all Traverse-side relays leading to the Theodosian prime relay.

March 2nd, 2180 – The Qwin'tos's SIU teams make their first raid on a Blue Sun world, helping the Blood Pack Warlord Ganar Yulaz destroy an eezo refinery.

March 9th, 2180 – Eclipse CO Sederis begins negotiations with Aria and several lesser Terminus Warlords. It quickly becomes clear to the others that T'loak and Sederis have allied with one another, forcing several of the lesser warlords into stricter levels of subservience to them.

March 14th, 2180 – Personally led by Commander Balak, the SIU teams aboard the Qwin'tos launch three rapid assault attacks at separate Blue Sun outposts used to shuttle supplies from the Terminus to Vosque in the Traverse. Two are destroyed, and the third is so badly battered that Warlord T'Ravt seizes it easily two days later.
March 22nd, 2180 – Hegemony Second fleet returns to the blockade line, while the Fourth is pulled off.

March 28th, 2180 – Seeking to prove herself as an upper-tier leader, Warlord T'Ravt launches direct attacks on the remaining Blue Sun positions in the Terminus. Most surrender after token resistance and are absorbed into her forces, and her fleet blockades the Terminus side of the Theodosian prime.

April 5th, 2180 – Aria T'loak, T'Ravt, and High Admiral Del'thran begin negotiations to establish trade lanes between Omega and the Hegemony. They will go into effect once the Hegemony has destroyed Vosque's final bastion in an assault planned for May. Realizing their situation, several Blue Sun ships flee to T'Ravt's territory and surrender rather than be taken by the Hegemony.

April 10th, 2180 – Attempting to insert an SIU team onto Korlus, the Qwin'tos is struck by several volleys from hidden ground to space batteries. Badly damaged and losing power, the ship makes a low-powered crash landing on the planet's northern continent.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a little harder to write.. Cieran didn't have as much to do as he was worried about, the Eclipse it seems are more than capable of handling a half-strength group of Blue Suns. Of course, with Dougal and a much larger group on the way, we'll have to see how things go. :) 

Also work has struck back with a vengeance, which has thrown my time-table off a bit. Expect the next chapter a week from today, so 7/28. After that there's going to be a bit of a hiatus thanks to GenCon. Probably a full week off there, so the chapter after that wouldn't be until either the seventh or the eleventh of August, we'll have to see.

One more note, this is the last of the Timeline fun facts, given that we've reached the start of AR:Terminus. The next set is either going to be going over the history of specific galactic bad-asses (cough, Shepard, the Butcher of Torfan, Kai-leng, etc, cough), or delving a bit more into the strength and politics of the various Terminus warlords. Feel free to let me know which you'd prefer to get first. :) 

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 Warlord

Chapter Notes

Massive credit to GreaterGoodIreland for creating a TvTropes page for this series. Words can't express how awesome it was of them to create it and how thankful I am that they took the time to do so.

Everyone please feel free to take a look at it, and if you have an account, it would be cool to see people adding their own takes on the series. :)

See my profile for the link, or simply go to TvTropes . Org and search for 'Another Realm'.

Chapter 10: The Warlord

When I'd been younger, I'd gone in early to high school to work out before classes started. Now, at five in the morning, the lights aren't exactly on in most of the building. All you had to see by was whatever exterior lights were glowing out of the windows and the red exit lights over the doorways. Seeing the rows of lockers trailing into darkness, with the only sound being your own echoing feet. I'd always been more than a little creeped out by it.

The crashed Batarian cruiser reminded me of that. Just with more gunfire.

Either the mercs hadn't bothered to get the ship's reactor going, assuming it could be, or they'd deactivated intentionally. Regardless of the reason, the only lights we had were the ones that the Suns had strung out to make sure they didn't trip over crap as they moved around. Rane and her girls had started to flick their gunlights on, only for me and the Eclipse team to quietly yell at them to turn them off. I'd read enough stories, and seen enough movies, to know that carrying around a light in a dark location would do little more than broadcast our location.

We hadn't gotten very far down the hall before we'd run into a pair of Turians fleeing from deeper within the ship. That fight had delayed us longer than I'd hoped, the two of them easily holding us off thanks to the narrow corridors we were fighting in.

I had hoped that that would have been it, but I'd had to leap back around the corner leading to the main hall as shots whipped past me. For more fun and games, I had a rough time getting a good count of how many were even shooting at me from the darkness. But from the tentative way they were firing at me, they were having just as rough of a time figuring shit out.

My SMG clicked ominously as it overheated, and I promptly yanked myself back around the corner. Without missing a beat, Hetherus moved up to take my place, firing quick bursts from his own light weapon.

"How many?" Even with our helmet radios, Rane'li had to shout to be heard over the deafening echoes. Yellowish light from the gunfire and ricochets flickered like demented strobe lights.

"Five!" I brought my left arm up and flicked my omni-tool online.
"Four now!" The Eclipse Salarian corrected, "Staying in cover, quite annoying! Grenades?"

I nodded, taking the time to prep one of my overload mines. "Flash bangs!?"

"I've got two left!" Gregory was the only other human present, his voice gruff as he held up the two small discs.

"Right, same as the last time!" Rane scooted over to give me space to lean against the wall between her and Hetherus. "Xan, Greg, front!"

The Batarian sniper and Human technician both moved up, quickly checking over the gear as they got ready.

"Distance sir?"

"Twenty meters." The Salarian ducked back, checked over his gun, nodded once and then promptly leaned around the corner to send another volley of shots down the hall. "Mark, ten seconds."

Rane belatedly got her own omni-tool ready, the orange light from it shifting as her fingers moved. My own continued to glow a pale blue, the tech mine launcher on my belt causing a panel to blink slowly in readiness.

The Eclipse leader gave another quick nod before blurring into motion, "Mark!"

As he fell back, Xan and Greg moved up. The human's left arm cocked back and whipped the grenade down the hall, a blindingly bright flash illuminating the cracking bulkheads for a split second. A few breaths after the detonation, our sharpshooter was already in the hall, falling to a knee as she brought her long rifle up.

If my and Hetherus's sub-machine guns had been loud, her sniper rifle was positively deafening. It thundered once, then twice.

"One down, three in sight!" I barely registered her words as I pushed off from the wall, dodged Greg as he fell back, and stepped out into the hall.

I still couldn't see crap, and the only thing I could do was hope that the salarian's range estimate was right as my left hand triggered the mine. The small disc sailed smoothly through the air, detonating after traveling the prescribed distance. Lightning seemed to arc, curling malevolently across three forms still reeling and clutching at their heads from the flash bang.

Their screams and flinches as barriers were ripped away grew louder after Rane's mine shot past my right ear and detonated in a red flash in the center of their formation. One was flung into a wall, while the other two began to thrash and frantically beat at the fire that clung to them.

Taking a few breaths, I carefully brought my little gun up and fired once. And then again.

"Merciful." Hetherus carefully moved up next to me, his own weapon still up and ready. "Would have let them burn myself."

A twitch of my shoulder was my response. I had left people, a very specific someone in particular, to burn to death in the past. But that didn't mean that these two random mercs had deserved that. "Take point with Rane. Xan, Greg. Follow up with me."

"Harath'krem." Rane carefully moved past me, her head dipping to left as she did.
"Status ape?" Trena's voice sounded off in my helmet.

"Another group of Suns down, we're moving up the port side corridor." Up was meant literally in this case. The angle of the ship was making my damned calves start to burn. "How's everything else?"

"Everything else is going well." Captain Wasea cut in, her voice amused. "Engineering is secured, but we're keeping the power off until we take the bridge. My team and two others are converging on it, the others are already headed back outside."

I grunted. That was something at least. "Is the main reactor good or are we looking at backup?"

"Guess."

Backup power then. Workable, if a bit annoying.

Hetherus apparently agreed. "Will need to reconfigure the emergency lines to ensure the launchers receive power. Do we have a trace of the cables in question?"

"They follow the secondary access shafts." Both his and my omni-tools flashed as Trena forwarded us the data. "Better split some people off right now ape, they're going to have to re-route several of those damned things if you want this to work."

"Hetherus, take Ullavai."

The Eclipse member gave me a quick nod, he and his fellow Salarian cutting right as we passed a side-hall.

"How's the rest of the fighting going?"

Her shrug was practically audible. "Both flanks are secure, such as they fucking can be. Rest of the mercs bolted into the wreckage north of us, probably waiting for their boss to show his face."

Rane cut in. "Do you have an update on him?"

"He and four of his companies are on their way." My friend's voice went flat. "First will hit us in thirty, the rest hitting us in waves. About twenty apart, if the goddess grants us luck, otherwise it'll be shorter."

I grimaced, slowing as we neared our destination. "Access corridor Nine-F?"

"That's it ape."

The emergency bulkhead next to the label was rather closed. We'd need power tools to cut through it, and even then it would probably take more than an hour. "Wasea, we need some power here."

"One-" A shotgun's roar made me wince. "-moment!"

"Scales?"

"The hall is for maintenance on the missile bays and port side heat sinks, should be right on the other side of the door. You'll need to locate which tubes are loaded and mark them for the Salarians."

"Where am I launching them from?"
"Auxiliary bridge, you actually just went past it." I could imagine her lips twisting. "That's going to need power too."

"That what this stupid thing is for." Greg jerked a thumb at the case on his back. "Should I get started on that?"

My chin jerked in a nod. "Xan, Feia, go with him. If you can grab some of those emergency lights the Suns left, we're going to need more lighting than we've got."

The human mercenary seemed a little uncomfortable as the two Batarian women followed him back the way we came, not that I really cared.

"And me?" Rane asked a few moments later, interrupting my impatient foot tapping.

"Make sure no one sneaks up and shoots me while I check these stupid things."

Her helmet swung my way. "I was a communications technician you know. I'm not useless with an omni-tool."

"Have you ever cracked open a missile battery to see if the warhead was hot?"

"Have you?"

My mouth opened, closed, and then I had the good grace to feel a bit abashed. And a little ashamed. "Well... No. I'm sorry. Ah..."

A strangle sound that might have been the start of a giggle made her shudder, and her voice was full of suppressed mirth. Apparently she hadn't taken what I'd said as badly as I'd thought. "You don't have to act super-competent in front of me Cieran. I'm not in the Eclipse."

"I'm aware."

"I mean. I was in the garage when you and Trena tried to get that shield prototype to work. How long did it take to fix that aircar?"

I might have twitched slightly. "You can help, all right? I'm sorry for implying that you couldn't."

"I didn't know you could curse so fluently in the high language."

Thankfully Captain Wasea came to my rescue before that particular story could continue. It hadn't been one of my prouder moments as an engineer. Or Trena's, come to think of it. Dark red lighting flickered weakly to life around us as the ship's emergency power was brought online, revealing just how trashed the place was. This part of the ship might have been mostly intact, but between the impact and the Suns looting through everything... well, there was random crap everywhere.

Far more importantly, the small panel next to the door blinked to life.

A quick jab had the all of metal sliding away, revealing another dimly lit corridor. This one, however, was filled with machinery, leaving barely enough space for the pair of us to crouch down and awkwardly move along underneath of it.

Trena kept up the commentary as we moved. "Air duct. Coolant lines to the heat sinks. There, loading mechanism for tube one. No, stop. Roll over ape. That lever on the left, haul it down to disengage it. Good. Now get off your ass and haul it up and out of the way."

I growled out more than a few uncomplimentary things about her parentage, and Rane surprised
me with her own invectives. The fucking thing was heavy. As we heaved it upwards, it eventually clicked and locked, giving us just enough space to reach the launching tube itself. Honestly it reminded me a bit of a submarine's torpedo launcher, except with deactivated control panels rather than levels and knobs.

"Right. There's the tube end, link your omni-tool to port five-oh-oh-two, that should trigger the automatic diagnostic."

My fingers flickered as I did so, grunting as tiny led icons lit up on the side. "Rane, some light?"

Her helmet lamp obligingly snapped to life, letting me read the Batarian script.

"Loaded and cold." Which was good. There was no way in hell we'd be able to get the loading mechanisms to work without a hell of a lot more time. And if the stupid thing had been armed and ready to launch when the ship crashed, we'd be more likely to blow ourselves apart then launch it if we tried.

"Now what?" Rane turned her head, and her light, around. "Is there a diagnostic to run?"

"Hegemony construction girl. That's it on your end, no safety to disengage or crap like that. Check the rest and then get your asses to the control center."

I blinked disbelievingly. "Wait. That's it?"

"That's what I just fucking said ape. Now get to the rest of them." The radio clicked as she switched to a different channel.

There was a moment of glaring at nothing in particular before Rane couldn't help herself. "Well. You're right, this is a very advanced-"

"Rane."

There was another strangled laugh, but she let me off the hook.

The next ten minutes were filled with swearing and sweat as we worked our way along the battery. Of the eight tubes, six were good to go. One was empty, and we couldn't get number six's reloader to retract. Either there was a missile in the process of being inserted, or there was damage above it that was preventing it.

"You two alive in here?" Wasea's voice called into the hall as we made a last effort to get the thing to move.

"Yes!" I collapsed onto my back, panting more than a little. "We've got six."

"That enough?"

Six anti-ship missiles being shot at surface targets, at point blank range? It would be like swatting flies with a hammer. Assuming we could get power to the launchers, number one. And actually get them targeted. "It's enough to stand off one wave, maybe two."

"More than that coming our way Kean."

My lips curled downwards. "I know Captain, but this is what we can rig to shoot soon. I'll have your guys check the other batteries once we have at least this set ready to go."

Her head cocked slightly in consideration, then gave a quick nod. "Right. I'll be in the main cargo
bay, good a place as any to command the defense. You lot keep your asses working." Armored feet sent pounding echoes drifting into the air as she left.

Rane and I slid out from under the machinery one at a time, and I gratefully accepted her hand when she offered it. Then she hauled a bit harder than I expected, probably because she thought I was heavier than I was, and we practically bounced off one another as I rose unsteadily fast.

"Sorry!" We both staggered a bit, grabbing each others arms to stay upright. "Are you all right?"

I was sweaty, I felt like I could sleep for a week, the girl I thought I loved was beyond pissed at me, and me at her. Oh yeah, and there was a small army of mercenaries on their way to kill us all.

"I'll live." It came out with a sigh. "Come on, more crap to get done."

The port side auxiliary bridge was fairly well lit when we arrive. Xan was absent, but Feia and Greg were both there. She was busy opening up access panels on a few of the stations as he absentely directs her, most of his focus on the portable power pack that he's rigging into place.

"We've got six." They both glanced over as we entered. "Power?"

There was a grunt from the human. "Weapons has power, but sensors are fucked. No way we can aim them."

"What about communications?"

His head tilted. "I don't know. Why?"

It took quite a bit of self control to not call throw something and call him a fucking moron. Which he apparently was. "Because there's a goddess damned fleet in orbit that can feed us targeting data. Fuck, it's not like the actual sensors would do us any fucking good with half the ship buried in the muck even if they did work."

Fingers curled slightly as I stung his worthless pride, but he jerked his head. "Station on the right."

"Feia, get it open. You, power. Rane?"

She was already moving. "We're going to need data. Preferably from something with a good angle and top end equipment. The flagship?"

"Scales?"

"Sending the request now ape."

"Can you translate it?"

Her omni-tool flickered to life. "I have a few algorithms that Xerol had me write when I was on the starport's control team. Assuming the Hegemony hasn't shifted their standards since I left, and the Eclipse haven't totally reconfigured their sensor packages.. I think I can get something put together."

"Get to it then."

The next fifteen minutes were a minor frenzy of activity. Greg and I spliced the power cables into place, communicating with Hetherus over the radio as he re-routed the emergency power to the right locations to let us actually pull this off. Not only did the missile tubes themselves need power in order to trigger the launch sequence, we needed to make sure that all of the secondary systems
that actually connected this control room to them were also functioning.

While we mere males were busy doing that, Rane had managed to get the ship's comms online. Quick, clipped conversations with the crew of the *Solar Eclipse* and Trena followed as she pulled in the sensor data that we were going to need. It also gave her plenty of opportunity to let us know just how many Suns were on their way.

Nothing motivates like a literal deadline.

Feai and Xan didn't exactly have any training that would be helpful, but they had strong arms, and that was about all they needed to check other missile bays. The first one they checked, nearest to the bow, was a definite no-go. The armor had bulked down and smashed the launch tubes entirely. But the second was still intact, and their own cursing filled our helmet comms whenever we asked for a progress report.

"*Five in this one.*" The sniper groused. "*Moving to number three.*"

I grimaced at the orders I was about to give. "Sorry Xan, Wasea's calling everyone but us to the bay. The pickets have engaged at the edges of the perimeter."

Feai's voice was equally as exhausted. "*Please tell me we'll get some water at least.*"

"*You two are defending Kean's armor.*" The Eclipse Captain cut into our channel, the override making me wince at the radio's squeal. "*Haul your asses down here then you get sit on them for a bit.*"

The pair signed off, but my omni-tool flickered as Wasea shifted to the personal channel she, Trena and I were sharing. "*For a bit. Tell me you're making progress in there.*"

"*We are. Rane's reconfiguring the targeting data into something these piece of shit computers can actually understand, Hetherus is patching in two of the cut lines now.*" I leaned over Rane's shoulder, watching her fingers fly as she coded on the fly. "Call it fifteen."

"*We don't have fifteen.*"

My lips twisted. "That's still fifteen faster than I originally estimated."

"*I get it, it's a goddess sent fucking miracle.*" There was a hiss of breath. "*Who do you actually need in there?*"

"Rane and Hetherus." I wasn't so conceited as to think that I could just take over the coding she was doing. Not on the fly like this. "She's handling the sensor conversion. He's getting the power spliced properly to battery four. Soon as he's done there he's heading to number two."

"*Not you?*"

"Well ideally we'd have someone on the targeting software." I glanced at the station, "But Rane should be able to handle it once she gets the data converted. And your voice makes me feel like you want every gun."

"*No shit.*" Her voice was a tad more respectful as she continued, and I got the impression that I'd just passed some kind of test. "*All right. Grab that tech and get your ass down here as well. Tell that girl to keep at her shit and to feed T'laria a copy of the data, she's going to handle target selection.*"

My mouth went a bit dry. Brave words kind of went with the territory when you had to talk with
the Eclipse, but I honestly had been hoping she wouldn’t take me up on that particular offer. I’d much rather be sitting at the targeting computer and picking out targets to shoot massive warheads at that being outside and getting shot at.

"Right. On my way then." The line went dead with a click. "Greg, off to the front."

The fellow human had only grown surlier as the work had gone on. Especially as it became increasingly obvious to everyone that he wasn’t nearly as skilled as he apparently thought he was. I’d more or less given him standing orders to shut up and do what Rane and I told him. "And what, leave you two alone in here?"

"No. I’m going with you.” Rane’s head whipped around in shock. "Rane, you're staying. Soon as the conversion is complete you need to setup a copy-link to scales and then get your ass into the weapon's chair. She calls out the target zone and you launch, got it?"

"I. Cieran, you should be the one-"

"If this is another caste thing I'm going to hit you."

She shrank a little bit in her seat, tilting her head deferentially to the left.

I sighed at the sight of her mental switch flipping back to 'worthless lowborn' mode. "You and me, seriously need to have a talk when we get back to Illium. Preferably when people aren’t shooting at us."

"Not all you two need to have a talk about." Trena’s voice made both of us start.

"Scales.” I growled. "Not the time. And how the hell do you keep cutting in like this? I thought you had video only."

"No idea." Which meant she’d probably copied the old programs I'd used to let her and I spy on the teams while she was injured. Fuck if I knew when she'd gotten it into my armor though. "Shouldn't your pale ass be moving?"

"Yes. You, let's go. Rane, let scales know when you're done."

She barely had the time to give me a nod before I was in the hallway. Gregory just shook his head as he exited as well, setting off at a decent clip down the corridor.

I had enough sense to make sure that he was out in front.

Emotionally compromised from all the crap that was going on or not, I liked to think that I kept some of my wits about me. We didn't talk as we moved, a situation that seemed to suit the both of us just fine.

"Hurry up ape. Dougal's sticking to form."

"Meaning?” I almost slid as we skidded around the last turn.

"Meaning he's got a fucking brain to go with his quad and doesn't give a fuck about fancy shit. He's keeping his first company in one big mass and is swinging it around our left."

It took a second for me to bring up the mental map. There were really only two good targets in place for him to hit, us in the cruiser, and the broken tower where Chen and Marn were setup. Both their people and Wasea's here were pretty well dug-in, with plenty of space to retreat if we had to. But our left flank was out in the fucking breeze, without any good cover or positions. If he
rushed his full force along that side he'd minimize the damage Chen's sharpshooters could do.

"He's going to roll up that side right into us." I grimaced. "Fucking smart. Denies us being able to use their own defenses. What's the counter plan?"

"Wasea's rotating her first unit out of the ship to try and punch him on the nose while the others make a controlled withdrawal."

My mouth went dry. "Um."

"Yes. It's a bad fucking plan ape. We don't have the numbers for a better one, all you can do is buy time for Rane and that goddess damned Salarian to finish."

"Great." Not that I didn't have confidence in Rane, but any plan that started with 'we need to buy time until x happens' wasn't one that I liked.

The cargo bay was mostly empty by the time we arrived. Wasea was surrounded by a small group, all of them working on portable terminals that had been brought in at some point. She was snapping orders, frantically trying to orchestrate a defense from a shitty position with inferior numbers. My companion took off in her direction without a word, while I turned left to where Xan and Feai were standing next to my immobile armor.

"She's nice and safe for you Harath'krem." Xan hefted up her gun. "Was wondering if you were going to make it."

"I had nothing better to do." I shrugged, handing her my own weapon before yanking my helmet free.

She just snorted, heading around to attach them to the thing's back while I started the laborious process of getting in.

"Wasea, this is Kean. I'm in. Few moments to get all systems online."

"Good." Something exploded in the distance, and everyone froze for an instant before her staff gave out muted cheers. "Two Suns shuttles just crashed trying to get around us, no survivors."

"That's something." I muttered. "Plan still the same?"

"Your girl and unit five are coming to the party. Soon as we engage they're going to hit those assholes in the flank."

"Quite." Nyn's voice wasn't a lot warmer, but she didn't sound furious anymore. Either she'd had time to calm down or she was starting to worry about the situation. Maybe a bit of both. "We'll be making a combat landing in the old Suns trench line, we should be able to catch them in the open."

"That's a big if Tarath'shan." I barely paid attention to my HUD as it booted up, trying to keep my voice level and respectful. This wasn't the time for either of us to snap again. "If they advance down that line you're going to be landing right on top of them."

"Do you have a better idea?" Or she could get insulted anyway. "If we land in the zone you used we'll be totally exp."

"Don't start." Wasea snarled, her head whipping in my direction to emphasize her irritaiton. "Either of you. Kean, get your ass moving. Shaaryak, hold until I give the signal."
"Understood."

I felt my muscles twitch in a cheek, but forced my legs into motion. My left hand shifted a bit, making sure to cut the private line so that Nyn wouldn't hear the next part. "I don't suppose Balak could provide a distraction?"

"Asshole still isn't answering our hails." Trena growled. "And he's had more than enough fucking time to find a safe spot to hold up."

"Smart asshole then." The Eclipse Captain stepped away as I passed her, breaking into a slow jog to match my strides. Xan and Feai followed a few strides behind. "I'd keep him on the damn line if he did pick up just to give them someone else to go after."

"Too bad." Would have made our lives easier.

Her personal commandos were waiting just outside of the ship, rising to attention as their Captain arrived.

"Lieutenant Elissa, status of unit one?"

The competent human woman who'd been on our flank during the first advance stepped forwards. "Ready to advance ma'am."

A slow breath escaped my lips as I did a last check of my systems. Some were still glowing a baleful yellow, which was irritating, but there wasn't anything I could do about it without getting it back to the mansion's garage. And I still had no fucking idea what was wrong with the left leg. But the patch repairs still seemed to be holding. That was something.

So long as they continued to.

"Kean?"

"Ready to go, Captain."

"Then let's get our asses moving."

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Next up is Chapter 10: The Kill

Author's Fun Fact: Profiles in Courage I

Lt. Cmdr John Anders, N7, "The Butcher"

Growing up on the colony world of Mindoir, John Anders would likely have been destined for the quiet life of a farmer had it not been for a pirate raid that saw his entire life turned upside down. Hungry for revenge, he joined the military as soon as they would take him, and hurled himself into his training.

Despite worries over his psychological profile, he wowed trainers and superior alike with his rapid improvements. Even his personal life seemed to become far more settled when he met a fellow N7 trainee, equally as dedicated to the pursuit of justice after her own experiences as a child. While their romantic liaison ended after they graduated as N7s, they remained close friends.

After earning his nickname during Alliance's reprisal raid on Torfan, there were rumblings
among the civilian government that Anders should be pressured to resign as a face-saving measure after the Council moved to censure the Alliance for the attack. His attitudes towards the Asari and Salarians, who voted for the motion, decreased alongside his respect for his own government.

One too many public comments later nearly had him exiled to the training facility on Titan, before Shepard convinced her mentor Captain D. Anderson that his talents, and outlook on life, could be put to good use liaising with the Turian Hierarchy. Indeed, his posting as commander of the guard to the Alliance ambassador on Palaven was met with much fan-fair, the Turians applauding a man who had gotten the job done, regardless of political correctness.

**Spectre Candidate:** Fourth Selection group, rejected by Ambassador Udina

**Posting, January 2183 – Systems Alliance Embassy, Palaven**

Chapter End Notes

Not as much action in this one, just framing at the edges while they try and get power to the ship's weapons. For those still hoping for more combat, that's basically the entire next two chapters, and I'll give out the hint that there will be a deal of it outside of his armor.

The next chapter will post either Wednesday, 7/29 right before I start the drive down to GenCon, or sometime after I return (on or around Friday, 8/7).

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 11: The Kill

The fighting had barely begun, and it was already going poorly.

If that wasn't obvious from the panicked chatter filling the radio waves, it was also entirely apparent that, unlike the rear-echelon troops that had been inspecting the crashed warship, Captain Dougal didn't skimp on the gear for his personal soldiers. Or on their training either. They'd hit Wasea's front units with all of the subtlety and strength of a fucking battering ram.

I did have to admit that the second unit was doing a respectable job holding out against the heavy force hitting them straight on. Between the main Sun trench running parallel to the ship's side, the communications trenches running back from there, and an assorted number of hastily dug foxholes they actually had a decent enough position to fight from. But their success was costing their friends in unit Three.

While Two's right flank was secured by the ship's bulk, and then by unit Four and Chen's snipers in the tower on the other side of that, their left was hanging in the breeze. Sure they could curl around into the Suns' main trench, but we just didn't have the people to man the entire thing. If we tried, we'd end up spread as thin as the Blue Suns that we'd evicted just the hour prior.

In the end, what that meant was that Unit Three was stuck in the no man's land between the junkyard wilderness and the ship. Their only cover was what few bits of wreckage the Suns hadn't managed to clear and what foxholes they'd managed to scrounge out in the time they had. And then, just to make things interesting, their Lieutenant had bought it in the opening volleys. As one would expect, things had only degenerated further from there as Dougal left a few squads to keep Two pinned while the bulk of his forces swung around to hit the crumbling flank.

I winced as Wasea tried to keep pace with the crap that was happening not more than two hundred yards away.

"You have to hold them together Sergeant!" she barked, crouching down further behind my bulk. "And make a controlled withdrawal around to Two's left!"

"We'll try ma'am!" The Salarian had to scream to be heard, even over the comms.

"Athame's tits.." the Eclipse leader muttered as soon as the line cut, "What's it look like Kean?"

My lips twisted. I was in cover as much as I could be, trying to blend in a bit with a Gardian turret that had been ripped free when the ship hit the planet's corroded soil. "Not that I can see all that much hiding behind this thing, but it looks like they're getting hammered."

There was a muted growl over my speakers. "They're going to fucking break."

I agreed entirely with that assessment, but it didn't need to be said aloud. Instead I switched to a different channel and hoped for better news. "Rane, time?"
"Still working." Her voice was harried. "Call it ten for bay nine, five more for twelve. After that.. it's going to be a bit."

I blew out a breath. That we'd have five more missiles so soon after our first volley was good news, but there was no way we could take out everything hitting us or on its way to with just eleven missiles. Even if they were fucking big missiles.

"Scales?"

She apparently didn't have any issues reading my mind. "Their shuttles are staying a bit more spread out than I'd like, it'll take most of those to take out just the next two companies." That that would leave us with two more still on the way didn't need to be said.

"That can still work." I tried for optimism, but I could tell that it came off a bit flat. "The last groups are further out right?"

"Yeah." There was a beat, and her tone turned wry "Ape."

"Would you rather me be convinced we're all about to die?" And all over fucking Balak's life too. If we did survive this by some miracle, I was going to have a very fucking long talk with Nynsi.

Wasea growled. "Don't start human. It's a good damned plan, you fucking came up with it, so believe in it."

"He's good at coming up with plans. Just not that second bit."

"First time for everything." I muttered, shrugging out my shoulders as best I could within my restraints. The forced belief had barely even begun to formulate before I noticed the yellow-clad forms darting left to right in the distance. Some were living long enough to dive into cover. Most weren't. "Wasea, they're breaking."

"Athame's motherfucking.. Unit one, prepare to advance! Shaaryak, you better be ready!"

"Of course." My Tarath'shan's voice had tightened as it usually did before a big fight, the bits of irritation and anger suppressed. For now at least. "They're pursuing your people towards the trench-line."

"Lieutenant Ghadon!"

A burly male voice came on as Two's commander updated his boss. "I'm already pulling my command unit plus my rightmost squad and rotating them to my left. I'll try to stop what's left of three from running all the way back to Illium."

"You survive this I'm giving you a bonus." Wasea rose up a bit behind me, checking over her massive weapon. "Any indication they've detected us?"

It was Nynsi who replied. "No. They're pursuing hard, looks like they're going to try and break through what's left of them right into the backfield."

Which would, more or less, make Two's position instantly untenable. They'd have to surrender or be wiped out within minutes against that many Suns streaming around their flank.

"How long until they hit the trench?"

"Momentarily."
"Shit. Shaaryak, move in! Soon as you're on the ground we'll hit those tides spawned assholes!"
To either side of me merchs quickly began to check over their weapons, a few rocking back and
forth as if to make sure that their adrenaline got to every limb.

My systems flickered as she shifted back to the command line. "Kean, odds are they're going to
rush us as soon as they realize we're here. Our position isn't all that much better than three's was.
They get within twenty meters I'm going to order a counter-charge with my Vanguards. You're
coming with us."

"Got it." Hefting my gun up a bit, I did a quick visual check of the heavy weapon. "Xan, Feai.
That happens, you two are staying back."

"No problems with that order, Harath'krem." Xan spoke for the pair. "We'll cover you as best -"

A sniper round slammed into my exposed shoulder before she could finish the sentiment, and I
quickly lowered my gun to respond in kind. Three heavy rounds thundered down range towards
the Sun who'd apparently spotted me. Two of them sent explosions of mud and dirt flying around
him, while the third hit him hard enough to send the distant figure sprawling back.

"By the goddess.. " Wasea swore. "All units open fire!"

Our broken line promptly exploded with roaring gunfire, tracers and streaking shots filling the air
as everyone sighted in on our enemy and began blasting away. Dragging my flat metal feet out of
the muddy soil, I shifted around my makeshift cover and settled into a better shooting stance.

In the distance to my left, my cameras caught the flickering lights of a half-dozen shuttles making
a rapid descent. More importantly, the entire field in front of us was filled with Blue Suns. Nearly
all of them were in heavy armor and were moving left to right as they chased what was left of unit
Two towards the trench-line. But a few had been moving along in the backfield, double-timing it
as they headed straight for us, probably having originally been sent to extend the flank further.

I didn't have anymore time to pay attention to what everyone else was doing after that, as the first
shots started reaching out in my direction as the Suns belatedly realized that it was their turn to be
flanked.

Settling my left hand onto the weapon's grip, I slowly began to fire off short bursts, the double-
barrels thundering as the heavy rounds exited. Focusing on the few who had noticed us, I
switched targets after three or five rounds in each's direction. Not usually enough to kill, but
enough for my companions to finish them off. Xan hogged most of them, her sniper rifle booming
every few seconds as she patiently executed them.

Wasea snapped off a carnage round under my right arm before ducking back to let her weapon
cool, her voice barely audible as she tried to keep in touch with Ghadon and Nynsi. The latter's
forces had begun to land, adding their own shots in from that side. But on the other. . it was
obvious that Three wasn't going to be putting up any kind of meaningful resistance anytime soon.

"Fuck." I swore quietly as I watched the Suns reaction continue to evolve. "You called it
Captain!"

Normally I'd think it was stupid to divide your forces once, much less three or more times, but that
was apparently what Dougal was doing. At least one group was still keeping two pinned, and
another began to throw themselves to the ground, focusing on keeping what was left of Three
likewise stuck in place. Maybe forty broke off to the left, stoically accepting the losses that Nynsi
and five were dealing in order to press into the junkyard after them.
The rest, more than I could easily count, headed straight for us. Snipers dropped to one knee or went prone, their heavy weapons quickly dropping several of the Eclipse. Omni-tools flashed brilliantly as tech mines began to soar, our lines rippling as incinerates, overloads, and cryoblasts began to disrupt the shooting rhythms. And while they were busy keeping my allies pinned down, more were sprinting as fast as they could.

Hoping that my reduced coolant would still be enough to keep the weapon from overheating, I yanked hard on the trigger and swept my fire left to right without bothering to aim. A few went down, dead or just battered, I didn't know. I couldn't spare the time to even worry about it either, relying entirely on my companions to finish off anyone that I merely knocked down or maimed.

"How fucking many of them are there?" Xan protested as she finished off a Turian for me, switching targets as quickly as she could.

"Shut up and keep shooting!" I snapped back, flinching as another light round hit my chest. The fucking snipers were the only ones bothering to shoot at me, a few of them apparently volleying their shots into the easy target. It couldn't have been anything heavy because they weren't doing crap to my actual armor, but they were keeping my damned barriers on the verge of collapsing.

The danger of that became obvious when the first grenade whipped just over my head, quickly followed by a carnage round that drove me back a good half meter as it struck my chest flat-on. I was fine up until the next one hit my right arm, shrapnel tearing at my gun. The weapon itself held up, but the vulnerable coolant line once again snapped as shrapnel tore into it.

"Son of a... Wasea!"

"Not yet!" She snapped back, another heavy shot from her weapon killing a human woman who'd gotten too far ahead of her comrades. "Not until they're closer!"

I could only growl and space my shots out more carefully, trying not to make the fact that I was edging a bit more behind the wrecked turret obvious. A move that paid off a few seconds later when another grenade from a launcher slammed into the debris. Not more than a few seconds later another carnage round clipped my exposed right shoulder.. tearing the previously damaged pauldron free with a scream of tearing metal. Wasea actually had to duck as it nearly took her head off, and then scramble back as I staggered, trying to let my eezo core properly stabilize me.

"Unit One.." The Commander hefted her gun up as she managed to get herself upright, slapping her weapon into a proper two handed grip. "Advance!"

Lights flickered crazily as the Vanguards hurled themselves directly into the rushing enemy. The light-show only grew more intense as they began to hurl shockwaves in every direction, countering enemy numbers with the controlling blasts from their biotics.

Someone, Lieutenant Elissa I thought, started shouting. "Up! Up! Move you fucking asses! Eclipse to the Captain!"

I wasn't Eclipse, but the order still applied.

Flat feet dug into the ground as I heaved myself around the shattered turret, slightly trailing the rest of the Eclipse as they sprinted into the increasingly chaotic melee, blasting away as they did so. Biotic powers and tech mines were exploding chaotically everywhere, and I couldn't even begin to guess how many people were dying every second.

That was about all of the time I had to take in the view, because even with my slow speed I lumbered past where Wasea was executing a Batarian within a few moments.
And then shit got messy again.

My gun turned into a club as I heaved it up and then brought it down to slam onto a Turian trying to aim a shotgun at the Captain, his scream of pain nearly inaudible amidst dozens just like it. A shotgun roared as I turned away from his broken body, sending sparks across my visor.

Three rounds were all it took to kill the human woman who hadn't been smart enough to load a carnage round.

Another member of my own species, a guy this time, tried to dart past me. Snapping my left arm out, he let out a yelp of pain as I clotheslined him. The hit was barely enough to move the heavy limb as he went flying. He had enough time to start to curl up on the ground before an Eclipse engineer put a round through his visor.

More rounds ricocheted off of me as I quickly looked around, finding a pair of Turians standing over two dead commandos. The first didn't even get a chance to realize that I'd shifted my aim before the large rounds blew his chest apart into a disgusting mist of blue blood and viscera. His companion staggered away, managing to get off a burst that didn't do anything besides annoy me. Another short burst ended his life as easily as I'd killed his friend, but brought my gun worrying closer to the red line in my HUD.

"Kean!" Wasea's scream echoed from my speakers as she hurled past me, her biotic charge more of a flying kick that broke the neck of a Sun about to finish off a wounded Asari. "Start falling back! Adepts, we need a wall!"

Biotic barriers began to snap to life, rippling as shots peppered them.

"Already?" I staggered back a bit, glancing at my screens. I'd thought we were pushing them back pretty well, and we'd barely even gotten started. It hadn't even been more than a minute. So why the fuck.. oh.

Maybe twenty of the fifty or so Eclipse we'd started with were staggering backwards behind the glowing walls. Which themselves weren't all that long with only four adepts gasping with their arms raised.

The Suns weren't in much better shape, there was a hell of a lot of blue clad bodies on the ground. But there was still a lot more of them than there was of us, and from the flashes on the flanks we weren't going to be getting any support soon.

"Back to the foxholes!" Wasea was limping as she waved her people back, "Watch the flanks! Grab our wounded! Kean, I need an update!"

I began to backpedal as carefully as I could, trying to keep an eye on either end of the dark energy barrier. It didn't really seem like I needed to bother, the enemy seemed content to likewise grab their own wounded ad get reset for the next round.

A few finger flicks brought the right channel up. "Rane, please tell us you've got good news."

"How's this?"

Brilliant light flared to life on my right, and the battlefield went abruptly quiet as the first missile roared free from the crashed ship. It was swiftly followed by several more, massive grey tubes trailing plumes of fire and smoke as they accelerated at an astonishing rate before whipping away to the right and vanishing into the low cloud cover.

Rane'li's voice was entirely too smug, if still a bit frazzled. "So much for their second wave. Give
us a few minutes and the third will be dealt with too."

I couldn't help but blow out a relieved breath, a move that Wasea echoed. "Good job girl. Glad to
see Kean was right about you."

Before we could do any more self-congratulation, the center most barrier exploded with a flash
and roar of fire. The Adept who'd been holding it let out a high pitched scream that cut off
abruptly as she collapsed.

Charging through the smoking cloud that the grenade launchers had left behind, a knot of eight or
so Blue Suns rushed forward. Unlike the others, their armor was midnight black and utterly
devoid of markings. Shotguns roared before I could belatedly get my gun back into position,
killing the remaining adepts before they could make any moves to defend themselves. Blue light
rippled and vanished as the barriers collapsed.

Though obviously as taken aback by the sudden change in fortunes as we were, the remaining
Suns quickly got themselves back into gear and started moving after the apparent elites.

"Move!" Wasea screamed, firing off a wild shot before hauling ass. The other Eclipse followed
her example, setting off a few wild shots and biotic attacks to cover themselves as they dove for
whatever cover they could find.

I, unfortunately, couldn't do that.

My gun had cooled enough that I could open up on the elites as I frantically backed up. My first
burst caught the leader, blowing thick pieces of armor away before red blood sprayed into the air.
Tracers shifted right as I corrected my aim, trying to take out the next opponent in line before I
ducked back behind the broken turret yet again.

But just as I could shoot them, they could shoot me right back.

The elites got their shots off first. But rather than a single volley of carnage rounds and solid slugs,
they fired in sequence. Really, the only difference was that it gave me time to realize just where
and how hard they were hitting me.

The first shot hit me high on the left, the scratch repairs nowhere near strong enough to withstand
the blow. Unlike the other side the entire plate didn't fly free, instead buckling with a tortured
scream of metal as some of the round's energy ripped into the actuators and motors controlling the
shoulder. Carnage round number two hit me smack on around the waist, bending a few plates but
not really doing any severe damage.

The next pair did their damnedest to make up for that, hitting more or less at the same time. One
hit the protective box around my skull, throwing my head against the padded sides as my ears rang
with echoes. The other hit my left leg smack in the shin. Like the shoulder pauldron on that side,
the armor twisted and tore at the impact.. but unlike my shoulder there wasn't an extra layer of
equipment to stop the round.

I couldn't stop the yowl of pain from escaping when something like a hot poker slammed into my
calf.

My HUD was flashing madly as systems failed, the computer desperately rerouting to what few
backups there were as the eezo core fought to keep me upright. Between the ringing in my ears,
the fire in my leg, and the chaotic displays all demanding my attention, I almost didn't even notice
the next volley.

I had just enough time to snap my eyes up at someone's shout, seeing three tumbling canisters
descending directly at me.

Things got.. a little confused for a few moments after that. I remember the impacts, being thrown hard to the left and then bouncing against my restraints as the armor fell, the HUD snapping off as everything went dark around me. I remember somebody shouting that I was down, gunfire shockingly loud without the engines dull rumble to drown it out.

"Kean's down!" Wasea's voice was warbling through the speakers. "Cover him!"

Right. I was down. Fuck. And my engine was out. Fucking fuck.

"Ape! You alive!?"

I gasped as my leg throbbed in pain, as if it was reassuring me that I still as. "I'm.. fuck.. alive."

"Thank the goddess.. don't fucking get out, you're totally exposed. Wasea's pulling back to the trenches, you have to get up and follow!"

Up. Right.

Almost hesitantly I jerked my head down, my chin hitting the power key. The engine thrummed before giving a long rattle.

Grimacing at another wave of fire in my calf, I tried again. This time it coughed to life, followed by an ear-splitting clatter as something was ripped free. I almost flinched, expecting it to die, but the usual hum slowly settled back into place as my HUD flickered on.

Everything was red, flashing red, or at best yellow.

"Ape, fucking MOVE!"

My body was moving by reflex within seconds. It at least remembered that when Trena told you to do something in that tone of voice, you well and fucking did it.

There was more metallic screeches and grinding as I rolled to one side, my eezo core wobbling my mass dangerously as I fought to stand. A quick glance confirmed that it was damaged, possibly even leaking. Which explained why my back felt too damned heavy, it wasn't compensating for the engine's weight sufficiently. For more fun and games, the gun wasn't in my hands anymore, and I didn't have the time to look for the damn thing.

I had just managed to get up to one knee when another sucker shot at me.

Thankfully it was just lightweight rounds from my right side, but it still meant that at least one Blue Sun had noticed that I wasn't dead.

"Got him!" A sniper round rang in time with Xan's voice, and the incoming fire ceased. "We've got your back!"

"Just hurry up!" Feai shouted as her own gun thundered off a burst.

Yanking my other flat foot under me, and struggling to contain myself as my left calf screamed in pain, I turned back towards the cruiser and began limbering.

The fighting had shifted, and actually moved away from where I'd fallen, which was probably the only reason I was still alive. Wasea and her people, plus Xan and Feai, had pulled back to their right towards the trench line in front of the cargo bay we'd used to get in and out of the ship. By
pursuing them as directly as possible, the Suns hadn't actually gotten too close to me.

Most of them were currently setting up in the same debris field we'd been using. Fire was volleying between them and the Eclipse in the trench, but that status quo would only last until the rest of the Suns got their shit together and showed up.

Fuck.

The only reason any of us were still alive was that the Elites had made their move before their regulars were ready for it. They just hadn't been able to exploit the devastating assault with enough people to wipe us out.

As I half walked, half limped, systems squealing and shrieking while my left leg screamed with each step, more Suns began to realize that I was still up and moving. Between them and the increasingly worrying flashes from my eezo core and damaged engine, it was clear that while I could currently move, that state of affairs wouldn't last much longer. And since both sides of my armor were riddle with holes and loose plates, the only thing I could really do was bite my tongue against the pain, hope everything stayed together, and run as best I could.

Shots started hitting me a few steps after I made the decision. Assault rifle and SMG rounds that sent sparks flying across my vision. A few found their way through the torn armor to hit the artificial muscles and motors beneath. One or two might have made it to my light armor, which thankfully did a better job against them than it had against the hit to my leg.

Directly ahead of me, Xan and Feai's upper bodies appeared as they moved onto a fire-step. The former was firing as quickly as her rifle would reliably allow, sending two Suns tumbling and another ducking back into cover. Her companion simply kept her trigger held down, sending a stream of tracers left and right as she tried to protect my flank.

"Come on! Almost!" I don't know which of the two shouted. I know that they were right, that I was almost there.

Then another Carnage round tore at me from the side, slamming directly into my engine. Heat flared at my back, and alarms shrieked briefly. I stumbled hard to my right at the impact, only belatedly realizing that I didn't have any control over my own movements anymore. I barely managed to tuck my chin down to brace myself before I crashed to the ground and rolled. My neck strained as I fought to keep my head from bouncing off the armored plating again, and pain continued to shoot up my leg.

Eventually the armor gave a final rattle, the movement ceasing as I slid to a stop. I could smell the disgusting local air, and most of my body had joined my leg in its pulsing misery.

"Fucking... fuck.. no.. move.. move your fucking.. pale ass..Cieran.."

It probably wasn't a good sign that I was giving myself verbal orders, but they were enough to get my chin to jerk down against the release button.

Unsurprisingly the hydraulics failed to start.

Grimacing, I pressed the button and held it down. There was a long pause that nearly gave me a heart attack before the backup system kicked in. A quiet whirring reached my ears as the tiny motors unscrewed a few select bolts, and the chest plating sagged away from me.

Moving hurt, but the increasingly loud sounds of gunfire and explosions were all the motivation I needed to start shoving and wiggling to get free. Hunching my shoulders and head down, I used my forehead to shove the plating open enough for me to try and get free.
"Harath'krem!" Strong hands grabbed my shoulders, seizing the thin armor plates and heaving as Feai fought to help me get out.

I'll admit to screaming when my left leg hit something, my body spasming as fire raced up and down my nerves. My world briefly turned white from it, my vision only coming when someone shoved my helmet into my hands.

"Harath'krem! Please!" Feai was kneeling in front of me, flinching as tracers shot overhead. One of her hands was holding my little SMG, while the other was still pressing my helmet into my grip.

"Hurry up!" I glanced to my left, seeing Xan kneeling near the armor's legs. She'd laid her heavy rifle down across them, an impromptu tripod that was letting her fire quickly. "They've definitely noticed us!"

It took Feai's help to get my helmet on, the crisp air from the tiny filters giving me just enough of a shock to get my shit back together.

"Can you run?"

I glanced down at my leg and tried not to flinch. My left calf, on its side, was bloody all the way down to my boot thanks to a shard of metal that was actually fucking sticking out of it.

"Fuck! No, don't yank it!" My hand grabbed Feai's arm before she could. "Don't know if it's... fuck that hurts... close to something. You're going to have to help me up. Xan, we need to know when to run!"

"Got it!" Her rifle barked again. "Feai, get him up but stay down!"

"Contradiction!" Nevertheless she grabbed my right arm and threw it around my neck as both holstered our guns. She heaved me up into a low crouch, ignoring my snarl of pain as I tried keep my weight on my right leg. "Pillars you're lighter than I thought.. Ready!"

"Wait.." One more heavy shot was followed by a distant scream. "Go!"

The Batarian woman heaved me to my feet, hauling me along like I was luggage. If moving in my armor had hurt, moving without it was agony. I had to throttle back a scream with each step, doing my best to propel myself along with my good leg as we moved. As we passed her, Xan snapped off another shot as she rose to follow.

"By the goddess move faster!" Wasea briefly appeared as she fired off a shot before vanishing back into the trench. Her voice still carried as she reminded us why we needed to. "They're gathering for a push!"

Just ten yards. Eight now. A metallic grain of sand whined off my barriers, several more sending sparks off of Feai as we tried to hunch a bit more yet keep staggering. Five yards. Two.

We tumbled into the trench, almost crashing into the Eclipse Captain as we did so.

"About fucking time! Elissa, grab Kean and get him to the ship! Girl, help them!" I barely had time to glance at the Asari before the human Lieutenant was grabbing at me, pulling me back up. The two women quickly had my arms thrown over both of their shoulders, letting me hop on my right leg as they dragged me.

Wait.. two women.. "Xan?"
Feai's steps hitched. "You didn't hear her?"

Fuck.

"You still there ape?"

"Mostly." I hissed at another throb. "Xan.."

"I know... just keep moving ape. Get back into the ship, everyone else can hold out while the missiles do their damned job."

It wasn't as if we had any other choice.

Shots began to chase us as we moved up the ramp leading out of the trenches, depositing us right in front of the cargo bay. More walking wounded were head of us, a few taking the time to fire off what shots they could while others just limped for the safety of the ship's interior. We'd barely made it to the cargo bay proper when the volume of fire suddenly increased, sending two yellow clad beings to the ground before they could react. Next to me, Feai yelped as something hit her, but she kept moving.

"Move move move!" Wasea's voice was overlayed by shotguns snarling. "Fuck, you two, grab them!"

Feai and Elissa had to let me go as two more Eclipse grabbed them. Before I could do more than stagger, strong arms were suddenly around my chest and the Captain was screaming in my ear.

"Exhale and relax!" That was the only warning I had before she hurled herself into a biotic charge.

If I never, ever, have to live through that experience again, I will live a long and happy life. I can't even begin to properly... fuck. I was pretty sure that we left most of my internal organs behind when it happened, at the very least. One moment she was clutching my tightly to her, the next everything swirled in a blur and we were stumbling through the doorway as she sagged against me.

Some of the Eclipse that had already gotten inside quickly yanked us aside. Moments later there were more flashes of blue and our companions staggered past us.

Feai and Lieutenant Elissa moved past me before almost collapsing, sucking down oxygen heavily.

"How.. many?" The former managed to gasp the question out.

"A lot." Wasea growled as she let me go. "Kean, we need this door sealed."

"Right.." I staggered over to the control panel. A few seconds of examination later, and it slammed shut with a metallic clang, locking into place as I hit a few extra commands.

"Locked." I couldn't help but lean against the wall, trying to keep my weight off my wounded leg. "Not getting in this way."

"This way." Elissa sucked in a long breath. "There's plenty of other ways onto the ship. If they get to the auxiliary bridge, or find Hetherus.."

"And they're looking for ways in." Trena's voice filled our radios. "A few guards making sure you lot don't make a run for it, rest are spreading the fuck out and searching."
Which wouldn't take them long. The ship was basically a sieve, they'd probably find half a dozen ways on in a matter of minutes.

"This is Shaaryak." Nyn's voice was tense. "I'm coordinating with unit two, we're launching a counter-attack now!"

"Move your ass girl, they aren't going to last long in there!"

While that was entirely true, I could have done without Trena pointing it out aloud. Wasea apparently agreed, because she promptly cut me and the others out of the command channel. "You three, take a few moments. Get water and check the human's leg. Rest of you, anyone not wounded sound off."

I was too tired to be annoyed, or to pay attention to where she was sending the half a dozen other mercs who'd lived. Instead I just sank to the ground in relief. My helmet hit the decking a moment later, joined by the women's as they yanked theirs free. Elissa turned out to have dark skin and short hair, her cheeks accented by tribal tattoos that lent her a dangerous edge.

"How's it feel?"

"Hurts." My lips twisted as I glanced at my calf. The fucking piece of metal was still sticking out. "Mind?"

She snorted, quickly yanking some medical tools free from her belt. Some, like the medigel canister, I recognized. Others I didn't, but the omni-tool scan seemed harmless enough. "Looks like it's just through the meat. Sucks and it probably hurts like hell, but you'll live if nothing gets infected. Might want to bite onto something for this part."

Of course she didn't give me time to do so, instead yanking the piece of my armor free with a quick pull.

My teeth ground as I held in a scream, my eyes burning a glare into her skull.

Still, she more or less made up for that bit of agony by having Feai slather medigel onto and into the wound. A few hypo-shots later and I was trying not to moan at the simple recession of pain.

"Am I good to walk?"

"Would your rather die sitting here?"

Feai snorted and I felt my lips twitch. "Good point."

"He going to live?" Wasea interrupted us before we could get too positive. Probably for the best, all things considered. Behind her the rest of the Eclipse were shuffling away, heading to wherever she'd posted them.

"He'll be fine, just slow."

"Good." The Asari captain heaved her gun up, resting the barrel on a navy colored pauldron. "Because we need your gun. Kean you're with me, we're heading to the auxiliary bridge to check on that girls' progress. Elissa, take the Batarian and find Hetherus. Keep that twerp alive until he gets the goddess damned missiles ready."

"Athame's ass.." I sighed as I grabbed my helmet, hoping like hell that Rane and that Salarian were on the ball.
Tropes Page / Request:

As I've posted on profile, and in the prior chapter, GreaterGoodIreland was kind enough to create a TvTropes page for this series. I took the time to add a few things, but I'm also very interested in seeing what you, my readers think of the tropes in play.

Please, if you've got some time, go through the page and make a few tweaks here or there. If you don't have an account, or don't want to make one, feel free to PM me any thoughts you have and I'll be more than happy to add things for you.

To find it, simply go to TvTropes . Org and search for "Another Realm" or "Katkiller".

Author's Fun Fact: Profiles in Courage II

Lt. Cmdr Theodore Gates, N7, "The Survivor"

The eldest child of Captain Elicia Gates and Commander (posthumous) Johnathan Gates, Theodore Gate's military life effectively began when he was born. As his parents were moved from ship to ship, he and his younger sisters were continuously shuttled from one station or vessel to another, only rarely making planetfall when their parents had leave.

Graduating in the same N7 class as Anders and Shepard initially gave Alliance Intelligence dreams of forming their own elite unit around this core, preferably with Anders in command. Not only did he have the military pedigree, but his strong appearance and dedication to military regulations endeared him to most of his superiors. Typically, it also estranged him from his fellow N7's, who were all too happy to see him re-assigned to command a recon team as the brass began to groom him.

The now infamous drop onto Akuze, where Gates was the only survivor of a vicious Thresher Maw nest, broke something in the stalwart warrior. Several years of counseling were required, with the only silver lining being that the experience brought him closer to his old comrades who were instrumental in his recovery. During their long talks, he finally began to understand the deep pains that drove them both.

Upon returning to active duty, he was granted a transfer to the Corsair program, secretly vowing to repay his debts to his friends by joining their pursuit of justice against pirates and criminals. As an executive officer, he quickly earned a reputation for effectiveness during several raids into the Traverse. That, in time, earned him his own command, and he wasted no time in establishing himself and his crew as the premier anti-pirate unit in that region of space.

Spectre Candidate: Third selection group, Rejected by Admiral Hackett. Reason: Currently too critical to Corsair operations to be withdrawn, being groomed to take command of the Second Corsair flotilla when Rear Admiral Theosis retires in 2184.

Posting, January 2183 – SSV Queen Anne's Revenge, C.O.
So.. working seventeen out of eighteen days right after a vacation, averaging sixty hours per week over those two and a half weeks fucking sucks. But we just got our last official build out, so hopefully things will slow down now that the priority level crap is done and out of the way.

This chapter was half written before GenCon (where I played very poorly in my chosen events, but had fun on the Expo floor and watching the cosplayers), and then in bits and pieces of the last few weeks when my sanity required that I do something else besides work. I think it came out all right for how choppy the process was. Hopefully the combat is still up to par.

The next chapter should post this Friday, 8/28/15, with the story resuming its regular Tuesday/Friday update schedule after that.

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

Chapter 12: The Return

I had time to think as I limped along after Wasea, and that was always a dangerous thing to do in the middle of a fight.

Worse, I had a lot to fucking think about.

My armor was trashed. Probably a total loss this time. A straight hit to the engine mount like that would have torn the heart out of it, and the eezo core wasn't something you could just buy at a corner market.

But it was still just a machine. Xan.. in less than a day I'd lost all but one member of Rane's team, and I had no fucking idea how to tell her that. Or how she'd react. She'd taken her responsibilities seriously, knowing how lucky she was as a lowborn to have been given a squad by Nyn. And even if they hadn't been the best unit, they'd all tried their damndest and had shown every sign of promise.

Now.. it was just Rane and Feia left, and the odds of either of them, or any of us, surviving the next hour seemed pathetically low.

"Trena." Wasea grunted as we made the turn onto the main portside hall. "Update?"

Scales' voice crackled over our speakers. "Could be fucking worse. Shaaryak and her team are pushing in from the wreckage, and that Turian is leading Two out of the trenches and south. Dougal's got his people fortifying around the ship's side, it's going to take a lot of goddess damned lives to evict them."

"What about four? Can we move them out of the tower?"

An ominous pause was answer enough, even before she spoke. "The next wave has broken formation. I'm tracking the groups on the north end for the next missile volley, hopefully that'll force them to get past the teams we've got there before they can reinforce their boss."

So no reinforcements either. Great. I took the moment to ask my own question. "How long until the next volley?"

As if in response, the ship actually shuddered a bit as dull roars echoed down the hall. The noise quickly dulled, and then faded, leaving Wasea and I to glance at one another.

"Never mind."

The Eclipse Captain snorted before we resumed moving, passing a side corridor that held three Eclipse. One glanced at us before saluting, the other two were keeping their guns trained on a closed airlock.

"Ma'am!"
Wasea growled. "Get farther back dammit, they blow that door and two of you are dead before you can fucking react."

"Ma'am! You heard her, get your fucking asses back!" The three of them quickly filed into the hall proper once we'd moved past, the three of them quietly working out how best to cover the potential entryway.

The Captain kept her voice low. "Lost most of my best girls out there. Athame's azure.. they were mostly spoiled bitches, but at least they knew what they were fucking doing."

I could only shrug laconically. It wasn't as if I was in any position to offer her wise words or anything like that.

"Fuck. Girl, you still on the bridge?"

"No ma'am." Rane groaned before she spoke again, her voice tight. "Helping your people get power to the next battery."

"Kean, can you run the controls?"

I had no idea. "Rane?"

"It's all tied in to the Yare Noln's control systems, Trena will have full control once we get the system online."

"We need to keep the connection solid, don't we? If we lose power, or the control systems on the auxillary bridge are shut down or blown apart.."

Rane's voice grew tenser. "We'd lose the ability to aim and launch them."

"Looks like we're defending the bridge then Kean. I've already got a team in engineering, and most of the walking wounded are setting up around it."

I couldn't help but glance up and down the dimly lit corridor. "Just us?"

"No one else. How long?"

"Fifteen, best case. Another ten after that for the fourth round."

Trena confirmed what I thought I remembered. "That will let us hit the remaining two groups coming in with plenty of time to spare. They aren't the fucking problem. The assholes already there and en route are."

Well. Fun times then. Especially with those black-clad elite assholes out there. Speaking of which..

"Scales, anyone have eyes on those elites?"

"A few sightings.. think they're trying to find ways into the ship while the regulars hold our people off." There was a long pause before she hissed. "Just checked the logo one of our cams caught. It's Dougal's personal guard, that asshole has to be leading them personally."

Never rains when it can fucking pour. "That explains the reaction then. Soon as he saw the missiles he must have figured out what we're doing."

"Nobody said he was stupid ape, just straightforwards."
We reached the cramped back-up command center as Trena spoke, the various computers humming as they displayed various locked screens. I had to increase my appraisal of Rane's tech skills at the sight of those. How the fuck she'd managed to link the cruiser's targeting systems to our frigate in orbit, and managed to get password protections over the systems to delay any rival engineer's attempts to disrupt things I had no idea. Then again, she had been the one in charge of running the mansion's computer systems in Xerol's day, so maybe it shouldn't have been all that surprising.

"All squads report in the second you hear anything happening." Wasea actually began to pace in the small space, and I winced as she almost kicked a cable free. "Fall back to choke points wherever possible and hold them back. They're on a timer until the rest of the company tears their hearts out and throws them into the sea, all we have to fucking do is hold them off. No fucking heroics, just hold the tide back!"

"Ma'am!" A dozen or so voices chorused.

I took the time during her little speech to collapse into chair, glancing down at my leg as I did so. It wasn't hurting so much anymore, probably from whatever painkillers the Lieutenant had given me, but it wasn't exactly comfortable either. It didn't seem to be bleeding through the bandaging at least.

"You moving all right?" Wasea had paused to regard me.

"It's tight." I admitted. "But not that bad. For now at least."

"Four should still have their medics, we'll get it looked at once this shit is done with." The words might have been confident, but the tone was anything but.

"You don't have to placate me Captain." My hands pulled my weapon up, checking to make sure it hadn't been damaged during the fighting outside. "I know we aren't in the best situation here."

A quiet grunt was her only response to that, and she resumed her pacing without any more words.

Our wait wasn't long. Five minutes at the most passing before there was the dim echo of an explosion, and someone started shouting over the radio.

"Contact contact! Level one, corridor two!" It was hard as hell to make out the words over the sound of gunfire confined in the ship.

All I had time to do was heave myself to my feet before someone else was shouting. "Contact! Airlock twenty-two!"

"Athame's azure." Shifting my gun to my right hand, I brought my omni-tool up with my left to make sure that my tech launcher was ready. "That's the airlock we passed."

As if to reinforce that point something exploded not all that far away, and stupidly loud gunfire began to assault my ears.

"Twenty-two, we're on our way. Elissa, move to support corridor two!" Her shotgun was hefted into a two handed grip, "I'm going ahead Kean, follow up!"

"Right!"

The Eclipse Captain took two steps out into the hall before vanishing in a haze of blue. Someone let out a surprised scream that cut off when her monster weapon roared.
Ducking out of the bridge, I started moving in a limping jog, heading towards what was becoming another full-on melee. The Eclipse had apparently taken their bosses orders well, and had caught at least two of the Suns in a cross fire when they'd attempted to storm their way on board after blowing out the airlock. Their black armored forms were limp on the ground as the survivors fought atop of them.

Wasea threw back a Salarian, his spindly hands clutching at green blood dribbling over his armor, before simply slamming her weapon across a Blue Sun Elite's head with bionically enhanced force. I couldn't see much beyond them, just yellow and black blurs in the dim lighting.

But even as the Captain's opponent dropped, two more forms moved up to replace him. One blew the wounded Eclipse trooper's head apart with a shotgun before the poor man could even react. The other actually dropped his own weapon so that he had a hand free to shove Wasea's aside before she could kill him. While they fought over the weapon, the form next to him began to swing his gun around.

Snapping my gun up, I slowed and brought my left hand up to steady my aim before triggering a long burst.

Sparks flew from the Sun's barriers as the first metallic grains of sand hit his chest, then trailed up and over his helmet as I adjusted my aim. He flinched, trying to protect his visor as the heavy armor's shields died.

Suppressing a snarl, I cut off the trigger, shifted my aim again, and cut off another burst into his head even as he tried to bring his gun around to aim at me. This time the incendiary ammunition did its job. Burning orange rounds tore into his helmet. The retaliatory shot, fired in the milliseconds before his own death, slapped across my right arm, staggering me as my barriers collapsed from the heavy scatter-shot.

While I dealt with him, Wasea proved more than capable of dealing with her own opponent, slamming him into a wall before slamming a warpfire wreathed hand into his throat.

Dropping my left hand free, I started to prep an overload, ready to fire it into the back of the two opposing mercs still struggling with their Eclipse counterparts. As I started to move up again, Wasea turned, hefting her weapon up to signal me.

The turn was why she never saw the hit coming.

A black blur dove through the airlock and into the ship proper, a shotgun whipping up the second he rolled to one knee. The first shot took the Asari Captain across the chest, slamming her against the bulkhead while the second blew what was left of her barriers away.

The third blew the armor over the stomach away, and drew a scream from her throat.

I triggered my overload on reflex, firing my weapon one handed with the other as I tried to cover her. The tech mine exploded in arcs of lightning, drawing a startled oath, and he staggered back as my wild shots splayed wildly over his body.

Wasea managed to get her gun around to fire a hastily aimed shot of her own, but between his stagger and her injuries all she managed to do was blast his weapon free of his hands. The Sun dropped a hand to his waist, yanking a hand cannon free before swinging it towards her.

But before he could pull the trigger, one of his own people slammed into him from behind, one of the surviving Eclipse tackling the elite into his comrade.

"Ma'am! Go!"
The Captain tried to bring her gun up again, only to nearly collapse with the effort. It was clear that she wasn’t about to abandon the fight, even though she was about to fucking keel over. I had no idea how many more mercs were about to pile through, and without barriers I’d last about a second against those shotguns in the open like this.

"Wasea!" I snapped, my tech launcher spitting out another overload that drew irritated curses from everyone as they dog-pile tried to resolve itself. "Get your ass over here!"

There was an exhausted oath as she dropped her weapon, turning towards me before hunching her shoulders. The biotic charge barely carried her two me, the shockwave anemic enough that I barely staggered as she appeared next to me.

I threw one of the Captain's arms over my shoulders, hauling her bodily along with me as I staggered back down the hall, trying to get her back to

"Fuck. goddess.." Somehow she managed to draw her pistol with one hand and hold onto the thing, Athame only knew how considering her other was pressed against her stomach. Purple blood was dribbling through her fingers, and it was clear that each step was agonizing.

Behind us, the shouting and cursing continued until a single gunshot rang out. Then there was just the sound of someone snapping orders and people scrambling to armored feet.

I didn't bother waiting to hear anything else. Groaning with the strain of it, I hauled her through the doorway. She gasped in pain as I lowered her as gently as I could, turning away to glance back down the hall.

"Kean.."

There wasn’t any time to reply, three armored forms had risen, all starting to pound our way. In the lead was a Turian, and I didn’t waste any time getting my aim set. Apparently his barriers remained down, because when my finger squeezed off a short burst the burst sent him tumbling to the floor amidst a spray of cobalt blood.

"Idiot." My head shook. Running forwards without any barriers.. fucking morons. That thought lasted until the remaining two mercs ducked into side rooms, another Turian shifting out to fire off a burst from her assault rifle. I almost yelped as I ducked back into the room. "Fuck!"

"Trena.. report.." I could barely hear Wasea, even in between the bursts my unseen opponent and I were blindly triggering at one another.

"Next group landed on our east flank, what's left of them after the missiles tore their shuttles apart. The tower is still holding out, but casualties are building up." Her voice was tense. "Shaaryak and your boy are making progress, fucking hang in there!"

Another set of sparks made me flinch as they streaked off of the hatchway's frame. They were quickly followed by someone firing a pistol in confident, aimed shots. I risked a longer glance in time to see the last of the emergency lights in that area being shot out.

Motherfucking son of a.. I’d be highlighted by the lights within the room while they were relatively concealed. Nothing I could fucking do about it either.

The Captain continued speaking as I hurriedly prepped an overload, half doing so just to get a temporary light source down there."Target.. besieging.."

"Ape, how bad is she?"
I spared her a glance as my tech launcher finished spinning up. Her shotgun had fallen from limp fingers, and her chest was rising and falling haphazardly. "Not good."

"Eclipse!" A confident voice rang out before I could launch it. "Your position is hopeless! Surrender and you'll be treated according to Citadel laws for prisoners!"

"Fucking.. Dougal... tell him... he's a dick." Wasea gasped out between breaths.

Why not?"

"Dougal, Captain Wasea says you're a fucking dick!"

There was a startled pause, and then the gunfire resumed. I whipped my left arm in an arc, the tech mine curling out the door in a blue streak. The explosion of lightning showed me the Turian, a female I thought, flinching back as the apparent Blue Sun warlord did likewise opposite her.

"Any idea's Captain?"

She didn't respond.

My heart and jaw both clenched as I ducked back, pointedly not looking at where I'd left her leaning against a console.

"Ape.."

"Shut up and get me some support scales!" Ducking out, I fired off another quick burst that kept the Turian honest. As she ducked, my arm shifted left, sending a volley at Dougal that made him shift out of sight.

Who promptly started talking again. "Make it easy on yourself and surrender kid!"

I hesitated briefly. I'm not proud of that.. but at the end of the day, I didn't want to die.

But I didn't want to fail everyone else either. His word or not, I didn't want to think of what someone like Jedore would do to Rane or Nyn or anyone else they captured... yeah, no thanks. "Fuck you you fucking fuck!"

"Eloquent!" The only other surviving merc leaned out, and I caught her with a volley as she tossed an overload my way. There was a yelp of pain before she got out of my sight, followed by more cursing tearing at my throat as my barely recharged barriers sputtered and died again.

The Warlord leaned out, his gun already up and fired a pair of blind shots down the hall. Neither hit me, but they were close enough that I flinched at their passage.

"Cieran!" Rane's voice filled my helmet, "Elissa and I are on the way!"

My teeth ground as I ducked out to fire off another quick burst. They'd get here way too late to find anything but my body if I couldn't think of something fast.

But what the fuck could I do? I was very much stuck in this small room, with only the one way in or out. Couldn't retreat, couldn't advance. Maybe if they rushed me without their barriers up.. Fuck, no way they were that stupid. I couldn't even spare the time to check the Eclipse's bodies for grenades. The second I stopped trying to keep them away from me, Dougal would rush in. And it would only take one shot from that hand cannon he was carrying to kill me if that bitch kept my barriers down.
We exchanged several more volleys, myself and the spare Sun liberally using overloads to stop each other from being bold enough to run forwards. Eventually either she or I would run out, but that would take a hell of a lot longer than they had.

After a minute or two, optimism started to rise. So long as their barriers were down they couldn't risk rushing me. Maybe. Just maybe I could hold out long enough for Rane and the others to get here.

Someday, some glorious day, I will learn not to taunt the universe.

No sooner had I felt the stirrings of hope than Dougal leaned out and fired another blind shot.

But this time it connected.

My gun spat sparks as the heavy slug ripped it from my hand, a snarl of pain escaping me before I could even consider reining it in.

"His gun is out!" The Turian woman shouted, her booted feat scrabbling as she moved out of cover, rifle already up and aimed.

I frantically ducked back as her shots sent sparks flying from the metal, fingers already frantically drumming out a new command onto my omni-tool. It pinged with readiness just as her large frame filled the doorway, the tech mine whipping from my launcher to explode near her head.

The incinerate killed her more or less instantly, but made me yelp again in pain as I stumbled back from the blast. My armor was actually smoking, which couldn't possibly have been good.

Cieran! Fucking concentrate!

Bringing my arm up, I desperately tried to load another one before Dougal could arrive. But it took time to input the command, time for the launcher to load it, time for its power core to spin up again.

It was time I didn't have.

Dougal fired two shots as he strode into the room through the smoke, stepped over his subordinates corpse, and precisely aimed each of them.

The first round hit my right shoulder and made me stumble as pain exploded through my body. I tried to force my fingers to keep moving, to finish inputting the command, but they refused to do more than twitch.

The second hit my left side, the tech launcher exploding from the direct hit. Shrapnel tore into my arm and leg, fire blossoming from the half charged mine to ravage my skin with heat. My throat tore from a scream that I couldn't have stopped, and I stumbled to the left, trying to raise that arm to brace myself.

He didn't give me the chance.

I don't know where the third shot hit me. I just knew that my entire body was pulsating with agony as my legs buckled, unable to support even another step.

Pain became my existence as I fell, the dimly lit world spinning wildly.

There was a hiss of irritation from somewhere above me, followed by limping motions across the decking. "I don't know if you're good or just fucking lucky kid, but you and that Eclipse bitch
killed all my engineers. That's why you're still bleeding on the floor. Now, what the fuck did you do here?"

I had to force my eyes open, vision only slowly coming into focus. Dougal was already turning away from me, holstering his hand cannon as he started limping towards the targeting controls. His head turned left and then right, obviously trying to work out the best way of undoing all of the work that we'd done.

"I'm reasonably sure you'll live for a few minutes, but I've got a full container of medigel to stop all that bleeding." His shoulders rose and fell as he hesitantly touched a few buttons, cocking his head at the data displays that popped up as a result. Of course, those weren't nearly as important as the flashing bar requesting override authorization. "Damn. Fast workers, you and those Eclipse. Have to give you that."

Twisting around, I desperately tried to find something. Anything. It wouldn't take long for him to decide to just blast the control panel Han Solo style, and that would do the job just as well as any hack. My gun was in pieces somewhere.. wait.. the merc. The Turian woman's rifle, it had to still be in the doorway. It was the only hope I could think of.

Sucking in a breath, and trying not to make a sound, I forced my right arm to move. If I could just drag myself a bit closer to her..

"Don't even think about it." My world went white when something hit my left side, my body curling reflexively around itself. I would have screamed if I'd had any air in my lungs. "I respect your determination, but you've got to learn when you're beat. Tell me how to disable-"

"Hey! Asshole!"

There was a curse, a shuffle of feet, and then a thunderous crack before something heavy collapsed on top of me, drawing another scream from my battered throat.

"Cieran!" It was gone an eternity later, someone groaning as they hauled it off of me. Air reached my skin as my helmet was ripped free, fingers prying my eyes open. I tried to flinch back from the bright light surrounding Rane's helmet, but my body refused to respond. The pain began to fade, leaving only a bone-deep weariness. "Pillars.. I need a medivac now!"

Down? Oh, right. I was down, probably bleeding out. Rather shitty way to die, really. I hadn't even wanted to be on this stupid planet. Rescuing some asshole.. asshole. Heh. I'd have to tease Rane about that one-liner later.. maybe when I wasn't so fucking cold.

I didn't remember feeling this cold the last time.. strange. It was like someone had turned the ship's air conditioning on. Why the fuck would they have wasted the power on that? Really better things to use it for.

Warm hands were pulling at me, laying me out. Someone was saying something. It sounded important, but I couldn't work out the words. They sounded panicky and concerned, definitely a bad sign.

Maybe I really as dying this time. Then again, maybe dying was like falling asleep. And I was so very tired.. maybe I'd just-

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End Act 1: The Rescue
**Next up is Act 2 - The News**

**Author's Fun Fact: Profiles in Courage III**

**Lt. Cmdr Kaya Shepard, N7, "The Lion"**

Very little is known, even to the Alliance, about Kaya Shepard's early life on the streets of New York. What is known is that, at some point in her childhood, she was left abandoned on the streets after her parents vanished. Eventually she managed to become a member of the Tenth Street Reds, one of the stronger gangs in the undercity. Her natural skill for fighting saw her begin working as an enforcer, rather than being pressed into prostitution as most other young women were. At some point she received the group's trademark facial scar, running in a line under her eyes and across her nose, often painted bright red.

Why and how she left the gang is also unknown, but shortly after her eighteenth birthday she arrived in an Alliance recruiting center. Despite setting records in the various training programs while en route to graduating as an N7 with honors, Alliance psychologists remained deeply concerned about her psyche and refusal to talk about her childhood and teenage years. Still, her short-lived relationship but continuing friendship with Lt. Cmdr Anders, and their subsequent acceptance of Lt. Cmdr Gates seemed to help stabilize the troubled woman. Being taken under Captain Anderson's wing as his protege also appeared to give her the father figure she needed to properly separate her past from her present.

She became a celebrity after her actions in rallying the defenders of Elysium during the Blitz, leading a tiny unit of police officers and surviving militia in holding the city center for nearly eight hours before reinforcements arrived. Despite her newfound fame, she did her best to stay out of the spotlight, a move that endeared her to several of the old guard admirals who found the press's obsession with her unseemly.

**Spectre Candidate:** Final Selection group, Accepted

**Posting, January 2183 – SSV Normandy, Executive Officer**

**Tropes Page / Request:**

As I've posted on profile, and in the prior chapter, GreaterGoodIreland was kind enough to create a TvTropes page for this series. I took the time to add a few things, but I'm also very interested in seeing what you, my readers think of the tropes in play.

Please, if you've got some time, go through the page and make a few tweaks here or there. If you don't have an account, or don't want to make one, feel free to PM me any thoughts you have and I'll be more than happy to add things for you.

To find it, simply go to TvTropes . Org and search for "Another Realm" or "Katkiller".

**Chapter End Notes**

So.. yeah. Liked this chapter too much to not post it today, hope everyone enjoys it. ;)

The next act is going to be a mini-act and be something a little different than the
norm, hopefully everyone will enjoy it because it's proving to be a pain to write. The next chapter should post by Friday, 08/28/15.

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 1: The Wounds

My cane struck the metallic decking as I paced in the frigate's hanger, waiting for the fucking shuttle to hurry up and land.

Behind me, the sisters weren't much better off. Illyan was at least keeping her shit together, but she had to hold onto little Erana. The young maiden had started sobbing when we got word about the ape's condition. She apparently thought of him as a surrogate uncle or some crap with how he'd gotten the two of them their jobs, and how he'd helped her adjust to dealing with Batarians on a daily bloody basis.

"Fucking move." I growled, ignoring the twinging in my back as I turned too suddenly.

"They're going as fast as they can boss."

Even being half again as tall as I was, she wilted under the glare I threw her way. She tugged her sister a bit closer, muttering something soothing as she stroked the maiden's crest. Ignoring the pair of them, I resumed pacing as the shuttle's engines slowed to a low whine.

I thought I had good fucking reason to be impatient. The Suns had managed to realize how we'd been firing off the damned missiles, and had shifted around a mobile jamming unit to cut the connection. We'd had to suffer through nearly two hours of radio silence before the fucking Eclipse had gotten around to telling us that we'd 'won' the fight. Apparently Rane had been quick enough to react to the riptide, getting a direct laser signal straight up to an Eclipse frigate to fire off the next volleys.

But we still didn't know how badly we'd been hurt. Beyond badly, anyway.

After far too long, the hatch swung open to reveal several Batarians and Asari, all in battered and scorched armor. But they were distinctly absent one human male. and one highborn bitch that needed a good thrashing.

"Ghai?"

My bondmate gave me a tired nod, hopping down from the shuttle and waving for the others to go on ahead. All of them looked battered and exhausted, limping and shuffling towards the exit as they left the small craft.

While they did that, she made her way over to me. "Trena."

A lot of my anger bled out into the sea at hearing her ruined voice, and most of the rest joined it...
when armored arms wrapped around me as she pulled me tightly against her. She stank of sweat, and her armor wasn't exactly comfortable against my chest. but a part of me was still glad that the ape wasn't there to see me reach up and stroke the back of her neck while my other arm wrapped around her waist.

"That bad?"

"Worse." she pulled back to rest her forehead against mine, a Turian gesture she seemed fond of. "Cieran.."

"Not here." I pulled back slightly, forcing my breathing to even. "Come on."

She let me guide her out, not commenting when Illyan and Erana joined us. What few crew were in the corridors quickly got out of our way, leaving us free to make it to my quarters in the port-side wing. There wasn't much space, and only one chair. I sat on the bed, leaving space for Ghai to sit next to me once she got her armor off. Illyan let her sister take the chair, while she leaned against the entryway to the room's small bathroom.

I managed to keep my mouth shut for about thirty seconds while she started pealing her light armor plates off to reveal the bodysuit beneath. It probably spoke volumes about my state of mind that I didn't stare at her tits nearly as much as I normally would have.

"Right. The ape?"

She grimaced before visibly forcing herself to actually speak. "Emergency medivac took him to the Solar Eclipse."

"Is he.. going to make it?" Erana almost whispered the question.

Ghai's lips thinned. "He was shot twice in the left leg and once in the right shoulder. Another round hit his tech launcher while he was spinning up an incinerate and it detonated."

Tingles shot up and down my arms as my biotics reacted to my emotion, and my fingers reflexively curled into fists. "Full strength?"

"I do not believe so." Light glinted off of her artificial hand as she pulled at her belt, tossing it onto the floor. "Last report from my contact on the flagship had them struggling to locate all of the shrapnel to stop the internal bleeding."

Goddess damn you ape. Not fucking like this. Not on fucking Korlus, not for some fight that neither you nor I cared about.

Illyan shifted to rest a large hand on her sister's shoulder. "He'll be all right. He's tough even if he's thin."

Tough wasn't the word I would use, he was too much like a rail for that. There was a fucking reason I'd conned Xerol into giving him the damned armor in the first place. But he was a stubborn dick. That would have to be enough.

Don't fucking die on me ape. I have a hard enough time dealing with this crap with you around.

Forcing my body to relax, I managed to get the next question out. "The rest?"

"Wasea is dead. Dougal." There was a pang somewhere in my chest. "So is Marn. Lost her in the final push on the tower."
After that, the body blows just kept on coming. From Rane'li's team, only she was uninjured. Feai was still alive, but had had to be evac'd with the ape. Marn's group of veterans had likewise been decimated. Only three were still breathing. Chen had made it, which I supposed was something. His team had more injuries than deaths, which probably had left him thankful. Ghai's team was in much the same way, having lost one girl but with the remainder besides her being wounded.

We were still better off than the Eclipse. Wasea's unit had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist.

When Rane had dropped Dougal, shit had apparently gotten confusing. Shaaryak had gone on a warpath to try and get to the ape, while the remaining Suns had likewise gone berserk to try and avenge their commander. While the teams on the cruiser's left flank had dealt with their crap well enough, the tower's defenders had had a rougher time. The Suns had made a final push, apparently trying to place demo charges in the structure to drop it onto the cruiser to stop it from launching any more missiles at their reinforcements.

By the time she finished her voice had become little more than a whisper, and Erana was practically catatonic. Ghai had finished removing her armor, but clearly was getting impatient to get out of the sweat soaked underclothing as well.

"Illyan." Our sometimes lover glanced at me. "I think your sister could do with a drink. Or ten."

She gave me a little nod before gently pulling her up. "Keep me in the loop about the boss?"

"No shit."

Her lips gave a little twist before the pair of them left.

Sighing, I let my body fall back into the bed, staring at the ceiling. "Shaaryak go with the ape?"

"No. Coordinating with Balak and Sederis." Clothing hit the floor, but I couldn't bring myself to sit back up. "Wreck."

"She better fucking be." I muttered, desperately wishing that I could smoke my pipe. Or that I had a beer or ten. "Still need to flay that bitch's hide."

There was a quiet noise of disagreement.

"I don't care that you were Xerol's Harath'krem. She lied to us. Even to the ape. And he was fucking pissed."

"You. Not helpful."

My mouth twisted. I hadn't been. And it hadn't been the goddess damned time or the place for any of us to lose our tempers, but we fucking had. They were practically damned kids, but I at least should have known better. This sure as fuck wasn't my first time at sea.

She sighed and a hand touched my knee. "Passionate. Too much sometimes."

"He's a friend dammit." And I still didn't fucking know how that had really happened. But it had. And now I didn't fucking know if he was going to live or not.

"You need to shower." Her hand patted my lag again, and feet began to pad away. "Wait. Where's Rane?"

"Surface."
"Dammit."

Another displeased sound, followed by an actual sentence. "You're still trying to get them together?"

I shrugged, grimacing as my crest caught in the blankets. "Yes. They'd be good for each other."

"Shaaryak."

My throat vibrated in a growl. "Fine, she feels like crap right now, but how long is that going to last? She's trying to turn herself into a typical fucking highborn, and trying to turn him into one too. He's going to keep pushing her back and they're going to fight more."

Her grunt wasn't exactly one of agreement.

"Fine. I'll bitch about her to Rane then."

She sighed before footsteps echoed quietly, the bathroom door sliding closed behind her. The sonic shower kicked on a few moments later.

Groaning, I tried to get my thoughts straight.

One. The ape was down, and possibly dead. I didn't want to think about that.

Two. Wasea was dead, along with most of her company. Sederis was going to flip her shit, and I could only hope that Shaaryak dealt with her before I had to. A century felt more like a blink of an eye, and I just wasn't ready to see her again. Nor was I ready to answer anyone's questions about it.

Three. If.. when.. Cieran recovered, he and I had to talk with his Batarian lover. And the girl who very much wanted to have him in her bed too. Ghai could disapprove all she wanted, but I'd seen plenty of relationships born of combat. I'd yet to see more than a handful actually last all that long.

Besides, she was a bitch and didn't deserve him. Especially after this crap.

My omni-tool pinged quietly, the orange display automatically snapping to life. Groaning, I brought my arm up so that I could actually read the stupid thing.

One new message from.. from.. my heart trembled slightly in my chest, as if Athame herself was squeezing it. It took more effort than it out to have to shift my fingers to open the inbox.

From: Cieran Kean (The Ape)

Subject: Automatic transmission of will

I snapped the omni-tool off.

No.

He wasn't fucking dead. Whatever fucking automation he'd setup had to be wrong. Just keyed to his breathing or heartbeat, and they could get both of those going again.

He wasn't fucking dead.

The first friend I'd made in over a hundred goddess-cursed years wasn't fucking dead.
This time there wasn't any suppression. Not even a token effort. Metal groaned as my biotics lashed out uncontrollably. The few objects in my quarters slammed into the walls before careening away. Above me the lights started to flicker as dark energy pressed against them, trying to shove them into the ceiling.

The shower abruptly cut out and the bathroom door shot open. Her own biotics were still weak, but they were sputtering as strongly as she could make them. The crackling static of her powers cut out as she realized that we weren't under attack.

A few moments later a body was pressing against me, arms sliding beneath my back as she hauled me up and against her. Even when my hind-brain instinctively tried to shove her away she held on. Her forehead fell down until it rested against mine, our noses gently touching as she adjusted me. A hand cautiously slid to the back of my neck, tiny biotic bursts disrupting my amp and outpouring energy.

I almost collapsed against her as exhaustion abruptly washed over me, my lungs heaving to get more oxygen to my starved body.

Ghai just held onto me as I got myself under control. She didn't say anything, just held me. Let me know she was there. The ape did the same stupid thing when I'd been in the mansion's medical wing. He'd just sit next to my bed, reading crap. Not talking when I was feeling sorry for myself. Just being there.

Athame.

"He's not dead."

She nodded minutely, lowering her head just a bit to press her lips to mine in a soft kiss. "See him?"

See him. On the Solar Eclipse. Keyword there being fucking Eclipse and all the baggage that came with it.

I closed my eyes and blew a long breath through my nose. "Yes."

---

Next up is Chapter 2: The Journey

Chapter End Notes

So. This was really, really hard to write. Shifting points of view is stupidly difficult. That the shift is both species and gender is also stupidly rough.

This mini-arc will go on for another three short chapters, and then Act 2 will kick off. There's also going to be a short hiatus from the Author's Fun Facts, so my apologies for that. It will resume with Act 2.

The next chapter will post next Tuesday, September the first.

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 made my way back to the shuttle-bay, alone.

Ghai had gone off to round up her squad. I didn't expect Shaaryak to try to leave without me or the ape, but there wasn't any point in taking fucking chances. Especially when they finished cramming a hundred odd extra Batarians on board. None of them would probably care, especially about a human. And after all the crap we'd gone through I sure as shit didn't trust this Balak fucker not to try and take over after he'd left us to do all the damned fighting for him.

My cane struck the decking as I walked, nodding to myself as my target tiredly exited the latest arrival. She was apparently the last one off, a half a dozen more walking wounded shuffling past me.

"Trena?" Rane'li already had her helmet off. There were deep circles underneath of her dark eyes, and her copper toned skin was pallid with exhaustion.

"Rane." I grunted before stabbing my cane at the shuttle. "Get back in."

Four eyes blinked rapidly as her tired brain seemed to struggle with what I'd just said. "Huh?"

"Get the fuck back in the shuttle. We have somewhere to go."

She still hadn't moved by the time I got to her, so I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her.

"Trena? Don't you want to know about-"

"Ghai told me." Shifting a bit, I used my cane to help lever myself into the shuttle as she finally started moving on her own. "We're going to the Solar Eclipse to make sure he's still fucking alive."

Thankfully the pilot had apparently already disembarked, which meant I didn't have to throw them off. It had been a while since I'd flown solo, but it wasn't as if I was trying to get us all the way back to Illium in this crate.

"Trena, what is going on?" a surprisingly strong hand grabbed my shoulder as I collapsed into the pilot's chair. "Shouldn't we be waiting until they update us?"

A long breath came out through my nose. "His omni-tool kicked off an automated message. He's still fucking alive, and I'm going to beat the crap out of him for not doing a better job of setting it up."

"A message? What kind.. oh. Pillars.. no, he.."

"He's not fucking dead." The snarl made her hand jerk away. Or maybe it was the flare of biotic energy across my body. "Now sit the fuck in that chair and help me get us over there."
She did so without another word. And at least she didn’t start crying, instead helping me get through the pre-flight before bringing up the channel to the control room.

"Shuttle five, requesting permission to depart."

There was a startled beat. "Shuttle five, you’re not on the flight plan.."

I growled impatiently. "This is T’laria. We are departing. My authority."

"Oh. My apologies ma'am, one moment while I check the lane." Fingers drummed slowly as we waited. At least it was someone who fucking knew me, not one of the new hires. They probably would have kicked it to that asshole of a Captain. "You’re clear to the surface ma'am."

A finger stabbed the cut off line while my other hand slid across the controls. The view outside the windows turned as we rotated towards the exit, a few crew-members belatedly getting their asses out of our way. My back pressed into the seat as I threw the throttle to the limit, ignoring pretty much every safety reg in the book as we shot out into space.

"Get me a line to the flagship." I had us turning into a broad arc, curling up and around to bring us near the battlecruiser's portside hanger.

She nodded, only to wince as someone started snapping over our speakers.

"Unknown shuttle. You do not have permission to approach this vessel. Alter course immediately."

"Clear us a landing zone in your port bay." I growled back. "Priority code T-H-W-9-7-5."

There was a startled beat. "Confirmation code two?"

It took me a moment to wrack my memory for that one. It had been a fucking while. "Whispers of the Goddess, Verse Five."

"..Apologies for my tone ma'am. You’re cleared to approach bay five." Another pause. "My sincere apologies, but it has to be cleared first ma'am. We have troop transports loading. Please shift to holding pattern three, it shouldn’t be more than ten minutes."

I grunted before cutting the line entirely. Beside me, Rane just stared, her mouth slightly open.

"Don't fucking ask girl."

Her cheeks tinged a bit, and she quickly busied herself with the console.

After a few minutes I leaned back in my seat and grunted. "That code is going to draw attention. Someone up high will probably be meeting us when we land, let me do the talking."

"That.. won’t be an issue." she assured me.

Good, because this was going to fucking suck enough without her getting involved in this. More involved anyway.

We managed about a minute of silence before I couldn't stand the thoughts in my head anymore. "You got Dougal then?"

Her lips thinned. "Not much to say. His shields were down and he wasn’t ready for a fight. I shot him, he died."
"Shit isn't always heroic. You saved the ape, all that matters." I exhaled slowly. "How'd he look?"

She seemed to flinch, her lower eyes glancing at me and then quickly away. "He was.. Pillars. It was bad. They had me help get him out of his armor and put medigel on the burns. He's.. I didn't realize that he was so.. so thin. You wouldn't think it by looking at him, but without his armor.."

"Yeah." I'd had to help him stagger back to his old place after we'd both had a few too many drinks at Forever or Eternity. And even after he'd tried to bulk up he was still a fucking pole without his ton of armor cocooning him. "You all right?"

Rane gave me a flat look that plainly told me how much of a stupid fucking question that was.

"Right." I shook my head, wondering why the fuck I'd let that bit of idiocy get out. I wasn't even fucking drinking. "Better topic then. Ape said you almost actually told him while he was bitching about Shaaryak."

"Oh pillars." Hands rose so that she could bury her face in them, her voice becoming muffled. "Are we seriously talking about this right now?"

"Yes." It meant not thinking about the fucking message I'd gotten. Or the shit I was going to have to deal with when we actually got onto the goddess-damned ship. "He's alive, he's going to fucking stay alive, and if I have anything to say about it he's going to rip your clothes off at some point."

Her body shifted so that she could see me with her left pair of eyes. They blinked several times before she gave a tiny nod, apparently accepting that I was trying to deflect us. "He did notice then?"

"He's not blind. He's known you've got a thing for him for a while." I had to tilt my head to lean it against the rest behind me. The stupid thing wasn't designed for Asari and it took me a few tries to find a spot that wasn't bending my damned crest. "Doesn't know what to say to you about it, but he knows."

A quiet groan followed. "Not sure if that makes it better or worse."

"Considering you've been all but pining for four fucking months? Worse."

"Pillars.. why do you keep pushing this?"

I brought a up hand, fingers ticking as I went through the points. "You have crap in common with him. You think he's pretty. He thinks you're hot. I've slept with people with far less than that."

Her cheeks started to darken around the bands. "It isn't about taking him to bed."

"Yes it is." I flicked my eyes over to her, my lips thinning slightly. "Your life is short enough girl. If you want him that badly you need to straighten up and grab him from Shaaryak."

Rane stared at me in disbelief before burying her face in her hands again. "Pillars. You make it sound like I'm a thief trying to steal him away."

"Don't give me that 'I want him to be happy' crap either. He and Shaaryak are going to kill each other if shit keeps going on the way it is."

My companion finally glanced at me with her lower eyes. "What do you have against her? I mean.. Cieran loves her."
"No. He loved what she was." I corrected, jerking two fingers at her to emphasize the point. "That bitch isn't the same person anymore and it's not going the way he'd want. Athame's ass, this whole fucking disaster was the perfect example. She fucking expected him to act like a Batarian highborn. That he might get a little annoyed because she omitted crap. It's like her brain floated out to sea for a while and fucking forgot that he's a goddess damned human. Of all the fucking things for her to overlook, it's how he was going to bloody react if shit didn't go perfectly. And that caused us all to get into a fucking fight in the middle of a damned battle!"

The Batarian woman's lips twisted, her hands digging a water bottle out from the cabinet on her right before taking a sip.

"Fuck.. for a while I thought he might actually turn her into someone worth tolerating. Then Xerol just had to fucking die." I groused, fully warmed up to my theme at this point. The ape didn't let me bitch about his woman, Ghai would tell me off, and Illyan worried about her damned job too much. Which left me with a damned short list of people I could actually say this shit to. "Now she's all trying to act high and mighty and live up to his goddess damned memory without even wondering if she should. Like all this fucking mess. Xerol would have done some similar shit, but he at least was from the fucking Hegemony. I could've understood why he'd want to help those assholes. She's never been and probably never will fucking be."

"Trena.." she seemed to hunch in on herself. "She did ignore everything to try to get to him, after the call went out."

"Which is something." I grunted. "Not fucking much, considering she's the one who put him in a place to get almost killed. Fucking again."

"Still..

My eyes narrowed at her, and she seemed to hunch down again. "Why the fuck are you defending.. shit. Caste crap again?"

There was a slight flinch. "Yes."

I groaned and wished I had a case or five of booze. She got a lot mouthier when she was drinking. And more fun, come to think of it.

"Trena.. you really believe that they're just going to hurt each other? Even with this?"

"This shit? This will bring them back together for.." My brain did a few estimates. I hadn't seen a situation exactly like this before, but a few were pretty close. Like when Wasea's cousin, Wasala or something had tried to shack up with that Turian. It hadn't ended well, but the clawmarks on her back had always been amusing. "Give them six months. At the most. Probably less with Balak and his cronies sticking around."

Something almost like a growl echoed from her throat at the name.

"You met him then?"

"Yes." Her fingers clenched around the water bottle. "Regrettably."

"That bad huh."

"It will take a miracle from the Pillars themselves for him to survive on Illium." Her tone made it quite clear she was hoping no such thing would happen. "In other words he seems to be a typical Highborn from the Hegemony."
Fucking great. Maybe I could trick him into going to the wrong parts of Nos Astra. Plenty of maidens and matrons who'd be glad to rip one or two of his eyes out just for looking at them the wrong way.

The silence stretched out for about a minute before Rane apparently had to say something to keep our little game of distracting ourselves going.

"You never asked me why."

"Why what girl?"

"Why I like him, even if he's a human."

I shrugged to my left. "It's not fucking complicated. He treats you like a person rather than trash. He doesn't care about your caste. Or about whatever you did to get exiled. Actually listens to your opinions and thinks you make a pretty good squad leader. You think he's hot, especially when he's building crap."

Which was a lot of why Shaaryak liked him too, come to think of it. Except she expected him to become something else now that she felt the need to change herself. And the only thing Rane would ask of the ape would be for him to stay just as he was.

Four dark eyes blinked at me.

"Fuck girl. I've been alive for a few of your lifetimes. It's not that fucking hard to read the waves after a while." Turning my head a bit, I stared at the glimmering battlecruiser hovering above the brown dirtball that was Korlus. "Fucking humans. And turians. If he was anything else he'd have already had you clawing at his back."

Her cheeks flushed again. "I don't want him to be anything else.. and why is it always about sex with you?"

"It's about sex for everybody." I countered with a lazy grin that wasn't entirely forced. "I'm just honest about it."

She groaned again.

"Seriously girl. Soon as he can walk, drag him to a closet or something. Fuck, you can even use our room. Just make sure Ghai and I aren't there first." My lips stayed curled. "Doesn't he owe you too?"

"I.. he.." If it wasn't for the extra eyes she would have been adorably flustered.

"There you go. Plenty of ways to use-"

"Ma'am."

The radio cut us off. "Bay five is now clear, you are open to approach."

"Confirmed." Rane sagged in relief as I brought us around, the computer updating as the capital ship's systems gave us our course. It didn't take us long to cross the empty void, the hanger itself becoming clear as we closed.

I was ready to get back to needling her when I realized that the normal crew in the hanger weren't sticking around. Tiny yellow figures were moving quickly away, heading for the exits. Still, I didn't start to get worried until we got closer and it became clear that pretty much all of them were leaving.
By the time we had begun to drift through the barriers, there was only a single figure remaining, and my body was tingling as my biotics started to flare in time with my heartbeat.

"Rane." She tensed slightly. "Stay in the shuttle. I don't care what you see. Stay in the goddess damned shuttle. Understand?"

Her chin jerked in a nod. "Is that..?"

"Yes." The shuttle settled onto the decking only slightly harder than it should have. Despite the echoing boom, the sole Asari didn't seemed bothered in the slightest. She simply stood there, as if prepared to wait as long as she had to for me to get out. And why wouldn't she? It was her ship, and now we had to play it by her rules.

Or she'd skin us alive and laugh while she did it.

Fingers flicked the power core off, the engines whining to a halt. "She and I apparently have to have a.. talk."

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Next up is Chapter 3: The Conflict

Chapter End Notes

Yup. Still stupidly hard to write, but we're getting through it. Hopefully people liked a bit more of Rane and Trena, especially given that the Rane/Cieran pairing requests seem to be on the rise. You all can thank SpiritStrike for leaving a review amusing enough to have me post this one early. Also the Blocked Writer for helping me get all this straight in my head and edited.

The next Chapter is done and will post sometime between tomorrow and next Tuesday.

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 anything about the Mass Effect.

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Chapter 3: The Conflict

I had to lean heavily on my cane as I exited the shuttle, staring at the person I'd rather have never seen again in my lifetime.

The head of the Eclipse stared right back at me without any hint of emotion, her expression tightly controlled as I limped towards her.

"Sederis."

Eyes narrowed slightly. "Gears."

It took my fingers tightening around my cane not to flinch at the name and the memories it invoked. "Don't call me that."

"I'll call you whatever I want." Definite anger colored her voice, dull flickers of light appearing in bands around her arms. "A century. A full, Athame damned century you've been missing. And now you come gasping out of the riptide."

My own anger overrode my brain. "Fucking give me a break. I hardly fucking vanished, you could have found me at any goddess-damned time you wanted. It's not like I ran off to the other side of the galaxy. Didn't even leave the fucking planet."

Her shoulders tightened, and for a second I thought she was about to blast me. A long exhale later and the energy bled away to nothingness and her tone softened. "You didn't want me to."

No. I hadn't. Still didn't.

A long breath escaped my nose. "So. Are you going to let me see him or not?"

Eyes blinked slowly as she took her time considering the question. When she eventually spoke, her voice as flat. "As far as I am aware, he is still in surgery. We have more than an adequate amount of time to talk."

Fucking great.

"He's still alive then?"

Those damned eyes kept staring at me as she repeated herself without a trace of emotion. "As far as I am aware."

Some of my anger came back, my throat vibrating. "Is he fucking alive or not?"

Sederis turned away from me, her boots causing echoes to rise when they struck the deck. "Your co-pilot may wait outside of the medical wing. You are coming with me."

My mouth opened to contest the point, but snapped shut reflexively when she gave me a look over
her shoulder. I still remembered that fucking expression. There was about a thirty second window for me to do what the fuck she'd just said or Athame herself wouldn't be able to save me.

A slight flick of a finger brought my omni-tool up. "Rane, power the shuttle down the rest of the way. Someone will take you to the medical wing, I'll meet you there."

"Understood... are you sure?"

"No fucking choice." I muttered before shutting it down, sharp clicks sounding as my cane helped me move in the warlord's wake.

She led me deeper into the ship, the corridors quickly becoming deserted ahead of her. A few people gave me pitying looks from the safety of their side passages or cabins. Oddly enough that almost brought up a bit of nostalgia.

Good to see some shit hasn't changed.

I followed her into a lift, glad at least that she hasn't said anything else yet. A few moments of whirring motion later deposited us on an upper deck with only a handful of rooms visible down the short hall.

The last one contained her personal quarters, which were about what I'd expected. Plenty of open space to revel in the greatest luxury aboard a ship, along with too much fucking gold. Seriously. Half the fucking room was a shade of yellow or had gold inlays. The nearer portion of the room was half office, half dining area, and I assumed that the bed was on the other side of the wall that seemed to split the place.

Sederis waved left towards the table, while she turned right. "Sit."

Throwing a glare at her back, I did so, leaning my cane against the table with a quiet clatter.

When she spoke, it was in an entirely normal tenor that made my mouth drop a bit in confusion. "I'm going to assume that you still drinking the same swill?"

My eyes blinked furiously. What the fuck...? "Yes?"

She grunted, yanking a pair of bottles from a small fridge. Slamming it shut with a tiny biotic throw, she tossed one to me while ripping her own open. "Good. It's the only crap that I can get down."

The tide finally rose. "You have a new mind healer."

"And about thirty medications." The glower at her drink suddenly made sense. And the unusual control she'd showed in the hanger. "It's hard to run a military campaign when each wave brings a new emotion. I'd sooner kill the bitch, but my subordinates made it clear that I'd be facing a total revolt if I did."

Which was brave of them. And fucking stupid, she'd find a way to get back at them even if it took her a few decades of waiting. At least the odds of me surviving the next few minutes just went up exponentially.

"Don't look so fucking relaxed." The growl was accompanied by a curl of biotics around her neck. "I'm still tempted to rip you apart for vanishing like that. You know how I deal with deserters."

My cheek twitched as I ripped my beer open, taking a quick swig. I didn't even take the time to
appreciate the rich flavor. "I know. I knew when I did it."

Which had led me to taking the Matriarch's fucking deal. And whatever I'd said, I didn't doubt that she'd kept me out of Sederis' search-nets for at least the first few decades.

The chair opposite me creaked as she sat into it. There was a long exhale. "Considering what happened to your unit, perhaps it was the correct decision Gears. If you hadn't been in the hospital when the Pack attacked them."

I twitched again. That was a group of people I also tried not to think about. "Could you get to the point?"

She blew out an irritated breath. "Still the same little bitch I see. Can't just enjoy a goddess-damned beer with the adopted father you haven't seen in over a century?"

"You never officially bonded with my mother after dad's death." Another pull of the beer was needed before I could go on. "And you're the one who wanted to talk."

More energy started to flicker over her fingers, the nascent warp fire digging pits into the table as she dragged the tips across it. "I'm starting to reconsider."

Somewhere in my head was a stupid, un-evolved fish that really needed to learn to shut its mouth. "Right.. what do you want to know? Why I left? What I'm up to? If I'm sleeping with the ape?"

Sederis gave me a long stare, and it took a very long drink before her biotics started to calm. "You wouldn't touch an alien that way if someone had a gun to your throat, I doubt that you've changed that much. And I know that you are working for Aethyta and Republic Intelligence, not for Shaaryak. That bitch is too self centered to realize that that old fish is just keeping tabs on her with you and her lover."

Partially true. The ape probably didn't realize that his regular reports helped his other boss stay up to date with details that Shaaryak probably didn't think Aethyta needed to know about it. On the other hand, I fully relished writing those messages every week. Of course I'd be even happier if she gave me something to really get her with, but if the goddess was willing Balak would do something stupid quickly enough.

"So that just leaves why I left." I glared at my drink. "Seeing a vid of my mother torn apart by rabid krogan couldn't have had anything to do with it. Or listening to my sisters dying trying to avenge her."

Another deep growl, but this time her anger didn't seem to be directed at me. "I killed those creatures. Not slowly enough, but they ended up dead."

"I also lost my entire unit." A hand rose to count off my points, continuing as if she hadn't spoken. "My father died a month beforehand along with my bondmate. Oh, and your brain got yanked into a hurricane and shredded. So yeah. I got the hell out of your ocean. Call me whatever the fuck you want, but there was no way I was dealing with that life anymore."

She didn't flinch, but there was the tiniest bit of motion in a cheek. "It didn't occur to you that you could have helped me?"

"By the time I even got back to Illium you were already raving and throwing people out of windows. I didn't see the fucking point." A tiny bit more motion, another almost-twitch in her cheek before a slight nod. My eyes slid off of her darker pair, staring into my drink as if it held answers for me. It didn't. No more than the thousands I'd stared into prior had. "So. Going to rip my crest off or just throw me out an airlock?"
Her fingers drummed once before there was a sigh. "Your mother would emerge from Athame's embrace and flay me if I did. And your father would come back with her to burn my ass off for making her bondmate upset."

I snorted, almost smiling at the hazy memories. "Yeah. Dad was always a protective old tit."

Sederis echoed my snort with one of her own. "She was. Fucking possessive bitch too. Still, can't kill you, but I can't exactly set a precedent now can I? As far as anyone else is concerned I exiled your little ass."

My head dipped once. I wasn't upset in the slightest about that, but she'd just get pissed again if I made that obvious. Instead I tried to be tactful for fucking once and change the topic back to why I was even on this goddess-forsaken ship. "You never did answer me if he's still alive or not."

There was a quiet grunt before her omni-tool flicked to life. A half a dozen menus opened and closed in rapid succession before she found what she was looking for. "No updates at the moment. He's been in surgery since he got on board, and the doctors won't give a prognosis until they're sure."

A hand rose to rub furiously at my face. Dammit. Still. If he had died when the message was sent, they'd have already told her about it. That meant he had to still be fucking alive. It had to be something stupid like him keying the transmission to his heart stopping, and they could have gotten that going again. Or even killed him on purpose for a few seconds for some medical shit. Fuck if I knew.

All that mattered was that he still had to be alive. And I was going to fucking beat his pale ass from here to Illium for scaring a decade off of my life with that message.

"He's a friend then?"

"Never had very many." I reminded her before finishing off the drink. "To be honest I don't know how he fucking got so close. But the furry asshole did."

"Here then." Her beer slid across the table. There wasn't much left, but I nodded in thanks all the same. "Apparently I owe him again as well."

My face pulled into a frown as I sipped from the new drink. "How? I mean, it was his fucking plan, sure, but it went to shit pretty damned fast."

"According to a Lieutenant Elissa he dragged Captain Wasea out of the fight when she was injured. And when he fell it was trying to protect her and the ship's control center. Without him Dougal could have stopped the missile launches and I'd have lost an entire company." There was a long exhale. "Instead of just most of one. I'm still tempted to kill that Batarian bitch."

"I won't stop you."

Fingers drummed again. "Hegemony is paying me too much. Four eyed dicks. Never making a deal with them again. As far as your human goes.. if there's a way to keep him alive I owe him that much at least."

"Thanks."

"Thank him." She grunted. "I've got techs trying to pull the data core from the ship right now. If there's any good intel on it call it another that I owe him. But while I owe him, you.."
"I don't owe you crap." I growled.

There was a clucking sound as she hit the roof of her mouth with her tongue. "No, you do. I'd be justified in sending the sharks after you, but these are hardly major requests."

"I'll keep my mouth shut on the healer and act like you're still insane. Easy enough."

Her lips twitched. "That's only one, Gears. I want to be copied on anything coming out of Khar'shan Minor. And you'll come to the mansion for drinks at least once a month. Mind healer says it would be good for me. And you."

The first wasn't a problem. I'd have done that if she asked, even without her threats. Between the Eclipse and Intelligence, the nanosecond that Shaaryak or Balak fucked up and I could at least get the latter and his SIU cronies thrown off planet. Or killed. I wasn't picky, just so long as they were fucking gone. The second though.. "You aren't giving me a choice, are you."

"No. I'm not." There was a slow exhale. "Trena, at one point I considered you a surrogate daughter. And a goddess-damned better one than some of my own. And with this fucking healing is coming a lot of memories that I did my fucking best to suppress. You're the only one still alive from those days, the only fucking one who lost the same people."

My fingers tightened, dark energy rolling down my right arm as I fought the urge to punch her. We had both lost people. Only one of us had gone insane. And apparently only one of us still thought about those days.

I don't care what some mind healing bitch had to say. I didn't want to fucking remember.

"I'm not giving you a choice girl."

.. Fuck. Maybe the old fish could get me an assignment off world.

"Fine." Forcing my hand open I grabbed my cane, heaving myself up. "I'm going to the medical wing."

She let me stand and turn, speaking only when I was near the doorway. "Does your human know you passed your initiation? Or you new bondmate?"

I glanced over my shoulder, ignoring the shudder in my chest. "Yes."

"You always were a poor liar." The way she inclined her head, and how her lips pulled into a shark-like grin, made it obvious that she knew that she had me. Again.

Ghai wouldn't care. I knew she'd done worse.

But the ape would.

Turning away, from her, I sucked in a ragged breath before fleeing. But this time.. I didn't think that I'd be able to get away.

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Next up is Chapter 4: The Message

Chapter End Notes
So.. yeah. I'm a bit ahead of schedule in terms of completing these chapters, and I'm loving the volume and quality of reviews that I've been getting so much that I thought I'd give you all another chapter. :)

Finally some of Trena's backstory, including quite a bit that she'd probably Cieran and others really not know about. Plus a slightly more sane Sederis than when she was last around, though whether or not that's going to last remains to be seen. The next chapter wasn't scheduled to post until the eighth of September.. but you all can expect it sometime between now and next Tuesday. :)

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 found Rane about fifteen minutes later.

The tall Batarian female was sitting in a small lobby near the entrance to the ship's primary medical wing, tiredly flicking through her omni-tool.

"Rane."

"Trena." her upper eyes widened as they snapped up to me. "Pillars. I didn't know if you'd.. you know."

"Same." I admitted, limping over before collapsing into the chair next to hers with a groan. My life had just gotten a lot more fucking complicated that was for sure. I'd thought I'd accepted that when I'd decided to fly over to this damned ship, but actually having to talk with that bitch for the first time in a century had me reconsidering. "Always fucking something."

"I don't suppose she gave you any news?" Her lips twisted. "They won't tell me anything."

"Still in surgery. Means he's still alive or they'd have already told her."

"So.. we're just going to be sitting here until someone tells us one way or the other?"

"Yeah.." We'd look awfully stupid going back to the frigate without an answer. But that still left us sitting here. Doing nothing. Trying not to think about crap. Again. Well, she at least was just trying not to think about the ape. I had to distract myself from both his injuries as well as the conversation I'd just fucking had.

"So.." her voice trailed as she glanced at her omni-tool again. "Shaaryak wants to know when we get any updates."

I grunted, glancing at my own omni-tool. After I'd gotten the automatic message from the ape's I'd locked it down. A slight finger flick brought it up, revealing several messages all waiting for me. Besides the will there were two from Shaaryak, one from Ghai, and a recent one from Sederis.

Angling my screen away from her, I opened the last to find a list of potential dates that I could show up at the mansion. There was also a list of extranet addresses as an addendum where I was apparently supposed to copy my reports to.

Suffice to say, seeing that she'd already put fucking thought into it didn't improve my mood.

Wishing that I could punch something, I closed that message down and skipped both of the ones from Shaaryak. I didn't fucking want to hear from her right now.

Ghai's proved to be a short one indicating that the Batarians were starting to get shuttled up, and a gentle reminder to let her and Illyan know when I had news.
“Are you going to reply to her or should I?”

“You can handle it.” There was a sigh before she started tapping out a reply that was probably leagues more polite than I could have managed.

While she was doing that, I was staring at the message that had started this fucking trip.

*Automatic Transmission of Will.*

Why had I gotten it? Why not Shaaryak? As much as I couldn't stand the woman I knew he really did care about her. And what in the deeps did he even have to give away? An apartment that he didn't live in anymore? A small mountain of credits that he just let accumulate interest? I didn't care about either one and he knew that shit.

Well. Wasn't as if I had fucking anything else to do.

A tap of my finger opened it, bringing up a fucking waterfall of text. Groaning, I settled back and made myself start reading.

*Hey Scales. If you're reading this.. fuck that's too cliched to even write down. If you got this, you know why you got it. If you hacked my omni-tool and found this file I'm going to beat the crap out of you. Assuming you don't kill me, that is.*

*Right.. so... you probably want a drink, or ten, before reading this. It's.. pretty fucked up.*

My head throbbed. Another drink sounded good, but I wasn't about to crawl back up to Sederis and ask for one.

Guess the only thing I can do is launch right in. I might not have been entirely honest when I told you that I had amnesia from the attack. I don't. Not even a little bit. Before you hit something, keep reading. If he hadn't put that in there I fucking would have. Rane had actually started to scoot away from me as much as she could, and my biotics were starting to ripple energy up and down my entire body. I doubt you'll believe this the first time you read it, and it sounds stupid when I put it down like this, but fuck it: I'm not from this universe.

Well. He had two things right. It was stupid, and I didn't. I had to read it four fucking times before the words actually stayed in my brain.

*If you want proof, I can't really give you much. What I can say is that where and when I'm from (about a century and a half ago by your time), this universe is represented in a series of video games, comics, shit like that. I played them, obviously, which is how I knew things. Whatever the Matriarch did when she dragged me here also gave me your language. (Insert: I don't know why she brought me here. Apparently I was a test of some kind but she was cagey about the details). Problem is the events of the first game are still a few years off.. so there isn't much I can say to prove this. Worse, my memory is starting to get a bit hazy on some of the details..*

I really needed a fucking drink. And to work out what fucking drugs he'd been taking when I hadn't been paying attention.

*Here's a few bullets I think you can safely check on.*

*One; The first attempt at making a human Spectre should have already occurred. The human in question was Captain David Anderson, and he failed after Saren Arterius framed him for the destruction of something they were investigating.*

*Two; Aethyta had a daughter with Matriarch Benezia T'soni, named Liara. Both of them call her*
'little wing' and she's an archeologist. She doesn't know who her dad is, and Aethyta would probably maim/kill you for asking her.

Three; The first human spectre will be a woman named Shepard, sometime in 2183. She'll be tasked with hunting down and killing Saren after he goes rogue.

There's a bunch of others.. including some crap in here that would have given me a death sentence from the Republic if they knew that I know (stupid sentence – edit that if I have time?). But the events of the games are.. well, pretty hardcore. Especially the later shit. The Matriarch told me that if I got involved she'd kill me, and I believe(d) her. But that being said.. I didn't want you going into this blind. If you can do anything to keep yourself alive (and Ghai and Nyn and everyone else) I wanted you to be able to do it. Maybe you can even change shit for the better, I don't think that I have.

"What the fuck is this shit.." Snapping my omni-tool closed, I leaned my head back before massaging my temples with a hand. Did he really expect me to believe this crap?

"Are you.. all right?"

"No." Grabbing my cane I used it to shove myself up. I started pacing as I fumed, stabbing it into the ground viciously with every step. "Trying to work crap out in my head."

"About Cieran or Sederis?"

"Sederis." I lied blithely. "Nothing to do with you, girl."

"Oh." Her fingers fiddled with one another before she brought her omni-tool up again. "All right then."

Nothing about this shit was all right. What the fuck was he on about. If I found a tagline near the end saying the entire thing was a last joke I was going to rip his fur out. That's what it had to be.

My omni-tool chimed quietly with another fucking message. Jerking it up, I was ready to lock the thing down again until I saw the sender.

"What the shit is this?"

Rane's lips thinned slightly, but her lower eyes glanced significantly at my omni-tool while her upper set made a show of looking around the room we were in. In particular the Eclipse duty officer flipping through console windows at her station outside of the doors to medical proper.

I rolled mine before opening it.

User Communications Head Rane'li wishes to begin a secured communications. Initial message: You were reading something from Cieran when you said that, so I know it isn't about Sederis.

Growling, I stalked to the other side of the room before sitting down. I didn't doubt that the girl had the link locked in a dozen different ways to stop the Eclipse from listening in, and it would at least let me vent about crap. Once I changed the subject anyways.

"What the shit is this?"

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"Trena: His fucking will. He must have been drunk when he wrote it. That plus the shit with Sederis and I want to smash the crap out of something."

Her lips thinned before she penned a reply.

"Rane'li: I doubt that. The first part anyway. Does it have anything to do with the secrets you and
Aethyta are keeping form him?

Secrets? I didn’t keep secrets from the ape except about my past. And Aethyta had been pretty damned honest since she’d gotten shit about the Matri... oh.

Well.

Shit.

*Trena:* His fucking paranoia is rubbing off on you if you’re reading my mail.

*Rane’li:* Well.. in all honesty yes. *In the future you might want to avoid using the mansion’s servers to transmit messages, even secure ones, if you don't want me to be aware of it. I created the infrastructure for Xerol.*

*Trena:* Are you at least smart enough to have a dump to his omni-tool ready in case something happened to you?

She blanched slightly, her copper skin shifting to a pale tan. *Yes.*

*Trena:* Relax. We’re friends girl. Good on you to have at least done that much, too many fucking amateurs out there.

*Rane’li:* … *Trena.*

I blew a breath out through my nose before squeezing my eyes shut. A lot of my anger at his supposed past drained into the sea at the reminder that I had hardly been honest with him either. And my transgressions were a bit more recent. And numerous.

*Trena:* He doesn't need to know that crap. And no, what I got from him didn't have anything to do with it.

*Rane’li:* … *Trena.*

A growl escaped my throat. *He doesn't fucking need to know that he's just the latest in a fucking spree of attacks going back a decade. There's enough crap going on right here and back on Illium without him worrying about whatever that Bitch is up to.*

There was an echoing growl from across the room, loud enough that the duty officer glanced up. *And what if she comes back to finish the job? The prior two both lasted a few months before having 'accidents'. Your own report back to Aethyta said he could be in danger. Shaaryak kept him in the dark. I can't believe that you'd do the same thing.*


She sighed as her shoulders slumped, her head dipping a bit to the left in a partial apology. *I'm sorry, but I had to say it. I don't want him to keep getting hurt.*

*Trena:* .. Fine. I'll tell him when he's able to be up and moving. You can be there too. Fair?

*Rane’li:* Fair. I won't ask about his will, and will delete the copy routed to the mansion.

*Trena:* .. Thanks.

I shut my omni-tool off with a flick before burying my face in my hands. Shit. Of all the fucking amateurish shit I’d done, routing classified shit through the mansion’s network had to fucking be up there. Aethyta would bend my crest down if she found out, if she didn't just cut the whole thing
up there. Aethyta would bend my crest down if she found out, if she didn't just cut the whole thing off.

Fuck.

How the hell was I supposed to tell the ape about the others. We didn't even have a guess as to what she was.. was..

My fingers snapped back into motion, bringing his insane will back up. I let my eyes slide back and forth until I found the line I cared about.

*I don't know why she brought me here. Apparently I was a test of some kind but she was cagey about the details.*

A test.

Reaching out, I grabbed my cane again before rising. This time my pacing was slower, more deliberate, and my eyes stayed locked onto that line.

A test.

She had told him that he was a test. He thought it was a test of bringing someone here from another dimension. That had to be a load of shit, because that was fucking impossible. But what was possible was that he really was a test. Just the first one to be a success. Implanting memories in other people's heads wasn't supposed to be possible, not even for a Matriarch. Mind healers could help recover memories that were damaged by trauma, or soothe an unbalanced mind like Sederis'. But even with centuries of training they couldn't create new ones.

But if the Matriarch had found a way to do that.. that could explain a lot of shit. The trail of dead humans across the outer colonies were just the failures, the ones who'd lived only partial success to be removed later. But the ape could have been the first actual success. She'd dragged him here from wherever she'd found him and scoured his brain until there wasn't much shit left. Then she'd put in whatever she'd wanted, all the crap about being from another universe, where our galaxy was just a game or some shit.

It was a good way to make sure he never talked about it, because no one would fucking believe him. For good reason. I liked the guy a fucking lot and I thought it was just insane drivel.

"Fuck." Rane glanced up at the oath, but focused on her omni-tool again after a quick shake of my head.

That didn't really give us anything to work with. If she could plant shit like that she could rewrite any human she wanted. Which was fucking bad because it meant there was a million fucking motives she could use.

Athame's ass.

And then there was the ape himself. He probably wouldn't believe it, not if she'd done better than a half-assed job. He'd go right on thinking he was from the past or wherever in the deeps he thought he was from. The only way to prove it to him would be to find out who he actually was, and even Aethyta hadn't found shit on that yet.

I groaned before rubbing my face again. I didn't want to deal with this shit. I wanted the ape to get out of surgery so I could fucking bitch him out. I wanted about ten drinks. I wanted to be in bed with Ghai, her hands and lips doing things to me until neither of us could see straight.

I wanted shit to be fucking simple for once.
"You're T'laria?" A new, flanging voice snapped me out of the swirling storm inside my head. I glanced up to find a Turian in doctor's scrubs staring at me.

"What's it to you?"

His mandibles quivered irritably. "Miss Sederis said you were to be informed when the human was out of surgery."

Rane sat up straight. "He's alive?"

"Probably wishes he wasn't." I wanted to fucking throw him into the door. "He's going to need months of therapy and recovery to get that leg functional again. Over a year possibly."

"But he's fucking alive."

Yellow eyes rolled, and this time my biotics did start to flare. He took a quick step back before clearing his throat. "Yes, he's alive. Should be stable to be transferred back to your ship with your other wounded sometime tomorrow. Your ship have medics?"

I glanced at Rane, who nodded. "Yes."

"Good. If you could wait for an hour or so, I'll have short and long term treatment and rehab plans drawn up. He should see an actual doctor as soon as you get back to Illium."

My eyes narrowed. "Why? He still have issues? It's a long ass trip back to Illium with only medics to take care of him."

His mandibles twitched before he spoke. "He should be fine for the trip provided you keep him in his bed without any exertions and plenty of medication. The doctor's visit is precautionary, he took a lot of damage. He'll be lucky if a year of recovery is sufficient, and he might need a walking aid beyond that."

"Fine. Get your shit drawn up, we'll wait."

There was a tight nod before he spun away and headed back through the doors.

Treatment plan. A year of recovery. His strange ass will. My own theories.

Whatever.

He was fucking alive.

---

Next up is Chapter 5: The Highborn

Chapter End Notes

So.. I might have lied a little about this act only stretching for four chapters. At this point it's going at least six, but it could keep going for another one or beyond that. They should still be shorter than the Cieran chapters, just a few things that have to be cleared up before Act 3 begins.
Probably not the best efforts of keeping it intriguing if Cieran would live or not.. but I really did consider killing him and switching entirely to Trena's point of view (again.). Honestly the main reason I didn't run that concept past my beta is because I thought it would be too hard to switch points of view.. plus I kind of had a big outline already scripted for all of these stories that would have had to be entirely redone.

Alas what might have been.

The next chapter will post at some point soon. Forgoing dates for a while because I'm currently on a roll. :)

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
By the time we got back to the Yare Noln, half the damned hanger had been taken over by Batarians.

Most were finding what space they could to lay down bedrolls, or simply collapsing wherever they could find a spot. A few of the ship's crew were doing what they could to keep the landing spots open, but I still almost crushed a pair of idiots who didn't understand that I had a fucking shuttle and they didn't.

"Going to be a rough trip back to Illium for them." Rane glanced out the window as we went through the shut-down list.

Honestly I could have cared less about their comfort. Or about them in general. "They're alive and not on fucking Korlus."

"Point." She admitted as the consoles started to flick off. "You have the datapad?"

My left hand absently grabbed the thin casing, heaving it up in demonstration. "No, I fucking left it with the Eclipse."

Dark eyes let me know that she wasn't amused at the sarcasm, and she twisted around before leaving the small cockpit. The ape would have smirked. Or shot something equally caustic back at me. Probably both. Then we'd have hit each other. She might have already starting picking up his paranoia, but apparently not his sense of humor.

Well. Could only hope that would change eventually.

"We need to update Shaaryak." her voice was a lot primmer than normal, which made me roll my eyes. "I do believe that you can handle that."

I froze, blinking at the ceiling for a moment before forcing myself to look at her. "No. I'm not fucki-"

"You are the commander of her security forces, so technically Cieran's well-being is something you should tell her about." She cut me off with only the slightest hint of a smile. "I, meanwhile, have a plan of action that involves both my bed and sleep."

My throat vibrated. "If I'm the commander of her fucking security, you are still a squad leader and I can order you to do it."

"Not if I quit." Those damn lips quivered again. "And have Cieran promote me again when he wakes up."

I honestly could only fucking stare at her. "Athame's ass why can't you be like this around him? You'd already fucking have him."
Some of her good humor receded there. "It's.. easier with you. You're an alien with no title, one of the few people my culture says I can look down on. Not that I do, but.. you know what I mean."

I did. Athame's azure what a fucked up society. And what the fuck did it say about me that I voluntarily dealt with them on a daily basis? Probably nothing good. "Fine, go pass out."

"Thanks." Her voice was dry, but she tipped her head to the left demurely before hitting the door control panel. There were a few annoyed glances at us as she stepped off, but the crew kept the rabble at bay so that we could head for the exit.

"You." One of the crew blanched slightly, his head dipping sharply to the left at my gaze. There were muted grumbles from the new arrivals at his subservience and I had to resist the urge to start throwing them around a bit. "Where's fucking Shaaryak?"

"I.. believe she is on the bridge, Commander."

Of course she was. "Thanks."

Cane striking in time with every other step, I resumed my trek. Rane had already vanished to the left, probably making a straight line for her rooms. The stairs quickly started to make my lower back ache as they always fucking did. Why the damn ship didn't have proper lifts I had no fucking idea. I'd have to grab the ape and take a look at the layout to see if we could add one.

By the time I got to the bridge I was grinding my teeth against the dull pain, giving only the slightest of nods to the two members of Ghai's commandos standing guard outside.

My bondmate herself was leaning against the wall just inside of the boxlike room, straightening as I appeared. Her head cocked slightly in a silent question as she stepped closer.

"He's alive. Staying that way."

Breath blew out her nose, her eyes closing as she sagged a little in relief.

"I have to tell Shaaryak about it, apparently. Going to sleep for a year after that."

One of her eyes opened, a sly grin pulling at her lips.

My own twitched a bit. "Well of course that will happen first. Wait for me?"

She stepped aside, nodding as she glanced towards the main holographic table. Following that look, I tried not to groan. Not only was Shaaryak present, but the ancient creature of a Captain was stooped nearby as well. And if he wasn't enough, there was a tall, broad shouldered male with faded yellow and black warpaint on his head pacing furiously.

It was the last one who was speaking as I weaved through the command stations.

"-until all of my crew is on board." He glanced at Shaaryak with his lower eyes, his upper set swiveling to keep an eye on the display. "We'll be ready to leave after that point."

The ape's lover didn't look at him at all. "We are remaining here until I receive word about my Harath'krem."

"That's what I'm fucking here for." She snapped herself around as I approached.

"Is he..?"
"Alive." I grunted. Both of her hands came to rest on her console as she seemed to sag in relief. "Fucked up, but alive. They'll bring him and the other wounded over sometime tomorrow."

Dark eyes closed and her lips seemed to move, the only word I managed to catch was 'pillars'. Dammit. She always had to do crap like this, give me moments that reminded me that she really did care about him. Even if she just kept fucking it up.

Stick with your gut Trena. Six months at the most.

"I've got a treatment plan, will ask the old fish for the doctor she knows." I continued on, twisting my cane in my hands and wishing again that I had my pipe. "He'll need medical attention on the trip back to make sure nothing starts leaking."

"He'll have it." Shaaryak straightened, seemingly strengthened by the news. "There is your news Commander. We'll be leaving tomorrow after receiving our wounded."

Balak gave me a tight glare before reining it in. "I will inform my people. Do you have a comm suite that I can use to contact my Patriarch and the Hegemony?"

"Of course." And the professional bitch tone was back. What a surprise. "T'laria, if you could forward me what data you have?"

I grunted, turning away. "Fine."

"Wait." Teeth ground as I stopped, turning to glare at her. She'd already turned back to Balak, but the thinning of her lips made it clear that she'd seen it. Fucking good. "Captain, please allow the Commander to send his message. I will join you both shortly, once I have spoken with T'larla."

"Of course Matriarch Shaaryak." The leathered creature gave her a stiff bow. Balak inclined his head tightly, directly forwards I thought, a motion that was returned by Shaaryak. That useless bit out of the way, she left them, following behind me when I started stomping my way back towards the exit.

Ghai joined us without a word, and soon enough we were standing just outside of the closed door.

"Pillars." Her back slumped as a bit, her eyes closing as she exhaled "I was.. were you able to see him?"

"No." Shifting my cane around, I brought up the thin tablet. "This is the plans and status of his wounds."

She took it, lower eyes opening to focus on it while her upper set swung over to me. "How bad was it?"

I felt a muscle in my cheek twitch, and I entirely ignored Ghai's warning. "He's going to need at least year of therapy to get full motion in his leg back. Assuming he ever does, it's more likely he'll need a walking aid for the rest of his life."

Her fingers seemed to tighten around the device. "You said he'll need attention.."

"Precaution." Ghai grunted, cutting me off before I could even start. "Doctor?"

"Aethyta can bring him to hers." I injected.

Shaaryak seemed to flinch slightly. "Another thing we don't have.. do you want to tell her or should I?"
"I'll deal with her." And give her a small mountain of fucking reports on this tides destroyed plan.

The Highborn female sucked in another long breath before nodding tightly. "Ghai, we're going to need security outside of his room. And the bridge. At all times if you could."

My bondmate and I exchanged a quick glance. "You don't trust that painted asshole?"

Something flashed in her dark eyes. "I believe it is stupid to take any chances when it comes to my Harath'krem's life T'laria. I may have confidence that Commander Balak would not do such a thing, but I cannot state the same over every member of his crew."

Next to me, Ghai grunted. "It'll be handled."

"Good." She seemed to sag slightly before pulling herself back up. "T'laria.. I know you don't like me, and I can assure you that the feeling is quite mutual. But right now I think it would be best if we suppressed that until we return to Illium."

My fingers curled, but I grunted when my bondmate stepped on the side of my foot as she wordlessly shifted a bit.

"Fine." I allowed. "No infighting with the assholes piled on board. But once we're back..

She met my glare in equal measure with her own. "We will talk. Yes."

"With Cieran." We both turned to stare at Ghai's irritated growl. Which only grew worse as we forced her to keep talking. "He cares about you both. After this crap you owe him enough to keep him involved."

I didn't mind that condition. He'd be on my goddess-damned side after all, he had been on Korlus. My confidence didn't flag in the slightest at Shaaryak's own smug look. Keep dreaming bitch.

"With the ape." A delayed throb in my back made me grind my teeth. "Anything else?"

"No." She spun on a heel, flicking the bridge door open with a hand, apparently satisfied now. "The meeting in the morning is at eight. Do not be late."

The door slammed shut before either of us could say anything in reply.

Whatever you fucking bitch.

Ghai just sighed.

I glared at the metal for a few more moments before turning away and stomping back towards the port wing. She fell in beside me quietly, letting me stew until we grew closer to our quarters.

"She does care."

My cane hit the ground a little harder on my next step. "They break up in six months. Two hundred credits."

There was a rumble of displeasure.

"Relax, I bitched to Rane. It's out of my system." For now anyway. Sooner or later she'd fuck it up again. Or I'd have the time to stew on this continuing fucking mess we were stuck in. "Besides. Something else on my mind right now."
She gave me an arch look that made it clear that she was reconsidering.

"Oh come on. I was fucking civil with her."

A grudging nod there, but she still seemed to be thinking about it.

I could only sigh as we got closer to our room. I was glad as hell it was so close to the ship's nerve center, my back was killing me. "Come on. It's not like I can go to Illyan, not with Erana on board."

All she did was give a quiet hum of bemusement as she tapped out our passcode before going inside ahead of me. As she did, I got a good view of the small space.. and who was already there.

"Boss." My shoulders slumped a bit at seeing Illyan and Erana both in our quarters. Again.

"News." Ghai gave me an amused little grin as she stepped aside to let me the rest of the way in.

The little maiden perked up like a jumper fish, her eyes widening almost comically. "About Cieran?"

I stared at her flatly for a long moment. "You are way too fucking young to be crushing on a human."

Her cheeks turned bright purple. "I am not!"

"You better not be." her sister actually growled a bit, making her shrink a bit into the chair.

"Relax Illyan, just teasing her." Sort of. She was too fucking young and the ape's love life was complicated enough with two Batarian women in it. Adding an underage Asari to the mix would probably drive him insane. Well, more fucking insane. "And yes. He's alive and is staying that way."

Athame be praised, Illyan managed to get a hand over Erana'a mouth before she could shriek in happiness or anything. "How bad though?"

Grunting, I tossed my cane into a corner with a clatter before limping to the bed. I was getting tired of answer that question. Maybe I should write a fucking memo or something. "Year of therapy minimum. Probably going to be stuck in a bed for a few weeks. He'll need a brace and a cane. Possibly for the rest of his life, humans don't regenerate like we do."

The well built Asari grunted again. "Well. He's alive, that's the important thing."

"Indeed." I glanced at Ghai as I sat, blinking a bit at her tone. Then the tide rose and my lips curled a bit. "Illyan."

"Yeah? Oh." It was her turn for her cheeks to flush a bit. "Sorry you two, we'll get going. Come on sis."

"But we just got here!" Erana protested the moment the hand was withdrawn. "Isn't there more to talk about?"

"They aren't going to be talking."

Innocent eyes blinked rapidly before understanding seemed to finally click. "Oh."

"Oh is right. Come on. We'll see you in the morning boss."
They were out of the door in a flash, Ghai moving to make sure it was securely locked behind them.

"That bad?"

She gave me a mild glare before flicking the lights low. A few moments later the small bed shifted as she crawled into it, strong hands firmly yanking me until I was laying back with her. Instead of launching right into things like I expected though, she maneuvered me until I was held securely in her arms and my head was resting in the crook of her neck.

Not that I was really complaining. She must have showered again after I left, because her skin smelled like the sea. Even as I pressed my face against her further, her artificial hand slid down to start massaging the ache in my back. If that wasn't delicious enough, its living opposite rose to stroke my crest in slow, smooth motions that sent tingling waves down my neck.

"I'm fine now Ghai.." I protested, only belatedly recognizing what she was doing.

"Liar." I could hear her muscles scratching in her throat as they strained to force the gravelly words out. "You're barely holding together."

I slumped slightly, all the shit I'd just dealt with rising with the tide. "I'm fi.. it's.. Athame."

Her head shifted, pressing me a bit closer into her neck. As if that was all that I needed, words started tumbling out. "Fuck. Sederis is ready to throw me into the whirlpool. Rane is pressuring me to tell the ape shit Aethyta doesn't want him to know. How the crap I'm I going to explain that? Or deal with her being involved in intelligence crap. And that's not even fucking all of it. His will is.. fuck. You have to read it. It doesn't make any goddess damned sense"

Those hands kept moving, her breathing making her skin press against my cheek with each inhale.

"I just.. there's too much going on.. how do we deal with.. all of this crap.."

"He's alive." The hand on my crest shifted, trailing down my cheek to my chin. "So are you. So am I."

We were.

"We'll be home soon. And you can hit him with your cane." The choked off laugh was out before I could stop it, a deeper echo reverberating in her chest. "Maybe you can both turn them into sniper rifles. Sounds like something you would do."

Fuck. It did. And it would probably be fun as hell. I mean, the space was limited but the length was there.. all you'd need was a miniaturized power supply in the handle. Replacing the ammunition cores, or adding custom ones, would be a bitch.. no, not right now Trena. Save it for talking with him.

Speaking of him. Maybe she had an idea about the drug trip that was his will. "His will.. It was the damned message that sent me over there.. you need to read it. I think.. it might have something about the Matriarch. About what she did to him."

It took a lot of effort to lean back, her hands only reluctantly letting me do so. Her eyes were narrowed in the low lighting. "You read it? It's a will."

"I didn't know he was alive. And if he hadn't fucking wanted me to he should have done a better job of coding his script." Ghai still seemed a little uncomfortable as I brought my omni-tool up,
taking extra care to link it to hers before forwarding the message. "And this isn't for Aethyta either. It's.. fucked is what it is."

"Trena." A hand rose to grab my chin, her eyes narrowing. "We're busy."

"I thought you were just.." my voice trailed as those strong fingers pulled me back down. And abruptly I was very aware of her chest pressing against mine, how the hand on my back was tightening, and how very warm and wet her lips were against mine.

For one night at least, I was able to stop thinking about much of anything.

And I fucking loved her for that.

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**Next up is Chapter 6: The Awakening**

Chapter End Notes

We're getting there. One more chapter before the act is completed and we go back to Cieran's point of view. We get a bit more of Trena/Ghai in this chapter, plus the usual confrontational bits between her and Nynsi. Also a bit of fun with Rane as well, showing some more of her personality when she isn't shackled by her caste. In the next chapter we'll finally see Cieran again, and he, Trena, and Nyn will have a conversation.. though at least one of them isn't going to be thrilled with how it goes.

While everyone, including me, is extremely happy with the current pace of releases.. it's going to have to slow back down soon. While I can get a Trena-length chapter done in a day, even with work, Cieran chapters take at least two to three. The current plan is to release the next (and last) Trena chapter tomorrow, with the first chapter of act 3 arriving either Tuesday or Friday, after which this story will resume it's normal Tuesday/Friday release schedule. If I manage to get ahead (IE - complete the entire story) ahead of time, I will probably still stick to the schedule to give myself some time to start on the next one.

After doing some re-work and talking with The Blocked Writer, the overall outline has been expanded a bit.. AR:3 has been split into two stories, giving us an overall series length of seven novel length fics... which I'm kind of regretting lol. Currently 3 and 4 would both be roughly the same length as Terminus (2 acts, possibly interludes).

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 6: The Awakening

It was three days later, when we were only about a half day out from Illium, before the ape had enough energy for our conversation to occur.

Even considering that he'd done nothing but enjoy drugged sleep in between occasional bouts of consciousness, he still looked like shit when I arrived.

His normally pale skin was practically ashen, and the normally well groomed fur badly needed to be washed. Even his dull green eyes seemed flat, but his lips still twitched as I drew closer. The rest of his body was covered in thin blankets, the contours of his thin body were marred only where small regenerators were still pumping medigel onto the left side of his torso. And of course there were still a dozen plus hoses and wires connecting him to the machines on the wall.

Shaaryak was already there, sitting primly in the chair nearest his bed. Which left me stuck with one against the wall where I'd be stuck leaning forwards to properly see the pair of them around the equipment.

"Scales." I tried not to flinch at how weak he still sounded. "Let's get this over with then."

I snorted, unable to help myself. "It could have fucking waited until we were on Illium."

The reason it was occuring fucking now of all times threw me a mild glare with her lower eyes. "I thought it best to clarify how things stand between all of us before we arrive."

I bet you fucking did bitch. Couldn't have anything to fucking do with how you want all blood rage when he was wounded, and how I'm sure that's been mentioned more than a few times to him by now.

The ape seemed to sag into the mattress, staring at the ceiling with a very long suffering expression pinching his eyes shut. "Can we just.. get on with it."

"Of course." Shaaryak patted him gently on his left hand, the right was stuck tight to his chest thanks to a sling.

Resisting the urge to growl as I sat down, I rested both hands on my cane and stared hard at the pair of them.

When nobody spoke for a minute I did growl. "Right. So. I've had a while to think about this shit, and I'm still pretty fucking pissed. You lied to us, made shitty decisions, and then got half of your own people killed and most of the rest are fucking wounded."

The woman twitched slightly as her lips thinned. "I'm well aware of my own failures and hardly need you to highlight them T'laria."

"Apparently you fucking do!" My cane struck the ground with a clack. "Don't you fucking know
anything about the SIU!? And you expect us to deal with them on a constant fucking basis for how long?"

"Six months after our return."

Six fucking months. It could have been worse, but I had a fucking hard time seeing how. "Athame's ass. Vasir and Aethyta are going to explode. Fucking forget your trade deal, there's no way they'll touch you if they know there's a band of Hegemony murderers running around."

Something about the way she shifted gave me a good damned idea as to what she was gong to say next. "And don't even fucking try asking me to keep the old fish in the dark. She'd kill all three of us the second she found this shit out."

Shaaryak looked ready to argue the point, subsiding only when the ape weakly patted her hand before speaking. "You know she's right Nyn."

The Highborn let a seething breath out through her teeth. "What do you propose then?"

"Not having fucking done it in the first place, but that's not an option now is it?" Cieran leaned up a bit to give me the best glare he could manage. "Fine. Disassociate yourself as much as you can then."

"That would be difficult to do, given that I am their host. Never-mind the political considerations with the Balak family."

"Off planet then." We both glanced at him with similar frowns of confusion. His head shook slightly, dirty fur shifting as he realized he hadn't quite gotten all of his thoughts out. "Make them do missions off planet only."

His lover kept on frowning, but eventually dipped her head in a slight nod. "That. might be more doable. It could reduce the tension but it won't eliminate it."

"Better idea?"

Her shoulders slumped. "No. I will consider what to tell Commander Balak."

"Well that settles that crap. Still doesn't change the fact that I want to punch your face in for the shit you pulled."

"Scales."

The folds on the back of my neck tightened. I knew that goddess-damned tone of voice. Whatever anger he'd managed to build up on planet had probably taken a fucking hit when he'd been shot. Plus Shaaryak fucking being able to be the one there when he woke up. Worse she probably did feel like shit for what had happened to him, and he knew Batarian body language more than well enough to pick up on crap like that.

"Athame's ass. No Ape. You don't just give to forgive and forget this time. I'm not going to let you. You fucking died."

He seemed to flinch slightly. All of his injuries he'd more or less seemed to take all right, being appropriately grateful just to be alive. But the news that he'd been dead on the operating table for over a minute had rattled him pretty badly. I'd overheard Shaaryak talking with Ghai about it, and it had apparently taken a lot for her to get his mind off of what she'd told him.

Shaaryak spoke up, her voice snapping. "He's alive now and that's what matters."
"Yes, but not fucking thanks to you!"

"Scales, Nyn." His voice cracked before he hissed in pain, subsiding back into the bedding as he winced. When he spoke again his voice was closer to Ghai's than his normal tones. "I'm not asking you two to like each other.. but fuck."

I threw Shaaryak a glare, but managed to nod my head tightly when she did.

But I still had a fucking question. "You forgave her, didn't you?"

The ape was busy suckling water from a straw, but he glanced up at his lover. The woman's face twitched before she answered for him. "He made his opinion of my choices.. quite clear yesterday."

That sounded a little more promising at least. But it still meant that they'd had a long fucking conversation without me and I didn't quite care for that. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that it is between he, and I." her lips twitched a little bit when my glare grew worse. "What remains is between us. Despite my opinions.. Cieran is adamant that you remain the leader of the security forces."

Which was a job I didn't even fucking want. But between Ghai and the ape.. I did have reasons to want to be around. Plus Aethyta wanting me to keep her updated on shit. "And?"

Cieran carefully removed the straw with his good arm before speaking. "She won't go into any big operations without consulting with both of us first. But you have to tone shit down a bit scales."

"Define big operations."

I enjoyed the way Shaaryak's lips thinned a bit more. "Any commitments to Commander Balak of my people, and any engagement that either of you believe could cause significant casualties."

"And you agree to that?"

She gave the ape a short glance with all of her eyes before sucking in a breath. "Provided that you actually begin respecting my position, yes."

Which would be.. hard. I didn't like the bitch in the slightest, and I didn't care about whatever shit she thought she was due just because of her caste. But the ape's pointed look made me sigh. "Fine."

"Then I am glad that this has been resolved." Shaaryak rose smoothly, leaning over the ape's bed to give him a kiss before turning away. "Now I must return to my quarters to work out what I will be telling Commander Balak. T'laria, I'll expect you and Ghai to be on the bridge when we near Illium."

"Sure."

I had to wait until she'd closed the door, and then a few more moments beyond that just to make sure she'd left before I let him have it.

"What the fuck was that!?"

He let out a quiet sigh. "Scales."

"Don't you fucking 'Scales' me Cieran Kean." He flinched at my use of his full name. "When you
were on Korlus you were made enough to leave her. This shit? I expected you to hit her with a fucking tidal wave and all I got was an goddess-damned splash!"

"You talked with Rane then?"

"Yes and I'm not changing the subject. Athame's fucking ass.. I wasn't asking you to break up with the bitch but fuck." My head lowered as I brought a hand up to rub at my face. "Fuck ape. This SIU ship is going to bite us on the ass sooner rather than later and you know it."

His body went still for a moment before he spoke quietly. "I love her Trena."

A lot of my anger faded into the sea. "Fuck. I know you do Cieran."

There was a slow inhale. "I crossed her lines. She crossed mine. We're still going to try and make this work."

"Her pissing you off involved lying to you about why we were risking our fucking lives. You pissing her off involved you bruising her fucking ego." I corrected him with another growl. "Athame's tits ape. I know you two have been through a lot of shit in the last year or so but.. fuck."

His tongue briefly appeared as he tried to wet his lips. I let him take his time to get his thoughts straight. After a few minutes of staring at nothing, and two more drinks of water through the tube, he finally nodded tightly.

"Would she have done this before Xerol died?"

Fuck. "Probably not."

"Did you approve of her more then?"

Fuck again. "Yes..."

Sheets shifted as his left hand rose in a there-you-go manner.

"You've got shit odds of making her like that again ape."

"I think she's worth it."

Fucking.. this shit would be so much simpler if he was with Rane. We could have just ditched Khar'shan Minor entirely and just made a living working for the old fish. Which was going to fucking happen.. eventually. But he was going to shatter himself with his own nobility before it happened.

"Goddess. How are we friends?" Both of my hands rose to rub at my temples, the groan coming out before I could stop it. "You're so.. fuck. Where in Athame's name is your pessimism and paranoia now?"

A quiet chuckle was his reply, his eyes seemingly half closing on their own. A definite sign that he'd about hit his consciousness quota for the day. "On vacation apparently."

My lungs pushed the air in them out slowly, my shoulders slumping as I failed, again, to come up with something that would get him to.. not be him for a while. "It's going to blow up in your face ape."

"Maybe."
"Two hundred credits."

The fur around his mouth twitched limply. "Timeframe?"

"Six months."

"It's a bet." His left hand weakly reached out in my direction.

Sighing, I heaved my ass up and limped over before shaking it. I had to fight back another wince at how pathetic his grip was.

"Get to sleep ape, we're going to have to drag you off the ship in a while." And it went without saying that that was going to be unpleasant as hell for him. Maybe we could get Sayran up here to drug him out entirely so he could sleep through the shift.

"Don't remind me." Shifting my cane, I leaned on it as he tried to get as comfortable as he could. Which didn't seem to be all that comfortable, but the massive yawn was probably a good indication that he was about to be done for the day either way.

"See you on the surface ape."

"See you scales." His eyes were already closed and he more or less mumbled the words.

I could only shake my head. Fucking injuries. I'd been the same way after surgery, wide awake and bored out of my mind. The next moment I'd wake up and find out that I'd been asleep for half a day.

Taking care not to let my cane hit the deck too loudly, I exited the room as quietly as I could.

"He's out." Once the door was securely fastened I spoke to the two Asari on shift. So far no one had tried anything stupid, but Harat had been sure she'd almost caught someone observing them in the night cycle the day prior. Neither Ghai nor I were sure if they'd been trying to lure the guards away by being pathetically obvious, but we'd congratulated them for staying where they were supposed to all the same.

The two gave me slight nods. "We'll keep shit quiet out here boss."

"Good."

Leaving them to their job, I started making my way back towards my quarters. As far as I knew Ghai was there, sleeping off her own turn making sure we got back to Illium without anyone ending up dead along the way.

Of course, before I could enter I'd have to update the woman leaning against the doorway.

"Rane."

She'd already looked over at hearing my approach, "Trena. Cieran?"

I still wasn't sure how aware Shaaryak was concerning the girl's crush on the ape, and neither was she. To be on the safe side she'd held off visiting him while we were still on board, instead relying on me to give her updates on how he was doing. Once we were back on Illium, and Shaaryak was busier, she'd be able to approach him normally again.

"Exhausted. Looks like shit. Is giving Shaaryak one more chance."

"He's too fucking nice sometimes."
Something like fond amusement appeared on her face. "He is."

"Oh for the love of the goddess.. I'm getting you both drunk and throwing you in a closet the second he can walk."

Arms crossed her chest. "What have I told you about drinking."

"That you're never fucking doing it again?"

"There you go."

I sighed. She was so much more reasonable when she was drinking. And the details, or lack thereof, about her sex life had been thoroughly amusing.

"Did you ask him about his wi.." She stopped talking when I stabbed my cane onto her foot as hard as I could.

Once she was done gasping in pain, I stepped closer and pitched my voice low. "Listen girl. As far as he and anyone else knows I didn't read it. Fucking be glad that you didn't. I have a theory that I can't fucking prove, and until I can that thing is only going to cause him and us problems. Got it?"

There was a quick, tight nod. After that I removed my weapon from her foot, earning another gasp as she leaned against the doorway.

Eventually she found her voice. "It's.. that bad?"

"Don't." My head shook tightly. "Don't pry girl. I shouldn't have even had Ghai read it because now she's just as fucking confused as I am."

We'd taken the time to actually read it the day we'd left Korlus.

All of it.

If the beginning had been fucked up, from then on shit just got worse. Like apocalyptic level worse. Shit about ancient AI starships that 'harvested' our galaxy every fifty millennia or so, about how the Mass Relays were designed to make sure that our technological progress went a certain way, and about a thousand other things that I could barely even begin to understand.

Worse some of it wasn't totally insane.

There was a hell of a lot of theories about the Mass Relays and the Citadel. Worse, a lot of recent evidence seemed to point against the Protheans having built them, just like the ape claimed. And the idea of a beacon on Thessia.. fuck. He hadn't been lying when he'd said there was shit in it that would get us killed. It would explain the shit out of how fast my people's technology had grown, and possibly why we'd fucking stagnated for the last few millennia. And if it was true, and it got out that we knew.. we'd be dead before the next low tide.

Of course, there was still the minor fact that he thought he was from another fucking dimension to get past. But from the timeline he'd laid out, shit wouldn't really start happening until humanity's Eden Prime colony got attacked by the Geth.

If, and that was a big fucking if, that actually happened.. I'd take my copy straight to Aethyta and we could work out what in Athame's name was happening. And how the shit the Matriarch had done something that was definitely impossible.
If it didn't, or if we found out where the Matriarch had actually grabbed him from.. I'd grab as many beers as I could carry and help him deal with it.

Either way, telling him about my theory would only give him a complex. His fucking paranoia would go through the roof and he'd probably end up wondering if he was actually him.

I didn't have the fucking heart to do that to him.

"All right.." Rane's four eyes blinked in succession. "Should we even tell him that you got it?"

"Only if he asks. Tell him I deleted it without reading it because he wasn't fucking dead."

"Ok." She nodded slowly. "I can do that."

"Thanks." I heaved a long breath. "Have to wake Ghai up now girl, needed to get our pretty asses to the bridge."

A hand pressed against the metal to help push her away. "All right. Give me the details about Cieran later?"

"Of course." Fingers started to tap out the code. "I'll pick a time where we can get some drinks."

The exiled Batarian just sighed, turning away without another word.

"And you think I'm fucking joking." I chuckled under my breath before entering the dark room.

My bondmate was barely visible as a curled up lump on the bed, only the tip of her crest visible above the blankets. I had no idea why she burrowed in her sleep like that, but even I could admit it was fucking adorable.

The fact that she usually slept naked just made it even better.

Shutting the door behind me, and tossing my cane to its usual resting place in the corner, I approached the bed as cautiously as I could. It wouldn't do to wake her up before I managed to enjoy the view, after all.

My left hand slowly wrapped around the blankets, the cloth cool in my grip. Once I was sure she was still asleep I started pulling, tugging it in short movements to reveal her face.. then her bare shoulders..

Right before I got to the good parts a mechanical hand grabbed mine, and she wasn't gentle about it.

"Athame's fucking ass!" I jerked my bruised fingers free, meeting her tired glare with one of my own. "Fucking seriously?"

A rumbling sound was her reply. And when she sat up it turned out that she was wearing a band around her chest for once, which did make me sigh a little in disappointment.

My bondmate just rolled her eyes before kicking the blankets off. "News?"

"Ape and Shaaryak talked it out yesterday without me. He's giving her another shot, with conditions." I sat as she stood, not bothering to hide the way my eyes flicked up and down her muscled body. "One of them is I have to actually be polite and shit to her. Which means we have to go to the bridge to stand around like idiots until we get to Illium."

"Progress." She grabbed for her clothing and armor, quickly starting to pull the former on. "You
"Progress." She grabbed for her clothing and armor, quickly starting to pull the former on. "You disapprove."

I grunted. "Yes. But it's his fucking choice. I'll play nice for his sake until she does shit that I can't stand. Then the storm rolls back in."

Ghai gave me a look, but nodded slightly all the same. That was as far as I would go and she knew it.

It didn't take her much longer to finish dressing, a few minutes at the most. Another handful were required to get her armor on, and I handed her her guns when she got the last plates into place.

"Ready to go home and deal with a new ocean's worth of crisis?"

She sighed as she took the weapons. "Fucking Illium."

Maybe we'd get lucky and the Hegemony would recall its assholes, and Aethyta found the Matriarch while we were gone.

..And maybe Sederis would decide to let me off the hook and Shaaryak would convince Cieran to invite Rane into their bed.

Athame. Just don't let anything new go fucking wrong. We had enough crap onboard as it was.

Of course.. if I'd known what the next six months were going to bring, I'd have stayed on goddess-damned Korlus.

Fucking Illium.

End Act 2 – The News

Next up is Act 3 – The Exit

Chapter End Notes

Well. That was a thing. Have to say I really enjoyed writing Trena a lot more as I got into her head. It's going to be a little rough to go back to Cieran.. but at least I know I've got the option to flick over to her here and there if it seems to be a good idea again. Currently writing a few short scenes that won't likely end up in the story just to properly get used to him again. I might include them if people wish, and if they turn out to be short enough. (Not as part of the main plot, but as shorts at the end of chapters. Let me know what you all would like).

It was.. interesting to write Cieran from Trena's perspective, and the comparisons to how she views Nynsi against how Cieran views her. Expect a lot of relationship drama and conflict in the next act, as well as more on Batarian culture.

There's going to be a bit of a time skip between now and Act 3, not sure on the exact time frame as of yet, trying to make sure that everything pans out and makes sense. Chapter 1 of Act 3 should post this Friday, September 4th. ANd as I said, from there one we'll be back to every Tuesday and Friday for chapter releases. By my current
outline, that would have Terminus ending in the middle of October.

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 1: The Guests

“Thanks Erana.” I grimaced as I used my left arm to push myself up. Honestly I was sure that my shoulder was fine, but the doctors insisted that I keep my other limb in a sling.

The young maiden gave me a bashful little grin as she settled my lunch onto a stand next to my bed. For obvious reasons I hadn't been staying in Nynsi’s room, which had left me in the guest room next to hers. “You're welcome sir.”

Illyan’s little sister had apparently become my nursemaid over the past few weeks. Everyone else was too busy either trying to handle the fallout from Korlus, or keeping a paranoid eye on our new guests. Balak had apparently managed to keep the better part of three SIU teams intact, which when joined by the half strength group already on planet gave him a worrying amount of highly skilled soldiers. The fifty or so ship’s crew that were lucky enough to live weren't nearly as much of a problem in a fight, but finding the space to house them all was proving to be nearly as annoying. Rane was apparently in charge of finding them space in a nearby hotel, and had admitted in her one visit that she had nearly shot half of them after they wouldn't stop bitching about the 'conditions'.

All of those were just some of the reasons why I hardly saw Nynsi over those weeks.

Our own tension remained rather high, especially as Trena kept harping her own opinions. On one hand.. I knew that scales had a fucking good point, but on the other.. I still loved her dammit. Still, her bruised ego was a pretty fucking big damned ego, and things had remained cool between us. A situation made worse by the stress of having to deal with all the crap that was happening.

She'd made sure that I was more than well taken care of, of course, but there were still days when I hadn't seen her even once. Even then, the times she had stopped by had been rather awkward.

Which was probably the reason that it was a surprise when she slammed the door open and stalked in like she wanted to murder someone.

“I don't suppose that there's any..” My voice trailed off before I could ask Erana about the food, my eyes blinking rapidly as I stared at Nynsi. “Um..”

Her voice was a deep growl that made my eyebrows go up and the maiden flinch. “Erana. Out. Now.”
“Ma'am.” The Asari scampered, and her heels had barely gotten clear of the door before it was slammed shut behind her.

“That was rather impol...” I started to admonish her irritably, only for my voice to trail as she stood still facing the door. Her entire body screamed tension and anger, and her fists where opening and closing as I watched. “.. Nynsi?”

Her name seemed to snap her out of it, but not in a good way. A wordless snarl emerged from her throat as she whirled around and stalked towards a decorative table against a wall. The gleaming wood looked impressive, but she snapped the thing in half with a single furious slam of her fist.

I flinched back in my bed at the massive crack from the impact, and felt my eyes widen further when she picked up half of the broken table and slammed into the wall with another furious snarl.

“Desert dwelling.. blind.. cross eyed.. son of a whore!” The fourth blow was enough to shatter the thing. Without pausing she threw aside the splinters and grabbed the other half. Heaving and spinning in place, she hurled it clear across the room to shatter a mirror in another terrific clash of noise.

Now.. I'd seen Nynsi pissed before. I'd heard her angry. But even when we were dealing with her parents she hadn't gotten to a point where she lost control like this. And given that I was currently stuck more or less immobilized in a bed.. I'll admit to being a bit terrified in those moments.

“Nynsi?” My voice seemed very quiet as she gasped for air, all of her dark eyes furiously glaring at the wreckage she'd made.

She sucked in a long breath before letting it out with a shudder. “Cieran.”

“I'd ask if you were all right.. but I think that's obvious.” I tried to keep my words spaced and calm. “Did you.. want to talk?”

Her fists clenched again. “I want to let T'laria throw that pretentious asshole out of the Noln while we're bluelit.”

I had to blink several times. “Um. Who?”

"Ka'harial Balak.” She literally spat the name out, a level of vitriol I'd only ever heard her use in reference to her father. “Apparently it is so difficult to believe that I am capable of choosing a human as my Harath'krem that he felt the need to invent his own explanations. And then to tell those Pillars damned stories to his people!”

Oh. “What kind of-”

A hand cut through the air. “I just left the communications suite after speaking with his Patriarch. Apparently you have some form of blackmail that caused Xerol to give you your title, and is enough for me to keep you around. The Patriarch even felt the need to circumspectly ask if you were raping me to keep me under your control.”

This time it was my turn to let out a very Batarian hiss of anger, but she continued before I could say anything. “When I demanded he tell me where he'd heard such a thing, he indicated rumors amongst his nephews people. And when I confronted him he not only admitted it, he told me all I had to do was say the word to have you eliminated!”

Nynsi turned again, stalking over to the room's only window to stare out at the grounds as her chest heaved for air. “I informed him that if he did such a thing, I would ensure that I-Sec threw
him and his entire force into jail for the rest of their lives. Assuming that I could be persuaded not to execute him myself. And that if I heard any more rumors about our relationship that I would be forced to reconsider allowing his people to remain.”

Oh. It was nice of her to threaten him like that, but he still had a lot of firepower and we both knew it. I-Sec would be more than capable of stopping him from getting off planet, but the odds of her living long enough to make good on her threats were slim to none. “Nynsi…”

Her head bowed slightly. “Dammit Cieran just let me.. dammit!”

I flinched as a fist struck the glass, but I kept my mouth shut.

“Fucking..” Air whistled as she inhaled, then exhaled slowly and forced her hand to relax.

“Dammit…”

From there she recounted the rest of her morning in short, terse sentences. Once she'd finished threatening Balak, she'd rounded up every staff member she could and more or less interrogated them to get every detail she could. Apparently the SIU teams and marooned crew members hadn't just been content to openly wonder if I was forcing myself on Nyn, things went considerably downhill from there. Everything from me making her lay with Trena or Ghai to me openly flaunting her wealth as if it was my own and forcing her to act 'human' in public.

The staff had fought back as best they could, nearly all of them had been around long enough to know bullshit when they heard it. But in the end that had just made themselves targets as well. After all, excepting Chen, Nynsi, and myself, everyone on staff was either an alien or an exile, and thus worthy of only contempt if they didn't leap to obey the Batarian's whims.

Although one thing did make me smile. Apparently Nyn had run into Trena on her way here, and had told Scales that if any of Balak's people disrespected any of her people while in Trena's, or any other Asari's, presence that scales had permission to throw them out of the mansion. Preferably out a window rather than a door.

When Scales had reminded Nynsi that the windows were bullet proof with mass effect barriers on the outside, and that throwing someone out would be nearly impossible without killing them, my Tarath'shan had simply asked why that was relevant.

“I do wish that I had caught that moment on my omni-tool..” Nynsi had eventually migrated until she was seated next to me on my bed, stroking my free hand with one of hers as she spoke. Her tones were mostly back to their normal, smooth superiority rather than the biting anger after venting for nearly an hour. “For a moment I was actually worried that she might kiss me.”

My lips curled a bit. “That would have been rather awkward.”

“Not the word I would use.” She seemed to shudder slightly. Still, I took it as a good sign. Or at least, you know, a small improvement.

Agreement or not, they still cordially detested one another. And that was on a good day. Ghai and I were the only reasons they spoke at all, and I was pretty sure that they'd had a fist fight at some point last week. Even if neither of them admitted it, Ghai had all but confirmed that something had happened after Trena had shown up for a visit with a black eye and a split lip just after Nynsi had left with her own bruises on her cheeks and forehead.

But hey. If they could bond over how much of an asshole Balak apparently was, I wasn't going to complain.

“So..” Hesitantly I lifted my good arm, running my fingers along her cheek. “Better for having
destroyed some things?”

Her skin flushed a bit, warming beneath my touch. “Partially. There was also…”

I frowned slightly as she paused. “Also what?”

She hesitated a moment longer before sighing. A hand rose to gently wrap around mine, holding it in place against her skin while her other dropped down so that her fingers could leave tingling trails across my face. “At one point during our discussion, Ka'harial demanded that I tell him one good thing that you had done for me. One good quality you had. I believe he expected me not to come up with any at all, or to rant over your less than admirable traits.”

My lips twisted a bit, thinking back on everything that had happened. “I’m sure I have a few of those.”

All of her eyes narrowed, and her tone became a bit prim. “The only thing I find less than agreeable is your strange relationship with T'laria. I was able to provide him with an extensive list of everything that you had done for both me and for my fallen uncle. When I was finished with that, I continued on to illustrate why I care about you.”

I blinked rapidly. “Oh.”

There was a long moment as she regarded me before she lowered her head a bit. “It was.. a good reminder for myself, of what I've nearly lost. In more ways than one. If you aren't... averse to the idea, I would like to move you to my chambers. It would be easier for me to visit you there, and to bring you meals.”

I had to blink again. “Are you.. apologizing?”

Her lips thinned a bit as she deflected. “Am I not allowed to take care of my Harath'krem and lover when he is injured?”

It was very, very hard not to stop a smile. So hard in fact that I failed entirely.

Nyn let out a low growl. “This is difficult enough for me Cieran. You don't have to openly enjoy my discomfort.”

“Sorry love.”

“No you aren't.”

I snorted out a laugh, “No. Not really.” It was.. too strangely relieving for her to admit, however indirectly, that she owed me an apology. Plus there was the whole her standing up and defending me to Balak, which was.. warming.

The next growl was deeper. “Cieran..”

My hand gently detached itself form hers so that I could wave at my bandaged arm and limp leg beneath the blanket. “Injured, remember?”

Her eyes flashed in a decidedly predatory fashion, and it was her turn to give me a slow smile. “Yes you are.. quite helpless really.”

And suddenly I felt far less amused and far more worried. “Um. Nyn?”

She caught my only free hand with a negligible effort, leaning down towards me with that smile
becoming vulpine. “I did some more research on your people's customs Cieran. In particular how your females would be expected to.. make up for trouble that they may or may not have caused.”

I had to swallow as she nudged my chin up with her cheek, her warm breath tickling my neck as she ran her lips across my skin. My battered body was still lethargic as hell, but her words and nearness was more than enough for certain parts of it to start reacting.

“Nyn, you don't.. ah..” Words deserted me as she started to plant small kisses on my skin, little pricks of pain mixing in when she nipped with her teeth. Her fingers tightened around my left wrist to keep my arm pinned down, leaving me feeling strangely helpless as she thoroughly began to enjoy herself. And she definitely was, pleased little sounds coming quickly after my own gasps and groans.

After an eternity, or maybe ten or fifteen minutes later, she slowly pulled back, regarding me with four lidded eyes. “My poor Harath'krem. All tense now.. yet unable to do anything about it.”

My fingers curled in tension as I let out a ragged exhale. “You are.. very, very cruel.”

“Am I?” Her free hand reached up to caress my neck as she inspected her handiwork. I was probably going to be bruised on that entire side, which would lead to all kinds of fun questions when scales visited. “That is a rather disrespectful thing to call your Tarath'shan.”

“Not when she is my lover.. and when it's true.”

“Hmm..” She couldn't seem to stop the grin from returning. “Perhaps.”

I let out a long groan and closed my eyes, trying to will my arousal away. It was actually easier than I expected.. mostly because I just didn't have the energy. Still took a little bit, but that was to be expected really.

The bed shifted as Nyn adjusted herself, and I stilled as I felt her breath on my face. Warm lips pressed against my forehead for a long moment before pulling back. “I won't.. ask for your forgiveness Cieran. But if I can make things up to you I will.”

“My poor Harath'krem. All tense now.. yet unable to do anything about it.”

My lips twitched. “You are the boss Nyn.”

An irritated sound was her response to that.

Before I could ask anything else, there was a polite knock on the door.

The bed shifted again as Nyn rose, her voice rising. “Enter.”

I opened my eyes in time to see Illyan carefully lean in through the door. “Hey boss. Ma'am. Sorry to interrupt but we need you over at the hotel.”

Nyn let out a low growl. “The crew?”

The burly Asari rolled her eyes. “One of them groped one of the stewardess' at the place's restaurant. And then defended himself by calling her 'just an alien slave who should be honored that I even touched her.' She used her biotics to bounce him out of the building and slammed two
of his friends into the ceiling hard enough that both needed medivacs. That pretty much kicked off a riot that I-Sec is still trying to sort out.”

“By the pillars..” Her voice trailed off into a hiss. “You stay here and make sure that Cieran’s room remains locked.”

“Ma’am.”

My lover turned and leaned down to give me a quick kiss before whirling away, her omni-tool already snapping to life as she started snapping out orders to Ghai and Chen. Illyan quickly shifted out of her way, closing the door again after she’d gone.

“So. Good to see you two are back at it again.” It took her all of a few seconds to get a giant grin on her face. Which only grew more amused when she took a moment to survey the destruction that Nyn had caused when she’d lost it.

“Illyan..”

She boomed out a laugh before making sure that the door was sealed. “Want some bandages to cover that up?”

Sighing, I nodded slightly. While she started to bustle about to get what she’d need, I leaned out and dragged the small table with my forgotten lunch closer. “Is it that bad out there?”

“Shaaryak trashing the room should have been a clue boss.” Her joviality faded a bit. “The SIU assholes are assholes, but they’re better than the ship's crew. They’ve dealt with aliens before and are smart enough to realize that an angry maiden is deadly even without training or a weapon. Nevermind matrons or matriarchs. Thank Athame for small favors I guess.”

I grimaced before taking a bite out of my cold sandwich. “And the crew?”

There was a reverberating growl. “Balak hasn't told Shaaryak yet, but three of them already.. vanished.”

One of my cheeks twitched, and I pitched my voice lower. “Trena?”

“We only did two. No idea on the third. Apparently he went for a walk in the district and didn't come back.” Her eyes seemed to tighten as she knelt beside the bed, viewing the marks that Nyn had left on my neck. “The two we did.. caught them when they tried to drug Erana.”

My fingers tightened enough to start shredding my meal, and I had to throw it onto the plate before I ruined the thing. “They.. son of.. Athame's fucking azure.”

“Ghai did one. She let me handle the other.” Her fingers tensed a bit. “I wasn't fast about it.”

“Good.” The big mechanic seemed startled by the vehemence in my voice.

“. boss?”

I turned away, tilting my head to expose my neck enough for her to wrap it. “What, you expect me to yell at you for it?”

There was a moment of hesitation before she started working. “Well.. you're kind of our designated moral center boss.” And wasn't that a fucking terrifying thought. “I mean, Trena told me you’d be good that we handled it but she didn't want to tell you the details. It got a bit messy.”
“Good.” I snapped again. “Next time any of them looks at your sister feel free to handle it however you want. She’s a fucking kid for Athame’s sake. The bodies?”

“Aethyta handled it for us. Trena didn’t really go into the details with her.” The cloth was cool as she started to wrap it, helping me lift my head just enough to get the adhesive stuck in place. “Probably a good thing.”

As she finished I let my head sink into the pillow, and tried to calm myself down for entirely new reasons.

“Tell Nyn.” I spoke again a few minutes later, after she’d gotten up to inspect the debris. “She won’t have an issue with it.”

Illyan turned to eyes me slightly. “You sure boss? I mean.. she did kind of start this whole thing.”

“I don't think she quite realized what they'd be like.” My good shoulder rose and fell, though I had to fight back a wince of pain as the other reflexively tried to do the same. “It would be a good reminder for her. And it'll give her more reason to try and get those tide stranded assholes the fuck out of our ocean.”

Her eyes blinked before she actually barked out a laugh. “You sound less human every day boss.”

I blinked slightly, only then taking the time to realize what I’d said. I knew she meant the words as a compliment, but I couldn't help but feel.. something about it. Fuck. How long had it been since I'd even spoken English? Or even thought in it? These days all I did was flip between Higher Khar'shan and Thessian depending on who I was talking to. And the last human I'd even really spoken with at any length had been.. who? Zaeed? And before that.. huh.

I wasn't sure what that said about me. But I was sure that I didn't particularly want to think about it.

Rather than respond, I changed the topic. “They haven't been giving you any issues have they?”

She snorted before bringing an arm up and flexing it, her bulging thews visible even through the loose shirt. “These are enough to keep them away boss. None of them have been stupid enough that I've had to hit them with a singularity either.”

I echoed her snort. “Pity.”

“I know, right?” Leaning down she shifted part of the broken table, mindful of the glass from the shattered mirror. “Speaking of my sister though boss, she hasn't.. you know, done anything stupid has she?”

“I know, right?” I thought I was calm enough to try eating again, and I carefully grabbed my sandwich again. “What do you mean by stupid?”

A hand waved slightly. “I think she's starting to look at you as some kind of surrogate parental figure or something. Athame knows our mother was and is a useless bitch, and her dad died just after she was born. Salarian you know. Just.. don't be surprised if she you know. Treats you like that.”

“She.. what?” I had to put the food down again before rubbing my face furiously with my good hand. “I'm not.. how?”

“Fuck if I know boss. If it helps she's treating Trena the same way.”
Picking me and *Trena* as substitute parents. “Your sister has appalling judgment.”

She barked out a laugh again as she stood. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she doesn’t bother you too much. Just don’t be surprised if she acts a bit odd around you.”

It certainly explained the shy smiles and the way she's practically glowed with approval when I’d thanked her for doing things for me the last few weeks. I’d honestly been a bit worried that she was starting to crush on me... so this was actually strangely relieving. I had enough issues with my love life without adding the Asari version of an underaged teenager to the mix.

Speaking of my fucked up love life.. Nyn was apparently determined to make things better, which was good. But that still left another Batarian female. “How’s Rane doing?”

“Tired. Overworked. Trying not to think about her team.” Illyan sighed. “She's not in the best state boss, but Trena's been helping her get through crap. I think she's doing a bit better since we got back. Shaaryak's been smart enough to keep her on assignments away from the Hegemony's people so that she doesn't have to deal with them.”

“Good.” That was something for her at least. I still had to find a way to let her down gently, something that would only get harder after the shit that had happened on Korlus. And would probably only get harder as time continued to pass.

“Yeah.” She seemed to stare at nothing before shaking herself. “Offered to take her to bed to help her relax, shot me down. Was cute the way she blushed though.”

I couldn't stop a snorting laugh. “You didn't.”

“What? I told you she isn't bad for a Batarian.” A crooked little grin appeared on her face before she strolled over to the room's only other chair. She took a moment to pull a pistol from where she'd had it concealed on her back, setting it on the chair's arm before collapsing into it. “Would have been nice if she'd said yes. Trena and Ghai haven't been inviting me along as often anymore, think they're getting more serious with each other.”

Part of me wanted to sigh. It always seemed to come down to sex with Asari. The other part of me was eager to push aside the serious crap we'd been talking about and move on to something more amusing. “Really?”

Her eyes glinted. “We've already started a pool. How long until they get carried away and Ghai ends up pregnant.”

Trena? As an actual *parent?* The thought was terrifying. And incredibly amusing. “Odds?”

Fingers shifted as she quickly brought up her omni-tool, flicking through screens until she found a text file. “Most money is on within the next year, only a few people have gone shorter than that.”

“One of them being you?”

“I've got within the next four months.” she admitted.

“Hmm..” Why the fuck not. “Two hundred, same time frame.”

Blue lips curled as she entered the bet. “Got you down boss.”

Figuring the third time was the charm, I grabbed my food and started eating again. “Not upset that they're cutting you off?”
She shrugged before shutting her omni-tool down and leaning back in her chair. “It was a casual thing boss, we don't take it so goddess-dammed seriously as your people do. Or the Turians for that matter. Still remember when mom slept with one of her friends.. never saw dad get so angry before. He was on the next ship to Palaven before she could even try to explain.”

I grunted, setting what was left of my food down so that I could grab my water. “You don't have to lecture me on it, it's not like I'm new to the planet anymore.”

“Sorry boss, just making sure you didn't forget anything after.. you know.”

A muscle in my right cheek twitched. I didn't like to be reminded that I'd been dead on an operating table. Or what I'd.. no. Not fucking going there. “I haven't. You have anyone new lined up?”

Her head dipped as a shoulder rose. “Not really. Rane's not interested, and I don't think you and Shaaryak would want me in between you.”

Half of the water I was drinking went down the wrong tube, and I promptly started hacking uncontrollably.

Instead of helping me she just threw her head back and started cackling. “Goddess! Your face!”

It took me a few minutes to get all the water out, my lungs burning as I glared at her. “You did that on purpose.”

The big Asari seemed entirely without contrition as she grinned. “Sorry boss, needed the laugh after the last few days.”

Groaning, I set what was left of my water aside. “Still.”

She was still chuckling. “Just teasing boss, calm down.”

I gave her an arch look and shook my head, but I let a small smile tug at my lips to reassure her that I wasn't actually mad. “You get to refill my water. And get me another sandwich.”

Her eyes rolled but she stood up all the same. “You going to be awake when I get back?”

“Probably.” It was a legitimate question, I was sleeping close to eighteen hours a day. “Haven't taken any pain killers yet.”

“Need some?”

I glanced at my covered left leg. It wasn't throbbing at the moment, probably because I hadn't been moving it much. “I'll take some after you get back.”

“Gotcha boss.” The door slid open, giving me a glimpse of two of Ghai's commandos standing guard outside. “Don't go anywhere.”

“Oh go fuck your..” the door slid shut before I could finish.
Chapter End Notes

So. Bit of a break.. mostly because of work. Sixty two hour week last week pretty much left me comatose to the point where all I did for a few days was play Dragon Age to try and escape reality for a while. Things are going better now, obviously, so I'm hopeful I'll finally be able to resume my standard schedule.

This chapter was a bit rough to write, having to both get back into Cieran's head as well as nudging things along. Plus planting a few long term seeds as well as illustrating just all of the problems that they're having now. Next chapter will have another bit of a time skip before we start getting into the meat and potatoes of this act.

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
Two weeks later, I was trying not to flinch at the aches driving up and down my left side with each step.

“You doing all right boss?” Illyan was leaning against the wall near the door, her clothing stained with oil and grease. Despite her insolent posture, I could tell that she was tensed and ready to dart out and catch me if I fell on my ass.

“Can't just lay in bed all day every day.” As much as I wished I could. My cane thumped with every other step as I moved closer to her. “The brace is helping.”

She grunted, reaching out to tap the door open. “To the dining hall then?”

“Followed by the conference room.” Which was actually the reason I had to get up. I could have stolen Erana away from her secretarial duties long enough to get me some food, but Aethyta had insisted that I actually walk to my meeting with her.

“And you wanted me to escort you around. Touched boss, really am.” The bulky Asari slid into the hall, making sure that the door stayed as I followed.

“Scales and Ghai are on assignment for the old fish, and Rane is still stuck liaising with I-Sec.” I reminded her. “It was you or Chen.”

Another grunt. “He's been on edge since we got back. I mean, he's always been an asshole, but goddess.”

My lips twisted as we started heading down the hall, my taller companion keeping her strides short so that I could keep up. “I haven't seen him.”

We both gave slight nods to two of the staff as we passed them. They dipped their heads, holding the laundry they were apparently doing against their chests. Things seemed entirely normal until one of them hesitantly spoke.

“Are you.. going to the dining hall, Master Kean?”

I paused, turning to blink at the young male who seemed to shrink nervously at my attention. “I am. Why?”

The two lowborns exchanged a tight glance with their upper eyes, even while their lowers remained locked on the floor. “Commander Balak is there.”
Well shit. “Thanks for the warning.”

The guy who'd spoke tilted his head hard to the left and gave me a little bow, “Pillars be with you, Harath'krem.”

They'd probably have to be. Illyan was noticeably tenser as we resumed our trek, her fingers twitching nervously as if she wanted to have her holdout pistol in her hand.

I was hardly any better, grimacing as I realized that my grip had gotten painful around my cane. I had yet to personally meet Balak, a state of affairs that could have continued indefinitely as far as I was concerned. And when that eventuality did happen I'd really hoped that Nyn would be there with me.

Plus Ghai and her commando team with their safeties off.

“I can get you lunch.” Illyan pitched her voice low as we drew closer the double doors. “You can wait out here.”

It was tempting.. but this had to happen sooner or later.

My head shook slightly. “I can handle it.”

She gave my cane a pointed glance.

“He won't be stupid enough to do something in the middle of the day inside of the mansion.” At least, I hoped that he wasn't that stupid. In the games he'd seemed extremely intelligent, even if he was a prejudiced asshole. “I won't be upset if your biotics are ready though.”

The mechanic wasn't the strongest biotic around. Indeed, by Asari standards they were actually rather weak. But she could still throw down a singularity, and that would be more than enough to deal with anyone so stupid as to start shit without their armor and kinetic barriers.

Her chin jerked in a nod before a large hand hit the door, revealing an almost deserted room.

As was usual for lunch, the kitchens had simply provided a spread of food buffet style along one wall. A small collection of tables for the staff were scattered across the room, with the expensive main table dominating the center. At least Nyn had gotten rid of the hideously uncomfortable chairs that Xerol had favored.

Balak was, strangely, alone. It was odd to see him without armor, and the suit he was wearing had to have been one's of Xerol's. But at least he wasn't wearing the bumblebee warpaint on the sides of his head.

The Hegemony Commander glanced up from his meal as we entered, his entire body locking up as his lips thinned.

Since I was technically a hightborn as well thanks to my title, and since he wasn't a family Patriarch, I wasn't under any compulsion to show him deference. My head thusly stayed firmly upright as the pair of us stared at one another without a word. After a long moment I turned away, letting Illyan guide me towards the food.

“What you thinking boss?”

I glanced across the options. A lot of it was too rich for me right now, but thankfully there were a few things still open to me. “A few slices of fish, and some of the Yllian bread.”
“Sure thing boss.” Plates and utensils began to clink as she started to grab what I’d indicated. “Drink?”

“I got it.” Turning away, and trying not to breath heavily as I began to realize just how fucking tired I was just from walking this far, I began to shuffle over to the water cooler.

Which, naturally, brought me a bit closer to Balak.

His gravelly voice was vaguely familiar, but not much more than that. “I see that even Nynsi Shaaryak could not teach you proper manners.”

I felt a muscle in my cheek twitch, responding in his own language. “If you were your grandfather I would have tilted my head thirty degrees to the left and greeted him before doing anything else. As you aren’t, and since I’m not particularly disposed to care about your opinions, I did not.”

Dark eyes narrowed as his jaw clenched, but he gave me an extremely grudging nod. “She taught you our caste’s tongue, though you share her accent.”

One of my shoulders twitched as I grabbed a glass with my right hand. I had no idea what kind of an accent she and I apparently had, nor did I really care. Well.. not quite. There was a sudden urge to setup my omni-tool to translate and play my voice back and see what kind of human accent it gave me.

Dammit.

I turned away to fill it with water, trying to smother my annoyance as he spoke again.

“I am told that I have you to thank for the plan to save my people.” His tone made it clear that no thanks would ever be happening, which made me wonder why he’d bother speaking at all. A wonder he resolved as he then continued on before I could voice anything. “As well as the reason why my ship is now in the hands of the Eclipse. Along with its data core.”

“That was inevitable,” My left shoulder twitched again. “from the moment you crashed on Korlus.”

A trace of a growl appeared. “You denied me any opportunity to wipe it before they took possession.”

Not bothering to look at him, I rolled my eyes, throwing my head back to make it obvious. As my glass was now full, I turned my back entirely on him and started limping back towards where Illyan was holding up a now full plate for me. “Sederis is insane, not stupid. She would have had you killed before you got anywhere near that wreck. If you were that concerned you should have killed it before you abandoned ship.”

Apparently stating the obvious wasn’t a way to get on his good side. “I had more pressing concerns, such as the survival of my people.”

“A worthy goal.” I tilted my head a hair or two to the left for a brief moment. “One you succeeded in far beyond our expectations. Next to that I wouldn’t worry about whatever the Eclipse can retrieve.”

“I do not recall asking for your advice Harath’krem.”

Illyan gave me a warning look, clearing thinking that I’d said enough to the prickly racist.

I gave her a slight nod and swallowed my initial response. And then my second. Eventually
voicing my third with as much forced politeness as I could manage as she opened the doors for us. “Then I will no longer offer it. Enjoy your meal Commander.”

Thankfully nothing more was said as we exited. At least, by him. Illyan waited until the doors were shut before blowing out a heavy breath.

“That could have been worse.”

My head twitched in a nod, my weight almost entirely on my cane as I limped along beside her. “I get the feeling that was him being civil.”

Her expressive face twisted slightly. “No.. normally he's a bit more subtle than that boss. He's never that overt around Shaaryak. Not after their fight anyway.”

Balak hating humans enough to lose his cultured edge? Color me shocked.

“Not around Asari?”

Lips twitched in a more positive direction. “Trena's got a talent for building up some waves, but she's not allowed to be near him anymore.”

I mimed a gasp that quickly turned into a groan as I had to stop moving, half closing my eyes as I focused on not falling over.

“Boss? You all right?”

The wave of exhaustion didn't want to abate. I gave her a slight nod all the same, “Just need a moment.”

A tiny beep sounded as an omni-tool opened. “Still have some time before your meeting boss. Let's get you to a calmer shore huh.”

I didn't protest as an limb that felt like it was made of steel cords carefully slid under my arms to help take some of my weight. It was probably awkward for her, given that she had to keep my food balanced in her other hand and stoop down to get her arm there. Still, she didn't complain as she carefully guided me to a nearby alcove.

After setting the plate aside, she helped me sit down, resting a knee on the floor before rolling my pant leg up enough that she could check my brace.

“It's fine.” I shook my head before taking a long gulp of my water. “Just... fucking tired already.”

She glanced up at me. “Not really surprising boss, you took a lot of damage. You're lucky to be here at all, much less be up and moving around.”

This time there wasn't any hiding the wince. “I know. Without the hormones and drugs they're making me take I'd probably still be a vegetable in bed.”

“Probably?” Her eyes flicked down as her fingers checked the straps and nobs on the metal and composites. “Boss.. you were in Athame's embrace. I don't even.”

“Illyan.” I closed my eyes and let out a slow exhale. “I really don't like thinking about it.”

“...shit, I'm.. fuck. Not great at this boss.” My lips might have twitched a little as she came close to resembling her sister.

“Hold onto my cane while I eat and we'll call it even.”
There was a snort, but I soon found my plate being pushed into my hands. She'd loaded it up with way more than I could finish, something that I ribbed her for as I barely got through a third of it.

“Ulterior motives boss.” Those motives became quite clear as she helped herself to what I hadn’t eaten. It was a rather transparent way of letting my rest a bit longer, but I kept my mouth closed and made a mental note to find a way to thank her later. I could probably convince Nyn to get her a new toolset or something. Which also reminded me that I had to do something for Erana as well for all the things that she'd done for me while I was stuck in bed.

Oh well. Wasn't like I was doing anything with the credits that were piling up in my back account.

Once she had finished my food, and I'd let her polish my water off as well, she helped me get up. I managed to limp a few meters on my own before I had to bow my head in defeat. Illyan didn't say anything, just wrapping her arm around my chest again before helping me along.

“Thanks.” My voice was quiet as we approached the conference room, the burly Asari stepping back to let me cross the last bit of distance on my own.

“Calm seas boss.” A broad hand patted my good shoulder. “Have to get back to work, I'll see if I can drop by with Erana tomorrow.”

I blinked a bit, but managed an Asari shrug. “Sure.”

Another strong hit made my glad I had the cane to lean on before she turned away to head back to the garage.

Shaking my head in bemusement, I managed the last few steps to the door before sliding inside.

“Cieran.” Nynsi was out of her chair inside of a breath, “Are you all right?

“Bit tired.” I admitted, not complaining when her arm wrapped around my waist. She had as little trouble as Illyan had had taking a lot of my weight onto her shoulder. As my Tarath'shan helped guide me to the table, I got a better look at who was already present.

One of them I’d expected. Aethyta was flicking a finger across a datapad, frowning at whatever information it held.

But the other three I very much hadn't. Trena and Ghai were at the Matriarch’s left, while Rane’li was nervously puffing on her pipe across from them.

“Scales? Rane? Thought you were all out on assignment?” I tried not to groan in relief as I sat. “What's so important about my rehab that you all came back?”

Trena took that moment to light up her own pipe, drawing an eye-roll from her bondmate as she stalled. When she made no efforts to speed up the process, Ghai forced the words out. “Not entirely about that.”

Great. Another one of those meetings.

I glanced at Nyn, wordlessly asking if she knew what this was about, but only got a tight shake of her own head as she sat next to me.

“Not entirely about that kid.” Aethyta agreed, shutting her device down and glancing at me. “But we'll get that out of the way first.”
“Doc Sayran still handling it?”

There was a small Asari shrug. “She’s going to handle the medical side, but the actual work is going to be Trisren. I wanted to handle it, but a new storm’s rolled in and I’m going to be stuck dealing with a lot of crap sooner rather than later.”

I shared another glance with my lover before she spoke. “I don’t suppose you can tell us what it’s about?”

“No. And don’t pry for details either.” Whatever it was was enough to annoy her. Even if she wasn’t going into details there was a tense brusqueness to her manner that she normally reserved for that kind of thing. “It’s going to keep me occupied for the foreseeable future. You know Tris and she’s just gone through a lot of the same crap with her own recovery. Best if she can stay here girl.”

Nyn nodded tightly. “There are still guest rooms open given our.. losses.”

“Good. Wouldn't be remiss for you to join them either.” Liara's father gave her a pointed look. “I think you've skipped out on enough training sessions, don't you?”

Her lips thinned but she gave a tight nod. “I suppose it would not be remiss given our current company.”

The Matriarch let out a low growl. “Don't get me started girl. One wounded SIU team was enough, I thought you would be able to work out an arrangement that wouldn’t' dump three more in my fucking pond.”

I felt the need to defend Nyn a bit there. “They're only doing missions off world, and the crew is confined to Khar'shan Minor.”

“That you know of.” Aethyta wasn't about to be dissuaded, and I didn't miss the I-told-you-so glance that Trena threw at me. “It's a decent concept, but you don't have the guns to enforce it.”

“Yet.” Nor was Nyn going to let herself be pushed around, even by a Matriarch. “I'm working on that. And the Commander is well aware that politically he cannot move against me, it would be a severe setback for his family's faction in the various Hegemony Councils. I'm also repeatedly told that my death is unacceptable thanks to the family holdings that are keeping Khar'shan's economy hostage.”

Hostage was a bit of a strong word, from my understanding, but I supposed it was applicable. And she'd carefully referenced that specific planet's economy, rather than that Hegemony itself. Not that I thought that Aethyta would care about the exact wording, but it was probably good practice for when she had to deal with the Board or the dear Commander.

Blue fingers drummed once on the table before stilling, but the Matriarch nodded tightly. “Watch yourself girl. These are dangerous tides for you to try and deal with, and I'm not going to be around to help.”

“We will manage.” This time it was my turn to share a glance with Rane, and then another with Trena. I was pretty sure none of us were as confident as Nyn sounded, but then again we didn’t have much of a choice. Well, they did. They could always quit. I didn't quite have that luxury. “Will you still be reachable if we require intelligence? Or if you need T'laria or my Harath'krem for missions?”

“Yes to the first. Trisren will be handling the second. I expect you four to do as she says, especially you girl.” Trena twitched a shoulder as smoke drifted from her pipe, apparently
unconcerned.

Nysni was frowning though. “My apologies, but I won't exactly have time to go out to handle stakeouts or intelligence drops.”

Trena went still for a moment, her expression becoming almost.. guilty as her other boss gave her a hard look. Worse, across the table from her was Rane. The young exile was very firmly keeping both sets of eyes on the table, not wavering her gaze in the slightest. She'd removed her pipe, setting it aside.. something I would expect her to do if she was about to be asked to speak in a significant fashion.

“Scales..” I didn't quite like where this was going. “Rane..”

The former let out a growl. “Fine. I fucked up ape. I sent official shit through the mansion's servers because I'm a goddess-dammed idiot.”

“At least you're aware of it.” Aethyta grunted, seemingly strangely mollified. “And you told me about it. Too many young idiots think they can cover it up.”

I blinked slowly, trying to work out why that was such a big deal. Everyone sent messages through the mansion's system, it was the easiest way to do it. After all, Rane had set it up very... oh. “You read them?”

Rane squirmed a bit, her head dipping sharply to the left. My fingers tightened a bit as her 'submissive lowborn' switch flipped, but I couldn't do shit about it right now. “I did. Specifically ones pertaining to you and Miss Shaaryak. The latter were routine with nothing incriminating in them. But the former.. had information that was being concealed from you.”

Well.

Great.

Nyn let out a quiet growl. “And I was not told of this why?”

“I only had time to read the messages while we were en route to Korlus. I did not think that was an appropriate time or place to talk with either of you about it.” In all honesty, a fair point. “After the battle I confronted Miss T’laria, and she agreed to bring you both into the loop.”

More grousing from Aethyta followed. “Which meant I had to fucking get involved. And since I now know that you're aware of what we've been up to girl she got conscripted into RI.”

Which meant she'd get another paycheck at least. Even if it did mean that she now had another boss, and even more dangerous missions tacked on to the ones she'd already have to perform for Nyn.

It was my Tarath'shan who spoke next, her voice still prim. “What was this information that was so critical to warrant such an act?”

Rane flicked her upper eyes to Aethyta, who nodded permissively. “During their search for the Asari who attacked the Harath'krem, several other.. similar cases were discovered on Asari colonies. Both in the Republic and in the Terminus.”

Beneath the table my fingers tightened slowly around my cane.

Similar. Cases. That was more than enough to push my sluggish brain back into motion.
Other people like me. There were fucking other people like me. I hadn't been the only one she'd brought over.

“So far ten have been identified.” The former comtech continued. “Seven of them were killed by their attacker... and their attacker was typically found dead beside them. The cases were unusual in that both parties were clothed in all of the cases, ruling out sex as a method of the attack.”

“Which was fucking weird.” Trena cut in, waving her pipe in the air for emphasis. “But it wasn't until the damned autopsies that they realized that their brains were fried. And even the sick freaks who enjoy fishing for prey that way almost always like to get some physical pleasure along with the bonding. Put the two together and you get a bitch with disposable followers, a lot like what you described ape, who's been up to Athame knows what.”

I was less interested in how they'd figured it out, and more interested in the people themselves. “What about the three that lived?”

Rane glanced at me with an apologetic tilt to her head. “In the order they seem to have been attacked in... the eighth is still alive, but she is effectively brain dead in a hospital on Thessia. The ninth died when he attempted to sleep with an Asari prostitute... who also died from the backlash. The tenth, who was attacked six months before you, died a week before we left for Korlus. Her aircar crashed under mysterious circumstances.”

Oh. A lot of the hope that had suddenly built up flipped to become a weight in my stomach. Neither of those sounded like innocent deaths. The second was obvious, but even the first... one of the first things that bitch had told me was not to sleep with the locals. Either the guy had been a complete idiot or she'd made sure not to give him the same advice.

Down the table, Aethyta was giving me a long look. “It goes along with where you ended up. Sticking you with T’laria here put you in the path of a gang war that was going to break out sooner or later. If she had wanted you eliminated, and you hadn't ended up with the Shaaryaks, there would have been plenty of opportunity.”

Groaning, I brought both hands up to rub at my face. My facial hair bristled against my skin and I tried to work through this crap out loud. “But it doesn't make any fucking sense to kill me. Why put me in touch with scales, give creepy warnings, and then kill me anyway?”

Trena's eyes narrowed. “Why do any of this shit at all ape? As far as we can tell she's only done it to humans. And why the fuck force her people to off themselves? Athame's ass you'd fucking think that sooner or later they'd get sick of dying just to mess with some humans' heads.”

That was the million dollar question wasn't it. What the fuck was she doing?

My gut reaction was that it sounded like she'd been experimenting. Trying to find a way to bring people here without them dying in the process, and had simply accepted that there was apparently a life for a life trade that needed to occur. Of course, that didn't explain why she'd killed the two successes before me. Or even why I and number ten had been brought here at all if number nine had actually made it here all right.

Fuck.

One of Nyn’s hands reached out to rest on my shoulder. “Were you able to locate a twelfth target? I'm assuming Cieran is then number eleven.”

“There's been a few reported attacks since his, mostly on the Citadel. None of them fit our profile
though.” The Matriarch's mouth twisted irritably. “Of course, if she's got more brains than a sunfish she'll vary her pattern sooner or later. It wouldn't surprise me if twelve has already occurred and we just haven't located the victim yet.”

A stray thought occurred to me, but I had to cover a yawn before I could get the words out. “Or just have her victim not tell anyone about the condition. I mean, if they're on the Citadel.. they wouldn't have a need to.”

“Which is why we didn't want to bring you into this crap ape.” Trena's head shook slightly. “Just more fucking questions than answers.”

I grunted. I was happier knowing, I liked knowing shit, but this was just another damned puzzle that I had to deal with now. Or at least, you know, make it look like I was dealing with this. Honestly I was far more worried about things more local to me than things that would eventually happen with Shepard. Probably not the best thing for the galaxy itself, but if things stayed mostly to canon then I didn't really have to do anything at all, did I?

Besides.. me just being here had apparently fucked up enough crap. I didn't want to think of what would happen if I actively tried. No. Let Shepard and the Chosen One deal with the galaxy. I would take care of Nyn, and Trena, and Rane.

“Yeah, well. It's stuff I should know. Even if we can't really do anything about it besides keep digging and waiting.” The Asari shrug was a bit forced, and stiff, but seemed to mollify everyone all the same. “So. Rane is stuck with us now?”

Nyn sighed. “Sounds that way. The same rules will apply, I assume?”

“Your crap has priority girl, except in emergency situations. Same deal as with the kid.”

My Tarath'shan glanced at the lowborn woman. “If possible I would like for her to remain out of combat situations as well. Losing another squad leader would be.. difficult to overcome.”

Rane seemed a little taken aback by the support, glancing questioningly at me. I shook my head slightly, trying to make sure that she knew that I wasn't putting Nyn up to this. That only seemed to confuse the poor woman more. After a few moments where both sets of her eyes flicked between me and Nyn, she eventually returned her pipe to her mouth and nervously took a few puffs from it.

“That's fine.” Aethyta glanced around the table. “You lot aren't exactly in any shape to get involved in running gunfights anyway. I have a few mission slots lined up over the next few weeks, let's get that out of the way while I'm here.”

I tried not to groan, settling back into my chair as Nyn patted my good leg under the table. The battle to stay awake as the briefing and conversations about what stakeouts and runs we would be doing was a vicious one. Eventually Nyn had interrupted the meeting when she noticed how I was blinking furiously to try and keep my eyes open.

The trip back to her room was a bit of a blur, but it felt like only moments had passed before I found myself burrowed in Nyn’s bed. A small part of me was worried that there was more that I should have talked with Aethyta and everyone else about.. but the rest of me was too fucking tired to worry.

The last thing I remember before passing out was Nyn stroking my hair and telling me to sleep.

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Next up is Chapter 3: The Clash
Chapter End Notes

So. Cieran is able to get up and move around, albeit not all that well, something that's going to continue for a while. He also had his first conversation with Balak, clipped though it was. Not too many surprises in this chapter, given that bits of it were implied in Trena's section, but still had to happen for Cieran. It also serves to setup the next chapter, which will have a bit of stuff that should make the pro-Rane crowd rather happy.

For the Author's notes, we'll be alternating between character profiles for the Terminus Warlords, and more data oriented comments on how the galaxy has changed thanks to the Blue Sun war.

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
“Cieran, you have to wake up.” Nynsi’s voice was affectionately prim, a tone that I’d heard all too often over the past two months. “I have to prepare for our departure, and you need to get ready for your therapy session. And you have your own assignment tonight as well. Best you wake up now so that you can rest later. Otherwise you’ll have a hard time during the evening.”

At the moment, I didn’t care about any of that, so my only response was to groan and pull her warm body a bit closer.

“At the moment, I didn’t care about any of that, so my only response was to groan and pull her warm body a bit closer.

“Cieran..” My Tarath’shan let out a quiet little sigh, following that by reaching up with a hand to stroke my hair. I’d let it grow long again, to both Aethyta and my new trainer’s displeasure. In the end though, it had been one of the few arguments that I’d managed to win. I wasn’t going to be fighting anytime soon, after all.

“Nyn.” I covered a yawn by pressing my mouth against her shoulder. “One more hour.”

A quiet chuckle escaped from her lips. “Do I have to order you to get up, Harath'krem?”

The noise I made could probably be described as a protest. I shifted a bit, but rather than get up I simply draped myself over her. She let out a warning growl that subsided when I placed a soft kiss on her neck.

“You are impossible sometimes.” Despite her words her other arm slid around my waist, carefully holding me against her. “You are aware of this, yes?”

“Probably..” My body began to relax again, sleep tugging at me as I let her pulse and breath lull me along.

At least it was until the hand playing with my hair slowly wrapped the strands around her fingers before pulling it back. A hiss of discomfort escaped my lips as my neck and back arched, trying to relieve the pain against my scalp. She’d managed to get a good grip near the skin, and made good use of that leverage, shifting her arm until I slid off of her and onto my side.

“No more sleeping love.” The tension eased as she lessened the pressure, the bed shifting a bit as she rolled onto her side so that her body was pressing against mine. “Are you going to get up now?”

Mindful of the fact that she hadn't exactly let go yet, and fully awake now, I gave her a tight nod. “Yes.”
“Good.” Warm, earthy lips pressed against mine for a short moment before she pulled away, thankfully letting go of my hair as she did so. “Now up.”

Heaving out a sigh, I forced myself to sit up as she slowly extracted herself from the bed. I couldn’t resist watching her stretch and walk over to her dresser, entirely enjoying the way muscles rippled beneath her skin. “Where are you going this time?”

“Erinle.” She began to dig through drawers as she spoke, extracting dark clothes as she found them. “A Salarian colony that apparently once had several Blue Sun outposts that received protection money from the planetary government. They.. ’quit’ when the war began, but have maintained their monetary demands. Removing them would endear the locals to the Hegemony, at least enough to open trade negotiations.”

“Awesome.” I muttered, swinging my legs around before covering another yawn. “More people indebted to the Hegemony.”

“I am not indebted to them, they are indebted to me.” Nyn’s voice became a bit waspish. “In increasing amounts since we're shuttling the Commander and his teams to their targets.”

Indebted or not, she hadn’t been seen a credit yet. Not that I was about to say that out loud. Instead I focused on grabbing my leg brace, rolling my shorts up enough so that I could get the massive thing on. The scarring was both impressive yet minimal. Thin white marks up and down my left side from my knee to my ribs hardly looked traumatic at a glance. Sayran had tried to explain just what the hits had done to me internally, but she’d lapsed into medical speak that I couldn’t understand in the slightest.

As I worked the straps and buckles, I tried to steer things in a more positive direction. “At least other things are going better. And it isn’t as if you’d be doing anything with the Noln even if you weren’t.”

“True.” Her voice became a bit muffled as clothing rustled, “The tech mine plant is finally operational, and the initial orders have been rather positive. A few Spectres have even sent requests through their agents.”

Blinking, I turned back around. “Seriously? Which ones?”

She’d already pulled loose black pants and a matching shirt on, and was comparing earring selections as her shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. “Fethen and.. Bau I think his representative said. Vasir has made inquiries through her sister as well. Apparently my pricing is superior than the human corporation they’ve been using.”

“Huh. Good advertising material if nothing else.”

“Provided that they actually make the orders. And approve of the quality.”

“Provided that.” I agreed, reaching down to grab my own shirt. “How long are you going to be gone?”

“It is only a one day trip, but there are several outposts that apparently need to be removed.” Nyn shook her head irritably. “We will likely be stuck in orbit for several days while the Commander conducts his operations.”

I had to resist the urge to rub at my face. I’d heard that tone when it came to Balak’s schedules before. “So I'm going to have to deal with his crew for a week, at best.”

“No. Captain Vasir is aware that we will be gone, she is.. quite eager to deal with any issues that
might arise.” That didn't shock me. I-Sec was already holding more than a dozen of them for minor violations. All they had to do was pay the fines for the petty things that they had done. But thing was, none of them had any money.

And alas, Nyn simply didn't have the capital to spend to get them out.

Her dark eyes glared at me in her mirror as she paused pulling a simple necklace on. “I mean it Cieran. If I find out that you tried to get involved..”

“I won't.” My lips twisted as I stood, fighting back a groan. The glare faded into a familiar worry. “Are you all right?”

“Nyn, you ask me that every day.” I stretched slowly, rotating my torso and trying not to wince as aches and pains made themselves clear. “I'm as good as I could possibly be right now.”

Teal lips curled a little bit. “Liar. I'm wearing clothes.” My cheeks burned slightly as I grabbed my cane. “All right. I'm normally good then. Things would of course improve for me if you weren't though.”

“Perhaps when I get back.”

“Perhaps?”

It was her turn to blush slightly, walking back towards me as she corrected her phrasing. “When I get back.”

As much as I enjoyed her words, I didn't miss how tense she was when her arm slid around my waist in the familiar way. She tried to steer me quickly towards the door, but I kept my pace deliberately slow so that we had some more time to talk before we had to separate.

“You're stressing again.” I kept the reproof in my voice as light as I could. “You sure you don't want to take our vacation sooner rather than later?”

Her right eyes glanced over at me as we exited the bedroom, “We will have time to relax after our guests leave. Until then-”

“Until then you need to delegate more. Ghai can handle at least some of it.”

“She can't manage the business interests.” She countered, her voice lowering as she brusquely opened the chamber's outer doors. “Or negotiate with Balak.”

“She could liaise with Captain Vasir.” I tried again, letting her guide me into the hall. “At least get that out of the way for you.”

“Cieran.” Her arm tightened a bit around my waist in warning. “I am fine. We aren't going into battle, I can handle things for a while longer.”

Swallowing my opinions, I shut up at that point. Disagreeing further wouldn't change her mind, and would only lead to more fighting later. Whatever progress I'd made before Korlus had apparently been worn away by the simple presence of one Ka'hairal Balak. The Hegemony born asshole might not have been directly going against everything Nyn said and did, but he was proving to be very adept at subtly pressing her buttons.

And even though Nynsi knew what he was doing, actually being able to control her reactions was
proving to be easier said than done.

Small comments about the successes of her business interests in the city had led to her micromanaging the midcaste exiles who weren't used to her direct oversight. Irritated remarks about how Captain Vasir treated his people had led to Nyn supporting I-Sec all the more, but also personally involving herself in matters that Ghai or I could handle. And of course his requests to use the *Yare Noln* to shuttle his teams to their missions, plus glowing praise of its traditional Captain, had led to her insisting that she and almost all of our remaining security people go with to supervise each trip.

Not that it was entirely bad. He'd quickly stopped mentioning me to her when it became clear that the only thing it did was piss her off. And her own retaliatory commentary often left Balak fuming in his room for a few days.

Those days were becoming treasured by the mansion's lowborn staff, as they didn't have to deal with him. Nyn might consider herself superior to them, but they were still very much *hers*. She treated them as important cogs within the machine that was her affairs, and made sure that their lives were comfortable enough not to impact their ability. In comparison, Balak and his people just treated them like shit.

The Asari on staff had been spared some of the vitriol in the first few weeks, but as I-Sec increasingly cracked down on the crew even the SIU teams had started to heap verbal abuse on them. They were careful not to take it too far, but they were leaving pretty much everyone on edge.

She paused as we neared the dining hall. “Regrettably, I will be having my morning meal with the briefing.”

Which meant we were parting ways here. Turning, I leaned my cane against my leg before carefully wrapping my arms around her waist. “Be safe Nyn.”

My Tarath'shan leaned in, giving me a soft kiss. Her lower eyes glanced down at my leg while her upper set stayed on mine. “*You* be safe Cieran. I will be safe enough on the ship.”

“And I will be safe enough in the mansion.” My right arm slid up her back, pulling her closer against me so that I could press our lips together again. Her throat vibrated with a quietly pleased note, and she seemed to relax for the few moments that I held her. Then time moved on, she pulled away, and for a brief moment I could see just how much all this crap was wearing on her. But as quickly as it came, it vanished, buried beneath Highborn pride and confidence.

“Pillars be with you, my Harath'krem.”

“And with you, Tarath'shan.”

Ritual farewell complete, she turned away and left me there. I leaned heavily onto my cane, watching until she vanished within the conference room. I kept staring vacantly down the hallway for a few minutes, trying to work out how the hell I was going to get Nyn to take some time off. She wasn't going to do it voluntarily, that was for sure. But it was also clear that if she *didn't* get some kind of relief soon that she'd break down again, and this time more than some furniture would get trashed. If she and I weren't, more or less, back on the level I didn't doubt that she already would have.

Dammit.

Of course, my worries took a backseat to a near heart attack when someone spoke up from a foot
or so behind me. “You worry about her.”

“Fuck!” I actually stumbled as I tried to spin, and only managed to stay upright because Rane grabbed my shoulder with the hand that wasn't holding a plate full of food. “Rane.. did you really have to sneak up on me like that?”

If she'd had eyebrows they would have gone up. The corners of her mouth did curl a bit in amusement. “I was hardly sneaking. I've been here for three minutes now, wondering when you were going to notice that your food was waiting.”

My free hand rose to rub at my face as she let me go. “I could have gotten it myself.”

“Probably.” Her head tilted a bit to the left, “But it seemed polite.”

I gave her an exasperated look that bounced off of her innocent expression. We'd had a conversation during one of our stakeout missions a few weeks ago, well, sort of a conversation, where I thought she'd accepted that she and I weren't happening. That I was, for lack of a better phrase, a one woman kind of guy.

But apparently I was wrong, because she'd actually started doing more things to get my attention. Not overt things, most of them were actually very subtle and almost subservient. If I hadn't spent the last year more or less downloading Batarian culture into my head I wouldn't have even realized what some of the stuff she did meant.

Then again, getting me breakfast was rather obvious. And that made me nervous. “Rane..?”

Her lower eyes blinked slowly before glancing down. “Nothing is wrong Cieran, just.. trying to be friendly. Although you might not want to eat in the dining hall, one of the SIU teams is still in there.”

Ah.

“So you got me food as an excuse to leave as quickly as you could.”

Copper toned cheeks muddied a bit, her lower eyes shifting to her left. A quick glance of my own revealed another plate and two glasses resting a windowsill. “Maybe.”

The maybe turned into a definitely when Illyan threw open the doors, muttering under her breath as she practically stomped out of the hall. How angry she was became apparent when we both only received tight nods as she stormed past.

“Illyan..”

One of her feet hit the ground harder than necessary, and she didn't slow down in the slightest. “Fine boss. Just need to work on something.”

I had to count to ten in three different languages, and force my fingers to relax from where they'd tightened on my cane before I could resist the urge to go after her and figure out what the fuck had happened. “That bad?”

Rane's voice lowered appreciably. “They know they're leaving, and since Shaaryak and Trena are stuck in the briefing..”

“They had a window of opportunity.” Hefting my cane up a bit, I thumped it hard onto the floor as I bit back a growl. “Dammit. If I had my armor..”
“You don't Cieran. Nor do we have four full combat teams.” A hand carefully touched my shoulder again. “Right now you have to eat before Trisren gets here.”

Letting her steer me aside, we ended up heading to the small training room in the west wing. We settled into chairs at the room's only table, which was usually only there to throw bags and equipment on. Still, it was more than large enough for us to eat at, and even better the seats were angled to that neither of us had our backs to the door.

Fucking Illium.

“Now you're worried and angry.” Rane sighed as I picked at my food. “I'm sorry. I was hoping to head you off before you could get there, but you were with Shaaryak so..”

“If Illyan had stormed out just a bit earlier, Nyn could have done something about it. They must have said something about Erana. Again. Fuck..” My fingers started to curl again before I dropped the bit of bread I'd been eating. “Fucking.. Athame fucking take them into the deeps!”

“Cieran..”

“I know I can't fucking do anything about it Rane!” Her dark eyes flashed and I grimaced, lowering my voice and my eyes. “Sorry..”

She let out a slow breath. “You worry about how much stress Shaaryak is under, but Trena and I are starting to worry about you.”

I wanted to deny it, but I'd more or less just shown that I wasn't exactly operating at my best. Awkward flirtations and crush or not, Rane was still a friend of mine, and a girl besides that. And I didn't like snapping at either of those.

“It's not like I can take a vacation Rane. I'm pretty much on an enforced one right now.” A hand waved vaguely at the leg that I'd left stretched out by way of explanation.

There was a slight nod as she sipped from her cup. “That's your problem. Shaaryak might be overworked but.. I think you've got the opposite issue.”

My eyes blinked as I absorbed that. “So.. what? I start showing up to the garage again and bossing people around?”

“Not exactly, even if that would probably lift Shaaryak's spirits.” Her lips twitched a bit behind her glass. “Something more practical. A new powered exoskeleton maybe?”

I felt my mouth drop open a bit.

“Trena may or may not have brought in everything that should be needed for you to get started.” It was clear that she was having a hard time not giggling at my response. “It's going to be even more scratch built that your last model, but we thought you might enjoy that aspect of it.”

“She.. you.. “ Eventually I manged to get my brain functional again. “How the hell did you pay for it?”

A shoulder twitched bemusedly. “Illyan helped us raid the city's scrapyards, and she arranged for a few trades with other sites around Nos Astra. Some of it might not be usable, but it should have most of what's needed.”

“You..”
“Even a Harath’krem should thank a lowborn when they put in as much effort as we did.” Some of her mirth faded. “Though..you might want to wait a bit for Illyan, even if she'll probably appreciate helping you to keep her mind off of things.”

“I..” I shook my self a bit. “Rane.. you didn't have to do this.”

She flushed a little bit again, her head dipping a hair to the left as her lower eyes avoided mine. “I didn't do it alone Cieran. I just told you that Trena and Illyan helped.”

Which I didn't doubt. Illyan was more than capable as a mechanic, and Trena had been the one who'd helped me first fix and then modify the construction model suit whose wreckage they'd left behind on Korlus. But I had a pretty good idea who's idea it had been.

Any advice Trena could have given to help my stress levels would have started with either alcohol or sex, and ended with the other. And while Illyan and I were friends, I knew that she spent most of her free time acting as a surrogate mother to her younger sister.

“Rane..”

The lowborn shifted her upper eyes down to her food as well. “Just because you aren't going to kiss me doesn't mean I don't want to help you.”

Not going to lie, her words combined with her tones to make me wince. “If you know then why..”

“The flirting?”

I nodded.

Her mouth opened, then closed, and she let out a strained exhale through her nose. Recognizing the signs, I winced again as she tried to work her way past the ingrained societal rules that said that there were things that she shouldn't speak of with someone of my station. It had probably taken her weeks to work up enough will to even get out as much as she had.

After a few moments her spine straightened a bit, and her voice again took on the forced politeness that I hated hearing. “Hypothetically speaking, a lowborn female such as myself, especially as an exile, wouldn't have many rights against demands from a male of the military caste. Regardless of his level. But if those warriors were under the impression that the female had caught the eye of a Harath'krem, alien or no, they might direct their attentions elsewhere.”

One of my hands clenched slightly. What the fuck was with these people? And if this is what they were like, what the hell was life actually like inside of the Hegemony? I mean sure, I'd understand that things like that could technically happen, but Xerol had always made it clear that he considered those who abused the system to be barbaric.

I'd thought that his attitudes were close to the norm for men of his station on Khar'shan. Lately.. I had to wonder. “Crew or SIU?”

“It's been handled Cieran.” And I didn't doubt what she meant by that, which probably meant it had been a regular crew-member. Ghai and her people didn't have any issues handling them, but they weren't exactly eager to take on their Hegemony counterparts unless lives were literally on the line. That put the body count up near a dozen known so far, nearly a full fifth of the starting total. So far Balak hadn't raised a fuss about it, which struck me as odd.

Odd, and very, very worrying.

My head dipped in a nod, and I blew out a breath of my own. “That's a nice explanation but
somehow I don't think that's all of it.”

Her upper eyes glanced up at me, her shoulders slumping a bit as she managed to shake off the societal rules for a few more moments. “It couldn't also be because I think that you're attractive, especially with your fur long like that. I also enjoy seeing your skin turn red.”

Some of the tension eased as I groaned, resisting the urge to bury my face in my hands. “Rane..”

There was an almost apologetic smile. “I know it.. that it isn't happening Cieran. Can I have this, at least?”

“Have what? My friendship you already have Rane. We've saved each other's lives enough times. And been stuck on RI missions together, which is almost the same thing.” I pointed out. “And if you're talking about the flirting, Illyan's been doing it non-stop since scales stopped bringing her along to their bed.”

“I know she does, but she's an Asari.” A hand rose palm up. “Sand in the desert. I'm..”

“You.” I finished before she could inject any demeaning statements in there. “And I don't see why anything has to change between us right now.”

Her upper eyes glanced up at me, holding my gaze for a long moment before she gave a slight nod of thanks. Thankfully the rest of our breakfast passed quickly as we moved onto less.. personal topics. She was apparently the only squad leader remaining behind, largely because she didn't have a squad to actually lead anymore. The few survivors from Marn's team had been folded into Chen's, and what Asari that Nyn had been able to hire had been put under Ghai's command.

There had been some hope of being able to recruit more Batarians from the district, or from some of the refugees fleeing from the chaos in the deeper Terminus, but no one had been able to spare the time to make the effort yet. That Rane wasn't exactly over losing her team in a matter of hours also had us dragging our feet a bit.

We were finishing our meals when Trisren made her own appearance. Like me she was in shorts and a loose shirt, though hers were gray instead of black. The shirt was cut low enough to expose bits of her stomach as she moved.. what little of her abs you could see beneath the burn scars anyway.

“Kean.” She tossed her bag into a corner as she glanced at us. “Rane'li. Late meal?”

I gave her an Asari shrug. “SIU team was in the dining hall.”

That earned us an understanding grunt. “Thought they were gone already.”

“Most of them are. This was the last group.” Rane supplied, taking a moment to finish her drink. “They'll be leaving with their Commander I believe.”

“Thank Athame for small favors I suppose.” Tris's dark eyes glanced at my plate. “We'll have to stretch a bit more before we really get you started.”

“I figured.”

“And what about you girl? You going to get some work in as well?”

Rane shook her head slightly. “I should see if I can catch Shaaryak before she leaves, make sure there aren't any last minute instructions for us.”
The former bartender narrowed her eyes a bit. “She can leave you a message can't she? Or is she heading off planet without an omni-tool?”

Well used to Tris's surprisingly commanding style, I settled back in my chair to enjoy what was unfolding.

“I... I mean, of course she can, but-”

“But what?” Rane straightened in what had to be reflex at the snap. “You're in RI now girl, and with Aethyta on her own assignment that means I'm responsible for keeping your tanned ass afloat. You have workout clothes?”

“Yes. I can be back within a few minutes.”

The thin Asari jerked her chin in permission, and Rane was out the door as quickly as I'd ever seen her move. And then it was my turn.

“ Aren't you supposed to be stretching that leg?”

I gave her an arch look as I stood up and limped towards the training mats. “ I liked you better when you were a bartender. You were friendlier then.”

Blue arms crossed her chest, revealing more scarring as the motion tugged her shirt up a bit more. “ We are friends Cieran, but sometimes friends have to push if they want you to keep breathing through another fight.”

After Korlus, I couldn't really deny that. Well, not even Korlus. Sederis's mansion. Our mansion. The treatment plant. The warehouse...

Sighing, I settled down and did as she instructed.

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Next up is Chapter 4: The Retreat

Chapter End Notes

So.. this chapter was surprisingly hard to write. It turns out that it was hard enough to get in Cieran's head when it was basically just him and Nyn. Adding Rane back into the mix really made it difficult, especially as I kept hearing Trena's voice in my head screaming at him to shut up and do things to her.

So yeah. Bit more exposition on how life is proceeding in the new normal, for as long as it can last.. which doesn't honestly feel like all that long. This was the last of the major time skips (we're now three months out from Korlus), and the pace should tighten up a bit as the ball resumes its inexorable roll again.

Also, because I haven't said this since Arrival.. Cieran Kean is not Tony Stark. He
won't have his armor built in a matter of days/a few weeks. What Rane-Trena-Illyan dumped in his lap is a several months level project, and that's assuming he has help.

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 4: The Retreat

I staggered backwards, trying to keep all of my weight on my right leg as I dodged a quick jab. My reflexes were running faster than my brain, which was all that saved me from the follow up strike that whipped through the space where my head had just been.

Whipping my cane up I slapped it hard against her forearm before she could recover, drawing a deep hiss of pain as she yanked it back. Limping closer I got in a few more strikes, the metal hammering at her arms as she brought them up to protect her face and neck. But despite my best efforts there just wasn't anyway I could keep up with her. Her long legs had no issues opening the distance against my own slow movements, leaving us glaring at each other across the sparring mat.

Once she finished shaking off the stings she bounced once or twice on her toes before darting back at me.

Tossing my cane from my left to my right, I kept my good leg forward. Her first and second jabs were both blocked by the walking tool, but I overextended trying to block the third. Realizing too late what she'd just setup, I tried to hunch in and get at least part of my arm in place to protect my side.. but I wasn't nearly fast enough.

The kick knocked me a good inch off the ground, an explosive sound escaping my throat as all of the air in my lungs found itself exiting violently. If that wasn't enough, she followed it up with a follow up snap-shot to my sternum that flung me backwards.

When the world eventually stopped spinning quite so much, I had a good view of Illyan's face grinning down at me as I lay on the floor. She'd already removed her mouth-guard, which probably meant I'd been here for a while.

"Not bad today boss."

I could only let out a long groan of pain in response.

Somewhere nearby, Trisren scoffed. "She didn't hit you that hard Cieran."

My eyes closed as I finally managed to start breathing normally again, trying not to wince at all of the aches and bruises that quickly began to make themselves known.

The sparring had originally been my idea. If I was going to be stuck with a brace and a cane for a while, possibly forever, I'd be better off getting used to being able to move and fight with them. Of course, my shit stamina and persistent aches made it pretty much impossible for me to go for more than a few minutes, but it was still better than the usual rehab routines that Tris had me doing.
At least, when it was against her or Rane.

Flailing a bit with my left hand, I eventually managed to yank my mouth-guard out enough so that I could speak. Well, less peaking and more mumbling, but they seemed to understand either way. “Why did you invite Illyan again?”

“Because Illyan here is an Athame blessed shark who could punch out a Krogan.” Amusement laced her voice as she appeared, lightly punching one of the mechanic’s massive biceps in explanation. “If you can last a few minutes against her you could take out damn near anyone.”

Which was probably true. What was also true was that Illyan had a much harder time pulling her punches than my usual partners did. As a consequence she tried to focus more on my right side so that she didn’t accidentally setback my recovery. Don’t get me wrong, I was grateful for that. But at the end of the day it still left my entire body feeling like a giant bruise instead of just one side of it.

“How long was that run?”

Illyan glanced over at Tris, who glanced down at her omnitool. “You managed to stay on your feet for two and a half minutes during the last bout, a bit above your average. Incremental improvements.”

Not bad. Definitely not great, but it certainly could have been worse. I lasted about as long against her, but longer against Rane. Mostly because Rane had an extremely hard time getting past her societal blocks to actually fight me, even in practice. Then again, this was only the fifth day of it, so I had some hopes that it would help her keep getting past some of that.

“Please tell me we’re at least done for the day.”

The scarred alien cocked her head slightly, a smile playing at her lips. “I suppose I can let you off without another session.”

Letting out a groan, I relaxed even more, basically turning myself into a rag doll just lying on the ground. “Great.”

Trisren let out a quiet snort. “Just be on time tomorrow, we're starting early remember?”

“Yeah. Yet another waste of time stakeout mission.” One my hands flopped around in what might have been a wave. Apparently that damned smuggler in Nos Irrail was still in business, and it was increasingly making Aethyta irritated that we couldn't track her down. A few teams had gotten glimpses of her, but that had been it. “Rane and I again?”

“Yes. It's-”

“Better to keep everyone compartmentalized.” I finished for her. I still didn't know any other official RI agents besides our little group, and pretty much everyone was determined to keep things that way. Which I thought was an entirely sensible and appropriate attitude for a spy agency to have. “What about Trena and Ghai? They should be getting back tonight.”

Her expression looked like she'd just bitten into something foul. “Another meeting with Sederis apparently.”

I grunted. The two of them had been meeting with the Eclipse's leader every three or four weeks, but wouldn't say why. Aethyta had apparently gotten some kind of answer, because she'd told us not to worry about it, but that didn't stop me from worrying. It probably had something to do with
her past... at least, I hoped that it did. The alternative was that it was some kind of payback for the Eclipse’s doctors saving my life, and I really didn't like the idea that scales was having to pay for things that I should have been.

But she kept saying that it was her issue to handle... in the end, all I could really do was trust her.

“Well, at least they'll be around for the next one.” It went without saying that I didn't think that we'd catch the bitch tomorrow. “For now, time to shower and then I've got things to do in the garage.”

Tris rolled her eyes as Illyan chuckled. “Going to commandeer my entire team again boss?”

“Just your sister. And probably Rane today.” The words were interrupted by a groan as I forced myself to sit up. “I should probably let you get some work done this week.”

Steel arms crossed one another. “Oh come on boss, it's not like we have that much to do. We spent most of yesterday becalmed, so unless a few midcaste decided to smash their aircars into crap we won't have much today either.”

The other Asari turned away, walking over to where her bag was resting on the table. “You two enjoy your nonsensical discussions about machinery. I have more important things to do.”

Illyan rolled her eyes. “Like seeing that Turian here on leave?”

“Turians and Krogan, neither can resist a few scars.” A hand waved as she slid out the door. “Tomorrow Cieran. Don't be late.”

A few moments after she had vanished, my remaining companion glanced down to give me a grin even as she offered me a hand the size of a small plate. “So. Which shower we using boss?”

I gave her a glare but took it. “I am showering in Nyn's room. You can use your own.”

Even with one arm she didn't have any issues hauling me straight up to my feet, and then helping me to stay steady as the world spun a bit at the rapid motion. “Oh come on boss. You've been helping me out, taking care of Erana. Can't say you haven't earned a bit of skin.”

My head bowed as I fought back a groan... and a slight flush. “Illyan...”

She chuckled before handing me my cane. Once I was letting it take at least some of my weight, she flicked the door open for me and helped me limp out into the hall.

“Really wish I knew someone to set you up with.” I admitted as we turned, heading back towards our rooms. “I honestly can't think of someone that you haven't flirted with in the last few weeks.”

“It's all in good fun boss.” Her neck cracked slightly as she rolled her head around to stretch it out. “And I am grateful for the new aircar for me and Erana, even if it was a bit much.”

“What else am I going to do with my money?” My left shoulder rose and fell as my head dipped. “Between my salary from Nyn for my position and the pile of credits we grabbed from both the Sons and the Suns...”

She flicked my temple gently. “I get it boss, don't need to remind me that you have a small fortune.”

I shrugged again, a little bit abashed. “Sorry.”
“Don’t worry about it.” There was a beat. “So. Sure you’ll be all right showering with—”

“Oh for Athame’s sake. Do you need some alone time with your hands or something?” Her mouth actually dropped open a little bit, and it was her turn for her skin to flush closer towards purple. I wasn’t usually that blunt, but she was definitely starting to bring out the bits of me that I usually reserved to defuse scales when she wouldn’t shut up about her and Ghai’s sex life. “I’m sure Trena has a few things that you could borrow if you need help. Should I send her a message asking for you? Maybe copy Ghai and Rane on it as well, just in case they have any ideas.”

I actually brought my right hand up, flicking my omni-tool to life with a gesture. A blue hand grabbed my wrist with almost indecent haste before I could fire up my mailbox. “No! It’s.. I’m all right boss, thanks.”

“Sure? I mean, it isn’t like they’d tease you without mercy for weeks on end.”

There was a definite look of horror on her face at that. “I’ll stop flirting with you boss, just.. don’t, please. I really don’t want to have to explain that to my sister.”

Mission accomplished. If I’d have known it would be that easy I would have tried this angle earlier. “Deal.”

Her fingers slowly let go of my wrist, and it wasn't until I shut the device down that she seemed to relax with a groan. “You fight dirty boss.”

“You know it.” My chin jerked at the entrance to Nyn's room as we approached it. “See you in the garage?”

“See you there.”

Showering was an exercise in irritation these days. I won’t deny that it was easier when Nyn was around to help, but that wasn’t really an option. And since I wasn't about to to invite Illyan or Rane along with me, that left me alone to deal with it. First the brace had to come off, which easily took five minutes. After that I had to make ample use of my cane and the bars inside of the bath to make sure that I didn't fall on my ass and break anything, a requirement that made the process of getting clean take easily three times as long.

For a bit of added annoyance, I had to clean off my brace afterwords in the sink, otherwise the damned thing would reek of sweat all day.

It was nearly forty minutes later that I was finally dressed in casual clothes, my wet hair loosely tied back. The walk to the garage was uneventful, with only one or two staff members around to tilt their heads deferentially as I limped past them.

When I got to the garage, things were more or less as Illyan had said they would be. She and her team were mostly just sitting around and talking with one another. While they were busy doing not much at all, Erana and Rane were sitting at the consoles near my work area and apparently both quite busy with whatever they were working on.

“Rane. Erana.” My cane struck the concrete floor as I moved in their direction. “What's going on?”

The young Asari practically bounced to her feet. “Cieran! I mean sir!”

I resisted the urge to sigh. “Erana, Nyn isn't here.”

“Oh, um.. right. Sorry. Um, I was going through the list of materials and parts that my sister
brought in and trying to itemize everything for you.” Her eyes nearly crossed as she frowned in thought. “They brought in what was left of Yi’ren's armor from the storage unit earlier, but I haven’t gotten to that yet.”

Glancing around here, I quickly located what was left of the bitch's exoskeleton. We'd cannibalized it pretty heavily during the last major workup, so there really wasn't much to see. All of the armor and most of the interior equipment had been yanked, and the left arm and lower leg had both been removed. All that was left was the internal framework and an engine that we hadn't needed to use after Patriarch Balak had given us one in apology for his son's involvement in all the crap that had happened.

Not that I was going to fix her old armor up. Call me superstitious, but I'd burned the woman to death inside the thing. I'd happily take it apart and use what I could, but there was no fucking way that I'd do more than that.

“Don't worry about that, just focus on everything else.” I frowned at the way she slightly bounced as she nodded. “How much did you have this morning?”

“Only two glasses of tea!”

I gave her a flat look, but when she didn't offer anything more besides a guilty glance at the floor, I flicked my eyes over to Rane. She held up a hand with three fingers without a word, her eyes still on her screens.

Three bottles of Demonjuice. And two glasses of tea. It was a wonder that her stomach hadn't exploded from the sugar and that her brain was still functional with how much caffeine was probably in her system. “Please tell me you ate breakfast at least.”

“I did remember today.”

“You know you won't be able to binge like this when Nyn gets back, right?”

She winced slightly, still looking at the floor. “I know sir.”

I sighed. “I'll have some painkillers for you tomorrow so the crash isn't as bad. For today just go over everything again to make sure that you didn't miss anything. When you're done go ahead and take lunch and then work on anything Nyn left for you.”

The young maiden gave me a pathetically grateful smile before going back to her seat, once again burying herself in spreadsheets.

Sighing again, I headed over to where Rane was sitting. Her upper eyes flicked up at my approach, her lips curling a bit at the edges. “How noble of you.”

“Oh shut it.” Giving her a mild glower, I stopped beside her and leaned on my cane. “Any news?”

She shook her head. “Nothing from the hotel, which I'm taking as a good sign. We did receive a signal from the Noln. The mission went well and they are approaching high orbit, we can expect the first shuttles within a few hours.”

I grunted before muttering. “I'd rather the mission have gone terrible.”

Her head dipped a bit to the left. “You're speaking from the Pillars, Cieran. Here to work on your designs again?”

“Not like I have anything else to be doing.” Shifting a bit, I looked past her console to see the piles
and piles of equipment now littering my corner of the garage. Some of it was old, most of it was new, and none of it was remotely organized. I had spent the last few days going through everything and marking whether or not I'd be using it, but I hadn't actually bothered to separate anything yet. That would have to be fixed before I could really start. “Illyan!”

“Boss? Going to give us something to do?”

“Yeah. Organize the crap you dumped all over the place.” There was a loud groan from her, joined by a chorus from the mixed Asari and Batarians on her team. The latter were probably the only lowborn on staff that didn't treat me like a highborn, which was probably due to me spending so much time in the garage getting my hands covered in grease alongside them. “Blame her, she volunteered you lot.”

That quickly earned her some ribbing, to which she replied in kind. Still, in short order they'd descended on the small junkyard and quickly began to separate everything into smaller groups. Leaving Illyan to supervise that, I slid past them to go over what few prototypes bits that Trena and I hadn't quite gotten working for my old armor. Rane, apparently having finished whatever report she'd been writing, wandered over maybe an hour later as I was inspecting something I'd have very much liked to have with me on Korlus.

If the damned thing had ever worked properly that is.

“Going to try and use some of this?”

One of my shoulders twitched as I went over a thick plate of metal that we'd been trying to turn into a heavy shield. “I'd like to. We did put effort into a lot of this, even if..”

“Most of it failed?”

My lips twitched. “Scales fried that aircar, not me.”

“I'm sure.” She nodded seriously, only the slightest of grins ruining the expression. “What about the first prototype of your heavy shield that you two tried to make?”

“How was I supposed to know it would explode like that?” I gave the thing an irritated kick. Much like the previous prototype both Trena and I had thought we'd had a good idea. It was basically a giant slab of metal with a double layered barrier system that we'd hoped would allow for a barrier layer over omni-tech plates over the composite plating. Something that I could have actually used to, you know, block missiles and carnage rounds with some kind of reliability.

Of course.. in order to fuel that the shield had needed its own power supply. And the damned thing had exploded when we'd run our first test. This one hadn't failed quite so spectacularly, but we'd never quite been able to work out the kinks. We'd settled on needing two separate power sources, one for each defensive system, but our tinkering had been put on hold when the whole Korlus crap had started.

“So..” Rane's voice trailed as she glanced around at everything. “What are you thinking for your new one? Same as the old?”

“You sound disapproving.”

“It was efficient if.. well.. it wasn't all that efficient.” She admitted. “The strength was impressive but unless you were fighting Krogan or other people in power armor it wasn't all that necessary.”

“Being able to fit through smaller spaces would be nice as well.”
“That too.” Leaning down, she traced her fingers along some of the wiring on the shield's back. “Are you going to try and use this?”

“It might be too heavy as it is.” One of my own hands rose to stroke my goatee as I thought. “I was trying to think of ways to lighten it a bit. Might drop the tech plating and cut a bit of plating out. Removes the need for the second power core at least.”

“What about weaponry?”

My lips twisted as I glanced around at some of my other projects. “Well, since the Eclipse didn't bother to salvage the gun for me.. not really sure. Probably stick with conventional weapons at first, definitely not building anything in until we're further along the process.”

“I thought you liked the wrist mounted weapons that the Asari models use. We have plenty of spare pistols that you could fit in there.” Her cheeks tinged a bit. “I could work on an integration program if you need me to.”

“Integration program?” I shook my head. “Probably going to need a full VI to help run it, and yes, I'll probably need your help with it. Putting a shield on the left arm like that and I'm going to have to move the tech launcher to a shoulder or maybe a hip. And definitely want redundant barrier layers this time. Come on, have a few ideas to run past you before scales and I start fighting about it.”

The pair of us weaved our way through the mechanics still hauling things left and right under Illyan's direction. They had managed to at least get all of the artificial musculature separated from everything else, and had a good start on pieces that could probably be used for the suit's skeleton.

“Illyan, you send your guys on lunch yet?”

Said Asari turned to glance at me, her arms full of metal plating whose weight I couldn't even begin to guess. “Oh. Food. Right.”

I had to fight back a groan. “Athame's ass what is it with you and your sister and not remembering to freaking eat?”

The burly alien blinked a few times, looking like she was honestly thinking about it. “You know.. I really don't know boss. Family blind spot?”

“Apparently. Grab your sister and get to the dining hall before everyone gets back.”

She heaved the plating aside, letting it crash to the ground with a clatter that made me wince. “Sound like a plan. Erana! Stop staring at your screens, time for food!”

The maiden blinked rapidly as she glanced up, “Huh?”

Her sister didn't bother repeating herself, instead simply crossing the distance in a few long strides before yanking the smaller Asari clear out of her chair and throwing her over a shoulder. That certainly got Erana's attention, her entire face turning purple in embarrassment as the laughter started. “Illyan! Put me down!”

“Food first!” Completely ignoring her sisters struggles, and the cackles of her subordinates, she headed out into the halls.

“You want us to get you anything, Harath'krem? Ma'am?” One of the Batarians paused in the entryway, his head tilted left as he glanced back us.
“If you don't mind Ferai,” Rane spoke before I could, “I think we could both do with a plate. Have some of the kitchen staff run it down if they have the time.”

He gave us both a nod before following in the others wake.

I gave her a glance as I limped towards the now open consoles. “You know we could have just gone with them.”

She glanced at me with her right eyes. “You can stop hiding how tired you are Cieran. Illyan told me that she might have gone a bit overboard this morning.”

My lips thinned but I couldn't really deny that I was leaning on my cane far more heavily than I normally would be. And of course she would be paying attention enough to notice. “Because the SIU gets back today?”

“Oh.” There was a soft sigh as she settled back into her chair. The groan of relief that I let out was considerably louder, my brace clicking as I straightened my leg out. “Do you need your painkillers?”

“No.”

That earned me another look. “What about your head? I don't remember you complaining about your migraines lately.”

I twitched a shoulder. “I've gotten used to them.”

And it was kind of sad that I had. True to Doctor Sayran's predictions, the side-effects of the Floating Mind had gotten more frequent. It had once been rare for me to have a migraine more than once every few weeks. Now it was getting to be unusual where a week passed that I didn’t have one. She'd done her best to reassure me they wouldn't get much worse, and had made sure that I had plenty of pills in case I needed them.

“Cieran..” A touch of irritation there.

A long breath blew out of my nose. “You and Nyn both. They aren't going to kill me.”

“They might not kill you but they still leave you collapsed on a couch!” She snapped back. The anger lasted all of a moment before she seemed to shrink on herself, realizing how she'd just said that. “Hara-”

“Rane.” I cut in before she could stammer out the apology. “Stop undoing your progress.”

She gave me a tight look but subsided, taking a few deep breaths. “I don't think many Batarians would think of this as progress.”

“I don't care what most Batarians would think.” My hands rose to start playing with the holographic panels, logging me into the mansion's network. “I care about what you want. And you said you want to be able to talk with me normally, so..”

“I did.”

I gave her a glance. “Regretting it?”

Her head bowed slightly. “No. It's just.. Pillars, it's harder than I thought it would be. I thought it would make me feel.. I guess like I imagined a highborn might. Instead I feel.. I don't know.”
“Rane..”

“I’m all right Cieran. Just.. need to keep trying I guess.” She shifted her eyes back to her screens. “Didn’t you have designs that you wanted me to look at?”

I did. Linking our systems together I brought up a few concepts I’d come up with. Most of them were fairly close to my old construction model, just a bit smaller in scope. They kept the harsh angles and hard lines, I didn't want to bother with trying anything like the smooth curves of Asari models.

The one feature they all still maintained from my old model was the almost hunchbacked appearance. Having the shoulder armor coming up to envelope the head area might not have done much for looks, but it let me layer on far more armor around my skull than a helmet could.

Rane was far more of a coder than a mechanical engineer, and couldn’t offer much input on the overall designs. But she could bring up good points about the OS and various control systems that they would need, and did so with gusto. She grew almost giddy about creating a VI for it when I started elaborating about the numerous backup barrier layers that I wanted to install.

“If we can link it into your sensor network,” she’d nearly spilled the drink that the staff had brought her as she excitedly thought it over. “And if you're power core could manage it we could install a rotating barrier system. Each time a barrier over a specific area collapses the VI would bring up a backup to cover the hole and swap them out as they recharged.”

I nodded, pushing my own empty plate out of the way so that I could better gesture at how I was going to link the power core to the eezo module. “Exactly! The power draw would be intense, probably too much for the eezo we can afford. But if we keep the barriers weaker than you'd expect.”

“Even a weaker core could maintain them.” She finished, nodding as she poked at the parts on her own screen. “And they'd still be enough to hold off carnage rounds or grenades.”

That was more or less the next few hours. Illyan, Erana, and the rest came back after their lunch. The maiden apparently wasn't talking to her sister, something that surprised me not in the slightest. Rather than deal with any sibling confrontations I sent her off to the conference room to make sure that Nyn had reports on how things had gone over the last week.

While they got back to work, Rane and I got more in depth on how we were going to set up the systems based on the resources that I expected it would have. It was a bit tricky without a completed exoskeleton to actually work on but it was at least laying the ground work. After all, even the construction model had at least had a primitive OS that I’d been able to build off of. This one wouldn’t even have that much.

The first aircars bringing people in from the district's shuttle-port started to arrive just before dinner. And as I’d expected, my lover was one of the first to clamber out.

“Nyn!” I flicked the console back to locked with one hand, while I groped for my cane with my other. Using it as leverage, I shoved my body up to its feet so that I could limp in her direction.

“Cieran.” She looked exhausted but still happy to see me, covering the distance far more rapidly than I could before wrapping her strong arms around my chest. “Pillars it's good to see you again.”

My own reciprocated the hug, even as I blinked a bit in bemusement. “Not that it isn’t good to see you as well love, but it's only been a week.”

Her head nudged mine so that she could press her face against my neck and groan. “A very long
week ended with more irritations.”

Well. That sounded promising. Flicking my eyes to the aircar, I glared at the Hegemony Commander as he slowly extracted himself. His own expression was.. strangely controlled. Honestly I expected loathing, maybe a bit of venom. Studiously neutral was definitely not even on the list.

“Balak?” I pitched my voice low.

“Surprisingly tolerable actually.” Nyn pulled back with every sign of reluctance, pressing our lips together only briefly before stepping back. “No. The news was from this planet. We have an early morning tomorrow."

“We do? I have rehab with Tris, and a mission at night..”

“You should be fine for the latter, but you'll be missing rehab.” Her voice was contrite. “The Executive Board has called another meeting on the trade agreement. I want you with me.”

Great.

She shifted so that she could wrap an arm around my waist, turning me towards the exit, only to pause when she saw what I had the entire garage staff quite occupied. “.. Cieran?”

“Oh. Just a.. side project. Something to stay busy.” I twitched a shoulder. “They didn't have much to do these last few days so I sort of commandeered them.”

A quiet noise escaped her throat. “The equipment?”

“Eventually it should be a new exoskeleton. You can thank Trena, Illyan, and Rane for the parts. And the idea really.” I admitted.

Her left eyes glanced my way, her tone wry. “I'm not concerned where they got the parts. You've been directing.. commanding them these last few days?”

I blinked. “Yes?”

The arm around my waist tightened slightly, and she let out a very quiet sound of pleasure that probably reached only my ears. “I think we'd best head to my chambers, Harath'krem. There is something that I believe I promised you.”

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Next up is Chapter 5: The Board

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was easier to write than the last few, something which I was profoundly
thankful for. And I'm sure no one will complain that you get it a few days early. :) 

So here we get what's going to be the last bit of quiet time for a while. Plus some work on Cieran's armor, a look into his rehab, and more or less what life was like during the week that Nyn was gone.

I know that I promised that the ball would start rolling in this chapter.. and it kinda, sorta did. I mean, I poked it. That counts as motion right? I swear that things will actually happen in the next one. Rather big things actually, so stay tuned. :) 

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 5: The Board

I opened the driver's side hatchway for Nyn, taking her hand as she extracted herself from the aircar.

“Thank you, Harath'krem.” As she had the last time that I'd been with for one of these, she was wearing a tasteful white suit that was a feminine variation of something that her uncle might have worn. Thankfully she hadn't asked me to likewise dress formally, which left me in my plain para-military gear. Not that I really was expecting trouble, but the outfit did make me look a bit more like what my title said I was supposed to be.

“You're welcome Tarath'shan.” Shifting so that she could rest a hand in the crook of my arm, I glanced around as more aircars began to settle in. “Chen's team is already waiting for us.”

Her dark eyes flicked to where a half dozen heavily armored Batarians were standing, even as she absently leaned in to kiss my cheek. “I can see them love. I can also see T'laria and Ghai, and hear Balak and his people getting out of their own vehicles.”

My lips twitched a little. “Just making sure.”

She rolled her upper eyes but allowed me to guide her to where everyone was congregating.

Chen gave a quiet grunt at our approach, tilting his head but not saying anything. He'd remained withdrawn since Korpuz, speaking only when required and acerbically when he did. No one was really sure why, he'd always been a bit of an ass but he'd certainly had a sense of humor. The current bet was that he'd been sleeping with one of the people that we'd lost, but no one was about to ask him.

“Ape. Shaaryak.” Scales was wearing her armor, but she'd at least cleaned it up a bit. “Ready to get this shit over with?”

Nyn's lips thinned a bit. “Quite.”

I could only sigh and glance at Ghai. “Are you two still seeing Sederis after this?”

The taciturn Asari grunted. “During.”
My lover tensed, her fingers tightening around my elbow. “During? Sederis is here?”

“That idiotically posh restaurant next door.” Trena grumbled. “She didn't really ask for our opinion of the timing girl. I'd sooner not speak with the bitch at all.”

Which I didn't really doubt. I spoke up before Nyn could, “Don't say anything stupid scales. I'd rather not have to try and save your ass.”

She snorted. “What, you going to limp over and wave your cane threateningly?”

Twirling the metal stick up with my left hand I whipped the edge of it across her wrist before she could duck back.

“Athame's ass! That fucking hurt you prick!”

“Good.” Nynsi, Ghai, and I all spoke at more or less the same time.

Trena stuck her tongue out at us, proving yet again how much of an adult she was. Then again, I couldn't really speak because I promptly retaliated in kind. Our respective lovers could only sigh in irritation and disappointment.

“Cieran, stop that. T'laria.. just go and do whatever it is that you need to handle.”

Ghai wrapped an arm around Trena's shoulders before scales could say anything else, more or less force-marching her on ahead of us. Nynsi gave me an arch look, to which I replied with a mildly abashed shrug.

“If your subordinates are done being childish,” Balak growled as he and his entourage approached, his fingers twitching as he seemed to be fighting the urge to pick at his suit. “Can we get this over with?”

I bit my tongue when Nyn's fingers tightened in warning. She inclined her head politely to the Commander. The SIU team and Chen's people fell in around us as we started to move, more or less pairing off as they escorted us. There were enough shifts of their helmets to make it clear that neither group trusted the other to keep their respective leader safe. And the Hegemony commandos in particular seemed equally as concerned that Nyn or I might be a danger to their boss.

Of course, they got a bit distracted as they approached the stupidly ostentatious structure.

“This is where they rule from?” He seemed to have a hard time accepting that even as we drew closer. “How.. tasteful.”

“Wait until you meet them.” I muttered. Nyn gave me a glance but didn't say anything, probably because she entirely agreed with me.

Unfortunately I had made the mistake of talking in Balak's presence, which meant he remembered that I existed. “If you consider them to be worthless then they must be pathetic indeed.”

A muscle in my cheek twitched as I used my cane to help propel myself up the stairs leading to the building. “If it pleases you, Commander, I'll be glad to translate anything you have difficulty understanding during the meeting.”

“I will of course make use of your services if I feel the need to limit my perspective.”

“Commander. Harath'krem.” My Tarath'shan's eyes were split between us, and the thin set of her
lips and tightness of her fingers on my arm betrayed her rising irritation. We both looked away, dipping our heads to Nyn. My own apologetic tilt was deeper than his, but that was to be expected. That he'd bowed his head at all meant quite a bit, strictly speaking he wasn't under any onus to show regret for anything he said to me.

Which left me yet again wondering what the fuck his deal was.

The doors slid open at our approach, the glass sliding away to reveal the same secretary seated behind her grandiose desk. And just like last time, she looked positively thrilled to see us.

“Madam Shaaryak. Your adviser.. and your guest.” She gave me and Balak equally poisonous glances, “are expected. Your guards may wait in the usual location.”

“Chen, please show the SIU teams to the appropriate lobby.” Nynsi was already turning towards the elevators, making me move with her. “Commander, this way.”

Soon enough the three of us were standing in the lift, my finger hitting the appropriate floor. “Let’s hope this one isn’t as pointless as the last.”

My Tarath'shan nodded slightly. “If the Pillars are willing, it will be.”

Balak split his gaze between us, arms shifting to his sides. “You sound less than pleased with these Asari, Matriarch Shaaryak.”

Nyn's lips turned downwards slightly. “They have perfected the art of stalling. If the trade agreements were not so important to both my family and to the Hegemony I would have ceased attempting to create them months ago.”

All of his eyes blinked rapidly. “I.. see.”

I kept my own mouth shut, despite the lovely setup. See? Right there, proof that I am capable of learning.

Of course, if I'd have remembered what happened the last time that we arrived on this floor, I would have said something entirely different.

The lift doors pinged open a minute or so later, sliding open to reveal the Board's bodyguards with their weapons drawn but not quite aimed at us. And, of fucking course, Balak's own hand shot towards his back a the sight of them.

After which shit became blurry. At his movement all of them snapped to full alert, their guns jerking into line. My left arm snapped around to grab Nyn, hauling her around me and into the corner even as I cursed the fact that I couldn't reach for my own gun while I had my cane in my hand.

“Stop!” The lead guard snarled, her biotics rolling to life across her arms as she settled her aim onto Balak.

The Commander, quite sensibly with four guns leveled at his forehead, did so. Nyn tried to shift, growling a bit as I locked my arm to keep her out of the line of fire.

“Arm out, slowly.” Only when it was clear that he didn't have a gun in his hand did she and the others seem to relax. Slightly. “Let me make this clear. You reach for anything while you're in here and you'll be meeting Athame in person, got it?”

He gave her a look that plainly said that she could shove her threats, but tightly nodded all the
“Good.” They stepped back slowly, waving him out first. Only when he had cleared the elevators did I finally let Nyn move, pointedly ignoring the angry glare that she gave me as she slid past me.

Not thinking that I entirely deserved that, I could only shake my head before limping after them. Showing that she wasn't thrilled about how I'd acted, she moved quickly enough to select her own seat, preventing me from drawing it out for her. Balak quickly took the seat on her right, subtly asserting his importance by leaving me stuck on her left.

None of the Matriarchs spoke until I had slowly settled into my chair. Strangely only four were present, making wonder where the fifth was. From the way Nyn's expression had tightened slightly, she'd also noted the decreased attendance and didn't like it for one reason or another.

As usual, it was the Director who opened the meeting, her voice coolly amused. “Not the best first impression, Commander.”

“Speak for yourself, Dantius.” I thought it was Ullai who spoke. “Personally I view it as an appropriate reaction, if he was not forewarned that our guards would meet him in that way.”

Which he hadn't been. I had entirely forgotten, and I had no idea why Nyn hadn't. Unless she'd expected it to happen for one reason or another... fucking politics.

“Agreed.” Tevos, at least, was easy to recognize with her flat, cold voice. “His reaction was impressive. As was the human's. His lady was removed from danger before the Lieutenant could order him to cease movement.”

Dantius picked up a wine glass before waving it around negligently. “Yes, yes. She has a loyal shark at her side and a capable ally from her native seas. They are both irrelevant, let us move on.”

“Commander Balak is quite relevant.” The Asari counselor's relative countered. “Or else we would not have requested his presence. But yes, we should move on rather than wasting yet more of our time. Iandanni?”

The mark-less Matriarch glanced at a datapad before speaking. “This question is for the Commander. We have provisionally agreed to open trade with the Batarian Hegemony pending several questions. The first of which is this; when can we expect the Theosdosian relay to be in your hands?”

Balak leaned onto the table slightly, apparently having expected that question. “The final assault is being prepared, but I have not been told the exact time frame for security reasons. You must understand that we consider operational security paramount for an operation of this level of importance.”

Translation: I'm not stupid enough to tell any of you when it's happening because I'm positive that Vosque would somehow be told before the day was over.

If his answer surprised the matriarchs, they didn't show it. Iandanni simply nodded before moving on. “We have concerns over the security of any trade vessels, especially considering that any vessels will be forced to have several discharge stops while traversing the Terminus. Nor are we convinced that the Attican Traverse will be any more secure.”

“I was under the impression that Hegemony ships would be handling the trade.” Balak glanced at Nyn.
Her own face was drawn into a frown, eyes flicking rapidly between the various Asari. “As was I. And if there were independent traders involved, would their security not be their own affairs?”

“It would.” Ullai, I was sure it was her now, spoke again. “Our concern is our own vessels and that of our founding corporations. Their safety is our responsibility.”

“You avoided my principal question.” My Tarath'shan countered, a touch of irritation entering her voice. “Since when would your ships be involved in trade with the Hegemony? The agreement that has been debated for the past year has only concerned vessels owned by my family's subsidiaries as well as a limited amount of Hegemony trade ships.”

“Whether or not that will be expanded, to the profit of both Illium and your Commander's government, is the purpose of this meeting.”

Nyn looked mildly apoplectic that she hadn't even been told that beforehand. “It is my understanding that the Hegemony would be covering the fees imposed by Warlord T'Ravt and Aria T'loak for moving through their territory. The fleets would also maintain active patrols in the Traverse.”

Tevos glanced between Balak and Nynsi. “That makes no mention of the required stopovers between here and Omega.”

Because no single warlord controlled anything between here and Omega and they damned well knew that. There wasn't anyone to negotiate protection fees or anything like that, and any ships making the trip would likely have to convoy just to be able to discharge their drive cores without easily falling prey to pirates. Not that they'd be safe, but at least it would discourage the smaller bands.

And at least we had the Noln now. Something that Nyn confirmed a few moments later. “I intended to convoy my vessels and escort them with my own ship, at least as far as Omega.”

Dantius had already downed her wine, and now used the empty glass to emphasize her boredom. “Which we already assumed. Get to the point please, dear.”

Tevos briefly looked like she very much wanted to slam her counterpart's face into the table, her jaw clenching as she visibly forced herself to keep her composure. “Have you performed a risk assessment based on the piracy data from the past several years?”

“The risks are judged as acceptable.” I had to suppress a twitch, but from the way Ullai gave me a glance from the corner of her eyes made it clear that I didn't entirely succeed. Thankfully Nyn pressed on, apparently determined not to let them divert her. “The greater matter, in my opinion, is that of the preliminary agreement that was agreed to in principle. I still have not received a direct answer as to whether or not trade may begin once the Blue Suns have been removed.”

“That is currently still under review.” The Director's voice had a note of relish to it that made my lover's posture tighten. “Dear Yethenera is currently on Thessia, negotiating with the Republic's Commerce Board. Until she returns we can come to no official decision.”

“I see.” Well. I was glad that she did because as far as I was concerned this entire thing had been another colossal waste of time. That Balak looked equally confused didn't improve my mood in the slightest. “Matriarch Tevos, I will forward you my analysis. When Executive Yethenera had returned, please contact me so that I might inquire as to our negotiations.”

“Forward it to me as well.” Ullai spoke, giving me another glance. “I am most interested in your findings and how they may relate to our opening this agreement to parties beyond you.”
My Tarath'shan inclined her head politely. “Is there any other business to conduct?”

“That is everything, Shaaryak.” Dantius waved a hand flippantly towards the door.

We rose without further wasted words, heading for the elevators. The guards made it clear that they were watching Balak as we passed them, even if he refused to rise to their bait when they negligently rested their hands on their weapons.

It wasn’t until the doors slid shut that Nyn spoke. “Pillars crush that bitch.”

“Dantius?” I guessed.

Her throat vibrated in a deep growl. “Her. And Ullai.”

Balak echoed her anger. “What was the point of this then? Nothing was decided or even elaborated upon!”

“The point, Ka'hairal, was for Dantius to show her claws.” If there had been room for her to pace I didn't doubt that she would have been. “By sending her strongest supporter to Thessia she sent a message to myself and Tevos that she considers her position untouchable. If Ullai or Iandanni abandoned Tevos to support Dantius, she once again has a controlling interest on the Board.”

I grimaced. “And no love for you, thanks to Xerol.”

“Yes.” Her breath came out in a sharp exhale.

“So this was entirely a display of power by the Director?” Balak cut in again, his lips twisting irritably. “So that she could prove to you that the deal will never happen?”

“No. It will happen. She stands to make a profit and so has no real reason to cancel it entirely.” Nyn's anger deflated slightly into exhaustion as her head shook. “But I will be forced to make concessions, bring in more Asari businesses. Particularly her businesses, in addition to what I already promised Tevos. The Hegemony will likely still benefit but it is becoming clear that I will not. Not in any appreciable manner, anyway.”

The Commander seemed to digest that for a moment. “How do they intend to cut you out? Surely you will be able to still operate your own vessels?”

Nynsi tiredly launched into an explanation of how the Citadel's embargo of the Hegemony affected what the Board was and wasn't willing to do, in particular how they intended to limit the overall shipping so as to not annoy the Republic overmuch. Proving again that he wasn't stupid, just an asshole, Balak continued to make relatively intelligent inquiries as to just how Illium was actually governed and why Nyn had to listen to the Board at all.

Thankfully for my own distraction, my omni-tool began to ping with an incoming message just as the elevator finished lowering us to the lobby.

Tuning out the conversation beside me, I flicked it open. “Kean.”

“Ape.” Trena's voice was a bit strained. “Need to steal you away from Shaaryak. Those fucking bitches done wasting your time?”

I gave Nyn a glance as she continued to elaborate on the system's defensive fleet, the two highborn drifting ahead of me as I slowed. “They are, why? What's going on?”

“Sederis wants to talk with you. Not her, just you.”
My fingers tightened on my cane as I grimaced. The last time I'd had to meet with Sederis she'd scared a good year or two off of my life, and I'd very much hoped to never do so again. “Request or demand?”

“She doesn't do requests ape.”

Dammit. “About what?”

“Korlus.”

Not my favorite topic. Dammit again. “If you have a way for me to get out of this I'd love to hear it scales.”

“Not happening ape.”

“... fine. I'll tell Nyn and be there in a while.” There was a grunt before she cut the call.

“Harath'krem?” Nynsi had apparently noticed that I had slowed far behind them as they neared the exit. She'd apparently sent Balak on ahead because it was just her and Chen, with the rest of the security detail filing out of the doors to wait outside. “I was hoping that we could speak on our way back to the aircars.”

I knew that tone of voice. Athame's ass, today just wasn't turning out to be my day.

“I would be happy to walk you back there.” All of her eyes blinked as I limped in her direction. “Unfortunately it seems I have a meeting that I have to attend.”

Whatever irritation she'd had for vanished as she worked out what I meant. “Sederis?”

My lips twisted as I nodded. “About Korlus, apparently. Scales made it clear that she wasn't making it a request.”

“Of course it isn't.” One of her hands rose to rub at her lower eyes, while her upper set stayed on me. “You had best go then. We can speak about your actions in the elevator when you return to the aircars.”

I didn't see what there was to talk about, but all right then. “I'll call you if it's going to take a while, I can always just ride back with Trena and Ghai.”

Something in my tone must have revealed my irritation. She nodded slightly at my words, reaching out to brush my face with a few fingers as I neared her. “I am not angry, Harath'krem, we just.. need to talk.”

I leaned into her touch, enjoying the warmth of it while I could. “All right.”

Her body shifted a bit closer, giving me a soft kiss before pulling back. “I will see you soon love.”

My head dipped to the left respectfully. “As you say love.”

She stayed close as we drifted out through the doors, splitting away with her escorts only as we reached the bottom of the stairs. While they broke left, heading back towards the landing pad, I split right, heading towards the fancy restaurants that catered to the upper class tits who worked here.

Not that I was moving all that fast. Not because of the crowd, which was sparse for the time of day, but because I wanted time to think about this crap.
What the fuck did Sederis want with me? Before she'd 'owed' me, but as far as I knew that was no longer the case. Unless she thought that I owed her for the whole Eclipse doctor's kickstarting my heart thing. I didn't think that I did, I mean, I had helped come up with the plan that had resulted in Dougal's death and that could only have been a good thing for her.

And if she did want to talk about Korlus, why not have Nyn come with? She'd been the one behind the entire mission after all. Or was this about the ship's data core? I had no idea what she might have found on it, but Balak was definitely furious about it being in her hands at all. If it was she might not have wanted Nyn around because she thought she'd tell the Hegemony commander about it, where I wouldn't.

I was lost enough in my thoughts that I bumped heavily into a Turian, who seemed equally distracted as we both staggered backwards. My cane thumped heavily against the pavement as I used it to prevent myself from falling, nodding thankfully as a taloned hand grabbed my shoulder to help steady me.

He was wearing casual clothes, but there was enough bulk beneath them to make it clear that there was armor beneath them. Considering this was Illium, that wasn't particularly surprising. Probably a plainclothes Eclipse agent on patrol, given that Sederis was nearby.

“Sorry about that.”

“It's quite all right friend.” His mandibles flicked a bit. “I wasn't paying much attention either. Are you all right?”

Something about his voice was familiar.. but I couldn't place it. It didn't remind me of Korlus.. strangely it put me in mind of here. Still, I inclined my head politely, banishing my curiosity for now. “I am, thanks for the assist.”

“Not a problem.” His head cocked slightly. “You don't seem like you're here for the food.”

My lips thinned a bit. “Do I look like a billionaire? I thought you had to be to even be let in the doors.”

I could see his razor teeth as he barked out a laugh, letting my shoulder go as he stepped back. “A good point. Still, this is not an area one just passes through.”

There was a lot of fishing for information going on for someone who'd just walked into me, and I felt the skin around my eyes tightening as I frowned at him. “I could ask you the same thing.”

His mandibles quivered again, his damnably familiar voice still sounding amused “Another good point. Shall we instead pretend that we did not just embarrassingly walk into one another?”

“Works for me.” I turned away slightly, holding my right hand up politely. “Enjoy your afternoon.”

He reciprocated, the motion revealing some of the armor on his arm as his coat slid down. “The same.”

I was glad that I was already turning away, because my heart was suddenly hammering as I realized where I recognized his voice from.

The armor underneath his coat hadn't been Eclipse yellow.

It had been True Son gray.
The sight of it had brought to mind a smug Turian, bartering his life for information that had led us to Yi’ren. After that he’s supposedly vanished to Omega, to join up with the rest of the ‘Actual’ True Sons.

But it looked like Sederis had been right after all. They had snuck their way back on world.

Forcing my body into motion, I kept limping away. He apparently hadn't recognized my own voice, which was understandable given that I didn't remember saying much to him back then. Plus he probably had assumed that the guy in armor had been Batarian, rather than human.

But where there was one... keeping my head level, I let my eyes flick around as Aethyta taught me. A few glances was all it took. There were at least eight people in sight wearing similarly heavy clothes.

Approaching the target restaurant, I slowed further and turned so that I was leaning against its exterior wall. As casually as I could, I brought my omni-tool up and made a call of my own.

“Chen. It's Kean.” I had to fight to keep my voice relaxed and my posture casual, as if this was just a regular phone call. “Get Nynsi back to the mansion.”

There was a startled beat before he spoke. “Kean? What's the issue?”

“True Sons. At least eight.. no.. twelve now.” The midcaste warrior let out a hiss. “They're trying to move around under cover, I think they're after Sederis, not us. But she's not in armor.”

His voice was appropriately serious. “What do I tell her?”

“That it's going to be a long meeting, and that I will return with Trena and Ghai.” I licked my lips in thought. “Apologize for me and tell her that I'll pick up some of her favorite wine in apology. Once you're airborne call Rane and have her lock the mansion's comms down so that she doesn't hear about this.”

Which was going to fucking piss her off, but as I'd said.. Nyn didn't have her armor or her usual weapons on her. There was no way I was letting her get involved in this crap.

“Got it. You want us to come back out once we've got her secured?”

“No. Keep the mansion secured, they might have people after us as well.”

“Stay safe Kean. We've got enough people.”

“I'll try.” Cutting the link without wasting more words, I flicked through my address book before starting up another call. “Scales. We've got a problem.”

My friend growled. “I know ape, you aren't fucking here yet and she's getting annoyed.”

“There's at least a full squad of True Sons outside. Probably more.”

There was a startled beat. “You're shitting me.”

“Scales...” my voice trailed off as I caught sight of the same Turian from before. He was about a block down from me, and was likewise on his omni-tool. Unlike me, he wasn't paying much attention to it, instead more or less staring at me. And I was suddenly very conscious of the fact that the buildings around me were several stories tall, and I was very much not wearing a helmet. “I'm coming inside. Tell Sederis to get her fucking people here.”
Flicking it off before she could ask anything else, I lurched back into motion, exaggerating my limp as best I could.

I survived the few meters to the grandiose entryway, accelerating as best I could the second I was through it.

“Scales!” I snapped, entirely ignoring the staff member who looked exceedingly insulted that I’d even stepped inside.

“Over here ape!” Trena snapped her head around a corner, “Get away from the fucking windows girl!”

The server jumped, her purple skin paling as she caught sight of the heavy pistol in my friend’s hands. She ducked beneath her table without a word, for what good that would do her.

“Help?”

Scales grimaced, frantically waving me into the dining area. It was apparently empty, likely cleared out by the Eclipse’s leader so that she could have her meeting in relative privacy. “We’ve got us, Sederis, and two bodyguards. Reinforcements are on the way, twenty minutes out.”

“Dammit.” I shoved a chair out of my way. “Chen's getting Nyn back to the mansion, she doesn't know.”

There was a short hiss of breath. “She's going to be fucking pissed ape.”

“She'll be alive to be pissed, all I care about. We have a way out of here?”

“We do, human.” Sederis, clad in what looked like light golden armor, leaned out from what I thought was the kitchen. “Two aircars on the roof, with room for all. Are you armed?”

Reaching behind my back, I pulled out the Acolyte that I’d kept collapsed there. As that hand did that, I used my cane to tap the small tech launcher on my belt. It only had a dozen or so mines, just enough for an emergency, and a hell of a lot better than nothing. “This is fucking Illium, of course I'm armed.”

The grin she gave me was both approving and strangely sane. “I see why Gears keeps you around.”

She ducked away before I could do more than blink, my eyes sliding left to glance at my friend as we finished navigating the tables. “Gears?”

“Long fucking story ape.”

I grimaced, reassessing why I’d been called here in the first place. And why Trena had been meeting with Sederis. I couldn’t imagine the leader of the Eclipse giving just anyone a nickname, which meant her past was even more complicated than I’d thought.

Of course, any worries about that vanished at about the same time as the impressive glass windows behind us fucking exploded inwards.

Trena and I both dove for the kitchen more or less by reflex, my bad leg screaming in pain as I put way too much pressure on it. Hands grabbed at me, Ghai grunting as she hauled my ass around the safety of the wall. Scales groaned as Sederis did the same to her, all four of us scrambling back into cover as a fucking torrent of gunfire roared to life outside.
Tracers whipped through the place, wood splinters and cracking as the fancy seating arrangements were torn apart. More explosions began to sound off, rapid *pop-pop*pops of frag grenades sending their deadly shrapnel through the restaurant. Somewhere someone started screaming, probably that hostess, before another *pop* ended her cries.

Athame's fucking ass. They'd definitely come prepared to deal with a strong biotic, couldn't deny that. Even a Matriarch's barriers couldn't have fucking held against *that* many grenades and heavy shots. They must have had at least two, maybe even three LMG's outside to keep up as much fire as they were pouring in.

I hauled myself up to my feet with a wince, grabbing my cane as I did so, before screaming to be heard over the sounds. “Stairs!?”

“Right!” Ghai shouted, grabbing my arm as she started to move.

My entire body was aching, a bunch of racists were trying to kill me, and Nyn would probably want to finish the job if I managed to survive this.

Fucking hell. This just wasn't my day.

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**Next up is Chapter 6: The Intervention**

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Chapter End Notes

So... our old friends are back! And shit's going down again after a little break. The rest of the act should be pretty fun to get through, what with the Hegemony, the Eclipse, and the True Sons all having their plans hit one another and pile up so very nicely. Plus, you know, Trena actually having to explain things to Cieran.

Good times on Illium. Good bloody 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
Chapter 6: The Intervention

My leg burned as Ghai hauled me up the narrow stairwell, my cane becoming a life saver as I used it to propel myself as best I could.

“How many did you see Kean?” Sederis snapped from somewhere behind me, her voice echoing in the closed space.

“At least a dozen.” I shouted over my shoulder, almost stumbling as we exited onto the third floor. “I’m guessing that means double that.”

Her voice was pure mirth. “That is still insultingly few. I would assume there's at least thirty.”

Thirty. Possibly even more. And there was four of us, plus two bodyguards who were still a floor above us. Nor could I forget that I wasn't exactly in power armor, or even close to combat ready. Trena wasn't much better off with her back. Add in Ghai's limited biotics, and we were almost entirely dependent on what Sederis could manage. Which was probably a fucking lot, but she was still just one person. She could be overwhelmed, she could be flanked, she could be sniped.. fuck Cieran, not the best time for pessimism and paranoia.

Below us the gunfire and explosions had stopped, why probably meant that they were checking to see if they'd killed everyone or not. Either that or they had realized that their target was bolting and were repositioning.

“Your guards?” Trena snapped as Ghai led us down the hall, presumably guiding us to whatever service ladder that would get us to the roof. Conference style rooms seemed to dominate the floor, their lights flicking on automatically as we moved past. Which made me really fucking glad that it was daytime, if it was night out they'd have broadcast our progress to anyone outside.

There was a pause before the Eclipse's leader barked. “Stop!”

My heels were skidding as I slid to a halt, Ghai and Trena likewise reacting to the pure authority in her tone.

Sederis’s lips twisted as a hand rose to the side of her head, listening to whatever implant was carrying information to her. “I can't raise them. They're fucking jamming us, strong enough to fuck even these up. Gears, operational order three?”

Scales grimaced at the nickname, studiously not looking my way. “Whatever the fuck they expect, don't fucking do it. So we're not going to the roof, or looking for a backdoor.”
“Fucking right we’re not. You, strong and silent. This building connect to its neighbors?”

Ghai nodded with a frown, her chin jerking back the other way as her guttural voice ground the words out. “That way, left. Connects to the hotel.”

The golden-clad Asari promptly spun in place and resumed moving, leaving us to lurch into motion after her.

“How do you hack an aircar?” I was getting increasingly weirded out by how normal she seemed compared to the last time I’d spoken with her. Then again, this wasn’t the time or the place to worry about that.

“Unless they have an active-VI.” I knew the theory... in theory.

“He can handle it.” Trena hit my shoulder with a hand as we both strained to keep up with the other two.

“Remember what your sister did on Selvos?”

She blinked before grunting. “Got it. Heading for the garage?”

Any reply Sederis might have said was lost when someone began to shout, the words echoing unintelligibly up the stairs. A few seconds later a grenade detonated somewhere below us, followed by armored boots slamming into metal as True Sons began to pound up the stairs.

Trena started to spin around, only to nearly fall on her ass when I grabbed her shirt and shoved her back into motion. “Scales, no fucking helmets here!”

If she growled something I couldn’t hear it, our small group rounding the corner at the end of the hall. Just a few meters ahead was a suitably impressive doorway that looked like they led into a lobby of some kind. From the glowing red lights on either side, they were probably locked.

Not that Sederis even bothered to check. The hotel's logo worked into the glass exploded when her biotics boiled out in a stupidly overpowered throw, people on the other side began screaming as shards whipped through the air. As you'd expect, even without the added people, it was hardly a quiet way to open a locked door.

It only took the True Sons a few moments to realize where the sound had come from, but thankfully one of them was stupid enough to scream the confirmation for us. “Third floor!”

Acting as if she had all the time in the world, Sederis slowed, practically strolling across the shattered glass. Nearing a whimpering matron, she reached down and grabbed the woman by her crest, yanking her around so that she could stare at her. “Landing pad?”

She got a terrified little squeak in reply, before a shaking hand rose and pointed to the right.

“Thanks.” A flick of her hand sent her back to the ground with a short cry of pain. “Fucking weak bitch. You're a matron, grow a fucking quad.”

While she was wasting her breath, Trena gave my shoulder a light punch and motioned towards the now shattered door. Getting her intention, I backed up until I had at least some cover at the edge, while she did likewise on the other side. We'd barely managed to do so before there was a flicker as a hand whipped around the corner, tossing a silver disc in our direction.

“Grenade!” I snapped, hunching back behind the wall as scales did the same thing. We'd barely gotten into cover before it detonated. Whoever had set the fuse hadn't done the best job, most of
the shards fell far short with only a few ricocheting off the wall.

One or two made it farther, sending sparks off of Ghai and Sederis's barriers, and making the cowering civilians scream even more loudly.

Leaning out, I began to bring my pistol up to try and at least deter the group of True Sons even now rounding the edge, pounding our way. Their faux civilian clothes were still in place, but now it was easy to see the armor hidden beneath them.

I was about to settle my aim on the lead figure, a Turian I thought, when Sederis felt the need to remind me that my presence was hardly required for this part.

There was a quiet grunt from somewhere behind me, and then a shockwave literally blew past me. I was sent sprawling backwards with a groan, the sensation like a pillow the size of an aircar being slammed into my entire body. But if I'd had it bad, the True Sons had it far worse. The rhythmic detonations were followed by shockingly loud screams and crashes as armored bodies were tossed around like rag dolls.

Scrambling to my feet, and almost screaming myself as I pushed my leg too hard too fast, I got a quick glimpse down the hall. Every side door had been ripped off their hinges and flung into the side rooms, and sparks and water were spilling from where the successive blasts had torn the ceiling open. There were maybe four limps forms visible in the flickering light, but only one of them was moving.

Ghai snapped off a single shot from her pistol, wrapping up the loose end.

“Move your asses!” Sederis snapped, using a biotic gesture to yank Trena up to her feet. Thankfully I managed to grab my cane again and use it to shove myself up before she could repeat that for me. “You two, the garage. Silent, we're covering them.”

I lurched into motion as best I could, joined by Trena a few moments later as she accelerated. Most of the hotel's guests were apparently intelligent enough to have already bolted, but we did stagger past a few idiots taking shelter underneath tables or behind counters. If I'd had the breath I would have berated them for being idiots, but all the oxygen I had was reserved to keep me moving.

Thankfully there were plenty of helpful signs pointing us in the right direction, which meant I could pay more attention to what scales was saying.

“Goals is simple ape.” She gasped out as we moved. “Hack an aircar, set the auto-VI to fly the thing over the fucking ocean. You get one, I get one.”

“Distraction?”

“Sort of. If they make it out of the fucking garage, we know we can fly out.” Thankfully the doors leading to our destination were automatic, whisking open as we approached. “If they don't, time for a fucking new plan.”

“Ah.”

Scales took about a half step into the garage before trying to throw herself back, a burst of tracer rounds whipping a few inches ahead of her chest. Grabbing her arm I yanked her the rest of the way back before sliding into place at the door's edge, grateful at least that I had something to lean on.

“So much for the plan then.” Not bothering to aim I shoved my pistol around and fired off a few
blind rounds to try and keep whoever it was off of us for a moment. “New plan!?”

“No fucking shit ape!” She had to use her own cane to help her stay upright as she staggered back, tossing me a glare before hefting her gun into a ready grip, “Overload, twenty meters, right side along the wall!”

Dropping my cane, I brought my other hand up. Fingers flicked as my omni-tool snapped open, quickly inputting the command. “Ready?”

Scales grunted, hefting her gun up as she moved close enough that we were almost touching. Gem colored eyes narrowed at some silent count before her chin jerked in a nod. “Now!”

My arm shot out as I leaned, whipping around as I directed the tool in the appropriate direction. The first glance I had of the garage was.. that it was a typical garage. Support columns, parking zones, and rows upon rows of aircars. Of course, the gunship hovering outside of an entryway about thirty meters away was rather different, as were the True Sons that had taken cover behind some of the parked vehicles.

The overload streaked over top of a pair of them hiding behind an aircar that looked like it cost more than Nynsi paid me in a year. Both yelped as lightning arced off them and their cover, though their reactions differed. One was smart and dropped out of sight. The other, well, wasn't and staggered back.

Trena, leaning out around me, snapped off three quick shots, the second of which tore into the Salarian's head.

We both scuttled back as a fusillade of fire chased after us, blowing pieces of stone free from the doorway.

“How many does that make ape?”

I fired off a few more blind shots while the petite tech launcher recharged, not daring to risk my unprotected head. “At least nine.”

“Shit. Sederis!” If the gunfire already hadn't left me half deaf, her shout would have done the job. “Gunship, full squad in here!”

It probably spoke volumes as to where my focus was that it was only then that I realized that there was more gunfire echoing in the hall, just from the other direction. A quick glance confirmed that other two Asari were busy defending the door we'd originally come through. Well, Sederis was busy defending it. She was negligently hurling biotics out of sight, while Ghai was only occasionally leaning out to fire off a shot or two.

“Did the gunship bring them?” The Eclipse CEO screamed back, her entire body swirling with blue lights so dark that they were nearly black.

Trena glanced at me, I gave her a tight nod as my launcher finally finished prepping the next mine. “Yes!”

I missed whatever was said next, gulping down a quick breath before leaning out to hurl another mine. These definitely weren't the old True Sons. That bunch of gang kids and idiots would have rushed us as soon as they'd seen us. Which, ironically, would probably have worked very well as far as killing Trena and I, even if Sederis would have amused herself by massacring the lot of them after. This group was far better trained, and far more cautious. A few pairs and trios had moved up to nearer cars, but they seemed content to keep us pinned in. Which meant they were either waiting for reinforcements, or content to wait for their fellows to finish us off.
There wasn't time to do more than toss the mine, letting the shield drain force a few of them to stay in place for a bit longer.

My duck back into cover was expedited by a gold covered hand, bringing me face to face with a grinning Sederis. Whatever exhaustion I felt vanished pretty damned quickly before the insane smile that revealed just how much she was currently enjoying herself.

“Excuse me human, I need to fetch our ride.” All of her teeth were gleaming, and I could only stagger backwards against the wall as she negligently let me go. “You three can follow along, and do try to keep up.”

There was about enough time to blink before she was past me, fucking *running* into the garage.

The gunfire paused for a long moment, as if the True Sons couldn't believe it either. From the screams that followed after something very heavy and metallic crashed into something else very heavy and metallic, that was a pause that they probably regretted in the few seconds they had remaining.

Stumbling after her, I could only stagger and stare as she went to work.

I'd seen Tela Vasir fight in real life. She had been an energizer bunny on crack, a barely visible blur rocketing around the battlefield as she mowed down her targets.

I'd seen Aethyta fight a few days later. Liara's father had thrown a pair of aircars around like they'd been nothing more than toys, the center of her very own localized biotic storm.

But apparently with great insanity came great power, because seeing Sederis in that garage was a terrifying and humbling experience.

I'd thought, when I'd been healthy and had my armor, that I'd been something. Dangerous, powerful, that kind of thing you know? Even Aethyta, for all of her strength, was still old. She had tired quickly when I'd seen her fight, and I'd thought that a well trained squad like Shep's might have been able to fight her. And Vasir could obviously be killed as she had been in game. Sure they kill me if they wanted to, but I'd comforted myself in thinking that, with ample prep time, maybe I could have made a fight of it.

The leader of the Eclipse probably wouldn't have even noticed that I had gotten in her way.

I had no idea how she'd entered the fight. The only thing that I could tell was that there were pieces of aircars in the fucking ceiling, like they'd been blasted into the concrete and steel as easily as if it were butter.

Sederis herself was standing on top of another aircar, totally ignoring the fact that the engine was on fire, and was howling with laughter as she hurled her full power around the place without care for the destruction she wreaked.

The shockwave she'd thrown back in the hotel had apparently been tight and controlled, because the ones she was throwing around now were anything but. Aircars were detonating like fucking grenades when the unstable dark energy ripped threw them, the True Sons screaming as they were flung about like rag dolls before being impaled by swirling shrapnel.

She wasn't even throwing one at time either. Even as I watched she whipped her arms in a cross like motion that sent *two* fucking chains rippling down the lanes of cars to rip apart the men and women hiding behind them.
Nor was the offensive display hurting her defenses like you'd imagine.

Each arm was covered in boiling light, and she was cackling as gunshots reflected harmlessly off of barriers that could probably bounce tank rounds. Or apparently shots from a gunship, she merely tossed her head with another laugh when it belatedly swung around, trying to cover what was left of the team in the garage. Face-tanking a long burst, she waited for the pilot to cease shooting before bouncing once on her heels, and then blurring in a biotic charge that had to have covered a good fifty meters.

The gunship, now with a new passenger busily tearing the glass canopy apart with her fucking hands, whirled up and out of sight.

Which really just left the three of us standing there like idiots, staring at what had just happened. The entire thing had taken.. fuck. Fifteen or twenty seconds. Tops.

“Athame..” my mouth worked for a long moment, unable to get anything else out until my brain finished rebooting from 'Cave-man terrified of blue goddess' back to 'Homo sapiens'. “How the fuck did Chacksin ever get her?”

“Paid one of her bodyguards to shoot her in the back with a tranq dart.” Scales supplied, shaking herself a little bit as she too stared at the destruction. “You want her in a fight find a Krogan warlord.. maybe Matriarch Lidanya.”

“Aria.” Ghai grunted, apparently the only one of us with the sense to still be watching behind us. “Move. More.”

Oh. Right. We were in a fight.

Lurching into motion, I didn't realize that I'd left my cane behind until a particularly bad throb in my leg nearly sent me down. Ghai caught me before I could stumble more than a step or two, throwing one of my arms over her shoulders without even breaking stride.

For once we actually made it to where we were going without someone showing up to shoot at us, our pace slowing as we neared the edge. Trena kept an eye out behind us, while Ghai hauled me behind an aircar that somehow had escaped the carnage.

“Stay.” Her rasping voice still managed a tone like she was talking to a dog.

I tried to glare at her, but felt the effect ruined somewhat by the fact that I could barely breath.

Fuck. Whatever adrenaline I'd gotten from watching Sederis had gone as quickly as it had showed up. I mean.. shit. I'd been dead on an operating table three months ago, and a few minutes in the sparring arena was all I could manage. I should probably have been fucking grateful to have made it as far as I had before my battered body couldn't take it anymore.

Things got a little blurry after that. Ghai and Trena started snapping off random shots, and flinching behind the car with me as more rounds came in. Scales, as usual, was the ballsier of the two, relying on her natural barriers to protect her skull as she tried to keep them off of us until Sederis finished doing whatever it was she was doing outside.

Which she did as quickly as she'd done everything else.

The gunship was more like a Huey than the ones I remembered from the games. It had was all curves and smooth sides, and seemed to be quite a bit larger in order to accommodate the squad bay. Of course, I don't think they came standard with a shattered canopy and insane pilots.
Most of the remaining True Sons seemed to get the message from Trena's irritated shouts, bolting back into the hotel proper as the heavy gun began to spit heavy slugs over our heads.

“Athame's azure! How the shit are we supposed to find out what they're up to if they all fucking escape?”

Sederis's voice was booming enough over the thing’s speakers that I flinched. “The pilot is sleeping in the back Gears. So little fucking faith.”

“ Fucking good reasons for that.” But her voice was a hell of a lot quieter. “You letting us on?”

She didn't bother responding, instead simply swinging the hovering machine around until there was only a meter or so gap between the garage and its bay. They both helped me to my feet, throwing my arms around their necks as they muttered a quick count down before rushing into a short jump.

Things got blessedly quiet for a while after that. Someone, Trena I thought, propped me up in a seat and tied me in.

I'm a little ashamed to admit that I blacked out around then. For how long I don't know, but I sure as fuck woke up when someone flicked my forehead hard enough to bounce my head off the wall behind it.

“ Fucking...” The groan was out before I could stop it, my eyes only slowly managing to focus on the Asari in front of me. We had apparently landed somewhere because the engines were out and we weren’t moving, but the side hatches were shut precluding me from having any idea where we were.

“Need to work on your endurance Kean.” Sederis, acting like we were best friends or something, turned and collapsed into the chair next to me. “Tell that RI bitch to stop taking it easy on you.”

“He's sparring with one of our mechanics.” Trena spoke in my defense. Turning my ahead around, I managed to find her and Ghai checking on a Turian in plain clothes. He'd been tied into place using most of the harnesses on the other side and was still very much unconscious. “ She could bounce you around in a non-biotic match.”

Sederis grunted. “Good. I don't want you fucking dying before I pay you back.”

Which sounded more like a threat than actual concern, but at least it was closer to what I'd expected from her.

“Thanks.” I muttered, wincing as I stretched my legs out a bit. “Did I miss anything?”

“Not really.” Scales shrugged. “Fucking just sitting next to our aircar, I-Sec's handling shit out there with her people. We're waiting for this thing to wake up.”

It took me a little while with my head still throbbing, but I managed to piece a few things together all the same. “ Hoping he knows which of your subordinates told them where to find you?”

“One of three. Normally I'd just fucking kill all three but some of them are actually competent and replacing them would be goddess damned annoying.”

I stared at her for a very long moment before glancing at Trena. The Sederis I'd spoken to before wouldn't have even hesitated. “Um..”
“Five prescriptions and a mind healing regimen.” Fingers grabbed my goatee, making me hiss in pain as she jerked my head around so that she could stare at me from a few fucking inches away. “You want your heart to stay inside your chest, right?”

My throat worked as I swallowed. “Understood ma'am.”

“Good.” She didn't fucking let go, instead just cocking her head. “You warned me about them, but I saved your life at the end. We're even for this. I owed you two from Korlus, and I repaid one of those by having my doctors patch up your leaks. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” It was an increasing fight not to try and jerk away from her damned eyes.

There was a long moment of silence before she let out an annoyed sound. “We were supposed to work this shit out over fucking food. What do you want? Sex? Money? Information? I fucking hate owing people.”

For the record, it was really fucking hard to keep a straight train of thought going when Jona Sederis fucking had me by the beard. “Information?”

Her eyes narrowed. “On?”

Fuck if I knew. Something useful.. something useful..“Um.. everything you have on the True Sons?”

She blinked slowly. “That's it?”

I couldn't fucking think of anything else when I was half dead from exhaustion and half terrified out of my wits. “Yes?”

Another slow blink. “Gears. Your human is fucking weird. And I still fucking think I owe him shit.”

“He grows on you.” Trena gave a strap a good tug before turning to regard us, a small grin on her face. “Like fucking algae.”

Sederis finally let me go, which let me shrink a bit into my seat. And let me get a hand up to properly give my friend a rude gesture. “Fuck you too scales. We hear anything yet from I-Sec?”

There was a grunt as my friend dropped into a seat of her own. “About what you'd expect. They blew the goddess damned restaurant apart with a fuck ton of firepower, then most of them bolted. The gunship and two squads apparently stayed back to finish off any survivors.”

“Not a half bad plan.” The Eclipse's CEO admitted, standing up before languidly stretching herself out. “Though they shouldn't have bothered leaving anyone behind. Plant some charges in the service ducts beneath the place instead and just bring it down after.”

“Do the hotel too. Just to be sure.” Trena added. “They were overconfident with a good plan, didn't fucking have a decent backup.”

I grimaced at the idea. That would have fucking worked too. And killed who the hell knows how many more people than had already been caught in the crossfire. “Your bodyguards?”

A touch of the less than stable anger appeared on her face again. “One had her throat slit. The other was shot at point blank range. Whoever fucking killed them was familiar enough that they didn't recognize them as a threat. When I catch them.. I'm going to fucking skin them and leave their hide from my mansion's door.”
I didn't think she was exaggerating either.

“Waking.” Ghai's rasp drew all three of our gazes as she stepped back from our guest. Sure enough his mandibles were twitching and his head was slowly shaking itself around.

Sederis let out an almost purring sound as she slipped past Trena and I, kneeling in front of the gang pilot. “Hello there.”

The Turian let out a rasping cough that seemed to catch in his throat as he realized who was in front of him. I couldn't tell how old he was, I hadn't been around enough Turians to even have a clue as to telling their age. But he sounded as painfully young as most of the True Sons that I'd seen. “Spirits...”

“Your spirits can't help you here.” A blue hand rose, almost caressing the side of his face. “This is Athame's planet, alien. Would you like to tell me which of my sisters sold me out?”

“I.. I don't know!”

She seemed to sigh. “Wrong answer.”

And then she ripped his right mandible off. Dark blue blood sprayed down from his cheek as he thrashed and screamed, stopping only when Sederis grabbed him by the throat and forced him to be still. Not that that stopped him from trying to move, especially when her other hand rose to begin fondling his other one.

“Going to answer this time?”

“Sorchai!”

“Sorchai T'Lars.” Sederis murmured, ignoring his increasing whimpers as her fingers wrapped around his remaining mandible and began to absently play with it. “Not her style. She has at least three snipers on her team who could have done the job. Were you promised my holdings on Omega in exchange for eliminating me?”

“I.. I don't know! I just heard the name!”

“What is she up to..” It was clear to me that she wasn't talking to him anymore, but apparently he didn't get the memo.

“I swear to the Spirits, I don't know! Please, just let me-” Increasing the pressure on his throat, she let go of his mandible with the other before reaching up to grab his fringe. I could guess what was coming, and glanced away before a vicious snapping sound echoed in the small space.

“Useless.” She sighed, and I heard her shifting around. “I hate fighting people competent enough to not tell their underlings critical information.”

Trena grunted. “You think T'lars was a target as well?”

“Anything is possible on this Athame cursed planet. Kean, you wanted information. I will send a runner in a few days with what I have on the True Sons.”

I turned to give her a nod. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the Turian's head hanging at an unnatural angle, blood still dribbling down from his mouth and torn face. “Thanks.”

“Gears. You get your school here back to that Batarian bitch's place. And don't fucking be late for our next meeting.” Sederis turned away from us, regarding the cooling corpse impassively. “I
might need some eyes on this outside of the Eclipse. So keep yours fucking open.”

Trena rolled her eyes before standing with a groan. I mostly managed to imitate her without any help, though she still grabbed my arm once I was upright. I tried to growl at her, but had to shut up when both my calf and my hip throbbed with the first few steps.

Ghai opened the door for us, leaving Sederis behind with the body as we emerged into the afternoon’s sunlight.

The plaza hadn't exactly been crowded before, but now it was absolutely packed. I-Sec white and Eclipse yellow predominated, both groups alternately patrolling and investigating the scene. Whining engines made me look up in time to see several more gunships whirling in slow patterns high above us.

We managed to make it most of the way towards their aircar before someone stopped us, an aristocratic I-Sec Captain who looked like she'd just smelled something terrible. “You three are needed for questioning.”

Scales gave her a low growl. “We're leaving. If you don't fucking like it, take it up with Sederis.”

The Asari’s lips actually pulled back from her teeth before she got herself under control. “Very well. I will forward the appropriate reports to Captain Vasir, hopefully she will be competent enough to get them to you.”

I felt my lips curl. “We'll be sure to repeat your words verbatim. I'm sure she'll find them.. amusing.”

Her jaw worked for a moment before she spun on a heel and stormed off. I probably shouldn't have mouthed off to authority like that, but I fucking liked Vasir. Plus, I knew for a fact that Vasir wouldn't have just let us leave like this. Sederis's presence or not.

“I fucking corrupt bitch.”

Ghai could only sigh while Trena barked out a laugh. “Fucking Illium ape. Still, starting to wonder if you aren't more fun when your pale ass is exhausted. You're more honest at least.”

I grunted as she helped me the rest of the way. She got in first, hopping into the back and letting me take shotgun. Another thing to silently thank her for, I didn't want to try bending my leg as much as it would take to get into the back.

The air inside of the car was silent even after Ghai brought the engine to life, easily weaving through the security traffic before heading for the traffic stream heading west.

“Ape..”

My head hit the rest behind it as I groaned. “Nynsi is going to kill me.”

Ghai grunted. “Maim. Probably.”

A hand rose to rub at my face. “Thank you Ghai. Always ready to be the clear day after a storm.”

“Welcome.”

Behind us Trena groaned. “Cieran, stop not talking about it and fucking ask me already.”

I sighed. “Trena. Your past is your past. I don't want to ask about it.”
“We just fucking fought with Jona Sederis, who called me by a nickname and all but said I'm one of hers.. and you still aren't asking me shit?”

“Now that you mention it.. yeah, that's about right.”

She didn't say anything for a long moment before snapping. “Why can't you fucking make this easy on me for once in your life?”

Turning a bit, I glared at Ghai. “I blame you. You're turning her into a drama queen.”

The stoic Asari blinked then turned and glared right back at me. “You.”

“I am going to strangle-” Anything else she had to say was cut off by a yelp when I hit the recline button on my chair, letting it roll back and more or less fall onto her.

Which left my head more or less below hers, giving me a good upside down view of her glare.

“Trena. I guessed that you were Eclipse a long fucking time ago, and made up my mind that I didn't care what you were. You drink too much, talk about sex constantly, and you're a bit of a tit. But you're still the first friend I made and you haven't fucking let me down yet. So I. Don't. Care. Is that so hard to understand?”

Her mouth opened before closing as she stared at me.


Scale's lips twitched a bit. “Thanks ape.”

Reaching up and back I patted her cheek as condescendingly as I could manage from that angle. “You're welcome scales.”

She growled and batted my limb away. “Keep that shit up at your own peril though.”

“Ominous. Are you going to massage my shoulders in thanks or what?”

Her eyes rolled but soon enough calloused hands were digging into my skin through my shirt. “Ass, fucking knew you were angling for something. Still.. Shaaryak is going to rip your fur off when get back, isn't she?”

I grimaced at the mental image, closing my eyes as her fingers pried at my muscles. “Probably.”

“Just don't let her kill you. Don't want have to ignore another fucking message.”

One of my eyes flicked back open in confusion. Message? “What?”

“Your heart stopped ape. Remember when you set up your fucking will before we went after Chacksin'? My heart nearly did fucking stop again. I had entirely forgotten about the stupid thing. “Deleted that shit as soon as I got it because you weren't fucking dead.”

I forced my eye shut and tried to focus entirely on the calming motions of her hands. Fuck. How the fuck had I forgotten about my fucking will? Everything that I knew about what was coming, and all of the awkward shit that would have been raised if she'd actually read it.

Fuck. I hadn't dodged a bullet, I'd fucking dodged a dreadnought round. I couldn't even imagine the interrogation she'd be laying into me if she had read it.

Or worse. If she'd given it to Aethyta.
Ugh.

“I'll fix it.”

“You fucking better.” She growled, making me wince as she found a knot in my left shoulder. “I was annoyed as fuck.”

“Panicking.” Ghai corrected, her ruined voice amused. “Trashed our room.”

The banter at least worked away some of the initial panic. “Trena.. I didn't know you cared so much.”

Warm hands slid down from my shoulder to my throat. “Keep fucking talking ape.”

I held up my hands in mock surrender, making a mental note to fucking get rid of that document. Or at least make sure that my omni-tool had a timer on it or something so that it didn't kick it off the moment I 'died'.

Of course.. in order to do that I'd have to survive what was waiting at the mansion. Maybe I'd be lucky and she turned in early, or Balak had done something stupid enough to distract her.

One of these days something had to go right.. right?

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Next up is Chapter 7: The Argument

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was surprisingly hard to write.. got stuck a few times before managing to get into a flow. Hopefully it turned out all right and people enjoy Sederis blasting things into tiny pieces. Seems strange but we're already at the halfway point of this act, meaning we've only got six more chapters to go. Still so much to get through, but should be a fun ride.

A lot of people seemed surprised by the True Sons coming back to Illium, but I did foreshadow it a bit in Act 1. They're still very much a player in the Terminus, particularly on Omega, and will be involved in the story for a while moving forwards. But as is noted.. these aren't the gang kids given crap guns and told to fight or die anymore.

Also, there is now a poll up on my profile looking for people's opinions. Basically I'm either going to be doing a short side story, or making another separate POV as the interlude for AR:3. Either way, I want to know who people would like to see as the main character. Right now I'm looking at Nynsi Shaaryak, Trena again, or the Matriarch's Chosen One. It would probably be about the same length as Trena's interlude in this story. If you want to see one from someone else, PM me and I'll see if
I can come up with a plot. If I can, I'll add them.

Long story short, please vote if you like, or don't if you don't like.

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
“Final approach.” Ghai’s rough voice brought my out of the half-sleep that I’d fallen into.

“Already?” I covered a yawn as I struggled to sit up. It got easier when I remembered to return the seat to its upright position, which earned me a groan of relief from Trena. “Sorry scales.”

“You needed the rest ape. Especially with what's fucking waiting.”

My lips twisted a bit. I could have done without the reminder, even if it was an accurate forecast. Below us the slow downtown of Khar’shan Minor rolled past, the mansion and its grounds becoming prominent out the front window as we approached. Ghai decelerated a bit more than was required, giving us plenty of time to get a good look into the garage before we landed.

Trena scooted to the center of the backseat before leaning forwards, resting an arm an each chair as she grunted at the nearly empty space ahead. “It's too early for Illyan's crew to be done right?”

“Yeah.. not a good first sign.” I winced as I caught sight of a single form stepping away form a console, it's arms behind its back as it moved to stand next to Ghai's designated spot. “And there's a bad second one.”

“You sure? She's not trashing shit.”

“If she was breaking things I'd know she was pissed at me personally.” My head shook tightly as we drew closer. “Rigid control means she's pissed professionally. And probably hiding the personal bit. It would be easier if she was throwing things.”

Scales grunted. “You want us to back you?”

It was tempting, but I shook my head again. “No. You two haven't done anything to make her angry. Go ahead and get out once we land, I'll handle it.”

Ghai glanced at me she finally brought us to a slow landing, none of us quite looking Nynsi’s way. “Sure?”

No. “Yeah.”

“Luck.” The engine cut out, and she was out of her door almost before the hum had stopped. Trena still didn’t look quite sure, but allowed her bondmate to drag her out. I heard them exchange tense greetings with Nyn, who jerked her head in a 'get out' motion.
I gave them a decent head start before popping my own door, grimacing again at my lack of a cane. It made getting out a bit painful, though my Tarath'shan noticeably made no efforts to help me. The motions gave me plenty of time to realize how dirty and battered my once fine clothing was, and there was some Turian blood on my right boot just for flavor.

In contrast she was still perfectly dressed in her formal wear, the pristine whites serving to remind me of what kind of conversation this was going to be.

“Tarath'shan.”

Her voice was as cold as ice. “Harath'krem.”

I winced. “My apologies for not getting your wine.”

There was a low, muted growl before she spoke. “I gathered that I would not be receiving the wine, or the pleasant dinner that its mention conjured, when Captain Vasir arrived. Apparently she had been attempting to contact me for nearly two hours. When I questioned Rane'li, she indicated that Chen had informed her that we were under a blackout by my order.”

Shit. I definitely hadn't told Chen to tell Rane that. Even if it would keep her out of trouble, it would put him into it.

She continued on before I could interject. “When Captain Vasir and I questioned him, he quite readily admitted that you had told him to place my mansion on lock-down without informing me. The Captain then brought me up to date on a shootout involving Jona Sederis and three very familiar figures in downtown Nos Astra. Strangely, it seemed to occur not more than a few minutes after I had departed.”

“I didn't want you involved.” I tried to at least defend myself. “You didn't have armor or your weapons.”

“And you are wearing nothing more than light plating and are armed with a pathetic back-up tech launcher and an old pistol.” Her tone was scathing. “And you can barely run for more than a minute without nearly collapsing in pain. I am not a child, Harath'krem. I am your fucking Tarath'shan. While I can appreciate the sentiment behind your actions, those actions themselves were completely out of line!”

Really, the worst thing wasn't the cursing. Or the shouting. It was the fact that she was more or less entirely correct. The smart thing would have been to warn Trena and Sederis, and then gotten the hell out of there myself and told her what was going on. But that would have left scales and Ghai in danger alongside a psychopath. Who was apparently friendly with them, but I also didn't doubt that the Eclipse's leader wouldn't have hesitated to leave them behind if they'd been injured.

My shoulder rose as my head dipped. “I wasn't going to leave Trena, and I didn't want you in danger. So I.. improvised.”

“No. Improvisation is what you do with your machines.” A hand waved dismissively towards my work area. “What you did was.. was.. Pillars grant me strength, I can't even find the proper words to describe this debacle.”

I blinked. “Debacle?”

All of her eyes narrowed as they usually did when she couldn't believe that I didn't understand. “Cieran. You are my Harath'krem, and you effectively just announced to everyone here that you believe yourself to hold authority over me. Not some authority either, you essentially left me a prisoner inside of my own home! Commander Balak in particular was extraordinarily smug when
he implied that I would have to declare you Reyja.”

It took me more than a few moments to process that. I mean, I'd known that she would be pissed, and that I'd at least have been mildly insulting her by Batarian standards. But going so far as to exile me and wipe my name from the Shaaryak family's list of Harath'krem was a bit much. I thought so anyway.

“That I did it to protect you doesn't matter?”

She let a seething breath out through her teeth. “Knowing why you did it is the only reason I haven't already hit you. I understand that you are a human, and not a Batarian, but you aren't stupid! More than that, we've spent most of the last year going over things like this so you cannot even claim ignorance! You should have understood the political considerations, never-mind the insult!”

I grimaced. The Balak angle was one that I'd missed entirely, and really shouldn't have. I knew that the asshole was always looking for ways to get under Nyn's skin and I'd just gift wrapped him something he could hit her with for months. And that wasn't even going into the attacks she'd probably take from the Patriarch's Council once the Commander got word of it back home.

Worse, my reasoning was entirely insufficient. A human woman or an Asari might have been annoyed at what I'd done, but they could have also been flattered at knowing the lengths I'd go to keep them safe. A batarian woman though.. especially one of Nyn's rank and level? I might as well have just skipped the subterfuge and slapped her across the face in front of Balak and the entire mansion's staff.

In short.. I'd fucked up. More than a little bit.

“My apologies, Tarath'shan.” I dipped my head to the left in remonstration, “I shall endeavor not to make such a significant cultural mistake in the future.”

“Yes. You will.” Her shoulders rolled as she let out another hissing breath. “Don't think that a simple apology will make this better.”

A muscle in my cheek twitched. “I don't.”

“Good. You will be finding a new room to sleep in, obviously. Most of the spare rooms have been taken by Commander Balak's people, so you will have to find someone's couch.” I'd have to talk to Trena then. Or maybe Illyan, she and her sister had taken Ghai's old suite. “While I will not declare you Reyja, largely because I love you and this is the first time you have made this kind of mistake, I am still curtailing your authority. Rane and Chen have both been informed that they may consider your suggestions at their discretion, but that you can no longer give them orders. I will be telling Ghai the same thing.”

“I understand, Tarath'shan.”

There was an annoyed pause, and I tried not to wince again. Apparently I wasn't supposed to speak during this part. I ducked my head a bit more and waited for her to continue.

“I will still allow you to direct Illyan and the mechanics, if for no other reason than you do have skill there. I also expect you to revisit the Harath'krem's code, in particular the lines struck into the Pillars of Strength and Unity.” Some of the anger seemed to finally drain out, her posture slumping a bit before she regained control and stiffened her spine again. “If, in a few weeks, your behavior has been commendable, I will allow you to court me again. And I would expect it to be done as tastefully and properly as your prior actions.”
“I understand Tarath’shan.”

Her feet slowly brought her closer, her dark eyes searching my face before she sighed. “I love you Cieran Kean, but you just kicked sand into my eyes. If I hadn't had these past few hours to calm myself..”

I grimaced. “I'm sorry Nyn. It won't happen again.”

“I expect that it will not.” Giving me a last look, she slowly turned away before making her way towards the exit. “I expect a full report on what happened by tomorrow evening so that I might examine it during the next mission.”

My eyes blinked at her back. “You're leaving again?”

“This should be the final assignment for the SIU team while they are here.” One of her shoulders twitched as she paused in the doorway. “Another run to Erinle, the government there is offering lucrative trade agreements if the Commander is able to deal with several new groups that have attempted to take residency in the outposts that we just cleared.”

That hadn't taken long. But then again, with how chaotic things were in the Terminus right now it wasn't all that surprising.

“I'll have it ready for you.”

Nynsi glanced back at me. “Do so. We leave the morning after next. I will have more instructions for you tomorrow once I have decided who is making the trip with me and who is remaining here.”

My head tilted politely again. “As you say, Tarath'shan.”

Dark eyes glinted at me for a long moment before she dipped her head slightly to the right for a brief second, and then she was gone.

Well.

Shit.

Very much wishing that I had my cane to lean on, I turned and limped my way over to my work area. As soon as I could I collapsed onto a bench, staring at the neatly organized piles of machinery without really seeing them.

On Korlus, I'd gotten pissed at her, and she'd gotten pissed at me. I'd definitely had a reason then, that time it had been her making the cultural mistake in assuming that I'd be able to just get over it like a Batarian Harath'krem might have. Trena's words about me being angry enough to nearly leave her hadn't been far off either, especially in my initial reaction. And her reaction.. I'd stung her pride and her ego and she'd reacted poorly, even she had more or less admitted as much over the last few months.

But now I'd unwittingly done the same right back to her. I didn't doubt for a moment that I'd have been kicked out the second we had gotten back if not for our romantic entanglement. And this time I hadn't just hit her self-worth, I'd gone way above and beyond that. I'd ripped away her control over not only myself and the situation, but her own life. To add further insult I'd deprived her of the information, and thus the power, to make her own decisions. I'd denied her any chance to even try and get out of the gilded cage that I'd trapped her in.

Groaning I buried my face in my hands before rubbing my skin furiously. “Shit.”
There was a quiet knock against a wall, which was really the only thing that stopped me from having a heart attack when Rane spoke. “I'm sorry. I wanted to warn you but she kept the blackout in place until you returned.”

“No, it's.. I mean..” she let out a ragged breath, closing her eyes for a much longer moment as she seemed to force herself to think. “Pillars You don't have many good options.”

It was my turn to blink. “Rane?”

“I remember.” I spoke slowly, trying to see where she was going with this. “So? She knows I wouldn't.”

“She also knew that you understood our culture and hadn't made even minor misjudgments in over six months.” Copper skin darkened further, approaching a brown. “And I am a lowborn who.. hasn't exactly kept my attraction secret. Illyan has flirted openly with you in the last few weeks, and Trena's sexual appetite is well known.”

“For other Asari.”

A hand waved impatiently. “Yes, but you have also known her for longer than you've known Shaaryak and made it clear that you aren't exactly impartial when it comes to her. And it wouldn't be the first time that she and Ghai invited another to their bed. You could hardly fault your Tarath'shan for being jealous about your friendship, or for her being worried that it might become something more.”

It wouldn't, but when she phrased it that way I could also see why Nyn might become paranoid.
about that kind of thing. Especially as... I groaned. “And that I admitted to running into that crap because scales was in trouble probably didn't help.”

She grimaced. “It probably didn't, no.”

“Chen?”

“He doesn't have a suite, and.. he and Feai have started spending time together. I think its helping them both get past Korlus.”

Fuck. “And I don't have the authority to kick any Hegemony assholes out of their rooms. Which leaves me with two Asari and you, and any of you three would make this worse.”

“I could..” It took her a ragged breath before she could continue. “Give you my room and take Illyan's couch, or see if she and her sister could share a bed.”

“Rane, I'm not going to turn you out of your room for my own fuckup. I'll set something up out here and-”

She surprised me with a low growl that cut me off. “Cieran. For once would you stop being noble and let me do something nice for you?”

My mouth actually dropped open slightly, and she promptly darkened again in embarrassment. If her head went any further down and to the left she'd probably have broken it on her own.

“I'll just.. ask Illyan then.” Before I could say anything she fled as quickly as her legs could carry her.

Well.

Shit.

Again.

Not only had I apparently just fucked up my relationship with Nynsi, I'd just made Rane's crush worse. Somehow.

“Today just isn't my fucking day.” I spoke into the empty air. “Just.. had to get that our there. So.. Athame, God, Pillars.. whichever one of you is up there, I could really use a break. Just saying.”

Shockingly, none of them responded.

“Worth a shot.”

The smart thing to do would probably be to go after Rane and try and talk her down. I knew there were field cots somewhere in the armory, or maybe in storage. I could easily just throw one of those up right here and be fine with it. But with my fucking luck I'd probably trip and break my leg, or run into Balak, or something else equally shitty would happen.

It seemed safest to just sit there. Yeah. Much safer.

I groaned after staring at nothing for a bit longer. I couldn't even make the lies sound believable in my own head.

Honestly I don't know why I wasn't going after her. Probably because I'd have no idea what to say even if I did manage to limp fast enough to catch her. With how my day had been going I'd either find a way to insult her enough that our friendship would end, or make her crush so hard
that she would forget her caste and try to start something.

Sighing, I spun back around to stare at my workbench. Trena's latest pet project sprawled across it in pieces. She'd probably hit me for working on it without her, and hit me again for not following her plans, but I needed to do something that I was actually good at.

Bringing my omni-tool up, my fingers flicked through the programs before I found the extranet's version of the radio. A few moments later and classical Asari music was filtering out of the small speaker, the ancient singer doing her best to wash away some of my ills.

The mood set, I cracked my fingers, picked up the thin metal tube that would be the core of a new cane, and got to work.

All of the pistol parts were swept aside after a moment's consideration, replaced by the back-up tech launcher once I managed to yank it off my belt. A few minutes of work was all that it took to rip the rectangular box open, revealing the simplistic interior. The remaining mines were removed and set aside so that I could better contemplate the actual launching mechanism. It wasn't much really, just a tiny rail assist that first spun the mine up before spitting it out.

The real question was how to fit it into the cane, preferably without making it stupidly obvious that I had done something like that.

“And still need room to run the wiring down.” I muttered to myself. “Need to at least be able to set the detonation range, even if I won' be able to designate a target properly.”

Pushing everything out of the way, I grabbed Trena's tablet. Creating a new copy of her plans to make sure she didn't get too pissed off, I started measuring the parts that I had and comparing them virtually. It would be tight.. but possible. I wouldn't be able to use the pipe she'd set aside though, I'd need a slightly wider one in order to properly fit the mines themselves. And that would also give me the room I needed to fit everything, plus a reasonable number of reloads.

Rane came back perhaps an hour later, though this time she was accompanied by Trena and Ghai. Which was a bit of a relief, probably for her as well. I don't know if I could have taken another awkward conversation.

“Ape.” Scales' voice was predictably low as she caught sight of what I was doing. “You better not have fucked my shit up.”

I waved the new metal tube that I'd grabbed, “Your crap is still here scales, calm your ass down. Just can't have your cane being the most useful one around.”

“What the fuck is better than a hand cannon built into one?”

Rane's voice was amused as she moved closer, her lower eyes glancing over the pieces that I'd left scattered over the table. “A tech launcher built into one?”

There was a beat before Trena spoke again. “Fuck, that is better. Where's the schematic?”

My head jerked to the left. “On your pad.”

Not wasting any time, scales quickly grabbed the device before collapsing into her own chair and flicking through what I'd put together.

Trying to focus on lining up how I'd want the launcher to sit, I spoke without looking at Rane. “How'd your talk with Illyan go?”
“She was agreeable to the idea. At least, once I again made it clear that I would not be sharing her bed.” Rane groaned a bit. “That admittedly took a while.”

“And you might want to lock her room's door.” Trena didn't look up from the blueprints. “Or you might find yourself in her bed anyway. Not saying she'd do crap without your permission, but I'm pretty sure she's missed just having someone warming her beach.”

Rane and I both glanced at her, six eyes blinking confusedly at the slang.

Thankfully Ghai was able to translate, even if she looked annoyed at having to do so. “She likes having someone in bed with her, even if nothing sexual is happening.”

Ah. “We really need to find her someone.”

“You're taken, Tris is seeing a Turian, and Rane's not interested.” Trena grunted, a finger slowly tracing something on the screen. “And it was fun having her around, just.. haven't been in the mood for threesomes lately. That pretty much exhausts the pool she's interested in.”

“What about what's his name.” Grabbing one of my tools, I carefully began to pry the launcher apart so that I could reconfigure it to best fit. “Ferai? He's Feai's brother isn't he?”

Rane shook her head slightly, picking up some of my custom mines to examine them. “He is. He's also alternating between two of the servants on staff.”

The banter was doing wonders at helping me not think about crap, and I made a mental note that I owed all three of them. Again. “That pretty much exhausts everyone I know that she might be interested in. Scales, what about your conquests?”

“What about them?”

“You think any of them would be good for her?”

“No.. well.. hm.” She tilted her head slightly as she glanced at me. “Not by name, but we could take her out to Forever once it re-opens.”

I blinked. I hadn't realized that Aethyta had finally gotten around to fixing up the old bar. “When's that happening?”

“Three, four days. Don't fucking know, somewhere around then. Don't cut that edge too much or you'll have a bitch of a time mounting it.”

“I know what I'm doing scales.” Though I still was exceedingly careful as I moved ahead. “Sounds like a plan then. Rane, you in?”

The lowborn bit her lip slightly. “Are you sure you want to invite me, all things considered?”

“We are friends.” I reminded her patiently. “And I'm currently persona non grata, can't get much worse. Besides, everyone will be off on their new mission anyways.”

“Me.” Ghai practically groaned the word. “Cieran, Trena.”

“I'll keep her in line, don't worry.”

There was a low growl from her bondmate. “I don't fucking need an escort Ghai.”

All three of us stopped what we were doing to stare at her.
“Go fuck yourselves.”

I felt my lips twitch. “You sure you want to be insulting your bondmate when you’ve only got two nights until she’s gone for a week again?”

Said bondmate gave me a tiny grin before crossing her arms and pointedly looking away from Trena.

“Ghai?” It was totally worth it to see scales blinking slowly. “Don't fall for his shit!”

“You know.” Rane leaned a hip against the workbench, her head cocking a bit to the right in amusement. “Illyan is rather lonely Ghai. And there are cots around here somewhere, I'm sure Trena could make do if you wanted someone else in your bed for the next few nights.”

The stoic Asari looked intrigued by that idea.

Trena, meanwhile, was staring at us both as if we had just thrown her to the wolves. “Fucking.. shit! Ape, I come out here to help you not think about crap, and this is how you pay me back? And Rane.. Athame's ass!”

I snorted, turning back to my new project. “Bitch bitch bitch.. such a drama queen scales.”

“I swear to the goddess that I'm going to mmph!”

Rane quickly turned around, all of her eyes fixed on what I was doing. I sighed, guessing what had just happened. “They're making out aren't they?”

“Yes.”

“Ghai, at least take her to bed first. And maybe make her shower, you don't know where she's been.”

There was a moment of scuffling before scales managed to growl again. “Ape, I'm going to beat you within.. Ghai, let me fini-fucking ow! Watch the crest!”

My companion risked a quick glance. “She's dragging her out by her scalp.”

Not bothering to look, I brought up a hand to wave vaguely in their direction. Trena's cursing continued on for a few moments, until the whooshing of the door sliding shut cut her off.

“Pillars..”

I grunted before lowering my head to get a better angle on the tube. “You heading to bed as well, or you want to help?”

She hesitated before her voice turned a bit more formal. “Harath’krem.. I know that you enjoy working, but you did have a very long day. I think you had best get some sleep. Especially given that Tris will likely be less than impressed when you tell her of how you did.”

My fingers froze for a moment before I groaned. “Trena told you. And after all this, she's probably going find Illyan before the session and con her into going all out on me.”

“Probably.”

“All right.. help me clean up a bit?”

“Of course.”
It didn't take us all that long. Mostly because I didn't really care about keeping this particular area
organized, so long as everything was properly shut down and all of the tools cleaned off. It was a
pleasantly quiet process, at this point Rane knew the work area about as well as I did, so she
wasn't in need of direction. And despite my efforts to get her to be more expressive, she still
maintained the universal lowborn trait of speaking only when she was sure that it was all right that
she do so.

Well. Exiled lowborns on Illium had that ability. Military lowborns from the Hegemony
apparently had no self control over their mouths, but that was a separate thing.

It wasn't until we had left the garage and were slowly making our way towards her room that I
realized an issue. “Fuck. I don't have any of my stuff from Nyn's room.”

Rane seemed to grimace. “She had the staff deliver it to Illyan's. I think she expected you to end
up there. I had them move it to mine and alert her to the fact that I would be staying with the
sisters and giving you my room.”

“Oh.” I limped a few more steps. “Thanks. I don't suppose they delivered a cane?”

“Honestly I don't know. I can check for you when we get there.”

I waved a hand, “I can handle it. Just still annoyed that I dropped my other one at the damned
hotel. Ghai had to haul me around.”

Her lips thinned a bit as she gave me a tight glance with her lower eyes. “Would the cane have
really made a difference?”

My initial response was that, yes, of course it would have. Forcing myself to swallow that, I
actually gave it some thought before grimacing. “Probably not.”

“At least you are being honest with yourself now.” She turned away, pointedly not looking at me
before adding, “Maybe you should have thought about that beforehand.”

“Rane.. I appreciate the thought, but I got enough of that from Nyn.”

Her fingers curled slightly but she managed to get the next bit out without deferring. “Obviously
not, or you wouldn't have rushed into a fight as you are. There are people who would be very
upset if you died.”

It was my turn to flinch and look away. “Rane..”

She sucked in a ragged breath before forcing her tone towards the jovial. “After all, it would be
very annoying to have to find a new.. what was the phrase you taught Trena.. a new piece of eye
candy?”

I had to stop moving because all I could do was stare at her again. She carried on a few more steps
before stopping, very much not turning around. “Did you just.. call me eye candy?”

I couldn't see her face but the back of her neck had darkened entirely in embarrassment, and her
voice was almost a mumble when she spoke. “I like the fur.”

“Apparently.” My head shook slowly. “You're going to have to tell me why once you can actually
look at me while we talk like this.”

If it was possible, what skin I could see darkened further, and she seemed to hunch in on herself a
bit. “Can.. can I just get you to my room so that I can run away again?”

Bemused in spite of myself, and knowing that saying anything further would probably make the girl bolt before I could finish the sentence, I started moving again. She escorted me the rest of the short way, pointedly not looking in my direction with any of her eyes, opened the door for me, and muttered something vaguely formal before not quite running in the direction of Illyan's room.

I could only stare at her back as she fled, pointedly keeping my eyes above her waist, before shaking my head a final time and heading into her room. The report could wait, I needed fucking sleep.

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**Next up is Chapter 8: The Departure**

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**Chapter End Notes**

So. Cieran totally forgot about the driving factors in Batarian personalities and severely fucked up in the process. Nynsi is livid, but they have some time apart so that she can cool off, which is probably a good thing. And Trena, Ghai, and Rane remain his friends and very much themselves. Also, more tinkering and a potential new weapon.

The rest of the act will be occurring in a relatively short time frame (story wise), so expect things to start moving at a fairly frenetic pace moving forwards.

For those who might have missed it, there is a poll up on my profile concerning whose point of view will be used for either a short story or Ronin's interlude. Please vote if you like, or don't if you don't like, it will remain up until Terminus is completed.

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

Chapter 8: The Departure

“Our council of managing this shit until Nynsi gets back is hereby called to order.” I dropped the tablet onto the dining room table, the thing’s clatter not nearly as impressive as I’d hoped it would be. “We have three-”

“Ape. Shut up.” Trena growled as she stared into her tea, her head held in both hands. “Fucking hangover.”

Rane gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Maybe you and Ghai shouldn't have had so many drinks last night.”

“Do me a favor and ask your damned pillars to send you back in time to tell me that yesterday.” Scales groaned. “Fucking pills aren't even helping. I don't even remember the sex.”

“Good.” I shook my head before collapsing into my own chair. “Because we didn't need to hear about it. And you might want to start drinking again. You're liaising with Sederis to quote-evaluate the threat from the True Sons-unquote.”

“We get your intel today. Fucking liaising done.”

I couldn't really argue with that. “Sounds good to me. Rane, you're in charge of managing the mansion's defenses.”

All of her eyes blinked irritably. “With what forces? A few cooks and janitors who've only held a gun once or twice in their lives? We're the only ones here with any combat experience and you aren't exactly up for a fight.”

“Speak from the Pillars Rane. Make sure the automated systems are up to spec, all you can really do.” One of my shoulders rose and fell. “I tried to get Nynsi to at least leave us a few commandos, or even one of Chen's sub-teams, but no luck. She's pretty dismissive of the threat to us personally.”

Trena forced a bloodshot eye to look up at me. “Why not just ask the fucking galaxy to attack us. What are you doing ape, supervising?”

My lips thinned a bit. “Technically I don't have any authority over either of you right now, which is why she divided up the jobs. My assignment is to work with Captain Vasir to ensure that Balak's people survive the next week. Apparently she's been excusing the disappearances as the price of business for being on Illium but that's worn pretty thin at this point. So no more vigilante raids.”
Scales grunted before letting her eyes droop shut again. “She want I-Sec surrounding the place?”

“She apparently promised Commander Balak that all of his people would still be there when they got back, so yeah.” I twitched a shoulder. “I called the hotel, the manager was very apologetic about the strange new virus that’s forced her to put the place into quarantine for.. oh, at least a week.”

Rane snorted before hurriedly burying her smile beneath a mock serious nod. “And I-Sec?”

“Already redeployed.” In my opinion it solved our problems quite easily. The district and its vulnerable population were kept safe, Balak’s people weren’t allowed to leave the hotel to cause even more problems.. everybody won.

Well, except for the Hegemony idiots stuck in their rooms for the next week, but if they weren’t complete and total assholes it wouldn’t have been necessary in the first place.

So fuck ’em.

“A few officers will slap down any idiots that try to wander out. The rest are going back to their usual patrol routes to their eternal gratitude. Captain Vasir wanted to take me out to dinner, I directed her to the hotel manager. It was her idea anyway.” My lips twitched. “I think they’re going out to one of those high price places in Nos Astra tonight.”

“Fucking unfair.” Trena apparently wasn’t done grousing. Not that she really ever was. “That bitch is going to be getting some and I can't even remember last night.”

Rane sighed. “Trena, just drink your tea please. Cieran, if that's the official agenda, what are we actually doing?”

I shrugged before leaning back in my chair. “No idea. Probably going to Forever with Illyan tonight, doing some work on my projects. Really all we officially have to do at this point is go over whatever Sederis can get us. So five or six days of taking it easy.”

Scales slowly set her tea down and gave me a bleary glare. “You mean I could have fucking kept sleeping?”

“Nope, because I had to wake up to have Nyn lecture me on what we just went over. There’s a human saying for this; Misery loves company.”

The stocky Asari let out an irritated growl, and bits of light actually appeared around her arms. “Ape.”

“Go back to sleep scales. We'll wake you up when we're going to go find Illyan someone.”

She kept glaring at me. “Why do I put up with you?”

I blinked slowly at the stupid ass question. “I'm building you a cane that shoots incinerate mines.”

“Oh. Right.” Her head shook slowly before she carefully stood up. “If anyone wakes me up before noon, this building had better fucking be on fire.”

And with that, she limped out of the dining room. The door had barely swung shut behind her before it was shoved open, two new exhausted looking Asari strolling in.

“Boss. Rane.” Illyan covered a yawn as her joints cracked, already making a beeline for the food.

“Cieran. Miss Rane’li.” Erana echoed, slowing as she stared almost lustfully at the drink in my hand. “Can I.?”

“One cup of tea Erana. And no demonjuice until noon.”

She gave me a pouting look, which faded into a dejected sigh when I didn't alter my expression in the slightest. “Yes sir.”

“Illyan, if your sister shows up on a caffeine high I'm not paying for your drinks tonight.”

“Whrea dres?” The tall Asari turned, a piece of bread dangling from her mouth. Her cheeks tinged a bit purple at her sister's giggle, a hand reaching up to yank the food free. “What drinks?”

“Rane's tired of you hitting on her, so we're taking you to Forever and getting you very drunk.” I supplied, setting my now empty cup aside. “And preferably sending you home with someone that will occupy you for a while.”

“Oh.” She blinked a few times. “Um. Boss, you don't have to-”

“Illyan.” Rane interjected, slowly standing as she collected her plates. “Are you saying no to free drinks and the company of your friends?”

I had to hand it to her, she hit the guilt buttons pretty well. Illyan's enormous stature seemed to shrink a bit, “Of course not. Um, when are we going? And where?”

Rane glanced at me, and I could only shrug as I rose. “Forever. And probably whenever we feel like this evening. Don't really have much to actually do today.”

A broad hand tossed her half eaten bread onto a plate before loading it with more food while her sister impatiently tried to get a new pot of tea to brew faster. “Never been there. They have good drinks?”

“It was scales' preferred haunt.” Nudging my chair back in with a foot, I tossed the cup onto my plate before grabbing it all. “So yeah. They do. Well, did before the True Sons trashed the place. I can't imagine that they didn't restock with anything but top of the line stuff.”

“Works for me then. See you in the garage boss?”

“See you there.” Moving around the table, I followed Rane towards the door, tossing my dishes into the designated bin as I passed it. “And watch your sister!”

Her reply was lost as the door swung shut behind me, probably for the best. After all, I hadn't been kidding when I'd threatened to not pay for her tonight.

Of course, with Trena having slunk back to her bed, and with the sisters in the dining hall behind us, I was left with only Rane as company. Which remained rather awkward. She'd spent pretty much all of yesterday avoiding me and blushing furiously whenever I'd caught sight of her. It was probably a combination of the fact that she'd tried openly flirting with me.. and the fact that I was sleeping in her bed, even if she wasn't there.

I'd tried to sleep on her couch instead to make things a little less awkward, but the damn thing was obviously a Xerol purchase. It was fancy, looked expensive, and was about as comfortable as a broken wooden board. I already had a requisition order in the system to replace the stupid thing, and to have the servants look for any matches in other people's rooms, but that hardly helped me
right now.

Instead I was left sleeping in a bed that smelled strongly of the vanilla scented leaves she often
smoked, with an undercurrent of something earthier. It wasn't unpleasant in the slightest.. hence
the awkwardness on my part.

It would have been a hell of a lot easier if it had been.

“So.” I was still moving slowly without a cane, though I hoped to rectify that today. “Are you
going to go pass out as well?”

“Do I look as hungover as our friend? You know I don't drink with Trena anymore.”

My head tilted to the left slightly. “No, but given that we don't really have anything critical
occurring until this evening..”

“You two may not, but I have to check over the defensive networks and the mansion's VI.” She
shook her head, eyes distant as she went through her mental list. “And I should probably make
sure that the auto-turrets have been properly maintained.”

“Rane, you don't have to do all of that this instant you know. It is possible for you to take some
time to yourself.”

“Once I get those tasks done-”

One of my hands cut the air ahead of us. “You'll find more tasks to do, even if they don't really
need to be done. Athame's ass Rane, what do we have to do to get you to relax?”

“I'll be going out with you three tonight.” She defended herself as we approached the garage.
“That counts as relaxing.”

I stopped beside the door, sighing as Rane glanced away from me. “Run your checks on the
systems. After that, I'd appreciate it if you stopped by the garage.”

She turned back, blinking slowly. She knew me well enough at this point to recognize that I
normally didn't give up that easily. “Cieran?”

It was my turn to shift away, “If you insist on working, I have something that you can help with, if
you don't mind.”

“No.. no, of course I can help.” Her voice betrayed her obvious confusion at my sudden
capitulation, and a definitive note of wariness. Which only proved that she was definitely getting
to know me better. “I'll.. see you then.”

“See you.” Slipping through the door before she could gather herself enough to ask pointed
questions that I’d have to evade. After all.. it wasn't as if I what I wanted her help with actual
work, more getting her to help herself by actually taking some time off.

The garage was empty, my footsteps echoing as I made my way over to my projects. I'd let Illyan
tinker a bit with the exoskeleton, but it remained little more than an partially completed skeleton
hanging on its racks. She'd also had some of her people ripping apart the shield, getting rid of the
omni-tech panels we'd never been able to get to work. In theory that would lighten it enough to
make it usable. At least, if our math was right.

While she and her guys had been working on that, I'd spent most of yesterday working on my
new cane. I was hoping to have it at least in an alpha stage by the end of the day, which more or
less just meant that I'd be able to use it as a cane. And if I was really, really lucky the mine would actually launch properly. Because if it didn't I'd be stuck with an active incinerate without the benefit of my linked omni-tool to shut the thing down.

Grimacing at the image of the thing blowing up in my hands, I dropped into my chair and stared at the long pipe. Drumming my fingers once, I blew out a slow breath and started working.

The staff started drifting in over the next hour. I greeted them cordially, but waved off their offers of assistance. For the first time in a while a few of the midcaste managers had actually sent their vehicles in for work, and I'd rather not have them bitching to Nynsi that they hadn't been promptly taken care of.

Thankfully Illyan seemed to have taken my warnings to heart, because Erana was more or less stable when the pair of them arrived. While the larger sister started barking the day's order of business to her team, the young maiden drifted in my direction.

“Cieran.. um, do you have anything you need me to do?”

I glanced up at the girl. “Don't you have reports to compile for Nyn?”

“Well, yes.” She hedged, biting her lips a bit as she obviously fought back a nervous babble attack. “But I have until she gets back to do those and it doesn't take me that long.”

“So they're boring and you're hoping I have something more fun for you to do?”

Her cheeks tinged with purple.

“Sorry Erana, I don't really have anything since you finished the inventory... wait. How's your coding?”

Dark blue eyes blinked a few times. “It's.. all right. Did you need me to program something?”

My lips curled. “Easier. I need you to run some checks for Rane to make sure the mansion's defenses haven't been corrupted. Think you can handle it?”

Erana frowned in thought, still nibbling on her lip. “I think so. You think someone might have compromised it?”

“No really, but Rane insists on checking. If you can help her finish before lunch I'll let you have whatever you want to drink tomorrow.”

And just like that, I had her. The way to Erana's heart lay entirely in feeding her sugar and caffeine addictions. Offer her demonjuice, human made sodas, or even just tea as a reward and she'd work her little blue ass off.

“Is she in the conference room then?” Her nervousness vanished, her entire posture becoming positively eager to get started.

“Should be.” The first word was barely out of my mouth before she was moving, already bringing her omni-tool up. Probably to review everything she could before she actually arrived. “Have fun!”

“Bye Cieran, thanks!”

Snorting, I could only shake my head before returning my attention to the reloading mechanism. Before I could do more than pick up one of the thin rods I was going to use to guide the excess
mines to the launcher itself, a very impressive hip leaned against my workbench.

“Seriously boss. All that crap this morning, and what, two hours later you're offering my sister drugs.”

I rolled my eyes before pointedly reaching around her to grab a few bolts from a container. “You're acting like I just offered her dust and black sand.”

“It might as well be.” Illyan muttered.

She stayed right there for the next five minutes, apparently content to just be there while I carefully lined up the first guiding rod and slid it into place. The silence stretched on until after I'd fastened it and grabbed an inert mine to make sure that it still fit properly.

Only once I finished that little test did I speak, though I pitched my voice lower. “You can't do anything to the crew while Nyn's gone Illyan. We've got strict orders to make sure they live through the next week.”

The big Asari let out a a rumbling growl that would have made a Krogan proud. “I know boss, Trena shot me a message before she passed out.”

Leaning against my chair, I had to tilt my head back to be able to glance up at her face. “We've got them on lockdown in the hotel. They aren't going anywhere, Erana's going to be fine while we're gone.”

Green eyes glanced down at me. “Am I that easy to read boss?”

“She's your sister. And after all the crap you've heard from those assholes I'd be worried if you weren't a little overprotective right now. Lean your ass forwards a sec.”

She did, stepping off enough for me to open up the drawer she'd been blocking. “You think we could bring her with tonight?”

My lips thinned a bit. “Illyan, Forever isn't exactly in the best part of town to begin with. Plus you know, the fact that we're all going to probably get more than a little drunk. She'll be safe here.”

“Boss..”

I sighed. “I'll see if Tris is working. If she is maybe we can let Erana relax in the place's office. Or I'll just hold off on my drinks and supervise her or something.”

A massive hand ruffled my hair. “Thanks.”

“Hey!” Snapping an arm up I tried to bat hers away, which worked about as well as you'd expect. “Sorry boss.” She didn't sound it in the slightest. “You're a good friend Cie.”

I felt my cheekbones heat up a little bit. “Stop slacking and get back to work why don't you.”

“Sure you don't want me to just, you know, stand here? Maybe flex a bit? If Shaaryak and Rane are anything to go by, you definitely like the muscles.”

Some of my fingers drummed slowly on my workbench, “You know, instead of taking you out tonight I could just ask scales if she has any toys you could.”

Blue fingers covered my mouth before I could finish the sentence, and it was her turn for her cheeks to darken. “Athame's ass boss! Not in front of my guys!”
One of my eyebrows arched as I stared up at her, my fingers still slowly drumming on the table. Her eyes rolled before she pulled her hand away, “Got it boss, getting back to work.”

Watching her long enough to make sure that she actually did, I could only shake my head in bemusement before turning back to my parts. Taking a few moments to remember where I’d been, I grunted, picked up the tools, and resumed my own activities.

I had enough time to get the other rail in place and slide in a dozen or so mines before someone else interrupted me.

“Cieran, it’s Rane.” My omni-tool buzzed.

My fingers flicked as I groaned. “I hear you. What’s going on?”

“Sorry to bother you, but there’s an Eclipse agent on the line. They’ve just transmitted the intel you were waiting for.”

“Wake up scales then. Throw ice water on her if she gives you any trouble.” A few more flicks shifted my omni-tool’s screen until the mansion's database was open to me. “Usual location?”

“Yes.” She paused for a moment, “I’ve locked it to our accounts.”

I grunted. “Good thinking. Meet me in the eastern conference room when you’ve got Trena up.”

“Got it Cieran.”

That taken care of, I frowned at my half finished cane before quickly grabbing the incomplete head and connecting it to the main rod. It wouldn't be able to do what I wanted as far as launching tech mines, the power core wasn’t hooked up, nor was the trigger assembly or any of the controls, but it would work as a cane. And the throb that went through my shin when I stood confirmed that I still needed the damn thing.

Ten minutes later found an annoyed Trena, Rane, and I all huddled around a conference table poring over what my favor had earned us.

“They're doing a lot of shit on Omega.” Scales grunted, rubbing at her face as she flicked through files on her tablet. “Not that we care about any of that.”

“Surprised Aria hasn’t slapped them down.” I muttered, my own screen shifting as I searched for anything related to how they’d gotten people on planet. Or how many the Eclipse thought might be here. “Must not be stupid enough to be racist dicks to her face.”

“Probably.”

Rane's eyes flicked up, one set going to each of us. “I'm not seeing anything about Illium. You?”

“No.” Trena’s voice was disgusted. “I don't care how many brothels they're running in the Kenzo district. Or that they're stealing business from Jaroth's whores. Ape?”

“Talons and Eclipse are fighting them on Omega's C-Deck, and in the Gozu district. Keep looking.”

And we did. For nearly three more hours, having a light lunch delivered while we kept reading. There was plenty in the files about what the group was doing on Omega, plus a few details about
their attempts to get involved on various other planets in the Terminus. Sederis had obviously been
good on her word to give me the intel that I'd asked for, but she just as obviously hadn't bothered
to have her people organize any of it.

It wasn't even in a fucking format that we could easily search either.

After the third hour I finally just tossed my tablet aside in disgust. “Fuck this shit. Rane, remind
me to have Erana help you write an algorithm to search this crap tomorrow.”

The lowborn gave me a pair of slow blinks. “Why didn't you just have me do that in the first
place?”

I gestured irritably at the piece of equipment. “I'd hoped one of us could find something, a folder
actually relevant to us.. anything really. I didn't expect it to come in a jumble like this. I'll buy your
drinks if you're that annoyed about it.”

Trena's groan at one of my words was almost lustful. “Drinks? Please tell me we're getting
fucking drinks now.”

“Yes scales, we're getting drinks. Go find the sisters.”

She was out of the room inside of a heartbeat, leaving me with a still testy looking Batarian
female.

“I'll buy your drinks Rane.” A huffing breath indicated that was the right thing to say, but that she
still wasn't thrilled that I'd just made her manually look through file after file for several hours. It
wouldn't have been so bad if half of them hadn't had tantalizing names that made it seem like they
might have something relevant. “Come on, let's go change.”

An hour and a half later found the five of us stuffed into an aircar, all wearing at least some body
armor either woven into our clothes or beneath them. Finding gear for Erana had been difficult,
and she obviously wasn't quite comfortable in the ill-fitting clothes. Still, the young maiden was
too happy about being allowed to go out with all of us to really complain all that much.

A little too happy really.

“Why can't I have a few drinks? Trena lets me drink!”

Illyan groaned. “Because she's a terrible influence. You're seventy six, not a hundred and six. If
you could go at least another decade before you start bar hopping that would be great.”

“You make it seem like I'm forty.” Erana grumbled as our vehicle slowly swung around to pull
into the parking lot. “Cieran, can I have one?”

“Your sister said no Erana.” I sighed, glad I wasn't in the back with them and Rane and thus could
avoid the sad eyes she was probably trying to direct my way. “Maybe next time. And don't ask
scales either.”

There was a bit more complaining, but most of it was just muttering as everyone piled out.

The bar itself looked more or less liked I remembered it. They'd obviously had the exterior cleaned
up, removing the traces of blast residue from where the gang had blown the main door open.

“Wonder why it took her so long to re-open it.” I murmured to Trena as the pair of us moved on
ahead of our companions. “It didn't take that much damage.”
Her head tilted as a shoulder rose. “Don't know ape. That old fish hasn't fucking told us anything since Korlus, and Tris isn't any better these days.”

“Fair enough.” Shoving open the door, I limped in and used my cane to hold the thing open while my friends filed in past me. The interior was blessedly clean of the multi-colored bloodstains, and the walls had been patched up without any sign of where they'd been blasted apart. There were maybe a dozen or so Asari present, a few looking up from the drinks to glance at us, but it was the one behind the bar that seemed bemused to see us.

“Cieran. Trena.” Trisren called out, waving a hand towards the mostly open bar. “Be right with you.”

“You lot go on.” Scales jerked her chin towards the bar, her eyes already playing the tables. “Illyan you and I are going.. that table ape?”

My own eyes flicked over in that direction, seeing a quiet Asari sipping from a drink and trying to make herself seem invisible. “Just make sure it's Illyan who goes home with her.”

A fist hit my arm hard enough to make me wince, though she yelped in turn when my heavy cane whacked her shin in retaliation.

Muttering something uncouth about my parentage under her breath, she grabbed Illyan by the arm and dragged the massive Asari towards their target.

“Why do you two always hit each other?” Rane absently caught Erana by the wrist when she tried to follow her sister, speaking over her protests as the three of us slipped around tables and chairs to reach the bar. “I mean, I get that the insults are kind of your thing, but the hitting?”

“Also our thing. Hey Tris.”

“Cieran. Your usual?” She was already grabbing the ingredients before I finished nodding. “Sorry I wasn't there this morning. Had to get shit ready here. You still do your exercises?”

“Yes.”

“No.” I turned to glare at Rane, who simply crossed her arms. “Three hours Cieran.”

The bartender-slash-spy glared at me. “Double session tomorrow. And the day after. Me in the mornings, Illyan in the afternoon.”

I tried not to grimace at the idea. “All right.”

“All right what, agent?”

My back straightened a bit at the snap in her voice. “Ma'am.”

Erana stifled a giggle from where she'd sat on my left, though it was quickly stifled when Tris shifted her intimidating gaze her way. The rail thin Asari grunted in approval when the maiden quietly asked for water before turning around to Rane. “Your drinks are on the house girl. And I'll let you beat on this pale, furred thing tomorrow.”

Dark eyes blinked. “Ah, that's all right, I have things to... yes ma'am, I'll be there. Um, a Fusionairre?”

A few awkwardly silent minutes later had Rane and I with our drinks, and Erana trying to avoid drawing Tris's attention anywhere near herself. At least until the Intelligence agent made her way
to the other end of the bar to serve a huddled group of matrons, her serious demeanor fading almost at once into the relaxed joviality I could only vaguely remember.

“Is she.. always like that?”

I glanced at the maiden. “Pretty much. She takes her job seriously, but since her job is to train us so that we stay alive.. probably a good thing. Even if we don't really enjoy it.”

“I think your sister enjoys it.” Rane took an experimental sip of neon blue liquid before nodding in approval. “Mostly because she's already in shape and can just have fun hitting us.”

“Hitting me mostly.” My left ribs gave a slow throb that was probably mental, my brain already dreading the next few days. “Athame's ass it's going to be a long few days.”

There was a moment of hesitation before Rane patted my shoulder. Her fingers might have lingered a bit more than they should have but I didn't comment on it. “You'll make it. And then you can finish your cane. Maybe you can make it even fancier.”

I snorted. “Rane, when has anything I've ever made been 'fancy’?”

“Hm. You do tend to be rather.. blunt in your engineering. And your coding.”

“It works doesn't it?”

“Um... she does kind of have a point Cieran.” Erana hesitantly cut in. “Her programs are a lot more elegant than yours.”

My eyes flicked to my left to give her a mild glare. “You're just taking her side because I won't let you drink.”

Her skin tinged purple. “Of.. of course not! I mean, yours is still better than Miss T'laria's.”

Our Batarian companion let out a disgusted sound before taking another sip from her drink. “Pillars. I don't understand how half of what she writes even compiles. It's atrocious.”

“Speak from the Pillars Rane. I've had to deal with it a lot longer than you have.”

From there the three of us enjoyed ourselves by bitching good naturedly about Trena, occasionally glancing around to see how our friends were doing. The big Asari seemed to be making progress, she and her companion both blushing lightly as they spoke over drinks. While they made small talk, scales had found her way over to a rambunctious group of maidens and was gesturing wildly as they laughed their asses off at whatever story she was telling.

Eventually Tris wandered back to our section, and was far more relaxed as the conversation turned casual.

“And you can't feel it? At all?” I was pretty sure that Tris had slipped some alcohol into the fruit drink she'd brought Erana, enough to make her bold if not really get her drunk.

I groaned, not entirely sure how the conversation had turned to my hair. “Only if it pulls on my skin. So if you yank on it I'm going to notice.”

“But why don't more human males have it on their face like you do?” The maiden pressed, leaning almost uncomfortably close as she clearly resisted the urge to tug on my goatee. “Even in the vids they don't.”
“They shave it off.” I leaned back slightly. “For fashion or something. Facial hair isn't in style right now.”

Tris grunted. “Hasn't been since your race showed up, at least in Citadel space. Even your females keep theirs shorter than what you've got now. Personally I'd think you'd look a lot better without it, and definitely with shorter fur on your head too.”

Rane groaned. She was well into the tipsy range and, just like Trena had often said, had started to lose control of her mouth. “You're telling me that human males are cutting all of it off just to make Asari like them more? They're so much better looking with it, it makes them exotic. You don't even notice the missing eyes.”

Erana giggled as my cheekbones burned a bit again.

The bartender gave me a slight grin before showing at least some mercy. “Really all that surprised? Just having long fur basically marks you as being a Terminus savage even if you're cultured like Kean is.”

“So I'm a cultured savage.” Tossing the rest of my drink back, I shook my head bemusedly. “Don't tell me you think that too Tris.”

“Only when you annoy me.” A blue hand rose so that she could flick me on the forehead, her other hand grabbing my empty glass. “Another?”

I was opening my mouth to say yes when her omni-tool pinged loudly, flicking to life above her still outstretched hand. Ten eyes automatically shifted to stare at the glowing image, even if hers were the only ones that could properly read the display.

Tris' eyes narrowed slightly. “The security VI is concerned, we've got a few loiterers on the street who haven't left the area in over an hour.”

Rane and I both straightened, sobriety coming quickly as the alarm made my heart beat a bit faster. “When did they get here?”

Slim fingers shifted quickly, pulling the data. “The first.. Athame's azure, a few minutes after you did. Recognize any of them?”

The image flickered before reversing so that I could properly see it. Sure enough the camera caught an aircar settling down next to ours, the time-stamp revealing that they must have landed not more than a moment or two after we'd come inside. Either they had an incredible sense of timing.. or they'd been following us.

Several figures emerged with forced casualness, drifting towards the street. I didn't recognize three of the four, two were humans while the other a salarian.

But I did recognize the Turian driver.

“That fucking True Son asshole again.” I couldn't stop the growl. “I'd really hoped that Sederis had killed him.”

“Well she didn't.” Tris snapped her left hand vanishing beneath the bar. “There's a dozen plus of them now, maybe more outside of our camera's range. Silent alarm is hit, doors are locked down.”

Rane glanced around the floor. Forever wasn't exactly packed, but it definitely wasn't empty. “Civilians?”
“There’s a shelter beneath us.” Well that explained why it had taken so long to re-open. She sucked in a long breath, and I flinched in anticipation. “ATTENTION!”

The quiet chatter stopped abruptly, twenty or so blue and purple heads whipping around to stare at us in confusion.

“I need everyone who doesn’t have combat training to get their asses to the black door by the bathrooms. Follow the stairs down into the shelter, we’ve got gang movement outside!” There were a few gasps, and some of the Asari started to get up and move.

One, a scarred matron who’d been in a booth by herself, spoke into the startled silence. “The Sons back?”

“They’re fucking elites.” Tris growled, obviously unhappy about how only a half a dozen were actually moving. “Fucking MOVE your worthless asses if you don’t want to end up DEAD!”

That got the rest of them scurrying, chairs hitting the ground as they were knocked aside in the rush to get to safety.

“Um.. Cieran?” Erana’s voice trembled slightly. “Sh-should I go with them?”

“Yes.” Spinning in my barstool I tried not to grimace when my feet hit the ground roughly. “You’ll be safe down-“

“No. Need her up here.” Tris cut me off, making me draw up short. “Girl, through that door, first entry on the right is the office. Get in there and seal the door behind you.”

“Trisren.” The 'she's too young for this shit' went unspoken.

“She can handle this.” The 'this is fucking Illium Cieran, it had to happen sooner or later' when unspoken in return. “There’s going to be vidscreens showing the exterior cameras. I need you to get on I-Sec's channel and keep them updated as they approach. Got it?”

“I.. I..”

I glared at Tris for a moment before grabbing the maiden by her shoulders and making her look at me. “Erana. You can handle it. Don’t think. Just watch the screens and tell them what you see. All right?”

Her eyes were painfully wide but she nodded slightly before turning and running to where she’d been told to go.

“Trisren.” The angry rumble was easy to identify, fury making each word sound like boulders grinding. “We’re having words tomorrow.”

“So long as we're alive Illyan, I will be happy to darken your eyes.” The bartender blithely yanked a shotgun up from wherever it had been hidden. “And I need all of you out here. Cieran's right, she can handle it.”

I glanced around at what we had. Besides the four of us, plus Trisren, five customers had apparently elected to stay up here. Ten guns in total then.. it definitely could have been worse. Only three had light armor, but all were at least armed. And even the two without gear could at least generate their own barriers, which meant they had some degree of protection.

“You lot have problem’s following orders?”
The scarred matron shook her head, a hand cannon held loosely in her right hand. “Former military. Where you need me?”

The others made similar murmurs, giving us a few military vets and a pair of ‘retired’ gang bangers. “Trena, scars, and you two head into the kitchens and watch the back. Everyone else is staying up here. I need-”

She didn't get to finish her orders, the lights flickering out above us. The darkness lasted only a moment before a generator kicked to life somewhere, the flatscreens cycling behind the bar to bath us in scratchy, chaotic light.

“Move your fucking shit!” Trena was already following her own orders, the vets hard on her heels.

“Over the bar.” I snapped before Tris could, all of us scrambling up and over it. Rane and Illyan both helped me, the latter tossing my cane over before easily vaulting it on her own.

My ass had barely hit the mats on the other side, drawing a startled Batarian oath from my lips, before the familiar sound of the front door exploding inwards made us all flinch. A similar sound echoed from the kitchens, gunfire sounding moments later. Beside me, Tris was the only one standing, her shotgun bellowing as she snarled for the rest of us to get up and shoot.

Here we fucking go again.

Next up is Chapter 9: The Hunt

Chapter End Notes

Well their return to Forever is looking like it's going to be just like their last trip to Forever. In other news, Trisren is commanding, Rane got annoyed, and Cieran just wanted to finish his project. Also a bunch of fluff with.. pretty much everyone, giving a bit of a wider glimpse as to what life is like during the 'downtimes'.

The next chapter will have some action, and the return of the fan favorite psychopath. Just four more to go before this act ends, after which we'll have four quick epilogue chapters.. and then the second story in this series will be complete.

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 9: The Hunt

Apart from Tris's shotgun, the rest of us were only armed with pistols. But with the True Sons forced to enter one at a time through the front door, even pistols were proving to be enough.

The first two had both dropped before they'd made it a meter, their barriers and armor disintegrating against the firing line that we hit them with. The third had realized that we were more than ready to receive guests, and had scrambled backwards with a shout before we could do more than tap lightly at his shields.

“They're waiting for us!” His cry echoed outside, and there was a long few moments while we waited for the next attempt that seemed delayed in coming.

“Get ready for grenades.” Tris growled, keeping her gun up. “You, barrier? Good. Get it over us and drop it at my mark.”

One of the Asari gangsters, her face covered entirely in dark tattoos, set her pistol aside. Taking a few hyperventilating breaths she shoved her hand outwards as if slamming a door. Blue light swirled to life from the bar-top to the ceiling shimmering in the chaotic light from the screens behind us.

I resisted the urge to let out a slow whistle. “Nice control.”

Her lips curled slightly, the one eye I could see winking in my direction.

“Hey! You inside!” It didn't take me any effort to recognize the Turian that I'd now met twice, his voice flanging as he bellowed. “We've got it surrounded and your communications are blocked!”

Trisren snorted before shouting back. “What's your fucking point!?”

“My fucking point is that if you turn over the short Asari bitch and the long furred human, we'll leave peaceably!”

Everyone glanced at me, while I could only gape at nothing and blink confusedly. Why the fuck would they want me and Trena? I mean sure, we'd fucked up their plans last year, but you'd figure they'd be more after Nyn and Aethyta than us for that crap.

Rane glanced at me with one set of eyes while her other set remained on the doorway. She pitched her voice low, “Trisren, do we still have comms?”

“Landlines separate from the main trunk. They can jam us all they fucking want.” That definitely
seemed to relieve our new friends, who'd looked nervous in a way that I hadn't liked. She raised her voice, “How long to decide?”

“You have one standard minute!”

“One minute closer to I-Sec showing up.” Tris muttered. “You ok girl?”

There was a quick nod, her posture relaxed as she kept her hand in place.

I didn't honestly expect our opponents to give us the full minute, and I wasn't disappointed. It couldn't have been more than twenty or thirty seconds after he'd gone quiet before a hand whipped around the doorway, a trio of silver discs sailing through the air.

“Drop!” I think all of us, sans barrier girl, shouted it at more or less the same time. I caught a brief glimpse of her squeezing her eyes shut and flinching as I tucked myself down. There was an odd thrumming noise as one rebounded off of the barrier, followed by a dull series of muted thuds.

The flinch as metallic fragments slashed at the other side of the bar was entirely reflexive, but I managed to force my legs to straighten even as my ears rang from the blast. To my left, a low groan heralded the collapse of the barrier as the Asari dropped to a knee. Purple blood was dribbling down her nostrils, but a shaking hand still reached gamely for her weapon.

There wasn't enough time for me to check on anyone else. There was barely enough for my forearms to settle on the bar before our old friends again came rushing through the doorway.

Intelligent enemies were always annoying, and the True Sons apparently felt the need to again remind us that these weren't the same teenagers and idiots that we'd fought before. Rather than sending just anyone in the front, they led with two Batarians in heavy armor, helmets, and tech armor gleaming over top of that. Just to rub salt in the wound, both were also carrying massive shotguns, the barrels glowing red with prepped carnage rounds.

“Right!” Our de-facto leader snapped, her own short-barreled weapon roaring as she put a round into the shining panels. My small pistol barked repeatedly as I joined in the barrage, trying to keep my aim more or less around his head and shoulders. His barriers easily held off the initial flurry, giving him more than enough time to pull the trigger a split second after his companion.

Both of their carnage rounds struck the bar itself. In any other place that would probably have been the right choice, but they likely hadn't counted on Aethyta being a paranoid bitch. Instead of blowing out our cover, and probably killing a few of us in the process, all they did was shower themselves with splinters as the heavy shots tore apart the wooden facade to reveal the armor plating beneath.

Our target made the mistake of staring in disbelief, “What the fuck-”

Someone, Rane I thought, managed a shot through the top visor of his helmet, cutting the curse short. Which at least solved on issue, but his companion wasn't stupid enough to stand and gawk. Instead he dove for a booth, his tech plating more than holding up against the desultory fire we sent after him.

“Overheated.” Illyan growled, wincing as her pistol steamed in her hands.

“Space your fucking shots!” I snapped, more figures already rushing through the door. “And get an Athame damned singularity on the door!”

There was a slight flinch on her broad face, but her body promptly began to glow as her lips pulled back with the effort. A sharp gesture later had a dark orb whipping through the air to settle
before the door, the three True Sons who'd been trying to follow on the Batarian's heels cursing as the miniaturized black hole began to pull. It wasn't terribly strong, it didn't pick them up and throw them through the air like the ones in the game. But it did drag them to a halt, leaving them wide open in the entryway.

“Good call!” Trisren promptly blew a human's head apart as she shouted, a truly gory mess splattering over the others. “Kean, keep our friend pinned! Rest, drop them!”

Keep him pinned.. right. My light pistol put a few shots into the wall around the booth the sentinel had leaped into, not even coming close to breaching the wall. If I had my fucking tech launcher, maybe I could.. wait.

“Illyan.” I barked, barely aware of the others using gunfire and biotics to fight off more people trying to rush in. “Grab my cane and rip the head off!”

Give her credit, she might not be as used to full on firefights as I depressingly was, but she didn't waste time asking stupid questions. Dropping her still glowing weapon, she grabbed the walking tool and ripped the top off with less than a moments strain of her bulging arms. “Swap you boss?”

The sentinel's gun had apparently cooled sufficiently that he could lean out and fire off a wild shot in our direction, my own sending sparks off his helmet as his shattered the flat-screen just behind my head.

Illyan and I both yelped in pain as glass tore at us, the feeling not dissimilar to small animal clawing at my face and neck.

“Cieran!”

“I'm fine!” I waved off Rane as I shoved my gun into Illyan's lap, grabbing my cane from her fingers. At least, I thought I was fine. I could still see, and I didn't feel the crushing cold like on Korlus. “Illyan?”

“Athame damned asshole!” Yeah, she sounded fine, if furious. A hand wiped away some of the purple blood dribbling down her face from cuts in her scalp, while the other grabbed my gun. It looked stupidly tiny in her massive paw, but she didn't seem to have any issues popping back up to snap off a few measured shots.

A quick tilt of the metal tube dumped out the mines that I'd shoved inside, each of them easily sliding down the rails to land in my lap.

“Incinerates please!’ Rane had apparently noticed what I was doing, “Most of them aren't wearing helmets!”

I nodded as my omni-tool flickered to life, trying to ignore the warm feeling of liquid dribbling down from my scalp. All of the mines were upgraded incinerates anyway, so it wasn't as if I had a choice. We should probably have just considered ourselves lucky that they were going for the inconspicuous look, instead of bringing everyone in in full armor. Two or three more sentinels could have easily let them rush the bar and then execute us before we could put up more than a token effort.

Grabbing one of the small discs, I let the computer on my wrist sync, tiny orange lights signifying it's activation a few moments later.

“He still there Illyan?”

The big Asari flinched as pellets screeched off of her thin barriers, one of them slapping into her
shoulder as they failed entirely. She dropped back down as I grabbed her elbow with my free hand, yanking hard to make sure she actually got herself out of the way. “Fucking.. shit! Yes!”

Blowing out a quick breath, mindful as ever of the fact that I didn’t even have weak barriers around my skull, I jerked upright and whipped the mine out in a side-arm throw. The orange streak left a burning afterimage in my eyes before it connected with the booth’s wall.

One finger twitch later, and a fireball replaced the wood panels.

Someone screamed pitifully in pain before the sentinel, his armor scorched and smoke curling from the helmet, staggered into the open before Rane put him out of our misery.

I had enough time to glance to my left, trying to see how the fight was going and where I should toss the next one.

And then some fucking asshole shot me in the left arm.

Pain promptly exploded behind my eyes as my knees hit the mats, oaths in three different languages pouring out of my mouth as I grabbed at the bleeding hole. “Athame’s motherfucking azure! Fucking.. shit!”

Illyan pulled me the rest of the way down, flinching as an SMG sent a burst into the bottles above us. I swore again when she yanked me half under her, ducking her head as more glass bombarded us.

“Boss!” Even with her shouting in my ears I could barely hear her over one of the other Asari sending a shockwave rippling outwards. Tables slammed into one another, and into fleshier targets, as men and women screamed. “Can you still prep them?”

Letting go of my arm, and trying not to flinch at how much blood was covering my right hand, I grabbed at the mines still spilled out on the floor. “Only on remote det. You throw, say when !”

“Got it!” Strong hands hauled me up a bit, until my back was resting against a fridge or something. She stayed in a crouch until I tossed her the next active mine, popping up once for a quick glance. A long exhale served to warm her up before she bounced all the way up and hurling the tiny thing. “Now!”

My omni-tool flashed as I hit the button, the air glowing momentarily with orange light as more people shouted in pain and surprise.

By the time she was crouching again I already had another mine held out for her, desperately ignoring the steady throbbing in my arm. We went through seven more within the next minute, the explosions joining more biotic strikes as Trisren managed to get the two gangsters into a rhythm with her. Which left Rane to keep up her pistol fire, apparently executing anyone that either the mines or biotics didn’t kill outright.

After a few more minutes.. I think it was a few minutes anyway. It could have been longer or shorter, honestly time was pretty hazy with the pain. Either way, things seemed to finally settle down into an awkward detente. At least, for us. There was still plenty of gunfire echoing from the kitchens but we couldn’t really spare anyone to go check on Trena.

“They done?” I craned my neck around, Illyan fondling the last mine while I awkwardly tried to bandage one arm with a rag. “How many are down?”

“Regrouping.” Trisren grunted, sparing me a glance. “Figure a dozen dead just out here.”
Fuck. How many of these assholes had gotten on planet? “How long for I-Sec?”

“Should have already fucking been here. I'm going to tan their blue asses for being late.” She didn't sound like she was joking either, a hand leaving her shotgun to tap her com implant. “Girl?”

Erana sounded like she had gone straight past emotional breakdown and into the monotone-slash-autopilot stage. I could understand that, poor kid probably had had an excellent view of everyone dying. “First officers arrived... they're waiting on backup.. I think.”

As if summoned by the maiden, someone outside shouted something alarming. It was almost at once followed by a new barrage of gunfire, the deeper thrum of active biotics adding their own noise to the chorus.

Rane's voice was dry, “I would say that their backup has arrived as well.”

The bartender-slash-spy grunted at the noise before glancing between the Batarian and the Asari gangster on her other side, “You two, with me. You three, stay.”

I didn't miss the worried look that Rane shot me before she vaulted out of cover, their footsteps drowned by the chaos outside.

“You all right Illyan?” The big Asari was the only one still keeping an eye out. I was still fighting with getting the fucking rag tied, and the tattooed maiden's eyes were clenched as she held her own bit of cloth to her face.

“Fine boss.” She sounded anything but. “Sorry about the gun thing, not.. really used to fights like this.”

“Wish I wasn't.” I admitted, finally getting the stupid thing in a knot. “And don't worry about it.” Lips twisted. “Hard not to with Erana stuck up here.”

There really wasn't much I could say to that. I liked the maiden well enough, but she was Illyan's sister. Some people, so far as I knew, fought better with their loved ones nearby because they wanted them safe. Others, Illyan apparently included, fought worse because they couldn't focus beyond them.

Not that I was the poster child for the first type. My own reactions to Nyn being in danger had never been exactly... well, smart.

“Hey! Ape! You still alive!?”

“We're still here scales!” I shouted back as best I could, which admittedly wasn't all that well. “You guys good?”

“Lost one, and the rest of my help was fucking wounded. I-Sec finally showed up and are clearing crap out.” Her voice got clearer as the gunfire outside slowed, and then stopped, leaving only a vague ringing in its place. “You?”

“Need someone to pick the glass out of my hair.” My face pulled into a grimace, “Medigel would be nice as well. Plus a Nos Astran ganger whose nose won't stop bleeding.”

“Retired.” Said person protested, her voice absolutely ridiculous with her nose pinched shut.

“Rigght...” I rolled my eyes before banging my head against the fridge behind me. “Want a job then? Pretty sure we're still hiring.”
There was a bit of blinking before her lips curled a little, a hand carefully pulling the rag away. “I got one, thanks.”

“I’m sure.” Trena grunted, finally limping out of the kitchens. She looked exhausted but none the worse for wear despite that. Gem colored eyes blinked at the sight of us, hurriedly shifting onwards at whatever destruction had been wreaked upon the bar proper. “Shit ape. The old fish is never fucking letting us into one of her bars again. You all right?”

“Fine scales, would have said if I wasn’t.”

“No you wouldn’t, you’re a stubborn ass like that. Keep your ass on the ground, going to find what’s taking the fucking medics so long.”

“Scales, wait!” She stopped midturn, turning to frown at me. “The asshole outside wanted us. Specifically you and me.”

Her blue face pulled into a frown. “What? That doesn't make any fucking sense ape. They weren't after the old fish... shit. Sederis.”

It took me a moment to get it. “They were after us because we were with Sederis? What the fuck did they think, that she'd give herself up for us? Don't they know anything about her?”

“Or they wanted to torture us until we told them shit about her defenses, weaknesses.” Scales shook her head slightly. “Not that we'd have crap to say. Fucking shit. Now we have to talk to the bitch. More.”

“Bet you thirty credits someone in I-Sec already contacted her?” The River District unit wasn't as openly corrupt as the Nos Astra department, but I didn't doubt that the Eclipse had more than a few informants amongst the officer corps.

And, as usual, scales agreed with me. “Athame's ass, I'm not a fucking idiot ape. Now shut up and stop bleeding. Illyan, make sure he doesn't move his goddess damned ass.”

I tried to bring up my arm to flip her off, only to gasp in pain when I tried to use the wrong fucking arm. Which of course made Illyan start worrying, shifting her large frame over to inspect my arm and face. My efforts to wave her off were predictably futile, the mechanic fussing over me despite my protests that she was exacerbating her own wounds.

The I-Sec officers who poured into the bar a few minutes later were hardly any rescue. They promptly separated us, carefully helping us back into the dining area and setting up what few chairs had survived the conflict.

Tattoo girl was inspected first, wincing as a medic shined a light to her eyes before frowning and waving for two officers to carefully use their biotics to float her outside.

“Maidens.” The Asari grumbled as she moved over to start checking on me. “Always relying on their damned biotics too much. Can you move your arm all right kid?”

“Yes. Hurts like a bitch though.”

She grunted as she carefully pulled the rag down, her eyes flicking over the wound for just a few moments before she removed the dirty cloth entirely and slapped a medigel patch onto it. “Looks like a flesh wound, sit still and let me run some scans on it and your scalp to make sure nothing vital got pricked.”

I stayed quiet and let her work, trying not smile at her choice of words. Eventually she started
using some kind of tool to prick the glass out of my skin, admonishing me whenever I winced and practically lathering my hair with medi-gel as she worked it into the cuts. While she worked on me, the other officers began carefully removing the bodies from the place.

Gloved hands were dabbing some on my jaw when a familiar face arrived. “Cieran Kean. You just can't stay out of trouble, can you?”

It was a fight not to groan as Detective Wear'an dragged a barstool, her petite frame settling into it as she motioned for the medic to move on. “Detective. Been a while.”

“Not a long enough while. Athame's ass, this was a good bar and you just can't help but destroy it can you?” Her button nose wrinkled irritably. “I was hoping to never have to deal with you or your friends again. Do you have any idea how much paperwork I had to deal with the last time?”

“A lot?” I hazarded. “We just wanted to have some drinks, it's not like we intended to have a shoot out with the fucking True Sons here.”

The tiny investigator didn't particularly looked like she believed me. Her omni-tool snapped to life with a purpose, but before she could begin with the questions a new voice interrupted her.

“I-Sec.” Everyone in the bar flinched at the flat voice, myself very much included. “Need the human.”

“Jona Sederis.” I knew that Wear'an wasn't stupid, but her tiny chin jutted out as she turned to glare at the Eclipse's leader. She was lounging in the blasted apart doorway, her golden armor battered enough to make me think she'd just come from a fight of her own. “I have questions for him. And the others.”

Sederis cocked her head slightly, repeating herself emotionlessly. “I need the human.”

“I have questions.”

“Detective..” I cut in, glancing between them as I fought to not lick my lips nervously. Sederis was either off her meds or simply acting as if she was still less than stable, and either way that meant Wear'an would definitely be in danger. “Perhaps it would be.. safest to do this later. Perhaps at the mansion?”

I only belatedly realized that it might have sounded like I'd been threatening her, but thankfully the Detective seemed to take it the way I'd meant. Shutting her omni-tool down, she let out an annoyed grunt. “I will arrive tomorrow morning, and I expect all of your people who were involved to be present.”

They weren't really my people, not anymore anyway, but I nodded politely all the same. “We will be waiting for you.”

At her unspoken order, the medic and the other officers filed out with her, dodging Trena when she came back in to join the conversation that I didn't want to have. I had no idea how she'd kept Rane and Trisren outside, but I was glad for it all the same. I didn't really want to involve Rane in this bullshit, more than she already was anyway, and I had no idea if Intelligence knew that Sederis had been passing her sanity checks lately.

First though, there was someone that had to be taken care of. “Illyan, go grab your sister.”

“You.. sure boss?” Illyan was trying very hard not to look anywhere near where Sederis was now sitting at the bar, looking like she was just waiting for the bartender to show up and take her order.
“Yeah.” They really didn't have to be involved in this part. “The two of you get to the aircar, we’ll be there in a bit.”

The big mechanic scampered after a grateful nod, which left me with the two Asari, neither of whom seemed to want to lead the conversation.

“We weren't the only targets, where we?”

Thankfully for my sanity, Sederis dropped the voice, even if her regular tones weren't that much of an improvement. “My mind healer was attacked by a human assassin, a skilled asshole named Anad Krom.”

Trena winced, actually looking like she was going to step towards the other Asari before stopping. “She live?”

“Yes. He enjoys playing with his food and hadn't finished when I arrived.” Her voice dipped into a low growl. “She'll survive with a few scars. The asshole threw True Sons in my way while he escaped however.”

I grimaced, trying not to move my left arm much as I shifted in my chair. “I-Sec get that Turian who was leading them here?”

“Guess.”

So they hadn't. Fucking awesome. “So we can expect more attacks on us then. They trying to get in your head?”

Her head dipped as a shoulder rose. “Probably. Don't fucking care, because I spoke at length with T’lars. And ripped the bitch’s head open. Fucking too clever for her own good, trying to set everything up like little pieces on a game board so that I would die in just the right way. Should have just fucking killed me straight and pinned the blame.”

And done the galaxy a favor probably.

Trena and I exchanged a glance before she spoke, “What did you get from her?”

“The name of the ships that were bringing the assholes back on planet.” The grin that appeared was positively vicious. “Their captains were quite willing to tell me what I needed after I showed them her skull.”

I was unpleasantly reminded of her promise to skin whoever she caught. I'd done.. shit, some of the fights I had been in hadn't been pretty. But I still had to swallow against a bit of nausea at the mental image. “You get their base?”

“Indeed I did Kean. Tomorrow night we're moving into the slums.” A low growl was accompanied by flashes of biotic light around her arms, and I tried not to flinch. “Krom's head is going to join that bitch's outside my mansion's gates. Gears, you're involved. I dealt with one bitch but I don't fucking trust her subordinates.”

If scales was as terrified of Sederis as I was, she certainly didn't show it. Her own voice dropped in anger as her fingers curled tightly around her cane. “I'm not fucking rejoining. We'd be safe enough in Shaaryak's goddess damned mansion. And you already called in the shit that I apparently owed you.”

The Eclipse leader stared hard at her. “We will renegotiate our current arrangement.”
Trena's lips pulled back from her teeth as she grimaced. “Ape, take a walk.”

“Scales..”

“Cieran.” I couldn't stop from flinching at the snap in her voice. “You said you didn't want to know, right?”

I had. And I didn't. Nodding, and hissing in pain as I rose, I limped my way towards the door. I half expected Sederis to say something, but she seemed strangely content to remain silent as I departed. If I had been a dangerous bad-ass I might have glanced back over my shoulder, thrown the deranged woman a glare with a quippy one liner.

Since I wasn't, and since the various aches and pains in my body had been joined by a whole new set of injuries, I could only limp my ass out the door pathetically.

Dammit Scales. I really didn't care for being on the receiving end of being sent off for my own protection.

“Ci.. Harath'krem.” Rane was waiting just outside of the door, helpfully blocking anyone else from trying to get in. And there were quite a few people outside now that I was out here to see them. I-Sec had more or less descended in a swarm, white clad officers and plain clothes detectives darting around as they tried to organize shit. A small knot of Eclipse commandos were probably not helping, several of them arguing with the officers guarding what few prisoners seemed to have been taken alive.

“Rane. Formal? Really?”

“My apologies Harath'krem,” Her throat worked as she swallowed, “I wish to.. maintain my distance while I help you to the vehicle.”

“I can make it on my own.”

Four dark eyes blinked, a bit of her natural self appearing beneath the subservient facade as her arms crossed her chest. “And where is your cane?”

I started to reply before stopping myself and groaning. “On the bar floor?”

“Thankfully Illyan was intelligent enough to retrieve the pieces before she removed her sister.” The lowborn took a few steps closer. “May I assist you?”

A low throb started in my left shin and worked up to that hip at her words. One grudging nod later and she had moved to my right side, carefully sliding an arm around my chest to take some of my weight.

Her voice dropped when we started to move. “Trena?”

“Sederis still. “ I kept my own low as I kept an eye on the people moving around us. “Negotiating crap apparently, hopefully she'll tell us later. We also have a breakfast date with a detective tomorrow, just a warning.”

“She indicated as much when she departed. I believe she is currently speaking with Trisren.. perhaps the Pillars will approve and she will be able to get us out of it.” Her tone made it clear how likely she thought that was. “The medic also updated me on your and Illyan's conditions. I'm.. relieved that you are all right, Harath'krem.”

“Rane..”
She inhaled deeply but slowly. “You could have died, Harath'krem. It is difficult for me not to.. Pillars. I need the rules tonight. Or else I will.. do something to lose your respect. Please.”

Fuck. What.. fuck. I dipped my head in a slight nod, which was all I fucking could do. I hated the subservient, deferential crap, and it was the last thing I wanted to deal with after all the shit that had just happened. But if she thought that was the only thing stopping her from doing something that would make things.. awkward, or worse.. shit.

We both fell silent after that, reaching the car after another minute or so of walking.

Rane'li paused before opening the door for me. “You may wish to sit in the back. Erana.. isn't taking things well.”

Of course she wasn't. She was a fucking kid who shouldn't have even come with.

Fuck. How many times could I screw up in a three day stretch of time? Maybe I should just ask I-Sec to arrest me to protect everyone else. First Nynsi, now Erana. And I probably shouldn't have just fucking left scales like that. Or let Rane hide in her shell.

Before I could articulate anything coherent, my companion had already opened the driver's side door. The sisters were in the backseat, with Illyan holding her much smaller sibling against her side while the maiden stared at nothing.

When I didn't move to get in, Rane shifted behind me before giving me a light shove.

Trying not to grimace, I clambered into the back of the vehicle and stoically ignored my various limbs bitching about the movements. Once I was seated she shut the door again, turning before leaning her back against it to give us some privacy.

“Boss..”

I shook my head slightly, “Illyan. I'm.. fuck. Erana, I'm sorry. Shouldn't have brought you into this.”

The maiden didn't respond, so her sister spoke again instead. “I talked you into it, I already told her that she can blame me.”

“I could have said no. Should have, even.” I countered. “Erana.. say something.”

Her lips moved slightly, a mumble maybe escaping them.

“Sis.. you can talk with us.” A broad hand carefully reached up to rub her sister's shoulder. “Come on.”

“It.. I..” The ragged breath was the only warning we had before the words began to escape her incomprehensibly. “Goddess I saw them, they were dying, people were bleeding and screaming and Goddess the screaming didn't sound like people it sounded like.. like.. Goddess..and.. and.. and you were hurt and Cieran was shot and-”

“Oh!” I cut her off, my right hand shooting out to take her arm. “Athame's ass, breathe.”

The maiden's eyes were shockingly wide as she whipped her head around to stare at me, her chest heaving. “But.. Cieran.. sir.. you were.. oh goddess, you're injured and-”

Ignoring the pain, I turned and brought my other arm around so that I could plant both hands on her shoulders, turning her a bit awkwardly so that we were properly face to face. “Erana. Look at
me and breath. All right? Just breath for a second before you give yourself an attack. Can you do that?"

“I.. I can..” She bowed her head as her fingers clenched on her knees. It took her another minute or two of ragged breathing before she found her voice, even if it was quiet and miserable sounding. “I threw up. In the office.”

“Scales threw up her first time too.” Erana shifted her head up, blinking at me as I carefully pulled back. “She was fighting Krogan and puked all over herself. Get her drunk and she'll tell you about it. It happens.”

“She.. did?”

Illyan chuckled deeply, shifting a bit in her own seat so that she could lean forwards and wrap her strong arms around her sister. “She did sis. Tired?”

“I.. I am, but..”

“No buts.” For once the maiden didn't protest as her sister effortlessly hauled her around, repositioning her body so that her head was buried in Illyan's neck as she held Erana against her side. “Come here and fall asleep. We're with you. And tomorrow you can have all the sugary caffeinated shit you want.”

There was a muffled noise that might have been more words, and one of her hands rose to grasp at her sister's bloodstained clothing as if terrified to let go.

It was another ten or fifteen minutes before Trena and Rane finally got into the vehicle, the former apparently livid from the way she growled and slapped at the controls.

“Fucking shit!”

“Scales!” It was her turn to go still when I snapped at her. “Save it. We'll talk at the mansion. All right?”

She leaned around her chair, apparently ready to argue before she caught sight of Illyan literally glaring poison in her direction as she held her sister.

After a moment's stillness there was a tight nod, and then we headed home.

Next up is Chapter 10: The Insubordination

Chapter End Notes

So. Yeah. Forever got trashed, again, and everyone is rather annoyed by it. Sederis is still up to crap, I-Sec isn't happy, and it looks like Trena is still neck deep in shit that she'd rather not be involved with at all. Should be a fun last three chapters.
Apologies that there is only the one chapter this weekend, had a five round Warmachine tournament yesterday so wasn't able to spend most of it writing like I usually would. Still, at the current rate Terminus will be completed before October is out. At the moment I'm thinking that I'll be trying to write most of AR: Ronin before I start posting it to make sure that it works.

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 didn't end up talking about what happened when we got back. By silent but seemingly mutual
greement we all stumbled off to bed instead, the need for sleep trumping the need for
information.

Detective Wear'an showed up bright and early as promised, but it was clear that her heart wasn't
really into it. If I'd had to guess, I would have put money on someone above her trying to cut her
investigation off before it could really start. Not that we had actually done anything illegal, we'd
simply defended ourselves, but Wear'an wasn't stupid. Sufficiently pointed questions could
probably have let her work out just how Sederis was involved, and probably reveal quite a bit
more about the incident in Nos Astra proper than that department probably wanted.

She didn't even sequester us alone as I had expected, instead tonelessly rattling off a few generic
questions before turning around and leaving.

“She'll probably be re-assigned to Vasir before the week is out.” Trena muttered as the pair of us
lounged in my work area. I'd given Illyan's team the day off, ensuring that we'd have some
privacy.. and also giving her the time to spend with her sister. Rane, meanwhile, was still avoiding
me. She was apparently occupying herself in checking the mansion's defense systems again, even
though she'd just checked the systems yesterday. “Another promising career thrown to the storm
by fucking politics.”

“Corrupt politics.” I pointed out as I worked on my cane, trying to straighten out the parts that had
bent when it had been yanked apart.

“There's another kind?”

I snorted. “Point. How long do we have until we leave?”

“Not until... wait, no. Fucking no ape. Don't even go there.”

“You think I'm letting you deal with that psychopath alone?” Tossing my tools down, I turned so
that I could glare stubbornly at her. “You'll need someone to watch your back, and Ghai isn't
here.”

Arms crossed her chest as she glared right back at me. “What makes you think I'm even doing shit
for her in the first place?”

Fingers drummed on my desk as I started to rattle off my points, turning away from my work to
properly stare at her. “Because you're tense as shit. Because you keep checking the time on your
omni-tool. Because you didn't hit on the Detective this morning.”

When she opened her mouth to speak again, I interrupted her purely because I knew it would annoy her. “Also, you said no first and then you tried to deny it was happening.”

The glare predictably intensified. “You don't have to be an ass about it.”

“Scales.”

Some of her anger seemed to bleed out. “Sorry ape. Shit. Why the fuck do you want to be more involved in this crap? I'm doing this to try and get less involved.”

I grunted, leaning back as much as I could in the chair. “How much less involved?”

“Meeting with the bitch every eight weeks instead of four, and.. her letting some other shit go. And answer the goddess damned question.”

It was my turn to cross my arms across my chest in irritation. “If I owed someone and had to do something like this, would you let me go off and do it on my own?”

“If I could barely walk and had just been fucking shot would you let me go with?”

“You're acting like I'm giving you a choice. It's cute.” She let out a low growl. “Scales, when we went after Chacksin you smuggled yourself onto our shuttle and you were way more fucked up than I am right now.”

Trena couldn't exactly deny that, and even had the decency to flush guiltily and glance away. “Point. Athame's ass ape, you know this is a bloodtide right? Shaaryak really will break shit off if she finds out.”

It was my turn to glance away as I blew a long breath through my nose. Nynsi would most definitely be furious with me for putting myself in danger, especially after I'd gone and gotten myself wounded again. “Technically she didn't order me, or any of us, to stay here. So long as it's still standing and everyone is alive, we did our jobs as instructed.”

That earned me a look that plainly stated just what she thought of that particular argument.

“Shit scales.. Trena. You're the first friend I made since I woke up. If Nynsi can't handle the fact that I'm helping you.. then maybe all this,” I waved a vague hand at the mansion around us, “Has changed her more than I thought it would.”

“Go ahead and admit that I was right then.”

I might have twitched slightly. I honestly hadn't gotten all that much sleep the night before, spending most of it tossing and turning in my borrowed bed. At first I'd been thinking about everything that had happened at Forever, and growing increasingly paranoid about not hearing anything from Trisren or Aethyta in the aftermath. But as I'd laid there in the dark.. my thoughts had turned to the cold space beside me.

I still loved her. But the more Trena had harped on me.. the more it was making me wonder if I was loving a memory instead of an actual person. The woman that I had fallen into bed with, it felt like a long time ago now, had been Xerol's designated heir. Despite that title, she'd still been, well, free to more or less walk her own path with only a few restrictions. And there had been the dangling idea that one of the twins would replace her in that role, removing what few rules had bound her.
But these days.. it was like I could see the chains of her position increasingly weighing upon her, working to separate Matriarch Nynsi Shaaryak away from the Nyn that I'd fallen for.

“I'm getting there.” I admitted quietly. “Not going to pay up just yet, but.. shit. Maybe if Balak hadn't been here. Maybe if the Hegemony wasn't leaning on her so hard. “

“Maybes don't change the tides Cieran.” For once she sounded as serious as I was. “You've been having nightmares again, haven't you?”

“No, thank Athame for small favors. Just.. had a lot of time to think for once.”

As usual it didn't take her long to work it out, growling as she shoved off from her workbench and stalked closer to me. I didn't bother glancing away as she leaned down, not quite glaring as she looked directly into my eyes. “Fucking stims ape. And you want me to take you into combat?”

My lips twitched slightly at the edges. “Do I have to follow you?”

A fist hit my right shoulder, my own lighting thudding against her stomach in retaliation. “You can be my bodyguard, but I'm not letting you near actual fighting if I can fucking help it. And we're bringing someone else with to keep an eye on you.”

I arched one of my eyebrows as she didn't step away. “Tris?”

“Rane.” Her mouth curled. “And don't think I'm not telling her about the drugs.”

Ugh. That would get rid of the awkward phase and put her straight into overprotective mode with my luck. “Bitch.”

“Asshole.”

“Slut.”

“Monkey.”

“Fucking fish.”

“Foul alien.”

I couldn't stop the snort. Mine hadn't been all that good, but that last one had just been bad. “Seriously? Foul alien? That's fucking tame scales.”

She groaned as she stepped away, shaking her head as she ambled back towards her own workbench. “Yeah. Shit, that wasn't a good one. Your round ape. Get Rane in here would you? If you two are coming with we need to lay out what we're fucking doing.”

“You should probably handle that.” I caught her annoyed glance as I spun in place, glancing back down at the pieces of my cane. “Still a little awkward with her right now.”

“Because she wanted to rip your clothes off last night?”

I wouldn't have put it quite that way, but the poor woman had definitely wanted a round of thank-god-we're-still-alive sex. Specifically with the guy she'd been watching from afar, or from not so far away, for nearly a year now. “Something like that.”

Trena grunted. “Seriously. She'd have been in your.. her room as fast as if a hurricane had been at her back if you'd just said shit last night. Wasn't like you were sleeping anyway.”
“Scales, I'm admitting that you might be right about Nyn.” I grunted as I forced the last connecting rod back into place. “That doesn't mean I've given up yet. And stop trying to tempt me.”

“So you are tempted.”

Of course I was fucking tempted. I was a living human with active hormones, my relationship was falling apart before me, and there was a very well muscled girl who was seriously crushing hard on me. But just because the temptation was there didn't mean that I would take it. I wasn't that kind of guy dammit.

“Just call her scales.”

“Fucking noble humans and your weird crap. It's just sex.” Despite the muttered words I could still hear her omni-tool chiming as she sent off the message.

Shaking my head, I tried to focus on what I was doing. There was no way I was going to get the cane finished today but I could at least get it put back together. And maybe add a better way to reload the thing, and remove the mines without needing Illyan to tear it apart.

“A small hole cut into it here to install a door, maybe bend the guiding rails slightly to match that point.” I muttered to myself as I held the thing up, looking down it as I worked things out. Originally I'd just intended to be able to detach the grip and reload it that way, but this seemed far more efficient. “New idea on reloads scales.”

She grunted after I brought her up to speed, waving me over to her bench so that we could lay out mine next to her own. Ten or fifteen minutes later had her cutting out rectangular spots we'd marked from the both of them while I dug through our spare materials to find what we'd need to make the cover plates slide open and closed. And lock closed, now that I took an extra second to think about it.

I was mentally debating about how complex I wanted the locking system to be when the sisters quietly arrived. They were both dressed casually, and at first glance didn't seem all that worse for wear. Maybe a bit tired, but I could hardly judge them for that.

“Boss.” Illyan waved a broad hand as they slowly walked our direction. “Morning.”

“Ilyan. Erana.” My chin jerked as I nodded politely back at them, carrying the parts I'd selected back to scales. “Sleep all right?”

“Surprisingly.” The big Asari glanced between me and her sister, “Can't complain about that. You?”

“He didn't. On fucking stims.” Trena ignored my betrayed glare as she yanked things out of my hands. “You all right kid?”

“I.. I think so.”

Yeah. Because that tone of voice made me feel even better about my life.

“Erana, are you sure-hey!” There hadn't been any warning. One moment she'd been next to her much taller sister, the next a bluish colored blur had collided with me as arms wrapped around my waist. She was almost my height, but still managed to bury her face in my neck as she clung to me. “Um. Erana?”

“Cieran. Sir. I..” There was a sniffle that I found alarming. “Thank you for.. for trying to help.”
“I.. didn't really say all that much.” I had no idea what to do with my hands, settling for patting her on the back a little awkwardly. “You should thank your sister.”

Her voice was muffled as she buried her face a bit more, her sister grinning like an idiot instead of helping me as Trena struggled not to laugh. “I did. I just.. wanted to thank you too. You care so much and.. goddess, my sister says you're only half my age but your so.. so..”

Illyan finally stepped in, “Sis, come on. Let the boss breath why don't you.”

The maiden blushed all the way to the tip of her crest as she finally let me go, letting her sister pull her back. “Goddess. I'm sorry, I just.. I..”

I cut her off before she could get a good head blabber steam going. “Have you head any demonjuice or tea yet?”

“I.. no, I haven't.. wait, you're saying I can?” Something like her normally excitable self returned for a brief moment before flickering out. “But.. what about last night?”

“You have the day off. As for last night, you did good, and you won't have to worry about getting dragged into anything like this again all right?”

She didn't say anything until her sister nudged her shoulder. “I meant.. I wanted to ask.. how.. how do you handle it? It was.. goddess, it was horrible. But you deal with it all the time.. so..”

Trena's smile faded as we traded a long look. Neither one of us was a poster child for properly dealing with things like this, and I'm pretty sure she knew it as much as I did. I refused to dwell on shit that happened, to the point of throwing the memories aside and not looking too closely at myself. And having lots of sex with Nyn when the opportunity was there.

Scales spoke after a long moment, “Don't think about it too much girl. Don't dwell on it. If you have to talk, you've got a sister who isn't a useless tit. Or us if she's not around. First few days might be rough, just do what you can to focus on your job and put it behind you. You're too young to deal with it like we do.”

“Go treat yourself. Illyan can take you out on the town.”

Massive arms crossed her chest. “Volunteer me why don't you boss.”

Not that she really sounded upset. She wasn't stupid, she had to have known that Trena and I were still probably drowning in this crap. But there was no way she was leaving her sister alone after last night, and there was no way that we were involving either of them any further.

My eyes rolled. “I'll give you money. Just don't get your sister drunk.”

“What about me?”

“Ilyan.” Trena snorted. “It's not even fucking noon yet. Even for me that's too early to drink.”

“Oh fine.” The big Asari's dramatics at least got her sister to smile a little bit again. “You know boss, the River District plays the Reaches tonight..”

I tried not to groan at the hit my account was about to take. Not that it was really all that much of a hit, but it was the principle of the thing. “Normal tickets only.”

“I'll be sure to thank you later boss,” She gave me a grin that was definitely bordering on flirtatious, which only grew wider when my eyes narrowed in reply. “Come on sis, we have a
clawball game to get ready for. And money that's not ours to spend.”

Erana tried to stammer out that she was all right and didn't need us to do this and blah blah blah. Illyan eventually heaved her up onto a broad shoulder, drawing another flush to the maiden's face as she squeaked in protest. Any hopes that I had of getting back to work, however, were dashed as Rane arrived just as they were leaving.

She was obviously restraining a smile as the bigger sister simply carried her sibling out, though her mirth faded a bit once they were gone. “Trena. Harath'krem.”

“Rane.” Trena and I spoke more or less in time, though her tone was annoyed while mine more disappointed.

“. Cieran.” The correction was far quieter, but at least it was there. “There was news about what happened last night?”

“Not really.” Scales waved a hand at a nearby chair, the lowborn taking it only after a moment's hesitation. And she still didn't seem to want to look at me. “Tris and Aethyta are letting me handle this crap since it's on my end.”

I whipped my head around to gape at her. “Since fucking when?”

“This morning.” Her head cocked to the side. “I told you about it before Wear'an pretty little ass showed up. Or hadn't your drugs kicked in yet?”

Apparently they hadn't because while I remembered talking to Trena after she'd woken up, I didn't remember her telling me anything about the two of them.

“Drugs? What...” While I was trying and failing to recall what we'd actually discussed, Rane was leaning forwards so that her dark eyes could focus on me. I didn't bother trying to look away, Trena would just tell her if I did. “.. stimulants?”

“He didn't sleep. At all.”

Copper colored lips thinned as she growled my name. “Cieran.”

“Insomnia gave me time to think at least.” It wasn't the best deflection but it was all I had. “I'm helping scales with this Eclipse shit tonight.”

Her expression shifted from anger to confusion, and then onto worry. “Shaaryak won't-”

“Take it well.” I finished for her. “I know, already had the discussion. I'm doing it anyway.”

Her upper eyes flicked over to Trena while her lower set stayed on me. “You're letting him?”

Our Asari companion snorted. “He's not giving me a fucking choice girl. Insists on being his usual, stupidly noble self.”

“He's like that.” Rane agreed, again shifting all of her eyes to Trena. “And you want me along with to make sure that he doesn't do something brave yet idiotic given his condition?”

“Something like that.”

I glared at each of them in turn. “Stop talking about me like I'm an invalid.”

“Ape, you've got a medigel patch on your arm, you've still got a few months before you'll be able to walk around without a cane and a brace, maybe. Oh, and you're on goddess-damned stimulants
because you decided that fucking sleep was overrated.” Scales stabbed her fingers in my direction. 
“Which you’re going to have to take more of otherwise you’ll just fucking crash mid-operation.”

“You forgot the part where the internal injuries left him with no real endurance.” The lowborn just 
had to pile on a bit more. “And since his exoskeleton was destroyed, he’s limited to just his pistol 
and light armor.”

“I get it all right, I’m not in any fucking shape to do this but I’m fucking doing it anyway all right?” 
Rane’s skin darkened slightly, while Trena gave me a look as if she’d just noticed that I was there. 
Rubbing my forehead, I groaned before continuing. “Scales.. what are we doing? Sederis needed 
you to plan things?”

“She's handling the detailed planning.” An Asari shrug. “Got out of that shit or I'd already be 
gone. What she wants is eyes on her own people as much as on those assholes. Technically I'm 
just running the patchwork shit she's put in place of Wasea's command, entirely initiates whose 
loyalty she's sure of.”

That at least made some sense to me. If Sederis was still concerned that the one traitor wasn't the 
only one that she had in her inner circle, having an outside source that she trusted to act as her 
backup sounded like a good move. “Either reserves against the True Sons, or a group with a 
commander she's sure she can trust to deal with any more traitors that show up. Multipurpose 
really.”

“Pretty much. We should have gunships so we'll be mobile enough to move fast.” Another shrug. 
“Rane, think you can handle a door gun?”

All four eyes blinked. “I.. yes?”

“Good, because I don't fucking trust the ape to do anything else.” I wanted to glare at her, but 
given that I'd more or less just admitted that this was a bad idea ten seconds ago.. I could only 
hunch my shoulders a bit and not really look at either of them. “We're heading over to her 
mansion after lunch, give me some time to figure out just who the fuck this is I'm supposed to be 
leading.”

“I'll admit that the fact that you don't know them worries me.” Rane shifted slightly in her chair. 
“Are you confident that this will, well, work?”

“No.” The blunt reply didn't surprise either of us. “But this is at least something I can use to avoid 
getting caught any deeper in that bitch's wake. And shit. Maybe the ape being along will convince 
her that she really does owe him more than some useless intel.”

Miracles could happen I supposed. Not that I had any fucking idea what the hell I'd use another 
favor from her for, given that she had given me no indication that she was willing to let me hold 
onto one for a while. “Where's the attack going to happen?”

“Nos Astran slums, the ones north of the spaceport.” I tried not to grimace. I might not have ever 
been to that part of town but I'd heard and seen enough on the news to know that that wasn't a 
good part of town. Even living in the Manufacturing District was considered a step up from those 
streets.

That it was also the largest concentration of aliens outside of Khar'shan Minor also made it a rather 
obvious place for the True Sons to go. There were plenty of smaller gangs there, just as virulently 
anti-Asari, who would probably leap at the chance to work with the larger group.

“Any other details?”
Trena gave me a look. “Athame's ass ape, I just fucking said that I was letting her handle that shit. I know enough to handle my bit of this goddess damned mess.”

I glared back at her. “My apologies for trying to know enough to you know.. maybe survive?”

“Then keep your pale ass here.”

“Enough, both of you!” We both whipped our heads around to stare at Rane, who's cheeks promptly darkened. “I understand that arguing and hitting each other is sort of your thing, but by the Pillars, this just isn't the time.”

I wasn't used to being the one yelled at like this. Usually it was me jumping between Nyn and Trena.

Trena grunted something that was vaguely apologetic, a sound I echoed a few moments later.

“Right.” Now that we'd both shut up our friend seemed to be at a loss for words. “Ah. What do we need to do before we leave?”

I glanced at scales, who waved for me to speak. “Call it the same division of labor that Nynsi left for us. Scales, you can tell Sederis that Rane and I are going with to keep you alive. Rane, work with the staff to make sure that they keep the mansion on lockdown until we get back.”

Rane nodded slightly, “And you?”

My lips twisted. “Vasir should know that we won't be available to deal with any issues that come up with the hotel. With our fucking luck the crew's going to pick tonight to try and break their doors down to get out of the quarantine.”

Trena grunted. “Probably a good call. Doubt we'll be done before fucking midnight, so make sure to grab more stims for yourself ape. And probably a few for us.”

I made the mental note to grab some. I hated taking the fucking things because the crash was.. well, they call it a crash for reason. And taking more would definitely not help with that, but the alternative was passing out mid-mission and that obviously couldn't happen.

After agreeing to meet in the dining hall to grab some food before we left, we separated to get what we needed done done.

Of course.. if I'd known what Athame had planned for the next twenty-four hours.. shit. I don't even know what I could have done.

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Next up is Chapter 11: The Criticality

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Chapter End Notes
Apologies for this chapter being shorter than the norm, but this was really the point in
the story to cut it before things start.. well, exploding again. The next chapter will
likely be a bit longer to cover everything in the build-up to the final chapter, after
which we'll have a few shorter epilogue scenes before the story wraps.

As far as what happened in this chapter... Cieran is starting to come to terms with the
idea that he and Nynsi may simply be too far apart to fix, and kudos to Trena for not
jumping for joy and screaming I told you so at the top of her lungs. Erana is shaken
but not yet broken, and Illyan at least will be able to take care of her.. and Rane is still
awkwardly Rane.

For those looking for more details about the new named True Son, expect them in the
next chapter.

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, nor will I make money off of this story. Dammit.

Chapter 11: The Criticality

Ten hours later the three of us, plus four Eclipse initiates, were in a gunship as it bobbed and weaved above the Nos Astran slums. My finger was clenched on a door guns trigger, walking tracers across yet another gang holdout that had been stupid enough to open fire on us. We'd already dealt with five or six such locations over the last four hours, while Sederis and two of her 'line' companies dealt with the True Sons proper. And for the most part it had been pretty one-sided.

But once and a while some asshole on the ground gut lucky.

Pain tore at my left arm, ripping that hand free from the heavy gun as I swore violently. “Athame's motherfucking ass!”

“Sir!” Hands grabbed me from behind, yanking me off of the door gun and keeping me upright as I staggered back. “Hank, the gun!”

A burly human swayed past me, moving his body in time with the gunship's motion before taking my place. The massive weapon promptly began to chatter and bark, tracers whipping downwards to continue suppressing the advance below us.

While he got on with my job, the Eclipse Lieutenant hauled me along before pushing me into one of the squad bay's chairs. Captain Wasea's daughter looked a lot like her father, with similarly bright tattoos covering her face. But where her father had been a close combat maestro, she had apparently followed in her mother's footsteps and become a combat medic.

Washana quickly strapped me in before I could protest, her motions quick and efficient. “Sir, I need your arm.”

Trying not to snarl in pain, I forced the limb away from where I'd instinctively tucked it to my chest. “Same fucking arm.. always the same fucking side.”

The Asari let out a polite hmm noise, her hands quickly working to tie off a tourniquet just below my elbow. I nodded when it was tight, letting her get on with removing the forearm plate to get a better look at the wound.

Well.. what was left of the armor anyway. The plate more or less fell apart in her hands as she pulled it off, both of us staring at the shattered ceramics for a long moment. I grimaced and glanced away, feeling her armored fingers start pushing up the underweave to better expose the area.
“You all right ape?” Trena’s voice carried through my helmet. I couldn't have heard her without it, even if she as just up ahead in the cockpit. Between the roaring engines, the gun I'd been on, the gun that Rane was on opposite, and a pair of Eclipse mercs riding in side-seats and blasting things with light machine guns.. even Lieutenant Washana and I had needed radios to properly speak.

“Just another fucking flesh wound.” I tried not to grimace as she turned my limb, letting me get a better glimpse of the bleeding gouge in my flesh. “Armor took most of the blow.”

“Pretty much all of it actually,” The Asari kneeling in front of me started to pull containers from her belt. “If it hadn’t you’d have lost your hand at the very least, sir.”

Huzzah for wearing armor then.

“We still all right?”

Trena's snort carried easily over the speakers. “Most of the local gangs are already dead. The Sons are falling back to an apartment complex near the canal. Sederis is laughing her ass off. Shit is normal.”

A hiss of pain was out before I could clamp down on it, the medic not saying a thing as she put the hypo-needle aside before grabbing medigel. “Some warning next time?”

“It's just a pain killer sir.”

My lips thinned. “And stop calling me sir.”

“With respect, sir, you fought beside my father on Korlus. She told me that anyone who she called an ally is someone I should respect.”

I felt my cheek twitch. I'd had no idea that Captain Wasea had even had children, much less that she'd apparently written them letters during the trip to Korlus. And of course Trena had accidentally pointed out that I was the same Cieran Kean from said letters and that I'd tried to save her life on that forsaken planet.

The maiden was nearing her matronhood, but had.. well, she'd basically squeed with joy as soon as she'd we'd been introduced. She'd started firing off questions about me, her father, my fighting style, if I was building new power armor, what Korlus had been like.. and she'd done it all while barely pausing to draw breath. After getting her to be quiet for just a moment, I'd contemplated my options and then done the coldest thing that I could remember doing in my life.

I'd grabbed Rane by the elbow, pulled her over, and told her that this was the woman who'd killed Dougal and avenged Wasea. Washana had promptly thrown herself at Rane and begun babbling incoherently as she hung off the larger alien, a state of affairs that had more or less continued for over an hour.

Trena had thought it was hilarious, but needless to say, the lowborn hadn't quite forgiven me yet.

While the Asari began slathering medigel into place, the gunfire around us slowly petered out.

“Out of targets.” Rane reported as her gun went silent. “Looks like we've cleared this area.”

“Agreed.” Scales paused before speaking again, “We're falling into a holding pattern while the other teams get picked up. Next stop is the main fight. How useless are you going to be ape?”

I flexed the fingers on my free hand experimentally, only a mild ache accompanying the movement. “Painkillers are doing what they're supposed to for now.”
“Not that you can move quickly.” Turning, I gave Rane a glare through my helmet that bounced entirely off of hers. “Are we remaining airborne?”

Trena grunted, “Obviously. We’ll be over the canal and watching for anyone trying to bolt. I think everyone would be fucking happier if this was the last goddess-damned time we have to deal with these assholes.”

A rumble of agreement was her answer there. In its own way it was good to know that the Eclipse, at least, were equally sick of dealing with these idiots. I glanced out of the open doorway, watching the dark slums beneath us as the gunship slid into a long turn. Sederis had paid off someone to kill the power in the entire area we were attacking, which probably made life a living hell for the civilians down there. Against the True Sons it wasn’t all that much of an advantage, now that they actually had proper equipment. But against the gangs who’d apparently jumped into bed with them.. it turned one sided fights into total slaughters.

Now parts of the area were burning from explosions and missile strikes, beacons of yellow and orange amidst the darkness.

Blowing out a long breath, and trying not to think about what the fires would mean to the people caught in the cross-fire, I asked a question of my own. “Any news on our Turian friend? Or Krom?”

There was another deep grunt from scales. “No to the first. The second.. remember that big fucking explosion an hour ago? That was apparently Krom's local hideout.”

I let out a slow whistle. “He dead then?”

“Probably not.” Hank the door gunner shook his helmet. “I know his rep, he's a cockroach.”

While I nodded, everyone else in our area turned to stare at him in confusion. Apparently the term didn't translate well, a fact that Rane confirmed a moment later. “That's.. a scavenger insect?”

“It's an Earth bug, a cock-roach.” He sounded it out the second time, “Little bastards can survive fucking anything, goddamned impossible to get rid of.”

“Ah. Wait, you have shit like that on your home planet?”

“Um.. yeah. Doesn't everybody?”

“Gethin worms.” Rane shuddered before turning back to her weapon, “Don't ask, they're disgusting.”

The Asari hanging half out of the aircraft beside her made a retching sound in her helmet, clutching her LMG to her chest as her head shook violently. “Goddess. You had to bring them up.”

“Not going there.” Washana tilted her helmet up. “That feel all right sir?”

“Athame's fucking.. just call me Kean at least. And yeah, the bandaging feels fine.”

“Very good sir.” Teeth ground as I resisted the urge to say something obscene. The combat medic quickly packed her gear away before rising, lifting a hand to a guide rail in the ceiling as she carefully headed up to the cockpit.

After she'd gone through the hatch, and closed it behind her, I turned to stare at Rane. “You're responsible for this, aren't you?”
The lowborn pointedly didn't look back at me. “I have no idea what you mean, Harath'krem.”

Athame's fucking ass. She was *pranking* me. And it was *annoyingly* effective.

“You seem upset sir.” My head whipped around as the much larger human guy quickly turned back to his own gun. “You all right?”

“Yeah, are you all right sir?” Now the fucking side gunners were getting in on it, the one next to Rane leaning back so that her visor could catch me. “That injury looks bad. Maybe you should take it easy sir.”

I sucked in a very long, very slow breath that failed entirely to calm me. “I fucking hate all of you.”

That drew a protest from the other side gunner. “I didn't say anything!”

“You were thinking it!” I snapped.

“.. yeah.” The Asari actually giggled. “I was. Sir.”

You know your life is in a weird fucking spot when an Eclipse initiate, an Asari maiden who'd probably lived at least three of my lifetimes, was *giggling* at me while we were flying above a blacked out city that was..well, for lack of a better term, being sacked by Jona fucking Sederis.

Shit.. I needed a vacation, my life was just too fucked up to deal with right now. Maybe I'd even be able to drag Nyn with and get her to be the woman that I'd fallen for again, instead of the Matriarch Nynsi Shaaryak that she was turning into fulltime.

It was a nice dream, so long as I remembered that that was what it was.

“Last squads finally have their asses back in their own gunships.” Trena grunted before anyone else could annoy me. “And stop harassing the ape with that deferential crap. Even if he deserves it.”

I might have made an irritated noise there. As expected, she ignored me entirely and continued speaking. “Gunships two through six, you're the reserves. Put down on the canal's south side and wait for my signal. Seven to ten, you're airborne with us. Pilots, keep your fucking hands on the throttles and be ready to dive. Might have to drop your teams off in a goddess-damned hurry.”

Ten clicks quickly sounded over the radios as the other units acknowledged the commands.

I tried to place everyone, given the terrain, only to grimace as I realized that I really didn't have a mental map of the area. Bringing my right arm up, the omni-tool on that wrist snapped to life when I flicked my fingers.

There wasn't much to see once I got the map in front of me. The apartment complex that the Eclipse had surrounded lay along the canal's northern edge, sprawling over several city blocks. On the south side there were several battered office buildings that would at least give the gunships something tall to set down on.

A few moments of thought, and then work, later tied int the map to the Eclipse's comlines to give me a decent idea as to where they were. Sederis had intended to end the True Sons annoyance for good, and had brought in a hell of a lot of firepower to accomplish that. The word 'overkill' didn't even really describe it properly.
Apart from our flock of vehicles, there were two more flying squadrons acting as hunter killers to blast anyone trying to flee. Another was further south, flying slow patrol patterns in between us and the Nos Astran starport just in case anyone got past the main body. Not that that getting there would help them, last I'd heard she'd actually brought the *Solar Eclipse* itself into low orbit.

Which probably was making the Executive Board freak the fuck out. Couldn't complain about that.

Another flick shifted to the private frequency between Trena, Rane, and I. “You know either of the officers sieging the target?”

“No, she brought them in from Omega just for this run.”

I grunted. “Either way, looks like Sederis is moving in with them. Shouldn't take them long to end this.”

One of these days I'll remember not to fucking be positive on a battlefield.

Seconds after the words had left my mouth, the VTOL bounced hard upwards before pulling hard to the left. The pilot began frantically swearing, her voice frantic as the rest of us were thrown against our restraints. Rane and Hank both nearly went flying out of the gunship, the latter kept in only by the straps connecting him to the gun.

My own oaths filled the air my left arm slammed into the wall, the drugs not nearly enough to prevent the dual wounds from screaming in pain.

“Get us over land!” Trena's bellow made me wince, “Prep for a fucking hard landing back there!”

It wasn't like we could fucking do anything else. The craft was oscillating wildly around us, I had no idea how everyone else was staying in the damned thing. I was constantly getting thrown against my restraints, it was all I could do to tighten my good hand around one of the straps and keep my left arm tucked against my chest.

Things got a bit blurry after that. I remember looking out the left side and seeing the engine on the short wing burning. The ground coming up a hell of a lot faster than I was comfortable with. Trena and the pilot swearing their blue asses off as they tried to get us to crash in a sort-of controlled fashion.

I don't actually remember the impact, Rane told me about it after the fact. The pilot managed to get the pointed nose up at the last moment to avoid slamming the belly into the canal wall. Instead we bounced hard upwards before the ship plowed into the ground, the impact snapping my head back against the bulkhead.. which more or less explained the lapse in my memories.

When I came to someone had dragged me clear of the vehicle, shoving me behind the rusted out hulk of an aircar. Everything fucking hurt, and there was already plenty of gunfire flashing past overhead. Overhead another gunship neatly sideslipped another missile, the door gunners spewing fire in every direction as they tried to cover us.

“Fucking..” My cursing was cut off when a stumbling form staggered and collapsed on top of me.

“Cieran!” Rane fell into a soccer style slide, following the person she'd just thrown at me. “She's out of it, check her for injuries!”

I wasn't exactly in my right mind either because it took me a few moments to realize that it was Trena that was draped over me.
“Shit!” Grabbing her head, I tried to keep her neck straight while shifting her off of me and onto the ground. “Scales!”

If she made a noise I couldn't hear it over Rane's assault rifle thundering near my head.

Shit! Using my hands as much as my eyes I checked her for blood, especially around the back of her neck. I breathed out quiet thanks to whatever deity was up there when I didn't find any, carefully popping her helmet loose.

Her eyes were open, but unfocused. Another quick check confirmed that she was breathing., and a bit of mental beration at myself for not fucking checking that first.

“Scales!” Armored fingers carefully pealed some of the blue skin away from her eyes, the gem colored iris's flashing as tracer fire continued to whip past. “Rane, where's Washana!?”

“Pinned down, other side of the crash!” She snapped back, her words punctuated with more triple shots from her weapon. “She's not getting here soon Cie!”

Fucking.. shit! I was a mechanic, not a fucking medic! “Trena! Come on you fucking short bitch, move something!”

One of the muscles in her cheek twitched, her eyes finally blinking.

Before I could try and get her to to do anything else, Rane was grabbing my good shoulder. “Cie! They're closing, I need you!”

I hesitated for a long moment before swearing again, stumbling back into a crouch and ripping my pistol off my belt. “What side?”

“Right!”

Shifting a bit to try and cover Trena's twitching form, I popped up to take a quick glance over the ruined car's trunk. Someone promptly started shooting my way, sending sparks off of the vehicle. A few punched through the ruined metal to ping off my shields but didn't do much more than nudge the bar a bit.

Ignoring the ache in my left arm, I brought my gun up with both hands to steady my aim before replying in kind. My heavy pistol chased one distant form back into a building, a few more making another duck out of the window that they'd firing on Rane from.

“They're pulling back.” I called out as the firing slackened, the gang apparently needing time to regroup. “For now anyway."

“Same. Washana, you still alive over there?”

“We're good ma'am! Got both LMG's behind a fountain or something, they tried to rush us and paid for it.” The confident tones were a far cry from the fangirl we'd met in the afternoon, making her sound a lot like her late parent. “Can you make it to us?”

I couldn't run, and even if I could we'd have to try and carry Trena.

“Not a chance.” My head shook, trying to keep my eyes alert for any signs of motion. The night vision mode on my helmet wasn't exactly high end, but it at least let me see in the blacked out city. “Trena's still down, we need an extraction.”
There was a grimace in her voice. “We lost two more gunships to those missiles, with their squads still inside. I can't risk bringing them in.”

“They've got fucking missiles right!?” I snapped. “Get the reserves in the air and bring the goddess-damned waterfront down!”

“I... yes sir, strikes incoming in moments!”

“Rane, I'm getting Trena's helmet back on,” Suiting actions to words I ducked back down, grabbing the errant piece of armor.

She'd dropped down, probably to give her weapon time to cool, but nodded at my words and shifted back upwards. “Covering you.”

Getting her helmet back on was harder than getting it off had been. Scales wasn't exactly coherent, but she was twisting her head around and flexing her fingers as she visibly tried to work out what the hell was going on. I had to slap her lightly to get her to stop moving enough for me to get the armor back over her skull.

“..ape?” Her voice was weak over the speakers. “..what.. fuck?”

“Stay down!” I snapped, shoving on her breastplate to keep her on the ground when she tried to get up. “Buildings coming down soon!”

The buildings were actually coming down.. right about then. I flinched as something streaked past overhead, the muted explosion nearly making me drop onto Trena. Fighting off the reflex, I pulled her a bit closer to the car before flinching again as another missile whipped past.

More began to flash in, their exhausts creating a strobe-light effect that was quickly swallowed by the gleaming firelight.

“They're breaking!” Rane's rifle began to roar, making it quite clear what direction they were breaking in.

Snapping back up, I barely got my gun settled in time to put a quick pair of shots into a Salarian. The already scorched armor shattered, green blood spraying as the long limbed alien tumbled to the ground.

Motion on my left nearly made me swing my gun around that way, my teeth grinding as I forced myself to trust Rane to handle that side.

It was a good decision on my part, because three forms broke away from a burning apartment to rush me. The lead human took five shots to put down, his scream loud even against the detonations still sounding off.

I tried to reset, but I only had time for a single snap shot before a pair of booted feet slammed into my chest as a Turian simply vaulted the car entirely. Trena yelped in pain as both of us tumbled over her.

When it came to wrestling, strength mattered, but not as much as having a weapon did. Jerking left when he tried to slam the butt of his rifle into my head, I retaliated by shoving my pistol into his stomach and pulling the trigger as rapidly as I could. There was a echoing screech of pain as he started to thrash, his gun going flying as he settled for trying to rake at me with his ungloved talons.

The claws screeched against my armor, his flailing stopping at the same time as my pistol
overheated. I lay under him for a long moment, trying to gasp for air. The characteristic *thrum-thrum-thrum* of biotic shockwaves had joined the conventional explosions, and there was a lot of shouting and screaming that was hard to process.

Trena.. had to make sure she was all right.

Shoving the heavy corpse aside with a groan, I tried to get up... right in time for another Turian to deliver a snap kick to my bandaged left arm.

My world went white with pain, and I felt my throat tear from the scream that emerged.

“Cease fire or I execute him!” The flanging voice was familiar, where.. oh. Great, my old friend.

Equally familiar laughter was the reply, the mocking sounds trailing as the battlefield went silent.

“You think a hostage will allow you to survive?” Jona Sederis cackled again, “By the goddess you're amusing.”

My vision slowly came back, though I'd have rather it hadn't. I had an excellent view down the barrel of a monster pistol, the weapon pressed directly against my helmet as its wielder crouched directly over top of me.

The Turian surprised me by chortling as well. “You are going to allow me to kill someone that you owe?”

Sederis took a moment to respond to that, but when she did her voice was low and rough. “That bitch told you quite a bit before I killed her.”

“She was very informative.”

“Athame's fucking ass. Let me guess, an unmarked shuttle to Omega?”

“That would be ideal, yes. I'm sure he can find his way back to this forsaken planet from there.” You know.. I really hated being a hostage. Last time I'd at least had confidence born of being cocooned in power armor, even if it had been shot to hell. This time.. shit. It didn't help that the asshole was smart enough to be kneeling on my good arm to keep me from being able to try anything on my own.

My fucking life was in Sederis's hands. I had to gulp down deep breaths to stop from hyperventilating as my brain finished processing that fact.

“And if I say no, you kill him...” The Eclipse's leader mused. “And then what? You have no one else in arm's reach. Hm. Ripping your plates off makes your kind scream too much.. not sure where to start.”

My head was shoved against the ground as the pistol pressed into my visor. “I don't think you understand the situation, blueie bitch.”

“I don't think you understand modern fucking technology. Make sure he can still talk.”

In time with the final syllable, a monster rifle roared from what couldn't have been more than a few meters away. Dark blue blood exploded across my visor in the same moment, the pressure against my helmet vanishing.

The screaming started a few moments later, probably when his brain caught up with what his body was telling it.
“Someone tie off that fucking arm before he bleeds out!” Sederis snapped. “Initiate Washana! Get your skinny ass over here and check on Gears!”

Dropping my pistol, I brought a badly shaking hand up to shove my helmet off. I couldn't see shit with all of the blood on it anyway, and it sounded like the battle was over.

Thankfully the Eclipse apparently agreed, because they'd begun to snap lights on so that they weren't stuck with just the burning buildings for light. Not more than a meter away there were two yellow clad forms holding down the asshole who'd been shoving his gun in my face, while a third was frantically working to tie off what was left of his forearm.

More important was the blue clad form already hovering over Trena, carefully removing her helmet yet again while a pacing Sederis stared down at the both of them.

“Cieran.. are you all right?”

Shaking my head, I glanced up at Rane as she stepped over. “I'm... yeah.”

I couldn't read her face through her helmet, but the way she hesitated before offering me a hand made it clear that she didn't believe me. Easily hauling me to my feet, she stayed close as I limped my way towards the Eclipse's leader.

“Kean.” Sederis's wild eyes flicked my way. “You lived. Good.”

“Why..” Bringing a hand up I pinched my nose. Public, she still acted nuts. Have to roll with it. “Sorry, been a long day. Sniper?”

Her lips peeled back to show her teeth. “Easiest method to deal with shit like that.”

I couldn't argue with results.. though I could have done without the experience. “Trena?”

Those wild eyes shifted to Washana. “Girl?”

“She’s alert and responsive.. if slow. Heartbeat is steady.. she definitely has a concussion at the very least. It would be safest to get her to a hospital for scans.”

“Handle it.” There was a brief moment of sanity as she glanced at me. “I'll have my personal bodyguards escort you. Kean, walk with me.”

I dipped my chin in silent acceptance. “Rane’li, stay with Trena and help the Lieutenant move her.”

Rane nodded, stepping away from me, her voice as formal as mine had been. “Understood Harath'krem.”

Tapping her on the back in thanks, I ambled very slowly away, falling in beside Sederis as she waved off her personal commandos to give us room.

“Who made the call to light up the buildings?”

I grimaced. “Me. I didn't think we could keep them off of us with Trena down so..”

There was a quiet chuckle. “Stop worrying human, I'm hardly the type to get upset about property damage. You kept Gears alive, that's the important shit here.”

My tongue licked my lips. “Please don't grab my beard again.”
“I might, just for appearances sake. I am growing rather annoyed at having to owe favors to a random human however.” She let out a slow exhale as we slowed to a stop, standing a few meters away from the cooling wreckage of our gunship. “What do you want this time?”

“I didn't save Trena for you, or come with to help you.” Picking my words carefully, I blew out a breath before continuing. “I did it because she's my friend. So you don't owe me anything.”

Golden armor creaked as she shifted, glaring at me out of the edges of her eyes. “You.. are an extremely frustrating man, Kean. Though I suppose your loyalty to Gears is.. commendable.”

“Um... thanks?”

“Whatever.” Her nostrils flared as she exhaled. “You wanted intel last time, here's some more. Krom escaped. Fucking again. Used improvised explosives to blast his way into the sewers after throwing a few True Sons in my commando's way to buy himself time. Ruthless and pragmatic.. I should have hired him first. Dammit.”

Yeah, he definitely sounded like her type. “Can't catch him?”

“He's not a fucking idiot. He's gone.” Armor chimed as fingers curled into fists before she smacked both of her hands together. “I'll have to alert Omega. But your Turian friend.. I intend to get answers from him. You can remain during the interrogation.”

Now, I wasn't exactly the squeemish type.. but I really didn't want to watch her torture the guy to death. I'd be happy to put my gun to his head and kill him, he fucking deserved it, but I very much doubted that Sederis would be that merciful.

Thankfully, Rane came to my rescue. “Harath'krem! Apologies, but there's a transmission for you.”

Sederis continued to stare at the wreckage, giving a minute nod of permission. I waved the lowborn over. “From who?”

“Captain Vasir.”

Her left arm rose, omni-tool gleaming as I restrained a groan. I didn't fucking want to deal with the crew's bullshit tonight.

“Captain.” I forced my voice to remain polite as the small screen flickered to show her face. “With respect, we're in the middle of something.. and very much exhausted. Unless someone's died I really don't care how you deal with the situation. I'll deal with Nynsi for you even.”

The I-Sec officer didn't smile, and her voice was hard as steel. “Kean. Get your ass here. Now.”

Um.. what? “What happened? Did they try and break quarantine?”

“No one is alive to try and break quarantine.” I stared blankly at the tiny image, the words not processing in my brain. “Get your pale ass in an aircar and get over here.”

She cut the link before I could formulate a reply.

“I'll get you an aircar.” Sederis's voice was darkly amused. “And new bandages for your arm. Looks like your night isn't over Kean.”
Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit harder to write than combat scenes normally are for me. Part of that was Cieran's current limitations, another part of that was bridging what had to happen here with what's happening in the next chapter. I actually scrapped a five page draft and ended up writing all of Chapter 12 before coming back and trying my hand at this one a second time.

I'm not putting a 'review requirement' in place, but Chapter 12 is done and been proofread by the Blocked Writer already. I'm planning on putting it out later in this week, probably on Friday. But if there's a lot of reviews I'll post it early. Because I like reviews. :)

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 12: The Line

Captain Vasir was waiting for us outside of the hotel, not flinching in the slightest as Rane brought the aircar down hard into the middle of the street. She and I were the vehicle's only occupants, Sederis indicating that she'd have someone track it down and retrieve it later. I had the feeling it was her way of 'repaying' me for whatever she felt like she owed me, but I wasn't going to complain. Trena's car was still at the base, and we were in a bit of a rush after Vasir's heart-stopping message.

The building itself wasn't all that impressive, not compared to the monsters in Nos Astra proper anyway. Five stories, built simply like most buildings in the district, with an attached restaurant and garage stretching off to one side. While the building may not have been all that much to look at, the I-Sec swarm that had descended very much was.

Besides the Captain, the entire block looked like it had been cordoned off with flashing lights. Officers and detectives were racing around in the chaotic yet strangely controlled manner of people having to deal with extreme shit.

But all of them were giving their boss a wide berth, none getting within a few meters of her.

I needed my cane to help propel me to my feet as I got out of the aircar, everything between my head and my shin aching painfully. The shots were at least keeping my left arm numb, which was... something I guessed. “Captain.”

“Kean.” The Asari sounded exhausted, which wasn't really surprising given the hour. That she very obviously hadn't bothered taking the time to put a shirt on before grabbing her armor also gave strong hints that this was going to be bad. District level Captains wouldn't get yanked out of their beds that quickly for nothing. “Nice sling. Come on.”

Rane fell in just behind me as I limped after the Asari. “What happened?”

“Easier to see.” Her voice was flat. “Not going to prejudice you. Take a breath beforehand.”

“Captain.. remember the treatment plant?”

“I have not forgotten. As I said, take a breath first.”

Well... fuck. Following her advice, and still trying to ignore my body's throbbing, I gripped my cane tightly in my right hand before following her inside. Rane trailed behind us, and actually walked right into my back when I stopped not more than a step or two later.

“Cie...ran..” Her voice trailed off as she leaned around me to see what had made me stop in the middle of the doors like that.
Like most hotels, the main doors opened to a lobby. It had been quaint, sparsely decorated with a mixture of Asari and Batarian paintings of their species pasts. The centerpiece had been the reception desk, its location and size carefully positioned to ensure that it was the first thing your eyes went to when entering the room from any direction.

Which was probably why they'd left the receptionist.. what was left of her anyway, on top of it.

From the amount of blood, her heart had still been pumping while they had.. the only word I could think of to describe it was halathen. It doesn't translate well from Thessian to English, and was usually reserved for saying what an Ardat'yakshi had done to her victim. Combine the words rape, defilement, and add in a sense that their very souls had been brutalized and you might get the idea.

Her crest had been sawed off before being shoved into her own mouth. The mouth itself had been likewise sliced open with something jagged, the effect not dissimilar to a Glasgow Grin. As for the actual method of death, she certainly could not have survived her throat being opened in that way. I could only hope that the poor girl had died long before that final cut though.

The shirt and jacket had been removed to give them access to her chest. Her breasts.. I'm not even going to describe it. Trust me, it was.. shit. Below that, her abdomen hadn't escaped their attention either. A pair of strangely neat slices had been enough for someone to reach in and rip out her intestines, the slick organs wrapped around hands whose fingers had been all cut off.

I had to close my eyes at that point, refusing to look at the rest of it... the rest of her. “How long did it take them?”

“The officers on sight reported on time three hours ago and did not give any codewords indicating duress.” Vasir’s voice was subdued. “When they missed their next check-in two hours later, officers arrived ten minutes after the appointed time to investigate. They immediately called in for backup and attempted to initiate a lockdown. I've called in the River District for assistance.”

I sucked in a ragged breath, which was a mistake. My teeth ground as I fought to keep from retching, and I was only peripherally aware of one of Rane's hands grabbing at my shoulder. Supporting me or her, I don't know. “This had to have taken time. They probably hit right after the check-in and were gone before the next. Locking down the star-ports?”

“Our already is. So is River's and Manufacturing.” Heat entered her voice. “Nos Astra refuses, of course. Their fucking profit margins would take a hit. Nos Irrail is being watched by the Eclipse for us, but..”

“But whoever did this was likely intelligent.” Rane spoke quietly, her fingers digging into me through my shirt. “If they know anything of Illium they would know that Nos Astra's facilities never close. If they aren't off planet they will be long before you can get that department to work with you.”

“Speak for the fucking goddess girl.” It was her turn to take in a slow inhale, though she was at least smart enough to breath through her mouth instead. “Apologies, my anger is not directed at either of you. As for.. what happened here. It's hard to see under the blood but there's evidence of shock collar usage as well. Likely tuned to suppress her biotics.”

“To stop her from fighting back.” Forcing my eyes back open, I glanced around the room again. “Not much destruction, even a maiden could have used the chairs as a weapon if she had to. She was taken by surprise.”

A new voice cut in, another Asari appearing in an open door to my left. “They all were. Hello again Kean.”
"Detective Wear'an." Transferred already. That hadn't taken fucking long. Letting my cane rest against my leg, I rose a shaking hand to rub at my face. "Were they.. all like this?"

"The staff are, yes." The tiny little detective's voice sounded as if all emotion had been wrung out of it. "As for your Batarians, they're in the rooms. If you could follow me?"

Vasir waved us on ahead, "Medical shuttles should be arriving soon to take the dead to the morgue. I'll meet you in the security offices when you're done."

I nodded, limping after the petite Asari and pointedly refusing to turn my head to look anymore than I already had. From the choking sounds that Rane made as she followed, she hadn't had that level of self control.

"You going to make it?"

There was a ragged intake of air. "Did you.. you didn't see between her.. Pillars."

"They tore apart her azure and her ass, yes." Wear'an didn't glance back at us. "Probably with the same set of knives they used on the rest of her. Won't know if they raped her beforehand until the autopsy."

Don't fucking think about it or you'll go catatonic with anger. Just fucking focus on what you can.

"Any evidence of an attacker's species? Security footage?"

"Latter was wiped by a localized EMP, after they cut the server hardlines running to your mansion. Then they blew the entire thing up just to be sure." Fucking thorough assholes. "Still looking for physical evidence, but the bodies indicate several species were likely involved. Neat Salarian cuts minimize the mess, maximize the pain. Batarians go for jagged brutality. Turians like to throw in psychological hits to go with the physical, hence the crest and tit cutting. Humans are more generalists, but the mouth cuts are a dead give away."

My fingers tightened around my cane. Never thought I'd fucking learn about the torture preferences of different species. "How many?"

Her small fists tightened visibly as we hit the end of the hall. "Twelve staff members, the manager, and four officers were here. Plus thirty seven Batarians locked on the second floor in quarantine."

Rane spoke as Wear'an guided us through a door, a stairwell revealing itself on the other side. "And all of the Asari were..?"

"All except the manager. They flayed her while she was still alive and left her skin outside her office door."

I had to stop on the stairwell at that point. I'd only spoken with Shahan once or twice on the phone, but I had known her. Fuck. I'd set her up on a date with Vasir not more than a few days ago after she'd come up with the quarantine idea. And.. they'd fucking..

"I'm going to kill these people Detective."

Her blue head turned back as she likewise paused. "What's your people's phrase.. right, get in fucking line Kean."

My head dipped deferentially to the left, a gesture that she seemed to recognize because she tilted hers to the right before waving us on.
The doorway leading to the second floor was open, a pair of armored I-Sec agents standing guard on either side of it. Both were visibly tense, not saying a word as we moved past.

"Things are different up here." The detective didn't waste any time, leading us to the nearest room. "They moved faster, more efficiently."

"So I see." I murmured as I got a better look into the first room. As before, there was no evidence of a struggle, but there was equally no evidence of torture. The crewmember's body was in a heap just inside the door, a single entry wound in the center of his broad face. "They all like this?"

A blue hand waved down the hall. "All the doors are open, the first group is like this. The further you go along the more things change. Some tried to hide, others tried to fight back."

Turning away from the body, I leaned against the wall and breathed shallowly through my mouth. The smell wasn't as bad up here, but death still permeated the air. "They started to realize what was happening. The rooms aren't soundproofed are they?"

"No."

Closing my eyes, I tried to push the fury and disgust aside, willing my exhausted brain to keep moving for just a while longer. "No way the staff weren't screaming under torture. The crew must have been killed first.. probably with silencers. Actual gunshots would have alerted everyone and you'd have a lot more hiding or fighting. All of them were in their rooms?"

She nodded. "The officers allowed them in and out of their rooms, just not off of this floor."

"But if they weren't locked in.. why didn't they try to run?" Rane gestured at the hallway. "Or fight back together in the hall."

Wear'an shrugged slightly, her head dipping as she turned to head back to the stairs. "Either they were all cowards.. or somebody locked them all into their own rooms. Come on, Captain should be in security by now."

We didn't talk on the return trip. Rane helped me down the stairs, making sure that I didn't lose my balance and tumble down them. Which was more likely than not really. Even without the aches and pains the stims I'd taken before the fight had definitely worn off, my body belatedly realizing that I hadn't slept and that it had definitely gone through the ringer.

The lowborn held me back a moment once we reached the ground floor, pulling a small container from her belt and offering it to me. After a moment's indecision I grabbed it, pulling a white tablet out and swallowing the stupid thing.

Taking three inside of a day could not possibly have been good for me, but neither could I just pass out in the middle of this shit.

Especially given that this was.. at least partly my fault. Maybe even entirely.

That was the thought that nearly drove me to the ground permanently. Rane had to wrap an arm around my waist and nearly haul me along to keep me moving as as I struggled not to hyperventilate.

Fuck. People had been tortured, butchered, because I'd fucking tried get cute. If I'd just done the shit Nynsi had told me, turned down Shahan's idea, kept Vasir's people in the hotel.. fucking.. Athame. Four officers couldn't defend a building this size, or even watch all of the entrances. If there'd been a dozen or so more.. maybe they could have held out long enough for someone to get
word out. Maybe some of them still die, but not.. not like this.

I lost track of things until a blue something whipped across my face, the pain making me gasp as the world returned.

Captain Vasir was staring at me, her hand lowering as she shook her fingers out. “Snap out of it Kean. You're in fucking Intelligence remember? You don't have time for self-pity. Or self-hate. Whichever ocean you're wallowing in get out of it.”

My eyes could only blink as I stared at her, trying to regather my wits.

She seemed to misinterpret that, because she heaved a sigh before speaking again. “Kid, you didn't have to put any effort into getting my people out of here. Even if you'd tried to get me to leave officers here I'd already made up my damned mind not to. They'd taken enough abuse from those assholes. Shahan.. she just gave you two an excuse to ask for what I was going to fucking do anyway. You want to blame someone, blame me.”

“Or whoever did it.” Rane carefully stepped around me, a hand trailing along my right arm, ready to grab it in case I started to tip again. “Cieran, none of us thought the hotel would be a target, we didn't have any reason to.”

Logic told me that they were right. Guilt didn't quite agree.

Pinching my eyes shut, I took in a long breath. “I'm.. all right. I just.. shit. Balak is going to go ballistic when they hear.”

“They already know. Not about the deaths, but that something happened.”

My heart went from tiredly slow beats to trying to claw its way out of my chest in about five seconds. Opening my eyes I stared disbelievingly at Vasir. “What.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “We just received word that the Noln returned to orbit twenty minutes ago. Apparently one of the missing crew members was just lurking nearby and felt the need to sent an emergency burst message to the ship after the ‘quarantine’ story leaked out. They turned around and came back at top speed. I.. Fuck, I assumed that you knew. They've been en route to Illium for over a day now.”

“Rane?” I whipped my head to her, not taking any solace in the fact that she looked equally shocked.

The lowborn brought up her omni-tool, quickly flashing though screens. “I.. I've got nothing Cieran. No indications to the mansion that they were on their way, that they're back.. nothing.”

“Athame's fucking..” Fingers rubbed furiously at my eyes before I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Dammit. She gave her word that the crew would survive. Balak must have talked her out of warning us to try and stop me from rushing them all to a hospital or something.”

That or Nynsi had made that call on her own. If they'd shown up without warning and everything had been fine, Balak would have had to eat some serious political pain both with her and the Hegemony for blowing off a mission for absolutely nothing at all. Fuck. She wasn't stupid, she'd probably realized that the disease scare was just bullshit that we'd made up to keep the crew locked away and was looking forwards to rubbing Balak's smug face in it.

Shit. But even if I'd had the rest of the week to work this shit out.. it wouldn't have changed anything.
Rane's teeth worked at her lip as she reached the same conclusion. “Cieran.. when they arrive..”

Vasir glanced between us. “All right, what do you two know that I don't?”

“I was on thin ice for the Nos Astran incident a few days ago.” Realizing that I had started to rub at my face again I forced my hand down, grabbing at my cane. “My orders were to work with you to keep his crew alive while they were gone. I think.. it's safe to say... shit.”

It was a hell of a lot harder to say than I'd thought, each hit that today had brought piling together until my brain simply refused to process it anymore.

“He'll be declared Reyja'krem.” Rane supplied when my mouth could only work silently, her voice quiet once more. “Effectively exiled. Their relationship will be over. She'll seize any assets he has that are under her control.”

The I-Sec Captain blew an annoyed breath out of her nose. “And that it wasn't your fault won't matter in the slightest.”

I tried not to flinch, or remember what I'd seen in the lobby. From Vasir's expression, I didn't go a particularly good job at that.

“Kean.”

One of my hands rose. “I'll.. make it for now. I can break down on my own time.”

That didn't seem to be the answer that she or Rane wanted to hear, but given our new problems Vasir could only nod tightly. “We don't have much time until Shaaryak is here and screaming her head off. Your assessment?”

“Assessment.. right. Right.” Pain radiated from where I was gripping my cane far too tightly, and from within my chest. Me and Nyn were... fuck. Half closing my eyes, I tried to focus on the physical pain in my hand, to use that to clear my brain for just a few more minutes. “Whoever did this killed the crew efficiently and quickly, but took their time torturing the hotel's staff. All of whom were Asari. First thought is whoever did all of this had a bias against your people. Second thought is they also wanted to hit Ny.. Shaaryak. Combine those and there's only one group on planet that fits.”

“The True Sons.” Rane shook her head. “But they were fighting the Eclipse. And losing horrifically at that. If they had an elite group capable of everything that happened here they would have called them back to help.”

“Or at least tried to, and Sederis would have intercepted any transmission.” I agreed. “And since when have the Sons been this elite? I mean.. shit. Jamming transmissions sure, but this was..”

“Exceptionally done.” Vasir supplied. “All of the underground hardlines were cut, all radio transmissions were jammed. My officers, and the staff, were apparently taken entirely by surprise and then bound before being tortured to death. They were thorough enough to leave no recorded evidence, even going to far as to take every omni-tool off of the corpses.”

I grimaced as she continued, “Which means that until forensics gets here and examines the entire building, we have no actual evidence beyond the corpses. Is it possible that the Sons entire purpose for being here was killing these people, and that they were willing to sacrifice themselves to ensure this mission occurred?”

Rane and I both snorted in response to that, though I was the one who spoke. “Not a chance. And their assassin was definitely present at the battle, even if he escaped.”
“Athame's azure.” It was her turn to rub furiously at her face in aggravation. “I have four dead officers, twelve dead citizens, and thirty or so dead Batarians here. Shaaryak is going to scream her head off about incompetence, that Hegemony asshole is going to make smug comments, and you're about to get fucking washed out to sea because of cultural politics.”

I wouldn't be the only one. Without me, Trena was gone as well. And given how much Ghai seemed to care for her, any lingering loyalty to the family likely wouldn't keep her around.

Before she could continue ranting, or either of us could interrupt, the door behind Rane and I slid open to reveal Wear'an's petite frame. “Sorry Captain, but we just got word that Shaaryak's shuttle has arrived at her mansion. We should expect company within fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Rane had to grab my shoulder again as I started to slump. This was.. this was too fucking much. Not enough sleep, too many stimulants, too many injuries, too many things to handle. I.. fuck.

Vasir grunted. “Sorry kids, but she owns the building. I don't have any legal grounds to stop her from coming in. Detective, if she's got any Hegemony assholes with her keep them out. If they're stupid enough to try to press it, arrest them for interference in an active investigation.”

Blue lips curled on one side, as she turned to leave. “It'll be a pleasure ma'am.”

“Wait. Any new evidence?”

There was a quiet grunt and a nod. “The service duct in the utility room was forced. Detective Ashlur thinks that's how they got in and out. That ladder connects to the main sewers below the building and provides easy access to the trunk holding the connections to both our headquarters and the district's mansion.”

“And the utility room would have had server access.” Everyone glanced at Rane, whose skin flushed a bit before she continued. “A skilled hacker could have locked down the building from there without setting off any local alarms.”

“Wear'an.”

A nod. “I'll have the techs check those connections, but I'm not hopeful ma'am. Whoever they were.. they were thorough in cleaning up after themselves. They used the fire fighting equipment in the pool room to wash the blood off themselves before draining the entire thing.”

The Captain growled, clearing about to break down in fury again. “By the fucking goddess.. just.. you have your orders, Detective. Alert me to any new developments.”

She vanished as quietly as she'd come. As if she hadn't just told me that I had less than a half hour before my life broke apart.

Shit. I'd..only begun to seriously think about whether or not Nyn and I should break up this morning. This was too fast. A big part of me had still wanted to try and make things right between us and now.. now that wouldn't happen. Ever. Everything that I'd started to work on, the vague plans I'd only started to formulate about the future.. gone. Because I'd fucked up. Because Vasir hadn't cared. Because some anonymous fucking assholes had cleaned out this building. Fucking why?

“Captain Vasir.” It was more than a fight to keep my voice level, but somehow I managed it. Rane stepped back as I straightened as best I could, refusing to let my cane take my weight. “I likely won't be speaking for Miss Shaaryak much longer. But as an agent of Republic Intelligence, I would still like to be kept abreast of this investigation.”
The Asari officer regarded me for a moment before drawing herself up as well, “Given your involvement, that will not be a problem agent. Will you need someone to accompany you?”

“I.. no,” My head shook slightly, the walls I'd hastily thrown together in my head almost crumbling at the lifeline she offered. “I'll.. this is something that I should.. handle alone. I.. may need a ride afterwords.”

“It'll be waiting.” We stood in silence for a moment before she shook her head slightly. “Kid, if this was the True Sons, they'll know where you live. I'll have officers outside your apartment until you can relocate.”

I honestly hadn't thought of that. Probably a sign that I definitely wasn't at my best right now. “I.. thank you Captain, but isn't that outside of your.. jurisdiction?”

“My sister is a Spectre. You think she's the only one who doesn't give a shit about rules? The tides can take that bitch in the River District anyway for submitting to Sederis like a ten credit whore.” For the tiniest of moments I smiled at her reminder of just why she'd gotten booted out of Nos Astra and stuck in Khar'shan Minor. “Besides, it can't hurt to have a friend or three in intelligence. Not like anyone tells me shit anymore.”

Which might have been her motivation all along, to have a few people who owed her favors. Honestly I didn't know her well enough to say either way, and at that moment I didn't really care. She was helping at the same time my life was apparently falling apart. That was enough for me.

“Anyone in the restaurant?”

Her head shook. “No deaths there. I'll have it closed off until you're done.”

Nodding my thanks again, I turned away. Rane followed quietly, waiting to speak until the door had shut behind us.

“Cieran.. I.”

“Too quiet.” I filled in for her, trying not to think about what would happen once my feet finished carrying me to my destination. “You are. You're not stupid, you could have filled in everything that I did.”

“I.. I mean, by the Pillars Cieran, it's hard to focus after seeing.. and hearing..” A hand reached out as she stopped, my attempt at distracting her failing utterly as her breathing quickened. “That was..”

“Rane.” Stepping back I leaned down so that I could look into her upper eyes. “Don't think about it right now, ok? Wall it off and focus on the now.”

The dark orbs blinked a few times before she managed a steadying breath. “I'm going to be exiled right along with you. So is Trena.”


Warm fingers pressed against my lips before I could continue, her head shaking as she tried to get some control back, “Cieran.. no. Blame.. blame whoever was sick enough to do this. Don't blame yourself. You couldn't have stopped it.”

No. I couldn't have stopped it, but.. maybe I could have mitigated it. But that.. that wasn't something I could spend time on. Not right now.
My eyes closed as she hesitantly removed her hand to let me speak. “Most of my assets are in scattered accounts, and I still have my old apartment. We can spend the night there, or at Trena's old place. After that we'll talk with Aethyta about.. finding safe houses to stay in.”

The tremble in her voice was obvious. “It's been.. I've lived in the mansion for.. no.. no, you're right. Focus on the now. What.. what do you need me to do?”

Part of me wished that my left arm wasn't stuck to my chest, so that I could touch her shoulder reassuringly even as I leaned on my cane. “Call scales and get her up to speed, if she's coherent enough to understand. If you've got the time after that, tell the sisters as well. Ghai if she isn't with Nynsi.”

“All right.” Air whistled through her teeth as she inhaled. “I'll.. see you after?”

“Yeah.”

Her fingers rose again, brushing through my beard to touch the skin on my cheek for the briefest of moments before she turned away, omni-tool already online and trying to connect to Trena's.

Which left me alone. With my thoughts. While I waited for my lover to show up and kick me out of her home. And her life. And the city she more or less ran.

Because I'd gotten... fucking basic math, fifty something people dead. Fifty four, there we go.

Awesome. It was a great fucking day to be me wasn't it?

Shambling into the dark and empty restaurant, I made it as far as the bar before collapsing onto a stool. After that.. I.. well. I fucking broke down for a while. Just buried my face in my good hand and did everything that I could to not puke all over myself. I vacillated wildly between pure depression and fury, slamming my fist onto the bartop one moment and then struggling not to sob the next.

“Fucking.. shit!”

With what we knew right now.. it pointed at the True Sons. They'd definitely be the types capable of doing.. what had been done. And we'd pissed them off more than once, and this would definitely send a message to Nynsi. Killing people who were openly under her protection would make her look weak and incompetent, possibly to the point where she lost local political capital and especially trust with the locals.

So. Motive down, they definitely had that.

But the fucking skill wasn't there. And the timing was wrong on top of that.

Maybe they could apply enough cunning to work out the basic plan, but being able to hack the local security system? Smart enough to very, very thoroughly cover their tracks? I'd expect them to be proudly saying that they'd done it to show off their strength. And all of the Asari.. none of them had fought back? How the hell could sixteen biotics not put up any kind of a fight before getting collared? And the collars themselves.. anti-biotic tech wasn't cheap. Not even slightly.

Plus there was the whole issue of Sederis, with us tagging along, massacring most of them on the north side of town in the same time-frame.

Not that who did it really mattered at the moment, because if I'd done my fucking job some of them might still be alive. And Nyn might not.. no, she still probably would. But there would have been a chance.
Somewhere behind me, doors whooshed quietly. The echoes of booted feet hitting the ground reached my ears as they approached before slowing to a stop.

“Cieran.” Her smooth tones were entirely without emotion. It hurt to think that.. this would be the last time that I heard it.

“Nynsi.” Titles seemed wasted at this point. “Here to fire me in person?”

“You.. deserve that much.”

I smiled sadly at nothing. “Thanks.”

She let out a low growl of anger. “Don't make this harder than it has to be. I gave the Commander my word that his people would be protected. I trusted that you could accomplish that much.”

A muscle in my cheek twitched slightly, little daggers of guilt somehow managing to dig further into my chest. “Don't forget the staff and officers who were tortured to death.”

“I have not. And for what, Cieran? So that you could tag along with T'laria on a mission that got you injured. Again. A mission that you were hardly needed for.” Tinges of fury made her voice choppy and rough. “It is even possible that if you and Rane had been at the mansion you might have been able to do something!”

You know, the worst thing was that she was entirely correct. Trena hadn't needed me to be there, I hadn't even managed to do anything besides get myself concussed and roughed up. Of course it was also entirely possible that I couldn't have done anything even if I'd stayed behind. But then again, logic and guilt hardly spoke the same language.

“You don't need to lay it all out there. I'm well aware of what happened.” I let my head bow a bit. “I don't need you to make me feel like shit Nynsi, already do.”

“If you are looking for sympathy you will not receive it.” She sniped back tartly. “Captain Vasir attempted to take the blame, but as far as I'm concerned that only indicates that she was equally incompetent.”

I felt a muscle in my cheek twitch, the despair fading as a new, hotter emotion began to rise. “Just say it's over so we can get this over with.”

“Of course it is over. It was over when I heard from the mansion that you were staying with Rane’li of all people!” A wooden chair skidded across the ground after a vicious sounding kick, her treads continuing before I could even open my mouth. “I expected you to have a cot in the garage or to sleep in the sister's suite! All of your talk of.. exclusivity.. do I even need to ask how often you've forced her to submit?”

“I.. what?” Shoving on the bar, I spun in place to stare at her as my mouth worked. “You think.. Nynsi, nothing happened between me and Rane. She let me kick her out! She's been in the sister's room!”

Teal lips pulled back, her head tossing to the right dismissively. “I'm sure the cameras show that. But we know who created the mansion's infrastructure, don't we? And don't believe that I've missed the way she stares at you. Balak was right it seems, I should never have given lowborn trash like her any authority.”

My mouth worked as the anger began to build. Blaming me for what had happened here? Sure. I fucking deserved it even if I didn't particularly want to hear it so scathingly. Accusing me of
“I put up with your highborn shit after you became the family head.” She drew back as if I’d hit her when my own voice dropped to an angry snarl. “I fucking let you off the hook for Korlus against pretty much everyone’s advice. I fucking put up with Balak instead of putting a bullet into his worthless skull because you asked me to.”

She began to reply, almost snarling when I rose my voice to cut her off, my feet hitting the ground as I stood and glared furiously at her. “I did everything I could to adapt to your culture. To do shit right by you. Have you even listened to your fucking self over the last few months? This is fucking Illium. Not Athame damned Khar’shan.”

“I’m well aware of what planet I am on Cieran!”

Grabbing my cane, I slammed the tip into the floor angrily. “Then why are you conforming to what that asshole wants you to be!?”

Fingers clenched as she took several deep breaths. I wasn't honestly expecting a response to my question... and I didn't get one when she began speaking once again. “Cieran Kean. As the head of the Shaaryak family, and your Tarath’shan, I declare you Reyja’krem for failing to protect those under your purview. Any possession you have at the mansion will be seized. You are no longer welcome there, or at any establishment under my control.”

The pang I felt wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be, the anger suppressing the pain enough that I only jerked my head in a nod.

“I expect that we will not meet again in this lifetime.” The Highborn Matriarch took a final breath. “Any last words?”

My eyes flicked between her two sets before I nodded tightly. “Tell Nyn that I'm going to miss her, and that I'm not a fan of the person she's become.”

For the briefest of moments I saw pain in her eyes, her head shifting minutely to the left before she caught herself. Schooling her features once more into a cold mask, she gave me the tiniest of nods, spun on a heel, stalked back out of the restaurant.. and out of my life.

Athame.. god.. whoever. Fucking shit. I was so fucking done with.. all of this. Fucking Illium.

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End Act 3: The Exit

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Next up is Act 4: The Epilogue
And.. well.. here we are. I'm sure a few of you at least predicted this outcome, or something similar. Though the events with the crew were hopefully a bit of a surprise.. if not a particularly good one. There will be the requisite four epilogue chapters, each dealing with a particular portion of the fallout from the story. As with Arrival, they won't be as long as normal chapter so I'm hoping to get them out fairly quickly.

As with this chapter, the first Epilogue chapter is already complete and checked over by The Blocked Writer (who is an awesome beta, just have to say it again). The planned posting date is on Friday.. but if I get a lot of reviews again I'll go ahead and post it early. :)

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 Mechanic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I don't own Mass Effect, or anything related to it. Which kind of sucks. I'd like to be a millionaire.

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Epilogue 1: The Mechanic

The first few days after my exile-slash-breakup-slash-massive fuckup passed in a tired blur.

A lot of that was the damned stims. My memories were a bit scattered, but I did remember the I-Sec officers flying us to my old apartment where I'd promptly collapsed. At some point Ghai and Trena had shown up, the three of them helping me out of the dusty place and into another aircar which had taken us to a temporary safe-house.

We'd stayed there for the first week, all four of us drinking copiously and bitching about the unfairness of life. The others largely stopped when Illyan and Erana joined us, their employment lasting a mere eight days after my own had ended. The day after they showed up the six of us moved again, this time into a quiet River District suburb not far from Trena's old shop.

Still.. while the others tried to find stability, I mostly stood alone, pushing my friends away when they tried to talk to me about crap. Not exactly smart of me, to be honest, but guilt and depression were a thing. And between them they definitely had me drinking far too much.

The situation lasted another few weeks before Trena finally lost her shit.

I leaned against the wall in my room, listening to my friends speaking on the other side of my door. They probably thought I was still asleep, otherwise they'd have found a more private spot to talk. Like one of the half a dozen empty rooms in the damned townhouse that Aethyta had shoved us into.

“I'm past worrying.” Rane's voice was tense. “All he's done for the last month is drink and then collapse, then wake up and stare at nothing until it's late enough to go to a bar.”

“With the shit that he went through can you fucking blame him?”

“I don't blame him for being upset, but he needs to start moving on.”

“Preferably moving on top of you?”

There was a low hiss of anger. “Trena. You make it sound like I want him better just so that I can share his bed.”

“Athame's ass.. you know I didn't mean it like that.” The Asari's tone was defensive. “I just meant.. shit. Wish he was a fucking Asari, could just send you or Illyan in there naked and he'd
get over that bitch real fast.”

It would certainly be distracting... probably even quite pleasantly so. But it would take more than good sex to get me over Nyn.

“Well he isn't. And you know how he is, he's still blaming himself for the staff's deaths.”

Because I could have saved some of them. Fuck. Maybe even all of them.

“I know.. shit. I know Vasir tried to talk with him a few days ago, she thought he was doing all right.”

Really? She must be a bad judge of humans then, I was pretty sure that I was still a crap actor.

“So.. what do we do? I mean.. I've tried to talk with him, but even as a Reyjak'krem his status makes it.. difficult.”

“Doesn't that just make him as much of an exile as you are?”

A delicate snort. “That would make it impossible for other families to hire them. He's still a Highborn.. just without the protections offered by having a Tarath'shan.”

Translation: If I was anything but a human other highborns would have already been flooding my inbox with offers. Since I was human however.. the Hegemony likely wouldn't put a contract out on my head, that would set a bad precedent. But on the same token, no one on the Patriarch's Council would get upset if I wound up face-down in an alley somewhere.

“Fucking cultural shit.. you can't work through it?”

“Once and a while, sure. When we're just sitting together casually it isn't as difficult, but on this kind of thing..”

“So it's up to me then.” She let out an irritated groan. “You can still barely talk to him, Ghai isn't a conversationalist, Erana's too busy being devastated that she got her and her sister fired, and Illyan would probably just go get drunk with him and then sleep with him. Which would get them both fucking killed because it's a bitch and a half to not meld even when you're sober.”

Hm. Good to know. Not that I ever got so drunk that I was tempted to sleep with an Asari, or anyone really. I drank to keep the depression at bay, not to get blacked out.. which was a bit of a fine line to be fair.

“I'll help as I can.”

“No.. it's all right, I've got a plan.”

Trena? A plan? The tiniest of smiles tugged at my lips.

“Does this plan involve me taking my clothes off?”

A very telling pause followed. “No?”

Booted feet promptly stomped away without another word, which earned another tiny smile. Of course, that faded a few moments later when there was a knock on my door.

Not bothering to leave my spot against the wall, I reached out and flicked the control switch.

If Trena was surprised to see me up and standing near the door, she didn't show it. “Ape.”
“Scales.”

We stared at one another for a long moment before she sighed. “Look ape. I know you heard all that shit, so I'm just going to fucking go ahead. It's been three fucking weeks. We aren't asking for you to act like the ocean's perfectly calm, but shit. You need to stop fucking drowning yourself every day. It's fucking annoying.”

For a long few moments I could only blink in disbelief. “You want me to just get over it.. because it's annoying to you.”

Any compassion in her voice faded as a growl touched each word. “You've also blown off Erana. Fucking girl got washed out onto the streets for fucking standing up to that bitch about you getting fired, and you barely acknowledge that she exists! And don't even fucking get me started on Rane! She's fucking worrying herself sick because you're so.. so fucking not you!”

I might have flinched slightly at that, glancing away when I couldn't continue to meet her eyes. “Shit.. I'll.. do something for them I guess.”

“Guess. You guess. Athame's fucking azure.. fuck this Cieran.” A blue hand grabbed my shoulder, yanking me around so that her other fist could slam right into my stomach.

My breath exploded out of my lungs as I staggered backwards, reflexively bringing my arms up to block the follow up punch that would have probably broken my nose. Instead pain slammed up and down my right forearm, more of it following when she snapped up another quick jab into that shoulder.

“Fucking fight back!” She actually spit out the words, her short frame dropping as a kick lashed out at my shins.

Dodging sent me lurching right, slamming my back into the wall. “Trena, what the fuck!?”

Her only reply was an angry snarl, body weaving to try and drive a foot into my gut. Dropping my hands I managed to at least partly catch the limb with a grunt of my own. She flexed her other leg, keeping her balance as I hung onto her shin, the both of us glaring at each other.


Blue lips pulled back into a sneer. “Fucking look at you. Just huddled in your own goddamned misery. Grow a fucking quad Cieran.”

She moved before I could snap anything in reply she ripped her leg free, practically spinning as she switched plant feet and drove the other leg right into my left knee. That limb promptly slammed into its opposite, sending me sprawling to the floor with hiss of pain. Rolling out of the way of a follow up stomp, I scrambled to my feet and slapped aside a punch.

Following the instructions that Trisren had drummed into my skull, I slipped right before throwing out my right arm in a counterstrike. Trena snapped her arms up before it could connect, her own hiss of pain sounding as my fist hit her arm.

“That's the best you can fucking do?” She scoffed, glaring at me when I didn't make any move to make a follow up attack. We both began to shift as she started to circle me, our feet making the expensive floorboards creak as we did. “One pathetic ass punch? Where's the stupid asshole that dragged his crippled ass along to watch my ass?”

“He hadn't gotten people tortured to death.”
That was apparently the wrong thing to say. I had enough time to see yet another snarl pull her lips back before biotic light swirled over her body and slammed into me as she punched the air.

A pillow of air the size of a fucking car slammed into my chest and sent me flying, pain exploding up and down my back as I sailed through the open door and hit the wall opposite it in the hallway. Before I could even begin to gather my wits there were two hard shots to my ribs, followed by a strike that slammed into my face and drove me to the ground.

More pain followed when she grabbed my long hair, hauling me up to my knees as I yelped.

“Still fucking think it's your fault?” My neck screamed as she shifted her grip closer to my scalp, forcing me to stare up at her. “The fucking universe doesn’t revolve around you! Sometimes a fucking hurricane happens and you just have to grow a fucking quad and deal! Now are you going to act like your goddess-damned self or are you going to keep fucking moping around like a maiden whose mother wouldn't buy her a fucking toy!?”

My eyes had narrowed to slits from the pain, and I let out a ragged breath as she glared at me. Then I snapped my right arm up and slammed my fist into her fucking mouth.

Her fingers yanked themselves free, the hand going to her mouth as she staggered back. It left her open for another quick hit that would probably give her a black eye and also sent her stumbling away.

I tried to get up and move after her, but the world was spinning enough that I needed a moment to recover. Which, naturally, gave her enough time to get over my own hits. Purple blood was dribbling from her split lip as she glared furiously at me.

“That it, ape?”

Something made my fists clench until I felt my nails digging into my skin. “Bring it, fish.”

Neither of us moved for a long moment, and then the fight was on in earnest.

Pain shot up and down both of my arms as I blocked blows, more of it radiating from my fingers when I threw my own punches. Curses in several languages tore their way out of both of our throats as hits landed, purple and red blood dripping onto the floor.

The arena moved with us. Trena was just as strong as I was, but she was a lot shorter and didn't want to keep the fight in the hall where she couldn't avoid my long limbs. I stalked after her, shifting backwards to avoid a pair of kicks as she fell back into the living room.

Ignoring the dull ache making itself known in my left leg, I baited her into throwing a high punch before diving into a wrestling style attack. She tried to jump out of the way as I swept out, snagging one of her ankles before she could yank it away. Returning to my feet without pausing my motion, I again held her leg in my hand as she hopped to try and keep her balance.

But this time I didn't give her a chance to kick free. Tightening my grip, I hauled her towards me, accepting the punch to my ribs as the price to pay. Grabbing her shirt with my right hand, and keeping her leg with my left, I enjoyed the momentary panic in her eyes as I hauled her completely into the air before hurling her into the couch.

“Athame's fucking ass!” The old furniture flipped over onto it's back at the impact, sending her rolling along the hardwood floor. She stumbled badly when she tried to convert the motion into carrying her back to her feet.
Not that I was doing much better. My chest was heaving as I tried to get air, and the anger and adrenaline were losing the fight to keep my own pain suppressed.

I approached carefully, keeping both of my fists up as she settled into a very low stance, her body again glowing with prepared biotics as her left hand came to rest on the ground. I almost missed her right shifting behind her back, only realizing the danger when she couldn't suppress her shit eating grin anymore.

Oh shit.

The dive for the floor was too little, too late. Thankfully she didn't throw the entire couch, instead simply hurling all of the cushions in my direction. They might have been soft, but they were still fucking heavy and her biotic throw was anything but weak.

When the world stopped spinning I was sprawled on the ground again, Trena grinning as she stood above me.

“Feeling better ape?”

Suppressing a growl, I closed my eyes as though in acceptance.. and then slammed my right arm out to take her legs out from under her. A strangled yelp was followed by a body striking the floor next to me.

“Now I do.”

Her only reply was a pain filled groan.

I kept my eyes closed as I tried not to make similar noises. Would it have been too much to have a fucking place with carpeting? Shit. Fucking hitting the floor hurt.

After a few moments a hand grabbed my right arm, yanking it around before a weight settled onto it. “Fucking floor.”

“I know right?”

Her head shifted around a little bit as she tried to find a comfortable spot, cheekbone digging into my muscles. “You done blaming yourself?”

“Probably not.” I let out a quiet groan as talking made my jaw hurt. “But I'll stop being an ass about it.”

A weak fist thudded my sternum. “Fucking better.”

Keeping my eyes closed, my lungs filled and then slowly let out a long breath. “Shit. I really blew off Erana?”

“You haven't been her surrogate parent, that's for fucking sure.”

Well shit. “And Rane? Illyan?”

“Illyan gets it, but she could use your help in the shop. And with her sister.” Trena let out a groan of her own. “And just rip Rane's clothes off already. The pining is getting old.”

My nose flared a bit as I exhaled. “It's only been three weeks scales.”

“Life is short ape. Even for Asari. The girl would swim naked into a lightning storm if you asked
her to, least you can do is give her something back.”

“I.. shit. I'll think about it.” Bringing my left hand up I rubbed at my face. Part of me was glad that she'd waited to hit me until the limb was healed, the rest of me regretted being an ass to the point where she'd felt the need to. “And I should actually do some work, shouldn't I?”

“Shop is open ape. And my cane is fucking awesome.”

Trena's weapon being cooler than mine? That wouldn't fucking do. Blowing out another breath I started making plans for the first time in weeks, working out what I needed to get done, who I needed to talk to. Friends I had to apologize to. Things that I had to build. A boss I should probably actually talk with.

The pain didn't go away.. I still felt responsible for my part in their deaths. But.. Trena was right, weird as that fucking was. It was the past. That wave had hit the beach and receded, and there wasn't shit I could do about it now. Well.. no. There was one thing. I could figure out who'd done it.. and I could fucking kill them.

A spasm in the leg that she'd kicked made me groan and brought my thoughts back to the present.

Right.. medigel first. Grandiose promises of revenge later.

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Next up is Epilogue 2: The Lowborn

Chapter End Notes

o. Trena and Cieran take some time and work through his problems.. some of them anyway. Hopefully he won't spiral any further into self-guilt and depression, but at least she'll be there to punch him in the face if he does. This one was fairly light in terms of dealing with the fallout from the hotel and true son fight, with those stories get more exposition in the next three epilogues.

Once the epilogues all done with, I'll start working on Another Realm: Ronin, which should be closer to Arrival in terms of length (Current alpha outline has three acts, each with eight chapters, and two interludes of unknown length).

That may grow or shrink as I talk with the Blocked Writer on everything, but this time there actually will be a break in my posting. My current plan is to make another attempt at writing ahead, possibly as much as writing an act or more before I start posting chapters and sticking to an actual release schedule (accelerated by reviews.. because I like them)
Also, there is a new poll on my profile: For those who haven't seen it, there is a new poll up on my profile concerning the future of the Author's Fun Facts. If you're interested, please hop over, take a look and vote.

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 2: The Lowborn

I had intended to try and start making my amends that evening by taking everyone out to an actual restaurant for dinner. Ideally without drinking for once. Unfortunately, my body had other ideas.

A few hours after Rane had found Trena and I on the floor, and promptly yelled at the both of us, I'd felt the familiar pain and pressure beginning in my head. Asking Trena for a reschedule to tomorrow with a wave at my head, she’d given me a sympathetic nod before helping me limp back to my room.

Making it to my bed hadn't been difficult, the agony hadn't really started until a few minutes after I'd laid down. Since then.. I tended to lose track of time during the worst episodes, and this was very much one of them.

“Fucking Matriarch. Bitch.” I hissed into the darkness, another throb tearing into my brain. “Athame fucking take you.”

The hesitant knock betrayed who was at the door before it she opened it, “Cieran? Sorry, it took us a while to find your pills.”

“Come on in.” My eyes had closed to slits at the light spilling in with her. “And close the door please.”

Rane’li did so, pausing long enough to let her eyes adjust to the near black before slowly making her way to my bed. Stopping near the edge of my bed, she wordlessly offered me a cup of water and a bottle of drugs.

Grinding my teeth against another spike, I shuffled up to a seated position before nodding in thanks.

Her voice was blessedly quiet when she spoke again. “Are they always this bad?”

“No. This one’s.. unusual.” I admitted before popping two of the pills back and chasing them with the cool liquid.

“Is there.. anything that helps? Besides the pills?”

“The dark. Quiet. Massages.” Handing her the empty glass, I dipped my head to the right with an emphasis on thanks. Once she'd taken it I scooted back down, groaning quietly in relief at being
horizontal again. “Cold towels. Usual human headache remedies.”

Closing my eyes, I tried to will the drugs to work faster. I honestly expected Rane to leave after that, at the most for her to maybe ask a few questions. Possibly even some more berating for the mess that Trena and I had made of the living room and each other earlier in the day. To say that she'd been upset to have found the pair of us bleeding on the floor would be an understatement.

I didn't expect my bed to creak slightly as she sat next to me, or for warm fingers to very hesitantly touch both of my temples.

“With.. with your permission?”

It would have been easier to kick a puppy than to say anything negative. “You don't need permission Rane.”

She sucked in a quiet breath before starting. Lightly at first, as if she was afraid of hurting me, but more firmly when I didn't suddenly start screaming. Between the slow, circular patterns she was working and the drugs, the pain slowly receded as I felt my body begin to relax. And for a while I contentedly just floated, only occasionally suppressing a wince at a few delayed throbs.

“Cieran?” Her voice broke the lull, an unknown amount of time later. The drugs usually took a while to kick in, so it had to have been at least twenty or thirty minutes.

I let out a slow sigh as I came back to the world, the pain thankfully reduced to that of a minor headache. “Still awake. Thank you.”

“You're.. welcome.” Her hands slowly withdrew, which left my skin feeling rather cold. “Um.. I should..”

Knowing what was coming, I quickly snaked my right arm down and around her strong waist. I felt her muscles clench as she froze mid-rise, letting me pull her back down. “Stay here. So we can talk.”

She remained incredibly tense as I touched her, even through her shirt. “Cieran, I.. I don't..”

I felt my lips curl slightly. “Trena made you come in didn't she?”

“Pillars, of course she did.” The lowborn let out a groaning sigh, relaxing a tiny bit as the conversation turned away from her. “She had plenty of idea of what I should be wearing. Or not wearing.”

Naturally. I'd have to hit her. Again. “I'm surprised you let her send you in here at all.”

A tingling growl entered her voice. “Illyan and Ghai blocked off my room. I'm still contemplating how to best get back at them.”

“Let me know when and what you decide, I'll help.”

Her abs flexed as she twisted, and I cracked an eye open to find her shrouded face looking down at me. I honestly missed what she was saying entirely as I belatedly realized that I'd never really just.. looked at Rane before.

Like Nynsi, and other Batarian females I guess, her nostrils were more closed and downturned. It made her nose almost catlike rather than gaping open like a male's. The cartilage bands stretching away from it didn't bulge like a man's either, instead being almost flush with her face and sweeping further out into her cheeks rather than running straight down to her jaw. Really, they
were more noticeable for their darker coloration than for their presence. And of course her ears were practically elfin in their point and length, only slightly smaller than my former lover's had been.

She certainly wasn't human, the extra eyes and lack of hair made that clear enough. And her voice was lower and rougher than Nynsi's... but I couldn't deny that she had her own appeal.

“Cieran?” Her cheeks had started to darken, all four of her eyes blinking with nervous intensity as she unconsciously dipped her head to the left. “You're... um... staring and... I mean, it's your right but...”

“Sorry.” I shifted my gaze away. “If you don't mind... I have a few questions.”

The pause that followed could best be described as nervous, “All right.”

“How many times have you saved my life?” I honestly wasn't sure. “Not including the first time where we saved each other.”

“Cieran... I, it wouldn't be right to keep track of that kind of thing.” My fingers drummed slowly against her side as I continued to hold her, and she seemed to sag a few moments later. “Three other times that I'm... mostly sure I did. I... I don't think you noticed them all.”

I probably hadn't. Shit, I knew that I hadn't. “I owe you a lot then. Plus, you know, the whole getting you fired thing.”

“You didn't.”

“But you know... I don't think that I know you all that well.” She went still as I continued on as if she hadn't spoken, turning back to glance up at her. “You like coding, you run when you're stressed, and you apparently have a thing for humans with beards and long hair.”

If I thought she'd been blushing before, she most certainly was now. Her skin darkened to a deep muddy brown as all of her eyes widened. “Let's start simple. What do you like to eat?”

“I... I mean...” It was clear that she had absolutely no idea where I was going with this. “I've gotten used to Asari cuisine.”

Seafood then, for the most part, with pasta like dishes thrown in for good measure. “Good. We're going out tomorrow, if that's all right with you.”

Her normally low voice actually rose to a near squeak of panic. “What?”

“You and I. Going out to dinner. In the district tomorrow.” I explained carefully, trying not to laugh at how high her voice had gotten. “If you're ok with that?”

“I... I mean, I'd... but you're a highborn and I'm...”

“Rane.” Not thinking that she'd run, I released her waist so that I could bring my right arm up to touch her chin with my fingertips. “Have I ever cared about that?”

She'd frozen when I'd touched her, and stayed silent as I trailed my hand up and over her cheek.

“Rane?”

For a brief moment her eyes became lidded as she let out a long breath. “Do you... have any idea how long I've wanted you to just... touch me like this?”
I winced, pulling my hand back reflexively. “Shit. Rane, I'm-”

“You.” My eyes blinked slowly at the interruption. She never interrupted me. “And you were with Shaaryak and you.. aren't the kind of person who would stray once your loyalty was given. Even.. when you maybe should have.”

Which was probably the most tactful way she could think of to say that I'd been an idiot in love who'd forgiven too much. “It's.. one of the things I admire about you. All of the things that you've been through since you were attacked and you're still.. unfailingly loyal to your friends. Trena doesn't understand you. Pillars, I don't even understand it. Maybe it's a human thing...”

I didn't say anything, afraid to break her out of whatever state of mind she'd managed to get herself into.

Her movements were slow and nervous, her fingers almost shaking as she brought a hand of her own to touch my face in turn. They slowly slid through my goatee, her lips twitching as she felt the hair bristling against her skin. “Pillars. Look at me.. running my hand through a human's fur. Not even a slave, a Reyja'krem. My parents would die of shame if they knew.”

“You've never spoke of them.” I murmured, half closing my eyes as her own touched slid across my cheek and up and into my hair proper.

“I.. don't think of them often.” Was it my imagination or was she starting to lean down? “They forced me into exile when I refused to hack a starport's security system so that they could smuggle things onto our colony.”

Warm breath blew on my face as she chuckled. “Honestly the only reason I didn't do it is because they wouldn't pay me. Seems so stupid looking back at it, but.. Reyja'krem, I'm going to do somethingstupidnow.”

The blurred words was the only warning I had before she closed the remaining distance and pressed our lips together. I stiffened for a moment, then relaxed as the kiss slowly progressed. It wasn't like the rough and tumble affairs that I'd gotten used to. It was far slower, more casual.. hesitant.

She pulled back slowly, a ragged exhale escaping her. “Pillar of Heart, I can't.. I shouldn't have.. please forgiv-”

I let out an annoyed sound before reaching up and grabbing her neck. “Rane.”

The lowborn went very still.

It took more than a few slow exhales to calm myself. My hormones didn't care that about things like emotional turmoil, or the fact that I wasn't even close to being 'over' Nyn. All they cared about was that I'd just been kissing someone and they wanted more in every sense of the word.

And then Rane just had to try again. “Cieran.. I just.. I just kissed you without your..”

“Rane'li.” She actually flinched when I bothered to add the extra syllable. “Stop apologizing and just do it again.”

“I..” For a second she seemed to freeze, and then she lunged back down.

This time there wasn't any hesitation. The vanilla scent of the Chehala leaves that she smoked filled my nose while the earthy taste of Batarian kisses filled my mouth. Mewling noises made her throat vibrate as she shifted and adjusted herself until she was laying more or less on top of me.
My tongue found its way into her mouth to press against hers while her hands slid up to my scalp to run through the long hair. I let my own drift to her back, feeling the plates over her spine through the shirt as I ran them up and down. That drew more noises of approval, her body shifting and flexing, trying to press itself as tightly as possible against my own.

A few moments later we broke apart to breathe properly, the lowborn still absently petting my head.

“Cieran..I.. you..” Her lungs pressed her chest against mine as she took a ragged breath, the exhale warm against my lips. “Are you.. sure?”

I wasn't sure of anything. Part of me still felt like I was betraying Nyn, even after everything that she had done. Part of me wanted to rip Rane's clothes off not because she wanted me, but just to get back at Nynsi for accusing me of sleeping with her in the first place. And yet another part of me just wanted to say fuck it, accept Trena's advice, and just enjoy a night with a friend who had stayed with me through all of this.

Bringing a hand off of her back, I lightly caressed her face once again, struggling to keep my breathing even. “Rane..I don't think I can do more right now.”

She leaned down slightly, until my protruding nose was pressed against her much flatter one. “I.. I know. It..I.. I would love to accept your invitation to dinner tomorrow, Reyja'krem. If you would have me.”

Letting out a long exhale, I tried to will my arousal down as I closed my eyes. “I would.”

Warm lips touched mine for just a moment before she pulled back. Initially I made a noise of protest, thinking that she was leaving entirely. The lowborn let out a tiny chuckle, her body simply adjusting itself so that she could rest her head on my shoulder as her muscled frame tried to tuck itself alongside me. It took her a few moments to get comfortable, but eventually there was a quiet groan before I felt a hand gently start playing with my goatee again.

“You're obsessed with my hair.”

Her voice was quiet. “Should I stop?”

“No.” Shifting a bit on my own, I draped my stiff left arm around her waist to lightly hold her against me. “Does it really help you not notice that I only have two eyes?”

“It.. it does, yes. Does it.. does it bother you that I don't have fur?”

I tried not to snort at the mental image of Rane with hair. “You would look so weird with hair. Don't worry about your appearance, I was staring for a reason earlier.”

Fingers continued to drift across my chin. “Oh. I..um..can we.. talk about something? I..”

I felt her swallow as her hips gave an almost unconscious roll against my side.

Ah. My cheeks burned slightly as I flailed mentally around for a topic. “Are you free to go to Trena's shop tomorrow? I have some projects I want to work on.”

“Of.. of course. Your cane?”

“Trena said hers is done. And more advanced than mine.” Which really did annoy the crap out of me. It had been my idea dammit. “Can't let that stand.”
A quiet chuckle made her chest vibrate. “It is.. rather impressive, though I'm not sure how much I can help. Mostly I was working on the software for your armor but..”

But the armor had been in the damned mansion. Along with too much of my crap. Nynsi had mailed some of it to my old apartment, which at least had meant that I hadn't needed to buy a new wardrobe, but there was a big difference between sending me clothes and sending me the projects that I'd been working on.

The exoskeleton. The upgraded tech mines. The various designs for the armor. My backup tech launchers. Shit, if I hadn't been wearing my damned light plates I'd have probably lost those too. Not that that really mattered because the set was so battered at this point that they were in bad need of replacement.

“Bitch is probably going to try and sell half of it.” I couldn't stop my voice from lowering to an irritated growl. “How many blueprints did we have?”

Her own turned annoyed, the skin beneath my beard jerking as she accidentally pulled on the hair. “Five. And a prototype VI I almost had completed.”

Well shit. “Did I miss any news from that district while I was.. being an idiot?”

“Balak is still there. Illyan said that he and Shaaryak were.. fighting rather viciously after she fired you. He wanted you dead.” Of course he did. “She brought in more Asari commandos to improve her personal security, so I don't think the Hegemony would try to eliminate her.”

Which would probably be enough to at least make the SIU think twice. Plus the potential economic fallout on Khar'shan if she died. Knowing Nynsi she was probably already making dozens of calls to lesser houses to network her assets there even more tightly. That way if they did kill her the financial chaos that would ensue on the Hegemony's capital would cripple them. And given that the Patriarch's council wasn't stupid I couldn't imagine them actually telling Balak to do it.

I didn't want to see her dead, even now.. but beyond that, I was surprised to realize that I really wasn't all that interested.

“Good for her. What about Captain Vasir? She didn't have anything the last time we talked.”

“Still fighting with the Board and Executor. They want her to go ahead and declare it an act of terrorism by the True Sons but she's stalling and hoping for more evidence.” Her body shifted slightly, her face and nose pressing into my neck as she dropped her hand down to rest on my chest. “Trena said she has a meeting with Matriarch Aethyta in a few days.”

“I'll have to get in on that.” I murmured before covering a yawn with my right hand. “Back to the projects I want to work on.. have to do something for the sisters for putting up with my shit. And Ghai. And you.”

Fingers twitched, bunching my shirt up a bit before trying to smooth it out. “Cieran, you don't..”

“Well I'm going to anyway. You need new armor, so does Illyan. And upgraded guns.” Closing my eyes I had to cover another yawn. Damned scales beating on me. And the drugs. Shouldn't be exhausted this early. “And I know I can do something for your tech launcher.”

“Are you falling asleep?”

I didn't see the point in lying. “Yes.”
“Should I go so that you can change?”

My arm tightened reflexively around her waist. “Stay. Please.”

Warm breath tickled my neck before she kissed the skin softly. “As you say, Reyja'krem.”

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**Next up is Epilogue 3: The Spymaster**

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Chapter End Notes

So.. Cieran and Rane finally have a moment, even if Cieran isn't entirely sure of his own intentions and wants to take it a lot more slowly than she does. At least she's willing to work with him, even if the poor girl has already waited quite a while. Also hit on some of the things that were lost thanks to his exile, a few base concepts he'll be working on, and the continuing evolution of Rane's overall personality.

The next scene will focus on the fallout from the hotel and that entire debacle, start setting the stage proper for Ronin, and the Asari spymaster will make her long overdue reappearance.

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 didn't go with Trena to meet with Vaisir and Aethyta, but not because I wasn't invited. Instead my request to attend was met with an invitation from Liara's father to show up early, alone, so that we could have a conversation about my own future with her.

And so three days after Trena and I beat on each other, I quietly entered Aethyta's office in Eternity.

“Kid.” She looked as surly and burly as ever, but I hadn't been expecting the deep rings of exhaustion beneath her eyes. “Nice face.”

My lips twisted a bit, which probably highlighted my black eye and still healing bruises. “Wait until you see Trena's.”

There was a deep snort. “She told me about her trying to help you get over your crap. It work?”

“Mostly.” Resting my cane against her desk, I dropped into one of the chairs facing it with a groan. “But I don't think you brought me here to listen to be blame myself for crap.”

“I might have the time,” Her lips twitched when I blinked, “Assuming you're still one of my agents kid. I've got a good idea on your finances, you don't need the damned paychecks.”

Which was an entirely true statement. Xerol had been generous with my salary, and Nyn had been more so. Toss in some random influxes of cash from Aethyta and the massive cut that I'd gotten when we'd hacked the Blue Sun's accounts.. I really didn't have to work for anyone if I didn't want to.

“Is this where you tell me that you need me to stay on?”

“Don't flatter yourself kid. Need and want are two different kinds of fish.” Serious eyes narrowed at me. “You see the news this morning?”

My lips twisted as I jerked my chin in a nod. The I-Sec Executor had called a press conference to reveal the 'awful' truth that the True Sons had been responsible for a mass killing in Khar'shan Minor. Oh, and thirty some Batarians had died too. “The True Sons didn't kill those people.”

“Probably didn't.” She agreed easily. “But since Vasir's people didn't turn up any concrete forensics, they're the easiest target.”

Feeling a lot bolder than I probably should have, I glared at her. “Don't patronize me, I'm not an
The Matriarch stared at me for a long moment before grunting. “Hit me with your suspects then kid.”

Shifting a bit, I rested an elbow on the chair’s armrest so that I could lean my head against that hand. “All right. In order of the highest likelihood, I’ve got the Blue Suns, the SIU, and then the Matriarch.”

A thick arm waved, wordlessly demanding elaboration.

“Blue Suns are down and basically out, and our involvement’s not exactly a secret. Everything I’ve heard says that Vosque is a severely petty asshole so I wouldn't put a commando raid past him. They probably wanted to take out Nynsi and Balak, and shifted targets when they realized they were off-world.” I felt my nostrils flare as I remembered the dead receptionist, the guilt welling up again before I shoved it back down. “Co-opting a few True Sons looking to kill some Asari wouldn't have been difficult and might explain the differences in the crew’s death compared to the staff.”

The Asari spymaster nodded slowly as I spoke. “Not a bad theory kid. What's your next one?”

“SIU.” Fingernails began to drum on the other armrest. “They're ruthless enough to kill their own people, that's for fucking sure. The main teams were on the Noln with Balak, but that half-team was supposedly on Erinle. They could have smuggled themselves back, and they'd have the skill to pull it off, but I don't like the motive.”

She grunted. “Because it's too damned egotistical?”

“Pretty much. Apart from making Shaaryak look weak, and getting me exiled.. or killed I guess, I don't see what they could have been trying to get accomplished.”

“What about Balak going after Shaaryak's assets? Try and seduce her or something with you gone?”

I couldn't stop a snort. “Then he fucking botched it from the start. He's been nothing but an asshole and a useless pain since he showed up. Nynsi trusts him so much that she's hired on another dozen commandos since she kicked me out.”

“Dammit. Was hoping you saw shit I didn't.” Her head shook slowly. “Suns have the best motive but it would have taken their best fucking Legionnaires to pull it off. Even then I don't see them managing it with as little evidence as they left. SIU’s got the skills but the motive makes no goddess-damned sense.”

I nodded in tired agreement. “And that just leaves the Matriarch. Honestly I just threw her out there because we don't know shit about her, but there's really nothing pointing in her direction.”

Not that I really believed that she had done it.. but like I’d said, the more Trena and I had thought about the old bitch the more we'd realized that we didn't really know anything about what she might have been trying to accomplish. Not that Trena knew the truth about me, or her, but even knowing what I did.. I still had no freaking idea.

Another grunt. “Slaughter doesn't match anything else we've pinned on her. Call it those two as our main targets.”

One of my eyebrows rose. “If you want me to go through the Theodosian relay, or pose as a slave in the Hegemony, I'm quitting right now.”
She actually cracked a small smile. “Nothing so suicidal kid. I've already got a different team in mind for the Hegemony angle, but I could use you on the Blue Suns operation.”

It was nice that she was at least giving me the choice beforehand. Not that I was going to say no. As much as Trena and Rane kept telling me it wasn't my fault, and as much as logic agreed with their statements, I'd still been the one in charge of keeping that fucking hotel secure, and I hadn't been there to even make the attempt.

“I'm guessing it's off planet.”

“Not much of a guess.” Both of her elbows came to rest on her desk, her hands joining together. “The Blue Suns are fucked and everyone knows it, it's just a matter of time. What everyone doesn't know is that Vosque is trying to cut a deal with T'Ravt to fold what's left of his people into her forces.”

“Keeps him out of Hegemony hands. Smart.”

“And gives her sole control of the Theodosian prime relay.” Aethyta nodded. “Which lets her hit the Hegemony for another payment demand if they want to keep trading with Aria. Not even going into how many extra ships that would give her at no cost.”

A fucking lot from her tone of voice. “So.. what? Infiltrate her forces? None of us are really that kind of spy.”

“No, you're not. She'd have you all shot before the first damned day was out. And I've got another problem thanks to those bitches on Thessia. The war screwed over Intelligence pretty hard, especially on Omega. The Matriarch there is dead, along with most of her agents.” Her already gravelly voice dropped even lower. “Don't need to ask the goddess for who they picked to replace her with.”

“My.. condolences?”

Liara's dad gave me a brief Asari shrug. “I'll survive. I'm nominally in charge of RI now, for what it's worth. Mostly I think they just did it so they had someone specific to bitch at when things go wrong.”

“Fucking politicians.”

“Stop patronizing me.”

I waved a hand vaguely. “Call it honest agreement. I've met the Executive Board.”

She grunted. “Good point. Anyway, I can't send in most of the girls I have on Illium. Most of 'em couldn't survive Omega, and the ones that could I need here. I dragged in a few of my old contacts and we threw together a plan. Not the best one, mind you, but it should work.”

My hand shifted to ask for a pause, “You sure you want to tell me? I'm fine being in the dark if that's better.”

“You'll be one of my cell leaders if you agree, so you'll need the damned story.” Cell leader? Me? She continued before I could interrupt. “I'm not using traditional spies, that shit doesn't work well out there. Instead I'm sending in mercenaries and support teams. I've got seven locations that need eyes on the ground, so I made them give me enough funding for seven small merc teams. Each team only takes jobs on planet or on station so they don't kill each other, and sends in reports on who they're fighting for and against.”
So.. Bull's Chargers, or maybe Wolf's Dragoons in miniature. Loved the idea, not exactly sure how I fit in.

Apparently that showed in my expression because she gave me a tiny nod, “I know you're not in fighting shape yet, Tris is keeping me up to speed on your recovery. It was damned stupid of you to go out with the Eclipse as it was. I'm assigning Tris as the unit leader for the Omega band, I want you to lead the support team there.”

I blew a slow breath out and rubbed fingers through my goatee. “Two questions. No, three. Who would I be working with, what would I really be doing, and how's this get us closer to whoever hit the hotel?”

“Trisren would be your local boss, you'd report to her.” Another Asari shrug, “Easiest cover is an arms dealer and general engineer, we can find a shop to set you up in. Make it look as if her team is just a regular set of customers.”

Which would basically mean that all I'd really be doing is running a shop like Trena's, that also happened to sell guns. “Sounds workable.. the last?”

“Think kid. Who else on Omega would have had access to the Blue Suns equipment and servers in the last year?”

The light-bulb went on after a moment's thought. “The True Sons.”

“And the wave hits the beach. They're still operating there, and they'd have to be total goddess-damned idiots not to keep any blackmail on their old bosses. I'm trying to line a contract up for the team to put them against those quadless fucks first thing. Do it noticeably enough and they can make an offer or two to T'Ravt and see if she bites.”

Which would theoretically put them in close contact with the Blue Suns she was trying to absorb.. possibly even Vosque himself if he survived the transition.

But that still left one issue.

“Why put me in charge of it? Shouldn't Trena or Ghai be?”

I didn't care for her expression, or for the words that followed. “They aren't going with kid. You can take your new Batarian girl, and the big mechanic. But T'laria and her bondmate are staying on Illium.”

My mouth went a bit dry at that. I could stomach the idea of being in a place as dangerous as Omega with Trena around. She and I had been.. well, more or less inseparable since I'd shown up on this fucking planet. Even when I'd been an ass or spending all of my time with Nyn, Trena had always been around if I needed her. Leaving her behind felt.. “Why?”

“T'laria's got inroads with the Eclipse, first of all. Second, she knows people in Khar'shan Minor so she's going to be on the Hegemony investigation team and helping Captain Vasir.” I opened my mouth, ready to argue both of those points, but she held up a hand and delivered the final blow. “And there's her bondmate's condition. Not sending her to Omega while she's in that way.”

…

…

I swear I actually saw a blue screen flicker across my vision as my brain tried to process what Aethyta had just said. “Wait. Wait wait wait wait. Ghai is.. Trena got her..?”
“Fucking terrifying isn’t it?” Aethyta chuckled softly. “Her bondmate told me this morning, I think she's breaking the news to her about now.”

Trena T’laria was going to be a parent. That was.. like.. fucking mind-blowing is what it was. Illyan and I might have joked about it but I'd never thought it would actually happen. I mean.. it was Trena. For the first six months that I’d known her she’d slept with anything blue that happened to have a pulse. Now she was.. holy shit.

“You all right kid?”

I stared blankly at her for a moment before being entirely honest. “No. Not really. I.. no.”

She actually threw her head back and started howling with laughter. It took her a few minutes before the guffaws faded, which at least gave me the time to collect myself.

Goddess. Trena was probably going to be getting very, very drunk tonight.

“Good to get back to it?”

“Yeah..” Resisting the urge to rub at my face yet again, I blew out a long breath. “So. You want me to go to Omega to act as Tris's supplier and mechanic, and to drag two of my friends along with me, all in the vague hope that we can find something on the True Sons or whatever Blue Suns that T'Ravt absorbs.”

Aethyta stared at me for a long moment before shaking her head, “When you say it like that it sounds like a shittier plan than I thought.”

“No, it's a decent enough plan. I don't think I could come up with a better one that your bosses would approve of.” I admitted, my brain slowly lurching back into motion as I tried to think through everything.

Rane would go with me if I asked. Shit, she'd probably hit me if I tried to leave her behind. Definitely would. And then she'd use her deferential voice to apologize before going onto a very polite lecture on why I'd been a complete idiot without ever actually outright saying that I'd been an idiot. Illyan.. I had no idea if she'd want to go to Omega of all places. True she needed the job, but Erana obviously couldn't come with.

I could always just let them live off of my own accounts, but I had a feeling that the big Asari wouldn't want to live like that. Well, she'd probably have the option of staying with Trena and Ghai.. I could make the offer but remind her that I wasn't pressuring her.

My eyes blinked as I realized that I'd more or less already made up my mind to go. Omega was probably a shithole.. but Illium was fucking Illium and I was more than ready to leave.

Still.. “Do I have time to think about it?”

Her head tilted into a slight nod. “I can give you two weeks before I'd have to get shit moving to put things in place.”

So. Talk with Rane and Illyan, probably hang out with Trena as much as possible for the next few weeks. After which.. I'd probably be doing nothing but prep for this trip. A trip that I didn't have any illusions about. It'd be rough.. but I'd be off Illium and away from all the crap that had happened, and have a relatively clear set of objectives.

And if we didn't find crap on either of our targets.. well, then I'd have to figure out my next step.
Next up is Epilogue 4: The Reyja'krem

Chapter End Notes

Well, there we go.. we have Aethyta and Cieran's theories, and the initial clues as to what will be occurring in AR: Ronin. Also some good, and bad, news concerning his best friend. For those who might be worried, she will not be written out of the story and her presence will still be felt even if she isn't out there with him (for now).

The next chapter will be the last of AR: Terminus, and will be.. more or less just the six friends sitting around and having fun together before things start moving again. There won't be any more AFF's.. mostly because I'm emotionally drained at the moment, but there's been enough interest in the poll for me to split off the existing ones into their own story. See my profile for the details.

Expect E-4 to post either tomorrow or Friday morning. Reviews, as usual, will accelerate the post time. :)

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 Mass Effect, or anything related to it.. which kind of sucks. I'd like to be a millionaire.

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Epilogue 4: The Reyja'krem

Rane and the sisters were out shopping when we got back, which meant that the only person waiting for us was Ghai. The normally stoic Asari looked anything but, only offering a weak wave with her flesh and blood hand from her place in the kitchen.

“I thought you were going out with the rest of them.” Trena grunted, her arms crossing almost nervously across her chest.

Her bondmate gave a little Asari shrug, setting aside the glass she'd apparently been drinking from. “Stayed. You.”

“Athame's ass, I'm fine.”

The snort was out before I could stop it. “Scales, you're freaking out right now.”

“Ape, you stay the fuck out of this.”

I glanced at Ghai, who gave my a tiny nod of encouragement. “How about I stay involved since I'm your damned friend. You didn't say a word the entire way back from the meeting, a meeting where you also barely said a fucking thing.”

“Maybe just because I just found out that... that..” she couldn't even seem to bring herself to say it.

My eyes narrowed before I glanced at Ghai. “Did you talk at all after you told her? Or did she just bolt?”

The way her lips thinned gave me my answer.

“Trena T’laria.” I growled out each syllable in her name. “And you lectured me on being an ass.”

She actually flinched, glancing away from both of us. “I fucking panicked all right? Athame's azure, I'm still.. shit.”

Part of me really wanted to hit her on Ghai's behalf. The rest of me just groaned before reaching out and grabbing her by the shoulder. “Right. Step one, move your ass this way.”

Her feet tried to dig into the floor, but she wasn’t quick enough to stop me from grabbing one of her arms and wrenching it behind her back. Leverage literally in hand, I force marched her around the counters and into the kitchen before shoving her at Ghai.

“Step two. Apologize to the woman pregnant with your kid.”

“I... shit. It was my turn to be an asshole wasn't it?”
Ghai crossed her arms in reply, staring down her nose at her smaller lover. “Trena.” I growled. “Stop trying to deflect.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I.. shit. This would be easier if we were drinking... Fuck. I'm.. fucking sorry Ghai. I was a bitch.”

Glancing at Ghai, I watched as she gave the smallest of nods. “Step three.” I gave Trena a shove in the small of her back, making her stumble against Ghai. The pair reflexively caught one another, Trena freezing for an instant before tipping her head to one side to let her lover hold her tightly. “Was that really so hard scales?”

Her voice was muffled by Ghai's shoulder. “I'm going to kill you ape.”

“Oh come on. And I don't know why you're worrying so much, your kid will be awesome. She'll know more curses by her first day of school than all of her teachers put together.”

Trena's bark of laughter may have had a tinge of hysteria to it, but she still did laugh. The taller Asari looked less amused, opening her dark eyes to glare at me over Trena's head.

My own rolled. “Don't even go there Ghai. You'll have her at the shooting range as soon as she can walk.”

She had the good grace to give me an abashed little grin. “Ass.”

Oh I hadn't even gotten started. Not even close. I.. we needed the fun with all the crap that had happened. And with all the crap that was going to happen in the next few weeks to months... and years when I thought about it. Asari pregnancies lasted about a year and a half, which would leave their daughter an infant when the Reapers made their appearance.

Just leaning against the wall, watching Trena and Ghai hold each other.. I let out a slow breath.

Their kid was going to make it through the war. That was happening. That was going to fucking happen. So were they.

I had no idea how the hell I was going to pull anything off, with the Matriarch and her Chosen One and general crap.. but my friends and their daughter were going to live.

No matter fucking what.

My internal promises and thoughts were subsumed when the remainder of our housemates returned, Illyan tossing a pair of grocery bags in my direction with a tired yawn. “Hey boss... what's up with those two?”

I couldn't restrain a smile as Trena quickly jerked her way free, her cheeks flushing a bit at the attention.

“Um.. what did we miss?” Erana slipped out from behind her sister, setting aside a few cases of drinks as she blinked in confusion.

“Noth-”

“She got Ghai pregnant.”

Trena's shout of “APE!” was mixed with Erana's screech, bags literally going flying through the
air as the maiden raced past us before barreling into Ghai. The former commando staggered from the impact, her eyes wide as the smaller Asari hung off of her and in full on babble mode.

“Goddess! Why didn't you tell us you decided? When did it happen? Did you think of names yet? Do you know when you'll-”

“Erana!” Everyone winced at the volume in the ruined voice. “Calm. Down.”

“Sorry!”

She made to let go, only to squeak when Ghai actually hugged her in return, her lips moving as she quietly began to fill her in.

Before I could really appreciate the bizarre sight, Ghai tolerated the young maiden but I'd never seen them be close like this, a fist rocketed into my arm. “Ape!”

I flinched and staggered away, “Scales, what the fuck?”

“You just had to blurt that shit out?”

“Um..yeah, pretty much.” Because Erana's reaction had been totally worth it.

“Goddess. You... Athame's...” Illyan spoke up before Trena could, her voice vague. It was clear that the big woman had blue screened just like I had, and was actually swaying a little bit as she stared blankly at nothing. “You got her pregnant. I mean.. goddess.. the galaxy is stopped right? It has to have stopped spinning.”

The disbelief drew scale's ire in a new direction, the shorter Asari stomping past me before launching herself at Illyan. Shouts and curses promptly filled the air as they began to wrestle on the ground, Trena demanding just why it was such a fucking surprise. Which was a far cry from the terrified disbelief she'd been showing just a few minutes ago, but was probably a good sign all in all.

With the four Asari occupied, the last of our companions was free to quietly approach me from where she'd been lingering near the door. “Cieran.”

“Rane.” I dipped my head reflexively to the right as she did to the left. “How was shopping?”

“Productive, though it would seem that your meetings were far more interesting.”

I couldn’t help a smile as Erana and Ghai finally separated, the two moving past us and into the living room to rescue Illyan. “You could say that. There's.. quite a bit to talk about, but that can wait. Tonight, we tease scales and have fun.”

Copper toned lips curled at their edges, “As you say, Reyja'krem. Should we start preparing food and drinks then?”

“Probably.” Turning away from where Ghai was hauling Trena away from a cackling Illyan, I waved an arm expansively. “After you my dear.”

Thoroughly enjoying the way her cheeks darkened, I followed her into the kitchen where we started getting everything out. Erana joined us a few minutes later, still giggling as Ghai led Trena into the hallway to bandage the cuts that she'd managed to re-open during the scuffle. Her sister nodded when Rane gestured towards the dining room, lumbering off to start getting everything setup in there.
“Go ahead and start on the noodles.” I instructed once the maiden had calmed down enough to be trusted with kitchen utensils.

Between the three of us we managed to make a decent enough meal. Making food for six mouths at the same time was always a difficult task, but having several people all working on it made it a bit better. Erana worked on the pasta, with Rane's upper eyes watching her like a hawk to make sure she didn't 'accidentally' pour in half a container of spices this time. Despite her divided attention, the lowborn easily handled her own share, preparing several bowls of greens with a sprinkling of fruits tossed in.

As usual, that left me to cook the fish. The smell of it quickly drew Illyan back in, staying back only when I held up my spatula in warning. Knowing from experience that I would absolutely whap her across the face with it if she tried to steal food early, she settled for just leaning against the wall after grabbing herself a beer from the fridge.

“Erana.” It seemed as good a time as any to talk. “You still doing all right?”

The maiden paused mid stir. “I'm.. I'm doing all right. I mean, I really haven't had many nightmares and I can sleep. That's good right?”

“It is. Have you been all right when you've been here on your own?”

“I.. the.. the books help.” She lowered her head a bit, “The ones that you and Miss Ghai gave me.”

Huh. I hadn't known that Ghai had given her reading material as well.. hidden depths I supposed. Glancing over at her sister, she gave me a slight nod. “She's doing better boss.”

“Really wish you'd stop calling me that.”

Illyan snorted before taking a pull from her drink. “You don't mind Rane calling you by that title.”

“She has her reasons.” Like using the formality as a brake on her own emotions, and occasionally desires. We hadn't kissed since that first night, restricting our relationship to little touches and subtle Batarian gestures of affection. I had made sure that she was aware that I was beyond thankful for her patience, I wasn't.. ready for more than that yet. “You just do it to bother me.”

“Then don't be bothered by it.”

“Just.. get everyone their drinks.”

“Got it boss.”

My nostrils flared a bit as I growled, Rane absently patting me on the shoulder. Erana giggled again, subsiding only when I gave her a mild glare.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later we had everything done, the two lovebirds returning to help us haul everything to the table. Soon enough all six of us were seated in a circle, throwing food onto our plates and passing crap around as friends asked for it. Conversation was light and amusing, with amusing child names thrown around to annoy the expecting parents.

Erana managed to get Ghai's attention to bashfully ask her for the next story in one of the series that she'd given her, while Illyan and Trena argued about whether or not our new cane designs should be quite so overt.

Once and a while Rane would lower a hand beneath the table, trailing her fingertips along my side
until I reached down to reciprocate. Her cheeks would flush when I gave her a small grin, her own lips curling before she'd occupy herself with her food once again.

I might have hated the planet I was on, might have just gone through the shittiest break up of my life, and felt guilty as hell for my role in what had happened just a few weeks prior.. but for a while, I was reminded that there were still good things in my life.

In the months and years that were to come, as dark as shit got.. I still remembered that day. It was one of the good ones, and those were always worth keeping close.

End Another Realm: Terminus

Well.. here we are, at the end of the second step in what's becoming a very long tale. Cieran's had his rough patches, but not everything is so bad, even if what may come in the future likely won't be easy.

Right now I have plans to work on a short spin-off about the Chosen One to expand the AR universe a little bit, and should have that written fairly quickly. Expect it to post sometime in the next month, December at the very latest. As far as Another Realm: Ronin is concerned, I'm going to make the effort to get as much of it done as possible before I start posting it. That way I'll be able to reward all of you with fast updates like I did this week, or default to a two per week update schedule. Expect is in the first month of 2016.

If that's too long of a wait, feel free to PM me with thoughts, questions, or ideas. I can't promise that I'll use them but I'll do my best to respond. There is also the TvTropes page, special thanks to GreaterGoodIreland for setting it up and SpiritStrike for adding her own bits and pieces. I'd love to see it keep growing, if anyone wishes to add things but doesn't feel like making an account feel free to PM me and I'd be glad to add things for you.

Back to AR: Ronin, I should be providing updates on my profile page here, and one week before I post the story proper I'll put up a preview for it at both the end of AR: Arrival and AR: Terminus so that everyone knows that it's coming.

Massive, massive thanks to everyone who's reviewed.. more special thanks to the Blocked Writer for being my beta and for keeping me from wandering too far from my outline. :) I hope very much to hear from all of you when the next stories go live.

Semper Victoria,

Katkiller V

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!