The Beast Inside

by MosaicCreme, squiggly_squid

Summary

[AU] After being given the chance to feed his need for revenge against the men who raped, tortured, and murdered his sister—as well as raped and tortured him—Charles Fairclough finds returning to life on the Citadel difficult ... and he's found he really has a taste for blood.

[AU spinoff from the AU 'Targeted Interference' series and the accompanying mock forum called 'Assassins Unveiled'. 'Divulgence' (co-written) is the first introduction of Charles outside of 'Assassins Unveiled' and is the start of his relationship with Ares. 'Feeding Revenge' (co-written) takes place a few months after 'Divulgence'. 'The Beast Inside' (co-written) takes place a few weeks after 'Feeding Revenge'.]

Notes

WARNING: This fic is meant to be dark. It will glorify murder and torture to varying degrees. It will deal with issues of past rape and torture. It will show murder and torture. It will show sex. It will talk about self-harm. No, that doesn't mean I agree with this character's actions. If you can't handle these things, please don't read this fic, and most certainly do not comment with hateful responses or demand that I defend myself for writing this fic.

A/N: Ares is a character developed by squiggly_squid. Ares' actions and dialogue are largely controlled by squiggly_squid, and she maintains all rights to the character.
Charles closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the shower wall. Blood danced on the backs of his eyelids, the memory of the way it felt to sink his razor into the flesh of the men who broke him made his fingers twitch, yearning to pick up his weapon and do it again. Screams echoed in his head, making his cock start to harden. He craved Ares' touch, remembering the tranquility he felt with the turian's hands on him, washing away Harvey's blood. He could almost hear the raspy sound of Ares' voice next to his ear, telling Charles how much he'd wanted to fuck him afterward.

And before that, watching Ares kill Charles' father ... Jesus, it was so fucking hot. The whole thing, their entire time on Shanxi, so fucking hot. He thought about Freddy, and how good it felt to hear the man's screams as he sliced open Freddy's face and ripped out his fingernails. How hard Charles got watching the men who hurt him and his sister so badly bleed.

Wrapping his hand around his cock, he stroked himself with slow, lazy movements, building his need. The images grew more vibrant, the screams more thrilling; he almost smelled the blood in the air. His breath caught in his throat, tightening his grip, speeding up his pace. He groaned, watching again as the pry bar smashed down on Cole's knee, feeling the reverberation through his hands and arms. His scrotum tightened, balls starting to pull up closer to his body. He saw Ares, crouching down over James, slicing the man's face off, and it was all he needed. Throwing his head back, cum rushed over his hand, hot and sticky, sliding down the shower wall.

Letting out a groan, Charles leaned forward, throwing an arm up against the wall to rest his head on and sucked in deep breaths. Eezo scratched at the door, whining, begging to be let inside. Chuckling, he rinsed his hand off before grabbing the soap. He needed to be at work in two hours, but it left him enough time to take Eezo for a walk, first. He thought he might take her down to the gardens to see Lindsey. He'd never felt particularly close to the chick, never really close to any of
his co-workers, but since Lindsey quit Citadel Souvenirs, he'd run into her a few times working at the gardens, and she seemed to really like Eezo.

Fuck, he hated having to go to work. He had to beg and simper to even keep his job after taking off to Shanxi with Ares. Irene made sure he paid for it, too, sticking him up front to greet customers and push sales because she knew he hated it the most. The whole 'normal life' bullshit was killing him.

He couldn't wait for Ares to show back up, maybe he'd stick around for awhile. Or better yet, maybe Ares would take him out on a job. Even if he didn't get to do anything but watch Ares pull a trigger, it'd be way more exciting than life on the Citadel. In the meantime, he had to suck it up and act like his entire life didn't change the moment the turian showed up in his apartment for the first time. And that meant going to work, putting up with other people's bullshit, slapping a smile on his face and acting like he gave a damn about the petty complaints customers brought his way. Every time he looked at them, especially the real entitled shitheads, he imagined what it'd be like to pull out his razor and drag it across their throats.

Finishing his shower, he turned off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel to wrap around himself. He opened the bathroom door, and Eezo rushed in, tail wagging, to yip at him before licking water off of his calves and feet. He laughed, nudging her aside with his foot. Moving over to the sink, he flossed before brushing his teeth; Eezo licked his legs the entire time. Rinsing his toothbrush off, he tapped it against the sink and stuck it back in the holder.

"You wanna go to the gardens, girl?" He pulled his towel off, rubbing it over his hair before drying off the rest of him.

Eezo barked, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she wagged her tail. Grinning, he tossed the towel over her and laughed as the Alaskan Malamute pup shook her head to dislodge the towel before flopping over to her back, rolling around on top of it. He stepped over her, making his way to his bedroom to put on his work uniform. Eezo jumped up, following him, the soft jingle of her tags filling the air.

Once he finished dressing and fixing his hair, he grabbed her leash and snapped it on her collar. "Alright, come on, Eezo."

"Welcome to Citadel Souvenirs.” Charles plastered a smile on his face even though he felt jittery and irritated.

The asari smiled at him before moving to the kiosk, and he wondered if her violet blood would feel different flowing over his hands than a human's. He reached down, sticking his hand in his pocket just to feel the cool metal of the straight razor tucked inside. It seemed to soothe the beast inside of him, at least for a little while. She took her time browsing the kiosk before letting out a deflated hum.

"Is there something in particular I can help you find?" He took a couple of steps closer, turning to lean against the counter facing her.

"Do you carry any Earth postcards?" she asked, not even bothering to look at him. "My bondmate is human, and I hoped to find her something to remind her of home. I thought you might carry postcards with pictures on them like she used to collect as a child."

"No, I'm sorry, ma'am. We don't have any postcards from Earth." He suppressed an annoyed groan. The damned store was called 'Citadel Souvenirs' not 'Earth Souvenirs'. "I'm afraid the closest thing we have are model ships based off of a few Alliance designs." Not to say model ships were even remotely close to postcards, but Citadel Souvenirs' employee policies insisted he offer every customer an alternative when they couldn't find what they wanted.

She sighed and shook her head, gaze flicking his way for half a second as she turned, heading for the door, throwing a half-hearted 'thanks anyway' over her shoulder. He rolled his eyes, glancing around the empty store. Mahlia was on duty, too, but Irene stationed her in the backroom doing inventory for the day, which left him alone with his thoughts for at least a few minutes. He rubbed his hands over his face, seeing Anthony's cheek split open in front of him, cut all the way down to the bone, blood pouring from the wound. His heart pounded against his ribs, fingers trembling. Christ, he wished he could go back to Shanxi and do it all over again.

The chime above the door pulled him away from the memory. Eye snapping open, he blinked, clearing the images from his mind, already slapping a smile on his face. "Welcome to Citadel Souvenirs."

His smile faltered, though, when he looked up and saw a man dragging a crying little boy by the wrist. The kid couldn't be any older than five, maybe six, and he looked utterly terrified of the man. Charles clenched his jaw, trying like hell to force his smile back into place. The man looked up, meeting Charles' gaze and stopped dead in his tracks, unease flashing through his eyes before he blinked a couple of times. He made his way to the kiosk, keeping Charles in his peripherals. It gave Charles a mad, giddy sort of delight to see the spark of fear again in someone's eyes, a spark he put there, and with nothing more than a look, apparently. The man let go of the kid, and the boy immediately put a little space between the two of them, tears still streaming down his face.
He rubbed at his eyes, giving Charles a peek at the bruises on his wrist, and sniffled. “I don't wanna go, Dad. Why do I have to go?”

Charles clenched his jaw again, turning his glare back on the kid's dad, hand sliding in his pocket to wrap his fingers around his razor. The sound of the backroom's door drew his attention, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Mahlia walk through. He pulled his hand back out of his pocket and turned his attention back to the customers.

“We'll talk about it when we get home, Logan.” The man glanced up from the kiosk to pin his son down with a narrow-eyed stare. His tone sounded mostly calm, but it carried an underlying seething quality that stood out to Charles' ears—reminding him of his own father. “I don't want to hear anything else about it right now.”

Charles really wanted to take the asshole someplace secluded and quiet, introduce the dickhead to his razor. He just knew the sonofabitch was responsible for the bruises on the kid's arm. Maybe he should. If the man beat his kid, he'd deserve it. Charles could follow the guy home, wait for the kid to go to school or something. But without Ares there to help, anything could go wrong. So fixated on the guy, he barely realized it when Mahlia stepped up to the counter next to him.

“Hi there! Are you okay, sweetheart?” Mahlia leaned over the counter, bracing her arms against the surface, gaze latched onto the little boy.

The man looked up, gaze shifting between Mahlia and Charles. “He's fine.” He reached out, grabbed the kid by his wrist, and jerked him over closer.

The man met Charles' gaze again, pulling Logan closer to him still, completely apathetic to the kid's cry of pain and the fresh wave of tears. He turned his attention back to the kiosk, selecting whatever crap he planned to buy, ignoring the whimpering of the kid wedged between him and the kiosk. Yeah. Charles was going to kill the asshole. He just needed to be smart about it, figure out when and where. Mahlia stood up straight, mouth hanging open, eyes wide with shock, but Charles just fumed.

Mahlia put a hand on his shoulder, leaning closer to him to whisper in his ear, and he caught a whiff of her soft perfume. "See if you can keep them here, I'm going to call C-Sec."

Charles gave her a little jerk of his head and cleared his throat. "Have you heard about our current sale?" He fought to pull a neutral look onto his face when the man glanced up again. "All fish are buy one get one free right now. They make excellent pets, especially for someone on the go. They're low maintenance and are sure to brighten up any living space."

C-Sec took the kid and arrested the father, but Charles got the man's address from his sale's receipt. Ares gave Charles a bunch of programs for his omni-tool, things he used to hack locks, disrupt camera feeds, turn off security systems, and run traces on people, among other things. They made it easy as hell for Charles to get inside the man's home. Not that he couldn't have gotten inside without the programs, but they sure as hell made it less risky.

He just planned to look around. Scope out the place, like Ares told him to always do. He'd come back another time when Ethan Rorschach wasn't in lock up. Hell, for all he really knew, Mr. Rorschach wouldn't be home for months, maybe even years depending on what C-Sec found on the sonofabitch, so there may not even be a point in checking out the apartment at all. Still, it gave him something to do, something he hoped might help stop the itch, for a little while at least.

He'd made sure the place was empty before breaking in, did a little research on Ethan. The man's wife died a few years back, the C-Sec report showed her cause of death as 'blunt force trauma to the head'. The report cited an accidental fall, but Charles' gut feeling said she'd really been pushed. He looked over the apartment, not touching anything, not even turning on any lights. The hall light had been left on, giving him just enough to avoid obstacles, so it wasn't much of a problem.

The guy sported a nice setup, plush furniture, stocked bar, vidscreen stretching damn near from floor to ceiling. Ethan definitely had credits to spare. Charles made his way down the hall, pulling his hoodie sleeve down over his hand before opening doors. The first room he came across was the master bedroom. The hall light didn't let him see much, so he opened his omni-tool, activating the flashlight program and shone it around the room, keeping it aimed low and away from the windows. King-sized bed, another giant ass vidscreen—though only about half the size of the one up front, but still—desk with a nice laptop, the Symtech X35 series, even.

Charles let out a low whistle, knowing the computer alone cost the guy at least twenty thousand credits. Shit. Charles could get an easy ten for it if he knew a fencer on the Citadel. Art hung on the walls, but he didn't know anything about art quality. Still, with as much as Ethan shelled out for electronics, he was willing to bet the art was worth quite a bit, too.

He backed out of the room and made his way down to the next one. He didn't know what he expected, but the bare room, nothing but a small bed and a chest of drawers, wasn't it. The kid had nothing. Dad lived large, and Logan didn't even have a single toy to play with. It really, really pissed Charles off. He sucked in a deep breath and finished his sweep of the apartment, taking note of the fire escapes. They weren't ideal, but they'd give him another exit if he needed one.
Heading back to the front, his heart skipped a beat when the door slid open.

*Shit.*

Charles ducked into the closest room—the kitchen—tucking himself back behind the refrigerator and pulling out his razor. He flicked his wrist, the blade sliding open, and waited, straining to listen. What the fuck? Not even five hours passed since C-Sec arrested Ethan. They already let the douchebag out? *Fuck.* Did he have Logan with him?

*Shit. Shit. This is so not good.*

A light came on in the living room, urging Charles a little further back behind the refrigerator. Maybe … maybe the guy would just go straight to the back of the apartment, and Charles could slip out. No harm, no foul. He didn’t feel ready for anything else. He’d just come to check the place out, that was all.

Footsteps moved toward the kitchen, making Charles’ hand tremble with nerves and something else … the beast in the back of his head, the thing fueling him on while he cut into Harvey over and over and over again on Shanxi, roared. His pulse pounded so loud in his ears, he couldn’t be sure whether he heard one set of footsteps or two.

*Jesus, don’t let the kid be here. Don’t let the kid be here. Don’t let the kid be here.*

The light in the kitchen flicked on, and Charles adjusted his grip on his razor, already feeling it sinking into Ethan's throat, already smelling the blood in the air. He thought about the bruises on Logan's arm, how afraid the kid looked, and he closed his eyes for a second, sucking in a shallow breath.

“What the fuck?”

Eyes snapping open, Charles lunged toward the man, rearing back before swiping down, slashing the man across his face. Ethan flailed, blood splattering across the wall and counters, knocking the razor from Charles’ hand, sending it flying into the wall before skittering across the floor.

Recovering enough to slam into Charles, Ethan knocked him back against the refrigerator, shoulder in his gut, ripping the air out of his lungs. Charles beat at him with his fists, hitting Ethan in the back of the head and neck, trying to suck in another breath of air. Ethan lost his grip, and Charles managed to pull air into his lungs again, the metallic tang of blood filling his nostrils.

Ethan staggered back, but Charles didn’t let him get far, punching him in the side of the head. The man carried a little extra height and weight compared to Charles, but he was losing blood. Charles grabbed the man’s hair, jerking him around and slamming his head into the counter, creating a fresh gash across his brow. Ethan reeled, and Charles slammed his head onto the counter again.

And again. And again, until the man collapsed, stunned but still conscious.

Charles went to step over Ethan, moving to retrieve his blade, but the man grabbed his leg, yanking him off of his feet. He fell forward, throwing his arms out to try to catch himself, but he couldn’t stop his fall. His head hit the corner of the counter on the way down. Everything went dark for a second, but then pain blossomed in his skull, setting fireworks off in his vision. He groaned, yanking his leg free and rolled over. Ethan scrambled up to his hands and knees, crawling over on top of Charles, punching him in the face and head before he fully recovered.

Fighting back, Charles managed to get a grip on the man's hair and ear, pulling as hard as he could, and he thought he felt skin tearing. The man howled in pain, shifting just enough for Charles to buck his hips, tossing Ethan against the cabinets. Rolling over and shaking his head, blood in his eyes, Charles rushed forward, grabbing his razor from the floor and turned, slicing into Ethan's forearm.

Ethan scuttled back, but Charles pushed forward, the howl of the beast and adrenaline abolishing the pain in his head and who knew where else. He cut the man again, catching Ethan across the palm when he threw his hand out to ward off the blow. Charles grabbed the hand, digging his thumb into the wound, savoring the man's cries of pain as he wrenched Ethan's hand back and slashed again. His blade sank into Ethan's neck, sliding down over his chest, cutting through his shirt and flesh. So much blood. The beast purred. Ethan’s head jerked back, slamming against the wall. Charles let go of his hand, grabbing his hair instead and pinned his head back. With Ethan’s neck exposed, Charles sunk his razor into the man's carotid, jerking the blade across his throat.

Chest heaving, blood washing over him, soaking him completely, Charles let go of the man, falling back on his ass. Eyes wide, he watched as the last of the life faded away in Ethan’s eyes, acutely aware of his hard cock pressing against his jeans. He grinned, gaze shifting to the blood still trickling from the man’s throat, riding the high. He did it. On his own. And damn, it felt good.

Charles glanced around him, taking in the mess, blood everywhere, dishes knocked out of cabinets, the table lying over on its side. He didn’t even know when that happened. Glancing down at himself, he said, “Fuck.” Blood drenched his clothes.

That's when reality came crashing back down around him. He’d just killed a man on the Citadel, the place where he lived. It wasn't like on Shanxi where he'd disappear, whatever evidence he left behind more or less irrelevant. Not unless he wanted to bail and leave the Citadel. But fuck, he
had a life there, a shitty life, but a life. He had Eezo and a job. And with the Citadel being one of
the biggest central hubs in the galaxy, it made it the most likely place for Ares to find himself
needing to visit frequently. He couldn't leave the Citadel. Shit. He groaned.

*What do I do? Fuck.*

Adrenaline wearing off, his head started to throb, the side of his head and face hurt like a
motherfucker, too. He pushed himself away from the man, leaning his back against one of the
cabinets. "Fuck." Opening his omni-tool, razor still clutched in his hand, he input Ares' contact
information, the turian having made Charles memorize it before he left the Citadel.

Damn it, he's going to be pissed.

The call connected, Ares' face appearing on the screen, half hidden by his hood. Charles lifted the
back of his hand, wiping it across his eye to try to clear some of the blood from his vision. He took
a deep breath.

"Ares, I fucked up," he said, wincing at the admission.

"Looks like it." Ares let out a curious hum, gaze trailing over Charles. "What'd you do?"

"I …" Charles tilted his head back, hitting it against the cabinet before doing it a couple more
times a little harder. "Shit." He turned the omni-tool, showing Ares the dead man and the massive
pool of blood. "The guy beat on his kid. I just came to check out the place, I thought he'd still be
with C-Sec."

He turned the omni-tool back around to look at Ares, dreading the disappointment he thought he'd
see there, but all he found was the turian staring back at him, a look of boredom and growing
impatience on his face. Charles licked his lips. "I don't know what to do with the body here. I can't
just walk away from the mess like on Shanxi! I fucking live here. And some of this shit's my
blood, too. Shit!" He banged the back of his head against the cabinet a little harder. "C-Sec's
going to find my DNA here."

Ares sighed, mandibles fluttering, and rolled his eyes upward. "Alright. First thing is you need to
remember everything you touched. Even if you just think you touched it, even if you
fucking breathed on it."

Charles wiped his razor off on his pant leg the best he could, wasn't any point in worrying about
getting more blood on him. "Okay," he said, trying to gather himself, mind racing through
everything he touched when he came in. "I was careful … until he came home, anyway. I used
my hoodie sleeve to open the doors, didn't touch anything else." He glanced around the kitchen,
taking in the blood splashed and smeared over almost every surface. He had no clue what he did
or didn't touch in there. "So, I'm pretty sure it's just all in the kitchen." He licked his lips trying to
center himself as he closed the razor and shoved it in his pocket. "But I'm covered in blood."

"What's your time limit?" Ares asked.

"My what?" Charles pushed his back against the cabinet, getting his feet under him before
dragging himself up, trying not to slip in the blood.

Ares grumbled under his breath. "Time. Limit. How much time do you have to clean it? When is
someone expected home?"

"Um." Charles looked around the room again as if it might hold the answers for him and licked his
lips. "The guy's wife is dead. C-Sec took his kid when they arrested him. It's night right now, a
little after ten … if they planned on giving the kid back to the asshole, I don't think they'd do it at
least until the morning."

"Fucking Spirits," Ares said, just barely loud enough for Charles to hear. Growling, he closed his
eyes. "Find bleach, trash bags, towels. If the guy has a cat, even better."

Charles' eyebrows dipped down, confusion making his head throb worse. "What the fuck does a
cat have to do with anything?"

Ares mumbled something low enough it didn't translate. "Litter, idiot. Cats shit and piss in litter. It
soaks up liquids. Clumps up? Don't you think that might come in handy?"

Charles winced and took in a deep breath, fighting the urge to rake his bloodied hand through his
hair. "Right. Yeah, sorry." He moved to the cabinets under the kitchen sink, tugging the blood-
soaked sleeve of his hoodie down over his hand, then stopped, staring at it. What was the point?
He didn't know whether or not the blood on the sleeve all belonged to Ethan. Whatever. He
opened the cabinet, pulling out what he could find, bleach and trash bags were easy enough. "I
think I'm going to have to go to the bathroom to find towels."

"Oh, please. After you," Ares said, enough sarcasm in his faux-polite tone to make Charles wince
again.

"I'm sorry I called you … I didn't know what else to do." Charles dropped the trash bags and
bleach on the counter, pushing himself back to his feet. His head spun the second he was upright, forcing him to grab ahold of the counter until it passed. He closed his eyes, sucking in shallow breaths, praying he wouldn't puke.

Ares sighed. "Just clean this shit up and shut the fuck up," he said, but he didn't sound quite so irritated.

Charles sucked in a slow, deep breath and opened his eyes again. Swallowing down the bile rising up in his throat, he said, "Yeah." He used the back of his hand to turn on the sink, running his hands under the water, scrubbing away as much of the blood on his hands as he could before splashing some over his face, hissing when he hit the cut on his head. Doing his best to avoid the quickly cooling, thickening puddles of blood, he made his way back toward the doorway. He took two steps out onto the carpet and stopped. "Fuck." He groaned, looking down at the bloody shoe prints he left behind. "I think I have to take my clothes off."

And with that, every ounce of irritation flooded right back into Ares' voice. "For the love of the Spirits, do not take them all off. If they catch you because of a fucking dick hair, I'm not busting you out of prison."

Despite himself, Charles chuckled. Stepping back enough to lean against the counter, he pulled his shoes off, careful to avoid getting any more blood on his socks besides the few spots around his ankles. "Guess it's a good thing I didn't jack off in here then, huh?" Once his shoes were free, he unzipped his hoodie, letting it drop to the floor next to his shoes, and looked down at his shirt and pants. The chest of his shirt was wet, but not so bad he needed to worry about it dripping blood anywhere. His pants were trashed, though. "Pants are soaked." He slipped those off, too, leaving them in a puddle with the rest then checked the soles of his socks, just to make sure he didn't transfer any more blood to them.

He made his way down the hall toward the bathroom, double-checking behind him as he went to make sure he didn't leave a trail. He did his best not to even so much as brush against the walls along the way. Shoving his hand under the hem of his shirt, where it remained dry, he used it to open the door. Luckily, he didn't have to go far, finding a stack of fresh towels on a shelf just inside the door. He grabbed an armful and made his way back to the kitchen, stopping just outside the mess, bringing his arm up to look at his omni-tool. "So … use the towels to soak up the blood, stuff them in the trash bags, use bleach to get the rest?"

Ares hummed and nodded once. "Yes. Soak the rest of the blood with bleach at least an hour. Every last drop. Steal some of his clothes, dress, and burn everything."

Charles stood there for a moment, trying to figure out where the hell he was supposed to burn everything without setting the apartment on fire. Maybe he should just set the apartment on fire. He shuddered, thinking of the fire back on Shanxi and the way he'd almost lost Ares completely. Hell, they both almost died there, but it was the look in Ares' eyes that really tore Charles up; the way he didn't even remember who he was, who Charles was, for awhile. A fire would take care of everything, though, wouldn't it? Except there were other people living next door.

Shit, he'd have to walk through the Citadel carrying at least one bag full of bloody towels and clothes to the public trash incinerators. "Mmmm. Okay. Fuck. So, what about him? I can't carry him to the damn incinerators." He sat the towels down on the counter and turned his attention back to his omni-tool screen.

Ares let out a pained sigh. "You need to clean the body. All of him. Burn his clothes, and don't forget to get under his fingernails really good."

Charles closed his eyes, sucking in a deep breath. "Okay. Anything else I should know before I let you go?"

"Yeah. And this is a big one." Ares narrowed his eyes. "Don't get your ass fucking caught, you idiot."

Charles smirked. "Yep, love you, too." He disconnected the call, closing his omni-tool and got to work.

He collapsed onto his bed, Eezo jumping up there to lay next to him. His head throbbed, strained muscles feeling weak and achy. It took him five hours to get the mess cleaned up and everything to the incinerators. He thought he did a pretty good job, but he didn't have a way to be sure. Paranoia set in around the second hour, making him really work to scrub at every little speck he thought he saw anywhere in or around the kitchen, regardless of how exhausted he was or how much he hurt. The scent of bleach still burned his nostrils, and he tasted it on the back of his tongue. He saw way more of Ethan's body than he had any real desire to see, but the sonofabitch was sparkling clean by the time Charles finished. Even the shit and piss. He'd needed to clean himself up in the bathroom, so after, he scrubbed the whole bathroom, too.

He hated having to burn his own clothes, he didn't have a whole lot, but he'd find a way to get more when he needed to, he always did. He knew he'd have to get rid of the clothes he took from Ethan's closet as well, but if'd have to wait, he didn't think he could get back out of bed just then even if someone came in and held a gun on him. At least he didn't have to work the next day.
Eezo sniffed at the Medi-gel coating Charles' cut, and he turned his head away from her before she started licking, draping his arm over the dog's back, and tugged her down to his chest. She licked at his cheek instead, letting out a soft whine, and he wondered just what Eezo smelled on him right then.

"It's alright, girl. I'm alright." He worked his fingers through her thick coat of fur, scratching his fingertips along the nape of her neck.

Ares was right. Having a dog did help Charles during the times he was away. Eezo wiggled in closer, laying her head on his chest and let out a soft, whining, grunt of sound before yawning. He closed his eyes, yawning himself, sleep already pulling at his mind.
Mahlia sat next to the news kiosk in the breakroom when Charles walked in. She glanced up at him and smiled before returning her attention to the datapad in her hand. The feminine voice on the kiosk talked about the virus which killed off a bunch of quarians in the Migrant Fleet the year before, saying something about some sort of remembrance service to mark the one year anniversary.

He made his way to the staff refrigerator and grabbed his bottle of orange-flavored, sparkling Paragade and sat down at the empty table. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarillos, brushing the filter off with his thumb before sticking it between his lips. He dug around a minute for his lighter, then stopped, hearing Ethan Rorschach's name on the news. He swallowed, fighting his cigarillo before stuffing the lighter and pack back into his pocket.

"Ethan Rorschach?" Mahlia asked with a spark of recognition in her voice. "Isn't he the guy we called C-Sec on a couple of weeks ago?"

Charles took a heavy drag off his cigarillo, blowing the smoke up towards the ceiling and glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. "Is it?"

Mahlia stood up from her chair, moving over to the table to sit with Charles, eyes wide. "I think it is."

She stopped, head cocked toward the kiosk as she listened to the rest. C-Sec reached out to the public, asking anyone who might know what happened to Ethan to contact them. People were encouraged to call with any piece of information they might have, if they saw or heard anything that night, even if they didn't think it was important. Charles cracked the lid on his Paragade, taking a heavy swallow before putting the cap back on. Good news: they didn't have any leads yet, it seemed. Bad news: someone might've seen him coming or going, might've heard Ethan yelling. What if they decided to call C-Sec?

"Goddess. I wonder what happened to him?" Mahlia turned back to face Charles when the news switched over to building aggressions between humans and batarians following the Alliance's retaliation against the batarians for the Skyllian Blitz.

He forced himself to shrug and took another drag from his cigarillo. "Who knows?"

"At least the little boy will be safe now." She sighed, a sad look tugging the corners of her mouth down. Nodding towards the cigarillo in his hand, she asked, "Can I have one of those?"

"Yeah," he said, eyebrow twitching. Shifting his cigarillo to his other hand, he dug into his pocket again. "Didn't know you smoked."

She shrugged and waved a hand. "I don't very often."

He hummed. "You sure you want one of these, then? They've got a bite to them."

"I'm sure," she said with a smirk. She pulled a cigarillo out and lit it when he passed them over to her before setting the pack back on the table, lighter on top. She eyed him for a second, something about her scrutiny making him uneasy. "Something's different about you."

"What do you mean?" He took another drag, leaning forward to grab the ashtray and drag it over, positioning it between the two of them.

"I don't know. You're just … different. Not as—what's the human term for it?—mousy?" She arched one of her brows. "Something happened a few weeks ago when you took off from work, didn't it?"

He smiled despite himself, letting out a soft chuckle. Flipping his ashes, he let his hand linger there, wrapping his fingers around the ashtray to turn it back and forth. "Mousy, huh?"

"Is that the wrong term?" She propped an elbow on the table, resting her chin in her palm.

He shook his head, letting out a soft snort. "No, no it's not the wrong term."

"So?" She arched her brow again and took a drag off of her cigarillo.

"What?" He kept his face straight, hoping the asari would let it drop.

Giving him an exasperated huff, she tilted her head to the side. "Did something happen?"

"Nah, nothing important, anyway." He opened his Paragade and took a drink before putting the cap back on.

"So what's going on with you, then?" Christ, she acted like Eezo with her chew toys.
"No offense, Mahlia, but why the hell do you care?" He took a drag, letting the smoke seep back out of him. "You've never given two shits about me or my personal life before. None of you have."

She jerked back as if he'd just slapped her across the face. Blinking, she looked down at the cigarillo in her hand. "I—I suppose I deserved that. I'm sorry, Charles, I never meant to—"

"Don't worry about it," he said, cutting her off. He really didn't want to hear her apologies.

He lay in bed jacking off, images of Ethan painting the backs of his eyelids in blood. His thoughts shifted to Ares, feeling the turian sink his teeth into Charles' shoulder, sliding his huge cock in and out of Charles' ass. Damn, he missed Ares. He hummed, tightening his grip and imagined Ares in the shower, talons digging into the tile while Charles' sucked his cock. The sounds he made ... fuck he was so sexy and he had no clue. Just as Charles was about to cum, Eezo jumped on the bed, sticking her cold nose against his thigh.

Charles groaned, trying to shove the dog away and pull the covers over himself. "No, Eezo! Down! Get down. I'll take you out in a minute."

"You need a better sense of awareness," Ares' voice filled the room, scaring the shit out of Charles.

Charles jumped, scrambling back on the bed, slapping his hand against his chest. "Jesus fucking Christ." It felt like his heart might burst out of his ribcage. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Damn it, Ares, you gave me a fucking heart attack," he said, but then grinned, realizing but not caring about the fact he probably looked like an idiot. And maybe the tiniest bit embarrassed to be caught jacking off.

Ares leaned against the doorframe, his dark silhouette barely recognizable against the other shadows. "Your dog sucks. I thought its purpose was to guard your fucking apartment."

Charles huffed. "She's a pup, she has to learn." He tossed the covers back. "Besides, you said you got her for me to make it easier when you're gone. She's ... emotional support."

Climbing out of bed, he walked over to Ares, pressing himself against the turian. Wrapping his arms around Ares' waist, he lifted up on his toes, mouth turned up. Ares leaned down, barely letting his mouth plates brush across Charles' lips before his tongue pushed past, hungry and demanding. Charles moaned, more than pleased with the turn of events, opening his mouth wider, meeting Ares' tongue with just as much urgency and desire. Pulling his arms away from Ares' waist, he wrapped them around the turian's cowl instead, tugging him down closer.

After a moment, Charles started to pull away, the words 'I missed you' and 'well someone's happy to see me' warring with each other over which made it from his lips first, but Ares growled into his mouth, refusing to let Charles go. He slid his arms around Charles, bare talons gripping his ass. Ares lifted him off his feet, and he wrapped his legs around the Ares' hips. Tugging and pushing at Ares' clothes, Charles became more forceful with his own kiss. Ares started walking, moving them to the bed. Loosening one of Charles' legs from around his waist, Ares leaned over, dropping Charles on the bed before stepping back. He started to undress, and even though it was too dark for Charles to see much of anything, it just made him more excited.

He reached down, taking his cock back in hand, slowly stroking. "I missed you," he said, mildly disturbed by the tremble of emotion running through those words, making them something more than just a declaration of his craving for Ares' touch.

Ares let out a low rumble. "If you cum already, I'm not stopping."

Charles grinned, but he halted his movements, just letting his fingers stay curled around his cock. "I was already really close before Eezo jumped up here, but don't worry, I have no intentions of asking you to stop."

Grunting, Ares pulled off his jacket tossing it aside before kicking off his boots. "Why didn't you just lock the damn thing out?"

Charles huffed, sitting up to grab the waistband of Ares' pants, tugging at the closure. "Because she'd just bark all night, and then C-Sec would knock on my door."

Ares stopped undressing, pulling away from Charles to march over to the door. He looked down at Eezo. "Get the fuck out," he said with a growl. He slammed the door closed when the startled dog ran out of the room.

"Hey!" Charles furrowed his brow, anger creeping into his voice. "Be nice to her and get your ass back over here."

Ares hummed, wordless sarcasm dripping from his subvocals. Pulling off his pants, he kicked them aside. As soon as he came back within reach, Charles grabbed for him, annoyance over Eezo's treatment slipping away as soon as Charles felt warm hide beneath his fingers. Squeezing Ares' hips, he ran his tongue along the parted seam in Ares' plates before leaning in enough to bite...
his hips and stomach. Muscles twitching beneath Charles' palms and teeth, Ares let out a low, breathy growl. Charles kept biting and tasting and touching, starting to feel desperate with his need to take in as much of the turian as humanly possible.

Ares put a hand on Charles' shoulder, pushing him back against the bed. "Move up."

Charles scooted to the middle, licking his lips and looking up at the shadow looming over him. "How do you want me?"

Instead of answering, Ares crawled up onto the bed, moving over Charles and crushing his mouth down over Charles' lips, tongue diving inside once again. A hand slid under Charles' head, pulling him in even tighter against Ares. Charles let out a little whimper, hands moving over Ares, touching every place he could reach. Ares released Charles' head, grabbing one of his hands and setting it over what felt like a bandage on Ares' left side, just below his ribs. Charles stilled, confusion and concern rushing through him until Ares tightened his hand on Charles', making him dig his fingers into the bandages.

Ares jerked away with a snarl. "Where's your lube?"

If not for already knowing about Ares's tendency of making aggressive sounds in bed, the snarl might've left Charles thinking he'd done something wrong. He couldn't quite reach the table from where he lay, pinned beneath Ares, so he waved his hand in the general direction. "In the drawer."

Humming, Ares leaned over, opened the drawer, and grabbed the lube. "Roll over."

Charles did as he was told, rolling over to his stomach, watching Ares over his shoulder. Ares opened the lube, squeezing some out into his hand before tossing it aside. He grabbed Charles' ass, his grip almost painful, and spread Charles' ass cheeks apart, smearing the lube over his asshole before slowly sliding a finger inside.

"Fuck," Charles said, voice low, almost a growl as he pushed back against Ares.

Working his finger in and out, Ares leaned over Charles, scraping his teeth along Charles' spine. Charles hissed and moaned, arching his back into the sensation. "I'm not going to last long. Not with that."

Ares let out a dark sounding chuckle, pulling his finger back out. "Get into a position, then."

Rolling back over, Charles hooked his ankles around Ares' thighs, pulling him closer. Ares slipped his arm under Charles' left leg, holding it in the crook of his elbow while he lined himself up and pushed in, slow and steady, stretching Charles' ass around his cock. Charles shifted against Ares and reached out, wrapping his hand around the bandage on Ares' side, squeezing, urging him in deeper. Letting out a growl, Ares shoved himself the rest of the way inside with one, hard thrust, baring his teeth. It tore a pained groan from Charles, filling him with pleasure.

Charles' gaze fixed on the sharp points in Ares' mouth, barely visible in the dark even with Ares so close, need growing inside of him. "Bite me," he said, voice husky.

Lifting Charles' leg in toward his chest, Ares leaned over, sinking his teeth into Charles' shoulder, fucking him hard and fast. It didn't take more than a handful of strokes before Charles cried out, spilling his cum all over his stomach and Ares. He kept digging his fingers against Ares' bandaged side, taking each frenzied thrust from Ares with satisfaction, savoring how far gone the turian seemed as he slammed into Charles again and again.

Letting out a growl, Ares sunk his teeth in deeper, drawing a hiss of pleasure from Charles, tensing as he emptied himself inside of Charles. Wrapping his arms around Ares' ribs, Charles eased his leg free from Ares' grip, lowering his foot to the bed. He turned his head, kissing Ares' neck, and Ares let out a low rumble, extracting his teeth from Charles' shoulder and started licking the wounds.

After a few moments, Charles brushed his hand over the bandage and asked, "What happened?"

"Bar fight," Ares said between passes of his tongue.

Charles snorted, finding the idea of Ares getting into a bar fight rather amusing. "Assassins get injured in bar fights?"

Ares hummed. "Drunk ones do."

Charles chuckled, trying to keep it light and cut it short, feeling his ass muscles squeeze at Ares' cock still inside of him. He caressed Ares' back and sides, soaking in the warmth from his hide.
"Fuck, I needed this."

Letting out a grunt of agreement, Ares slid himself free from Charles and rolled over, stretching out on the bed next to him, taking up most of the available space. "There are plenty of people to fuck on the Citadel."

Charles let out a sigh. "I know. But it requires going out there and actually talking to people … and they're not you, so it's just not the same." He didn't think it could ever be the same again. He'd shared too much with Ares, let Ares pull out those dark things he'd always fought to keep locked away inside himself. And he reveled in it; they both did. He'd never be able to have that with anyone else. He rolled over, scooting closer to Ares. "I'm sure if you stay gone long enough … I'll find someone to occupy a few hours with." But it just wouldn't be the same.

Ares thrummed but didn't say anything, staring up at the ceiling. Charles reached across the turian, dragging his right arm over where Charles could run his fingers over his name carved into Ares' forearm. He still couldn't believe Ares asked him to do it, but admittedly, he loved feeling his name there.

"Besides," he said after a moment, "I've been too damn busy kissing my boss' ass since we got back from Shanxi to do much of anything."

"Why?" Ares asked.

"Irene wanted to fire me. I convinced her to let me stay on, but she's making me work the front again … because she knows I hate it." He traced each letter in Ares' hide again. "And she's got me picking up extra shifts when someone calls in sick."

Ares didn't say anything, and though curious, Charles didn't ask what was on his mind. Instead, after a minute, he rolled over, lighting a cigarillo and brought the ashtray over to sit on his stomach. He finished smoking in silence, stubbed the butt out in the ashtray and sat up. Sliding the ashtray back onto the table, he stood up, leaving the room to use the bathroom and clean himself up, Eezo at his heels.

In the morning, Charles dragged himself out of bed when the alarm went off, cursing the incessant beeping. Ares was already gone, Charles figured he probably went out on the balcony. Making his way to the bathroom, he glanced in the living room, seeing the balcony door open, before heading inside to take a shower.

Once he'd dressed and fed Eezo, he headed out to the balcony, lighting a cigarillo. "I've got to go into work in a couple of hours." Turning his back to the view, he leaned against the railing next to Ares, studying his face. "I'll be there most of the day, if you're sticking around, we can meet somewhere for lunch, if you want."

"Fine." Ares didn't even really look away from gazing out over the Citadel.

Charles hesitated, a cold, sinking feeling taking root in the pit of his stomach at Ares' obvious disinterest. He knew something felt different the night before, the softer, more vulnerable moments they shared over their time on Shanxi and just after were apparently a fluke, a thing of the past. He didn't think Ares stopped caring—he'd shown up after all—he'd just gone back to not really letting it show. Charles worried it was because he'd killed Ethan and called Ares for help.

He swallowed. "Something wrong?"

Ares blew out smoke, looking down over the balcony. "No."

"Okay …" Charles pushed away from the railing. "I'm going to take Eezo for a walk, otherwise she'll tear the place up while I'm gone. I'll be back in a few minutes unless you want to come with us?"

Ares shrugged, flicking his cigarette butt over the balcony. Charles smiled as Ares followed him inside, and he grabbed Eezo's leash, fighting the excited dog to get it latched on her collar. He decided against taking Eezo to the gardens, despite her trying to tug him off in that direction, because he didn't think Ares would appreciate it at all if Lindsey tried to strike up a conversation … or looked too closely at him. So, instead, they just took Eezo around the block and let her sniff at the planters and handle her business. Ares groused a little when Charles cleaned up after Eezo, using a little bag to pick up the mess and toss it in a trash bin, but Charles wasn't going to just leave it there. They were on a space station, not a planet with grass and dirt.

Ares shifted around uncomfortably when some kid stopped them to ask to pet Eezo, but he didn't say anything when Charles consented. He watched with a smile as the kid squatted down in front of the dog and let her lick his face, but Ares turned his back on them, leaning against a wall and staring out over the Citadel. Eezo tired to get Ares' attention a few times, but he largely ignored her. So, Charles stopped once or twice to love on her, telling her she was a good girl. It earned him an irritated flick of Ares' mandibles, but he just smiled, amping up the baby talk and cooing at Eezo.

By the time they made it back to the apartment, Charles didn't have much time before he had to
leave. He ate some cereal, then headed out to the balcony to smoke, leaning against the railing next to Ares. "I'll message you before my lunch break. Figure out where you want to eat, and I'll meet you there."

Ares stared at him, his voice dry as he said, "I eat rations. And you're asking me to know of and pick a restaurant."

Charles let out a heavy, loud breath, rolling his eyes. "Okay, well, I guess I'll figure out a place and let you know."

Ares hummed, flicking his cigarette over the railing and turned back to the apartment, headed for the bathroom. Charles sucked in a deep breath, letting it out in a heavy sigh. He heard the shower start as he finished his cigarillo. Closing and locking the balcony door behind him, he bent down to pat Eezo's head.

Heading for the door, he called out loud enough for Ares to hear over the water. "I'm headed out." He left, making sure to lock the door behind him.

Seeing Mahlia kind of made Charles feel like an ass for shutting her down the day before. "Hey," he said to her, offering her an apologetic smile as he hung his jacket up in the breakroom.

"Hey." She eyed him for a second before offering him a weak smile.

He moved to lean over the table, pressing his palms into the surface next to her. "So, I was kind of a dick yesterday. Sorry about that."

Her soft smile shifted into a smirk. "Like I said, I probably deserved it."

Charles grinned, and he could swear he saw a spark of interest in her eyes. "So we're okay?"

"Yeah, we're okay." She let out a sigh and glanced over her shoulder toward the door leading to storage. "Which is why I'll be nice and warn you Irene's here today."

Groaning, he hung his head.

She chuckled, standing up from her chair, tentatively patting his shoulder as she walked away. "Don't worry, though, she's focused on training Cammus."

He looked up at her retreating back and arched an eyebrow. "Cammus?"

She stopped in the doorway and turned back to him. "Oh, right, I guess you haven't met Lindsey's replacement yet. His name's Cammus. Turian." She shrugged. "He seems nice enough."

Charles sucked on his teeth, wondering if his shower would be enough to cover Ares' scent on him. They sure hadn't touched much that morning, so it might be. Otherwise, he'd make a pretty awkward first impression on the new guy. "Alright, thanks." Oh well, nothing for it either way, it wasn't like he could go back home and take another shower.

She smiled, heading through the door out to the main lobby. Charles glanced at his omni-tool, he still had ten minutes before he needed to clock in, so he sat down and lit a cigarillo. Halfway done when the door to storage opened up, he looked over and saw Irene walk through, a good looking turian with dark plates and white facial markings hot on her heels. Charles wasn't really good at determining turian ages, but he pegged the guy as being in his early to mid-twenties. Irene glanced at Charles, giving him a fake smile, and he gave her one right back.

Leading the turian over to Charles, she stopped in front of him, giving him a fake smile. "Good, you're here. I want you to work with Cammus up front today, get him used to the kiosks and how to deal with customers."

Charles took a slow drag off his cigarillo, more to keep himself from giving Irene a snarky response than because he really wanted a drag just then. Blowing the smoke back out to the side, he let his gaze slide to Cammus. The turian's nose twitched a little, his gaze on Charles' cigarillo. Looking back at Irene, he found her watching him with a raised eyebrow. Charles took one last drag from his cigarillo and stamped it out in the ashtray.

Standing up, he forced her back a step. He slapped a smile on his face and said, "Sure, no problem. I was just about to clock in."

She let out a soft huff and turned back toward the turian. "Cammus, if you have any questions, Charles will be more than happy to help you. If he's busy, Mahlia will be around for a few more hours. When she leaves, Okal will replace her."

Cammus gave her a quick nod. "Thank you, ma'am."

Irene smiled at him and then walked away, headed back to storage. Charles watched her until the door closed behind her. When he turned back to Cammus, he saw the turian's posture relax a little. Cammus met Charles' gaze and let out a soft, questioning hum.
Charles tilted his head toward the employee kiosk. "Did she have you clock in yet?"

"No," Cammus said, following after him.

Charles snorted, shaking his head. It figured. "How long have you been here?"

"Today?"

Charles glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "Yeah."

Cammus tilted his head, mandibles fluttering softly. "About an hour," he said, hints of confusion and doubt coloring his subvocals.

Charles shook his head again, stopping next to the kiosk and clocked himself in. "Rule one, don't do shit in this place if you aren't on the clock. You should've been getting paid for that hour."

Cammus flicked a mandible, the hint of a smirk shifting his mouth plates, but he lifted his shoulder a little and kept his tone neutral. "I'll keep that in mind."

Charles stepped to the side, clearing the way for Cammus to get to the kiosk. The turian stepped closer, finding his name on the main screen. He logged into his account, but then hesitated, seeming confused. Charles leaned over and pointed to the button he needed to clock in, and he heard Cammus take a sharp, sudden breath. He glanced up at the turian, finding Cammus looking at him with wide-eyes, mandibles flared.

Well, I guess that answers the question.

Charles face flushed, and he stepped back, turning his gaze back to the kiosk. A moment later, Cammus let out an amused sounding rumble and pushed the button. Charles let out a soft snort; it could be worse, at least the guy found it funny. He recently fucked a turian instead of taking offense. Rubbing the back of his neck, Charles waved at the door to the main lobby when Cammus finished clocking in. Without a word, Cammus turned and started walking, and Charles followed him out. Once in the lobby, though, Cammus stopped and looked at Charles, seeming to wait for direction, face a little too passive to not be deliberate.

Charles groaned inwardly and nodded his head towards the sale's kiosk. "You'll need to familiarize yourself with the customer kiosk first, that way when a customer asks about something, you know what they're referencing." He made his way over to the kiosk, turning it around to face Cammus, and pulled up the first browsing screen. "You don't need to memorize all of the details or anything, and don't worry, it'll probably take you a few days to get comfortable with it all." He glanced up at the turian who'd moved to stand next to him, looking down at the kiosk. "Is this the first time you've looked at it?"

"Yes." Cammus nodded, meeting his gaze. "I came in once last week, but Irene just showed me around the storage room. She said I'll mostly be working back there, but I need to know all areas in case I'm needed to fill in."

Charles' jaw twitched, anger creeping up on him, low, but burning the back of his neck. It was insult to injury for Irene to ask him to help train Cammus, then. After all, he took the position she yanked away from Charles. Didn't matter, he refused to let it bother him.

Cammus flicked a mandible. "Is this ... a problem?"

Charles shook his head. "No, no problem." He sighed, taking in the wary look Cammus gave him, and he shrugged. "It's nothing you need to worry about, it's my problem, not yours."

Cammus slowly nodded his head. "Alright."

Charles waited for Ares outside of a restaurant his translator told him was named 'The Moons of Palaven'. He'd spent a few minutes on a smoke break looking for a place nearby that would have a good selection of dextro foods, but also served levo. It also looked like something Charles' could afford, he had a feeling Ares would insist on paying, but he wanted to try to make the offer either way. He hoped Ares was okay with the place.

A few minutes passed by until Charles caught sight of a turian towering over most everyone else in the crowd. He smiled, gaze latching onto the figure, watching as Ares brought a cigarette up to his mouth. He had on his fake plates, freshly painted green. Charles still didn't like seeing Ares with his face covered, but it didn't bother him quite so much as before. Ares dropped his cigarette to the ground, stepping on it as he neared Charles.

"Hey," he said, already feeling happier just having Ares there. "I figured I'd let you pick where to sit."

Ares rumbled and nodded, leading Charles out onto the veranda and took a seat. Glancing around a little, Charles wondered about the choice of seating, trying to see the location though Ares' eyes. It was relatively close to the gate, not that the short fence would keep either of them in if they had to bolt, but it also had a decent view of the area, putting the wall to Ares' back.
"So, how's your day going?" Charles asked, hoping to break the silence.

Ares shrugged. "Your vidscreen is broken."

"Since when?" Charles asked, trying to keep his voice calm, his face neutral, despite the sudden spike of confusion and panic. He'd saved for months to get the damn thing, and it worked just fine the night before.

Ares shrugged again, grabbing one of the menus. "About two hours ago? I wasn't paying attention to the time." He sighed, lowering the menu again to look at Charles. "And calm your tits, there's already one on order. A better one."

Damn turians and their excellent sense of smell.

"I don't have tits." Charles sucked on his teeth, narrowing his eyes. "Ares … did you break my vidscreen just so you could buy me a new one?"

"No." That was it. Just a simple 'no'. He didn't flick a mandible, didn't even blink, just giving Charles a cold stare of nothingness.

"Uh huh." Charles pursed his lips. "So then, what happened to the vidscreen?"

"Your resolution sucked, so I fixed it." Ares rumbled. "I attempted to anyway." He shrugged. "No fixing it."

Charles huffed, waving a hand, annoyed with how nonchalant Ares acted over the whole thing. "There was nothing wrong with it!"

"I fail to see why you're so upset," Ares shook his head, seriously seeming oblivious as to why Charles might possibly not be happy about the fact his property was broken, despite being replaced. "Your vidscreen sucked, and I know you can't seem to find anything else to do but watch it, so I got you one that was actually worth watching."

Sighing, Charles rubbed a hand over his face, trying to find a silver lining to latch onto. "Well … thank you. Maybe I can sell the other one off at a pawn shop or something, I guess. Or get it actually fixed and stick it in the bedroom."

"I doubt it," Ares said, voice flat.

"Why?" Charles dropped his hand to the table, raising his eyebrow. "How bad did you break it?"

Ares hummed as if in consideration. "I guess you could technically find someone to fix it."

Something about the way Ares skirted around telling him what happened actually kind of amused Charles. He cocked his head to the side, studying the turian for a moment before calmly asking, "Ares, what did you do?"

"I shot it." Ares shrugged again as if it were no big deal at all. "You might also have a hole in your wall."

Shocked, Charles leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the table. He opened his mouth, paused, and closed it again, struggling to process what Ares just told him. After a second, he opened his mouth again, but a soft croak escaped his throat. "I'll have to get it fixed before the landlord finds out. Did C-Sec show up?"

"You really think I'd be careless enough to have C-Sec show up?" Ares lifted a brow plate as if it was completely impossible to think someone might call C-Sec over a weapon's discharge in an apartment building. "No. C-Sec didn't show up. Anyone who overheard would probably have just expected I broke it, not shot it."

"Last gunshot I heard wasn't exactly quiet and unnoticeable by neighbors living right next door." Charles sighed, shaking his head and letting out a soft chuckle. "For fuck's sake, why'd you shoot it?"

Ares blinked, flicking a mandible. "It was annoying me," he said, his tone making it clear he thought it should be obvious and Charles must be slow for not seeing it.

Charles let out another sigh and rubbed his hand over his face again. "Just … please don't shoot anything else of mine. Even if you have enough credits to just replace it."

"I didn't just replace it, I got you another fucking better one." Ares growled and flicked a mandible. "Most people would be grateful."

Anger sparked white hot in Charles, Ares' attitude finally pushing his last button. He thought he was being pretty damn understanding and forgiving, why didn't the damned turian get that?

"That's not the point. It's mine. I worked for it, I bought it, I was proud to have something I earned." He leaned forward a little, fighting to keep his voice low, but it just made it come out sounding even more seething. "Even if my job is shit, I've been taking care of myself, you know?"

He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth for a second. "I do appreciate you wanted to do something
nice and got me a better one, which is why I said thanks, but it doesn't mean I'm grateful you broke the one I had!"

Ares didn't say anything, just watched Charles, jaw snapped tightly closed, mandibles flicking in obvious irritation. After a moment, his head whipped around to the side, and he let out a low, threatening growl. Charles' brow pulled in, and he turned to look in time to see several other turians around them snap their attention back to their own plates.

Suddenly deflated, Charles snorted softly and leaned back in the chair again. Letting out a long, heavy sigh, he crossed his arms over his chest, looking down at the table. "I'm sorry," he said, worried he just did something to push Ares away. "You're right. Let's just drop it, okay?" He looked up and swallowed, hating the pleading sound to his own voice.

Ares pushed a heavy breath out through his nose and turned his attention back to his menu, still not saying anything. Charles swallowed again, fighting back the panicked feeling tightening around his chest. He picked up his own menu, turning to the short list of levo dishes, reading over them several times while he finally started to calm down, the tension in his chest and shoulders relaxing.

Still, he felt like he needed to say something, clear the air. "Eezo bother you too much?"

*Christ, he better not have shot Eezo.*

"No."

Charles licked his lips, tentatively pushing forward. "She likes you, you know?"

Ares hummed and lifted a brow plate when Charles looked at him. "It's a dog. It likes food and destroying furniture and clothing."

Charles opened his mouth, snark already building on the tip of his tongue as he wanted to tell Ares it sounded more like him than Eezo. He snapped his mouth closed on it instead, thinking better of it for the moment. He didn't think Ares was in the mood for his smart mouth. Instead, he just smirked and said, "She's a good dog, and she likes people, too. She's been really good for me … I'm really happy you got her."

Ares thrummed, the sound a little less rough around the edges, almost gentle. He nodded once, leaning back in his chair to pull out his cigarettes and lit one. "Yeah."
Charles sat on the couch, staring up at the biggest, nicest vidscreen he'd probably ever own in his entire life. Ezoo curled up next to him. Christ, he didn't even want to know what Ares paid for the damn thing. Fuck, it kind of made him want to shoot his old vidscreen, too, but he didn't dare admit it to Ares. He pulled the pack of cigarillos and lighter from his pocket, kicking off his shoes. He stuck one in his mouth, but before he brought the lighter up, Ares opened his, and leaned over, sparking it in front of Charles' face. The gesture brought a smile to Charles' face. He loved it when Ares lit his cigarillos for him, it made him feel special, even if he didn't really know who else Ares might do the same for. Cupping the flame, he let his hand rest over Ares' while he lit his cigarillo, taking a deep drag.

Ares hummed, barely loud enough for Charles to hear, and closed the lighter, tucking it back in his pocket. Charles turned his attention back to the vidscreen, tuned into the news. A moment later, the reporter started talking about the 'ongoing investigation into the brutal murder of Ethan Rorschach'. Charles listened to it, unease settling a heavy weight around his shoulders. When the reporter started talking about something else instead, Charles glanced at Ares.

Taking another drag from his cigarillo, he licked his lips and asked, "How long will C-Sec keep the investigation open?"

"Depends on how important this fucker was, how much publicity it gets." Ares lit a cigarette and leaned back on the couch, propping up his feet on the table.

"The guy had serious money. Floor to ceiling vidscreen in the front, one half as big in his bedroom. Fancy art on his walls. Had a Symtech X35 series laptop. That's twenty thousand credits alone, easy. He didn't seem important, though. Stockbroker, if I recall." Charles let out a derisive snort and lit another cigarillo off the ember of the first before putting it out in the ashtray. "His kid's room looked completely bare besides a little bed and a chest of drawers. No toys, nothing on the walls, just nothing."

"Then ask yourself who'll be looking for his killer." Ares glanced at Charles, taking a drag off his cigarette.

Charles squirmed a little, drawing his feet up on the edge of the couch, knees to his chest. "I don't know. His wife's dead; 'blunt force trauma to the head'. Kid's only five or six. I guess his boss might care enough to pitch a fit. I didn't look into him too much after that night, afraid to." He shrugged. "I don't want to draw any attention to myself. He shouldn't have even been there, C-Sec only kept him a few hours."

Ares sighed, somehow managing to convey both annoyance and disappointment with the one sound, making Charles wince.

"I don't know these things, Ares," Charles said, turning a little on the couch to look at him. "I wasn't trained, I don't know the shit you do, don't think the way you do. I guess his boss might care enough to pitch a fit. I didn't look into him too much after that night, afraid to." He shrugged. "I just … it wasn't something I planned out very well, I get that. I screwed up."

Grunting, Ares opened his omni-tool, fingers running over the holographic keys before he glanced up at the vidscreen. "Pick one."

Charles turned his attention back to the vidscreen, brow furrowed in confusion as he took in the ten mugshots filling the screen. The heading identified them as C-Sec's most wanted, and under each picture, he found a brief list of the charges. Understanding dawned—or at least he thought he understood—replacing his confusion with excitement, and his eyes widened. Shifting forward to drop his feet to the floor, he leaned on his knees, scanning the images and descriptions. He stopped when he found a human named Aiden Jackson who'd been charged with serial rape and murder. Charles studied the man's face for a minute, taking in the hard lines of his features, the cold, dead eyes, and the scar trailing down his stubble-covered cheek.

"Him."

Ares hummed, glancing at the selection before returning to his silence. He typed into his omni-tool for a few minutes, leaving Charles sitting there feeling anxious, literally sitting on the edge of his seat. He turned his attention back to the image, trying to commit the details to memory. When he finished his cigarillo and started debating on whether to light another, Ares drew his attention with a low rumble.

He glanced at Charles. "Get some clothes."

Charles grinned, jumping up from the couch and taking two steps toward his bedroom before stopping. Turning back, he leaned down over Ares and kissed his forehead—right over the mended crack Cole put in his plates. Ares didn't move, but Charles thought he heard a faint chuff.
He changed out of his work clothes and gathered up an extra set, shoving it into a backpack. Fetching his razor, he slipped it into his pocket before making his way back to the living room to ask, "Anything else?"

Ares stubbed out his cigarette and stood, slipping on his jacket. "I ordered a contact to get the rest of what you need." He headed for the door. "We're going to the drop off first."

Charles followed behind Ares, looking down at Eezo when she ran up to join them, tongue lolling out of her mouth, wagging her tail. "No, Eezo. You're staying here." He nudged the dog with the side of his foot. "What else will I need? Is it something I can't get myself if I need to later?"

"You can so long as you don't buy them together," Ares said, stepping out into the hall.

Charles nodded, thinking he understood the reasoning. "Alright." He locked the door behind them then hurried to catch back up to Ares' longer stride.

They moved through the building in silence, which wasn't really a surprise for Charles. Ares remained a man of few words, and he especially didn't like to talk when there might be anyone else around to hear him. And since they were basically discussing killing a man, Charles figured it was a pretty good reason to stay quiet. When they reached a taxi stand, Ares called a skycar and climbed inside the driver's seat. Charles went around to the other side and opened the door, settling inside, turning his attention back to Ares.

Ares opened his omni-tool, and a moment later Charles' pinged. "You need something, you send this extranet number a message. That's it. They'll send the location to me, and I'll give it to you then."

Charles lifted an eyebrow, fighting to hold back the strength of his surprise. He didn't want to make Ares doubt the decision, but still, the questions spilled from his mouth. "Who is it? Wait, I'm not supposed to know, am I? Do they know who I am?" Admittedly, he felt a little unnerved by the idea of Ares' contacts knowing his name.

"No." Ares glanced at him. "To all of it."

Charles relaxed a little, but he continued to feel fidgety with his excitement and nerves. He still had about a million questions. None of them seemed dire, though, and Ares really wasn't real big on questions. "Okay," he said, absentmindedly nodding his head. Then after a few seconds, he licked his lips and asked, "You're really okay with me doing this sort of thing?"

Ares shrugged. "Don't get yourself caught."

Charles let out a raspy sounding chuckle, throat tightening as he considered the possibility. It was something he thought about a lot since Shanxi but even more since Ethan. "I'll do my damnedest not to." He hoped Ares would teach him what he needed to know to make sure he never got caught.

Ares hummed, and Charles wasn't certain, but he thought he detected a hint of reservation to the sound. If Ares thought he'd get caught, why didn't he tell Charles to stop? Because … because he probably knew the truth Charles wasn't really ready to face but felt deep down all the same. The thing he became on Shanxi, the beast inside of him … he needed to kill. Needed the blood and the screams; needed to feel his razor cutting through skin and fat and muscle. Closing his eyes, he took in a slow, deep breath. He wouldn't stop, even if Ares told him to, though he'd try really hard. For Ares … he'd try just about anything.

He reached over, settling his hand on Ares' thigh as the skycar took off. After a few seconds, he caught himself fiddling with the seam on Ares' pants and made himself stop before he irritated the turian again. It seemed like he annoyed Ares all the time, it kind of made him wonder if there was anything about him Ares actually liked besides fucking. He thought there must be, he just didn't know what. Before long, he started tapping his foot against the floor, restless, and he shoved his other hand into his pocket, turning the razor over and over between his fingers.

Settling the skycar down in a public transit station, Ares opened his door. "Stay here." He climbed out, closing the door behind him before Charles could ask any questions.

Charles watched Ares until he disappeared into the crowd. Gnawing on his thumbnail, he kept scanning the area until a few minutes later he saw Ares again, walking with a bag slung over his shoulder. He opened the skycar door, tossing the bag in on Charles' lap before climbing inside. Without a word, he started the skycar, and they took off again.

Charles glanced at Ares before opening the bag, digging around inside. He found latex gloves, some of those weird things surgeons put on over their shoes, plastic smocks, and trash bags. He was less than enthused by the idea of dealing with all of it, but if it let him do his thing and helped him to not get caught, he'd damn sure wear whatever the hell Ares told him to wear. He made a mental list of the items, making sure he'd remember them next time.

"How are we going to find him?" Normally, he figured he'd use one of the programs Ares gave
him, but with Aiden on C-Sec's most wanted list, the program he used to trace Ethan wouldn't be much help.

"For tonight, I did the groundwork with a contact." Ares glanced at him. "You're on your own for the others. Use those programs I gave you."

Others.

He said it with so much ease, such nonchalance. Maybe Ares really didn't care what Charles did … so long as he didn't get caught. It wasn't like Ares didn't enjoy killing just as much as him, maybe even more, but it just seemed different to him. Ares killed professionally, he didn't go off killing people because he couldn't shake the images and had some beast scratching away at the inside of his head. He did it because someone hired him to, even if he did enjoy his work … right?

Charles licked his lips. "I did, with Ethan anyway. It's how I got into his place as easily as I did, and knew he was still at C-Sec when I got there to scope out the place." He studied Ares' profile, anxious to show the turian that he took it seriously and really wanted to learn. "They must've let him go right after I checked. But … this Aiden guy can't be found that way; if C-Sec knew where he was, he wouldn't be on their wanted list. Right?" He brought his thumb to his mouth, tearing off what little nail he had left on his left hand. "So, I guess I'll just not use the wanted list."

"Gain notoriety with those you can find." Ares hummed. "Then, you'll gain enough attention that I can trust you with one of my smaller contacts."

Charles blinked a few times, lips parted as he processed. "... you want me to gain notoriety? Isn't that ... I mean … shouldn't I want to not draw attention—on any level?"

Ares sighed, the same tone Charles expected from a parent growing weary of a child's constant questions. He hated it when Ares got so impatient with him. It was hard enough for him to open himself up to someone, and it stung like hell when it was so poorly received. It made Charles want to clam up and stop asking anything, but if he did, he'd be more likely to fuck up and get something really wrong. Then he'd definitely get caught.

"You're going to create patterns no matter what. Even if you don't leave evidence, if you continue to kill the same way, there will be connections. That will get the attention of those who are actually looking at this sort of thing." Ares looked over at him. "There are some out there who will want to help you."

Charles swallowed, thinking about it for a moment, unease and dread pulling at him. "How am I supposed to trust they want to help and not turn me in?" He lowered his voice, finding it difficult to put it all into words. "I'm not blind to what I'm doing here. I know most people will think I'm just sick in the head. I'm not doing this for pay like you. It's not my job, I'm just … scratching an itch."

Ares rumbled. "Because they won't know about you unless you want their contact."

Charles brought his thumb back to his mouth, tearing at his cuticle with his teeth. "People you trust?"

"As well as I can trust," Ares said with a shrug.

Charles nodded, he knew coming from Ares, it said a lot. "What do they charge you for this sort of thing?" He started gnawing on the nail of his index finger. "I'll need to start putting credits aside or something. Limit myself."

"Depends on the difficulty of getting the information." Ares hummed and set the skycar down outside of an apartment complex. "It can go from favors to an actual load of credits."

Deflated, Charles asked, "What kinds of favors?" He certainly didn't have 'a load of credits'.

Ares turned his attention out the window. "They won't ask you for those off the bat, they need to trust you first."

"Right." So, basically, they'd be useless to Charles. "Yeah, of course." He looked at the apartment complex, taking a deep breath to clear his head. "He's here?"

"Yes." Ares sat back in his seat, turning a little to watch him. "Tell me what you're going to do."

Nervous about being judged, he chewed on his lip, taking his time to work the answer over in his head before he said anything. "I need to check the place out. Figure out where the exits are. Figure out who else is inside, and where they're located. See what kind of security is in place, if anything." He frowned. "Should I even be going in there tonight? Should I come back another time, after I've had a chance to check the place out?"

Ares' fingers twitched. "I gave you a program to hack into security feeds, didn't I?"

"Yeah." Charles pulled in a deep breath, looking at the apartment and the neighborhood, running through his own mental checklist from his time spent breaking into places. "The apartment itself probably doesn't have security. The building might, but it's probably shitty, and if there's guards,
they probably do a crap job of watching the feeds. Getting in won't be a problem, obviously, especially with the programs." He fell silent for a moment, thinking. "I shouldn't go in if he's not alone, but if there's not an internal security feed, I don't know how to tell if he's alone."

"Sounds like you're in for a long night scoping this place out," Ares said, voice flat.

Charles sat there for a moment, staring out at the apartment before opening his omni-tool. He took a minute to dig through the various programs Ares gave him before running one designed to search for active video surveillance feeds. Finding one for the apartment building's security, he tapped into it. He took a moment to check the different feeds on that signal, finding cameras in the foyer, each hall, and around the building.

He glanced at Ares and asked, "Which apartment?"

"47B." Ares lit a cigarette, lowering the window. "Check the message I sent you."

With as nervous as Charles felt, smelling Ares' cigarette just made him want his own smoke. He pulled out his pack and stuck one between his lips, flipping over to his inbox. Digging around in his pocket for his lighter, he looked up when Ares flicked his in front of Charles, the low flame springing to life. Smiling around the cigarillo, he leaned into the flame and muttered a 'thanks' before turning his attention back to this omni-tool. Along with an unlabeled extranet address—for the contact, Charles assumed—Ares sent him blueprints for the building. He hummed, looking them over, checking out the entrances and noting the balconies. Finding the page for the fourth floor, he zoomed in on 47B, studying the layout.

Taking a long drag, he moved back to the security feeds and studied what he could see of the hall, but the hall stayed quiet, no one out and moving around. Shifting to another feed, he looked at one of the cameras set up outside around the back of the building, checking out the design of the balconies and grumbling. "No fire escape ladders."

Looking up and around at the other buildings nearby, he chose the one he thought might give him a better angle and tried hacking into its feeds instead. Succeeding, he saw the target apartment building's back exit clearly and it gave him a better view of the balconies. Counting the doors, he pointed to the one he thought matched up to 47B and asked Ares, "That one, yeah?"

Blowing out smoke, Ares glanced at the omni-tool. "Yep."

Charles let his gaze roam over the ground outside before working his way up the building back to 47B and said, "I can get up there. Down from there, too, if I need to." He used a finger to trace out his route, showing Ares the patio railing on the ground floor he'd push off of to get him started. From there, it'd be easy to grab onto the first balcony and pull himself up. There were window ledges in between to help him get more height when needed while moving from one balcony to the next, making his way up.

Ares followed along with the directions and nodded. "Good."

"It's the only real window I can get access to from the outside and maybe see inside. Well, I might be able to see something if the blinds aren't drawn good enough. Balcony locks are usually shittier than front door locks, too." He looked at Ares and raised an eyebrow.

Ares flicked a mandible. "What?"

Charles pursed his lips a little and waved a hand. "I'm waiting for you to tell me it's a stupid idea and all the reasons why."

Ares shrugged. "You could go through all that trouble, or you could just get through the front door."

"Thought I'm supposed to scope the place out first?" Charles furrowed his brow in confusion, frustration at Ares' evasiveness and lack of direction starting to make the muscles along his spine tight. "I can sit here and stare at the security feeds all night if it's the better option?" He shrugged. "But will it really tell me anything about what's going on inside?"

"Ugh, why can't you just tell me what I should do?"

Ares hummed and flicked ashes out the window. "And what if there's more than one person in the apartment and you're stuck out on the balcony?"

Charles let out a groan, reaching up to rub at his forehead. He wouldn't be stuck on the balcony, but it obviously wasn't the point Ares wanted to make. "I don't know. So, what, I should just go in through the front blind?"

"You have scanning tech in your tool. You can scan from the hall." Ares shrugged. "Or you could get creative."

"You know what? Internal security feeds. At a place like this?"

Ares sighed, clearly as annoyed as Charles. "Have you even looked at the programs I gave you?"
Of course Charles looked through the programs. He’d looked through them all, but most of them
didn’t make any sense, and he couldn't figure out what they were for. Without Ares around to ask
questions—and apparently, that wasn’t doing much good, either—he was pretty much left in the
dark with the tech.

Charles huffed, pouting, and hating himself for pouting. “They didn’t come with fucking
manuals.” Christ, he felt so vulnerable, trying to open himself up to being taught and learning, and
Ares just made him feel like Eezo operated with a higher IQ than he did. “I told you, I used some
of them to get into Ethan’s.”

Ares took a deep breath like he was about to speak, but then he paused and threw out his cigarette.
It seemed a lot like he at least tried to make himself sound calm when he said, “You have a
scanner for life signs. It’s short range, but you can scan through the wall from the hall of the
apartment complex.”

Admittedly, the idea impressed Charles, and he closed the camera feeds, looking through the rest
of the programs. “Which one?”

Ares leaned over to tap a key on Charles' omni-tool. “It's useless out here.”

“Yeah, I understand. Just didn't know which one.” Charles studied the program while he talked,
figuring out how to activate and deactivate the scan, checking out the screen as it showed him a
bunch of nothing from where he sat, just outlines of the edges of the skycar and a red blob when he
aimed it at his own lap. “Okay, so, go in, disrupt security’s feeds, pass by the apartment with
this running or do I need to stop in the hall for it to take time to work right?”

Without warning, Ares opened the skycar door and climbed out, leaning against the vehicle to talk
to him. “You can pass by the door of the apartment, but it may disrupt your readings. It works on
pings. You moving can cause it to read the same person in different locations compared to your
moving positions.” He closed the door.

Charles got out of the vehicle, slinging the bags over his shoulder. “Alright. Well, with the
cameras down, shouldn't be an issue. I'll check again for an internal security feed when I'm
closer.” He started walking, moving over next to Ares. “Anything else I need to know first?”

Ares hummed. “How do you plan to incapacitate him?”

Charles thought about it as he walked, activating the program to disrupt the security building’s
main feeds before they got close enough to be seen by the cameras. He wished Ares had broached
the subject while they were still at home, giving him time to prepare. He scraped his teeth over his
lip. Too late to turn back, he needed to think of something. “I don’t have anything to hit him with,
and I doubt I’d knock him out with a punch …. Plus, I don’t really want to get close to
this
dude
before he's down. So, I'm thinking I'll have to find something inside to hit him with.”

“Afraid lot of trust in the unknown.” Ares followed Charles into the apartments.

“It's all unknown to me.” Charles let out a helpless sounding sigh. “That's the problem. It's why
you’re out here with me right now, isn’t it?” He glanced over his shoulder at Ares, despite the
tough love approach the turian seemed to be fond of, he felt damned glad Ares was there. “So,
something learned, next time bring a fucking baseball bat or something. Probably handcuffs or
rope, too.”

Ares hummed. “Word of advice, start working out.”

Charles scoffed, pride wounded, and muttered, “I do work out. A guy with my build … we can
only ever get so big without steroids or some shit.”

“So you can tell me, right now, you do strength training.” Ares rumbled, doubt clear in his tone.

“Yes.” Charles clenched his jaw, feeling his shoulders tighten and his face shift into a frown.
“Though obviously, it hasn’t been like a goal of mine to hulk out.” He sucked in a deep breath,
trying to push aside the sting of feeling inadequate. “I'll start adding weight to my reps. You could
teach me how to fight. That might help, too.”

Ares didn’t say anything else, just followed Charles to the elevator. They rode up in silence,
stepping out onto the fourth floor. Charles left the security disruptor running in the background and
did a quick scan to check for internal security systems. Unsurprisingly, none of the apartments
registered as having internal feeds, let alone an alarm system of any sorts. He opened the program
Ares showed him in the skycar, setting it to start scanning for life signs when they reached 47B.

Holding the omni-tool up, he stood still, watching as the screen showed the outlines of walls,
furniture, and one red, human silhouette. The guy seemed to be sitting on a couch, but it didn’t
look like there was much standing between Charles and the man; the door would open right up
into the living room.

Switching to the program made to hack through the lock for him, he glanced over his shoulder.
Ares just watched him, seeming almost bored. Charles passed his omni-tool over the lock,
watching the red light flip over to green and opened the door. Slipping inside, he spotted Aiden
sitting on the couch, watching a game on his vidscreen. Charles let his bags slide to the floor, giving the room a quick scan. Spotting a lamp sitting on the table next to Aiden, Charles made a beeline for it, moving as quietly as he could, and scooped up the lamp, slamming it down on the man's head just as he'd started to turn toward Charles.

Aiden reeled, stunned but still conscious. Adrenaline spiking, Charles grabbed the next thing off the table—barely registering it as a glass bong—and smashed Aiden over the head again. The resounding crunch of bone breaking sent a euphoric rush through him, and Aiden slumped over, falling from the couch to a heap on the floor. Blood trickled down the side of his head, barely noticeable against the dirty, dark brown rug. Charles froze, suddenly unsure of himself, remembering how difficult it was to clean up the mess he'd created with Ethan—and he still feared he'd missed something.

"Take him to the bathroom," Ares said, locking the door when Charles turned to look at him.

Right. The bathroom. Okay.

Charles moved around the couch, stooping down, reaching for the man's arms.

"No," Ares said, stopping Charles in his tracks.

Looking at Ares, Charles' face contorted, brow furrowing with his confusion. But then he saw the bags next to Ares' feet and realized his mistake. Standing upright again, he backed away from Aiden and made his way over to the bag. Pulling out all the crap inside, he started by pulling the foot coverings on over his shoes, then the plastic smock, which really made him feel like an asshat, and finally the gloves. The gloves weren't so bad at least. "I feel stupid," he muttered, moving back to Aiden.

If Ares heard his complaints, he didn't let on. Charles squatted down, sliding his arms under Aiden's and started dragging the man to the bathroom, grunting a little along the way. The man probably only had fifty pounds and a few extra inches on Charles—all dead weight at the moment—but it made Ares' comment about working out sting all over again. Backing into the bathroom, Charles let Aiden drop to the floor.

He glanced up at Ares watching him from the doorway. "Should I stick him in the tub? Less messy, yeah?"

Ares grunted, giving Charles a slight nod.

He maneuvered around Aiden, hauling him up by the arms again and dragging him up onto the edge of the tub. When Aiden's weight shifted, sending him sliding over the edge, Charles nearly fell in with him. The guy began groaning, head listing about as he started to wake up. Charles reared back and punched him in the temple as hard as he could.

"This isn't nearly as much fun," he muttered, shoving Aiden's legs over the edge of the tub, tugging him into a better position. Charles sat down on the toilet, catching his breath. Pulling out his razor, he flicked it open and glanced at Ares.

"We'll get you some cuffs. But for now …." Ares pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket and slipped them on. He moved to the tub, leaned over to grab the man, and slapped him hard across the face, rousing Aiden.

Charles beamed at Ares but bit his lip to keep from saying something stupid. Shit, he loved watching the turian manhandle assholes. Tugging the shower curtain out of the way, Charles moved over to perch on the edge of the tub. He leaned down, patting Aiden's cheek. "Hey, asshole. Wake up."

Aiden's eyelids fluttered again, letting out another groan. After a second or two, he focused in on Charles, confusion filling his eyes before his gaze slid up to the giant ass turian looming over him. Fear set in, dilating the pupil of his left eye a little wider than the right. Charles grinned, snorting as the man started cursing and scrambling, flopping around in the tub like a fish out of water as he tried to free himself from Ares' grip. Ares growled, putting more weight on the guy to keep him from sitting up.

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Aiden kicked out, nearly clipping Charles, but he got out of the way in time. The shower curtain got ripped down in the process, though, so Charles shoved it in around Aiden's legs, making it harder for him to kick. Ares shifted his weight, grabbing one of the man's arms and wrenching it at an awkward angle, making him scream but hold still. Snagging a washcloth from the shelf above the toilet, Charles stuffed it in Aiden's mouth.

Using his razor, Charles cut through Aiden's shirt, pushing the fabric aside to reveal the well-defined muscles of his chest and stomach. Aiden squirmed again, but Ares pulled on his arm, and he screamed around the rag in his mouth. Charles smirked, his cock already starting to harden. He wished they could afford to just let Aiden scream, but the apartment building was too crowded for that.

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Adjusting his grip on the razor, fingers feeling weak and trembly with the building need to spill blood, Charles made his first cut, slicing a long line down Aiden's chest. The man whimpered and
thrashed, only to be stilled once again by the pressure that looked like it might rip his arm clean off his body if he wasn't careful. That would certainly be something to see. Charles watched the blood for a second, licking his lips before cutting Aiden again, taking his time, dragging the razor through the man's skin and muscle.

Ares rumbled. "He's passing out."

Charles looked up to see Aiden's eyes rolling back, head starting to droop, and he reached out with his other hand, slapping Aiden's cheek. He smiled when the man's eyes snapped open, focusing on him again. "According to C-Sec, you've raped and killed eight women," he said, voice soft and pensive. "I wonder if they were as scared as you are right now." He cut into Aiden's chest for a third time, sucking in a deep breath as the man thrashed, blood spilling down over his sides to soak his torn shirt.

"I'd really love to take my time with you, but I'm still figuring this whole thing out, and I know I can't stay in here all night," Charles all but whispered when Aiden stilled again, savoring the pain and terror in his eyes. "So don't worry, I'm almost done. I just need," he said, bringing his razor back to Aiden's chest and dragging it down over his pec, making Aiden twist and squirm, screaming into his gag, "a little bit more."

Charles took a few more minutes with the man, cutting into him and watching the rivulets of blood sliding over his skin. He wanted more, oh so much more, but he really did need to finish up and get out of there. And, he didn't want to test Ares' patience too much. Finally, Charles met Ares gaze and nodded. Ares grunted, pulling the man's head back by his hair, and Charles sunk his blade into Aiden's carotid artery, jerking the blade across his throat.

Blood gushed from the wound, arching out before splashing down onto Aiden's shredded chest. Some distant part of Charles' mind saw Ares let go and stand up straight, felt Ares lingering there next to him, but he was transfixed. All he could do was watch, fixated, utterly unable to look away, even when he heard the gurgle of the drain, drinking in the offering. His cock felt so hard, it kind of hurt, pressing against his pants.

When the blood finally slowed to a mere trickle, Charles tore his gaze away to look up at Ares. Fuck, he wanted him. Wanted to pull Ares down to the bathroom floor and sink his teeth into the turian's hide, lick and bite every inch of him. Charles wanted to strip him down and take Ares' cock in his mouth before climbing on top of him and fucking him until they both came. Ares looked down at him, pupils dilated, that hungry look about him, and Charles almost reached for him, but Ares rumbled and gave him a stern shake of his head.

"Finish it," Ares said, his subvocals heavy and raspy, only stoking the flames in Charles. "We're on a time schedule."

Charles nearly whimpered, but he licked his lips and ripped his gaze away, focusing back on the body in the tub. His mind felt thick, thoughts hazy, and he needed to force himself to think. "I didn't bleed at all. Do I need to strip him and clean him?"

"No." Ares pulled off his gloves. "Stay here. He handed the gloves to Charles and left the bathroom.

Charles stood up, rinsing his razor off in the sink before grabbing another washcloth, using it to dry the blade and get the blood out of the crevices. He looked up when Ares returned with the bags they'd brought.

Ares squatted down, digging through the duffle bag. "Dirty shit goes in here." He tossed a trash bag to Charles.

Charles set to work, tossing the blood-stained washrag inside the bag before stripping off his protective gear. With everything in the bag, he looked down at himself and asked, "My clothes are clean, can I keep them?"

"Yes." Ares took the trash bag from Charles, handing him the two other bags instead. "Let's go."

Charles nodded, slipping his razor into his pocket and slinging the bags over his shoulder. He stole one last glance at the corpse before following Ares out of the bathroom.

Stopping in the living room, Ares pointed to the bong and the broken lamp still laying on the floor. "Grab them."

Charles did as he was told, squatting down over the broken shards of ceramic and picked them up, making sure not to cut himself or touch anything else. Ares held the trash bag open for him, and he dumped them inside before grabbing the bong, too. He turned it over in his hand a second and hummed, it wasn't even cracked. Dropping it into the bag, also, Charles stood back up.

As they headed for the door, Charles checked to make sure the security disruptor still ran. They left the apartment in silence, and Charles relocked the door behind them. He glanced at the trash bag in Ares' hand, the haze starting to lift from around his head. "Incinerators?"

"Yes," Ares said with a rumble. "This apartment, if not the block, should have one."
Charles felt a little surprised, he didn't think it'd be a good idea to stick around long enough to use the apartment's incinerators, but if Ares said it was okay, then he trusted Ares. He looked through the blueprints again. "The incinerators are on the lower level, near the back."

Ares waved a hand, telling Charles to lead the way, so he did. They didn't really say much else, just took the elevator down to the ground floor and made their way to the incinerators. Standing in front of the flames, Charles glanced at Ares and saw a familiar spark of terror flash through his eyes. Charles reached over, easing the bag from Ares' grip without a word and tossed it into the fire before closing the door on Ares' nightmare. He hugged on Ares' jacket as he passed back by him, urging the turian to follow. Ares rumbled and started walking. The slightly cool, fresher air of the Citadel seemed to work wonders to clear both of their heads. Ares picked up his pace, taking the lead back to the waiting vehicle.

Once they were back in the skycar, Charles asked, "Did I get anything wrong? Besides not coming fully prepared and almost touching the guy without all that shit on?"

Ares flicked a mandible. "Next time wear gloves before you get in."

"Shit. Of course. That was stupid." Charles raked a hand through his hair and let out a heavy breath. Turning in his seat, he eyed Ares, letting a smirk lift the corner of his mouth. "Can we go home and fuck now? Please?"

Ares chuckled and nodded, starting the skycar and lifting it into the air.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Charles flung the bags to the floor, turning to Ares. He grabbed Ares' jacket in his fists, tugging the turian down as he pushed up on his toes to kiss him. Mouth plates opening easily under Charles' insistence, he moaned as Ares' tongue dove into his mouth. Ares trapped his hands around Charles' hips, the tips of his talons digging into Charles. Pressing himself against Ares, he shoved his hand under Ares' jacket, grabbing his bandaged side and squeezing. He walked backward, using his grip to guide Ares toward the bedroom.

Snarling, Ares broke the kiss and bared his teeth, making Charles' cock twitch. "You open that wound and I'm making you lick it clean." He leaned in, nudging Charles' head to the side, running his tongue over Charles' throat as they walked.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" Charles kneaded the bandaged area again, testing Ares' response.

He growled against Charles, the sound somewhere between pain-filled and aroused. His grip on Charles tightened, and the talons of his first fingers and thumbs ripped right through Charles' shirt to pierce the skin just above his hip bones, but the thicker fabric of his jeans warded off the talons of Ares' second fingers. It sent a shiver down Charles' spine, and he sucked in a deep breath, rubbing the side of his head against Ares'.

"Because I'm totally okay with the idea," Charles said, his voice cracking in his dry throat. He stopped in the doorway, easing away from Ares enough to pull his shirt off over his head, tossing it aside and kicking off his shoes.

Ares hummed, seeming to consider the proposition. Gaze sweeping over Charles in the low light, he took his jacket off, tossing it back toward the couch. Pulling his shirt off, he let it drop. Charles caved to the urge to touch Ares, moving back to him, wanting to feel the turian's warm plates and hide against his chest. He leaned into Ares, pressing a kiss to his keel before grabbing his hips and turning him, getting a look at the bandage. The bandage itself was barely any bigger than the palm of Charles' hand, and blue blood spotted the white gauze.

"Looks like you've already bled through a little. Not much point in the bandage now." Charles picked at the tape a little. "Can I take it off?"

Ares shrugged. "Why not?"

Charles peeled off the bandage, scraping his teeth over his lip as he saw a little blue blood oozing from around the scabbed over areas. Dropping the gauze to the floor, he ran his fingers over the circular cut—suspecting it'd been caused by a broken bottle—dragging his fingers through the blood. He looked up at Ares, licking his fingertips clean. Ares let out an odd thrum deep in his throat, a sound Charles didn't recognize, as he watched. Charles rolled the taste around on his tongue, it had a different flavor from human blood, a little more bitter, but it still carried the tang of metal. He hummed, swallowing.

Leaning in slow enough for Ares to tell him to stop if he wanted, Charles laved the wound with his tongue, and Ares growled. Smiling, Charles brought a hand back to Ares' other side, getting them moving towards his bed again. He kept his mouth on the wound, licking and nipping at the hide around the area without actually biting the cut itself. When he reached the bed, he undid Ares' pants, shoving a hand down inside to wrap his fingers around his cock and started stroking, pulling an aroused rumble from the turian.

Moving his face away from Ares' side, blood still on his lips, he turned his mouth up to Ares. He thumped and leaned down, shoving his tongue into Charles' mouth. He started to shove his pants down, and Charles helped, easing them down over a hip even as he continued to stroke his hand.
up and down within the confines. Once they were off, he started working on his own, finally letting go of Ares to get at his own fly.

Ares leaned in and ran his tongue and teeth along Charles' neck as he tried to undress. He shuddered, forgetting what he meant to do for a second, bringing a hand up to knead at the back of Ares' head, tilting his own head back to expose his throat. When the ache in his balls reminded him of his task, he started shoving his pants down with one hand. Managing to get them tugged down low enough, he kicked them the rest of the way off before sitting back on the bed, pulling Ares along with him.

Ares hovered over Charles on hands and knees, dragging his teeth over Charles' shoulders and chest. Bracing himself on knees alone, he slid his hands under Charles, taking a firm hold of his ass. He squirmed, arching into the places where Ares' teeth meet his skin, seeking out more of the sensation. He lifted his hips as Ares' squeezed his ass, pushing his cock against the turian's chest. Releasing one hand to hold himself up against the bed, Ares moved down and lowered his face, swirling his tongue around Charles' cock.

Charles let out something between a whimper and a gasp. Tongue so hot and wet as it moved around him, it made him desperate for more. He reached down to wrap his fingers around Ares' forearm, bracing himself. "Let me feel your teeth … just a little."

Ares chuckled, the sound heavy with arousal. Wrapping his mouth around Charles' cock, he slowly slid his teeth along the shaft. Charles hissed, even just the faint, whisper of pain on his cock sent a shock through his system. He forced himself to hold his hips still and groaned, Aiden's blood pumping out of his body filling Charles' mind. He wanted … needed more, hungry for the place where pleasure mixed with pain, overcoming every inch of him, dragging him down into the abyss.

Squeezing Ares' arm, throat dry and voice cracking, he said, "A little harder."

Gasping at the sudden sting of pain, he trembled, feeling Ares purr around his cock, chest rumbling against his legs. He lifted his head to watch as Ares licked away the little beads of blood welling up on his cock. "Fuck." Moving his hand from Ares' forearm to his shoulder, kneading his fingers into the scars, he said, "You are so fucking hot."

Ares merely hummed as he took Charles back into his mouth, dragging his teeth along Charles' cock again, stopping here and there to lick up the blood.

"Make me cum," Charles whispered, not even caring about his pleading tone.

Thrumbing around him, Ares gripped Charles' ass harder, talons cutting into the skin as he scraped his teeth around Charles' cock, curling his tongue around him. Charles lifted his hips a little, fighting the urge to buck into Ares' mouth—both because it felt wrong to do and because he really wanted to keep his cock intact. He moaned, fingers digging into Ares' shoulder, breathing coming heavier. Despite having his gaze glued to Ares, images of his razor slicing through Aiden's chest flashed in front of his eyes. Aiden's muffled screams and pained groans resonated in his ears, the scent of blood filling his nostrils.

After a few more passes, Charles' grip tightened, and he forced a warning out through clenched teeth. "I'm gonna cum."

At that, Ares lowered himself completely, mouth plates flush against Charles' groin, flexing his throat around Charles' cock. It tipped Charles over the edge, a strangled grunt ripping through him, and he came. Cum pumping right into the turian's throat, Ares swallowed it down.

Charles collapsed back against the bed when the convulsions slowed to a stop, tugging at Ares. "Fuck me."

Ares released him and growled. "Make me."

Charles let out a snort, not really interested in getting into a battle of wills with Ares. "I've already gotten off, so if you're not in the mood …." He grinned down at Ares, nudging him with his knee. "Would you rather I beg?"

Ares hummed and smirked. "That's a thought …."

Charles chuckled and pursed his lips, removing his hand from Ares' shoulder to stroke his fingertips over the turian's mandible. "Please, please, please come fuck me."

Ares snorted but made a rumbling sound. "Your begging fucking sucks." Moving up onto his knees, he grabbed Charles' hip, guiding him over onto his hands and knees. "Get comfortable."

Charles adjusted his arms, tucking his elbows down against the mattress. "Maybe I need you to teach me how to beg, too."

"Like I would know," Ares said, grabbing a few of the pillows and tucking them under Charles before pushing him down flatter against them. "I said get comfortable."
Charles huffed. He was comfortable, not that the new position wasn't, too. "Less talking, more fucking..." He glanced back again as Ares spread his legs wider, and he smirked. "... pretty please."

Ares just hummed, stretching out over Charles, pressing his keel against Charles' back, weight resting mostly on his elbow wedged against the mattress. He brought his head close enough for Charles to feel breath ruffling his hair, prickling at the nape of his neck. He grabbed Charles' hip with his other hand, pinning him in place. Shifting his hips, his wet cock slid over Charles' asshole, spreading the turian's natural lubricant around before he lined himself up by feel alone. He pushed in just barely slow enough to keep it from hurting.

Charles groaned, pushing back against Ares. He already knew he'd end up with another hard-on before the turian finished with him. "Mmmm." He let out another groan, feeling himself stretch around Ares' cock. "You feel so good." Turning his head to face Ares, he gave him a victorious smile, all teeth.

Ares growled, grinding his hips against Charles, shifting up and to the side enough to shove his tongue into Charles' mouth before giving him a rough thrust. Charles hissed against Ares' mouth, still adjusting to the sudden penetration, scar tissue taking a little longer to relax and stretch than the rest of him. He didn't mind though, it was what he wanted, for Ares to fuck him hard and rough, make him hurt a little. He moaned, twirling his tongue around Ares' the best he could at the awkward angle.

After a moment, picking up his pace, Ares snarled, tearing his mouth away from Charles and turning to press his forehead against the bed. Charles moaned, moving against him, savoring the feel of the turian's body pressed against his as much as he did the burn of Ares' cock sliding in and out of his ass. By the time the pain faded completely, Charles felt himself getting hard again. He wedged an arm down between his chest and the pillows, wrapping his fingers around his cock and started stroking, feeling a fresh sting as his hand ran over the bite marks Ares' left behind.

Ares' voice and subvocals grew deeper, raspier, letting Charles know he was close to cumming. His movements shifted to rougher, shorter thrusts as he gripped Charles' hip harder, his other hand fisting in the sheets. Feeling Ares' talons sinking into his skin, Charles let out another, louder moan of pleasure. He began milking Ares' cock with his ass muscles, moving his hand faster against his own. Ares' tensed and snarled, burying himself deep inside of Charles as he came before giving him a few more lazy thrusts, riding the aftershock.

Charles tightened his hand around the tip of his cock, trying to choke off as much cum as he could when his second orgasm hit, shuddering around Ares and grinding out a strained, "Fuck."

Ares' breath came out in rough pants, subvocals rumbling in his throat as he slowly released his grip on Charles. He stayed there, though, pressed against Charles as they both caught their breath and regained their composure. After a minute, he slid out and rolled over to his back. Pushing the pillows out of the way, Charles turned over, tranquility washing over him as he took in the turian laying next to him. Easing over, he stretched out against Ares' side, throwing an arm over Ares' stomach and resting his head on Ares' shoulder, letting out a soft purr of contentment.

He stayed like that for a moment before pulling his hand back to rub his hand over Ares' hide, probably just barely hard enough for him to feel, and whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?" Ares asked, subvocals rumbling.

"For everything. For showing back up. Taking me out tonight." He grinned, looking up at Ares. "For the kickass vidscreen and for fucking me."

Ares flicked a mandible. "Don't mention it."

Charles snorted, knowing it was as good as it got with Ares. Reaching down to grab Ares' wrist, he lifted the turian's arm and ducked under it, pressing his face against the side of Ares' keel, head in the crook of his arm. He pulled Ares' arm back around himself, settling Ares' hand on his ribs. He knew he should get cleaned up, but he didn't want to move from that spot. Maybe ever.
Charles sat on the couch, a bowl of dry cereal wedged between his knees, watching some comedy about an asari who bonded with a volus. He didn't really see what was supposed to be so funny about the whole thing, but it gave him something to stare at while he ate breakfast … other than the back of Ares' head. Ares sat at the breakfast bar, cleaning his weapons, and Eezo lay draped over Charles' feet.

His omni-tool pinged with an incoming call, so he turned down the vidscreen and sat his cereal on the table. Opening his omni-tool, he didn't recognize the number, but he accepted the call anyway with a furrowed brow. A man in a business suit appeared on the screen, a grim look to his face.

"Sorry," Charles said, ready to cut the call. "I think you called the wrong person."

The man held a hand up, halting Charles, and asked, "Are you Charles Fairclough?"

"Yeah?" Charles raised his brows, warning bells going off in the back of his head.

"Mr. Fairclough, my name is Daniel Hendricks." He shifted forward, folding his hands together in front of him on the desk. "I'm with Blathers and Son's, we're a law firm on Shanxi."

Charles swallowed, heart pounding hard against his chest. He wasn't really sure how to respond, so he didn't say anything, just waited and worked on keeping himself together. He watched Ares out of the corner of his eye, wishing the turian would stop cleaning his damn weapons and turn around. Maybe give Charles some sort of indication about what the hell he should do about a lawyer from Shanxi calling.

Daniel hesitated, searching Charles' face as if he expected Charles to know exactly why he'd called—which of course made Charles' mind rush through fifty different scenarios, all of which ended with him behind bars. "I regret to say that I am calling to inform you of your father's passing."

Oh.

Charles blinked a few times, processing what the man just said. He almost wanted to laugh. There he was thinking the lawyer called to tell him the police wanted him for questioning or charges were already being brought against him, but the man only wanted to make a damn death notification. For about half a second, Charles wanted to tell the lawyer he already knew, he was the one who killed the sonofabitch. But as soon as the urge passed, the nerves set back in nice and hard, leaving him feeling as if he might end up puking before the conversation ended.

He swallowed and sucked in a deep breath. "When did this happen?" he asked because it was the first non-guilty sounding thing to come to mind.

"According to the coroner's report, he died the evening of the third of last month." Daniel made a fist, bringing it to his mouth to clear his throat. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fairclough, but it appears the nature of your father's death was quite brutal."

Charles brought a trembling hand to his face before curling his fingers and pressed the knuckles of his index finger against his mouth. He sucked in a deep breath, trying to still his racing heart, and fought the urge to look directly at Ares, who still sat with his back to him. If he actually believed in God, he might pray his nerves came across as shock. "What happened?" he asked because he thought it was the kind of thing he'd be expected to want to know.

"Your father was severely beaten and then …" Daniel paused to clear his throat, lowering his gaze from Charles "… the autopsy report indicates he was forced to consume alcohol until he drowned in it." He met Charles' gaze again. "There's an ongoing investigation, but the police don't seem to have any leads."

A quiet pause filled the air as Charles soaked it in, closing his eyes and taking a steadying breath. The image of his father struggling against Ares as the turian forced the whiskey bottle between his teeth flashed in front of Charles. Before he could get too lost in the memory, the lawyer cleared his throat again, dragging Charles' attention back to him and the gravity of the situation at hand.

"As the executor of your father's estate, I would have preferred to contact you sooner, but I'm required to wait for police clearance on the matter and there was some question about your whereabouts.” Daniel waved his hand before folding it back together with the other one. "The information we had on file for you was no longer accurate."

Charles rubbed his hand over his face before raking it through his hair and dropped his gaze to the half-eaten bowl of cereal sitting on the table. Unable to hold the images back, he watched his father die in front of his eyes all over again. The beast, the monster, whatever it was living in the
recesses of his mind purred, sending warmth racing down his spine, making him furrow his brow and suck in a stuttered breath.

"Are you alright, Mr. Fairclough?" the man asked, dragging Charles' attention back to him.

Charles cleared his throat and nodded. "Yeah. Have … have funeral arrangements already been made, then?"

Daniel shifted around in his chair and shook his head. "No, as his next of kin, we require your release before his remains can be dealt with. I assume you'll want to come to Shanxi—"

"No," Charles said, the word coming out faster and with a sharper edge than he'd intended, and Ares finally turned around on his stool to watch Charles, cigarette held between his mouth plates.

Daniel blinked a couple of times, his jaw slack until he finally said, "Excuse me?"

"Look … I haven't spoken to my father in ten years." Charles rubbed his hand over his forehead, pinching and kneading at a rising headache. "We weren't close, at all. I'm sorry to hear he's gone, but I have a life here. I can't just uproot things to go to Shanxi right now."

"I see." Daniel waved a hand, his entire demeanor seeming to shift from consoling ally to shark in a suit. "Well, if you'd prefer, I can send you the necessary documents for you to sign, and I can plan for his burial—or cremation, if you prefer—as well as my fees out of his estate. Your father didn't have much, but I believe there should be more than enough to handle the associated costs."

Charles nodded, running his hand over his face again. "Yes, thank you."

"There is still, of course, the matter of dealing with his personal effects. Mr. Fairclough, are you certain you don't wish to be here in person to go through your father's things?" Daniel's voice softened as he added, "I believe some of it may be your mother's as well."

Charles sucked in a deep breath, tears starting to sting at his eyes, and his voice cracked when he said, "I really can't."

"Of course, my apologies." Daniel cleared his throat and leaned forward on the desk. "What would you like done with your father's belongings?"

Charles stared at the man slack-jawed, blinking the tears out of his eyes. How was he expected to have the answers to those questions? For fuck's sake, as far as Daniel knew, it was the first time Charles learned about any of it. "I … I don't know. He drew his brows in, letting a grimace slide over his face. "Do I have to decide all of this right now?"

"No, of course not," Daniel said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. How about this? Why don't I send you the documents for the estate and you can take a few days to look over them? I'll contact you at the start of next week, and you can tell me what you've decided then."

Charles licked his lips and nodded, relieved to have a way out of the conversation and buy himself some time to think. "Yeah, okay."

"Have a good day, Mr. Fairclough." Daniel reached across the desk, finger poised to end the call.

Charles fought back the urge to snort and spout off something sarcastic. Instead, he nodded. "Thanks. You, too."

The call went dark, and he closed his omni-tool. Panic started to run unchecked through him, not having any reason to keep up the charade, making his whole world tilt sideways. His breath came fast and shallow, right on the verge of hyperventilating. He didn't … he couldn't … what the fuck was he supposed to do with … He didn't know what he expected to happen when his dad's body was found, but he sure as hell didn't expect to be the one to have to deal with it. Fuck's sake, he left Shanxi to get away from the asshole. They'd killed the sonofabitch, why couldn't he just stay dead and the fuck out of Charles' life. Scooting to the edge of the couch, he was about to stand up, feeling like he needed to move, even though he didn't really have a destination in mind, but instead, he dropped his elbows to his knees, shoving his face in his palms.

Ares blew out a breath, but Charles didn't look up. He heard Ares put out his cigarette, and the stool creak beneath him as if he'd shifted his weight. After a moment, Ares let out a low, pensive sounding hum. Charles scrubbed his hands over his face and glanced at the turian, finding him watching Charles with his arms crossed. Charles turned his attention to the table, pushing the bowl of cereal further away, not even remotely interested in finishing his breakfast, and picked up his pack of cigarillos. His hands shook as he pulled one from the package and lit it, taking a heavy drag.

Giving the nicotine a minute to settle into his system, he finally asked, "It's not really suspicious that I don't want to go to Shanxi to deal with this, right?"

"No."

Charles nodded, smoking in silence for a minute. "I don't want to deal with his shit at all, but I kind of have to, don't I?" He looked up at Ares, wishing he'd come sit on the couch and just
“Yep.” Ares reached into his pocket, pulling out another cigarette and lit it. “It's not going away until you do.”

Charles nodded and started gnawing on his fingernails. “I didn't say anything wrong, did I?”

Ares took a drag from his cigarette, blowing out the smoke before saying, “No.”

Charles stared at him for a second before letting his gaze drift away to stare at nothing in particular. After a minute, he muttered, “Fuck.” Then, because it felt like a rising tide building up inside of him, he said it again louder, “Fuck.” He pushed up to his feet, pacing aimlessly through the living room. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Each time he said it, it felt less and less like he had any control over anything.

He shoved a hand through his hair and turned, making his way to the bathroom. He closed the door behind him, but he didn't bother locking it. What would be the point? If Ares wanted in there, the lock wouldn't keep him out. Charles sat down on the toilet, propping his elbows on his knees and pushing his forehead against his palms, fingers curling into fists around his hair. He looked down at the floor between his legs, his father whispering in his ear, telling him how worthless and pathetic he was. He thought he'd never have to hear his father's voice again, thought it died with the old man on Shanxi.

Pulling his razor out of his pocket, he turned it over and over in his fingers, the urge to open it and cut into his thighs making his eyes burn with unshed tears. He hadn't cut himself in weeks. Not since the day Ares caught him … the day he told Ares about what happened to Sarah and the way his father treated him because of it. The day before they went to Shanxi and killed his father right along with the motherfuckers who hurt him; hurt Sarah.

He opened the razor and stared at it, barely pressing his thumb against the blade, not hard enough to cut. Seeing it there, though, open and glinting as the light caught against its surface, it only made him want to sink it into someone else, instead.

When he got to work, Cammus seemed to be waiting for him. The turian hung out in the backroom with Okal, listening to the salarian's diatribe against the organizational layout of the entire store. As soon as Charles opened the door, though, Cammus' gaze latched onto him, body language practically screaming relief. Charles chuckled, lighting a cigarillo and making a beeline for the two of them.

Okal raised her head, sniffing the air before turning to look at Charles, mouth shifting into a grim, thin line. “Other people breathe the air back here, Charles.”

“‘Yes, Okal, they do.’ Charles raised an eyebrow at the salarian and brought his cigarillo to his mouth. ‘How observant of you.’”

She gave him a disdainful sniff, turning her attention back to reorganizing the breakroom table. “I see your smart mouth still hasn't gotten you fired.”

“There's always tomorrow.” He took another drag from his cigarillo, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling and glancing toward Cammus.

The turian flicked a mandible, shifting his weight a little as he glanced between Okal and Charles. Okal pulled the rack holding packets of tea and water additives closer and started taking everything off.

Charles sighed, shaking his head. “Okal … what are you doing?”

“Organizing!” She threw a hand up into the air. “Cleaning! No one else around here seems interested in keeping things neat and orderly.”

Charles took another drag. “Right. Well, have fun with that.” He looked at the turian. “Cammus, where did Irene put you today?”

Cammus flicked a mandible, shifting a little closer to Charles. “I'm supposed to stick next to you from the moment you clock in until the moment you clock out.” He let out a soft trill and tilted his head to the side, and Charles thought it seemed like an apology. “Irene's words.”

Okal sniffed again, her lips tilting up in a smirk. “Still not sure why she didn't just fire you, but watching her punish you is amusing, too.”

Charles scoffed, taking a long drag of his cigarillo, blowing the smoke out a little closer to Okal, making her grimace. “Cammus isn't a punishment. If Irene wanted to punish me, she'd have stuck me with you all day.” He turned his attention back to Cammus. “Ready?”

Okal sniffed, but didn't look up at him from her 'work'. Cammus smiled and gave him one quick jerk of his head in acknowledgment. Charles smirked, turning and tilting his head toward the employee kiosk. He took his time, walking slowly with Cammus beside him while he finished his
cigarillo, veering off toward the table to put it out in the ashtray before going over to the employee kiosk.

"I am, though, aren't I?" Cammus asked while Charles clocked in.

Charles glanced up at him, lifting an eyebrow. "Are what?"

"A punishment." Cammus turned his attention to the kiosk when Charles stepped aside.

Charles sucked in a deep breath, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest.

"You in particular, no. Irene's giving you the position she took from me and making me work up front. So, yeah, asking me to help train my replacement is probably her way of taking another jab at me." He shrugged when Cammus looked at him. "But, whatever."

Cammus hummed and reached up, scratching at his facial plates with a gloved talon. He flicked a mandible and stepped away from the kiosk. "It's not a bad strategy."

Charles let out a soft, snort of laughter and headed for the main lobby. "It'd be a better one if I actually gave a shit about this place."

"You don't take pride in your work?"

"In this place?" Charles arched an eyebrow, looking back over his shoulder. "Hell no. Give it a couple of cycles and you won't either."

Cammus hummed again, the sound filled with disbelief. He followed Charles with his hands tucked behind his back. "Ah, well, I don't intend to be here that long."

Charles stopped in the doorway to look over Cammus again, and the turian shifted under his scrutiny. "Lucky you."

Charles agreed to let Cammus buy him lunch, even though he felt pretty sure the turian only offered because he felt bad Irene tied the two of them together for the day again. He did plan to spend lunch in the break room, or maybe head home to see if Ares decided to stick around, not that Ares would be especially pleased to see him. He chewed on the corner of his lip, thoughts drifting to Ares and the mood he seemed to be in the last couple of days. He was starting to think more and more that something happened Ares wasn't telling him about, something putting Ares on edge.

Cammus cleared his throat, drawing Charles' attention back to him, and Charles realized his hand had drifted up to trace the scars left by Ares' teeth through his shirt. Charles lit a cigarillo and turned his attention to the menu, but he needn't have bothered. They were at some dextro cafe, a small place right around the corner from Citadel Souvenirs, and what little levo options the place made were all variations on the same thing. At least they offered patio seating so he could smoke.

He tapped his lighter on the table and watched Cammus for a moment. "So … what do you think so far?"

Cammus glanced up at him and sat the menu aside. "Of Citadel Souvenirs?"

Charles nodded, taking a drag from his cigarillo.

The turian rumbled, leaning back in his chair, seeming far more relaxed off the clock and away from work. "It's a job. Something to pass the time and make a few extra credits." He turned a hand up before letting it fall back flat on the table. "I haven't spent a lot of time around other species, so it's interesting to see so many different ones living and working together, side by side."

"New to the Citadel, then?" Charles raised an eyebrow, turning his attention to the turian waiter who stopped at the table.

The conversation died down while they placed their orders, but as soon as the waiter left, Cammus picked it right back up again. "Yes, but I've visited before." He tilted his head a little. "Years ago. You?"

Charles took the last drag from his cigarillo and stamped it out in the ashtray the waiter left for him. "I've lived here for a few years now, but I've mostly stayed to myself."

"I thought humans were supposed to be really social?" Cammus fluttered his mandibles.

Charles raised the corner of his mouth in a smirk. "I thought turians were all supposed to be militaristic and either stick around after their mandatory time or take a job in law enforcement or security?" He shrugged, tilting his head toward his shoulder. "Or join the Blue Suns."

Cammus laughed, the sound rough and heavily flanged, mandibles flaring. "Fair point." He hummed. "I suppose I'm not exactly the average turian."

Charles rolled the thought over for a moment and pursed his lips before sucking on his teeth. "I'm not exactly the average human, sorry to disappoint."
Cammus chuffed. "Who says I'm disappointed?" He flicked a mandible. "At least I know you don't hate all turians on sight." He paused, mandibles stilling. "I just mean … a few of the humans I've met so far … hmm."

Charles snorted, flicking the lid on his lighter opened and closed. "No, you mean you smell another turian on me, but yeah, there are still a lot of bitter humans from the First Contact War. Not saying there aren't still a lot of bitter turians, too."

Cammus smiled, shifting forward to rest his arms on the table. "I'm told it's rude to other species to acknowledge what I smell on them."

"It probably is, but whatever," Charles shrugged. "Etiquette really isn't my specialty."

Cammus let out a thoughtful rumble and asked, "What is?"

Smirking, Charles flicked the lid on his lighter again. "Being a smart ass."

The waiter came by again, setting glasses down in front of both of them before returning to the counter. Charles watched him as he carried back two baskets of food before moving off to help other customers. The turian moved with a sort of grace beyond what he'd seen from most other turians, almost like a dancer, gliding across the floor, it fascinated Charles.

Cammus hummed, the sound almost hesitant. "I think Irene might still be bitter over the war."

"Irene's a bitch, and she's bitter about everything," Charles waved his hand, putting down his lighter to pick up the sandwich in front of him. "Lania's alright, but she mostly supervises first shift and is gone by the time I get to work. Who all have you met so far?"

"Just Irene, Mahlia, Okal, and you, of course," Cammus started picking at his food. "Are there any other turians who work there?"

"Poleceus," Charles took a bite, chewed and swallowed before adding. "He only works third, and I've only met him maybe four times."

His omni-tool pinged, so he sat down his sandwich and opened it, seeing a message waiting for him in his inbox. He clicked on the message, and his heart sank, finding the paperwork the lawyer mentioned sending. Moving his finger to the attachments to activate the link, Charles swiped his finger over to the 'download' icon and waited until the files transferred to his omni-tool before looking them over.

"Is something wrong?" Cammus asked.

Charles looked back up at the turian and took a deep breath. "The lawyer just sent me the paperwork for my dad's estate. I found out this morning he passed away a few weeks ago."

Cammus' mandibles stilled again, and he shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Charles rubbed a hand over his face and closed his omni-tool, mood crashing again. "I'm more sorry I have to be the one to deal with the legal crap."

After torturing himself the rest of the day by dwelling on the paperwork waiting for his signature, Charles felt sullen and irritable by the time he got home. He lit a cigarillo as he stepped inside, spotting Ares out on the balcony, Eezo sitting at his feet staring up at him. Eezo turned toward Charles as he made his way to the balcony, running back inside to circle around his legs as she followed him back outside.

Leaving his cigarillo between his lips, he squatted down next to the dog, taking her head in his hands to scratch his fingers through her fur. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth and she gave him a soft yip before wriggling around, trying to get at his face. He pulled his cigarillo away and exhaled the smoke before leaning in to kiss the top of her nose. Despite feeling like shit, she brought a small smile to his face.

Standing back up, he leaned over the railing next to Ares and stared out over the Citadel. After a moment, he glanced at Ares and said, "The lawyer sent me the documents. I looked at them a little at lunch. Haven't signed anything yet."

"And?" Ares blew out a breath of smoke and glanced down at Charles. "What do you plan to do?"

Charles held Ares' gaze for a moment and lifted his shoulders. "I guess sign off for the lawyer to handle his funeral. I don't want anything to do with it. There's a list of his shit. If any of it's mom's … I don't know." He turned his attention back to the flow of people moving down below. "Nothing I really recognized as being hers, so nothing that really means shit to me. Nothing of Sarah's, which probably means the sonofabitch either sold it all off or threw it away. I think I'm just going to tell the lawyer to sell everything. Fuck, or burn it. Think I'm going to have him cremate the body. I don't want the asshole buried anywhere near mom and Sarah." Furrowing his brow, he looked back over at Ares. "Or do you think it would look too bad?"
Ares hummed as if in consideration, then shrugged. "I don't know. Turians don't really think of the remains like humans do. When someone's dead, it doesn't really matter. Funerals or cremations are more for those living than dead, and we usually just cremate and spread the ashes. It's more uncommon to bury bodies."

Charles took a heavy drag, letting it back out with a sigh and said, "Either way is common for us … but with Mom and Sarah already buried on Shanxi … it's probably expected he be buried there, too." He rubbed his forehead, headache creeping back in. "Sort of a social taboo if I don't have him buried there, I guess. Hell, people who knew my family probably expect for me to be shipped back there to be buried right next to the motherfucker, too." The thought nearly made Charles barf over the edge of the balcony. He grimaced, looking at Ares with wide eyes. "If I die and you're still around, please don't let them put me in the ground next to that asshole."

"What would you have me do?" Ares rumbled, curiosity evident in his subvocals.

Charles shook his head. "I don't know. I don't care. Anything would be better than being next to him."

Ares hummed, seeming to contemplate Charles' request for a moment before he said, "Alright. I'll do something."

"Thank you." Charles took a deep breath, rubbing at his forehead again before taking a drag from his cigarillo. After a minute, he turned his attention back to the subject of his father's corpse. "Cremating him instead of burying him with the rest of the family would make it pretty clear I don't respect him. But … anyone who knew our family before I left wouldn't be surprised. They knew how he treated me. How he treated Mom, too."

"I heard plenty of things about grudges being forgiven when someone dies." Ares shrugged and took a pull from his cigarette. "Sounds like a stupid concept, but I hear humans tend to take that to heart to make themselves look good."

Bracing his elbows on the railing, Charles looked down over the Citadel. He stayed quiet for a minute but then, shoulders sagging in defeat, he said, "Yeah … fuck it, I guess I'll just have him buried somewhere near Mom. What does it really matter, it's just a fucking body."

Ares rumbled, giving Charles a slight nod of his head when he glanced up. "A very turian way of thinking." He turned his attention back to the skycars rushing by.

Charles snorted, feeling the first hint of a real smile since getting the damn paperwork. "Guess you've been a bad influence on me." He hummed and shrugged. "Or a really good one."

"Or a logical one." Ares glanced down again. "It's just a fucking corpse. Humans have a strange fascination with them that I'll never understand."

Charles held Ares' gaze and shook his head. "That's alright. I'm sure there's a lot about you and turians, in general, I'll never understand, either."

"Probably."

Charles sucked in a deep breath, pushing away from the railing. "I should probably take Eezo for a walk. I figure you probably didn't take her out, yeah?"

Ares grumbled and looked at Charles. "I fed it. That wasn't enough?"

Charles shook his head, putting out his cigarillo. "I didn't say that." He turned, heading back into the apartment. "Thanks for feeding her." He glanced back over his shoulder. "You coming with us?"

Thrhumming, Ares flicked the cigarette off the balcony and turned to follow. "I got this thing to entertain you, not to be a fucking chore everytime I come here."

Charles stopped in his tracks, tilting his head back to look up at the ceiling, tension creeping down his neck to spread out over his shoulders and back. "Ares … I didn't ask you to do anything with Eezo." Righting himself, he turned to face the turian. "I'm not judging you for not taking her out, I just wasn't going to if you already did. That's it." He reached up, rubbing his hands over his face before going to get her leash. "You don't need to come with us if you don't want to, but yeah, she is a living being. She needs things like feeding, a place to piss and shit that's not going to get her yelled at, and exercise. It's part of having a pet. You take care of them."

"Put the leash on Eezo then looked at Ares. "It's not like she can hunt in the apartment."

Ares gave him a rumble of agreement, but it carried an insincere quality to it, leaving Charles feeling even more broody than he did a few minutes before. Ares grabbed his jacket, sliding it on and throwing up his hood before moving to the door. He followed Charles out, waiting in silence as he locked the door. Charles didn't know what the hell was going on with Ares, but he'd wait him out. Eventually, the turian would start talking, and if he didn't, then Charles would just have to suck it up and pester the hell out of him until it pissed him off enough to make him talk.

Feeling too tired to care about whether or not going to the gardens with Ares was a good idea,
Charles didn't resist when Eezo led them off in that direction. Besides, getting a few minutes to run around off her leash would be good for Eezo, especially since he wasn't feeling up to the task of playing with her. If the location didn't suit him, Ares didn't say anything when they reached the walled-off gardens and Charles opened the gate.

Once inside, Charles took the leash off of Eezo, and the dog started jumping at his legs, trying to entice him to play. He reached down, ruffling her head, and then pointed out towards the trees. "Go on, girl. Go play."

Eezo took off running, stopping at the first tree to sniff around it before squatting next to it. Charles glanced at Ares, getting his attention and nodded at one of the nearby benches. Ares rumbled and followed Charles over to sit down. They watched Eezo for a few minutes as the dog ran through the area, sniffing different plants and digging at seemingly random spots in the dirt.

They weren't there long before Charles glanced up and caught sight of Lindsey, a smile plastered on her face, making her way over to them. He let out a little groan, glancing at Ares who raised a brow plate, skepticism written clearly on his face along with the unspoken question of who the hell the chick was. Charles didn't really have time to apologize or explain. Lindsey came to a stop with a little bounce, making her tits jiggled and her black hair swing back and forth before she swept her ponytail down over her shoulder.

He slapped a fake smile on his face. "Hey, Lindsey."

"Hey. Where's Eezo?" She turned her attention to Ares, wide-eyed gaze sweeping over him.

Ares didn't put on his prosthetics before they left, and even though he'd pulled his hood down low, the scars were still visible even if a little less noticeable. Which meant Ares probably felt extra uncomfortable with the bubbly, twenty-two-year-old human staring at him. Charles pointed at Eezo, circling a tree, trying to scramble up the bark only to slide back down. Lindsey looked over her shoulder, and Charles took the opportunity to mouth the words 'I'm sorry' at Ares. Ares grunted, attention shifting to stare at the woman.

Lindsey turned back around, the smile still on her face until she saw Ares staring at her and shifted, clearly uncomfortable under his scrutiny. But then she looked back at Charles, and her smile popped back into place. "So, who's your friend?"

"Ah … Thanatos." Charles cleared his throat a little, glancing in Ares direction but not quite meeting his eyes, already dreading the backlash. "This is Lindsey, she used to work at Citadel Souvenirs."

Lindsey quirked an eyebrow and turned her smile back on Ares, holding out her hand. "Thanatos? Interesting name."

Ares hummed and looked at her hand before lifting his gaze to hers. "My parents had an interest in human mythology."

Charles fought back a bark of laughter, his throat making an odd noise. They both knew damn well his parents never even heard of a human yet when he was born. Lindsey's smile faltered, and she dropped her hand, confusion creasing the corners of her eyes for a second.

"Oh, Cool," she said, tone making it clear she was completely clueless. Hell, she probably didn't even know who Thanatos was in relation to human mythology. She turned her attention back to Charles. "So, uh … I'm going to go say hi to Eezo. I'll catch up with you later."

Charles just nodded, lifting his hand in a wave to her. She flashed him another smile, then turned and ran off, which was kind of nice to watch. Eezo heard her coming and barked, wagging her tail before bounding toward Lindsey.

"Not the smartest human, is she?" Ares asked, voice dry and flat.

Charles chuckled, shaking his head. "No, no she isn't. I never really talked to her much when we worked together. I was actually surprised she even knew my name when I first started bringing Eezo here. Now, hell, most days I'm surprised she even knows her own name."

"You fuck her yet?"

Charles furrowed his brows and glanced at Ares. "No … she doesn't really interest me. Her personality is too … empty. I'd be bored in five minutes."

Ares snorted. "You're fucking, not having a conversation."

Charles shrugged, turning his focus out toward Lindsey who let Eezo chase her. It's not like he'd never thought about screwing her, but like he said, it surprised him for her to even know his name. "I guess. Appearance just isn't usually enough for me. Sure, I've had a few mindless fucks where I otherwise don't have anything in common with the person, but most of the time, I like to at least be able to carry on an interesting conversation with them." He tilted his head, watching her ass as she ran. Maybe he should reconsider.
Ares rumbled in amusement, digging out a cigarette. "Strange human."

Charles glanced at Ares, relieved to hear humor coming from the turian, even if at his expense, and pulled out his own cigarillo, arching an eyebrow. "You're welcome to her." He lifted one side of his mouth in a smirk. "Maybe we can convince her to come home with us tonight. Having you there might actually make her interesting."

Ares hummed around his cigarette. "Maybe ….

Charles chuckled and lit his cigarillo before sliding the lighter back into his pocket. "Either way, she plays with Eezo, so … she's not so bad."

"Perhaps," Ares said, falling silent to smoke.

Charles leaned back on his palms, watching Eezo pounce on Lindsey who dropped dramatically to the grass and let out a distressed sound when Eezo caught her. He chuckled as Eezo climbed on top of the woman's chest, wagging her tail and licking Lindsey's face. She squealed, scrunching up her nose and tilting her head away from the dog's kisses. She threw her arms around Eezo and rolled them over, pulling herself to her knees to scratch Eezo's belly.

When he was nearly done with his cigarillo, he leaned forward again, grabbing the leash off the bench next to him. He whistled, and Eezo's head snapped up, zeroing in on him before running over, tail wagging, tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth. Grinning, he put out his cigarillo, stuffing the butt into his pocket and leaned down. He ran his hands over Eezo's head, scratching into her fur before putting her leash back on.

Lindsey followed Eezo over, lower lip stuck out in a pout. "Leaving already?"

"It's been a long day," he met her gaze, forcing a smile on his face. "Besides," he pointed over at a man—he assumed her boss—watching her from the entrance, "aren't you on the clock?"

Lindsey looked over her shoulder at the man before turning her attention back to Charles, sounding sad when she said, "Yeah … are you bringing her back in the morning?"

He shrugged. "Probably."

She grinned, her whole face lighting up. "Okay, see you tomorrow!" She bounced on her feet a little, making Charles wonder if it wasn't intentional to draw his gaze back to her chest, and she waved before taking off and running toward the guy.

"Right," Charles muttered, standing up and glancing back at Ares. "Ready to head back?"

"'Bout time." Ares stamped out his cigarette.

Charles huffed, annoyed to see Ares went right back to being grumpy. "Alright, crabby ass. You know you didn't have to come."

He stood and shrugged his shoulders before tugging at his hood. "I wasn't going to stay stuck around your apartment."

Charles hummed, leading them back toward the entrance. "So, what do you do when I'm at work? Besides shooting my vidscreen?"

"Walk the Citadel, work on my weapons, my armor." He shrugged. "That's about it."

Charles nodded, mulling it over for a few seconds. "I know I'm not the best company right now, but is there anything you'd like to do?"

Ares shrugged again, taking a long drag. "Again, it's as good a place as any."
Charles lies stretched out across Sarah's bed, his feet hanging over the edge. She laughs and throws a stuffed animal at him, but he catches it, cradling it to his chest before pulling it back to look at. It's the purple and white rhinofelinus he won for her at the carnival last spring. He smirks, tossing it back at her, and it hits her in the head, earning him a dirty look.

He flops over to his back, tucking his hands under his head. "I'm telling you, he likes you."

"Whatever." Sarah snorts, pushing her hair over her shoulder and turning back to the closet. "Hunter's a total jerk." She pulls a sweater out of her closet and holds it up to her chest, looking in the mirror on the back of her door. Scrunching up her nose, she sticks the sweater back in the closet and rifles around some more.

"Uh huh." He lifts his eyebrow, catching her gaze in the reflection. "Then why are you up here digging through your clothes looking for the perfect thing to wear?"

She scoffs, narrowing her eyes at him and sticking out her tongue, bringing a smile to his face. "Shut up and help me!"

Chuckling, he sits up and rolls over, standing up from the bed. He goes to her closet, nudging her out of the way and starts flipping through the clothes hanging on the rack. He stops when he comes across a purple shirt with some sort of silver design emblazoned across the front, the hem hangs at a sharp, asymmetrical angle. Turning to her, he holds it against her, gaze roaming over the shirt with his lips pursed.

"You like Ramel, don't you?" Sarah asks, her voice low.

Charles glances up at her, meeting her bright, blue-eyed gaze. He shrugs. "Maybe." Pulling the shirt away, he turns, tossing it to the bed before looking back in the closet.

"But you like Jennifer, too?"

The confusion in her voice makes him snort. He grabs a pair of black pants he's seen her wear before, ones cutting off mid-calf, and tosses them at the bed, too. "Yeah. So?"

"What if … what if I like girls, too?"

Charles freezes, ice water flushing through his veins. He turns back to her, gripping her shoulder maybe a little tighter than he means to. "Sarah, you can't ever let Dad hear you say that. Ever. Do you understand?"

She winces, but he sees the flare of stubbornness cross her face. "But what if I tell him and he realizes it's no big deal? Maybe then he'll—"

"No." He clenches his teeth, giving her a sharp shake of his head. "That's not how it'll work. He's not going to stop treating me like shit just because you tell him you're into girls. Shit, Sarah, if anything, it might just be the thing to make him start hitting you, too. Just don't."

"Charles?" Dad's voice carries upstairs followed by the door slamming closed. "Where the hell are you? I thought I told you to pick this crap up? Goddamn useless piece of shit."

Sucking in a deep breath, he lets go of his sister and starts to turn to the door, but she stops him grabbing his arm. He glances back over his shoulder at her. They both know what's coming. Terror fills her eyes, tears starting to well up. "Don't go," she whispers. "Hide in here, I'll tell him you're not here."

He shakes his head, wrenching his arm free from her grasp. "That'll just piss him off more. Stay in here, get ready for your date."

Even scared, she still huffs and rolls her eyes. "It's not a date!"

He gives her the best smile he can muster and turns his back on her before she realizes how hard his heart is pounding in his chest. Leaving her room, he pulls the door closed behind him. She doesn't need to hear this.

"Charles!" Judging by the sound of Dad's voice, he's already good and drunk.

Charles stops at the top of the stairs, sucking in a deep breath, trying to find the courage he needs to make his way down them and to the living room.

"Where the fuck are you, you little—" Dad appears at the foot of the stairs, angry glower finding
Charles, making his heart stop for just a second. "Get your faggot ass down here and clean up this Goddamn living room! Now!"

Charles stands there a second longer, paralyzed, unable to make his feet move, even though he knows it'll just make it worse. Dad starts storming up the stairs, making Charles flinch. He hears the door open behind him, and he turns to look. Sarah's standing there watching the trainwreck about to happen, tears falling down her cheeks.

"Sarah, don't ...."

It's all he has the chance to say before Dad's at the top of the stairs, slamming his hand down on the back of Charles' neck. It makes him tense, shoulders drawing up around his neck as if it will help at all. Dad's fingers tighten, already digging into Charles' muscles hard enough to hurt. He'll have bruises by morning. Maybe worse.

"Stop!" Sarah yells.

"Mind your business," Dad says, starting to drag Charles back down the stairs, bruising grip on his neck.

He starts to stumble, but Dad only grabs him tighter, hauling him back to his feet and shaking him like a rag doll. They get about halfway down and he throws Charles the rest of the way. Charles slams against the wall at the foot of the stairs, landing hard against his shoulder, his head bouncing off the wood with a sickening, hollow thunk.

Scrambling for purchase, Charles fights to stay on his feet, but before he can clear his head, he feels his dad close a hand around the back of his neck again. He doesn't mean to, he knows it's only going to earn him rougher treatment, but he can't help it, he struggles against Dad's grip, digging at Dad's hand and arm with his fingers, flailing out with his fists. Dad grunts and drags him into the living room before shoving him forward, sending him crashing into the back of the couch.

Charles has just enough time to curl into a ball before the first blow lands, his dad's boot catching his forearm where it covers his head, making the bone snap with an audible crack.

Charles jerked upright on the bed, hands pressed into the mattress behind him. Sweat trickling down his spine, his heart slammed against his chest. Feeling confused and frantic, even as the dream slipped away from him, his gaze darted around the room, searching for the one person who'd ever made him feel safe. Ares wasn't in bed next to him, though, and he wasn't anywhere in the bedroom. He sucked in a deep breath, pushing himself the rest of the way up. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he reached out and threw back the sheets tangled around his legs.

He stood up and made his way to the bathroom, flinching when he turned on the light. He went to the sink, splashing cold water on his face and neck, pulling in slow, deep breaths while he fought off the last of the fear still making his fingers shake. Glancing in the mirror, he cringed away from his own, deathly pale reflection and pushed away from the sink. Stopping to grab a pair of sweats off the bathroom floor, he pulled them on before going in search of Ares, expecting to find the turian out on the balcony.

The balcony door remained closed and locked, though, and Ares wasn't anywhere else in the dark apartment. Crushed, Charles went back to the bedroom and grabbed his cigarillos before returning to the front to sit on the couch. Eezo woke up, letting out a whining yawn and crawled across the cushions on her stomach to lay her head in his lap. Lighting a cigarillo, he pulled the ashtray over to sit on the couch next to him and leaned back, letting his hand drift over her fur.

Unable to help himself, he sat there in the dark, smoking and replaying the nightmare over and over in his head. He should've fought harder. Should've … fuck. He should've done something, anything to stand up for himself. He was such a fucking coward, just letting the old man throw him around like that all the Goddamn time. Eezo yawned again, scooted closer to him, and turned her head, licking his bare stomach. He looked down at her, only the whites of her fur really visible, and gave her a sad smile.

"He's dead, Eezo. My dad's dead. I helped kill him, and it felt really, really good." He sighed, tilting his head back against the couch and took a deep drag from his cigarillo. Blowing the smoke back out toward the ceiling, he ruffled the dog's head. "So why the fuck can't I get past this shit?"

The dog let out a soft yip, rolling over to her back and gnawing on his fingers. He scoffed, reaching down to scratch her stomach. He couldn't remember all of the specifics of the dream, but he felt fairly certain the whole thing didn't go down exactly as he dreamt. Still, it seemed close enough for his arm to ache with phantom pains. Lifting his arm, he brought it closer, trying to see the faint, white line trailing over his skin where the doctors needed to actually go in surgically and set the bones, but his eyes couldn't make it out in the dark. Hell, it was hard to see in the light. That was the thing about his dad. He might beat the ever living fuck out of Charles, but he always made sure the doctors fixed him up real good, leaving little to no sign with everything said and done. His mom always said it was because he felt bad for what he did, but Charles thought it had more to do with making it easier for everyone else to forget what he'd done.
Eezo squirmed until he brought his hand back to her stomach, scratching his fingertips against the thin fur. Sarah would’ve loved Eezo. She would’ve squealed and scooped the dog right up the second Charles brought Eezo home. He snorted softly, the image reminding him of Lindsey. Truth be told, Charles might’ve been damn close to squealing and scooping up the pup when they found her at the pet store. If Ares hadn’t been there with him, huffing and puffing the entire time, ruminating about how he didn't understand the attraction humans had to animals that weren’t for food, Charles very well might’ve squealed at least a little. Especially when Eezo bounded right over to him, rearing back on her hind legs to press her little paws against his knees as if she already knew she was going home with him.

One of the guys he used to turn tricks for owned an Alaskan Malamute. Charles always felt bad for the dog … he couldn't remember the dog's name, but he knew it was male. The guy who owned him, Rico, found it funny to blow pot smoke in the dog’s face. It pissed Charles off, but he didn't go there to comment on what Rico chose to do with his pets. If he wanted to get paid, his job was to keep his mouth shut and take it up the ass or maybe suck the guy off so he could afford to eat the next day.

Finishing his cigarillo, Charles lit another off the last before putting it out. He wondered where Ares went, and when he’d be coming back. Charles didn't really want to go back to bed without him. He hated how vulnerable the turian made him feel, but at the same time, he loved he could be vulnerable with Ares. At least when it really counted. Ares might talk a lot of shit and nitpick, but when Charles needed something, Ares didn't really hesitate to give it to him—the best he was able. Even with as grumpy as he’d been since he showed back up, Charles knew if Ares had been there when he woke up from the nightmare, Ares would’ve wrapped his arm around Charles and pulled him in closer, making the deep, rumbling noise he used to calm Charles.

So where the fuck is he?

About the time Charles finished his second cigarillo, he heard the door open and turned his head to look. A few seconds later, Ares appeared, but he walked right past Charles, headed straight for the balcony. Charles knew Ares had to know he sat on the couch, but Ares didn't acknowledge him in the slightest. Rolling his head along the back of the cushion, he followed Ares' movements as the turian stepped out on the balcony and lit a cigarette, remaining eerily silent, not even letting out his usual rumble of a sound when he took his first, long drag. It made Charles feel uneasy in a whole new way.

He eased Eezo off of him and stood up, setting the ashtray on the coffee table and stuffing his pack of cigarillos and lighter in his pocket before following Ares out on the balcony. He watched Ares for a moment, the distant, shockingly sad look on his face making Charles' heart sink down into the pit of his stomach. Ares still didn't speak, didn't even turn his head to look at Charles despite his staring.

Reaching into his pocket, Charles got out another cigarillo and lit it before turning to rest his hip against the railing, facing Ares. He swallowed, keeping his voice soft and low when he asked, "Ares … what's wrong? And don't tell me nothing. I'm not stupid, you've been off since you got here."

Ares blew out smoke and leaned over, forearms braced against the railing, dropping his head. "My family's on the Citadel."

Charles let that sit between them for a moment, knowing full well the weight of what it meant for Ares. He hadn't told Charles a whole lot about his family, but enough to know they thought he was dead. And a traitor. He wanted them to keep thinking he died because he thought it was safer for them and the only way he could protect them. But Ares missed them, ached to see them again, just the same as Charles did with Sarah and his mother.

After a minute, Charles sucked in a deep breath and turned, mimicking Ares' posture. "Have you seen them yet?" He knew Ares wouldn't announce himself to his family, but if they were around, chances were he'd at least laid eyes on them.

Ares took a long drag, letting the smoke drift out between his teeth at the sides of his mouth, flowing around his mandibles. "Yeah."

Charles smoked in silence for a bit, his thoughts leaving a bitter taste on his tongue, but finally, he gave voice to them anyway, "You sure you want to be here right now? It can't make it any easier for you." He didn't want Ares to leave, but if Ares needed to, Charles would understand. Still, it'd suck.

"I know." Ares' voice sounded flat as he looked out over the Citadel. "But I feel like I have to be here." He let out a low, distraught hum. "My younger sister is getting bonded."

Charles wondered for half a second if Ares already looked into his sister's fiancé to decide whether or not the man was good enough for her, but then he figured Ares probably did the second he learned of the bonding. Humming, he moved down closer to Ares and settled his hand on the small of the turian's back. "You're going to be there, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Ares said, taking a deep drag and letting the smoke drift out as he spoke again, "They're
having a human-esque ceremony outside in one of the Presidium parks."

Confused, Charles arched a brow. "She's marrying a human?"

Huffing a humorous, almost dismissive laugh, Ares dropped his head again. "Maela's always into trying new, interesting things. It's not a big surprise she'd be interested in the grandeur of human weddings." He took a drag from his cigarette and added, "I looked it up on the extranet when I saw them decorating the venue."

Charles rubbed absently at Ares' back, taking a drag and letting it back out with a heavy breath. "So … what do we know about the guy? He good enough for her, or are we planning his demise?"

Ares gave him a distracted sounding rumble, taking a few drags from his cigarette before responding, "No. He's good for her. Former military, now a teacher for younger turians." He shrugged. "Teaches mathematics in Cipritine, close enough to home that Maela can still be with my parents."

Charles nodded. "Good." He fell silent for a minute, then looked back up at Ares. "You want me to come with you?"

Taking a deep breath, Ares dropped his shoulders. "You won't see much from where I plan to be." So, he'd already made plans but still wasn't decided on whether or not to actually go? It sounded like he was still trying to talk himself into it … or out of it.

"I wouldn't be there to see them," Charles said, giving Ares a soft smile. "I'd be there for you." He hesitated when Ares looked down at him, not making a sound. "But … if you'd rather do it alone, that's alright."

"No," Ares said, looking utterly deflated as he looked back out over the balcony and took a long pull from his cigarette. "No, it's not that. I'm still deciding if I even want to see it. My entire family will be there, from my parents and my sisters to my distant relatives. Cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents …." Waving a hand, he trailed off.

"Well … do you think you'd regret it more later if you don't go?" Charles raised his brow with the question even though Ares wasn't looking at him.

Ares growled softly. "I don't know. I could either regret not seeing it, or I could fucking hate that I broke my one rule and watched. And I'm not even going to be there, so I don't even get the fucking benefit of seeing them up close, of talking." A sound somewhere between a whimper and a broken keen moved through him, brief, but enough to tear at Charles. "Of letting them know I'm alive and not the traitor the Hierarchy made them believe I am."

Charles stayed quiet for a few seconds, his heart aching for Ares. He wished he had the opportunity to watch Sarah grow up and get married, even if it was only from a distance. He didn't say it to Ares, knowing it'd just sound selfish, and he didn't want to make it about him. "Is it really breaking your rule if you don't go near them? I mean … the Citadel's a big place."

Chuffing, Ares glanced at him with a lifted brow plate. "Tell me, does one smoke not lead to more? Just one more to feed that urge?"

"Ah." Charles understood the real issue.

If it wasn't really about breaking rules but the temptation it might create, then Ares already struggled with a new addiction. He saw his family on the Citadel by fluke, but it hooked him and he already needed his next fix.

Charles sucked in a deep breath. "I'm maybe not the best to preach about willpower and not giving into urges. I guess only you can know whether it'd be too much for you or not. If you decide to go, though, if you need someone to help talk you down … I'll do my best. But if you need someone to talk you out of going … I'm not really sure I'm the man for that one." He hated admitting it, but it was true. If he were in Ares' shoes, he'd sure as hell go, consequences be damned.

Ares hummed, not answering as he flicked his cigarette over the balcony. Pulling his pack out, he stuck a new one between his mouth plates and lit it. After tucking his lighter away, he opened his omni-tool. Charles watched as he slowly flipped through pictures of a group of turians in a fancy looking park, some of them with the same silvery shade of Ares' plates.

"Which one is Maela?" Charles asked, leaning closer for a better look.

The whole moment made him feel so much, it was overwhelming. He felt Ares' pain and grief, wanted to comfort him and make it better, even if he felt clueless as to where to even begin. More than that, he felt like he needed to soothe Ares. But he also felt warm and a little giddy inside, knowing it was a really big fucking deal for Ares to not only be talking to Charles about his family but showing him pictures, too.

Ares pointed to a young woman with gray plates, wearing a bright, yellow dress. It kind of looked
like something Charles saw human women wearing during the hotter months back on Shanxi. Her attention seemed intently focused on a bouquet of flowers, her hands picking at them, probably rearranging them. She had such a huge, warm smile on her face, and her posture radiated with so much happiness, it was almost painful for Charles to look at.

Swallowing back a fresh wave of grief—something he felt pretty sure came as much from Ares as himself—Charles leaned into Ares a little more. "She's pretty. Looks really happy."

"She probably doesn't even remember me." Taking a long drag from his cigarette, Ares stared at the picture. "She wasn't even in basic when I died."

Charles hated it when Ares referred to his death. He understood why Ares thought of the fire as dying, but every time he said it, it just left Charles cold inside. He didn't know Sirus Vakarian, he knew Ares, and when Ares said he died … well, the images it brought to mind felt like someone ripped his soul out of him and crushed it right in front of his face.

He took a deep breath. "Basic starts at fifteen, right? How much younger was she? Seems like she'd be old enough to remember."

Ares didn't respond beyond a shrug as he changed the picture to Maela talking to a turian in C-Sec blues. It was clear the officer wasn't there on business by how close he stood to Maela and the smile on both of their faces. Charles squinted at the picture, something about the C-Sec guy pulling at the back of his mind.

When the memory snapped into place, he huffed and pointed at the turian. "I've met him before. He's come in once or twice when some asshat was causing problems at the store."

"He's my cousin," Ares said, letting out a harsh snort. "More like a brother. He was more than a bit younger than me, but it was hard to separate us once we had some grand scheme in mind. One of our favorite things to do was one-up one another."

Charles smiled at the idea, trying to imagine Ares as a kid way back before life reamed him. "He seemed like a decent guy, a good cop. Which is saying a lot, since most of the time C-Sec seems full of assholes."

"No doubt he's in C-Sec because of his dad," Ares said, taking a drag and letting it out through the sides of his closed mouth again. "He'd make a better Spectre, but my uncle would never have it."

Humming, Charles thought it over, realizing he didn't really have a clue what made a good Spectre. "Kind of weird having law enforcement for family when you're an assassin, but given C-Sec is full of turians …" He reached into his pocket, digging out another cigarillo to light off of the first one before pulling away from Ares to snuff the butt out in the ashtray. "I'm sorry you can't talk to them. I'd have given anything … I wish there was a way for you to have both, you know? Have your family know you're still around, know the truth, and keep them safe."

Ares gave him a sad sounding rumble. "It's better for them. They trust the Hierarchy. Hell, my mom was from a political family and my dad was military for most of his life. To ruin that trust … and not even be able to keep them safe?" He sighed, taking a couple of drags off his cigarette before saying, "It's not worth it for them."

Charles let out a sigh, the sound every bit as sad as Ares' rumble. "I know."

He reached up, tugging at Ares' neck a little, trying to get the turian to bend down so he could press their foreheads together. Ares slowly dragged his gaze away from the Citadel, turning to look down at Charles before bending enough for him to make contact. Pressing his head against Ares', he slid his hand around to cup Ares' face, brushing his thumb over the turian's mandible.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "No matter what you decide, though, I'll do whatever I can to help."

Ares nodded his head against Charles', thrumming softly as he closed his eyes. "When I decide, I'll let you know."

Charles held him there for a few moments, wishing he had the words to tell Ares how much he meant to him. He'd do anything for Ares, he only had to ask. He let his hand drop down to Ares' keel so he could pull away when he wanted to and said, "You should get some sleep."

Ares stayed quiet for a moment, his head still against Charles' before he opened his eyes and turned enough to look sideways at the Citadel. Nodding, he stood and flicked his cigarette over the balcony. "You coming?"

The memory of his nightmare flashed through Charles' mind, but he swallowed and nodded. Taking one last drag off his cigarillo, he put it out and followed Ares back inside, locking the door behind them.

Ares was gone again when the alarm woke Charles. He groaned, rolling over to shut it off before turning back to shove his face into Ares' pillows, pulling the blankets up over his head even as Eezo scrambled up on the bed to climb on top of him. He groaned again, working his arm out
from under the covers to wrap around the dog and drag her back under, snuggling her in against his side. Eezo squirmed around in his grip until she reached his face, licking furiously at his throat and chin when he tilted his head back to stop her from licking his lips.

After a minute of refusing to accept reality, he let Eezo go and threw off the blankets, climbing out of bed. He glanced in the living room, not seeing Ares anywhere, and the balcony door was shut tight. He figured as much. He made his way back to the bathroom and started the shower before taking a piss. He left the bathroom door opened a crack to keep Eezo from scratching at the door and got inside the shower, letting out another groan as the hot water washed over him. Eezo poked her nose into the shower, and he splashed water at her, making her shake her head to fling it off before disappearing again.

He finished up and got out, drying off before brushing his teeth. He made his way back to the bedroom to find Eezo rooting around under the blankets, and he laughed. Ares would probably throw a fit if he’d been there to see it, but oh well. He got dressed and chased Eezo out of the bedroom, closing the door behind them. Dumping some cereal into a sandwich bag, he grabbed a bottle of Paragade from the fridge and found Eezo’s leash.

He had to put it all back down again to get the squirming dog to sit still long enough to get her leash on her, but finally, once Eezo was situated, he grabbed his stuff and headed for the door. They made their way to the gardens, and Charles let her off her leash. He spotted Lindsey right away, and she waved at him from her spot over by the flower beds, down on her hands and knees, gloved hands digging through the dirt. She shifted her attention to Eezo as the dog made a beeline for her. Charles smiled and crossed over to a bench a few feet away from the pair, opening his Paragade and taking a drink before picking at his cereal.

Lindsey pulled off her gloves, tossing them on the ground and then shooing Eezo away from them while she dug in her pocket. She pulled out a package, which instantly drew Eezo’s attention, and made Charles snort.

"Sit," Lindsey said, making her voice marginally more stern.

Eezo barked, wagging her tail and pushing up into Lindsey’s face. Charles chuckled, and Lindsey cast him a playful glare over her shoulder. He shrugged, grinning and popping cereal in his mouth.

She huffed, turning her attention back to Eezo. "Eezo, sit." She put her hand on the dog’s backside and urged her down. When Eezo finally got the hint and sat—for a whole two seconds—Lindsey opened the package and gave the dog a treat. "Good girl," she cooed, stuffing the treats back in her pocket and taking Eezo’s head between her hands, leaning down to rub her forehead against the dog’s.

"You’re good with her," Charles said, in a bit of a better mood and more up for conversation than the day before. "Do you have dogs of your own?"

"No," she said, glancing at him again. "The place I live doesn't allow pets." She huffed, blowing her bangs out of her face. "I've been thinking about moving, though. Now that I've got a job that pays better, I might actually be able to afford to move."

He grunted, and then, out of curiosity, he asked, "How much better?"

Lindsey turned a little, sitting flat on the grass and drew her knees up, grinning at him. "Why? Thinking about quitting, too?"

He snorted and shook his head, flashing his teeth at her with a smile. "What? And make Irene's life easier? Please."

She tilted her head back and laughed, dark hair trailing down almost to the grass when she did. She was actually really pretty. Damn it, Ares. Great, he started thinking of Lindsey as something other than just the chick he used to work with. She lifted her head to look at him again and opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, but Eezo pounced on her. She laughed again, picking Eezo up and folding her legs, settling the dog in her lap.

"I forgot how funny you are sometimes." She tilted her head to the side, fingers running down Eezo from head to rear. "Though you seem a lot more … I don't know, confident now or something. It suits you."

Charles smirked. "Mahlia said something about me seeming different the other day, too." He guessed going on a killing spree agreed with him. He tossed a few pieces of cereal into his mouth.

"How is Mahlia?" she asked, and he swore she looked a little sad for about half a second.

Charles shrugged. "She seems alright. Irene's got me working up front with her again, and she brought in a new guy to fill the spot in the back."

"Oh yeah? What's he like?" She dug the packet of treats back out her pocket when Eezo climbed down from her lap again and started sniffing at the pocket. She turned her attention to Eezo. "Sit."

"He's actually pretty cool, I guess. A turian named Cammus." Charles dug out a few more pieces
of cereal. "He's polite but not stuck up, you know? He has a sense of humor, and he handled Okal like a champ."

"Sit," Lindsey said again, pointing to the ground, but Eezo just stared at the bag of treats. "Eezo, sit." She pushed down on Eezo's back, and the dog sat. "Good girl." She gave Eezo the treat before looking back up at Charles. "Speaking of … what's with the guy you were here with yesterday?" She drew one of her brows down, arching the other up, turning her head a little to the side. "He's kinda creepy."

Charles snorted, taking his time thinking of a response. He didn't really know how to talk to other people about Ares. Before it wasn't an issue, because they were never seen together, but the more he started coming over, the more often he and Charles would go out in public together. They weren't especially touchy-feely in public most of the time, but they didn't exactly always keep their hands to themselves, either. They never really talked much about it, but Charles didn't think Ares really wanted him telling people they were together. Or hell, maybe he did. He didn't seem to have any problem with Charles declaring him as 'mine' on the ship to Shanxi and didn't hesitate to call Charles his human. And fuck, he had Charles carve his name into Ares' arm.

"He's a good friend of mine," he said, finally settling on the easiest answer. "But I'm sure he'll love to hear you think he's creepy." He grinned, shoving the cereal into his mouth.

"Oh no!" She leaned in toward him, eyes wide. "Charles! You can't tell him I said that!"

He had to cut off a laugh before he choked on his breakfast. Picking up his bottle of Paragade, he opened it and took a heavy swallow to wash the cereal down before running his hand over his mouth. "Relax. He knows damn well how intimidating he is, and trust me, he enjoys it. I'm not telling him anything."

She huffed, blowing her bangs around again, the anxiety easing off her face to be replaced with a grin. "You're kinda mean."

He laughed, throwing a hand up against his chest, and furrowed his brow. "I'm so not mean. Okay … maybe a little. Sometimes. But the look on your face was worth it."

"Daddy's a bad boy, isn't he, Eezo?" Lindsey scratched under the dog's chin. "No treats for Daddy."

Screwing up his face he shook his head. "No, no. That's weird. Don't do that."

She laughed again, leaning in to rub her forehead against Eezo's. "You wanna run, girl?" She pulled her feet in under herself. "Come on, let's go run, girl." She glanced at him over her shoulder, flashing him a grin. "Daddy's got to go to work soon, we better get your exercise in."

Tilting his head back, he groaned, listening to her laugh fade as she ran off with Eezo.
Irene walked into the backroom, glancing at Charles and throwing a smirk his way as she kept moving toward storage. "Charles, Cammus, I need you two in the back for a few hours." She wiggled her fingers as she walked by, gesturing for them to follow.

Charles groaned, just barely loud enough for Cammus to hear as they both stood from the breakroom table. Cammus fluttered his mandibles, reaching out and surprisingly patting Charles on the shoulder as they made their way after Irene. Charles gave him a soft snort, the show of moral support bringing a smile to his face.

"Okal convinced the owners that the storage room needs reorganized." Irene stopped, turning around to face the two of them. She threw a hand up, gesturing behind her. "There's a datapad over there. I need you two to get started on rearranging the shelves. Poleceus and Werin will be coming in for an extra shift after lunch to take over, and you can go back up front."

"Why don't you have Mahlia help?" Charles shrugged.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "The job requires muscle, and besides, someone is needed up front to deal with customers."

"I'm pretty sure that's sexist," he said with a grin, pointing a finger at Irene, "and she's a biotic."

"Just move the shelves, Charles." Irene glared at him as she walked past, leaving the storage room.

Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "Is it really wise to antagonize her if you're already in trouble?"

Grinning, Charles moved over to a table and picked up the datapad. "No, but it's fun."

Cammus chuckled, moving over to stand next to Charles and looked at the datapad with him. It looked like they needed to move a total of twenty shelves, but of course, the shelves had to be unloaded first. He looked up, glancing around the room. Someone—probably Okal—had gone the extra step of marking the shelves with color-coded tape.

Charles groaned, handing the datapad over to Cammus when he reached for it. "I'm going to kill Okal."

Chuffing, Cammus sat the datapad down and made his way to the first shelf. "Think that will get you fired?" He glanced over his shoulder and smirked at Charles.

"Probably," Charles followed him, starting to pull down the boxes they could move by hand, stacking them on the tables. "But then again, it might be worth it."

"If you don't mind my asking," Cammus said, pulling two boxes down, carrying one pinned against each hip, "what exactly did you do?" He hummed, easing the boxes onto the table and turned back, passing Charles on his way to the table and flicking a mandible. "I only ask so I can make sure I don't do the same thing."

Chuckling, Charles sat his own box down. "I had something come up I had to deal with and called in last minute. Told Irene I needed to take some time off, but I didn't know for how long. When she said we were too short staffed and company policy says I have to give them more notice, so if I didn't come in I'd lose my job … I told her to do what she needed to do and cut the call."

Cammus hummed but otherwise stayed quiet for a minute as they worked. "How did you manage to keep your job?"

"I reminded Irene that I'm the best damn employee this place has, and I've been here longer than anyone else at this point. Including her. With as high of a turnover rate as Citadel Souvenirs has, she couldn't really afford to lose me. I know things about how this place works she hasn't even figured out yet." Charles took a deep breath, letting it out in a raspberry and said, "Add in a killer smile and some good old fashioned ass kissing, and Irene decided to keep me on. With the caveat she moves me to the front, claiming I was needed up there more since we hadn't replaced Lindsey yet."

"Why don't you like working up front?" Cammus put two more boxes on the table and stopped to look at Charles, mandibles flared with his curiosity.

"Aren't you full of questions today?"

Mandibles pulling in against the side of his face, Cammus lowered his gaze. "Sorry, I didn't mean —"
"Nah, don't worry." Charles waved his hand, moving back to the shelves. "You're alright. I'm just not used to so many personal questions." He stacked up a couple of smaller boxes and slid them off the shelf. "Uh … I don't really like dealing with customers. It takes a lot of mental energy to keep a smile on my face and act like I give a shit about their petty complaints and narcissism. At the end of the day, I feel fried. Burned out."

Cammus let out another thoughtful sounding hum, and they both let the silence linger as they cleared the rest of the shelf. Taking a look at the datapad again, Charles checked out where the shelf was supposed to go. He really didn't see how the new layout was going to make anything better, but whatever. Nodding his head at Cammus when he asked if Charles was ready, they each lifted an end of the shelf and carried it over to its new location.

"So, what's your story?" Charles asked, starting on carrying the boxes back over to the shelf.

"My story?" Cammus fluttered his mandibles as they passed by one another.

"Yeah. Tell me something about you." Charles checked the labels and slid the boxes back on the shelf where they belonged.

"Hmm. I think I'm still trying to figure my story out."

"How so?" Charles glanced over his shoulder at the turian before turning and making his way back to the table.

"I'm what my mother calls 'aimless', and apparently it's a very disgraceful thing for a turian to be."

Cammus lingered near the table, waiting for Charles. "My father says I have a wanderer's spirit. He … encouraged me to leave home. Told me to go wander." He flicked a mandible, glancing down at his feet. "So here I am."

Smiling, Charles picked up another box. "That's … that's actually kind of sweet."

Cammus chuffed. "Perhaps, but I just feel lost. Although, I'm determined to make the most of the whole experience. Learn whatever I can. See new places, meet new people, try new things."

"Well," Charles said with a hum, "the Citadel definitely has a lot of people."

Cammus chuckled. "Yes, it does."

Charles glanced at the time on the kiosk, he only had ten minutes before time to clock out. Turning his attention back to Mahlia, he said, "Yeah, she seemed kinda sad when she asked about you. You should go see her."

Mahlia smiled, her cheeks turning a darker shade of blue. "Maybe I will."

"Oh … you like Lindsey, don't you?" He asked arching his brow.

Cammus let out a soft chuff, fluttering his mandibles and turned his attention back to the kiosk. Irene had him shadowing Charles again, no surprise there, but if she thought it bothered him, she was mistaken. He really didn't mind Cammus at all, in fact, he kind of enjoyed having him around. He thought he heard an amused sounding rumble coming from the turian, but he kept his gaze on Mahlia.

She rolled her eyes up and shook her head. "Why does everything end up being about sex with you humans?"

He grinned, holding a hand palm up. "I just said you liked her, didn't say anything about sex, but now we know where your mind is."

She let out an exasperated sigh and turned her attention to the datapad resting on the counter in front of her, but a shy smile still tugged at her lips. She totally liked Lindsey. He filed it away for later consideration when he heard the damn chime above the door go off, fighting back a wince, he forced a smile on his face and looked up. It only took half a second for him to recognize the giant turian, despite the dark brown plates and sweeping, white, facial markings, and his smile shifted into something far more natural. The same, stupid rush of excitement flooded him that he got every time he unexpectedly saw Ares, making his heart flutter in the most ridiculous way. He seriously had to fight the urge to vault over the counter and throw himself in Ares' arms.

Cammus chuffed and cleared his throat, no doubt smelling everything Charles felt in that moment, good enough as if he'd painted a big sign saying 'my turian' and hung it around Ares' neck. Ares gaze zeroed in on Charles before sliding past him to the other turian, and he flicked a mandible, seeming amused. Charles wasn't sure why Ares showed up there, though, so he hesitated, waiting to see what Ares intended.

"Welcome to Citadel Souvenirs." Mahlia had a smile on her face when Charles glanced at her, attention firmly on the new 'customer'.

Ares hummed, as if in consideration of her welcome, but the sound rang false in Charles' ears—no doubt Cammus' as well. "I'm looking for something for someone that doesn't come to the Citadel
very often, that hasn't seen what only locals know about."

Charles tilted his head, wondering if Ares came to buy a gift for his sister, and if so, if it meant he'd made up his mind about going to the wedding. Bonding ceremony. Whatever. He pursed his lips, debating on whether or not to move in and offer to assist the 'customer' and risk stepping on Mahlia's toes. Ares moved to the counter, standing in no man's land, somewhere between Mahlia and Charles.

Charles smiled, moving down the counter a little closer. "What's the occasion?"

"A marriage," Ares said, crossing his arms and looking back and forth between Charles and Mahlia. "And save the cheap tourist shit. I want something fit for someone close."

Letting out a soft snort, Charles forced himself to stick to his salesman's voice and said, "Alright. I'm sure I can help you with that, sir. If you'd like to step over here to our kiosk, there's a variety of items I'm sure you'll find of interest."

Cammus let out a soft chuckle, and Charles glanced over his shoulder to see the turian still managed to hold a straight face despite the slip. He gave Charles a very light flick of his mandible but nothing else. When Charles looked back at Mahlia, however, she gave him a narrow-eyed stare. Well, shit. He'd have to fix things with her later. She looked back at Ares who stared at her for few seconds longer, and she blinked, taking what seemed like a reflexive step back.

Ares looked away, moving down to Charles' kiosk and started scrolling through it. "Well? What were you going to show me?"

Charles smirked, fighting the urge to tell Ares to stop being an impatient ass. Leaning over the counter, he did the next best thing, though, and pulled the kiosk away from Ares, turning it enough for them both to easily see. He moved through a couple of screens, stopping on the housewares' section and scrolled down to the bottom. "Our most popular selection for wedding gifts are personally engraved vases made from hand blown glass, using sand from a Council homeworld of your choosing, with gold or silver veins. If that doesn't interest you, there are other equally impressive items in the housewares' section." He let his gaze flick to Ares for just a second before looking back at the kiosk.

"You might also consider looking at …" he said, changing screens, "… our selection of fine jewelry, handcrafted, and in a variety of designs." He shifted to another page, showing their selection of food and beverages. "If consumables are more to your liking, we offer a selection of fine wine and spirits as well as delicacies from a variety of cultures." He dropped his hand from the screen and let his gaze roam over Ares' fake plates.

Ares looked up at him, skepticism written all over his otherwise blank stare. "Well, I'm certainly not getting them dishes."

Charles narrowed his eyes at him a little—he didn't say anything about any damn dishes—but kept the smile on his face. "Certainly not, sir. Do you have a more specific idea in mind?"

Cammus cleared his throat and when Charles looked back at him with a raised brow, he stepped closer. He kept his gaze on Charles, an underlying nervousness creeping into his subvocals as he said, "I think we also offer more traditional, turian ceremonial daggers … ."

Charles grinned, stepping away from the kiosk and waved a hand at it for Cammus to take over. Nevermind the fact Ares seemed to imply he wanted something less traditional—which made sense given Malea's penchant for new and interesting things—if Cammus felt brave and wanted to try his hand with the sarcastic asshole, he was welcome to it. Charles moved to the side and watched as Cammus filled in the space he'd vacated. Cammus looked at Ares, nodding his head and giving him a soft rumble in greeting before reaching for the kiosk.

Ares thrummed, actually sounding genuine and good-natured, as he glanced over Cammus' shoulder to flick a mandible at Charles. "This kid gets it," he says with a jerk of his chin toward Cammus, giving Charles a shit-eating grin.

Charles snorted, rolling his eyes and muttering, "Of course." He glanced around to see if Mahlia noticed, but she was nowhere to be seen. He turned his attention back to the two turians, relaxing without the asari around. "I so should've just let you deal with Mahlia."

Cammus chuckled, still flipping through the screens.

Ares rumbled. "Maybe, or maybe I'd insult her just by being here. She's not a very good salesperson."

"You insult people deliberately." Charles laughed, moving a little closer to watch Cammus work and leaning back against the counter. "She's better than Okal."

Cammus chuckled again, glancing up at Ares. "Okal would probably try to organize whatever's in your pockets." Finally finding the specialty items screen, he scrolled down to the turian ceremonial daggers. "Sorry, I'm still in training. I don't have the whole sale's pitch thing down yet."

"You insult people deliberately." Charles laughed, moving a little closer to watch Cammus work and leaning back against the counter. "She's better than Okal."

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"Probably for the best," Ares said, distracted by already looking through the selections.

Cammus looked back at Charles as if seeking his approval, and Charles smiled at him. He seemed to do it quite a bit, actually, even with things that didn't really seem work-related. He thought about Cammus saying he felt lost, and suddenly he felt really bad for the guy if he thought following Charles would help him get found.

Charles thought it was kind of nice, though, having someone know—even if it wasn't exactly intentional—that Charles and Ares were a thing. And, an even better bonus, Ares had to know Cammus figured it out, but he didn't seem to care at all. In fact, he seemed to like the other turian.

After a moment, the kiosk sent a notification to the employee screen below the counter, telling Charles that Ares had selected something and added it to his purchase list. He glanced down, seeing Ares chose the most expensive one they carried, a dagger inlaid with about a month's pay worth of gemstones.

"And might as well show me that other shit you mentioned." Ares gave Charles a stern look. 
"Not the dishes."

"Vases aren't dishes. Christ," Charles rolled his eyes, nudging a chuckling Cammus aside and pulling the screen for the jewelry up.

Ares shrugged. "They're equally as delicate, and I don't want to give something that'll break if they so much as breathe on them."

Ares let out a fuller sounding laugh, flicking his mandible at Charles when he glanced at the turian. Charles flashed his teeth at him in a grin. Cammus turned, leaned his side into the counter, and rested his forearm over the surface, apparently taking his social cues from Charles.

"And who do you think is going to carry them to the wedding?" Ares lifted a brow plate at Charles once he looked at him, but then he turned his attention back to the kiosk. "And I'm certainly not going to give them something that's only purpose is to hold flowers. That's just pointless."

Charles' eyebrows shot up. Was Ares seriously saying he intended to deliver his gifts to his sister in person? Shit. That was so not good. "Well," he said, sinking a little caution into his voice, "we do offer delivery service, sir." He hoped switching back to something more formal might make Ares pay attention to his underlying message. "I'm sure we can make sure your purchases arrive undamaged.

Ares hummed thoughtfully, hitting a few more buttons on the kiosk, wracking up quite a list. Expensive ass feminine jewelry, wine from Palaven, dextro chocolates …. "Probably for the best …." He continued to shop, not bothering to look up at Charles.

Ares took a deep breath, looking over the purchases again on the employee screen and let out a low whistle, very pointedly saying, "That's quite the selection. I'm sure the happy couple will be eager to send you a very long thank you card.

He had to be kidding. Even if he didn't take all that crap to his sister in person, there's no way he could have it delivered anonymously without raising more than a few brow plates. People would start asking questions, try to figure out who sent them so much. Hell, they might even trace it back to Citadel Souvenirs and the human who made the sell—the human who smelled very much like Ares. Shit, even Cammus looked at the screen with a not-so-subtle, wide-eyed stare.

"True," Ares said with a hum, changing screens and adding one of the vases Charles showed him to the list. "Figured I'd get a bunch of shopping done for various occasions." He gave Charles a fake, gratingly forced chuckle. "Might as well spend my bonus on something worthwhile before I burn it all on new tech for myself."

Charles relaxed, leaning against the counter again and plastering a stupid, taunting grin on his face. "Thought you didn't like the vases?"

"The way you tried to sell them, I figure there's idiots out there that like the useless shit," Ares shrugged and finalized his purchases, scanning a credit chit and inputting a delivery address. "I'll give you an address," he said as he looked up at Charles, "but I'd prefer everything be packed up in protective wrap. It's an apartment complex, so you'll need to get clearance with the doorman."

Charles' brow twitched as he looked down at the address again. It certainly wasn't his address, and his place didn't have a doorman, but he figured he could always ask Ares about it later. He hummed, glancing back up at Ares and giving him a smart ass look. "So … you bought one because you plan to give it to someone you think is an idiot? How thoughtful of you." He grinned, pushing off the counter and shrugging. "Not a problem, everything will be taken care of. And thanks, you just raised my commission sky high. Mahlia's going to be pissed." He glanced at Cammus. "I'll split it with you."

Cammus shrugged and shook his head. "No need."
Charles raised an eyebrow, calling bullshit, but he'd talk to Cammus about it another time. He was ready to get out of the place and get something to eat. He wanted to kick back, get off his feet and relax.

Ares looked between the two of them, giving them a curious hum. After a moment, he shrugged. "Whatever works. I'm not doing the math, so I don't give a shit who gets paid what."

Charles scoffed. "You wouldn't give a shit either way." He finalized the purchase on his end.

"You paid with a credit chit, would you like the receipt sent somewhere?"

"Not really, no." Ares shook his head. "I'm sure you'll give me a manifest of the shit, so that's fine."

Seeing no point in pretending when he knows it's already more than obvious to Cammus, Charles nodded and said, "It's past time for me to clock out. Dinner?"

Ares looked at Cammus and made an odd sound, and although different from the tone he used with Charles, it still carried the same suggestive, flirtatious quality to it. "You in?"

Charles raised an eyebrow, not really surprised to see Ares hit on someone else, but a little shocked he chose Charles' co-worker. It could make shit super awkward for him, especially since he'd decided he liked the guy … might actually be able to start thinking of Cammus as a friend. Those were in short stock for Charles. He kept his gaze on Ares, forcing himself to relax because he didn't want his doubts to give the wrong signal. A moment later, he heard Cammus make an inquisitive sounding hum.

Ares chuckled, looking at Charles. "Want to take Cammus home?"

Charles glanced over his shoulder at the other turian, ready to brush it off as a joke and offer an apology if he looked uncomfortable, but a little shocked he chose Charles' co-worker. It could make shit super awkward for him, especially since he'd decided he liked the guy … might actually be able to start thinking of Cammus as a friend. Those were in short stock for Charles. He kept his gaze on Ares, forcing himself to relax because he didn't want his doubts to give the wrong signal. A moment later, he heard Cammus make an inquisitive sounding hum.

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Charles glanced over his shoulder at the other turian, ready to brush it off as a joke and offer an apology if he looked uncomfortable, but Cammus hummed again, the sound one Charles definitely recognized as sparked interest, mandibles lightly fluttering. Charles grinned, relaxing as he held Cammus' gaze to answer Ares' question, "Well … I'm not his supervisor, so if he wants to come, I don't see why not."

Cammus chuckled and dipped his head. "Dinner sounds good."

Ares jerked his head toward the door when Charles looked at him again and pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "I saw a place that seems to sell dextro and levo equally. Hurry up and clock out."

Charles glanced around the place again, spotting several humans and asari as well as turians and even one, lone quarian tucked back into a corner inside. He picked up a menu, flipping through the pages of the levo section and quickly settled on the elyine special. He didn't really care what he ate, to be honest, he just wanted to fill the hole gnawing away at his stomach. Glancing at Cammus, taking in the turian's stiff posture, Charles decided he might get himself a drink, too. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward to rest his elbow on the table while he dug out his cigarillos.

"Cammus is new to the Citadel," Charles offered, trying again to start a conversation, hoping to put the turian at ease. He put a cigarillo in his mouth and dug back in his pocket for the lighter.

"Oh?" Ares pulled out his own cigarettes, sticking one in his mouth before offering the pack to Cammus. "Where from?"

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Charles had yet to see Cammus smoke, and the turian's nose always seemed to twitch when Charles lit up, but after only a second's hesitation, he took one from Ares.

"Taetrus," Cammus said, rolling the cigarette over in his fingers for a second, letting out a curious sounding trill. He glanced up, meeting Ares' gaze, tilting his head a little.
Ares shrugged and held his hand out to Charles, rumbling in question and gesturing for his lighter. "I had a friend from Taterus."

A little surprised he didn't just pull out his own lighter, Charles lit his cigarillo and passed the lighter over to Ares.

Ares snorted. "Course, the man got me hooked on these," he said as he lit his cigarette and held the lighter out to Cammus. "Can't really complain, though."

Charles figured the odd, turian dialect inscription on Ares' lighter—which didn't even translate for Charles when he looked at it closer—probably had something to do with why he didn't use his own lighter. But seeing Ares just hand over Charles' lighter instead of offering to light the other turian's cigarette brought a pleased smile to Charles' face. Cammus chuckled, looking over the cigarette again and took the lighter, turning it over in his palm, too, glancing at Charles.

When Charles jerked his head to tell him to go ahead, Cammus put the cigarette between his mouth plates, muttering, "I don't usually smoke." He lit the cigarette and passed the lighter back to Charles. Pulling the cigarette away, he let out a soft cough and looked at it again, humming. "I moved here a couple of months back." He shrugged, tilting his head toward his shoulder. "I needed a change of scenery, and the Citadel seemed like as good of a place as any." He took a small, seemingly experimental drag from the cigarette and managed not to cough. "What about you," he asked, turning his attention back to Ares, "where are you from? How long have you lived here?"

Ares thumbed around an exhale of smoke, leaning back in his seat. "I was actually born on the Citadel, but my parents are from Macedyn. We bounced between the two depending on family—some were here, some there," he said, waving a hand. "I myself, though, mostly just go where my job takes me. I work on a cargo vessel, helping to load and unload shipments."

Charles looked away, catching the eye of an asari waitress and nodded to let her know they were ready to order ... but mostly just to have somewhere else to look while Ares spun his web of lies, not wanting his own expression to give anything away. He listened, though, cataloging the details the best he could to make sure he didn't fuck them up later if it came up again. Ares trusted Charles to keep his identity safe, and he'd damned well do his best. The asari smiled and nodded her head, holding up a finger. Charles returned her smile and nodded again.

Cammus hummed, drawing Charles attention. "Maybe that will be my next job."

Chuckling, Charles took a drag and asked, "Already hate the place, huh?"

Cammus hummed again, gaze sweeping over Charles in the first hint of anything beyond professionalism or casual conversation, making heat creep up Charles' spine. "No, it's not so bad. It's growing on me."

Charles grinned, taking another drag and letting it seep out of him slowly as he returned the leer, gaze lingering on the turian's lean build before glancing back up to meet his gaze. "Good."

The waitress approached with a smile and dipped her head to the two turians before smiling at Charles. "What can I get you, gentlemen?"

"Cipritine Red," Ares said, stacking his menu on top of Charles'. "And the sliced xemna on halafan, rare."

"I'll have the same," Cammus said, passing over his menu to Ares to be stacked with the others.

Charles waited for a second, giving the waitress a chance to record their orders. When she looked at him again, he said, "Mount Milgrom and a glass of tea." He hummed, pursing his lips, considering changing his mind about his choice of food but decided against it. "And I'll have the elyne special." He handed the menus over to the asari and waited for her to get out of earshot before turning back to the others.

Ares looked away from the retreating waitress and turned to Cammus, letting out a low thrum Charles barely heard. "Don't tell me you have something to do besides this tonight?"

Cammus shifted a little, mandibles seeming to flare in response to whatever the thrum of Ares' meant to him. He took a drag from his cigarette, looking as if he used it to buy himself some time. "No, no other plans."

Charles smiled at the younger turian when Cammus met his gaze. "You're nervous ... what can we do to put you at ease?"

Cammus chuffed, sounding mildly put off by being called out, but Charles did warn him etiquette wasn't his specialty. Cammus flicked a mandible at Charles when he grinned. "I'm fine."

Charles hummed, lifting an eyebrow. "Liar." He chuckled, leaning forward on the table. "But I get it. You're not really used to humans."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles and shrugged. "It'll be a new experience."
Ares hummed and smirked at the younger turian, his voice low and thick. "They're soft but tight." He rumbled at Charles. "Hot and grips you in all the right ways."

Charles felt himself flush a little and gave Ares a slow, exasperated shake of his head. He wasn't entirely sure whether to feel complimented or insulted, but he did feel entirely objectified … and it was kind of hot. Maybe not something he'd normally appreciate, but since Ares entered his life, it seemed like just about everything about himself became skewed.

Cammus seemed flustered, looking around the restaurant and patio as if to see who else might be listening. He chuckled, shaking his head, too. "Spirits, what did I get myself into?"

Charles laughed, taking a drag from his cigarillo before adding, "And we're not nearly as breakable as you might think."

Ares chuckled, tilting his head toward Charles as he watched Cammus. "He even wants to feel it. I sure hope you haven't filed your talons dull or this won't nearly be as fun." He shrugged, growling as he looked at Charles. "Although, he may forgive that if you use your teeth."

Charles grinned, both amused and starting to get aroused by Ares' lewd behavior. He glanced at Cammus, watching as the turian lifted a brow plate and turned his palms over to look down at his gloved hands, talons appearing to be a socially respectable length but still definitely pointed beneath the leather. He glanced back at Charles and gave him a curious hum.

Charles tilted his head to the side and shrugged. "I like the pain."

More now than ever.

Humming, Ares took a drag and waited until the waitress brought over their drinks and left again. He turned his attention back to Cammus. "Alright, so maybe we're going about it wrong. What do you like?"

Cammus squirmed in his seat a little, glancing around the restaurant again. "Hmm. I, uh …." He chuckled, reaching up to scratch at his facial plates. "I'm not really sure how to answer that … but I'm open to new things."

"What have you done?" Ares watched Cammus, curiosity on his face as he held his bottle of beer without drinking from it at all. "That might give us something to go off of."

Cammus gave Charles a helpless sort of look and fluttered his mandibles. He cleared his throat. "Mostly just your standard stuff with turian women … hmm, a couple of turian men."

Ares rumbled, the sound thoughtful as he took a drink and then set the bottle down. He looked between Charles and Cammus as if doing some sort of calculations in his head. "We can work with that."

Charles chuckled, knowing they were embarrassing the hell out of the turian by talking so openly about it at dinner. Hell, it was probably doubly awkward for Cammus since they worked together. Which seemed funny, because to hear Ares tell it, turians were far more open about that sort of thing than humans. He decided to take mercy on Cammus and said, "We can worry about it more later, after dinner, yeah?"

Cammus let out a relieved sounding trill but glanced at Ares.

"They had an opening?" Ares shrugged. "Fine by me." He stuck his cigarette in his mouth.

Charles shrugged, his hand slipping absently into his pocket to run his fingers over his razor. "I think I more enjoy being able to actually take care of myself."
"I can understand wanting to be able to take care of yourself," Cammus said, flicking a mandible and nodding.

Charles smiled, biting back a joking remark about turians he didn't think would go over too well. "It's nice." Glancing over at Ares, he added, "Though sometimes I think he wants to turn me into a kept man."

Ares rumbled, giving Charles an innocent shrug. "I have no idea what you mean."

Charles snorted. He didn't believe it for a second, knowing damn well after the first time Charles said it to him, Ares went and looked it up. And he knew just as well that if it wasn't true, at least on some level, the crass turian would outright deny it instead of feigning ignorance. Although to be fair, if Ares really offered to take care of Charles' rent and bills, he probably wouldn't say no, especially after watching the man burn through credits like they were nothing. Hell, he'd be more than willing to quip working if it meant Ares wanted to take Charles with him on jobs but not so much if Charles was expected to just sit around doing nothing while waiting for Ares to show back up. He just didn't want Ares to do it because he thought Charles couldn't handle taking care of himself. And, he didn't want Ares breaking his shit as an excuse to buy him better crap.

Cammus shook his head. "Neither do I."

Charles snorted again, taking a drag. "Just means he wants to take care of me instead." Of course, he realized it wasn't the entirety of the definition, but he didn't really think Cammus needed a full explanation of the sexual connotations behind the term.

"Of course not," Ares protested, but his smirk was telling. "But you might as well take what I get you."

Charles raised an eyebrow, giving Ares a dry look. "You didn't see me throwing out the vidscreen, did you?"

Ares chuckled. "Who knows? You might wait until I leave on another cargo trip just to spite me." He looked at Cammus, fluttering his mandibles. "I accidentally—"

Charles let out a bark of laughter, following it up with a noisy scoff.

"—broke his last one. Just shows how bad I am at tech," Ares said, and Charles gave him another, softer snort, "even with all the shit I spend my credits on."

"I said I like taking care of myself, didn't say I mind being spoiled." Charles pulled on his cigarillo before blowing the smoke toward the overhang. "And you know how excited I was over Eezo."

Cammus, who'd been watching the back and forth between Ares and Charles with an amused expression on his face, suddenly looked confused. He hummed. "Eezo?"

Ares nodded, blowing out smoke. "Know anything about dogs?"

Cammus shook his head, so Charles opened his omni-tool, pulling up a picture of Eezo before turning it around for Cammus to see. The turian fluttered his mandibles, looking at the pup, doubt and skepticism crossing his features. He rumbled, the sound a question, and glanced at Ares as if looking for guidance and an explanation.

"It constantly chews on shit, has to be taken for walks so it can shit—and have it picked up. Then it gets hair everywhere, pants constantly, and doesn't listen worth shit when you tell it to get off the damn bed."

Charles reached out, swatting at Ares' arm with the back of his hand. "Shut up, you love her, too. Even if you won't admit it."

"I really don't." Ares stamped out his cigarette in the ashtray.

Charles huffed, hearing the ring of truth to Ares' tone, and took a final drag from his own cigarillo before putting it out. "Well, you only have yourself to blame. She was your idea."

Ares shrugged. "What was it about you keeping everything I give you, again?"

"I'd never throw Eezo out. Just because she was your idea doesn't mean I think she was a bad one." Charles pursed his lips, leaning back in his chair. "I love her, and she keeps me company when you're gone."

Cammus hummed. "Is she … grown?"

"No, she'll get quite a bit bigger." Charles stretched his arm out to the side of the table, indicating with his hand in the air the approximate height for an adult Alaskan Malamute. "And, as she grows, she'll be less of a hassle."

Ares gave him a doubtful snort, cutting off his protests by saying, "Hush, the waitress is coming."
Chapter 7: Tempting Fate

Charles unlocked the door, glancing over his shoulder at Ares and Cammus. Stepping inside, he jerked his head toward the living room. "Come on in."

Cammus hummed, seeming a little less nervous than he was at the restaurant and stepped over the threshold, following Charles inside. Eezo came running up to him, and Cammus took a step back. Charles laughed, squatting down in front of the turian to scoop the dog up into his arms, scratching her under her chin. He glanced down the hall, seeing Ares disappear into the bathroom, and he turned to Cammus. Eezo squirmed, trying to get closer to the new person, letting out excited, little yips.

"She's not going to hurt you." He smiled at Cammus and tilted his head to the side. "Although, she'll probably lick you … and maybe gnaw on your fingers. Gently."

Cammus hummed, coming a little closer to the dog, gaze flicking back and forth between Charles and Eezo. He watched Charles stroke Eezo's head a few times and then lifted his hand to do the same. Eezo let out a happy bark, making his hand twitch, and his mandibles flare. Turning her face, she tried to lick wherever she could reach on the turian. He chuffed, letting out a soft laugh, and pulled his hand back after a moment.

Charles put Eezo down and nodded his head toward the balcony. "Come outside with me for a few minutes while I smoke?"

"Sure," Cammus said with a nod.

Charles led him out onto the balcony and lit up, taking a drag before blowing it back out and looking at Cammus. "You sure you're alright with all this?"

Thinking the turian was in over his head, Charles wanted to make sure if Cammus stayed, it was because he really wanted to. He'd found himself in way too many situations he didn't really want to be in but didn't feel like he could back out of in the past. He liked Cammus, he didn't want to put the man in such a position.

"Is this the human compassion I've heard so much about but haven't seen much of?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be here." Cammus' words came out low with a soft thrum, and he looked at Charles, mandibles fluttering softly.

Charles smiled, feeling a little more relaxed. "I'm glad to hear it." He took a few drags off his cigarillo, letting the silence sit for a minute. "Aelianus might be a little … rougher, more demanding, than what you're used to. He'd found himself in way too many situations he didn't really want to be in but didn't feel like he could back out of in the past. He liked Cammus, he didn't want to put the man in such a position.

Cammus flicked a mandible and leaned out over the railing. "Is this the human compassion I've heard so much about but haven't seen much of?"

He laughed, leaning over the railing, too. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

"If you're here because you're being a good person and not because you're forced to be here, I'm glad for that." Cammus' words came out low with a soft thrum, and he looked at Charles, mandibles fluttering softly.

Charles smiled, feeling a little more relaxed. "I'm glad to hear it." He took a few drags off his cigarillo, letting the silence sit for a minute. "Aelianus might be a little … rougher, more demanding, than what you're used to. I don't know, I don't have another turian to compare him to in bed."

"I'll do my best to make sure you're comfortable," Cammus said, voice sounding a little huskier as Charles squeezed again, running his hand up and down the man's side, starting with a far gentler touch than he used with Ares.

The turian rumbled, turning toward Charles and pulled off his gloves, bringing a smile to Charles' face. "You enjoy talons?"

"I do." He nodded, taking another drag of his cigarillo.

"I would," Cammus said, voice sounding a little huskier as Charles squeezed again, running his hand up and down the man's side. Smirking, Charles stepped away from Cammus to pull his shirt off, tossing it aimlessly back into the apartment. The turian's gaze roamed over him, snagging on the bite marks Ares left on his shoulder. Cammus let out a low, thoughtful hum, mandibles flaring.

"Sure."

"I'll do."

"Where?" Cammus asked, voice sounding a little huskier as Charles squeezed again, running his hand up and down the man's side.

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"Charles waited to catch the turian's gaze again before he said, "Take your pick, just not the face."

Cammus gave him a soft laugh, reaching out to trace Charles' collarbone before curling his fingers in enough to press the tip of his talons against the skin, slowly dragging them down Charles' chest. Grabbing his hand, Charles pressed the talons in harder, and Cammus flicked his mandibles, raising a brow plate. He nodded, so Cammus kept up the level of tension and continued his
exploration, trailing down over Charles' pec.

Cock already responding, he let out a light hiss followed by a moan, letting his eyes drop closed. Blood flashed on the backs of his eyelids, and he stilled for a moment, fighting to push it away. He wasn't comfortable letting himself go to that place with anyone but Ares. Cammus stopped, a worried sounding thrum filling the air until Charles met his gaze again. Giving him an encouraging smile, Charles moved closer and brought his hand back to the turian's waist.

Slipping beneath Cammus' shirt, he dug his fingers into the hide and muscle, gradually building the pressure. "How hard?" He stopped when Cammus let out a little groan, mandibles flaring. "There?"

The man nodded, eyes looking a little glazed over. Finishing his cigarillo, Charles leaned past Cammus to put it out before bringing his mouth to the turian's neck, nipping at the hide, pulling a moan from him.

"And to think you both started without me."

Charles glanced up, gaze roaming over Ares who leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his bare chest. He'd covered all of his plates with the brown paint, even using it to fill in and smooth out scars. Charles fucking hated it … but he understood.

"Just warming up a little." He smiled before tugging Cammus around to face Ares, urging him closer. Wrapping his hands around Cammus, Charles started working at the clasps of his shirt.

He chuckled, closing the distance between him and Ares, Charles moving with him. Reaching out a tentative hand, he closed his fingers around Ares' waist. Ares released a rumbling growl, stepping closer and leaning forward to run his tongue up the other turian's neck, nipping him just beneath his mandible.

Finally getting the clasps loose, Charles tugged at Cammus' shirt, slipping it free when the turian brought his arms down before tossing it inside, aiming for the couch, but he didn't really watch to see if he hit his mark. Charles knew Cammus' grip on Ares' waist wasn't nearly hard enough for what Ares liked. Sliding his hands along the man's arms, Charles closed his fingers over Cammus' and squeezed, forcing him to dig deeper until Ares gave a telling rumble.

Pulling back from Cammus' neck just far enough to be heard, Ares said, "We should take this inside. Much more room." He thrummed, heavy with arousal, and smirked at Cammus. "Unless you're feeling daring."

Charles chuckled, sliding his hands back over Cammus' arms to run his fingers over the turian's back and waist.

Cammus hummed, and Charles though he seriously considered it before he shrugged. "Your house, your neighbors."

Chuckling, Ares smirked at Charles over Cammus' shoulder. "As fun as that sounds, with our height differences, it might be easier on some kind of furniture."

Charles snorted and muttered, "Only with turians am I considered short." He nodded toward the bedroom, though.

"Everyone's short for me." Humming, Ares stepped back, hooking a finger in the waistband of Cammus' pants, tugging as he backed away.

Charles grinned, letting go of Cammus long enough to make sure Eezo was inside before closing and locking the balcony door. "True, but I like it." He followed along, wrapping an arm around Cammus' waist, walking next to the man instead of moving back behind him and tripping over his feet.

Not really a whole lot taller than Charles, Cammus chuckled and said, "He certainly isn't your standard turian." He glanced at Charles and flicked a teasing mandible. "I have a feeling I'm not going to, hmm, measure up."

Charles laughed, squeezing his waist. "I'm sure you have plenty to offer."

Ares rumbled, stopping next to the bedroom door and released Cammus, letting Charles lead him inside before closing the door behind them. When Ares rejoined them, Charles let him guide Cammus over to the bed while going to the dresser himself. Glancing behind him to make sure Cammus' attention stayed diverted, he emptied his pockets, tucking his razor into a dresser drawer before putting everything else on top. He idly wondered if all of Ares' weapons were tucked away somewhere discreet, not that it was unusual for someone to own a gun, but Ares carried a damn arsenal. Cargo workers didn't usually own so many damn weapons.

Turning back around, he watched as Ares licked Cammus' neck and rubbed the man's crotch through his pants, his other hand firmly gripping his waist. Cammus rumbled, pressing himself into Ares' touch as he kneaded Ares' waist and tugged at his pants. Charles grinned, kicking off his socks and shoes before moving to stand behind Cammus, reaching around with one hand to
work at the closure of Cammus' pants while ghosting the fingertips of his other hand over the cut on Ares' side.

Ares thrummed against Cammus before lifting his head just enough to look down at Charles, pupils dilated, growling and nodding. "Keep going," he said just before dragging his teeth along Cammus' pulse, making the other turian shudder and groan.

Charles smiled, scraping his teeth over his lip, and squeezed the wound but not quite as aggressively as he might if they were alone. He didn't want to make Ares bleed, thinking it might make the both of them get a little too carried away with Cammus there. Ares' hungry growl pulled at him though, so he tightened his grip despite his best intentions.

For a few minutes, they were nothing but touching, kneading, squeezing, biting, licking, and scratching. Deep rumbles and growls, soft groans and hums. Charles squeezed Ares' side, fingers pressing against his wound, hands sweeping over Cammus' hips and back, nipping at his cowl, cock pressing into his ass. He tugged Cammus' crest, urging his head aside to expose more of his throat to Ares, and Ares grabbed Charles' ass, pulling him in tighter against Cammus.

Catching sight of the two turians with their hands down each other's pants, Charles licked his lips and bit Cammus anywhere he could get his teeth into. Christ, it was all so fucking sexy. When Cammus reached back and dug his talons into Charles' head and neck, he sucked in a breath, electricity shooting through him and making his cock twitch, letting the breath out in a throaty moan. He seemed to be a fast learner, Charles gave him that. He wanted to see Cammus stripped down and sprawled out, losing himself completely as he succumbed to Ares' touch.

After a moment, voice heavy with desire, Ares softly asked, "Have you ever seen a human come undone?"

Something about the question, especially coming from Ares', sent goosebumps racing along Charles' spine. His breath caught in his throat, and he stood upright again, pressing himself against Cammus and nipping a little harder at his cowl, watching Ares over his shoulder.

Cammus purred, shaking his head in Ares' grip just a little, voice raspy when he said, "No."

The sound dark, Ares chuckled and stepped away from Cammus with a smirk, locking gazes with the other turian as he spoke, "Charles, come here between us."

Charles raised an eyebrow, he was used to Ares telling him what to do, especially in the bedroom, but somehow the statement sounded a whole lot more like a command than usual. He smirked, letting go of Cammus to move around between the two of them, looking up at Ares.

Ares turned his gaze down to him and cupped his chin between thumb and forefinger, thrumming. "How many times can you go? The usual?"

Charles' smirk grew, and he licked his lips. Reaching out to wrap his hand around Ares' wound and squeeze, he watched with delight as Ares' eyes glazed over for a moment. "Definitely."

"Perfect," Ares said, voice low as he released Charles' chin and guided him to turn around.

Pressing his chest to Charles' back, Ares splayed his fingers out over Charles' stomach, fingers dipping into his waistband and rumbling, the sound seeming to pull Cammus closer. Breath hitching, Charles tilted his head to the side and laid back against Ares, reaching for Cammus. The turian fluttered his mandibles, seeming a little less sure of himself with Charles in front of him but no less willing. Moving closer, his tongue swept over Charles' neck followed by his teeth.

Letting out a little moan, Charles turned his head a little to whisper, "Don't break the skin … not with your teeth." He didn't want anyone but Ares' teeth breaking his skin. Not anymore. He brought his hand up, kneading at the back of Cammus' head.

Cammus gave him an understanding hum and nipped just a little harder. Ares moved Cammus' fingers and palm over Charles. He stopped on all the right spots, guiding Cammus through all the best ways to touch Charles, caressing along his ribs and thighs, dragging talons along his shoulders and back, squeezing his hips and ass. Charles shuddered a few times, eyelids drooping half-closed, as Cammus explored.

"If his skin breaks out in tiny bumps, you're in the right spot," Ares said, chest vibrating against Charles' back and head.

Letting out a throaty laugh, Charles said, "I could get used to this."

Chuckling, Cammus dug his talons deeper into Charles' ass, making him buck his hips before doing it again. Charles reached up, kneading at the back of Ares' neck, pulling a growl from the turian. Sliding his hand into Charles' boxers, Ares gently dragged his talons over Charles' balls and shaft before stroking his cock. He sucked in a ragged breath, grip tightening on both turians, making Cammus growl and bite a little harder still.

Pumping his hand up and down a few times first, Ares bent down enough to rumble against Charles' ear. "And what is first on the list of things we're going to show him?"
Throat dry, Charles licked his lips. "I don't think he's ever seen a human cock before, let alone touched one. Tasted one." Christ, he wanted to know what Cammus' tongue felt like wrapped around his cock.

Pausing in his licking and nipping just barely long enough for Charles to notice, Cammus hummed in agreement. Head nodding softly against Charles, Ares released his cock and pushed down his pants and boxers, bracing Charles as he stepped out of them and kicked them aside. Ares ran his hands back up his body, talons teasing his skin before stepping back and moving to stand behind Cammus.

"We wouldn't want him to miss out," Ares said as he wrapped his hands around Cammus' waist, massaging rhythmically, pulling a series of growls and rumbles from the other turian who let go of Charles, allowing Ares to tug him back. "He's most sensitive around and on the head of his cock."

Gaze trailing over Charles, mandibles fluttering lightly, Cammus tilted his head to the side a little as he took in Charles below the waist. Flicking a mandible, he glanced up meeting Charles' gaze before looking down again.

Charles smirked and repeated what he'd said to Cammus about Eezo, "It won't hurt you."

His smirk shifted into a toothy grin at Ares' rumbling chuckle and the amused flick of Cammus' mandible before wrapping his hand around his cock, and Cammus watched intently as Charles stroked himself. After a few passes, Cammus reached for him, and he let the turian take over. It took Cammus a few strokes to get it right, but when he did, Charles closed his eyes for just a second, licking his lips and moaning. Cammus glanced back at Ares, a questioning rumble in his throat.

Ares growled and leaned in close to speak, subvocals low and thick with his arousal. "Swirl the pad of your thumb over the tip of his cock. Tease him with the slight drag of your talons."

Tilting his head back, Charles closed his eyes and soaked in the sensations as Cammus did as he was told, thumb brushing over Charles' frenulum before sweeping around the tip of his cock with each stroke. Hearing Cammus let out a soft, curious sounding trill, Charles opened his eyes and looked down, wondering what brought the sound from the man. Cammus' thumb stopped for a moment, poised over the head of Charles' cock where precum started to build up, but then Cammus slowly swiped over it, spreading it around, adding a slickness that made Charles moan, nearly a whimper.

Putting a hand on Cammus' shoulder, Charles gently pushed downward and said, "Taste it."

Rumbling before taking what sounded like a steadying breath, Cammus lowered himself to his knees in front of Charles.

"Leave your jaw relaxed. Curl your tongue around him." Ares looked up at Charles and smirked. "Turian tongues are much more flexible than humans," he said, and Charles stuck his tongue out at Ares, earning him a flick of Ares' mandible as he finished talking, "and they love that."

Charles chuckled. "That we do."

Taking another deep breath, Cammus leaned in, tongue wrapping around Charles' cock before the rest of his mouth. Charles groaned and grabbed Ares' waist, wanting to touch his turian. Feeling teeth scrape along his shaft sent a rush through Charles, instantly filling his mind with images of blood pouring out of Aiden's slit throat. He let out a little hiss, shaking his head and fighting to push the images away.

Bringing a hand down to lay on Cammus' shoulder, he swallowed, licked his lips, and said, "Not so much with the teeth there, it's … not a place you want to take me."

Ares gave him an agreeing rumble, gripping Cammus crest. Instantly the bloody images vanished, Charles' heart stuttering against his ribs with the sudden threat of terror, but Ares only gave the turian a squeeze as if in warning before letting go again, bringing his gaze to Charles. He cupped Charles' chin and leaned closer, shoving his tongue into Charles' mouth, chasing the spark of fear away with his rough kiss before it built into something more.

After a few moments, Ares pulled back and with a dark, lustful voice whispered, "Will you be taking him first or he taking you?"

Charles glanced down at the turian who'd slowed down on sucking his cock, smiling when he found Cammus looking back up at him. "I think I'll take him."

Humming and nodding, Ares left them to go to the bedside table. He came back with the bottle of lube and squeezed some onto his hand. "Cammus, we're moving to the bed." He chuckled, tossing the bottle onto the mattress. "You can continue there."

Cammus released Charles, and Charles held out a hand to help him back to his feet. Flicking his mandibles, he met Charles' gaze, the question clear in his eyes as he stood.

Charles smiled, wrapping an arm around the turian's waist and turning him toward the bed. "Yes,
you did that well, and yes, this is your choice." He figured the man didn't really need coddling, but with as new as everything was to Cammus and as nervous as he seemed, it made Charles feel better to keep reminding the turian he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to do.

Glancing over his shoulder at Charles, Cammus hummed before nodding and pushed his pants the rest of the way down, Charles' hands on his waist while he stepped out of them. Despite what Ares said, Charles moved behind Cammus when he crawled up on the bed, resting on hands and knees. He stayed a little off to the side, leaving Ares room to work as he sat down on the edge of the bed next to Charles, but he wanted to enjoy the show. Cammus turned a little, watching the two of them, mandibles fluttering nervously against his jowls, so Charles rubbed his hands over the turian, hoping to get him relaxed.

Ares ran a talon along Cammus' spine, letting out an amused rumble when Cammus purred but continued to watch them. He glanced at Charles. "Light touches will help him relax." Thrumming, he looked at Cammus with a smirk. "We want this to be good, not fuck it up by being tense."

Duh.

Cocking an eyebrow, Charles bit back his snarky response, amused Ares of all people would talk to him about being gentle. Still, he wasn't quite able to keep the sarcasm from his voice when he muttered, "Uh huh." Winking at Cammus earned him a confused mandible flutter, making him chuckle. "Well, I'll go over that one another time." Moving with a gentle caress, he stroked his hands over the turian's back and cowl before trailing back down along his spine. He glanced at Ares, raising another smartass eyebrow.

Ignoring Charles, Ares gripped Cammus' hip and circled his asshole with a lube covered finger. All snark evaporating, Charles licked his lips, throat drying as he watched, and reached under Cammus to wrap a hand around the turian's cock when Ares slid his finger inside. Tensing, Cammus let out a hiss and soft growl, Ares flicking his mandible in response. Cammus shifted, lowering himself closer to the bed and started to relax, making Charles adjust to keep his grip while he worked his hand back and forth along the turian's length. Ares hummed, easing his finger back out before pushing in again, building a slow rhythm to loosen Cammus for Charles' cock.

When Cammus let out a throaty groan, Charles smiled and stretched out a little more, running his free hand over Ares' side before making his way down to stroke the man's cock with slow, lazy movements. Giving him a low growl, Ares leaned over to kiss Charles, as rough and demanding as always. A hungry moan escaped him, and he pressed his tongue against Ares' tooth, using the sharp point to draw a pinprick of blood before deepening the kiss. Cammus shifted, a curious, almost concerned thrum coming from him, letting Charles know he'd caught the scent despite how little and how contained the blood had been. Tightening his grip on the turian's cock, he stroked a little faster, a little harder, and Cammus rumbled.

Ares curled his tongue around Charles' once more before ending the kiss. "He's ready," he said as he pulled his finger from Cammus' ass and moved out of the way.

"I'll need more lube." Charles smirked. "Human here, don't make my own." He let go of Cammus' cock before smearing the turian's natural lubricant over his own, doing the same with what Ares left on his other hand, too. Still, he held his hand out for the bottle, just in case as he moved into position.

Ares chuckled, the sound thick with hunger, and grabbed the bottle from the bed, but instead of handing it to Charles, he squeezed some into his own hand. Taking ahold of Charles' cock, he coated Charles with slow strokes. Letting out a moan, Charles tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He reached out, feeling his way to Cammus' opening and slid a finger inside, making sure he stayed loose.

Releasing Charles, Ares stretched out next to them, apparently intent on watching. Charles smirked, moving closer to Cammus as he pulled his finger out and lined himself up. He gripped the man's hip with one hand, holding onto himself with the other as he slowly eased inside, watching as the hole stretched and then closed around the head of his cock, so tight and hot. Blood poured over Ethan's face. He stayed like that for a second, letting go of his cock and bringing his other hand to Cammus' other hip.

Gently tugging the turian down inside, Charles took his time easing inside, letting himself adjust as much as Cammus. Cole howled in pain as Charles slammed the prybar against his hand, sparks flying up from where the metal connected with the concrete. It'd been quite some time since he'd been the one doing the penetrating, he'd almost forgotten how fucking good it felt. Cammus started to tense about halfway in, so Charles sucked in a deep breath, trying to clear his head, and stopped, rubbing his hands over the man's hips, waist, and back.

Once Cammus relaxed again, Charles pressed on, moving even slower until he was as deep inside the turian as possible, letting out a moan and fighting the urge to start bucking his hips right away. He waited a few more seconds, making sure Cammus was comfortable before he pulled back, moving slow, watching his cock sliding in and out of Cammus. He didn't pick up his pace until he heard the man let out a pleasure-filled rumble, and when he did, Charles heard Ares growl.

Cammus started to move against Charles, picking up his rhythm, and Charles tilted his head back,
scraping his teeth over his lips, trying to fight back the images, growing more intense with his need for release. He moved a little faster, heat surrounding him, squeezing him with each thrust. Recognition sparked and fear blazed in Harvey's eyes, and Charles reared back, slashing his razor across the man's face. Leaning forward, he shook his head a little, grabbing ahold of Cammus' shoulder, giving himself more leverage. So hot and wet, he needed more, faster, harder. Anthony whimpered, prayers tumbling from his lips, and Charles punched him in the face, razor wrapped tight in his fist. He fucked the turian harder still, hands on Cammus' hip and shoulder driving the turian back down on his cock.

Charles clenched his jaw, fighting to keep control over himself, but he knew he was tipping further and further over the edge into darkness, tempting fate as he spiraled out more than ever before. Somewhere in the distant recesses of his mind, he heard Cammus let out a low growl, but he thought it sounded like the turian enjoyed himself. He forced his eyes open, thinking maybe closing them only made it worse, but it didn't matter. Freddy tried to take a swing at Charles, but Ares snapped his wrist, and he let out the most delicious scream. Charles slammed into Cammus, again and again, harder and harder, reaching for the blood-soaked light waiting for him at the end.

The bed shifted next to him, but he didn't care. Ares traced the razor over James' eyelids before hooking the blade into the socket, popping the eyeball free and caught it, holding it up for Charles to see. Fingers wrapped around Charles' chin, forcing his head around, and a growl tore through his chest, ripping its way free from his throat. He blinked, vision red as if he had blood in his eyes, and for a second he didn't recognize the dark-plated turian in front of him, holding onto his face, giving him a questioning rumble. A taloned hand gripped his hip, forcing him to slow down. Charles took a deep breath as his mind fully registered Ares, what he was doing and why. It took every ounce of his willpower to heed Ares' warning, but he did, letting his hand drop from Cammus' shoulder.

One glance at Cammus—the turian looking over his shoulder at Charles, a heavy wariness to his gaze—was all it took for Charles' veins to turn to ice, chasing away the heat and bloodlust. Shame washed over him, and for one, wild second, he nearly pulled away to run to the bathroom, wanting to lock himself inside with his razor. He felt sick, disgusted with himself. "Sorry," he muttered, lowering his gaze and running his hand over Cammus' back, though he wasn't sure whether he tried to soothe the turian or himself.

When he glanced up again, he felt relieved to see Cammus flutter his mandibles, his gaze relaxing once more. He didn't pull away from Charles or tell him to stop, so he stayed there, hesitant and not really sure what he should do. After a moment, Cammus slowly rocked his hips, moving against Charles and pulling a groan from him. He started moving again, taking it real slow, making damn sure he kept control of himself. Glancing at Ares, he hoped his gaze conveyed the depth of gratitude he felt for the turian's interference. Ares backed away a little, giving them room, but he didn't return to his previous reclining position.

After a couple of minutes, feeling more confident, Charles built back up to a more reasonable pace. Rolling his shoulders and his head on his neck, he worked to loosen some of the tension still keeping his muscles tight. It wasn't long until he felt close to cumming again, and he locked his gaze on Cammus, forcing himself to keep his eyes opened, watching the turian for any sign of discomfort as well as trying to anchor himself in the present.

Feeling his scrotum tighten, balls pulling up closer to his body, he moved just a little faster, sucking in a ragged breath. It hit him hard. Hands clamping down around the man's hips, Charles threw his head back and closed his eyes as he slammed into Cammus, letting out a loud, growling grunt of a noise. He slowed to lazier thrusts, grinding his hips as the last bit of cum pushed out of him, filling the turian's ass. His head dropped forward to hang between his slumped shoulders, and Cammus let out a low, rumbling purr. Charles opened his eyes, meeting the turian's gaze and squeezed his hips.

After a moment, Charles eased out of Cammus and stretched out on the bed next to him. Voice low—though he knew Ares still heard either way—he asked, "You alright?"

Cammus flicked a mandible. "I think I should be asking you that question."

His gaze looked clear, no sign of pain or fear, not even a hint of anger or betrayal, and it eased the tightness refusing to leave Charles' chest, pulling a soft snort from him. He turned his attention back to Ares.

Ares flicked a mandible at him before looking at Cammus. Running the tips of his talons down the younger turian's spine, he asked, "You ready to go again?"

Cammus let out a hesitant sounding rumble and glanced over his shoulder at Ares. "That depends … are you going to be rougher than him?"

Charles winced.

Ares hummed, seeming to consider the question, and looked at Charles before saying, "No." He chuckled, the sound still rough with his arousal. "I think you should be able to walk tomorrow."

Charles winced again, scrunching up his face when he looked back at Cammus as the turian
After a moment, Charles asked, "What's on your mind?"

Shifting a little, Cammus leaned over and nipped at Charles' shoulder, leaving his mouth against Charles' skin as he asked, "What was it you said earlier?" He scraped his teeth over Charles again and let out a soft purr. "Not nearly as breakable as you might think?"

Charles chuckled, reaching up to dig his fingers into the back of Cammus' head. "Fair enough."

Purring again, Cammus pulled back and glanced at Ares again, giving him a nod to go ahead. Thrumming, Ares moved into position behind Cammus with a smirk and laid a hand on the man's hip as he lined himself up. He seemed to take his time, giving Cammus a chance to adjust to the different size and shape of Ares' cock. Cammus let out a little hiss as Ares moved deeper, but his gaze locked on Charles, and he saw the arousal in the turian's eyes. Smirking, Charles shifted up to his knees, kneeling next to the turian and grabbing his crest, tilting his head down before biting into the back of his neck. Cammus let out a low, long growl and pushed against Ares.

Ares picked up his pace, jostling them enough for Cammus' breath to hitch. Licking and nipping at Cammus' neck, Charles moved down, working his way over the turian's cowl, shoulders, and back until he reached Cammus' waist. He sunk his teeth into hide as he slid his hand around Cammus' cock again. Starting slow, he worked his way up to match Ares' pace, savoring the sounds of both turian's growls, and Cammus rumbled, moving himself a little faster against Ares.

Ares snarled and leaned over, his sudden presence urging Charles out of his way as he pressed his keel against Cammus' chest. Biting into the man's cowl, he growled, bucking fast enough to knock the breath from Cammus with each thrust. Cammus let out a mildly pained growl, but he didn't tell Ares to stop. Wondering just how rough he must've been with Cammus himself if the turian seemed more content with the way Ares was fucking him, Charles hesitated. But watching Ares bite into Cammus, hearing the loud slap of Ares' thighs, Charles' cock started to harden again. He worked his hand faster over the turian's cock, squeezing and twisting with each pass.

Growl starting low but getting increasingly louder, Ares removed his teeth, licking at Cammus' neck before saying, "Cum. Show us how much you like it."

Hearing the words leave Ares' mouth, subvocals drenched in pleasure, Charles' breath caught in his throat, cock growing fully erect once more: He sped up his movements further, determined to make Cammus cum for Ares. Within a few seconds, Cammus growled, the sound far more primal than anything else they'd heard out of him all night, and he bucked his hips into Charles' hand, cum pouring out of him. Charles slowed, milking the last of the thick fluid from the turian's cock, savoring the way he twitched and shuddered, head hanging between his shoulders.

Ares let out a low snarl, gaze flicking to Charles before speaking next to Cammus' head. "You're going to smell like us for days."

Charles smirked, and Cammus chuffed, fluttering his mandibles and catching his breath. Ares chuckled and pushed back on his knees, gripping Cammus' hips with both hands. He shifted his rhythm, focused solely on fucking Cammus until he came, tensing and growling. Charles let go of Cammus, wiping his hand over the sheet before moving over to Ares. Grabbing the turian's face while he rode out the last of his orgasm, Charles turned the man toward himself. Locking his lips over Ares' mouth, he shoved his tongue past the turian's mouth plates. Ares thrummed into Charles' mouth, tongue wrapping around his as he gave Cammus a few more shallow thrusts of his hips.

Charles felt Cammus pull away and roll over, but he kept his attention on the feel of Ares' panting breath and tongue brushing over his. Running his hands down over Ares neck and chest, settling on his keel, he broke away from the kiss and whispered against Ares' mouth, "You. Are. So. Fucking. Hot."

Ares huffed a breathless laugh. "I know it."

Grinning, Charles gave Ares another peck of a kiss. "I want to go get cleaned up." He glanced over his shoulder at Cammus who'd moved to his back, watching the two of them with curiosity. "And I'm taking him with me." He turned back to Ares with a grin. "We'll be back, so be ready for more." Leaning in, he nipped at the edge of Ares' mandible.

Ares snarled, tongue darting out to lick the mandible where Charles bit him as he nodded and got up from the bed. "I can wash with the kitchen sink." He looked at Cammus and jerked his head toward the bathroom. "I barely fit in the shower alone. Plus, I'm going to get something to eat."

Chuckling, Charles held a hand out to Cammus, and he flicked a mandible, taking Charles' hand and rolling over to his knees to crawl across the bed as Charles stood. Charles gave the turian a soft smile and led him to the bathroom, starting the shower and grabbing a rag from the shelf. Once he got the temperature where he wanted, he stepped inside, clearing the way for the turian. Cammus hummed and joined him as Charles picked up the soap, working it into a lather in the washcloth. Charles nodded toward the shelf where Ares kept a jar of the gritty cream crap he used to wash with, the label reading 'cleansing scrub'. He watched as Cammus picked it up, opening it before scooping some out and working it into his plates, not quite meeting Charles' gaze.

After a moment, Charles asked, "What's on your mind?"
"This …" Cammus hummed, letting out a soft chuckle and shaking his head. "… I didn't expect any of this when I started my job."

Charles' laugh echoed in the shower. "Afraid it's going to be awkward tomorrow?"

Cammus hummed, nodding his head as he washed.

"Doesn't have to be." Charles stepped back under the water, rinsing himself off and watched as Cammus seemed to relax a little. "Can I ask you something?"

Flaring his mandibles, Cammus glanced up, meeting Charles' gaze and gave him a brief nod.

"What made you decide to come with us tonight?" Charles ran his hands over his chest until the slickness of soap disappeared.

Cammus took a deep breath and hummed, a slow, almost shy smile pulling at his mouth plates. "I told you I want to try new things."

Charles chuckled. "That it?"

Humming again, Cammus looked down, focusing on working the cleansing scrub into his plates. "No, not exactly."

Charles remained quiet, waiting him out.

"I haven't been able to really connect with anyone on the Citadel. Even the other turians I've met, everyone seems too busy or wrapped up in their own thing to care about anyone else." He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably, mandibles jerking a little. "You're the first person I've felt like I can relax around since being here, and Aelianus didn't really seem like your average turian."

Lifting an eyebrow, Charles asked, "Did you think if you didn't agree to come I'd act differently toward you?"

Cammus' gaze flicked to Charles before shifting away again. "No, not at all."

"Good." Charles let the silence sit for a few seconds as he finished rinsing himself. "Are you glad you came?"

"That depends." Cammus chuckled, the sound soft, maybe a little nervous.

"Oh?" Charles asked, sucking on his teeth.

"On what made you …" Cammus' mandibles fluttered and he hesitated before continuing, "… smell so different."

Charles swallowed, turning his face up to the water and scrubbing his hands over his face before looking back at Cammus. He thought about asking what exactly he smelled like while he lost himself the way he did because he knew it was what Cammus meant, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. Something told him he didn't really want to know. "It wasn't anything you did. I've just got some fucked up shit in my head sometimes. Memories of things I'd rather not talk about."

Cammus let out a thoughtful sounding hum. "I'm glad I came."

Charles smiled, moving out from under the water to pick up the jar of scrub and squatted in front of the turian, scooping out some of the cleanser before handing the jar to Cammus. The man flared his mandibles, raising his brow plates as Charles started working the cream into his thighs. Smirking, Charles focused on moving down over the front of Cammus' legs before making his way up the back, smiling at the sharp hiss of breath the man let out as Charles' massaged the cream into his spurs. He made another pass before working up the back of the man's thighs and stood, seeing the heat in Cammus' eyes as he turned the turian around by the shoulders, setting to work on Cammus' back. He felt the last of the tension melt away from both of them, and by the time he eased Cammus under the water, the man's groin plates had started to part.

Smiling, Charles ran his hands over Cammus, rinsing him. When he reached the seam in the man's plates, Charles traced around the head of the turian's cock sticking out through the center, not quite making contact as he dragged his fingers over the edge of the plates. "You think you're ready to tell us what you like? Show us what you want?"

Cammus let out a little growl, bringing his hands to Charles' waist and pushing him back against the wall. Charles grinned, pressed the palm of his hand against Cammus' parted plates, and started rubbing. Leaning in, Cammus scraped his teeth over Charles' pulse, plates slipping further apart.

"Let me fuck you," Cammus said against Charles' throat, somewhere between a growl and a whisper, barely heard over the shower.

Charles brought a hand up to knead the back of Cammus' head when the turian reached down, wrapping his hand around Charles' cock. He thought about it for a few seconds and said, "Alright. Let's get out of here, then."
After drying off, they made their way back to the bedroom. Ares stood in there, just past the door, finishing off the last of whatever he’d found to eat. Charles didn’t pay it any attention, just dragged his hand over Ares’ keel and grinned as he passed him by, going over to the bed and climbing up.

Glancing over his shoulder at Cammus, he asked, "Do you have a preference in position?"

Cammus’ gaze roamed over Charles before he said, "How I was."

Moving up a little more onto the bed, Charles turned over, getting on hands and knees. He stroked himself with one hand while he watched Cammus. The turian hummed, moving to the bed and picking up the bottle of lube. Charles glanced at Ares, seeing him throw back his head as he swallowed down his last bite.

When he caught Ares’ gaze, Charles nodded toward the head of the bed. "Come here."

Giving him a seductive growl, Ares moved to the bed, climbing up and then helped to support Charles as they situated themselves. Ares settled in front of him, legs spread around him, cock out, ready and waiting just as Charles asked. He ran his hand over Charles’ head, pulling a smile from him before dropping the hand to Charles’ shoulder. Licking his lips, Charles lowered his mouth to Ares’ cock, taking his time, willing his throat to relax.

Cammus prodded Charles’ asshole before slipping a finger inside, careful with his talons, and Charles abandoned his own cock to wrap his hand around Ares’ instead, adding a twisting motion with each up and down pass of his lips and tongue. Ares gave him a rumbling purr, running his hand over Charles’ head again. Charles froze for half a second, his heart skipping a beat in warning, but he started moving again before Ares had the chance to worry about having upset them. They’d established the rules of what he could tolerate while giving head, and he trusted Ares to not make the same mistake twice. He didn’t think he’d ever stop feeling at least a little panic, though, whenever someone touched his head while he sucked them off.

After a minute, Charles knew he was plenty loose, but the turian behind him kept his finger inside, probably sating his curiosity over having a new species on display in front of him. Charles didn’t blame him, he’d been there himself before, but he leaned back into Cammus’ hand to get the turian moving. The finger disappeared, and a moment later, he lined himself up. He took his time easing inside of Charles, and Charles moaned around Ares’ cock, soaking in the sting of scar tissue stretching around the unfamiliar cock in his ass.

Ares lowered his hand to Charles’, pulling it away from his cock and bringing it to his waist, and Charles squeezed with well-practiced pressure. Ares’ rumbling stuttered for a moment before he let out a low growl and moved his hand back to Charles’ shoulder. "Shift your weight. Reach around him and jack him off to your thrusts. If you can get him off first, you can feel him tighten around you."

Cammus rumbled, and a moment later, Charles felt him do as he was told, shifting his weight so his keel pressed into Charles’ back, hand wrapping around his cock. Charles hummed around Ares’ cock, increasing his suction as he bobbed his head. Cammus brought him right to the edge, but he couldn't quite find the place he needed to tip over, not without letting his mind go back to the blood and gore. He really didn’t want that, not after how he acted earlier.

He pulled his mouth away from Ares’ cock to look up at the turian and whisper, "Use your talons."

Ares smirked, letting out a thrum Charles felt more than heard. "As you wish, so is my command."

Chuckling softly, Charles grinned before wrapping his mouth back around Ares’ cock. He lost himself in the feel of Ares’ talons scraping over his back and shoulder, hand squeezing the welts, and he started to buck his hips, forcing himself harder against Cammus. The turian picked up speed and tightened his grip on Charles’ cock. The growl coming from Cammus, vibrating against Charles’ back, didn’t give him the same thrill as if coming from Ares, but it was really hot and egged Charles on. Probably trying to regain some control, Cammus dug his talons into Charles’ hip, but the fresh sting of pain mixing with Ares’ hands on him, scratching and squeezing, and the taste of Ares in his mouth threw Charles over the edge. He bucked harder as he came undone, letting out a strangled cry around Ares as he came all over Cammus’ hand and the bed.

Ares’ breathy, amused purr shifted into a low growl as he flexed his hand, pressing his talons into Charles’ shoulder, sending another shock of pleasure through him. One of his hands left Charles, and a moment later, Cammus snarled, slamming into Charles with hard thrusts before letting out another growl, tensing and burying himself deep inside. Charles picked up the pace, scraping his teeth over the cock in his mouth as he sucked and squeezed Ares’ side harder.

When Cammus withdrew, moving to stretch out on the bed, Charles pulled his knees in closer to his chest to support himself and brought his other hand to Ares’ wound. Squeezing and digging his fingers into the cut, he built himself into a fever pitch, desperate to feel Ares come unraveled for just those few seconds as he came. Ares let out a groan, the sound a mix of pleasure and pain, and fresh blood slickened Charles’ fingertips. Ares’ talons kneaded into his shoulder a few times before he pushed against Charles, urging him back. He knew, in the back of his mind, Ares did it
because he was close to cumming and didn't want to choke him, but he didn't care and refused to give much ground. And what he did lose, he soon regained, picking up speed and taking Ares in deeper despite the man's efforts, sending him over the edge.

Letting out a grinding growl, vibrating through both their bodies, Ares came, and Charles swallowed it right down. The light, almost spasmodic twitches of Ares' hips told Charles the turian fought to keep from bucking harder and thrusting himself into Charles' mouth. So, he kept going, moving slower but taking Ares in as deep as he could, helping to chase those last waves of the man's orgasm, swallowing every last drop he gave Charles. Tense muscles relaxing, Ares muttered something under his breath too low for Charles' translator to pick up, but he had a feeling it definitely wasn't anything bad.

Finally releasing Ares, he licked his lips and pushed up to kneeling. Leaning in, he gave Ares a quick kiss, but the man wrapped his hand around Charles' neck and pulled him back in, pushing his tongue past Charles' lips to swirl around his. A moment later, Cammus let out a curious trill, and Ares purred into Charles' mouth just before letting him pull away. Licking his mandible, Ares looked over at Cammus and let out a confused hum before relaxing against the pillows.

Charles turned to his side, lying against Ares' chest and looked to see what brought the noise from Cammus. He found the other turian rolled over, propped on one elbow with the fingers of his other hand resting on Ares' wrist as he studied the word carved into the hide along Ares' forearm. Charles smiled when Cammus' mandibles fluttered a few times, brow plates turning inward, and he let out another confused sounding trill.

Charles reached over, running his fingers slowly, reverently, over the letters of his name, and simply said, "He's mine."

Ares purred, and Charles glanced up to see him still watching Cammus, flicking his mandibles. "Better speak your confusion. I'm in a good mood, so it won't kill you to ask." His voice was light, carrying humor, despite the very real threat Ares' posed if he didn't like what the other turian said.

Charles snorted and muttered, "Be nice."

Removing his hand from Ares, Cammus shifted to sit up, pulling one leg up to rest his hand on his knee while the other stayed folded and pressed against the mattress. He looked back and forth between Ares and Charles, mandibles fluttering softly. "I've just never … most turians wouldn't intentionally scar themselves … outside of a bondmark."

Ares hummed as if considering his response. "Only conventional turians stick to that shit." He shrugged. "I come from a family of very unconventional turians, it seems."

Charles let out another soft snort, bringing his hand back to the scars to trace his name again. "Besides, he didn't intentionally scar himself, he made me do it."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles, raising a brow plate.

Chuckling, Ares shrugged again. "His teeth certainly weren't going to make a big enough mark, so I improvised."

"You two are bonded, then?" Cammus asked, the other brow plate lifting up to join the first.

Charles got very still but didn't say anything, watching Ares out of the corner of his eye.

Ares flicked his mandibles a few times, a low buzzing sound in this throat. "I guess you could call it that," he finally said. "It doesn't fit the definition, but if you want to be technical."

A flurry of emotions rushed through Charles, some part of him felt absolutely elated at hearing Ares' words but other parts overwhelmed, maybe a little scared and confused. They still hadn't really talked about their relationship, what exactly it meant to either of them. Hell, Charles hadn't even told Ares that he loved him, and Ares certainly didn't say it to Charles. And words spoken when put on the spot like that, especially while Ares used an alias … it was just really something they needed to talk about together, alone.

Still, he had to hide his stupid grin against Ares' keel. He kissed Ares' chest and muttered, "It doesn't really matter what anyone else wants to call it. You're mine. I'm yours."

Ares growled, the sound possessive, and he shifted just slightly, pressing Charles tighter to his side.
Charles got called into work a couple hours early; Irene told him Okal felt sick and needed to go home. Since he'd already clocked twelve hours of overtime during the current pay period, she didn't want him getting any more than necessary, so she told him to adjust the day's schedule accordingly and leave early, too. He'd grumbled the entire time as he showered and dressed before scarfing down an asari pastry—something he found in the cabinet but didn't entirely remember buying. He'd taken Eezo for a quick walk around the block, it was the best he could do in such a hurry, and then he made sure she had food and water before pushing up on his toes to kiss Ares goodbye.

Okal looked miserable when he got there, and she didn't waste any time clocking out and heading home. It left Charles there by himself, bored out of his mind, for an hour until Mahlia showed up. Whatever issues the asari had with him taking over Ares as a customer the day before seemed put aside as she smiled at him, passing through the store to clock in.

When she came back out, she took up station next to her console and turned to look at him, leaning her hip against the counter. "I thought Okal was working this morning?"

"Got called in to replace her," he said, turning to mirror her posture, "she went home sick."

"Oh. I hope she's okay." Mahlia watched him for a minute before letting out an exasperated scoff and waving her hand. "You stole a customer from me yesterday." She crossed her arms and huffed. "I can't believe you're not even going to apologize! I looked at the logs, Charles. That sale should've been mine."

Okay … maybe not.

He sighed and reached up, scratching the side of his head. "Yeah … sorry about that." Dropping his hand, he slipped it into his pocket, the cool metal of his razor right there, offering him a comforting touch. "I kind of know the guy."

"It didn't sound like you knew him," she said, raising a brow.

"I was trying to stay professional." He brought both shoulders up in a shrug. "I'm supposed to be helping Cammus learn how to deal with customers."

Mahlia pressed her lips together, staring at him for a few seconds before she sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Fine. Goddess, what was with the way he looked at me?"

He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. "Uhhhh, I think that might've been because of the way you looked at me."

"Oh." Furrowing her brow, she scraped her teeth over her lip. "Well, sorry."

"Yeah, me too," he said, giving her a smile.

She returned it and sighed again. "I called Lindsey … we're going to meet for lunch today."

"Yeah?" he asked, flashing his teeth at her in a grin and crossing his arms.

Turning back to her console, cheeks a little flushed, she scraped her teeth over her lip. "Yes, but it's just lunch," she said, glancing at him, "it doesn't mean anything."

He snorted and pushed away from the counter. "I'm going to go smoke, we've been dead so far since I got here. Call me if you need me." He stopped next to the break room door to glance back at her. "Hey, Mahlia?" He waited for her to turn around and look at him, and then he smiled. "It's really cute when you blush."

She scoffed, rolling her eyes but smiled. "Be quiet, go take your break."

Irene stationed Cammus in the back, restocking the last of the rearranged shelves, so Charles didn't get the chance to say much to him since he'd arrived. When his lunch hour rolled around, Charles went to the storage room, stepping in far enough for the door to close behind him and leaned against the table. He didn't see the man anywhere, but the storage room was pretty big.

"Cammus?" he called out, letting his voice carry.

A moment later the turian stepped into view from behind a shelf halfway to the back. He fluttered his mandibles, mouth plates shifting into a smile. "Do you need help up front?"

"Nah," Charles said, shaking his head. "I'm on my way to lunch. Wanted to see if you'd like to
join me?"

Cammus nodded and started walking to Charles. "Sure. Do you have a place in mind?"

Grinning, Charles shrugged. "Did you like the place you took me to the other day?"

"I thought they were pretty good," Cammus said with a nod and flutter of his mandibles.

"Works for me." Charles turned when the turian reached him, opening the door again. "My treat this time."

Cammus chuckled, following him over to the employee kiosk. "You two paid last night."

"Mmm." Charles tilted his head to the side and activated his account. "He paid."

"You're bonded, or well, whatever the two of you actually consider it." Cammus waved a hand. "So, what's the difference?"

Charles shrugged and clocked out. "He has his money, I have mine."

Cammus hummed, stepping over to the kiosk when Charles got out of the way. "And you don't want to be a 'kept man?'"

Laughing, Charles tucked his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall. "I just don't want him breaking my shit as an excuse to upgrade it."

"You really think he did it on purpose?" Cammus asked with a chuckle.

Charles blew a raspberry. "Hell, yes."

Charles barely got the door closed behind him before Ares rushed in from the balcony, charcoal black plates with vivid, red colony markings covering his face. He only had a second to process the fact Ares wore a suit before the turian disappeared around the corner. He walked down the hall to look around the edge of the wall, blinking at Ares.

"Put these on." Ares grabbed a wardrobe bag from the breakfast bar and shoved it against Charles' chest. "Hurry up."

Dumbfounded, Charles stood there a moment, staring at him, taking in the man's clothes while he processed what he'd just been told to do. He looked down at the bag then back at Ares. "No shower first?" he asked, already kicking off his shoes and opening the bag, finding a nice suit inside, the color pretty closely matching Ares' prosthetic plates and the paint he'd used to cover the silver hue of his natural plates.

"How smelly can you get working a counter?" Ares lifted a brow plate before his nose shifted a few times. "You don't even smell, so don't waste time."

Charles gave him a mock salute, heading to the bedroom. "You're the boss. Mind telling me what exactly your plan is here?"

Ares followed him, clearly fidgety. "I rented an extended stay hotel room on the Presidium. We can watch the ceremony from there."

Tossing the bag on the bed, Charles started stripping off his clothes. Eezo ran into the room, pawing at his legs, and he reached down, rubbing his hand over her head. "Sorry, girl," he muttered. "You'll have to stay here." He'd have a mess to clean up later, but he'd gotten her some of those little absorbent pads for her to not piss and shit on them but everywhere else instead. He glanced up at Ares, finding the turian nervously pacing, as he started to get dressed. "When's it start?"

"Two hours." Ares didn't look up from the floor, his mandibles flicking in agitation. "We need to get to the hotel."

Charles thought it sounded like more than enough time, but he still got dressed as fast as he could without ripping a hole in the damn suit. Why the hell did he have to wear a suit? "Did you go through my clothes to find the right size?"

"Of course I did." Ares sounded affronted. "I wasn't wasting credits on a suit that wouldn't fit."

Closing the buttons on his shirt, Charles grinned and said, "I'm so a kept man. I don't know if I have shoes nice enough to not stand out with this."

Ares hummed and turned to Charles, moving closer to look him over. His mandibles flicked a few times before he pulled them to his jaw with a click as he scrutinized Charles. "There's a box of shoes in the living room. You can wear those." He ran his talons through Charles' hair—though God only knew what he thought he was trying to do.

Chuckling, Charles purred a little at the touch despite knowing it wasn't really an affectionate
gesture. "When did you become a human stylist?"

He pulled away when Ares seemed done fucking up his hair and grabbed a pair of dress socks from his drawer. He figured he'd probably end up with blisters on his feet before the night was through from wearing new shoes he didn't even get to try on first, and of course, Ares would have something to say about it, something about humans being weak. He made his way to the living room to find a box of shoes sitting on the breakfast bar and carried them over to the couch.

"We need to look like we actually belong on the Presidium, even if it's just to get to the hotel." Ares moved to the breakfast bar, drumming his talons on the surface as he watched Charles put on and tie his shoes. "We can't stand out. It's just ingrained."

Charles glanced up at him again and then back to his feet, hiding his amused smirk. He stood and made his way to the bathroom, despite Ares' annoyed huff. "Ew, no," he muttered looking at his hair in the mirror before grabbing his comb to fix it. When he came back out, he held his arms out to the side, during a slow turn, a smirk on his face. "Do I pass?"

"Good enough for me." Waving for him to get going, Ares headed for the door and paused outside, waiting for him to catch up. "Course, I have no idea what humans are supposed to look like when they 'clean up.'"

"That was almost sweet," Charles said as he made his way out to the hall and glanced back at Ares. "You look good."

Ares' mandibles fluttered a few times as he rumbled and locked the door, leaving Charles with the very odd impression he'd just embarrassed Ares. Standing there in silence for a moment before turning, Ares started walking, keeping his gaze forward. Charles smirked filing the reaction away for later consideration; he told Ares he was hot all the time, but thinking about it, he realized it always revolved around sex. Maybe he should start complimenting Ares outside of the bedroom more often. Falling into step next to him, Charles followed him to the elevator.

When they got outside, Ares made his way straight for one of the taxi stands and activated the console. Charles held back a bit, glancing around, trying not to fidget and tug at his suit too much. He felt so totally out of his element. But he looked damn good. Even if Ares couldn't manage to spit the words out. A moment later, Ares stepped back and waited, neither of them really saying anything until a skycar arrived, lowering down to the stand. Charles raised an eyebrow, it wasn't just a skycar, but a fucking Esquiran, which meant Ares spent a lot of extra credits to arrive in style.

Somehow, Ares managed to look even more cramped in the turian designed, sleek, high-class skycar than he did in one of the more standard X3M's the Citadel used. He didn't seem to let it bother him, though, too focused on driving to wherever the hell they were going. Shit, he even appeared completely unaware of the continuous drumming of the talons of his free hand against the vehicle's console.

After a few seconds, Charles reached over and set a hand on Ares' thigh. "Relax, big guy. You look like you're about to explode."

"I decided to have the dagger and chocolates delivered to the ceremony. Anything perishable." Ares said, mandibles flicking sharply against his jaw.

Charles blinked and nodded, the response seeming left-field. Sweeping his gaze over Ares, he tried to figure out just how volatile the man was at the moment, wondering if he'd make it to their hotel room without ripping someone's head off—literally. "Sounds like a good choice. I'm sure she'll be really happy to get them." His stomach rumbled a little, and he suppressed a sigh, a part of him wishing he'd at least had time to relax a little after work and eat dinner.

"You can order room service." Ares shifted from tapping the console to clenching his hand into a fist before relaxing it again, over and over. "They won't question it."

"I decided to have the dagger and chocolates delivered to the ceremony. Anything perishable." Ares said, mandibles flicking sharply against his jaw.

"My sister, who I haven't been able to see in years, who thinks I'm dead, who thinks I'm a traitor, is getting bonded in an elaborate, human-styled wedding ceremony. My entire family will be there, without me, and I won't be close enough to even hear what's happening, let alone join them." Ares made a clicking, buzzing sound before finally looking at Charles. "I'm fine."

Charles blew a raspberry, ignoring the sarcasm as he turned his gaze out the window for a second. "You are not fine. Pretty sure you're going to murder the first hotel clerk who tells you to 'enjoy your stay.'" He glanced at Ares again. "And maybe even me before this is over. So, you might as well talk about it some. Yell if you need to, whatever. Vent some of that shit out before we get there."

"I can't." Ares hummed, the sound carrying an odd pitch. "Not yet. If I do, I really will murder someone. I just need to get to the room, drink as many bottles of fancy alcohol I can, and watch
the ceremony." He flicked his mandible and glanced Charles' way, adding, "But I'll take you up on it there."

Charles tried really hard to not let the smart ass slip out. He had to bite the inside of his lip for a second to keep from saying, 'What yelling or murdering me? Because if that's the route we're going, I have to say I'm not okay with this.' Releasing his lip, he instead said, "Good, maybe it'll help. Hopefully, no one calls C-Sec."

Ares took a deep breath and waved out the window at a looming building. "That's where we'll stay." He pointed off to the right. "That's the ceremony."

Charles turned his head to look out at the small park where a crowd of people already gathered. They weren't close enough for Charles to make much out, but he saw the place had been decorated, bright colors adorned the trees, someone set chairs out, and an archway stood at the far end. He took a slow, deep breath, hoping the whole thing would go smoothly for Ares and make something better for the turian instead of worse. He nodded his head, not really having anything to say at the moment. A little tension crept into his shoulders, and he tried to prepare himself for settling in for the long haul with Ares in a foul mood, probably snapping at him and barking orders as they went.

Ares set the skycar down slowly. Once it's stopped, he turned the Esquiran off and laid his hands on the deactivated dash, lowering his head and closing his eyes. Rumbling softly, he took long, deep breaths. Charles tightened his fingers around Ares' thigh just a fraction. Otherwise, he stayed still and quiet, trying to let Ares do what he needed to in order to prepare himself.

After one, long exhale, Ares lifted his head, face expressionless as he looked at Charles and nodded. "Let's go. I'm good."

Charles squeezed Ares' leg and offered him a smile, returning the nod. "Alright." He pulled his hand away and opened the skycar door, stepping out and away from the vehicle a little to turn and wait for Ares.

As soon as Ares got out and moved around the car to stand beside Charles, a hotel attendant approached, suit pristine and smile wide. "Hello, gentlemen," the man said. "May I get your bags?"

Ares gave him a rumble of greeting and held up a hand, voice smooth as he said, "No need. I already had our things brought in before our arrival."

The attendant nodded, turning a little to hold out a hand to gesture in toward the hotel. With the man's gaze averted, Charles pursed his lips a little and allowed himself the chance to let his gaze roam, taking in the human's broad shoulders and tight ass. The man looked back at the two of them, and Charles' gaze snapped back to his face.

Ares returned the nod, flaring a mandible. "Thank you."

"Of course, sir." The attendant flashed Ares a smile—the same smile Charles slapped on his face fifty times a day at work every time he had to deal with a customer. "Have a pleasant stay."

Oh, so close.

Ares glanced down at Charles, speaking low as the two of them walked up the grand steps of the hotel. "We just need to check in. I really meant it when I said we had some things delivered." He lifted his gaze and said, "You can get into something more comfortable when we get up there."

Brow twitching, Charles thought about all the bad human vids he'd seen with someone always saying something about 'slipping into something more comfortable' and choked the thought down. "Okay ..." He let the word slip out of him, adding a hint of doubt and confusion, wondering if Ares seriously had some of his own, personal clothes sent there.

Empty bags he understood, or he guessed maybe shoving something inside so they had weight, but really what did it matter? He supposed Ares might've just been actually trying to make Charles' more comfortable, and if that was the case, it showed surprising insight and empathy. He didn't need to change his clothes, they weren't planning on killing anyone, so it wasn't like he might need to burn the suit he wore ... unless they were going to kill someone. Humming, he mulled that over as he followed Ares, the thought bringing a smile to his face. Still, he grew increasingly uncomfortable as he took in the flash and pomp of the hotel looming in front of him, and he felt himself slipping back into that old way of moving, stepping lightly and taking in everything around him, noting all the faces, all the cameras, all the places he could bolt to if he needed to make a run for it.

The doors slid open for them at their approach, but still, there were other attendants waiting on either side of the entryway, hands tucked behind their backs, smiling and nodding as Ares and Charles passed. The lobby seemed massive, sprawling with shiny, marble floors. Holy shit, it couldn't be real marble. A place would have to pay a fortune getting that much marble shipped in to the Citadel.

To the left, a long, gold-trimmed counter lined the wall with ... ten fucking receptionists standing
at terminals, smiles plastered on all their faces. On the opposite side of the room stood a row of elevators, each with golden buttons and polished, golden doors. Scattered throughout the middle, he saw nice, plush couches and chairs situated around low tables. They looked so nice, he didn't even think about wanting to sit on one. Yeah, he definitely did not belong in the place, at all. Oh, he'd been in hotels just as nice a handful of times, but never as a paying customer… unless being escorted by some John who brought him in off the streets counted as being a paying customer. Ares led him over to the counter, stopping in front of an asari who barely looked old enough to be considered a maiden.

"Good day, sirs," she said with a smile, dipping her head in greeting. "How may I help you?"

"We have a room under the name 'Setius,'" Ares said, dipping his head and rumbling in a greeting of his own. "I believe I have had our bags delivered ahead of time."

It occurred to Charles that Ares stood with his knees bent a little more than usual, curled in on himself just a touch, making him seem shorter, less imposing. Taking a slow, deep breath, Charles shifted his weight a little, trying to relax, telling himself he was supposed to be at that hotel. He had every right to be there, he was just another customer, checking in with his… damn, he still didn't really know what to call Ares. Even if the only reason they were checking in was to spy on Ares' sister's wedding. There wasn't anything illegal about looking out a window.

The woman typed on her terminal, smile not fading the slightest as her painted nails clicked on the keyboard. "Why, yes. Yes, I see here, Mr. Setius. An interspecies room with amenities for turian and human guests. Is that correct?"

Charles' eyebrow twitched, and he hit back a snort, curious to know what 'amenities' for both turian and human guests the hotel boasted.

"Yes." Ares glanced at Charles and offered him a warm smile, and though it caught him by surprise, the sight automatically pulled a grin from Charles. Ares looked back at the asari. "Are the wine and sampler trays already in the room?"

Wine and sampler trays? Shit, he really did think of everything, didn't he? Fuck, I almost wish this really was just a night for the two of us.

"Yes, sir." She nodded once. "We've delivered them as per your request at eight o'clock." She offered him a clearly fake chuckle. "Your warm h'ordeurves should still be very hot, sir. Please be careful. We wouldn't want to create any inconveniences."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Ares purred warmly as the woman turned her attention back to her terminal.

It's like he's a completely different man. This is ... actually kinda disturbing. The plates and paint are bad enough, but this... this is just weird.

"Very good, sir." She nodded and glanced down at something blocked from his view by the edge of the counter. "The hotel provides two key cards for each room. Please be sure to return them when you check out." Slipping the two key cards in a small sleeve, she handed them to Ares. "Your room will be on the twenty-sixth floor, room four overlooking the beautiful Sephone park. Please, be sure to contact room service if you need anything and enjoy your stay."

Ah! She said it. Well, if Ares' goes on a killing rampage, she'll be the first to go.

Ares nodded and wrapped his arm around Charles, purring. "We'll be sure to. Thank you."

Heart doing a stupid pitter-patter thing in his chest, Charles leaned into the touch, bringing his hand up to press against Ares' lower back. He really did love it when Ares made it clear they were together in public. Flashing a smile at the asari, he dipped his head to her as Ares led him away from the counter. Once out of earshot, he muttered, "I feel like I've just stepped through a portal into an alternate dimension."

Ares hummed as he tapped the call button for the elevator. "You can go back to normal once we get to the room."

Smirking despite how completely out of sorts he felt, Charles glanced up at Ares. "Nope. We're just going to stay here forever, and you're staying in that suit, all smiles and etiquette, for the rest of our lives."

Ares didn't respond beyond tightening his hand on Charles' ribs and then released him when the elevator doors opened. "Come on. We might be in time to see everyone getting to their seats," he said as he stepped in and turned to wait for Charles before hitting the button for the twenty-sixth floor, keeping anyone else from joining them.

Not that he could imagine what might be so exciting about watching a bunch of people sit down, but whatever, if Ares wanted to see it, who was he to say anything? Charles didn't relax much once the doors closed—he knew the elevators would have cameras—but he did feel a little better away from the flow of people and all of the splendor of the lobby. And, the quiet, solid feel of Ares at his side helped, even if, for the time being, Ares wasn't acting like himself. Which, was
actually a little amusing despite the creep factor.

As the elevator slowed to a stop, Charles asked, "What'd you have sent here?"

"From room service?" Ares glanced down at him, humming in question. "Or from your apartment?"

"From home." Charles moved a little closer to the doors as he waited.

Ares rumbled and looked up as the doors opened, leading the way out and glancing at a plaque on the wall where intricate, golden numbers and arrows pointed out the directions for room numbers on either side of the elevators. "Some of your clothes. Stuff you sleep in. Things you clean with." He shrugged and started walking down the left side of the hall.

Charles furrowed his brow. "How long are we staying?"

"At least a day. Long enough not to attract attention." Stopping in front of room four, Ares held the sleeve of key cards in a hand but just stood there, staring at the door. "I don't expect you to want to stay the whole time I have this room booked, so I won't make you."

Charles shrugged a little. "I have tomorrow off. I should head back for a little while to take Eezo out and feed her at some point, but I don't have anything better to do. We should have brought her with us, a place this nice would let guests do whatever the hell they want."

Ares shook his head as he slid one of the key cards out and held it before the reader, waiting for it to flash green. He looked down at Charles. "Eezo would attract attention."

Charles shrugged again, waiting for the door to open so he could get inside and relax a little. "We're just watching … yeah?"

Although the door opened, Ares didn't step inside. He let out a heavy breath, dragging Charles' attention back to him. "I can't let there be anything recognizable. It's just what I was trained to think. It's not something I can forget to do."

Pursing his lips, Charles nodded. "Alright." He made the effort to not point out that Ares was a giant and no matter what plates or clothes he wore or how much he stooped, he stood out—it wasn't like it was really something he could change about himself entirely.

Ares walked into the room, dropping the subject. The moment he crossed the threshold, automatic lights flicked on. The room's VI let out a chime and welcomed them, its simulated voice surprisingly masculine but holding a warm feeling of invitation in its flanged tone. Charles followed him inside, glancing around the room and letting out a low whistle. Floor to ceiling, tinted glass filled the far wall completely, and Ares headed right for it, taking off his jacket and tossing it on the slightly concaved bed as he went. He stopped in front of the window, staring out at the park with a rumble.

Moving further inside, Charles took note of the kitchenette to the left and the closed bathroom doors to the right. Couches and chairs—every bit as nice as the ones downstairs—surrounded a coffee table, a tray of finger foods sitting on top. A bucket of ice, with a bottle of wine nestled down inside, and glasses sat next to the tray. Unbuttoning his jacket, Charles followed Ares over to the window and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He looked down at the park, not really able to make out much of anything from the twenty-sixth floor beyond colorful dots moving around down below.

Glancing over his shoulder, he took in the chairs and table again before turning. He grabbed one of the chairs and dragged it over to the window, positioning it behind Ares, knowing damn well the turian wouldn't be leaving his spot by the window anytime soon. Making several trips, he pulled over the other chair, too, as well as a side table to put the food and wine on. Then, figuring the wine wouldn't be enough, he went and raided the refrigerator and bar area, bringing back as much alcohol as he could find to ply Ares with before setting the bottles down on the floor next to the small table. Ares remained standing, though, so for the time being, so did Charles.

Ares reached over without looking and grabbed the bottle of wine, popping it open before drinking straight from the bottle. "They're starting to take their seats."

Charles shifted enough to kick off his shoes, nudging them back toward the chair behind him before slipping off his jacket, tossing it in the same direction. "My eyes aren't really good enough to see what's going on, you'll have to keep filling me in." He glanced up at Ares. "When the big stuff happens."

Ares hummed, taking another long drink before nodding. He stepped closer to the window and leaned a forearm against it, pressing his forehead to his arm. "I think they're going to have some kind of turian officiant. Maybe they plan to bring the Spirits in to simulate human gods?"

Charles rumbled in his throat. "They might. Do you know which human culture they're borrowing from or if they're just mixing things together?"

"Not sure." Ares shook his head against his arm, only stepping back to drink before returning to
his position against the glass. "Mom was really into appealing to the Spirits. I never got into that shit, but she was really into it. Maybe Maela is bringing some of that into it."

"What about your father?" Charles turned to the tray, picking up something he recognized as levo and stuffing it in his mouth before bending to pick up one of the bottles he'd sat on the floor, glancing at the label to see it was vodka before opening it and moving closer to Ares.

"Dad was more open than I am." Shrugging, Ares rumbled with a hint of sadness. "He was mostly concerned with Spirits that dealt with combat, with instilling courage or granting the dead peace. The rest was mostly just to support Mom, but I don't think he necessarily thought it was pointless."

Charles turned to face Ares, leaning his shoulder against the glass. "Were you and your sisters raised to be really into it like your mom?"

Ares hummed, standing up straight to take a long drink. He lowered the bottle to swallow but took another deep drink before speaking. "Not in the way you'd expect. My mom encouraged it, but she didn't outright force us. She thought that it was up to us to decide if we really see the Spirits at work in our lives or not."

Charles nodded absently, glancing back down at the procession. He picked at the label of the bottle in his hand, spending a few seconds thinking about how religion was crammed down his throat early on … at least until Sarah died. "I've never really been able to make myself believe in any of that stuff, no matter how hard my parents pushed. Well, Mom, mostly. Dad didn't care about much of anything after the war." He snorted, and took a long drink from his bottle, savoring the irony. "Except for drinking."

Ares hummed and nodded, clearly and understandably distracted as he finished off the bottle of wine and then dropped it, letting it clunk against the floor. He bent down enough to grab another bottle of alcohol without reading the label and cracked the lid. "I couldn't find myself to believe any of that shit. Even more after starting to serve."

Charles took a deep breath. "Yeah, I can see that." He nodded his head toward the park, despite Ares' gaze not leaving the window. "What are they doing down there?"

Ares didn't speak for a long time, just let out a sad rumble. "Some kind of procession. I think it's started."

"People moving down the aisle in pairs?" Charles asked, turning back to the tray to pick over the selection, but somehow, none of it really looked all that appealing. Still, he was hungry, so he ate.

"Yeah," Ares said, drinking from his bottle of clear liquor. "There's some kids now. I don't recognize them."

"Hmm." Charles looked out the window, but instead of looking at the park, he glanced out over the skyline before turning his attention back to Ares. "If they're going really old fashioned and using a Christianized model … might be standing in as the flower girl and ring bearer."

Ares' expression faltered as he frowned. "I think … I think they might be my niece and nephew, from one of my older sisters probably. Maela doesn't have her own yet, but Sidna and Aelia do."

Charles glanced back at the park. "Do you know their names?"

"There's a few. Sidna has three and Aelia has two. Tiberius, Valex, and Rael are my nephews and Zella and Arria are my nieces." Ares released a shaky breath before downing some of his bottle.

Charles let the silence linger for a little while, eating and drinking as he watched. After a couple of minutes, he asked, "You alright?"

"No," Ares said, audibly flicking his mandibles against his jaw. "There's couples walking down now. But they aren't my sister. Not yet."

"She'll probably be at the very end, and everyone will stand when she starts down." Charles cleared his throat a little. "Probably change the music for her. A lot of human cultures act like the bride is the most important thing in the ceremony."

"That's because she is." Drinking, Ares took a moment to watch the procession below before adding, "At least here she is."

Charles smiled, even though Ares' gaze stayed on the park, and softly said, "Yeah. She is."

"That's the groom, Maela's mate." Ares tilted his chin to the window. "His name is Daxium, but she calls him Dax."

Charles hummed, sliding across the glass to stand closer to Ares and put a hand on the turian's back, knowing things were about to move into the actual bonding part of the ceremony. He brought the bottle to his lips and tilted his head back, letting the vodka sit in his mouth a second before swallowing, soaking in the sting as it slid down his throat. He knew he really should eat something more with as much alcohol he was putting in his system, but at the moment he didn't
really care.

Ares became deathly quiet, not even making a subvocal of sound, falling completely still. "There she is."

Charles rubbed Ares' back softly but didn't say anything. He wanted to remain a quiet figure, just in the back of Ares' mind, not saying or doing anything to steal his attention away from his sister. Charles tried to remember the details of the woman's face in the photo Ares showed him a couple of days before, but he couldn't really pull up a perfect image in his mind. Just remembered how happy she looked.

A low, soft keen came from Ares as he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to the glass. "They're sitting down now. They're about to start ….

Charles hummed softly, rubbing a little harder as Ares looked away. "You should keep watching, Ares," he said, voice barely more than a whisper. "You don't want to miss any more of it than you have to."

The breath left Ares in a low whine, his shoulders slumping. He stepped back from the window and opened his eyes. "I need to sit, and I need a lot stronger liquor." He growled and folded himself down on the floor—despite the chair Charles brought over—where he could still see out the window, bringing up his knees and resting an arm on one. "This shit isn't cutting it."

"I'll order something." Charles stepped away from the window to go look at the hotel's menu kiosk before placing an order for a bottle of the hard shit he knew Ares liked. Moving back to the window, he lowered himself to the floor next to the turian, sliding the tray of food off the table to set down between them, hoping it might entice Ares to eat something, too. "This shit isn't cutting it."

"She must have had that dress specially made for her," Ares said as he held the bottle before his eyes, looking at the label for the first time before taking a long drink. "It looks good on her."

Charles popped another little cracker with some sort of meat paste on it into his mouth. "Maybe one of her kids will wear it someday."

"Maybe," Ares said, subvocals distressed and filled with sorrow. "One more thing I won't be included in. If I even live that long."

Charles winced. He really kind of sucked at the whole supportive lover thing. "Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say."

Ares shrugged. "It's fine." He took a heavy pull from the bottle in his hand. "I think I've become numb to it. Or I hope I will by then."

Charles knew he wasn't numb to it, otherwise, Ares wouldn't struggle so much just watching Maela's wedding. He didn't say anything though, just stared out the window for a couple of minutes before stuffing more food in his face and drinking more alcohol. "This part shouldn't take a really long time, but when it's done, they'll be married. Bonded. Whatever. Humans usually have a big party right after."

"I think they will, too. A ways down the park is a setup that looks like it." Ares exhaled, sounding as if something ripped the breath right out of him, looking away as he took another drink. "They're doing something with their hands. I can't see what." He glanced up to shrug at Charles before looking back down again. "I guess they decided to do rings or something."

Charles tilted his head a little, narrowing his eyes for what good it did. "They're not tying their hands together, are they? Handfusting? Humans used to do that sometimes, too. Before rings became really popular."

"Again, I can't tell." Ares held his breath as his mandibles fell. He stayed quiet for a long moment before he keened softly and dropped his head into the palm of his free hand. "It's done …. They're bonded …."

Charles reached over, settling his hand on Ares' knee. "I'm sorry you're hurting, Ares."

Ares growled, sitting upright and throwing the bottle at the window, shattering the bottle into pieces. The sudden act of aggression startled Charles, making him jump and yank his hand back. Ares dropped his head back into his hands with a loud keen, shoulders trembling.

"Your room service has arrived," the VI said before Charles could react any further.

He sucked in a deep breath, pulling himself up from the floor. Glancing back at Ares, he made his way to the door and answered it. Doing his best to block Ares from sight, he nodded absently at the salarian's greeting, tucking the bottle under his arm and signing off on the ledger with a scribble. Flashing the attendant a smile, Charles said thanks and closed the door in the man's face. He figured if tipping was a thing at the hotel, Ares would have to take care of it later.
He brought the bottle back over to the window and sat down next to Ares, glancing up to find the turian had ripped the prosthetics from his face, hands lying limply in his lap. Charles let out a soft hiss, knowing it’d hurt to pull them off like that and it ruined the plates, but at least he figured Ares brought more with him, probably in the bags he had sent to the hotel. He turned, putting his back to the glass and stretched his legs out in front of him, opening the bottle and handing it to Ares. Taking it from him, Ares spent a long time just drinking, swallowing without taking the bottle away from his mouth. Charles didn’t say anything, he just sat there, picking at the food and drinking his vodka, casting furtive glances at Ares in between mouthfuls.

After a while, with nearly half the bottle gone, Ares lowered it with a long, mournful sigh. “I guess now they’ll have a more turian styled ceremony to celebrate.”

“How long does that usually last?” Charles asked, a stupid idea starting to bubble up in the back of his mind.

Ares huffed a sharp, derisive laugh. “Hours? Until people go home? Probably for however long they could rent the place at the park.”

Charles pursed his lips, gaze lowering to the tray of food. “Probably cordoned off, closed to the public, yeah?”

“Yes,” Ares said before taking another long drink. “Not that Maela would turn away people if they came.” He shrugged. “It’s just who she is. Always giving.”

“Hmm.” Charles picked up a mini quiche but just held it a moment. “I could go down there … if you wanted.” He swallowed and glanced up at Ares, expecting to be told it was a stupid idea and he was an idiot for even offering. “Stick to the sidelines. Take pictures or something.”

Ares went still, gaze straight ahead and subvocals silent. It took him a long time before he turned to Charles—just about long enough for Charles to think about backpedaling—and asked, “You’d do that? Even if it runs the risk of you being caught?”

Surprised by the response, Charles blinked and shrugged. “Sure. I’m human. I can always say I just thought it was neat they were doing a human ceremony, comment on her dress or something. Of course, I’ll need to probably shower first or something, I’m sure I smell like you.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you do.” Ares moved to stand up, swaying a bit before righting himself. “The bath … it should have something that smells strong enough to cover it, though.”

Charles smiled and shook his head, going on into the bathroom. The damn bathroom was almost as big as the sleeping area, complete with a hot tub and a shower. He left the door opened as he pulled off the rest of his clothes and looked over the neat rows of bottles, bars, and jars.

“Make something up. Use some truth. Makes it easier to remember.”

“Wait.” Charles stepped back out again. “Your cousin is C-Sec. What if he scans me to read my ID?”

Ares shrugged around a drink of the horosk. “Then I guess you gotta tell the truth.”

“Uh huh. I know.” Charles started toward the bathroom, stripping off his clothes. “But I also know you’re drunk and emotional right now.”

“Ares merely grumbled when Charles stopped to look over his shoulder at him. Moving on unsteadily feet, he walked to the coffee table to grab the ashtray and returned to his spot on the floor. Charles smiled and shook his head, going on into the bathroom. The damn bathroom was almost as big as the sleeping area, complete with a hot tub and a shower. He left the door opened as he pulled off the rest of his clothes and looked over the neat rows of bottles, bars, and jars.

"If they do talk to me, do you want me to use a different name?" He opened one, giving it a sniff before closing it and grabbing another, looking for the strongest smelling things he could find. “Should I go down in the same clothes or change?”

"There’s a different pair of clothes in the closet. S’posst to be for when we’re leaving but ….”

"But?" Charles started the water in the shower. "I’ll just wear the same thing when we leave. Or maybe mix up the stuff, wear some of both so it looks different." He waited for a second, but when he didn’t get an answer, he walked out of the bathroom to look at the turian. "Ares … I can’t see you shrug or nod from the bathroom. What about my name? If I’m using something different … I can make up some bullshit to go with it if I need to. Unless they start asking too many questions.” He went back into the bathroom.

"Make something up. Use some truth. Makes it easier to remember.”

"Wait." Charles stepped back out again. "Your cousin is C-Sec. What if he scans me to read my ID?”

Ares shrugged around a drink of the horosk. “Then I guess you gotta tell the truth.”

Charles stared at the back of Ares’ head for a second before closing his eyes and shaking his head. Letting out a sigh, he went back into the bathroom. “I’ll figure something out.”

He climbed into the shower and used all the strongest, terrible smelling shit he could find, a lot of
it carrying feminine scents … truthfully, he thought some of it smelled kind of nice, but he'd never admit it out loud. Scrubbing the hell out of himself, he tried to get as much of Ares' scent off of him as possible. When he finished, he dried off and splashed on some cologne crap before tousling his hair with a bit of styling wax.

Going back into the room, he looked in the closet, finding some of his own clothes and another suit, that one a dark blue with a more casual cut. He pulled out the suit and glanced over his shoulder at Ares. "Where exactly is their party?"

"Sephone park," Ares said without looking over.

Charles let out a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right, but where at in the park?"

Ares hummed, silent otherwise for a long time. "Northeast side."

Once Charles was dressed, he stopped near the couches, keeping his distance from Ares so as to not pick up any more of his scent, even a little. "I won't be gone too long."

Ares mumbled something, the words too slurred to translate as anything other than gibberish and waved Charles off toward the door.
Charles took a deep breath as he crossed through the park and unbutton his jacket, loosening the collar of his shirt a little more. He stuffed his hands in his pockets as he strolled across the grass, moving nice and slow, aimlessly, as if he were just there to relax. He stopped next to a tree and leaned against the trunk, bark digging into his back a little as he angled himself slightly facing Maela's reception. Crossing one ankle over the other, he lit a cigarillo and opened his omni-tool.

He stayed there while he smoked, keeping his gaze on his omni-tool, watching the party on his screen. It wasn't the best position, but he did take a few pictures, mostly just whenever Maela was in the frame. There were tons of people there. A lot of them were species other than turian, but still far too many turians to count, and he couldn't remember all the faces in the photos Ares showed him, so he didn't know for sure who was important and who wasn't. It was pretty hard to miss the bride, though, even if she'd removed the long train from her dress.

He needed to get closer. Like a lot closer, if he wanted to get anything worth taking back to Ares, and he really wanted to get something truly worth it. Charles scraped his teeth over his lip and finished off his cigarillo, grinding it out on the heel of his shoe before squeezing the last bit of cloves and tobacco out onto the ground and stuffing it in his pocket. Glancing around him, he spotted a bench twenty feet or so away from the edges of the lavender and white lace covered tables.

Stupid idea. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He started walking, making his way straight for the bench and sat down opening his omni-tool again. There wasn't really anyway to aim the omni-tool's camera at the party from so close without it being blatant, so instead, he just flipped through the pictures he already had before closing it again. He lit another cigarillo and glanced around, letting his gaze roam the park. Ares said Maela wouldn't turn anyone away if they showed up … maybe …. He sucked in a deep breath and stretched an arm out over the back of the bench, turning his attention to the party, making it perfectly obvious he was observing the festivities.

Cigarillo nearly half gone, he spotted Maela talking to an older turian couple. He kept his gaze on her, willing her to look at him, thinking she might just decide to come over and talk to him if she saw him watching. It was a tremendously stupid idea, one Ares definitely wouldn't approve of, but then again, going there at all was a pretty idiotic move he doubted Ares would've agreed to sober. After a couple more drags from his cigarillo, Maela's gaze found him, and he flashed her his best smile, lifting the fingers of his free hand off the back of the bench in a half wave.

Returning his smile, she tilted her head a little bit and waved him over. Charles' grin widened, and he lifted his eyebrows, affecting surprise at the invitation. She waved her hand again, so he stood up, finishing off his cigarillo and putting it out before making his way across the grass. He stopped just at the edge of the party, doubt warring with his desire to get closer and really do something for Ares he couldn't do himself.

Glancing back up at the bride, he found her still watching him. Maela tilted her head, shoulders bouncing a little, and he was pretty sure she was laughing at him as she turned back to the older couple and said something, waving her hand at them before weaving her way through the tables headed straight for him. He could still turn tail and run, but where would be the fun in that? He flashed her his best grin as she grew nearer, letting his gaze sweep down over her long, white dress, crystals edging her cowl and crest.

"I couldn't help noticing your interest in the party," she said, her voice soft and sweet as she chuckled. "I couldn't just stand by and let you watch while we celebrate." Thrumming, she offered her hand to him. "My name's Maela."

"Robert." Might as well use his middle name, why not? It was as good as any, and it wouldn't look too weird if someone did end up recognizing him or something. He took her hand in his, shaking. "My name's Maela."

"Robert." Might as well use his middle name, why not? It was as good as any, and it wouldn't look too weird if someone did end up recognizing him or something. He took her hand in his, shaking. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be a nuisance. I just saw the ceremony on my way by earlier … noticed quite a few human themes. It was lovely, nice to see. Oh, and congratulations."

Mandibles fluttering shyly, her smile warmed. "Thank you. And please," she said, waving a dismissive hand by her head, "you aren't a nuisance if I invited you. Are you hungry?"

"Ah," he said, dragging it out to show some hesitancy and rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean, I really don't want to impose—"

She gave him a loud scoff, following it up with a friendly sounding thrum and waved her hand at the buffet, seeming pretty adamant. "Nonsense! Come, come! We have plenty, and I'd hate for it to go to waste." She waved at him to follow as she turned and led the way, clearly just expecting him to follow.
Charles chuckled, already thinking he really liked her. "Alright, thank you." He followed behind her and gently cleared his throat. "Mind if I ask why a human style wedding?"

Glancing around him, he caught a wide variety of looks from the other guests. Some seemed momentarily confused by his presence, but others flicked their gazes to Maela leading him through and smirked as if it made perfect sense. He figured those were the people who knew her best and might be worth more of his attention depending on how things went.

"Well," she hummed as if in thought, "I happened to be invited to a human wedding once, and it was so beautiful." She stopped just before the buffet table set a little ways off from the rest of the others. "Turians don't really have ceremonies showing the bonding. We mostly celebrate after, like this." She gestured out over the crowd. "I guess it's something our species have in common."

He smiled, letting his gaze sweep over her dress for a minute. "Yeah, I suppose so. Your dress is beautiful." He picked up a plate but didn't look away from her. "It reminds me of the one my aunt wore." It wasn't a lie, not really. Of course, Maela's dress was cut for a turian and it seemed a lot more intricate, but when he first saw it, he did think of his aunt's wedding dress. He considered asking if he could take a picture of it but decided to hold off for just a bit longer, he didn't want to creep her out and have her change her mind about his being there.

Smiling, she said, "I bet she was beautiful on her day."

She really wasn't.

He let his smile fade as he turned his attention to the buffet, not really paying attention to what he was putting on the plate beside making sure he was choosing from dishes clearly marked 'levo'. He felt her gaze on him the whole time, and although he wasn't exactly drunk, he still had just enough of a buzz going on that he was fairly certain without the alcohol in his system, he'd be nervous as all hell.

"Oh!" Her tone brought his gaze right back to her, and her face brightened. "Try this."

She reached over to pick up a pair of tongs and put something that looked akin to a cracked crab on his plate, her exuberance making him laugh. He watched her with a broad smile, feeling a little awestruck because, at that moment, he found it incredibly difficult to believe she was in any way related to Ares, despite sharing a plate color and colony markings. Christ, though, she was. He was standing right next to Ares' baby sister, someone he so clearly loved, but she didn't even know he was alive.

Chest tightening, he fought to keep a smile on his face. "Thanks." He tore his gaze away from her, letting it roam over the guest-filled tables, trying to pick out familiar faces. "Where should I …?"

"Hmm …" She lifted further up onto her toes as she looked around. Her gaze seemed to snag on someone in particular, so Charles followed her line of sight, spotting an older, turian man with darker plates. "Dad! Daddy!"

Charles swallowed again when the man looked up, Ares' eyes looking back at him … well, at least one of Ares' eyes.

He offered a hand. "Caetis Vakarian. It's a pleasure."

Shifting his plate to his other hand, Charles shook hands with Caetis. "Pleasure's mine, sir. He glanced at Maela and smiled before looking back at her father. "Sorry for the intrusion, but I had a feeling she wasn't going to take 'no' for an answer."
"She certainly wasn't," a new voice entered the conversation as a dark maroon turian with purple markings—Dax, Charles realized—separated himself from the crowd. He purred, stopping in front of Maela to press his forehead to hers before looking down at Charles. "Maela's always one to offer a hand, even if it means she's bombarding you with a party full of strangers."

Snorting, Maela slid her arm around Charles to grip his shoulder and pulled him into her side, blowing Charles' mind at the level of familiarity, pulling a chuckle from him. How was the woman Ares' sister?

"He's not an intrusion, and I didn't twist his arm to come here." She smiled down at Charles, a good-natured rumble moving through her and into his side where it pressed against her, but then she slipped a stern look on her face, very much like the one her father had just a moment before. "Tell them I didn't force you to come."

He chuckled again and winked at her, feeling swept up in the moment and forgetting himself. "I don't know, I might have a few bruises."

Letting out an innocent trill, ringing false in Charles' ears, she turned to her husband. "I have no idea what he's talking about."

Holy shit. There it is. I see him in her now. Dax's chuckle was the only thing to keep Charles from gawking. The turian shook his head a little and looked at Charles. 'She'd have dragged you over if you so much as stepped foot in the park."

Flicking her mandibles, she rumbled before her brow plates suddenly shot up, mandibles flaring. "Oh! I'm sorry," she said, looking back at Charles. "I forgot to introduce you two. Robert, this is my love," she purred, subvocals drenched in affection as she looked up at her husband, "Dax. Dax, this is Robert."

"Nice to meet you," Dax said, a friendly rumble slipping from his as he glanced at his wife before returning his gaze to Charles. "I'd shake your hand, but my mate has staked claim on you, apparently."

Charles chuckled, fighting like hell to suppress the urge to say she'd have to take it up with her brother if she wanted to keep him. Glancing at Maela again, he said, "So it seems. I think I can live with that." He tilted his head and smirked. "So long as it doesn't come with more bruises."

She shrugged and smiled. "Again, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Bemused, Charles felt lost for a moment, her words reminding him again so much of Ares, but he managed to smile at her before turning his attention back to Dax. "Thank you for having me."

The man smiled and nodded, rumbling. "No need to thank us. I always expect Maela to make the most friends no matter where she goes."

"Maela," Caetis said, thrumming softly as he motioned toward the buffet. "I think it's time for the two of you to cut the cakes."

Purring, she looked over at the people milling about around the table and dropped her gaze to Charles. "You'll stay, right? Wouldn't want to miss out on cake. I hear the levo is chocolate."

Smiling, Charles thought about it for a second. He really shouldn't stay too long, Ares would get pissy, and Ares was alone and drunk, so …. "Sure. I—I'm sorry, this will probably sound crazy, but your dress … would you mind if I took your picture?"

Her mandibles fluttered in that shy way again, but she gave him a warm smile. "Of course." She motioned to her husband, waving him over as she released Charles to snuggle in against Dax. "Is this okay?"

Giving her a big, toothy grin, Charles sat his plate down on the nearest table where there was room and said, "Absolutely perfect." He opened his omni-tool, still grinning like an idiot when he brought the camera into focus and took a photo.

Caetis moved in, settling his arm on Maela's shoulder and said, "Honey, the cakes."

Before the older turian could pull away again, Charles hit the button on his omni-tool again, taking another shot of the three of them. He looked back up at Maela. "Thank you!"

She smiled and nodded, taking Dax by the hand and leading him off toward the table. Everyone started to huddle in closer to the buffet, including Caetis, so Charles picked up his plate, leaving his omni-tool opened and slipped off to the side to eat and watch. Someone had separated the tiers of the cake, putting them on individual platters. He recognized Ares' mother as she brought a set of knives over to the happy couple before tiptoeing out of the way again. Smirking, he snapped a picture of her before she got lost in the crowd again.

Toward the front of the masses, he caught sight of two female turians surrounded by kids. Their dresses seemed to be a turian interpretation of bridesmaid dresses, so Charles felt pretty sure the
two women were Ares' older sisters even though he couldn't get a good look at their faces—not that he'd definitely recognize them either way. On the off chance, he shifted his omni-tool a little to include the women and kids in the next picture he took of Maela and Dax cutting into the first cake. He glanced around, making sure no one paid him any special attention.

When they cut the second cake, Dax flicked a bit of icing onto Maela's nose, making the whole crowd laugh, including Charles. In retaliation, though, Maela smirked and grabbed a handful, smashing it into Dax's face, and he let out a shocked trill loud enough for Charles to hear all the way in the back. He snapped a couple more pictures as Maela ducked out of the way when Dax tried to wipe it off on her, waiting until her husband was occupied getting it out of his eyes before she pressed her forehead to his.

A moment of silence was interrupted by one of Ares' nephews calling out, "Caaaaake!"

Immediately, the other children joined in, and the adults laughed. Maela looked over at the children and nodded, waving her hand to settle them down. Dax and Maela turned their attention back to slicing the cake, and another turian—Aelia, Charles realized—joined them at the table to cut the other cake. The crowd moved in on them as they started dishing out the slices, forming a line. Caetis and his wife as well as the other sister ... Sidna went to the table, helping to pass out plates to the guests as they passed them by. As the line thinned out, Charles let a server take his mostly empty plate and then joined the line, more for the chance to get a good look at the other members of the Vakarian family and snag a few pictures from the line than for any desire for dessert.

Once he had his cake, he retreated to lean against a tree still within the party's perimeter since he was never actually given a place at a table to sit. He took his time with the almost sickeningly sweet, chocolate cake, taking pictures from time to time. As people started to finish up, Aelia and Sidna walked around, gathering up a few people before leading them off back toward where the ceremony took place. Charles was really starting to feel antsy, thinking he'd been gone too long, but when he saw them carrying presents back over to the reception area, he knew he couldn't leave yet.

Caetis took over organizing the gifts as they were delivered, neatly stacking them on a table near Maela and Dax. Her gaze shifted back and forth between the gifts and her husband, apparently shocked by the massive number of presents being brought over. Maybe Charles was just a bit cynical, but he figured the look was for show, after all, she invited half the Citadel it seemed. Still, the look brought a smile to his face, even as it made his heart ache a little. He wished Ares could be there. Sarah flashed through his mind, not for the first time, and he gently nudged his sister from his thoughts. It wasn't the time or the place. When the last of the presents were on the table, Dax took Maela's hand and led her over.

"Wow, you guys didn't have to go so crazy with the gifts," Maela stared at the table, slack-jawed.

"Because we love you!" someone from the crowd shouted, making her flutter her mandibles with a shyness that seemed so at odds with her personality.

Charles settled in to watch, taking the occasional picture as they opened presents. He snorted loud enough to earn him a momentary glare from a nearby salarian when he realized a gift from someone named Mercus was one of the same vases Ares' called pointless, obviously purchased from Citadel Souvenirs—and Maela seemed to love it. He took a picture of her holding it up to the light, wide-eyed, smile on her face, just to be a smart ass.

A slim, rectangular box wrapped in gold paper was handed to Maela, and she turned it over, seeming to look for something before glancing up and handing the box to Dax.

"Did it fall off?" Maela looked around confused when no one in the crowd spoke up, she shifted her dress, looking on the ground next to her.

"Some of the gifts were given anonymously," Caetis said, giving his daughter a reassuring nod. "It's alright. I'm sure they'll know you're grateful."

She smiled and nodded, taking the box back from her husband and together they pulled away the gold wrapping paper. They let the paper flutter to the table, glistening in the light, but judging by the awed looks on their faces, they knew what the box held without even opening it. Maela let out a surprised trill, and Dax's jaw hung slack. Charles grinned, biting his lip a little harder. Maela slipped off the lid, letting Dax take it from her, and they both just stopped, staring at the contents for a moment.

"Now I gotta know who gave us this," she said, her voice soft, almost strained.

Dax reached into the box, bringing out the jeweled dagger Ares' bought. Gaze on the dagger, he
set the box down on the table. He turned it a little in his hand, the silver surface and every gem embedded in the metal catching in the light.

"It's too pretty," Maela said, though it almost seemed as if she'd spoken to herself.

Glancing down, Dax said, "It has a card in the box." He pulled it out and looked it over. "But it doesn't say who it's from, just that they'd be honored if this stays as our family's ceremonial blade."

Charles sucked in a slow breath, reaching up with his free hand to wipe at the sting of tears threatening to well up in his eyes. Clenching his jaw, he glanced around again, making sure no one was watching him. It'd be damned hard to explain why the random human Maela dragged into the party was getting worked up over an anonymous, incredibly expensive gift.

Maela let out a snort, shock still written on her face. "As if there was any doubt."

After a moment, Dax eased the dagger back into the box and closed the lid. Maela pulled it over closer to her as Caetis started bringing over more gifts. Charles stopped recording, tears still stinging his eyes. He needed to get the hell out of there. Taking a deep breath, he carried his cake plate over to one of the servers before glancing around.

Spotting Sidna nearby, he made his way over to her and gently cleared his throat. Smiling when she looked at him, he said, "Hi, I'm sorry to bother you. I just didn't want to leave without telling anyone, and well …." He waved his hand at the table where the newlyweds were still opening presents.

"It's okay," she said, smiling with a soft rumble. "I'll tell her you enjoyed yourself. Can I get your name?"

"Robert. Thank you, I appreciate it." He hesitated a second and added, "Please, tell her again that I said her ceremony was beautiful, and I hope they have a long, happy life together."

Purring, she nodded. "I will. Have a nice evening, Robert," she said before turning her attention back to her sister and brother-in-law.

Charles opened the door to the hotel, finding it dark. The lights flickered on when he stepped inside, and the VI welcomed him. He made his way further in, but the place was empty, Ares nowhere in sight. Charles stood in the middle of the hotel room, taking in two more empty bottles of horosk and an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. Tilting his head back, he groaned at the ceiling.

Moving to sit on the foot of the bed, he lit a cigarillo and opened his omni-tool, placing a call to Ares. It seemed to take forever before the turian answered, surrounded by a thick haze of smoke, made more obvious in the dim, soft light of what was obviously a bar. He looked completely wasted, eyes glazed over. He hadn't bothered to clean the charcoal paint from his face, but neither had he put on new plates, creating an even greater contrast between the scarred and unscarred sides of his face, reminding Charles even more of the Batman comics' villain, Two-Face. He did, however, think to wear his jacket over the rest of his dress clothes, with the hood pulled low. Grunting in place of a greeting, he stared at Charles.

"Where are you?" Charles took a deep drag from his cigarillo, blowing the smoke back out through his nose.

Ares hummed, and it seriously sounded like he didn't actually know the answer. He looked around him for a second before looking back at the screen of his omni-tool. "There's a sign for a bar where I'm at," he said, and Charles snorted. "Something called 'The Mud Pit.'"

"Stay there," Charles said, voice stern. "I'm coming as soon as I figure out where the fuck it is."

Rumbling, Ares looked down and offscreen, and a moment later Charles' omni-tool pinged, a notification popping up on the screen. Ares looked back at him. "There. That's where I am. Down in the ass end of nowhere."

Charles glanced at the coordinates, but they didn't mean dick to him. It was alright, though, he could input them into a taxi. "Should I bring anything? Are we coming back here?"

Ares shrugged, making a drowsy sounding grunt. "I don't know."

"I'll be there in a bit." Charles closed his omni-tool, cutting the call. He figured he'd drag Ares in through a back door if he had to, so long as the turian kept his feet under him. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he finished his cigarillo before taking off again.

'The ass end of nowhere' turned out to be the shittiest area possible on the Bachjret Ward. It took Charles nearly twenty minutes to get there and another minute to convince himself to leave the taxi. The second he climbed out of the skycar, he stuck his hand in his pocket to grip his razor, knowing the area had a high crime rate.
"Fantastic," he muttered, looking down at his nice clothes. "The one time I'm actually wearing something nice…." He knew his clothes would make him a target, anyone who saw him would think he had credits to steal.

Heading into the seedy-looking, hole-in-the-wall bar, he waved his hand to clear some of the smoke billowing toward him, eager to fill the fresh air let in by the opened door. He scanned the bar, taking him only a second to spot Ares sitting at the far end. He had his head down, one hand wrapped around a bottle, the other holding a cigarette. Taking a deep breath, Charles stood there long enough to light a cigarillo and then made his way over, sliding up on a stool next to Ares and motioning at the bartender.

"Ares," he said just barely loud enough for the turian to hear over whatever crap music was being piped through the speakers and the sounds of the crowd around him.

Ares rumbled in acknowledgment but didn't look at him, bringing his cigarette to his mouth. Charles caught sight of several different shades of blood, some of it not even looking completely dry as it coated Ares' bare talons and knuckles. Glancing around the two of them, Charles realized the other patrons gave Ares a wide berth, and someone was busy sweeping up broken glass.

The bartender came over before Charles could say anything else and gave Ares a wary look before stopping in front of Charles. "Sure you want to sit there, kid?" The human nodded toward Ares. "This one's a fighter. 'Bout tore the last guy's throat out who sat there."

"Leave him be," Ares said with a drunken growl, not even lifting his head. "This kid is mine."

Charles grinned, glancing over at Ares before looking back at the bartender. "I'm the only safe person in this place. Give me a Mount Milgrom, please."

The man gave Charles a look making it clear he thought Charles was nuts and shook his head. "Alright." He turned, moving down the bar to the shelves at the back.

Charles took a drag from his cigarillo, turning sideways to lean against the bar and look at Ares. "Thought you were going to stay at the hotel?"

"I never agreed to that," Ares said with a rumble.

Charles huffed, doing a quick replay of the conversation in his head before muttering, "Sonofabitch." Sighing, he shook his head. "No, guess you didn't. But you should've. You made such a fuss about dressing up—" He cut off as the bartender started making his way back over. Paying the guy, he gave the bartender a nod and waited for him to leave again before turning back to Ares, picking up where he left off. "And not drawing attention, but you left without your plates … and now you'll be going back stumbling drunk. "Do you want me to take you home instead? I guess we can go back to get our shit in the morning."

"They stopped bringing me drinks," Ares said, obviously ignoring the rest of what Charles said. Charles snorted. "Probably because you tried to rip someone's throat out."

Ares gave him a sideways look, one that called him an idiot without actually having to say the word out loud. "Not here. The hotel."

"Oh." Charles sucked in a deep breath. "Well, have you had enough now?"

Ares rumbled, the sound not as rhythmic as usual with all the alcohol in his system. "No. I'm still conscious."

"Let's go somewhere and get something to take back with us, then," Charles said. "I'm not going to be able to get you anywhere if you're unconscious."

Letting out an annoyed hum, Ares downed the rest of his drink and then finished off his cigarette before standing. He pulled out a credit chit and tossed it on the bar before giving Charles an expectant look.

Charles knocked back his whiskey and slid down from the barstool. "Home or hotel?"

"Home." Ares growled as he turned away, heading for the door.

Coming back in from taking Eezo for a quick walk around the block, Charles felt relieved to see Ares still sat in the same spot on the floor, back against the couch. He let Eezo off her leash and she followed him to the kitchen as he filled her dishes. Going back into the living room, he kicked off his socks and shoes before pulling his jacket off and tossing it on the counter. He tugged his shirt out of his pants as he crossed the floor and sat down directly across from Ares.

Drawing up his knees and crossing his ankles, he wrapped his arms around his legs. "Well, do you want to see pictures and talk about the party, or do you want to wait until tomorrow when you can actually see straight and think clearly?"
"I envy you, you know," Ares said, taking a long drag before letting the smoke slip out from between his teeth at the sides of his mouth.

Sucking in a deep breath, Charles put his chin on his knees. "I know. I'm sorry. I went to do something nice for you, though, not make it worse."

Ares sat in silence, taking a long drink before smoking more of his cigarette. Finally, he asked, "Are they happy?"

"They are," Charles said and then hesitated before adding, "I actually met some of them."

If the news upset Ares, he didn't let it show. "Who?"

"Maela invited me over," Charles said, and then hesitated again when Ares frowned at the floor, "introduced me to your father and her new husband. I spoke briefly to Sidna, too. He gave Ares a sad smile even though the turian wasn't looking at him. "Your sister made me eat dinner and cake."

Ares hummed around a drag from his cigarette, letting the wisps of smoke curl out of his mouth plates as he said, "She used to have, what do you call it, tea parties?"

Charles chuckled, sitting upright to dig out his cigarillos and lit one. "I can see that in her. She's funny, and really … hrmn … really friendly. From listening to everyone talk, they weren't at all surprised she'd drag a stray human in from the sidelines and make him a part of the party."

He opened his omni-tool, uploading all of the images and the vid from the reception into a single file before sending it to Ares and deleting them from his own omni-tool. It stung a little to do, but they weren't his to keep, and he knew it. "Your dad seemed amused but also maybe a little exasperated by it, he was nice to me, though. Polite. Dax adores her, you can see—hell, feel it—when he's around her. And she seems to really love him, too."

Setting down his bottle after taking a drink, Ares nodded and huffed a forced, weak laugh. "Dad used to say she could charm even the hardest krogan."

"I believe it." Charles nodded, taking a drag and blowing the smoke toward the ceiling. He reached out and grabbed Eezo when she came back in from eating and pulled her in against his side. "The woman had me wrapped around her little finger in five seconds."

"Sounds like her." Ares took a drag before saying, "I looked into what she does now. She's a social worker, goes to various colonies, planets, and the Citadel to help organize shelters or whatever you'd call the places that help old bastards and kids."

Charles snorted at Ares' description. "She, uh … she kind of reminds me of you, a little. When you're in a good mood."

Ares scoffed, the sound self-deprecating. Letting out a sad hum, he took a long drink before finishing off his cigarette and lighting a new one. He seemed too drunk to even flinch away from the flame of his lighter.

"I'm serious." Charles took a long drag and then picked at the butt of his cigarillo with his thumbnail, running his hand over Eezo's side with the other. "At first I didn't think so, but after watching her for a few minutes, listening to her talk …. I sent you pictures and a vid. Don't you want to look at them?"

Ares took a long drag, holding it a moment before blowing it out. "I'll look at them when I don't already feel like throwing myself into the Presidium lakes."

"I regret agreeing to have me go," Ares rumbled as he downed more alcohol. "I regret trusting Cameric, trusting the Hierarchy."

"Yeah. Well, I hope this whole thing helps a little. Maybe not right now but down the road."

Ares simply hummed as he inhaled smoke, looking out toward the balcony. Eezo wriggled free from Charles' grasp, heading for Ares. Charles made a grab at her, but before he could pull her back, Ares grumbled and pat her on the head. Instantly excited into overdrive, Eezo started licking the shit out of him and trying to climb onto his lap. He growled, annoyed, and pushed her back toward Charles, but she just turned right back around and laid down, curling up against his thigh. Ares huffed but let her lay there, bringing a smile to Charles' face.
Charles came back from taking Eezo for a walk to find Ares still in bed, the lights off. He stood in the doorway for a few seconds, straining to make out the shape beneath the blankets and listening to the turian's breathing. Finally deciding Ares was awake, he kept his voice soft as he asked, "Can I get you anything?"

With a thick voice—probably from being hungover—Ares said, "More horosk."

"Alright. I'll go to the store. Anything else?"

Ares growled and, surprisingly, curled up, pulling the blankets over his head. "Don't talk so loud."

Biting back a laugh, Charles crossed the floor as quietly as he could, gently pressing his forehead to the lump under the blankets before standing up again. Creeping back out of the room, he grabbed Eezo's leash and hooked it on her, not wanting her to bother Ares while he was gone. He took her with him down to one of the stores a couple of blocks away that sold alcohol and tied her up outside.

Squatting down in front of her, he ran his fingers through her fur, holding her head in his hands and scratching. He leaned in, kissing her and said, "I'll be right back, girl." Making his way into the store, he stopped, taking a second to scan the shelves.

"Can I help you find something?" the volus behind the counter asked.

Charles glanced at him. "Horosk?"

The glowing lights standing in for eyes in the volus' suit blinked, his respirator hissing before he said, "Horosk? Are you sure I can't interest you in something a little less … dangerous for a human to consume?"

Smirking, Charles shook his head. "It's not for me."

"Oh." The volus' respirator hissed a few times. "It's on the third aisle, to the left."

"Thanks." Charles made his way over, stopping to check the credits in his account.

Eh … he'd survive. And, he could always ask Ares to help out if he really needed to. Besides, he'd get paid in a few days, and his commission bonus would be damned good. He grabbed a couple of bottles of horosk, tucking them under his arm before moving down the aisle to the coolers at that back. He opened one, snagging a bottle of Paragade and moving it to his other hand, the same arm as the horosk, before closing the cooler and turning.

A man crouched down on the floor, cooler opened, crates next to him as he stocked the shelf. Charles swallowed, images of Harvey forcing themselves forward. Licking his lips, he let his eyes lose focus, hand slipping into his pocket of its own accord. He saw himself, standing over Harvey in the convenience store on Shanxi again, the man looking up at Charles, confused and then afraid. So afraid. It felt so good to bring his razor down on the man, so good to see blood well up on his terrified face.

"Can I help you with something, sir?"

The voice snapped Charles out of his haze, and he realized he'd moved closer to the man. Licking his lips, he swallowed and said, "No, thank you." He turned, walking on unsteady legs back to the checkout.

Leaving his Paragade on the coffee table, Charles carried the horosk into the bedroom, moving on silent feet. He didn't say anything as he gently sat one of the bottles on the table next to Ares and bent down to put the other on the floor next to the table. Ares' hand darted out from under the covers, grabbing Charles' wrist as he started to rise, keeping him from standing up straight. Lifting an eyebrow, he turned enough to sit on the edge of the bed, gaze sweeping over the silhouette of the bundled up lump Ares made.

Ares rumbled, tugging at Charles, bringing him closer. Kicking off his shoes, Charles turned and pulled back the covers enough to stretch out on the bed next to Ares before dragging them back up around him. Ares pulled him closer, curling his larger body around Charles as much as possible even as he kept himself hidden under the blankets. A soft smile crossing his lips, Charles adjusted a little, lifting his arm up over Ares' head, giving him more room to get even closer.

Ares' even, steady breaths warmed the air beneath the blankets as he softly spoke, "You still smell
Charles chuckled, tucking his hand under the blanket to run his fingers over Ares' crest. "I'll take a shower in a little while, smell like my own soap again."

"No."

Charles raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"No," Ares said again, pulling on Charles' hip. "Smell like me."

Grinning, Charles rolled over as Ares tugged at him, using his hand on the turian's crest to guide his face back out of the covers to where Charles could reach him. He pressed his lips to Ares' mouth plates, opening up when the turian's tongue brushed against his mouth. The taste of horosk and Ares' cigarettes filled his mouth, tongue moving soft and slow against his. Charles still felt the underlying current of Ares' hunger, but it was more than obvious the turian felt like complete crap. Still, Charles took his time, enjoying the very rare change of pace and brought a hand to Ares' chest, unfastening his shirt enough to slip a hand inside and press his palm against Ares' keel.

After a moment, he pulled back and rested his forehead against Ares'. Licking his lips, his heart thudded against his chest, making the words catch in his throat as his mind raced through about fifty different ways to tell the man how he felt. Finally, he just decided to stick to something simple, even if he had a feeling it wasn't something Ares would entirely understand. Sighing, he said, "I guess I can't expect you to just know it if I never say it … I love you, Ares."

Even though Charles couldn't make out the details of Ares' face, he knew the turian could see his just fine as Ares shifted to look at him. A feeling of stunned silence filled their little space, making Charles' heart pound faster and harder against his sternum. He swallowed, refusing to cower from his own feelings. He knew he was important to Ares, knew Ares had to know Charles thought he was pretty damn important, too. So why not just say it? Even if Ares didn't say it back, Charles meant it, he wouldn't run away or take it back.

Finally, Ares thrummed softly and said, "I don't … really have anything to connect with that word … but I trust you. I trust you with everything I am, my body, my sanity, my family, my past … I don't know if that's love, but you're the only one I trust."

Charles swallowed, staying silent as he struggled through the maelstrom of shit going through his head, making his chest burn and ache while at the same time making him feel weak and oddly light. He figured what Ares did say was, in his own way, the same thing. Hell, maybe even more. Charles knew that, he really did, and it awed him to know the turian trusted him so much … but there was a part of him that really wished Ares knew he loved Charles and could say it back. A part of him that really wanted to hear those words. But … he was glad Ares didn't say it if he wasn't sure of it himself.

Lifting his hand to Ares' face, he pressed his palm against the man's cheek and just said, 'You're mine. I'm yours.' Maybe those words worked even better than 'I love you', anyway.

Ares purred, nodding and shifting down enough to duck his head beneath Charles' chin and pressed his ear to Charles' chest. "Your heart is beating the fastest I've heard."

Charles let out a surprised bark of laughter, bringing his hand down to run his fingers over Ares' crest, using his elbow to pull Ares in closer. "Yeah … I suppose it is. Not exactly an easy thing to tell someone you love them."

Ares hummed in agreement.

"I'm just glad you didn't say something like, 'Shut up, you idiot.'"

Rumbling with a hint of amusement, Ares said, "Then I'd be predictable."

"Can't have that," Charles said with a soft chuckle. He let the silence sit for a few seconds before venturing on. "What you said to Cammus … I figure that's something we should talk about."

"You mean bondmates."

Charles swallowed, his hand stilling on Ares. "Yeah … is that how you see me?"

Ares' hum vibrated against Charles' side and chest. "'Bondmate' is a word I've spent a long time trying to understand. What makes it a bond? Are there set rules?" He took a moment, just breathing as if thinking over his words. "They say a bond comes with a bondmark, and we've done that in our own way. They say bonds are official, but I won't put my information in anywhere legal, so there isn't that. Does that now make it not a bond? Who set these rules for what make bondmates?"

Charles hummed as he thought it over, fingers moving against Ares' neck and shoulder again in lazy, soft strokes. "I don't know for turians. The human side of things … well, I doubt you really care about the history, but it's always seemed to me to be more something people want as a way to
somehow validate their relationship to the rest of the world. What it's *supposed* to be is a promise to spend their lives together and always do their best by one another."

"In that case," Ares said, shifting in a little more against Charles, "I think I've already made that promise by telling you about my true self, letting you into my life, past and current."

Crunching up enough to kiss the top of Ares' head, Charles said, "You'd have to kill me to get rid of me. The moment you told me you wanted to go after ... you wanted to go to Shanxi. Like I told you there, I'd follow you anywhere, Ares. Anywhere."

Ares thumbed against Charles. "As for validation to others? I can't do that."

Bringing his hand back up to trace the lines of one of the spikes of Ares' crest, Charles took a deep breath. "I know. That's not really so important to me. I don't have any family left, no close friends ... so it doesn't really matter." He smiled and added, "Although, it feels pretty damn validating when you do things like tell the bartender I'm yours or put your arm around me in public."

Ares snorted. "You're too short for me to put my arm around you comfortably."

"Pfft." Charles nudged Ares' head a little, just enough to feel, but not enough to hurt with what had to be a massive headache. "Maybe you're just too tall. I'm actually so not short for my species, but you're way taller than any other turian I've met."

"And it's a bitch to find clothing, too," Ares said with a huff. As if he really cared.

Charles chuckled. "So ... feel up to making me smell like you again?"

Ares stretched out, spine popping loudly as he rolled over onto his back. "I think I can make due if you do all the work," he said, teasing tone to his voice. "And leave the lights off."

"I think I can handle that." Charles smirked, sitting up to strip his shirt off before turning over to finish opening Ares'.

Ares sat up long enough to pull his arms out of the shirt before laying back down and working on getting his pants open. Charles undid his own before rolling over to his back to lift his hips and pull them off, dragging his socks off, too and tossing them over the edge of the bed before moving to his knees. He wrapped his hands around the waistband of Ares' pants and helped ease them down.

Rumbling, Ares lifted his hips. "There are snaps around my spurs. These damn pants are too tight to just pull off of them."

"Okay," Charles said as he worked the material down far enough for Ares to relax against the bed again. Reaching down, Charles took a second to run his hands over Ares' spurs before popping the snaps loose and going back to the task of pulling his pants down.

As soon as the pants were free of his feet, Ares nudged him with a foot. "I'm not down there," he said, humor filling his hum.

Charles snorted, swatting at his foot. "Smartass. Now I'm going to take my time." He wrapped his hands around Ares' ankles, massaging his thumbs and fingers into the softer spots while he moved lower down on the bed to position himself between Ares' legs. Leaning in to rub his face over Ares' knee, he twisted enough to scrape his teeth very gently over the backs of Ares' calf and spur.

"Spurs, huh? Do I need to worry about some kind of spur fetish?"

"Shush and lay down." Charles nipped a little harder at the spur to punctuate his words before moving his hands up to massage Ares' calves.

"Spurs, huh? Do I need to worry about some kind of spur fetish?"

"Shush and lay down." Charles nipped a little harder at the spur to punctuate his words before moving his hands around to the front of Ares' legs, running his hands over the turian's knees before gripping his thighs. He stopped there to rub into the muscles as he scooted up higher on the bed.

Actually doing as he was told, Ares laid back again, shifting around a bit to get comfortable again. Charles smiled, leaning in to kiss Ares' thighs before pushing his hands up the man's legs, digging in a little with the heel of his hands. Moving up over Ares' hips, he closed his hands around Ares' waist, squeezing and kneading, pulling a deep rumble from the turian. He lowered his face to Ares' abdomen, rubbing his face over the hide as he kissed, nipped, and licked, letting his chest brush and press against Ares' groin plates as he moved, getting a soft, hungry growl from Ares in return.

Bringing his hand back down to Ares' left leg, he ran his fingers along the underside of the man's thigh, pulling just under his knee to straighten the leg out a little more before shifting his own leg over to the other side of Ares. He returned that hand to Ares' waist before doing the same with the
other side, biting into his hide far softer than normal, savoring the twitch of hide and muscle beneath his teeth. Ares never really gave him the opportunity to take his time like that, touching him everywhere, let alone being so gentle. It definitely wasn’t what Charles wanted all the time, but every now and again ….

He traced Ares’ wound but didn’t dig his fingers into it before dragging them back down to grip Ares’ waist, and Ares thumbed, letting a heavy breath out through his mouth. Charles took his time there, kneading for a few moments before moving higher. Kissing, nipping, and licking, he made his way up the edge of Ares’ keel before trailing off over the sides, bringing his other hand down to knead at the bite mark he left on the right side of Ares’ waist. Leg muscles flexing beneath Charles, Ares let out an aroused sigh, bringing a smile to Charles’ face. He continued up, stopping here and there as the mood struck until he reached Ares’ mouth and brushed his lips over the turian’s mouth plates, pulling away again before Ares could deepen the kiss and nipped at his mandible instead.

Ares gave him a disappointed huff, humming as he said, “I didn’t take you for the cock teasing type.”

Charles smiled against the side of Ares’ jaw, bringing a hand up to press his fingers to Ares’ mouth plates. “Shhh.”

Ares flicked his mandible but didn’t say anything else. Charles’ nipped his mandible along the edge before tucking his head under to bite Ares’ neck, trailing his tongue down over Ares’ throat before biting again. Thrumming, Ares lifted his chin, offering Charles more of his throat. Charles smiled, moving down to a new spot and sinking his teeth in again, trailing his hand away from Ares’ mouth to caress over his cowl and then along his shoulder. Running his hand down Ares’ arm, he ghosted his fingers across his name carved into Ares’ forearm before wrapping the arm up to settle the turian’s hand on his own waist. Ares squeezed, thumb softly stroking the skin beneath Charles’ ribs.

Charles brought his hand back up, tucking it under Ares’ head to knead at the hide at the base of his skull. Biting Ares’ neck again, he kissed the spot before moving back to Ares’ mouth, tongue slipping past his mouth plates. Ares growled but didn’t take any action to rush Charles, letting him set the pace. Hips shifting beneath Charles, Ares’ plates loosened. He reached down between them, digging the pads of his fingers into Ares’ stomach a little, holding the level of pressure as he slid his hand down, savoring the rumbling hiss Ares let out as his plates opened up the rest of the way, the tip of his cock sliding out to press against Charles.

Brushing his palm over the split in Ares’ plates just once, Charles moved his hand to squeeze Ares’ inner thigh, high into his groin, grinning against Ares’ mouth. As much as Charles loved taking his time, he also knew he was driving the turian insane, making him question his decision to let Charles take over. And it was kind of hilarious. A part of him wanted to see just how far he could push Ares before the turian either decided it wasn’t worth it or took control of the situation, but an even bigger part of him really just wanted to take Ares right up to the edge before bringing him crashing back down with an orgasm—hopefully—good enough to make him see stars.

Tongue retreating from Ares’ mouth, he nipped at the turian’s mouth plates before moving away to sink his teeth into Ares’ throat again, exploring new territory as Ares lifted his chin again. He massaged around Ares’ plates, occasionally actually running his hand over the head of Ares’ growing cock sticking out between. Bringing his mouth up to Ares’ ear, voice low and husky, he said, “Tell me what you want me to do to you.”

Ares hummed and shifted beneath Charles, flicking a mandible against him. “Fuck me.”

Stillling for about half a second as the words sunk in, Charles nipped Ares’ neck again. “How do you want me to fuck you?”

“Me on my hands and knees, you behind me.” Ares growled, shifting his hips again to press his cock against Charles. “I don’t care how, really. I just want you to do it.”

Breath catching in his throat a little, Charles scraped his teeth over Ares’ neck again before pulling back to kiss him. After a few seconds, he broke away and shifted off of Ares, moving to the bedside table. “Get comfortable, then,” he said, glancing over his shoulder with a smirk.

Ares sat up, moving slow—probably thanks to his hangover—as he righted himself and rolled over. Pressing up onto his hands and knees, he rested his upper body on his forearms. Charles took a moment, soaking in the image of Ares waiting for him. He’d just planned to ride Ares’ cock, never expecting Ares to actually want Charles to fuck him, but he was more than happy to. He just hoped he could keep his shit together.

Grabbing the lube from the table, he dropped it on the bed next to Ares’ knee before moving behind the man. He ran his hands over Ares’ back and along his waist, leaning in to bite the turian’s hip bone. Moving a little closer on his knees, he sat back on his heels, running his hands over Ares a few more times before picking the bottle up. He squeezed some onto his fingertips before tossing it back on the bed.

He ran the back of a knuckle down over Ares until he felt the man’s asshole and turned his hand,
spreading lube over the hole before easing a finger inside. Ares relaxed into the touch, letting himself open up to take in Charles’ finger, clearly having done so before. Charles filed that away for later consideration, sliding his finger in deeper, twisting a little before slowly dragging it back out to press the pad of his finger down toward Ares’ perineum—well, whatever the equivalent on a turian—massaging it into it with a circular motion, helping to relax the opening further before sliding another finger inside. He could tell Ares didn’t really need the guidance, but he savored the moment anyway, taking in something new about the man he loved he’d never had the chance to explore before.

Ares’ rumbled, that same low sound he used to tell Charles to get on with something, and Charles smirked. He didn’t really take the time with Cammus to look, but he didn’t feel a prostate in Ares, at least not where he could reach with his fingers, so he didn’t plan on taking much time there anyway, but he’d considered dragging it out further just because of Ares’ impatience. He figured he’d given Ares enough slow-burn torture for the time being, though, and pulled his fingers free instead.

Adding more lube to his hand, he slid it over his cock before lifting back up to his knees. He held onto Ares’ hip while he lined himself up, easing inside, breath catching in his throat as heat surrounded him. Charles groaned, closing his eyes and sucking in a steady breath. Ares thrummed, reaching back to move Charles’ hand to his waist, squeezing Charles’ fingers as he pressed back against him. Charles gripped Ares’ waist, pulling a soft groan from Ares as he pushed the rest of the way inside of the man.

Bringing his other hand to Ares other side, he pulled back out. Despite Ares’ obvious comfort, Charles took it slow at first, for his own sake. He needed to make sure he had his mind under control before he picked up the pace. Even with him on top, he doubted Ares would have any problem with him getting rough and going to his dark place, but it wasn’t what Charles wanted for his first time in that position with Ares, especially not right after telling Ares that he loved him.

He expected the bloody thoughts to force their way forward, but they didn’t. The only thing he thought, the only thing he felt, was his hunger and the desire to bring Ares pleasure. Moaning, he moved a little faster, stretching out the sensation of Ares’ tight heat swallowing him again. He reached around Ares, stroking his cock, but Ares growled, wrapping his own hand around himself, pushing back against Charles again, urging him on.

Charles smiled, pulling his hand back to wipe the wetness from Ares’ cock off on his own ass and thigh before gripping Ares’ waist and squeezed, bucking his hips to slam into Ares harder. Ares let out a low growl of a moan and pressed his forehead to the pillows. Doing it again and again, slow, hard thrusts, Charles soaked in the sounds coming from Ares. He picked up the pace, fucking Ares faster and harder, the low light coming in from the hall letting him see the turian’s talons digging into the sheet as he held to Charles’ pace, stroking himself with his other hand while backing into Charles.

One of his fingers slipping into Ares’ cowl, Charles grabbed his shoulder, digging his fingers into thick hide and dense muscle as he found the leverage he needed to buck his hips faster and harder still. He closed his eyes, focusing himself to fight off his own orgasm when he felt himself nearing the edge, wanting to give Ares whatever he wanted, what he needed first. Ares lifted his head, tilting his crest toward Charles’ hand, growth he arched his back, giving Charles a better angle. Shifting his weight a little, Charles moved his hand from Ares’ shoulder to his crest, instead, wrapping his fingers around the spikes, squeezing and pulling a little.

“Harder.” Ares’ voice was thick with arousal, growling and panting.

Charles tightened his grip, pulling Ares’ head back more, really hoping it didn’t make his headache worse. Bringing his left hand up, he squeezed the wound on Ares’ side, fucking him harder still. Ares gasped for air just before his breathing stopped entirely, body growing taut. The sound of talons ripping through fabric filled the air as Ares arched his back further, ass squeezing Charles’ cock, and let out a loud, drawn out moan.

Sucking in a sharp, deep breath, Charles let it rumble deep in his chest and throat as he let it back out. “Fuck,” he muttered. Hearing those sounds coming from Ares, feeling him come undone around Charles, pushed him to the point of no return. He slammed into Ares, only taking a few more deep thrusts before the first wave hit, tearing a loud groan from him, fingers tightening around Ares crest and waist. “Fuck,” he managed again, the word tumbling from his mouth as he let his head fall back on his shoulders, something between a cry and a moan ripping through his throat as he slammed into Ares once more, pressure building up before spilling out again and again. He jerked his hips with the spasms, grinding against Ares ass while he rode out the last of his orgasm, letting go of Ares’ crest.

Ares panted with deep, rumbling breaths as he dropped his head, back heaving as he leaned on both of his forearms. Charles slowed to a complete stop and leaned over, kissing Ares’ lower back before rubbing a hand over the same spot. Grabbing Ares’ hips, holding him in place, Charles pulled out of the man before moving to stretch out on the bed next to him.

Ares cracked open an eye, the light barely catching on the glassy surface. He looked down at Charles, humming before stating, as a matter of fact, “You keep grabbing that wound and it’ll probably scar.”
Chuckling, Charles grinned. "I think we've already established how I feel about scars, but I'll leave it alone if you want. It just gets such a fantastic reaction out of you."

Ares snorted and relaxed, laying on his stomach and turning his head toward Charles. "I'm far beyond worrying about my looks. And I keep it clean, so it's fine."

Rolling to his side, Charles settled a hand on Ares' back. "Good, because when it does finally heal up, I'll be sad."

Ares chuckled, vibrating against Charles' hand. "I'll be sure to get into another bar fight, then.

Charles smirked and leaned over, kissing Ares' shoulder. "I'd rather you didn't. I don't like the thought of you getting hurt. I know, I know," he said, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling and shaking his head, "you're a badass, but still … you're mine. I worry about you whether you like it or not."

Humming, Ares flicked a mandible, giving Charles a teasing smile. "You turn into a sap when you cum."

Snorting, Charles reached down to pinch Ares' side. "Shush. I can't help whatever hormones my body dumps into me."

Ares chuckled and closed his eyes. "I need to buy you new sheets now."

Charles hummed, laying his face on Ares' shoulder blade. "Doesn't matter. So, are we spending the whole day in bed?"

"Or maybe I should just get you a more comfortable bed," Ares said, voice mellow and relaxed even with the playful, taunting quality to his subvocals. "One that isn't flat."

Charles huffed. "You can get us a new bed if you really want. Maybe even a few things for you to actually have when you're here … make the place a little more yours."

Ares opened an eye, turning just enough to look at Charles. "You have seen what I travel with, right?"

"That's why I said for you to leave here." Charles huffed again, rubbing his cheek over Ares' shoulder before kissing him. "You have a place where you can always come back to now." He shrugged. "I'm just saying if there's stuff you want … you can have it here."

"That's the thing." Ares laid his head back against the pillows. "I don't know how to have something that I'm not supposed to carry on my back."

Charles let that sit between them for a few seconds, refusing to allow it to spoil his mood before he changed the subject. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm always hungry," Ares said with a snort.

"Feeling brave enough to leave the apartment?" Charles turned his face to kiss Ares' shoulder blade.

Ares groaned but nodded. "I need a shower first. I still look like two halves of different turians."

Charles chuckled. "I don't know, I kinda like you smelling like me."

Snorting, Ares slowly eased up, giving Charles enough time to roll off of him. "You can always fuck me after, but right now, the smell of horosk on myself makes me want to puke."

"Oooohhh, maybe we should find something to eat here?" Charles asked, scrunching up his face. "I said I'd shower." Ares sat upright, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "I may have shit cleanser, but it will get the smell out."

"Your stomach will be alright after that?" Charles sat up, digging through his pants for his cigarillos. "Mine sure as hell wouldn't be. I'm surprised you didn't give yourself alcohol poisoning."

Ares made a dismissive, groaning sound as he waved the statement off and headed toward the bathroom. Charles grinned, stretching back out on the bed and pulling the ashtray over to enjoy his cigarillo. He figured he'd take a shower after Ares, it seriously wasn't easy to get the both of them in there together. As soon as Ares left the room, Eezo ran in and jumped onto the bed, curling in against Charles' side, making him laugh.

Sitting out on the veranda of The Wheelhouse, Charles swallowed the last of his tea and looked over Ares. "How's your head?"

Ares hummed, the sound a mix of pain and frustration as he sat with his elbow on the table and forehead in his hand, the other holding his cigarette. "Same. Not sure if it's the hangover or my..."
usual migraines.” He shrugged and said, "I'll go away soon enough."

Leaning back in the chair, Charles pursed his lips. "We can stop somewhere on the way back and get you something to take."

Taking a drag, Ares shook his head as he blew the smoke back out. "No. Nothing really works if it's a migraine, so I'm not wasting my credits. Like I said, it'll go away."

Charles nodded. "Alright. Well, I'm ready when you are. We can head back home, let you sleep it off or something."

Ares rumbled as he opened his mouth, letting smoke waft out. "You know, I still have that hotel room booked for a few more days."

"Hmm. You want to go back?" Charles figured they'd go back at least long enough to check out, but if Ares actually wanted to spend a few days there ... well, it was quite a bit posher than Charles was used to, but it sure as hell would be nice. "I'll still have to work day after tomorrow, but I don't mind coming and going. I can change at work, I guess. Maybe I can get Lindsey to watch Eezo for a few days."

"Whatever you want to do," Ares said, shrugging before taking another slow drag.

Charles had a feeling Ares really did want to go back, he just wouldn't outright say so. He pursed his lips again, looking over Ares as he tried to ferret out the turian's reasoning. Finally, it occurred to him, Ares may simply want to do something nice for the two of them. It brought a slow smile to his face. Opening his omni-tool, he looked up the old contact information he had for Lindsey from when she still worked at Citadel Souvenirs and hoped she hadn't changed it since, and he placed the call.

"Oh! Hi, Charles!" Lindsey's perky voice filled the air as she gave him a big smile.

Charles glanced up at Ares, catching him cringe, before looking back at her. "Hey, Lindsey. I wanted to see if you could do me a favor?"

"Sure, what's up?" she asked with a shrug.

"I'm going to be away from the apartment for a few days. Think you could watch Eezo at your place?" He tilted his head toward his shoulder. "I know you said you can't have pets, but really, just a few days?"

"Um ..." She bit the corner of her lip before letting her teeth drag over it as her lip popped free, and she nodded. "Sure. She's a good girl, I can hide her if I need to."

Charles grinned. "Thanks. Send me your address, and I'll bring her by in about an hour if that works. And you'll have to tell me about lunch with Mahlia."

Laughing, she nodded. "Alright, see you in an hour."

Charles winked at Ares, catching him cringe, before looking back at her. "Hey, Lindsey. I wanted to see if you could do me a favor?"

"Sure, what's up?" she asked with a shrug.

"I'm going to be away from the apartment for a few days. Think you could watch Eezo at your place?" He tilted his head toward his shoulder. "I know you said you can't have pets, but really, just a few days?"

"Um ..." She bit the corner of her lip before letting her teeth drag over it as her lip popped free, and she nodded. "Sure. She's a good girl, I can hide her if I need to."

Charles grinned. "Thanks. Send me your address, and I'll bring her by in about an hour if that works. And you'll have to tell me about lunch with Mahlia."

Laughing, she nodded. "Alright, see you in an hour."

Charles winked at her and cut the call, a part of him thinking the woman was far too trusting. He turned his attention back to Ares. "Work for you?"

Ares hummed in approval around his cigarette before stamping it out in the ashtray. "Let's go. I want that horosk you brought to the apartment, and you can deal with that woman."

Paying for their meal, Charles chuckled and headed for the exit. "Aw, come on, she's not that bad."

"Then you're fooling yourself," Ares said as they stepped out of the restaurant.

"You're just intolerant." He grinned over his shoulder at Ares as they started walking back home. "I think she's going to end up hooking up with the asari you saw at work. Maybe getting laid and 'embracing eternity' will calm her down a little."

"Embracing eternity," Ares mimicked the words with a dismissive scoff.

Charles laughed and shrugged. "It's what they always say in the vids, right?" He paused for a second then shook his head. "I could never do it. Let someone in my head like that, besides maybe you."

"Asari are a pointless species," Ares said with a low growl.

Charles snorted. "What point do any species really have?"

Shaking his head, Ares gave him an annoyed rumble. "Most species can depend on themselves. Asari? They've become so dependant on others. Like I said, pointless. Pointless and useless," he said as if it should be obvious.

"Dependant on others how?" He furrowed his brow, trying to follow Ares' train of thought but missing it entirely.
"Breeding for one. Second? Salarians provide scientific advancements. They needed the krogan to fight the rachni for them, and look at what they did to clean up that mess," Ares added, motioning at himself. "They can't do shit without relying on others."

"Okay," Charles said, waving his hand, "but they don't need other species for breeding, and the asari aren't the ones who made or deployed the genophage, yeah?"

Ares shook his head, glancing up a moment before back down at Charles. "The asari and salarians uplifted the krogan to fight the rachni, forgoing the concept of letting a species mature enough to actually be of use in the galactic community. When then krogan became a problem, they turned to the turians to clean up that mess. They sent turians to fight a battle that came about because of theirs and the salarian's decisions." He growled and tossed his hand in the air. "We didn't cause the Rebellions, but we finished it. Because of that, we're the ones blamed for all the shit with the krogan."

Charles hummed, starting to realize the asari were apparently a real touching subject for Ares. And he was pretty sure the krogan uplifting was far more a salarian thing than an asari thing, but whatever. He dug out his cigarillos, pulling one out and putting it between his lips before going back for his lighter. "What asari pissed in your cereal?"

Ares huffed, giving him a throaty hum. "It's a long story. Let's just say there was a moment when I let my guard down just enough to almost get fucked."

Lighting his cigarillo, Charles hummed around it and asked, "She dead?"

"Yes." Ares huffed again. "But only after I had to chase her and track her down on Omega."

Chuckling a little, he moved closer to Ares and slid his arm around the turian's waist as they walked. "Well, Mahlia's not so bad. She's actually starting to talk to me more." He glanced up at Ares. "Apparently, a few weeks back, I took some time off from work and since I've been back, I've been less 'mousy.'"

"You say she isn't bad, but just the other day she was glaring at you like—how did you put it?—you pissed in her cereal." Ares lifted a brow plate.

Charles snorted but winced a little. "Yeah, well, I kinda did. In retail, especially where commissions are involved, my stepping in to direct you over to my kiosk was a pretty fucked thing to do. We're alright now, though."

Ares merely hummed as they arrived at the apartment, falling silent save for lighting another cigarette.
Ruin Everything

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Ruin Everything

Going back to the hotel for the third time wasn't so bad for Charles, especially since they didn't have to spend much time in the lobby. When he stepped into the room, he realized they'd left the place a mess. The ashtray still overflowed with cigarette butts, broken glass still littered the floor from where Ares' threw a bottle at the window, and the metal platter still lay there with untouched food. Chuckling, he grabbed a trash can and moved over to the window, squatting down to pick up the pieces of glass. Once the bigger shards were out of the way, he carefully ran his hand through the carpet, finding several smaller fragments still hidden about the damp fibers.

He stepped past Ares—standing at the bathroom sink, removing his prosthetics—to grab a towel and carried it back to the window. He patted the carpet dry, idly thinking it was a good thing the bottle Ares chose the night before held a clear liquor. Sure, the room might reek of alcohol, but at least the carpet wasn't stained. After soaking up as much of it as he could, he shook the towel out over the wastebasket, just in case it picked up any more glass, and then he carried it back to the bathroom along with the ice bucket. Dumping the water from the ice bucket into the sink, he dropped the towel on the floor next to the door and went back out to the main room.

After emptying the cigarette butts in the trash with the broken glass, he looked down at the tray of half-eaten food. He knew Ares turned away the daily housekeeping the hotel offered, so he wasn't sure if he'd want Charles to call up room service without any other reason. And, it seemed kind of a rude thing to do just for a platter and an ice bucket. Still, the shit would start to stink soon, so he didn't really want to toss the food out in the trash. "What am I supposed to do with this?" he asked, bending down to pick up the tray.

"Call room service," Ares said from where he worked in the bathroom, sounding exasperated.

Charles smirked at Ares' tone, not bothering to explain his reasoning as to why he didn't just do that from the start, figuring Ares wouldn't understand his line of thought anyway. "Just to come get a platter?" He shook his head and muttered, "Fuck, these guys better get paid good." He set the platter down on the table next to the ice bucket and made his way over to the kiosk. "Hey, should I have tipped the guy last night who brought your horosk?"

"No. Their tips come at check out," Ares said.

"Alright, good." Charles looked over the kiosk for a second until he saw an option for housekeeping and moved through the menu until he found 'pick up meal tray'.

He thought about it for a second and figured he'd give them the towel he used to clean up the alcohol, too. Bracing himself against the bathroom door frame, he bent down and grabbed the towel from the floor. Standing up, he smiled and took a minute to watch Ares but then left again before his staring became uncomfortable and Ares started complaining.

After stuffing the towel into the ice bucket, Charles looked around him and lit a cigarillo. Crossing the floor, he glanced over the weird-ass, concave bed before turning enough to plop down on it, sprawling across the mattress on his back. He shifted around a little, stretching out and humming quietly to himself. It wasn't so bad, really. He'd probably take some getting used to if he planned to sleep on one like it regularly, but he figured he'd manage if it was something Ares wanted to put in the apartment.

He took a long drag, blowing the smoke up toward the ceiling. "This place is like … stupid nice."

"Figured you'd be impressed." Ares snorted, the sound of water echoing in the bathroom before he turned it off again. "And it should be for the credits I'm paying."

Charles chuckled, taking a drag. "I've been in hotels like this before, but not … you know, just to relax."

Ares hummed before stepping out of the bathroom, shirt balled in his hand. He tossed it to the corner of the room, kicking his shoes off and out of the way. Making his way first to the coffee table, he grabbed the bottle of horosk they'd brought with them and then sat down on the bed next to Charles.

"So, this rounded bed thing, it's what turians usually sleep on?" Charles raised his eyebrow as he took a drag, turning his head to glance at Ares.

"Yep." Ares unscrewed the cap and took a drink. "We can use flat beds but need special pillows. Lots of them."

Snorting, Charles grinned, letting his voice take on a light, teasing tone. "That makes you sound like such a softie." He took another drag, letting the smoke seep out of him as he shrugged. "Course, I know you can sleep just about anywhere." Dropping his hand to the mattress, he ran
his fingers back and forth over the plush bedding. "This isn't so bad, though."

Ares shrugged as he swallowed another drink. "You can make it suit you better with the pillows. It's how most interspecies pairs do."

"I don't think I'll need much adjusting. Shit," he said, pausing to take a drag, "it's got to be better than a moldy warehouse floor."

Ares lifted a brow plate, smirking. "Then you haven't been sleeping on the right floors."

Huffing a little, Charles tilted his head back to better look up at the turian. "You're the one who insisted that foul smelling place was good enough."

Ares shrugged, taking another long drink. He wasn't drinking quite as fast as he had the night before, but Charles had a feeling if he kept going, he'd wind up getting trashed again before the night was out. He flicked a mandible. "At the time, it was good enough."

"Mmm."

"Then you haven't been sleeping on the right floors."

"Of course! Enjoy the rest of your stay!" The asari turned and started walking away, so Charles closed the door.

When he made his way back to the bed, he found Ares surrounded by pillows, stuffed all around his back as he stared intently at his omni-tool. His expression was almost vacant, he seemed so lost in whatever the screen held.

"What are you looking at?" Charles wondered if it was the pictures from the wedding reception, but he didn't want to risk putting Ares in a foul mood if the assumption was wrong.

Ares stayed quiet, his gaze fixed on the omni-tool as he took an extra long drink. Sighing, he said, "Yeah, it's the pictures you sent me. The ones of Maela's celebration."

"I think he was secretly trying to will me away," Charles said, smiling as he turned his attention back to the picture.

"What makes you think that?" Ares shifted the bottle, wedging it against himself while he zoomed in on the faces in the picture.

"Just a feeling, mostly. I mean, it is kinda weird for a human to crash a turian's wedding. I guess some of it's what Maela said about him being big on organization. I didn't fit the plan." He shrugged. "He was nice, though."

"Turians don't really have a special name for it," Ares hummed and took a drink. "But he used to help me with—I guess you could equate it to 'homework'. That's the word, right?"

"Yeah," Charles said with a nod.

"Turians don't really have a special name for it." Ares shrugged and took a drink. "But he used to help me with it. Help all of us, really. I swear he used to cringe when he saw us writing outside of the designated writing sections."

Charles chuckled. "I'd asked Maela if I could take her picture—told her that her dress reminded me of the one my aunt wore—but while I was taking her picture with Dax, your dad moved in to remind her—two seconds after telling her the first time—that it was time to cut the cake."

"Yeah," Charles said with a nod.

Murmuring, Ares took another drink and changed the image on the screen to the one of just Dax and Maela. "I wonder if she'll change her colony paints to match his."

"Is that common?" Charles asked, studying the purple lines sweeping over Dax's carapace.
Ares shrugged. "It depends. It really doesn't mean much now. Before, it was showing where your loyalties laid during the Unification War, but now it's mostly to show you're loyal to any kind of governing force." He took a drink before adding, "If you want to be specific, it means where you consider home, where you would fight for if there ever was another separation among the turian people."

"I haven't seen a whole lot of bonded turian couples together, but only one couple I remember had the same markings." Charles hummed, mulling it over. "Although, I suppose living on the Citadel provides a broader scope of things than living on Palaven or one of the other turian planets."

"You're right. Some of the turians living on Palaven go through that, but like you said, it's only a few who do it now." Ares shrugged and swallowed down more horosk. "I just meant because his are her favorite color."

Charles chuckled, absently nodding his head. "Good of a reason as any, I guess."

"Well, she'd be living on Palaven where colony paints have a more fluid meaning. You can switch them around quite often because, ultimately, they all boil down to belonging to Palaven. Now, if he was from a colony and she had the paints she has now, she might not change them." Ares rumbled, huffing a weak laugh. "I guess it's more complicated than something that doesn't even matter should be."

Shrugging, Charles dug out his cigarillos and lit one. "It matters to them." He took a drag, letting it out slowly. "I can't remember Sarah's favorite color … I feel like I should, though, and I'm an asshole for forgetting."

Ares just hummed and brought the bottle to his mouth, swallowing several times without pausing between.

Charles turned his attention back to the pictures. "The next few are of them cutting the cake and opening gifts, but I recorded her opening the dagger before I left."

Ares stilled, hand hovering above the command to switch to the next picture in the slideshow. A rumbling click escaped his throat before he dropped his arms to his lap, exhaling heavily. "I don't know if I want to see. Did she like it?"

Leaning against Ares' arm, Charles said, "It's alright. It's not going anywhere unless you delete it, you can watch it later if you decide you want to. I deleted them from my omni-tool, though, so don't erase it unless you're sure." He took a deep breath and glanced at Ares' face. "She fucking loved it. They both did."

Ares downed the rest of the bottle and set it on the floor beside the bed. Closing his omni-tool, he let out a heavy breath. "I need to be drunker to have the balls to look at it."

Charles shook his head, taking a drag. "You're gonna kill yourself. Want me to order more?"

Instead of answering, Ares got up and got it himself, stopping to grab his lighter and pack of cigarettes from his jacket. Putting a cigarette between his mouth plates, he lit it on his way back to the bed and got comfortable again. Charles took a deep breath and nodded to himself, settling against the pillows, preparing himself for the long haul. He worried about Ares, knew the turian was barely keeping himself from spiraling out, but Charles was at a loss as to how to help him. He didn't know what the hell to do, and he hated it.

"You should enjoy yourself," Ares said, the open bottle hovering in front of his mouth before he took a drink.

Charles looked around him. "I'm content for the moment." He took a drag from his cigarillo and flipped the ashes off the end. "Though I might check out the hot tub here in a bit."

Ares hummed. "It might be hot enough for us both to enjoy."

Grinning, Charles took another drag. "Didn't think you'd be interested in it."

Ares lowered his bottle and swallowed before asking, "Why not?"

Charles glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. "You take damn near cold showers—which I get—but I'd be happy to have you in there with me."

Nodding, Ares exhaled smoke before taking a long drink. Swallowing, he blew a heavy breath out through his nose. "Fuck, I need to beat the shit out of something."
Charles raised his brows, the sudden switch in Ares' mindset confusing him for a second. "So ..." he said, relaxing again, "... we'll go beat the shit out of something."

Growling around his cigarette, Ares blew out the smoke. "Look up one of those people on your 'list.'"

"What makes you think I have a list?" Charles raised an eyebrow. He did have a list. Kinda. But he hadn't talked to Ares about it at all; hell, he hadn't even really solidified the idea of having a list. He'd just spent some time browsing—okay, maybe a lot of time—the files on the program he used to look people up. There were quite a few there who'd caught his eye.

After taking several, long draws from the bottle, Ares finally pulled it away to say, "I'm taking a wild guess."

Pursing his lips, Charles sat up straight and opened his omni-tool. Digging through the programs, he found the one he was looking for and pulled up the information for a man named Brandon Majors. Brandon was a douchebag who C-Sec brought in and released a few weeks ago on his fifth accusation of domestic violence. His wife had been beaten black and blue, but of course, when the time came for her to give her official statement and press charges, she recanted. She'd probably be dead within the year if someone didn't take the asshole out first. Charles sent the profile over to Ares' omni-tool.

Ares held his cigarette between his mouth plates as he looked through the man's information. Soon, he shrugged. "I can deal with killing him. I just need to feel it. Nothing else about him really matters."

Grinning, Charles already felt his heart rate pick up, dumping adrenaline in his system. Muscles tightened, eager to do some damage—even if he just planned to sit back and watch Ares do his thing. Still, he'd definitely see some spilled blood and hear a few screams before the night was out, and the prospect left him feeling jittery. "Guy's ex-Alliance, Cat-6. Big dude, too. He'll at least give you a little bit of a fight."

"All the better," Ares said with a chuckle, taking a drink.

Having remained eerily calm through the ride, hood pulled up and a low hum in his subvocals, Ares lowered the skycar in one of the bar districts of the Bachjret Ward. They were in one of the few areas on the Citadel where humans clustered together, clinging to the familiarity of their own species while pretending to be brave and adventurous by living among the aliens of the Citadel. Better yet, the hunt for Brandon brought them to one of the seedier areas, lots of dark alleys, muggings, prostitutes, drug deals—a real 'pick your poison' sort of area. Charles knew places like it quite well.

He climbed out of the vehicle when Ares brought it to a stop, pulling up his hood and lighting a cigarillo. Staying silent, he watched as Ares checked his omni-tool before closing it and lighting his own cigarette. Ares started walking, leaving the taxi-stand and making his way back out to the strip, and Charles fell into step beside him. They drew—well, Ares drew—more than a few uncomfortable glances as they made way deeper into the district, making Charles feel a little like they'd just gone back to Shanxi.

Finally coming to a stop outside of a bar called Knuckleheads, Ares glanced down at Charles. Grinning like an idiot, Charles finished his cigarillo, flicking it off to the side. Rumbling, Ares gave him a soft nod before pushing open the doors, smoke immediately flowing out into the clear air of the strip, and stepped inside. He led Charles over to the bar where a burly man with a buzz cut watched them, the sneer on his face tugging at the scar on his stubbled chin. The bartender's posture shifted into something almost defensive as they got closer, and Charles let out a snort.

"I think you might be lost," the man said, but Ares just moved closer to the bar. His eyes narrowed as Ares reached into the pocket of his jacket only to widen a little when Ares pulled out a credit chit.

"Then I guess I should go elsewhere," Ares said around his cigarette, leaning closer to the bar. He set the chit down, keeping it pinned to the surface of the bar with a talon. "Somewhere more interested in the amount of credits I'm willing to dish out for the expensive dextro stock."

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Opening his mouth, the bartender started to say something. "We don't—"

"You do," Ares interrupted, jerking his chin toward the bar behind the man. "I'm not blind. Either you use Equitade to drug your customers ..." He let out a low, considering hum. "... or you like to charge more than that cheap fucking beer is worth. So, what would you rather I do? Pay your insane prices or go to another bar with these credits?"

The man curled his lip and glanced at Charles, giving him a once over as his gaze flicked back and forth between Charles and Ares, clearly trying to figure out if they were together. Charles smirked, moving closer to Ares' side and raised an eyebrow. The muscle along the bartender's jaw twitched, but he kept his gaze on Charles.

After a moment, the man's lips part, but it was a second later before he finally asked, "You know
"I do. He's mine. And trust me, big guy like this, he can put away a lot of alcohol." Charles turned his hands out and shrugged. "Why pass up the credits?"

Glancing between the two of them again, the bartender scowled before letting out a deep, irritated breath. "Alright. Fine." He turned his gaze back to Charles despite keeping his head angled at Ares. "You want something, too?"

After a quick scan of the shelves, Charles nodded. "Mount Milgrom."

The man huffed a breath, nostrils flaring as he spun on his heel and stomped to the back counter. He pulled down the bottle of Mount Milgrom, a tumbler, and a bottle of the beer Ares' talked about. Bringing it all back over to the bar, he nearly tossed the bottle at Ares as he handed it over. Charles' eyebrow twitched, kind of wanting to reach across the bar and slap the man in the back of his head. The bartender poured Charles' glass then picked it up, looking as if he meant to give Charles the same treatment.

Ares' snatched the man's wrist. "Spill that because you're being pissy, and I'm not paying for it," he said with a low growl, subvocals heavy with threat.

Despite his free hand balling into a fist, the man handed over the glass without incident when Ares let him go.

Charles grinned, and yeah, okay, maybe it was a little antagonistic when he said, "Thank you."

Jaw clenching, the bartender scooped the credit chit up from the bar and stuffed it in his dingy, apron pocket. Turning, he storms off to deal with the other customers down the bar, who were all staring at the giant turian who'd invaded their 'safe space'. One sideways glance from Ares, and they, too, quickly snapped their attention back to their own drinks.

Looking down at the glass for a moment, Charles glanced at Ares. "Sure you want to do this here? No way they're not going to remember you if C-Sec shows up asking." He dug out his cigarillos, stuffing one between his lips as he let his gaze roam idly over the room.

Ares hummed as he drank, not looking away from the shelves of liquor behind the bar. "Trust me. Don't question when someone's teaching you a thing or two about kicking the shit out of someone purposely."

Lighting the cigarillo, Charles took a deep drag, letting the smoke flow out of his nostrils before saying, "I do trust you. Questioning is a part of the learning process." He picked up the glass, taking a swallow before setting it back down. "If I'm not asking questions, I'm probably not paying attention." He smirked, watching Ares' reflection in the mirror behind the shelves as he took another drag.

Ares rumbled, a hint of amusement coloring his subvocals. Turning on the stool, he put his back against the bar and took in the rest of the place, but he didn't seem to be looking for anything in particular. "I guess that's a human thing." After taking another drink, he nudged Charles with his bottle, jerking his chin toward one of the vidscreens mounted on the wall. "Follow me. I want to get a better view."

Nodding, Charles stuck his cigarillo between his lips and left it there as he picked up his glass. Ares stood and walked over to one of the tall, rounded tables over by where a few men gathered around pool tables. Putting his back to the players, he leaned against the table, gaze on the vidscreen. Charles stood behind the table, putting his back to a wall, leaving the pool area and the rest of the bar open for him to watch with ease while keeping him close to Ares.

He took a drink from the tumbler before setting it on the table but kept his hand wrapped around the glass, figuring he could always smash it into someone's skull if he needed to. Taking a drag from his cigarillo, he watched the hockey game on the vidscreen for a moment before letting his gaze roam again. He spotted Brandon playing pool at one of the tables closest to them.

Glancing back at Brandon's table, he watched as one of the guys sunk three stripes in a row before scratching the cue. The man didn't move away from the table, though, staying hunched over, hands tightening around his pool stick. Charles trailed his gaze up the man to find him glaring, gaze flicking between Charles and Ares. Shifting between the man and the others at the table, it only took half a second to realize all of them were doing the same, including Brandon.

Without really giving any thought as to whether or not it was wise, Charles caught Brandon's eye, giving him a snide look as he raised his eyebrow and took a drag from his cigarillo. He blew the smoke back out in their direction, holding the man's gaze before glancing at the other three,
making it clear Charles thought they could all go fuck themselves. Maybe there was a reason Charles wasn't so good at making friends.

Ares rumbled, turning to put his back to the wall, half blocking the men from Charles' sight. He kept his gaze on the vidscreen and said, "Pay attention to the game."

Charles grumbled, turning his attention back to the game and took another drink of his whiskey. He watched as the hockey players slammed themselves together against the barrier, creating a tangled mass of limbs, and he was already bored. Sports really weren't his thing. He liked car racing, though, and MMA fights. Not that he needed to justify his preferences, he reminded himself, even if his father did use his lack of interests in sports as another means to challenge Charles' masculinity.

Keeping his voice low, Ares glanced down at Charles. "You look too out of place glaring at people, especially our target. Get your mind on something else. Engage me. Teach me about whatever the fuck this human sport is."

Charles didn't care how petty he sounded when he said, "They glared at me first." He didn't think it made him look at all out of place, that kind of shit was basic as fuck in human bars, but he wouldn't argue the point. Later it wouldn't look good for him to have paid too much attention to a dead guy, and he did stand out drinking with an enormous turian in a human bar. He narrowed his eyes at the vidscreen. "I don't know, it's hockey. They skate around on ice and beat the shit out of each other while trying to get the puck in the goal."

"Pick a team," Ares said quickly, not looking away from the screen.

Taking a second to glance at the team names in the background, Charles said, "The Mars Effect."

"Stupid fucking name."

"Then act like you like them." Ares put the cigarette in his mouth and shouted, sounding upset when the team's shot for the goal was deflected.

Charles' mood automatically shifted, and he had to hide his laughter from Ares by taking another drink. He watched the game for a few seconds, waiting for something to happen he recognized as a bad call before furrowing his brow and glancing at Ares, throwing his hand out toward the vidscreen. "Oh, come on! Did you see that shit? His skates were over the line!"

A moment later, Ares let out a long breath, shaking his head and speaking loud enough to play the part when he said, "Roderick is going to keep missing that pass unless he changes his fucking strategy." He took a drink from his beer before stamping out his cigarette, but instead of leaving the butt in the tray, he put it on the table between the two of them and lit another.

"It doesn't really matter if the linesmen can't even make the right fucking calls." He took a drag from his cigarillo as he glanced at Ares. "Should've called for a face-off on Stevens."

He turned his attention back to the screen, they were already well into the last quarter of the game, and the score was close. The Mars Effect was in the lead, but just barely. He and Ares kept watching, occasionally finding something to complain about or cheer over. Charles noticed a couple of times that Ares' was tearing through his pack of smokes, and the pile of butts on the table between them kept growing. He knew better than to ask questions just then, but he sure was curious to know why the hell Ares was collecting them. When at last the clock on the game was almost out, the opposing team scored a goal, winning the game.

"Aw, come on! Fucking Lunar pieces of shits," Ares shouted, growling as he rammed his cigarette in the ashtray, tucking the butt up into his palm. "Let's get the fuck out of this overpriced shithole." Finishing off his beer, he slammed the bottle down on the table.

"There'll be another game on …." Charles added a little grumble to his words as if he gave a shit, but he downed the rest of his drink and finished off his cigarillo.

"Dropped them in his glass." Shrugging, Ares rumbled around his cigarette. "That was the most boring human sport I've ever seen."

"What'd you do with the cigarette butts?" Charles asked, glancing up at Ares.

"Dropped them in his glass." Shrugging, Ares rumbled around his cigarette. "That was the most boring human sport I've ever seen."

Charles snorted, the simplicity of it amused him greatly. "Remind me to introduce you to golf."

Ares hummed around his cigarette. "I'd rather——"

"Hey! Prick!"

Ares let out a soft, satisfied purr, and Charles grinned. They both turned around, confused looks
Brandon stormed down the walk toward them, fists balled at his sides, lips pulled back in a snarl.

"I fucking knew it!" When he approached, he shoved Ares, but despite his size, he only managed to move Ares back a step. "You fucking piece of shit, skull-faced fuck. You think it's funny?"

Charles clenched his jaw at the racist bullshit, already looking forward to hearing the man scream in agony. The muscles between his shoulder blades tensed, making him want to roll his shoulders and stretch. He didn't though, instead, he just watched, waiting for the moment Ares finished playing with his prey and made the kill.

"I don't know what you're talking—"

Brandon threw a fist, punching Ares hard enough to make him drop his cigarette. Anger flared white hot in the back of Charles' mind, his hands curling into fists, but he sucked in a shallow breath, reminding himself that he needed to keep his shit together. Ares was more than capable of taking care of himself, and they weren't there for Charles' sake. It wasn't his beast they'd come to sate.

Growling, Ares flicked a mandible. "I'll tell you to walk away once."

"Oh, please don't walk away." Charles stared at the guy, feeling a calm slide over his face despite the fury raging in his mind. Maybe because of it.

"You want to start shit, then you better be ready to fucking face me." Brandon glanced at Charles, sneering. "And you better keep your fucking mouth shut or I'll make you watch while I make your boyfriend—"

The words 'make you watch' were just a little bit more than Charles could take, and something inside of him snapped. His fist shot out, punching the man square in the nose. Brandon's head rocked back with the impact, and he stumbled back a step. A second later, though, he let out a growl and charged at Charles.

Ares growled, slamming his hand against the man's face, closing his fingers around his skull and dragging him off into the alley. Charles glanced up and down the street, making sure no one was paying any attention before stepping in after them, leaning against the wall just inside the mouth of the alley. Ares tossed Brandon to the grimy filth, stalkling toward him as the man rolled back to his feet, taking a swing at Ares. Moving into the punch seemed to lessen the blow before Ares rammed his knee into Brandon's stomach, forcing a loud grunt from the man.

Surprise and pain flashed over Brandon's face, and in that split second, Ares wrapped his hand around the man's throat and spun, slamming Brandon into the wall. Pulling him back, Ares slammed him into the wall again, and Brandon's head cracked against the hard surface. Charles stepped back enough to glance up and down the strip again before lighting a cigarillo, savoring the tingle the cloves left behind on his tongue and in his throat as much as he did the violence unfolding in front of him.

Brandon dug his fingers into Ares' hand, trying to pry him off, but Ares kneed him again. The man grunted, coughing before hawking a red-tinged, glob of spit at Ares. Growling, Ares looked down at the spit on his sleeve. Rearing back, he headbutted Brandon, clearly dazing the man, and bringing a smile to Charles' face.

"Fight me," Ares demanded, his voice a deep rumble as he backed up and threw the man to the ground. "Fight me like you're fighting for your life."

Pulling himself to his feet, Brandon laughed, the sound broken by coughing. He took a single step as if to steady himself before charging, shoulder angled toward Ares' torso. Ares stepped to the side, slapping his hand down on the man's back to shove him, using his own momentum to propel him forward and throw him off balance. Ares followed, grabbing the man by the back of the neck, lifting him up to smash his face against the wall.

Charles heard a snap, and Brandon let out a growl, blood pouring down the man's face. Charles swallowed, the sight stirring the monster inside of him, and it let out a purr he felt vibrating throughout his entire body. Heat coursed through his veins, and he licked his lips, suddenly desperate to hear the man scream. Ares pulled Brandon's head back, smashing his face against the wall again, but Brandon planted his palms against the wall and pushed back, limiting the impact. Getting his feet more firmly under him, Brandon shoved back against Ares, but Ares turned with him, pulling Brandon into the momentum of the movement and tossing him to the ground again.

"You're not very good at this," Ares said, voice thick as he smirked.

Hearing footsteps rushing toward them, Charles backed up enough to look. He barely had a chance to register the man barreling down the street before the guy reared back and something flew through the air, smashing into Charles' head before shattering against the ground. Stunned, Charles' vision went black for a second, and he stumbled back, bringing his hand to his head. The guy slammed into him, ramming him back against the wall, skull colliding with a loud crack as the air ripped out of his lungs. He swung blindly, feeling his hand connect, but it didn't even give the
man pause before a fist slammed into his cheek, cracking his head back against the wall again.

A primal snarl filled the air, and suddenly the man was knocked away from Charles, leaving him to crumple to the ground. Head spinning, he tried to focus, catching sight of Ares pinning the man who attacked him against the wall by his throat. Baring his teeth, Ares sunk his talons in and slid the man up the wall, feet leaving the ground. The man struggled, kicking wildly, trying to pry Ares' hand away, but Ares only snarled, subvocals vicious and filled with malice.

Ares looked down at Charles, mandibles fluttering, as Charles pulled himself to his feet, swaying and holding onto the wall for support. Glancing around, he spotted Brandon laying on the ground, neck bent at an unnatural angle, eyes lifeless as they stared back at him. He pressed his hand to his head pulling it away bloody, still struggling to make his mind focus.

"Fucker threw a beer bottle at me." He glanced back down the street before looking at the man pinned against the wall, dazed and confused.

Using his free hand to hold the man in place, an almost frantic growl tore through Ares, filling the air before he sunk his talons in further. Blood flowed down the man's throat, a gurgling hiss escaping him just before Ares ripped his throat out. Growl still rumbling through him, chest heaving, Ares took a second to watch the man bleed, drowning in his own blood before letting the body drop. He moved to Charles, his gaze just as antsy as his growl. He hummed, but Charles barely made the sound out over the constant rumbling Ares didn't seem to be able to stop. Taking his chin in hand, Ares tilted his face up to look him over.

Mandibles quivering, he released Charles. "Come on. We need to leave."

"Yeah …." He followed after Ares, keeping his palm pressed to the wound in his forehead, trying to keep the blood inside and not on the ground.

Ares stopped behind a building next to a skycar lot. "Start a car," he said, stripping off his jacket. "There should be an incinerator behind one of these buildings. I checked the blueprints for the district, it should be …" He glanced around, jacket in his hand, and nodded to the left. "… a few buildings down."

Scanning the skycars until he spotted a C-111 Skyline Shuttle, Charles pulled up his hood as he moved to the familiar model and lowered himself to his back, careful to keep his head off the ground, knowing he had a cut on the back of his head, too. Reaching beneath the vehicle and up into the undercarriage, his fingers shook as he sorted through the wires, tracing the path up to the junction box to make sure he had the right ones before yanking them free. Head spinning a little, he pushed himself back up from the ground and opened his omni-tool, hacking through the locks on the door. Climbing inside, he started the vehicle before glancing over, watching Ares open the passenger's side door and sit down, torso completely bare without his jacket.

Lifting the Skyline into the air, Charles headed them off toward the incinerators. "Sorry," he muttered, glancing at Ares. "Guess that didn't really work out the way you wanted."

Ares hummed and flicked his mandibles once. "Don't apologize. I failed to anticipate it. I should have expected it." He growled and tightened his fist. "I was sloppy."

Charles furrowed his brow a little, which made the blood start flowing a little heavier from the cut up near his hairline. He winced and made himself relax, turning his attention back out the windshield. "You weren't sloppy, I was right there. I should've been paying better attention instead of watching you. I figured there was a chance one of his friends would show up … just didn't expect him to throw a fucking beer bottle at me." He watched Ares out of his peripherals.

Ares didn't answer or look at Charles, leaning his head back against the seat as best as his crest allowed and rumbling.

Charles licked his lips, blinking a few times to better focus on his driving. Last thing they needed was for him to crash the damn skycar. "I'll be alright. And, hey, you got to kill two dickheads tonight."

"That's not the point. I let myself become distracted enough that I wasn't completely aware of the situation." Ares' growled, dragging Charles' gaze back to him, and he finally looked at Charles. "I shouldn't have to put my safety on you when you're there to, what did you say, learn?"

Fighting the urge to huff and roll his eyes, Charles looked out the window and said, "Mmm. How about instead of hating on yourself for not being perfect for a few seconds, you just be happy that you had someone there to watch your back?" He glanced at Ares again, raising an eyebrow. "Someone you trust. Next time, we'll think it through better."

Lowering the Skyline outside of the incinerators, Charles brought it to a stop and focused his attention on Ares. The turian just looked at him a moment longer before getting out and throwing his jacket into the incinerator. When he returned, he gave Charles a nod to go ahead but didn't speak.

Charles sighed, taking off again. "We can't go back to the hotel like this, so home?"
"Yes," Ares said, voice utterly lacking inflection. "We can change there."

Charles turned the skycar toward Zakera Ward, letting the silence sit between them as he chewed on the inside of his lip. "So … that obviously wasn't the right thing to say. And now you're tense all over again. I should've just let you go by yourself. You would've done it all different if I wasn't with you."

"Stop," Ares said.

Confused, thinking Ares meant for him to stop the car, Charles furrowed his brow again. "What?"

"Just …." Ares took a deep breath as he stared out the windshield. "Just shut up. Stop laying blame on yourself."

Charles snorted softly, wanting to say the same damn thing to Ares, but he kept it to himself, driving in silence the rest of the way. When he lowered the skycar outside of his apartment, Ares climbed out before it'd even come to a complete stop, heading straight for the building. Charles sat there a moment, rubbing the back of his hand and wrist over the uninjured side of his forehead as he watched Ares walk away, feeling emotionally drained as much as he was physically.

Ares looked around, stopping about halfway to the apartment, seeming to realize Charles wasn't with him. His gaze moved along the ground until he found Charles still sitting in the Skyline. Taking a deep breath, Charles rubbed the back of his hand over his face again and climbed out of the skycar, slapping a stoic look on his face, and caught up with Ares.

They entered the building together in silence, taking the elevator up. Ares opened the apartment door and stepped inside, kicking off his boots before heading straight for the bathroom. Charles just stood there a second, feeling confused and uneasy by the tension left lingering in the air around him. He made his way into the kitchen, turning on the water, and started washing the blood from his hands and face.

I fucking ruined it. Ruin everything. God, I can't believe how fucking stupid I—

A hand landed on his shoulder, tugging at him. Charles glanced up, wiping water from his eyes, finding Ares right behind him. Ares tugged again, so he shut off the water and turned around.

Mandibles twitching, a tube of Medi-gel in his hand, Ares said, "Be still."

He nudged Charles back against the counter and opened the Medi-gel. Squeezing some out on Charles' forehead, he dropped the tube back on the counter before using his finger to gently smooth the Medi-gel out over the gash and dab it on the cuts and scrapes spotting Charles' face. His mandibles flicked as he worked, gaze staying focused on his task.

Despite himself, Charles smiled, relaxing back against the counter and watching Ares' face as he tended to him. "It's not that bad, really."

Ares growled softly. "Shut up."

Charles huffed, averting his gaze and crossing his arms. Sometimes … sometimes Ares really had a way of making him feel like complete shit, like nothing he might possibly have to say mattered. Like he was nothing but a stupid, misbehaving child, and Charles hated it. It stung. But still, he loved the grumpy ass turian. When Ares finished with the front, Charles wordlessly turned around, letting him get a look at the smaller cut on the back of his head. After tending to the last of Charles' wounds, Ares stepped away, wordlessly tossing the tube on the breakfast bar before disappearing down the hall.

Letting out a shuddering sigh, Charles pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. He finished washing up as much of the blood as he could in the kitchen, hearing the shower start as he picked up the Medi-gel. Making his way down the hall, he stepped into the bedroom, pulling off his hoodie and shirt, tossing them at his hamper before going to the bathroom. He glanced over Ares as he undressed, looking for any injuries hidden by clothing. Relieved to see none, Charles tossed the Medi-gel in the cabinet then glanced in the mirror, making sure he didn't miss any blood before leaving Ares to his shower.

After going back to the bedroom to put on a clean shirt, he made his way out on the balcony and lit a cigarillo. He'd long since finished his smoke and was halfway through another by the time he heard the shower stop. A few minutes later, he glanced over his shoulder to see Ares walk into the living room, wearing one of the casual outfits Charles convinced him to buy a while back. He sat down on the couch, lighting a cigarette and staring off into space, smoking in silence.

Taking a deep breath, Charles moved into the balcony doorway and leaned against the frame. He took a drag, steadying himself a little as he asked, "Still want to go back to the hotel?"

"I got the hotel room as long as I did for you," Ares said, not looking at him.

Charles let that sit for a moment, he'd already kind of figured it out himself—or at least the thought crossed his mind as a hopeful possibility. He licked his lips, fighting to keep the tremble of uncertainty from his voice. "So … let's go enjoy it. Still think the hot tub sounds nice."
Ares shrugged and stood up. "I already used all your hot water supply, so it wouldn't hurt."

Charles gave him a half-hearted smile. "What are we doing with the skycar?"

"Leave it. Someone will find it in a few hours." Ares walked toward the bedroom, holding the cigarette in his mouth.

"Ares, it has blood in it," Charles called after him. "Mine and theirs."

Ares stopped just inside the hall and removed the cigarette, blowing out smoke. "I know a cleaner. I'll contact them."

Charles nodded. "Alright."

He moved back out onto the balcony to finish smoking before putting the butt out in the ashtray on the table. Going back in, he locked the door behind him and made his way down the hall to the bedroom. Standing in the doorway a moment, he took a slow, deep breath and crossed the floor, reaching out to put a hand on Ares' arm.

Ares stopped with his shirt half on and looked at Charles, lifting a brow plate. Wrapping his arms around the turian, Charles leaned in, resting the uninjured side of his forehead against Ares' keel. Ares exhaled a heavy breath, and it seemed like some of the stress slipped away from both of them as he pressed his free hand against Charles' back, between his shoulder blades.
Charles woke up curled in against Ares, the dip in the bed bringing him closer to the turian in the night. Yawning, he rolled over and stretched before climbing out of bed. He glanced back to see Ares awake and staring at the ceiling before he headed to the bathroom. Stopping in front of the sink, he looked in the mirror, relieved to see the bruising on his cheek stayed at a minimum and the cut near his hairline didn't look too terrible beneath the Medi-gel. "Are we doing anything today?" he called out, moving to the toilet to take a piss.

"You're learning," Ares said.

Grinning, Charles finished up and flushed the toilet. He made his way back out, smile still on his face, and leaned against the wall to look at Ares. "Learning what?"

"How to kill people and not get yourself fucking caught." Ares hadn't moved and didn't bother to tear his gaze from the ceiling.

Charles crossed the floor to stand next to the edge of the bed, looking down at him a second before crawling on top of him, straddling his lap. "Mmm. And which specific lesson are we starting with, pretty sure that covers a pretty broad range of things?"

Ares hummed, wrapping his hands around Charles' waist. His thumbs gently stroked the skin just above Charles' groin. "The fact that you admit that is troubling."

"Why is it troubling?" Charles raised an eyebrow, skin prickling up into goosebumps at Ares' touch, teasing a soft hum of interest from his throat.

"If I'm going to need to teach you so many things that you'd qualify it as a 'pretty broad range,' then I have to wonder how you even manage to get out of bed," Ares teased, finally looking at Charles with a low chuckle, and Charles pouted his lower lip. "At least I know I don't need to teach you that."

Throwing himself sideways off of Ares, Charles sprawled out on the bed, one arm and one leg still draped over the turian and said, "Now you do."

Ares rumbled and rolled onto his side without removing Charles' limbs, leaning down beneath Charles' chin to run his tongue along his throat. "You can stay in bed all day, and I'll still make you learn."

"And here I half expected you to push me out of the bed." He reached up, sliding a hand under Ares' crest to knead at the exposed hide. "You don't have to make me learn. I want to. You'll just have to be patient with me, there's obviously a lot of shit I'm not going to just know."

Ares hummed in agreement as he palmed Charles' cock, fingertips massaging his balls. "We need to get you a better way to incapacitate people," he growled against Charles' throat. "Bats are too large. Need something collapsible, better concealed." "Hmmm," Charles' brain stalled a second while he took in the warmth and feel of Ares' hand, making him start to get hard. "Like one of those baton things cops on Shanxi used back in the day?" He sucked in a deep breath, lifting his hips a little against Ares' hand. "Is getting fucked a part of the curriculum?"

"Consider it a payment for my instruction," Ares rumbled, nipping Charles' throat before moving his hand to wrap around Charles' cock, stroking him completely hard. "And yes, we can get you one. They're still common even without being used for law enforcement, though they aren't legal."

Charles snorted, but it shifted into a groan, eyelids drooping. Growling, Ares rubbed his thumb over the head of Charles' cock. "I'll show you how to conceal it."

Moving his hand to Ares' crest, Charles wrapped his fingers around the centermost spike and squeezed. "Handcuffs, too." Ares chuckled, the sound husky. "Of course." His free hand slid up Charles' side and around to his back, pulling him in closer. "I'll teach you methods to disable humans. Just have to make sure they don't use them on you, so I'll teach you how to get out."

"Hmmm. Sounds like a good lesson plan. What else?" Charles brought his other hand up to run his fingers over Ares' side, stopping to squeeze his waist.

The sound of Ares’ voice at his ear, the idea of the turian teaching him new ways to be more...
proficient at killing … holy fuck, it was hot. He could already see blood on the backs of his eyelids, already hear the pained groans and whimpers of the men he intended to make pay for the shit they’d done. Growling, Ares shifted to lift Charles’ leg over his hip and jacked Charles off with a few, fast strokes, bringing a hiss from him. But then Ares slowed again, and Charles let out a soft, regretful groan.

Ares rumbled. "How to find the right target, when to take someone down at the right time."

Charles tightened his grip on Ares' crest and tilted his own head back a little more, wrapping his ankle more firmly around Ares' waist. "How to keep them conscious longer?" he asked, hearing the strain in his own voice.

Humming, Ares nodded slightly before running his tongue along Charles' collar bones and gripping his ass, squeezing. "There are drugs. Adrenaline. Synthetic shit works the best."

Charles let out a little moan, pushing himself against Ares' hand. "I need targets, or at least places to go, where I can take my time with them. Let them scream." He moaned again, voice husky and low. "God, I love hearing them scream."

Ares chuckled, growling and nipping the thin skin over Charles' collarbones. "You'll be pissed when I say this, but we need to work on your deadlifting. A body is heavy when they're knocked out." He hummed, pausing as he seemed to think. "Unless you want to learn how to gag them and take them by force, but that's more risky than I think you can do this soon."

Charles let out a soft chuckle. "You've got your hand on my cock, there isn't much you can say right now that's going to piss me off. Unless you're really trying. I already planned to start going to the gym more, but I wasn't joking when I said there's only so big a guy with my build can get. So, maybe we'll have to improvise a few things."

Ares chuckled, rolling over in Ares' grip enough to grab the lube. "I'll teach you to shoot. You won't have to shoot all the time, but you need to know if shit hits the fan."

"Does this mean you're getting me a gun?" Charles squeezed Ares' crest and waist harder before his hand trailed off of to move along his ribs, turning his fingers inward to dig the tips in and drag them back down over Ares' side.

"I already have." Ares let a hot breath out across Charles' throat and chest as he pulled him closer, pressing his cock against Charles. Ares continued to stroke him, moving agonizingly, deliciously slow. "It's on the way to one of my safehouses. You'll need to continue to practice when I leave."

Charles' voice came out strained, nearly cracking. "Where?"

"Any shooting range will work, but I know a place. Asks less questions." Slipping his hand beneath Charles' ass, Ares pulled his head out from beneath Charles' chin. "Get the lube from the side table. You can reach it, you're flexible enough."

Charles chuckled, rolling over in Ares' grip enough to grab the lube. "I think I prefer my razor, I like the blood, but I don't have any issue having a gun on hand, too."

"Good," Ares snatched the bottle from Charles' hand and released him long enough to squeeze lube onto both hands before tossing it away. "I'll teach you how to maintain your weapon," he added with a smirk, letting out a humor-filled growl, and Charles snorted. He wrapped one of his slickened hands back around Charles' cock, sliding up and down his length.

Hissing a little, he pushed himself into Ares' hand and dragged his fingertips over the turian's side again. "You said disable them." He licked his lips, trying to work up a little moisture in his mouth and throat. "What if I just want to kick somebody's ass?"

Ares let out a long rumble as his other hand reached behind Charles, finger dipping between his ass cheeks. "I can start you off, but our bodies are different."

"You should invite Cammus to spar. He's got a build similar to yours, and every turian has at least some training in hand to hand." He chuckled and lowered his voice, leaning in to lick just at the base of Charles' ear. "I'm sure he'd love a bit of stress relief."

Charles snorted and whispered. "It's because you're all assassins."

Ares huffed a soft laugh and nipped Charles' ear roughly. "We can control ourselves with people we'd much rather fuck." At that, he teased around Charles' asshole with a finger.

Shifting his leg a little higher up Ares' side to make it easier, Charles said, "Being a human fighting like a turian will probably give me an advantage."

Ares hummed in agreement as he eased his finger inside. "We have enough weak spots to match."

He growled and squeezed Charles' cock before pumping him fast a few times, making Charles' hips buck a little.

Groaning, Charles tilted his head back further, tightening his leg around Ares and squeezed the turian's waist. "Fighting style will just be different, too. People won't expect it from a human."
Rumbling, Ares nodded and dragged his teeth along Charles' neck, slowly thrusting his finger as he lowered his voice to a husky whisper. "And you smell good with his scent on you. Almost as good as with mine."

Charles huffed, moving a little with Ares' motions. "Anything to cover my own scent, eh?"

Snorting, Ares bit him just hard enough to sting and make him moan, and Charles tightened his hand on Ares' crest. Ares rumbled, tongue swiping over the bite. "What can I say? I like the way you smell when you've just been fucked. Just gives me a challenge to try and cover it again."

Charles laughed. "Mmm. How 'bout you fuck me now?"

Ares didn't speak as he released Charles' cock and pulled his finger from Charles' asshole. Growling against Charles' neck, he lifted onto an elbow and pulled Charles closer, shifting until his cock slid between Charles' legs. Ares lined himself up and pushed in, pulling Charles onto him with a hand on his ass, growling low.

Charles groaned, shifting a little to more easily accommodate Ares, pushing himself into the turian, savoring the burn of stretching scar tissue. He swallowed and licked his lips. "Tell me more."

After retrieving the Stiletto III from his safehouse, Ares had brought it back to Charles and handed it to him, telling him it was to be an extension of his arm and so his responsibility to care for. Charles had taken a few minutes to look over the pistol while in the apartment, but he'd left it in the case for the time being. Ares told him the Stiletto III came from a turian weapons manufacturer, Haliat Armory, but plenty of humans carried them, so he figured Charles could manage.

He took Charles to a shooting range on Zakera Ward, it wasn't exactly close to the apartment, but close enough for Charles to get to regularly without any real issue. It didn't look like a very big place, but it appeared well kept. He followed Ares inside, gun case in hand, and took in the storefront. Weapons and accessories lined the walls in locked cases and on shelves behind the counter. An asari—looking well into her matron years—and an older turian stood behind the counter. An asari—looking well into her matron years—and an older turian stood behind the counter.

The turian looked up first even though he stood further away, halting in his work of cleaning a rifle he'd disassembled and laid out on a piece of cloth. His mandibles fluttered as his gaze moved from Ares to Charles, and he smiled, turning his attention back to the rifle. The asari kept her gaze on them, though, standing at the center of the counter with a smile on her face as she waited expectantly.

"Back, again, Raetor?" The asari turned to the side and leaned an arm on the counter. She smirked at Ares as she jerked her chin toward Charles. "Wanting to show your friend the range?"

Ares rumbled and nodded as he walked to the counter. "We need the range to cover some basics. Might even get far enough to work on maintenance," he added with a glance over his shoulder toward Charles.

He'd lingered back a little, looking over the place, but when he caught Ares' glance, Charles walked over to stand with him. He offered the asari a smile, but he didn't say anything, feeling out of his element in a store filled with guns. Despite his father's history in the Alliance and having grown up around his dad's military friends, Charles never dealt with guns himself. He'd watched them at shooting ranges a couple of times and saw his dad clean his weapons almost obsessively, especially when shitfaced and lamenting his discharge from the Alliance. He didn't involve Charles in any of it, though. He'd never involved Charles in anything other than beating the shit out of him and finding new ways to tell him that he wasn't a real man.

The turian behind the counter rumbled, the curious sound drawing Charles' gaze to him. He set down a piece of the weapon and walked over to stand next to the asari, humming softly as he looked over Charles. Shifting a little under the older man's gaze, Charles watched him, something about his posture sparking a certainty in Charles' mind that the turian was one of those who stuck around the military long after his mandatory service. Maybe even fought in the First Contact War.

When his gaze stopped on the gun case in Charles' hand, the turian's mandibles fluttered. "Mind if I take a look?" he asked, motioning at the case with a hand.

Charles glanced at Ares, grip tightening on the gun case. Ares gave him a slight nod, tilting his head toward the other turian, so Charles sat the case on the counter. He popped the latches open and lifted the lid, turning it around for the man to see. The turian moved closer to the counter, letting out a low whistle in his subvocals. He glanced over the weapon before bringing a hand up, stopping just above the Stiletto III. Charles tensed, brow twitching, and the man looked up, glancing back and forth between Charles and Ares. He can't really say why, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but he doesn't really want the man to touch his gun. Still, if Ares said so, he would, so he glanced at Ares again.

"It's your weapon," Ares said as he shrugged. "You make the decision."

Charles shifted around uncomfortably for a moment, but then he shook his head. "Sorry, sir, but
I'd rather you didn't."

The turian chuckled and nodded, closing the gun case and sliding it back toward Charles. "Fair enough." His gaze shifted to Ares. "Will you be shooting, too?"

"Not really. Just plan on training," Ares said, and the other turian nodded.

Moving down to a locked crate, the asari opened it and pulled something out. She came back and tossed a key card to Ares. "Everything should be in place already. For a basic setup, that is. Anything specific otherwise?"

"No, that's fine." Ares hummed as he looked at the key card and nodded to the other two. "I take it you have a cleaning and maintenance kit?"

"For a Stiletto?" The turian rumbled in thought before nodding, pointing out towards the shop over Charles' shoulder. "Yeah, we should have one. Want me to grab it while you shoot?"

Ares nodded and nudged Charles before heading for the back of the store. Charles followed him, taking in a few of the stickers covering the large door, snorting softly at one reading, 'You can pry my gun from my cold dead hands'. Ares wiped the key card through the reader, and the door cracked open when the indicator changed green. The lights flickered on when Ares opened the door the rest of the way and stepped inside, illuminating four stalls with long partition walls. The range was a lot longer than Charles' would've guessed, seeing the building from outside and the cozy storefront.

Along the wall next to the door, a table sat holding eyewear and noise cancellation earmuffs. Ares stopped at the table but waved Charles on to the furthest stall. Nodding, Charles made his way down and sat the gun case on the counter. Ares joined him a moment later, setting eyewear and earmuffs down next to the Stiletto III.

"Take out your weapon," he said as he turned to a command console on the stall's wall, typing into the console to bring the target closer to them.

Charles popped the latches on the case and picked up the gun, watching as it whirred to life and unfolded itself. He turned it over in his hand, locating the safety and making sure it was engaged, that much, at least, he knew. He had a basic understanding of gun safety and how the weapons worked. He knew there was a block of metal inside which the gun shaved off pieces from, using a mass effect field to change the mass of the tiny shards of metal while projecting them at the target … but hell if he knew what that really meant. Feeling Ares' gaze on him, Charles glanced up.

"Put the human ones on." Ares rumbled, holding his hand out for the pistol.

Charles handed it over and picked up the eyewear, sliding it on his face and fiddling with the strap wrapping around the back of his head until it felt close to comfortable. He bit back a snide comment about how stupid he felt and picked up the earmuffs, draping them over his neck until Ares told him to put them on, too.

Ares held the—tiny in comparison—pistol in his hands and looked down the sights, humming as he then lowered it and looked over its sides. "How’s the weight on it?" he asked, flipping the pistol in his hand to offer the grip to Charles.

Charles took the Stiletto III back and shrugged a little. "I don’t really have much to compare it to. It feels okay, I guess."

Ares released a slight breath through his nose before shifting on his feet. "Hold your arm out straight with the pistol in hand."

Doing as Ares said, he held the gun out, aimed down range. He felt sure if he stayed like that long enough, his arm would eventually get tired, but then again, it would even if he held nothing in his hand. Ares stepped forward and slapped his hand against the bottom of the grip, jostling Charles unexpectedly. Sliding a foot back to balance himself, Charles looked at Ares with a raised eyebrow, confused by what the hell the turian was doing but didn't say anything.

"Alright. You're fine." Ares grabbed the other pair of earmuffs and pulled them on, resting them around his neck. "We'll start with stance and grip." He lifted a brow plate. "Show me how you think you hold a gun."

Letting out a soft scoff, Charles turned a little to the side and brought his left hand up, cupping the butt of the pistol in his other palm, fingers curled in around the outside of his right hand. He made sure his elbows stayed loose and shifted his feet a little further apart. Ares rumbled as he watched Charles, using his foot to nudge Charles' feet into a better position.

"Put on your earmuffs and show me what we're working with," Ares said as he situated his own over his ears and leaned back against the stall wall, crossing his arms.

Charles lowered the weapon to the table and put on his earmuffs before picking it up again. He glanced at Ares before turning his attention to the target down range. The only other gun he'd ever fired belonged to Ares, back in the burning factory on Shanxi. Hell, it was the only other gun he'd
ever even held. Swallowing, he knew it wasn't going to be pretty, but he did his best to aim for the relatively shapeless, non-species specific, silhouette on the target. He squeezed the trigger, the recoil slamming the weapon back in his grip but not too bad. It didn't make his hand instantly numb the way Ares' gun had, so he counted it as a win.

He looked at the little hole left in the paper on the lower, right side of the darkened area of the target and adjusted before trying again. He fired off several shots, the earmuffs not quite able to really keep the loud bark from reaching his ears. Each shot he took, though, seemed further and further off the mark, moving a little higher up on the target until it hit the white spot above the 'shoulder' of the silhouette.

Ares held up a hand to stop Charles before stepping forward and pulling Charles' earmuffs down to speak. "You need to leave a longer period of time between shots. It's causing some of your shots to still be affected by the recoil." He wrapped his hand around Charles' and leaned over his shoulder, adjusting Charles' grip on the pistol. He moved Charles' left hand from beneath the handle to the front, directing Charles to cup his right hand with his left, thumb parallel to the gun's barrel. "At this range, you don't have to account so much for drag. Still, you want to aim just below the target because of the buck of recoil. Like," he just barely nudged Charles' pistol lower and added, "this. We'll worry more about drag later. Aim for the bigger targets first, like the ones on the chest." He replaced Charles' earmuffs and stepped back, nodding at him to go ahead.

Charles took a second to look at where his other shots hit before adjusting himself and taking another. It hit the target in the shoulder area, he paused a second and readjusted again before firing. After a couple more attempts, he hit the target roughly in the chest, off to the right.

Charles looped his arm through Ares' as they left the hotel room, heading down the hall toward the elevators. If'd been a long day at work, and Charles felt tired, but he wanted to go out for dinner instead of ordering in more room service. The fact it didn't take too much to convince Ares told him the turian started feeling restless and probably wouldn't stick around the Citadel much longer. It left Charles a little sad, but he understood, and it was just a part of being involved with Ares—with any assassin, he imagined.

Still, even with as rocky as things had been for Ares over the last few days, Charles really enjoyed the extended stay. And, Ares really seemed to take to the idea of teaching Charles, even if he gave him a lot of shit in the process. Besides for taking him to the shooting range, Ares sat down and walked Charles through all of the programs he'd given him and bought him one of those collapsible batons and handcuffs. Later, they were supposed to run through a few restraint holds, too. Maybe eventually Charles would be good enough Ares felt like taking him out on a job with him.

"Robert!"

At first, the name didn't mean anything more to Charles than the feminine, turian voice who called out. But just as it started to click in his head, Ares froze, and Charles' steps faltered. He stopped, glancing up at Ares, dread flooding his veins and turning them to ice. His gaze slid away from Ares and back over his shoulder, spotting Maela standing just outside of one of the rooms, six doors down from theirs, luggage at her feet.

"Robert," she said again, a smile sweeping over her face as she waved. She glanced into the opened door before stepping away from the suitcase, starting toward Charles.

Shifting his arm free of Ares', he reached up and squeezed the turian's shoulder, whispering, "Just go, keep walking. I'll catch up with you later."

Ares' mandibles were pressed tightly to his jaw, almost looking painful. He nodded and started walking again, barely glancing back over his shoulder to softly say, "You still smell like me." He kept moving though, his long stride swiftly putting distance between him and his sister.

Charles sucked in a deep breath, hoping enough time had passed since Maela saw Ares for her to not recognize his scent. There wasn't anything he could do about it either way. He slapped a smile on his face and turned back to Maela, moving down the hall toward her. "Maela … it's good to see you again."

"I didn't know you were staying here," she said, but her smile faltered as they drew nearer, her nose plates visibly shifting as she took in his scent. She blinked a few times before giving Charles a curious look. "But I guess you were visiting the Citadel too, huh?"

Charles' smile stuck to his face with well-practiced ease after years of dealing with pissed off and annoying customers. "Uh, yeah, I had some things to take care of on the Presidium and this hotel is pretty nice." He made sure to say 'Presidium' instead of 'Citadel', not wanting to outright agree with her presumption that he didn't live there. He cleared his throat a little, reflexively starting to turn to look after Ares' retreating form but caught himself, returning his attention to Maela.

"Where's the happy husband?"

She laughed, subvocals rumbling with joy as she pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "He packs last minute, so I'm waiting up for him." She glanced the way Ares left before giving him a questioning trill. "It's unfortunate your friend wasn't able to join us when you were down at the
“It’s unfortunate your friend wasn’t able to join us when you were down at the park.” She chuckled but something about it sounded a bit forced. “You could always have invited him.”

Reaching up to rub the back of his neck, Charles allowed himself a quick glance down the hall, relieved to find Ares nowhere in sight. He let out a soft chuckle and said, “He was in the middle of something else, left me alone to wander.” He glanced back at Maela, but something about her seemed unconvinced even though she appeared to try and hide it with a smile and thrumming rumble. Dropping his hand to his side, he shoved it in his pocket. “Somehow, I managed to stay out of trouble.” He gave her a big grin, hoping to put her back at ease as he took a slow breath in through his nose. “I only crashed one wedding reception.”

She rumbled with a light chuckle but wrung her hands. “Yeah, not every day that someone rents a park for a wedding, I guess.” She glanced behind her as Dax stepped out of the room.

Dax carried out another piece of luggage and stooped to grab Malea’s as well, but he paused a second when he caught sight of Charles and smiled. Charles lifted his free hand in a wave, offering the man a smile and idly wondering if he should offer to help carry their bags down.

Maela’s purr brought Charles’ attention back to her. It seemed the sight of her husband put her at ease, her hands dropping back to her sides as she turned back to Charles. “Well, I guess this is goodbye.”

A flash of sadness ran through Charles, making him swallow and suck in a shallow breath. He didn’t want her to go, and it seemed like an incredibly stupid thing to think. Shit, he really wished he could tell her the truth about Ares, wished Ares could have his family in his life again. He couldn’t, though, and knowing Maela had been so close to him the entire time they were at the hotel probably just fucked up Ares’ head even worse.

She smiled, the gesture still seeming forced. “I might have said it before, but it was nice to meet you, Robert.”

His smile slipped a little, and he swallowed, nodding before glancing down at his feet. He took a slow breath, trying to calm the flood of emotion, knowing his scent only made the situation more awkward and probably confused the hell out of the woman. He raised his gaze to hers again, his voice a little softer than intended when he said, “It was a pleasure to meet you, as well. Thank you again for inviting me over, I really enjoyed myself. I’m sorry I had to slip away while you were still opening presents … I told someone, your sister I think?” He held his hand out to her. “Anyway, it was really wonderful being there, and again, you looked stunning in your dress.”

Her mandibles fluttered in the shy way of hers, and she dipped her head before taking his hand. “Thank you, again. Take care, Robert.” She looked over at Dax as he stepped up beside her.

Dax smiled and nodded in greeting. “Hello, Robert.”

Charles returned his smile and nod. “Dax, it’s good to see you.” He cleared his throat a little stepping aside. “Well, I’ll let you two get on your way. Congratulations again.”

“Thank you,” Dax said, handing over Maela’s bag when she all but pulled it against her as if she couldn’t get away from Charles fast enough. Dax looked at Maela and purred, though concern started to creep into his face, coloring his subvocals. “Ready?”

Maela gave her husband a soft smile and nodded, taking his free hand and leading the way to the elevators.

Charles stood there a moment, watching her go before sucking in a deep breath and rubbing his hands over his face. “Fuck,” he muttered.

He sure didn't want to risk further upsetting Maela by taking the elevator down with them, and he wasn't even sure if Ares took the elevator himself. Charles glanced back at their hotel room, he could duck back inside for a few minutes, but it'd just seem weird if they were watching. Instead, he decided to kill time by sending Ares a message to figure out where exactly he went.

“Down the hall,” Ares’ responding message said. “Did they take the elevator down already or go back to their room?”

Charles glanced back down the hall just in time to see the couple disappear into the elevator. Hitting ‘reply’, he told Ares as much. A moment later, Ares stepped out from around the corner at the end of the hall and started walking toward Charles. He stopped, looking at the floor indicator on the elevator before glancing back at Charles. Heading down the hall, Charles focused on taking steadying breaths, trying to push away the last of whatever the fuck he was feeling.

“She’s not your sister, Charles.”

Stopping next to Ares, he raked a hand through his hair. “Shit, I’m sorry. I had no clue they were here.”

“It’s fine,” Ares said, and despite everything, Charles knew it was a lie. He turned away and stared at the golden doors but didn’t press the command to call the elevator.
Charles cleared his throat and sucked in a deep breath. "I can tell she smelled you on me … but she probably wouldn't remember your scent, right?" As soon as he said it, he knew he was wrong, but the panic writhing around in the pit of his stomach made him reach for even the hint of a silver lining.

Ares frowned, a sad rumble filling the air around them. "She probably wouldn't remember me even if she saw me." Again, a lie, and it left a terrible, acidic taste in the back of Charles' throat.

Charles nodded, his gut telling him that they were both lying to themselves as much as each other, but there was nothing to be done about it, and facing the truth just then very well might break Ares. He chewed on his lip, watching Ares as the turian looked at his own reflection in the elevator doors. It was a long moment before Ares managed to tamp down his subvocals, reach forward, and press the elevator call button. Charles ached inside, desperately wanting to wrap Ares up in his arms, but something told him, just then, it wouldn't be something he'd appreciate too much.
A Goddamned Curse

Chapter by MosaicCreme

A Goddamned Curse

Charles sat on the couch in the hotel, looking over the paperwork the lawyer sent him. The clock ran out on him, he needed to suck it up and deal with the crap. Daniel, the lawyer, would be calling him at any time. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose before digging in his pockets to get out his cigarillos and lighter.

"Can't just fucking use layman's terms," he muttered, putting a cigarillo in his mouth and lighting it.

He spent a few more minutes going through the documents, trying to wrap his head around the fine print. Finally figuring he wasn't going to understand it any better than he already did, he went back to the first page and started filling in his initials and signature where required. He glanced up at Ares, finding him still sitting at the breakfast bar, smoking and zoning out. Probably still thinking about running into Maela a couple of days before. And how much of a jackass Charles was for thinking it was a good idea to go to the reception in the first place.

Finishing up the last of the paperwork, Charles uploaded it in a message to the lawyer, fingers hesitating over the 'send' button a moment. He dropped his hand, staring at the screen for several long minutes as he smoked in silence. The entire thing made him feel sick to his stomach and nervous as fuck. He killed his father, he shouldn't be the one dealing with the legal shit. What if he did something wrong, something suspicious, and they started looking into him?

And he heard his father's voice in the back of his head, calling him a pussy for freaking out over some goddamn paperwork.

Taking a deep breath, he hit 'send' and closed his omni-tool. He sat back on the couch, dragging the ashtray along with him and lit another cigarillo off the last one before stubbing it out. His fingers shook, and he hated it. Hated all of it. Jesus fuck, if he could go back to Shanxi and kill his father all over again, he'd really drag it out.

He watched Ares for a moment, staring at his profile before taking a deep breath. Just about to open his mouth to ask Ares if he was alright, his omni-tool pinged. He opened it, squinting at the number as fresh dread seeped into his muscles, making them tight. Groaning, he answered the call, sucking in a deep breath as Daniel's face popped up on the screen.

"Mr. Fairclough, how are you?" Daniel asked but didn't wait for a response before speaking again, "Thank you for returning the documents. According to your wishes, Blathers and Son's will contact Haven's End Cemetery to arrange for a plot. We'll try to get him as close to your mother and sister as we can, but considering the plots weren't purchased in advance to be next to one another, we can't make any promises."

Bile rose up in the back of Charles' throat, burning its way through his mind. He'd told Ares it was no big deal, it was just a body, but it was a big deal. A huge fucking deal. Even just the thought of his father being buried anywhere near Sarah and Mom left him feeling like he'd just taken another blow to the head. Like someone ripped his heart right from his chest and crushed in front of his eyes. Swallowing, he took a drag of his cigarillo, hands still shaking, and nodded for the lawyer to continue.

"The vacant plot closest to your mother is reserved," Daniel said, turning a palm up, "but if you would like, we can attempt to enter into negotiations with the owners."

"No, that's alright," Charles said, his agitation make his words come out a little sharper than he intended.

"Are you sure, Mr. Fairclough?" Daniel folded his hands together on the desk. "Most of the time, these things are easily settled, and it wouldn't cost much more than—"

"I'm sure." Charles took another drag, leaving his hand near his mouth as he exhaled.

Nodding, Daniel seemed to take the hint and changed the subject. "Once your father's house is sold, we'll only have a couple of weeks to clear out the rest of his personal effects." He leaned forward, doing something on his computer. "Now, I see here that you'd like to have his personal effects sold. I should tell you it's unlikely everything of his will sell. We'll do our best, of course, but in such an event, how would you like any remaining items handled? I can have them shipped to your residence on the Citadel, or if you prefer, they can be donated somewhere locally."

Charles took another heavy drag off of his cigarillo, holding the smoke inside of him for a few seconds before letting it out as he said, "Donate them, I don't really have a lot of room."

"Very well." Daniel nodded. "There is one last matter before I let you go. Once all things are settled and our fees deducted, where would you like the rest of your inheritance sent?"
The very idea of any of it being an inheritance made Charles' skin crawl, made him itchy and tense. He wanted to sink his blade into someone, wanted to hear them scream and beg for their lives. It wasn't an inheritance. More like a goddamned curse, a punishment. Just another way for his father to have the last word, beat Charles one more time. He thought about telling Daniel to donate the credits, too, but he had a feeling it'd draw more attention than anything else. Even though Charles and his dad weren't close, it wouldn't be hard for anyone to figure out that Charles really couldn't afford to turn away extra credits.

"I'll send you my account number," Charles finally said, finishing off his cigarillo and stubbing it out.

"Excellent. That's all I need for now. I'll be in touch if anything else comes up." He smiled at Charles. "Have a good day, Mr. Fairclough."

Charles nodded, relieved to have the conversation come to an end. "Thanks. You, too."

He let out a heavy sigh as the call went dark. Closing his omni-tool, he leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his palms. His father's voice still whispered in the back of his head, telling him how worthless and pathetic he was. He squeezed his eyes closed, pulling up an image of his father drowning in alcohol as Ares' held his nose closed. But it only lasted a second before he saw himself at seven, cowering in the corner as his father slapped and punched him, the taste of blood in his mouth and tears streaming down his cheeks.

Rubbing his hands over his face, he swallowed and opened his eyes. He lit his third cigarillo in less than a half-hour and laid down, avoiding the cut on the back of his head as he propped it on the arm of the couch and pulled the ashtray over to his stomach. Despite his best efforts, the memories kept coming. Sarah's pleading sobs filled his head, begging Dad to stop. Pain, white hot and blinding shot through his back, hurting so bad he couldn't even scream. It left him pissing blood.

He saw himself at thirteen, trying to pull his dad off of Mom, only to have Dad throw him across the living room. It left him with three bruised ribs. But Mom … Mom needed surgery on her jaw and couldn't eat solid food for weeks.

After a few moments, he glanced over his shoulder at Ares. "Hey … want to get out of here for awhile?"

"And go where?" Ares flicked his lighter opened and closed in his free hand.

"I guess, when you first got back. Before him, Ethan a couple of weeks earlier."

"I'm going for a walk, then. I can't sit here, I'm feeling too restless."

Ares merely rumbled in acknowledgment, going back to flicking his lighter's lid. Charles grabbed his jacket before stopping next to Ares, leaning in and pressing his forehead against the side of Ares' head. He barely seemed to notice. Pulling in a deep breath, he filled his lungs with Ares' scent before heading for the door.

He'd left the Presidium, heading back to the more familiar territory of the Zakera Ward, too agitated for the uppity bullshit of the Presidium. He didn't intend to go to a bar, but after a half-hour of wandering around aimlessly, still unable to shake the phantoms haunting his mind, a bar is where he found himself. He'd been there a few times before, not enough to say he really knew the people who worked there, but often enough to know what to expect from the place.

He sat down on a stool and waited for the bartender to make her way over. Raking a hand through his hair, he rested a foot on one of the metal bars at the base of the stool, and instantly his leg
picked up a rapid beat, knee jerking up and down restlessly. He forced a smile on his face when the asari came over and ordered a Mount Milgrom.

One drink turned into two, and then three, then four, five, six. He just kept drinking until he lost count. Despite the alcohol flooding his system, Charles couldn't push away the crap in his head. His muscles still felt tight, his hand still itched to pull out his razor and set it to flesh. Ares was right, though, he needed to slow down or he'd wind up spending the rest of his life in prison. Or dead. Maybe he should consider using other methods, Ares did buy him a gun. But his gut told him it just wouldn't be the same, wouldn't be as fulfilling.

He wasn't entirely sure how the fight broke out around him, or how he got dragged into the middle of it. But damn it did feel good to throw a few punches, not even caring who he hit or where they landed. At least it felt good until a krogan grabbed him by the back of the neck and tossed him out on his ass along with a couple of salarians, a turian, and a quarian.

Huffing, Charles swiped the back of his hand under his nose, wiping away blood. He looked over at the others, letting out a wry bark of laughter when he found the two salarians still bickering and shoving one another. The turian caught his gaze and flared her mandibles before letting out a chuckle, and the quarian climbed to his feet, looking over a tear in his suit.

Not feeling like he had any reason to rush off, Charles sat there a moment, digging out his cigarillos. Half the pack got crushed in the brawl, but he managed to find one unbroken and stuck it between his lips, lighting it before pulling himself to his feet. Swaying a little, he stood there for a second, taking a deep drag before moving over to the turian and holding out his hand. She let out a soft rumble and slid her hand into his, and he helped pull her to her feet before giving her a mock-salute and wandered off.

He spent another twenty or thirty minutes just walking until he found a public restroom and stepped inside. Bracing himself against the sink, he looked over his face and the blood drying under his nose. It really wasn't so bad, a little swollen but not broken. Hell, it went along quite nicely with the fading bruise on his cheek and the still healing cut on his forehead. Fuck, he'd end up losing his job if he kept going into work all beat up.

Turning on the water, he washed the blood off his face and then dabbed at the spots on his shirt. "FUCK." It didn't do any good, but at least there wasn't a lot of it. He opened his omni-tool, swaying on his feet bad enough he needed to lean against the wall to keep from falling over, and looked at the time. "Shit."

He'd been gone for hours, and it was late. Ares hadn't called or messaged, but he probably wondered where the fuck Charles was. He needed to get back. Closing the omni-tool, he looked in the mirror again, using his fingers to try to push his hair back into place before leaving. He made his way to a taxi stand just outside of the restrooms and called a cab.

It didn't take long to arrive, and he climbed inside. No way could he drive manually. He sat there for a minute, staring blankly at the skycar's dash before opening his omni-tool and pulling up the address for the hotel. It took him a few tries, but he managed to input it into the vehicle's auto-navigation system, and the skycar took off.

Seeing double, Charles somehow made it back to the hotel, and thank fucking God the hotel attendants didn't give him any shit. There was no way he'd pass for sober just then, and he'd acquired more than a few scrapes, new bruises already starting to show on his face and hands. He ducked into the elevator and hit the button for the twenty-sixth floor only to realize he hit the wrong one and cursed, hitting the right one instead. He took the elevator up to the room and tried really, really hard to not make noise going in, not wanting to wake Ares if he was already asleep. He knew Ares still dealt with his own shit, and he wanted him to have a few hours peace.

Ares wasn't asleep, however. Instead, he sat at the breakfast bar right where Charles left him. "Awful long walk," he said before glancing over and flicking his mandibles. "You're shitfaced."

Charles stopped inside the door, letting it close behind him before leaning against the wall and digging in his pockets for his cigarillos and lighter. He shrugged as he fumbled to get a cigarillo out of the pack, working his way through four of them before he found one that wasn't crushed. "Decided I needed a drink."

"More than a drink. Ares' tone carried a hint of annoyance, and he clenched and released his hands on the breakfast bar's surface.

Hacksles raising as he watched Ares' hands, Charles hesitated, lighter held opened in front of him but not lit. "And that's a problem, because …?" He flicked the lighter, sticking the cigarillo into the flame.

"Because you can barely walk, which means I have to take care of you." Ares stood but didn't move away from the breakfast bar. "And you smell like blood, look like shit, and shouldn't have gone alone."

Feeling like he'd just been slapped in the face, anger welled up inside Charles again, but with it also came the sting he felt anytime he thought he let Ares down. He took a deep drag from his
cigarillo, stuffing the lighter and pack back in his pocket. He let the smoke seep out of him slowly, still leaning against the wall as he eyed Ares. "I'm not a child. I don't need you to take care of me."

He pushed off the wall, moving past Ares toward the couch. "I can go to a bar by myself. I'm a big boy."

"Then you should have been a fucking 'big boy' and get shitfaced when I wasn't around." Ares snarled and breathed deeply through his nose. "Spirits fucking dammit. I can't even have one leave to let my shit go without you fucking making it about yourself."

Charles stared at him for a few seconds, taking a heavy drag off his cigarillo. How, exactly, did he make it about himself? He strained, trying to make sense of what was happening. Trying to wrap his mind around why Ares was so pissed. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

"I'm really fucking serious," Ares hissed, subvocals a constant growl. "Every fucking time you've told me about your problems, I helped you."

Charles leaned down to pick up an ashtray from the coffee table, swaying a little as he righted himself. Scowl on his face, he watched Ares, confused. Stunned, even. It was a truly rare thing for Charles to be left speechless, but just then, he didn't have a clue what to say.

"I showed you how to kill the people who hurt you, I still show you how to kill people. And you can't bottle your shit for a fucking week." Ares said, and Charles winced.

Charles stood there for a moment, shaking his head. "You know …..." he said, sounding eerily calm to his own ears despite his rising fury. "You can be a really huge asshole sometimes." He took a drag from his cigarillo. "I've tried like hell to do everything I could for you while dealing with this wedding thing. I waved the hand holding the ashtray. "Which, let's face it, is a bit like pulling teeth to even get to the point where I can get you to talk about it." He took a drag, blowing the smoke back out through his battered nose. He'd do anything for Ares. Anything, and he'd told the goddamn turian as much more than once, all he had to do was fucking tell Charles what he needed. "I came to the hotel to watch with you. I even went down there to see them for you. You wanted to get shitfaced, I made sure you got back okay. You were huggerunder as fuck, said you wanted more to fucking drink, so I went and got it." He got louder and louder as he went on, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. "You said you wanted to go kick someone's ass, I said let's go. So, really, tell me what the fuck have I not done for you?" His final words came out in a shout as he flung his arms out to the sides.

Ares scoffed, the sound harsh within his subvocals, and flipped a hand dismissively. "Oh, congratulations for actually taking fucking responsibility in a relationship!" He growled and took a step closer to the couch, making Charles take a reflexive step back. "I carry your fucking ass since we met, and all I ask for is time to have my own breakdown and you still make it about yourself!"

Charles threw the ashtray at the wall, so enraged he trembled, feeling like Ares chose damn near all the worst pressure points possible. "Yeah, and I pulled your ass out of a fucking fire, so go fuck yourself!" He stormed past Ares, heading for the door, glaring at him as he went.

As soon as he left the hotel, tears welled up in his eyes, but he still felt so pissed off, crying just made it worse. He shoved his hands against his eyes, scrubbing the tears away, glaring at anyone who dared look at him. He didn't go home, just in case Ares decided to show up there—he didn't think he could deal with Ares yet—but he did return to Zakera Ward. He refused to go back to the fucking hotel. He didn't really have anywhere else to go, though, so he wandered the streets until he felt like he was going to pass out.

He thought about going to Lindsey's. He'd probably wake her up, but he was willing to bet she'd let him crash on her couch. He couldn't bring himself to do it, though. The last thing he needed was to see pity in her eyes or have her ask him a bunch of questions about what happened to his face. He might try looking up Cammus, but again, he really didn't want to have to explain anything to anyone, and Cammus would surely want to know what happened. He could go to another hotel, somewhere cheaper, he could afford it with his last paycheck, but even that involved dealing with more people than he thought he could handle.

The more he walked, the more he sobered up, and the more his heart began to ache. He loved Ares, so goddamn much, and even though he knew deep down the turian loved him, too, just then it felt like Ares didn't give a shit about him. Like he'd been nothing but a burden on Ares. Nothing he did was ever good enough. His entire life, nothing was ever good enough. He felt so confused and lost, and his father just wouldn't shut the fuck up. He kept pick, pick, picking away at Charles in the back of his head.

When the tears started again, so hot and thick he could barely see, he stepped into an alley. He made his way all the way to the back and grabbed ahold of a ladder leading up to the top of a building and started climbing. He stood at the top for a few seconds, just looking down at the Citadel, watching people move about through blurry, tearful eyes. Taking a shuddering breath, he moved further onto the roof and leaned against the roof access wall, sliding down to the floor.

Drawing up his knees, he folded his arms on top of them and hid his face, completely giving up on fighting the tears. After a few minutes, he tucked himself into the corner and laid down, using
his arm as a pillow. He stared off into space when he cried himself out, and eventually, his eyes felt too heavy to keep open, so he let them close.

Ares was gone. All of his shit gone. He'd brought Charles' things from the hotel back to the apartment and left before Charles made it home. He didn't even send Charles a message to say goodbye. Charles tried calling the hotel, just in case, but they told him that Ares checked out the night before. Obviously, Ares didn't want to talk to him, so Charles didn't try calling him directly.

Charles didn't have time to dwell on it, though. Not if he wanted to keep his job. He'd barely made it back to the apartment in time to take a quick shower and get dressed. He was lucky as hell the alarm on his omni-tool even woke him up. Waking up on a rooftop, feeling like death warmed over but not remembering how he got there for a few minutes was a real mind-fuck. But when he did, when he remembered the night before … he almost just stayed there, wallowing in his misery. His head ached and his face throbbed, but the nausea really made him feel like shit.

Mahlia and Okal both glanced up when he walked in. Mahlia's eyes widened, her mouth forming a silent 'oh'. Okal blinked and sniffed, turning her attention back to the datapad in her hand. He kept his gaze down and made his way to the back to clock in.

Mahlia followed him, though, standing next to the kiosk. "Goddess, what happened? You look even worse today." She reached out as if she intended to touch one of the bruises on his face but let her hand drop when he cringed.

"I don't really want to talk about it," he muttered, finishing clocking in and stepping away from the console. He glanced at her just long enough to make his way around her, heading back for the door to the front.

"Charles," she said, "maybe … maybe you should work in the back for a couple of days."

He stopped walking and turned around to look at her. He knew his expression looked as vacant as he felt, completely hollowed out. "Irene has me in the front."

She brought her hands up, wringing them in front of her for a second. "I know," she said and shrugged, "but Irene isn't going to be here this week. I can handle the front without you, and if I need help once Okal leaves … Cammus can come up for a little while."

"Okal will just call Irene." He shook his head, not even caring if it hurt.

Mahlia scoffed but smiled. "Let me deal with Okal." She moved closer to him, reaching out and squeezing his elbow. "Just go work in the back, alright?"

His eyes burned, and he swore to God if he started crying again, he'd completely lose his shit. Swallowing, he nodded, forcing a weak smile on his face. "Thanks, Mahlia. I owe you one."

Chuckling softly, she patted his arm and walked around him. "No," she said, glancing back at him with a smirk. "Consider us even. Cute dog, by the way. Eezo's a real sweetheart."

He watched her leave through the door to the main lobby, the puzzle pieces taking a moment to fall into place through the dense fog surrounding his mind. A half-hearted smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he realized she meant she'd spent more time with Lindsey, probably at Lindsey's apartment. Well, maybe the two of them would work out and be happy together. Somebody should be.

Turning, he sucked in a deep breath and headed for the storage room. Cammus looked up when the door opened, gaze roaming over Charles, mandibles flaring. He'd been in the middle of packing an order but stopped to watch Charles as he made his way over to the table, picking up the datapad without a word.

"Are you …" Cammus hummed, and Charles knew it meant he reconsidered what he wanted to say. "Are you working back here today?"

"Yeah," Charles said, voice soft. He pointed at his face without looking up. "It's been a rough few days. Mahlia offered to cover the front so I'm not scaring off customers."

Cammus let out a soft, sympathetic sounding trill. He brought a hand up to Charles' shoulder, squeezing a little, letting his hand trail away down Charles' back before returning to packing the shipping crate. The gesture brought a soft smile to Charles' face, but something about it just made him feel even worse inside.

He stood outside his apartment door, Eezo winding circles around his legs, tangling him in her leash. Still, he just stood there, staring at the door. He didn't want to go inside and see the place empty again. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against the door. So long as he stayed outside, there was still a chance Ares would be waiting for him inside.

Reaching the end of her leash, Eezo whined. A door opened down the hall, and Charles heard his neighbor, Liana T'vas, step outside. She spoke to someone for a moment before closing her door
again. Charles sucked in a deep breath and unlocked his apartment, stepping inside before the asari made it down the hall and decided she felt obligated to engage him in polite conversation.

The place was empty, he felt it the second the door closed behind him. He left the lights off and took Eezo off her leash. Moving through the dark, he made his way to the kitchen to unload his arms of her bag of food and bowls. Lindsey sent back a big bag of dog treats, too. She really was a nice chick, even if she made him tell her three times he was okay and didn't want to talk about what happened.

Filling the bowls, he sat them down on the kitchen floor before turning to lean against the counter. He let out a heavy sigh and pulled out his cigarillos, lighting one before closing the lighter against his thigh and setting it on the counter along with the pack. He opened his omni-tool; although he knew damn well Ares hadn't messaged him, he still couldn't help but check. He sighed again, one of those rare occasions he hated to be right, and closed his omni-tool before picking his cigarillos back up from the counter.

He made his way out to the balcony and leaned on the railing, smoking in hateful silence as he looked out over the Citadel. Replaying the argument with Ares over and over again in his head. Maybe he was an asshole for going to the bar and getting so drunk, leaving Ares by himself while he was still hurting. But really, was it such a bad thing to make sense for Ares to get as mad as he did? To act so … betrayed and make Charles feel so useless? Did he really feel like Charles didn't do anything to try to help him? What'd Charles miss?

"I carry your fucking ass since we met, and all I ask for is time to have my own breakdown and you still make it about yourself!"

Charles closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and ring finger of the same hand holding his cigarillo. He didn't mean to be selfish. He wasn't trying to hurt Ares. Fuck, was he really so worthless? Yeah, he was. He knew it, always did. His father was right. He couldn't do a single goddamn thing without fucking it all up.

Switching his cigarillo to his other hand, he slipped his hand in his pocket, fingers wrapping around his razor. He pulled it out, holding it in front of him, turning it over and over. He swallowed, pushing away from the railing to lean against the wall instead. Using his thumb, he slowly pushed the razor open, watching the light catch on the blade and swallowed again as he imagined himself cutting into his own skin.

He sucked in a deep breath and finished off his cigarillo, moving over to the ashtray to stub it out. Going back inside, he closed the razor against his leg and dropped it back into his pocket before shutting and locking the door behind him. He made his way to his bedroom and turned on the light, grabbing the bag carrying his stuff from the hotel off his bed and dropping it on the floor next to the closet to deal with later.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he picked up the gun case and opened it, running his fingers over the cool metal. He felt empty inside. Numb. He'd tried telling himself it was just a stupid fight and they'd be fine, but looking around the bedroom and seeing no trace of Ares … He didn't feel so sure. It was a stupid thing to think, it wasn't like Ares ever really left much of anything behind, but somehow the place felt way emptier than before.

Closing the gun case again, he slid it under his bed and stood up, stripping off his clothes and pulling back the covers. Eezo came in as he turned off the light, following him over to the bed. He laid down, pulling the blankets back up around himself. He expected Eezo to jump up there with him, but she sat down on the floor instead, looking up at him. He patted the bed and she wagged her tail, scrambling up next to him. Wrapping his arm around the dog, he pulled her in closer, hugging her under the blankets against his chest and buried his face in her fur, taking a shuddering breath.
Chapter 14: Through the Motions

Charles turned off his alarm clock and rolled over, hand settling onto the empty mattress, Ares' absence sucking all the warmth out of him. He laid there for a few minutes, seriously debating telling work to fuck off and just staying there in bed all day. Eezo yawned and whined, wriggling closer to him before licking his side. Wrapping his arm around her, he buried his fingers in her fur and closed his eyes again.

Eezo only let a few minutes pass, though, before she got restless and started squirming around again, licking him and chewing on his fingers. Letting out a heavy sigh, he threw the covers off and dragged his ass out of bed, headed for the shower. The day was going to suck so bad, but he needed to make himself go through the motions. Once he finished cleaning himself, he dried off and spent a few minutes staring blankly at himself in the mirror, hating the man who looked back. Finally, he picked up his toothbrush and brushed his teeth before fixing his hair and getting dressed.

The entire walk to the park felt like he moved through a haze, detached and unfeeling. An old, familiar friend returned home after a long vacation. He took Eezo off the leash as soon as they passed through the gates, and the dog took off running. Lighting a cigarillo, he made his way over to a bench and sat down, watching as Eezo ran first one way along the garden wall before turning and racing back in the opposite direction.

A minute later, he heard Lindsey's approach, but he didn't turn to look. Instead, he kept his gaze on the black and white blur of fur running laps around one of the flower beds. He took a drag from his cigarillo, only glancing over at Lindsey when she rounded the bench and sat down next to him. She turned sideways, pulling her ponytail over her shoulder before resting her elbow on the back of the bench. Her gaze roamed over him, searching for something, and he just wished she'd go away.

"Hey," she said, voice soft and sympathetic, "are you feeling any better today?"

Taking a long, heavy drag from his cigarillo, he let the smoke seep back out of him as he weighed out his response. "Yeah, I'm alright," he said, turning his attention back out at Eezo.

"You don't look alright." Doubt filled her voice.

He let out a soft snort, glancing at her again. "Thanks."

"No!" She chuckled, reaching over to playfully slap his arm. "I didn't mean it like that, although … you definitely have looked better. I just meant you look kind of … sad, I guess."

Sucking in a deep breath, he forced a smile on his face. "I'm alright, Lindsey."

"Why is it anytime there's clearly something bothering a man, he has to lie and try to hide from it?"

Charles smoked his cigarillo in silence for a minute, watching Eezo play. It really wasn't any of Lindsey's damn business what was wrong with him, but he knew the woman was just trying to be nice. And she'd just done him a big favor by looking after Eezo for a few days. He wouldn't tell her anything about Ares, or even their fight, but he should tell her something.

Finally, he glanced at her again and said, "A few days ago I found out my dad died and day before yesterday I signed the paperwork for the lawyers back home to take care of everything. It's just got my head a little messed up right now, but I'll be alright."

Lindsey threw her arms around his neck, and Charles froze. "Oh, Charles! I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be," he said, taking a drag from his cigarillo. "He was an abusive asshole."

"You keep looking at your omni-tool and Aelianus' scent is fading," Cammus sat a box down on the table next to Charles. "He's shipped out, hasn't he?"

"Yeah," Charles said, closing his omni-tool.

Cammus turned and leaned against the table, crossing his arms. "How long will he be gone?"
Taking a deep breath, Charles shook his head. "I don't know."

"Is this why you've been so…?" Cammus trailed off with a soft, hesitant sounding trill.  

Hesitating, Charles lowered his gaze to the floor in front of his feet, pressing his palms against the table. When he finally did speak, his voice came out soft but strained, "We had a bad argument, and he left without saying anything. I still haven't heard anything from him."

Cammus hummed, the sound sympathetic. "Have you tried calling him?"

"No…" Charles sucked in a deep breath, letting it rush back out of him. "… I don't think he wants to talk to me."

Cammus let out a soft rumble. "I doubt that's true. The two of you are bonded, it's obvious he loves you."

*You don't really know him, you didn't get to meet the real Ares.*

Charles turned his head to look at him, raising an eyebrow. "Is it? He's got an odd way of showing it sometimes."

Cammus chuckled, turning back to the box. "Of course, I smelled it on him as easily as I smell it on you." He shrugged, digging through the box until he found what he wanted and set it aside. "Maybe he's not sure you want to talk to him."

*I doubt it.*

"Maybe." Charles left the table, bringing the conversation to an end for the time being.

It took him a couple minutes to find the product number matching the manifest, the new layout of the shelves throwing him off. Finally finding the crate of miniature mass relay statuettes, he pulled one out and carried it back over to the table. They worked in silence for a few minutes, moving back and forth between the shelves as they pulled items to fill orders.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" Cammus asked when they were both standing together at the table again. "To a bar or something?" He sounded both doubtful and hopeful all at once, and under other circumstances, Charles might've found it adorable. "Maybe it'll help to get your mind off of Aelianus for a while."

Charles hung his head again, staring at his feet. He shook his head and looked back up, meeting the turian's gaze. "I, uh… I don't think I'd be very good company tonight, Cammus."

Cammus let out a soft chuckle. "I think you're missing the point, but it's alright. Just let me know if you change your mind."

"Thanks." Charles did his best to give him a grateful smile, but he knew it fell flat.

Charles sat on the couch, the lights still off but the vidscreen on, playing through the Citadel news. Brandon Majors and his friend, Eric Flanagan, were nothing but a footnote, their names and mention of an ongoing investigation flitting across the screen on a news ticker. It was Aiden Jackson's face occupying the majority of the screen, though. After neighbors complained of a foul odor coming from his apartment, C-Sec was called in to investigate and found his corpse. He'd rented the apartment under the alias Mark Anders, but forensics identified him as Aiden.

"Authorities are currently withholding details of the murder, but our sources say it may be related to another open investigation, the murder of Ethan Rorschach." The turian on the screen fluttered his mandibles and glanced down at a datapad on the table in front of him before looking at the screen again. "Citadel Security is once again asking anyone who may know anything about either of these deaths to please come forward."

The camera shifted to a baby-blue asari with pale purple markings along her crest. "Matriarch dignitaries of Thessia will be visiting the Citadel this week—"

Charles turned off the vidscreen, leaving nothing but what little light trickled into the living room from the opened bathroom door. He sucked in a deep breath and tilted his head back, letting it rest against the couch. Taking a drag from his cigarillo, he finished it off and leaned forward, stamping it out in the ashtray. He opened his omni-tool—still no word from Ares—and debated sending Ares a message for a few seconds, but what would he even say? Instead, he stood up from the couch and turned on the light, placing a call to Cammus.

The turian smiled at him when he answered the call. "Charles. Did you change your mind?"

"Yeah." Charles pursed his lips a little and nodded. "Yeah, I think I did. Give me a half-hour and meet me over at The Palisade." Why not go back to the same bar he got trashed at the night he fucked it all up?

"The Palisade?" Cammus hummed, mandibles fluttering. "That's right around the corner from me. I'll head over, save us seats."
Charles nodded, raking a hand through his hair. "Alright, I'll see you soon."

Cammus gave him a pleased smile and cut the call. Charles made his way to his bedroom and dug through his closet and dresser, finding something decent to wear. He stripped to his boxers and took a few minutes to stare into the mirror on the back of his closet door, reaching up to trace the scars of Ares’ bite along his shoulder. Even just touching the scars sent a chill through him, making him long for Ares, and leaving him feeling empty inside.

He got dressed, nudging Eezo out of the way when she became excited and started jumping up and down, trying to scramble up his legs. "You're staying here, sweetheart." Making his way to the bathroom, he ran his hands through his hair, touselling it a little before grabbing his cigarillos and heading for the door.

It took him ten minutes on foot to get to the bar, and as soon as he stepped inside, a krogan bouncer next to the door gave him a warning glare. Charles offered him an apologetic smile and held up a hand. He glanced around, spotting Cammus sitting at the bar, talking to another turian. Lighting a cigarillo, he made his way over, narrowing his eyes at the woman sitting with Cammus until it clicked into place: she was the turian who got thrown out the night of the fight, too.

She saw him before Cammus did, and she tilted her head. Recognition sparked in her eyes, and she smiled at him. Cammus glanced over his shoulder—seeming to look for what drew her attention—and spotted Charles. Mandibles flicking, he smiled and waved Charles over before turning his head back to the woman he sat with. They both turned back to him as he slid onto a stool around the corner of the bar on Cammus' right.

Cammus fluttered his mandibles, something mischievous in his eyes. "Acevia just told me an interesting story."

"Did she?" Charles glanced at the woman—Acevia, apparently—and pulled an ashtray over closer to him.

Acevia hummed and smiled, lifting her shoulder in a light shrug before picking up her glass. "She said she saw you in here the other night," Cammus said, flicking an amused mandible, "and when a fight broke out, you jumped into the middle of it."

Charles chuckled, the sound dry and false in his ears. He took a drag of his cigarillo and blew the smoke out at the ceiling. "If I recall, she jumped right in the middle of it, too." He ran his fingers over one of his bruises. "In fact, I'm pretty sure she hit me a couple of times."

Acevia laughed, setting her glass back down. "You got me, too."

"Sorry about that." Charles took another drag, flicking the ashes.

She laughed again, the sound rich and joyous, and so completely out of place in the heavy, dark fog surrounding Charles. "Don't apologize, it was a good fight. And I think you needed it. I saw you when you first came in, you were carrying a lot of anger, trying to wash it away by drinking."

She flicked a mandible. "You're untrained, but you fight fiercely and you wear the scent of your lover like a sweet perfume. How could I not be lured into battle?"

Charles smirked at the poetic declaration. The idea of Ares' scent being enticing enough to draw another turian into a fight brought him a hint of amusement and a touch of pride. He felt sure Ares would've loved to hear it, if not for the fact she was talking about an incident which made him feel like Charles didn't care about anything but himself. "I don't even know how it all got started."

"Does it matter?" Acevia picked up her drink, taking a heavy swallow before setting it down again. "The two salarians were bickering with one another. She waved a dismissive hand. "Something about a research project and how to proceed. One of them pushed the other, and he stumbled back into the quarian, making him spill his drink. The quarian must've been pretty drunk already because he immediately took a swing. From there?" She shrugged and waved her hand again. "It's hard to say, but there you were, fire in your eyes and a smile on your face."

"Hmm." Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "Fierce? Too bad I didn't get the chance to see it myself."

Charles huffed, taking a drag and forcing a smile on his face. "The night's still young."

Laughing, Cammus reached over and patted his shoulder. "Perhaps another night? After your face heals?"

Charles nodded, catching the bartender's eye and waving her over. He ordered Mount Milgrom, but Cammus insisted on paying. Charles didn't have it in him to put up a fight, so he let the turian add it to his tab. Drinking and smoking in silence for a minute, Charles watched Cammus and Acevia, taking in their flirty body language and feeling like a third wheel.

*What the fuck am I even doing here?*

"So, Charles," Acevia said, drawing his attention to the red-brown markings on her gray plates.
"Do you make a habit of getting in the middle of fights in bars?" She pointed a finger at him, waving it at his face. "You came in here the other night already bruised up."

Charles took a drag and followed it up with a drink. "I wouldn't say it's a habit, no, but the last couple of months or so have been pretty … intense."

She hummed, crossing her arms on the bar and leaning over a little, putting her closer to Cammus. "What do you do to relax?"

**Kill people.**


Acevia fluttered her mandibles, brow plates raising. "You have one of those furry creatures? The ones that love to make so much noise?"

"Her name's Eezo," Cammus offered, and it was clear the level of familiarity such a statement implied wasn't lost on Acevia. "She's not very big yet, but Charles said she's still young." He hummed, tilting his head a little as he picked up his beer bottle. "His bondmate seems less than fond of her, however."

Charles snorted, bringing his cigarillo up to his mouth but paused to say, "He's not really fond of much of anything." He took a deep drag, letting the smoke seep from his nose. "You met him on a good day," Taking a heavy swallow from his glass, he carefully set it down on the bar, turning it back and forth between his fingers. He glanced back up, letting his gaze shift between Cammus and Acevia. "So, do you two know each other, or …?"

"Oh, no." Cammus glanced at the other turian and smiled. "We just met before you showed up."

"He's handsome." Acevia smirked and lifted a shoulder. "I thought I might buy him a drink while he waited." She flared her mandibles, gaze slipping back and forth between Charles and Cammus. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Charles chuckled, shaking his head. "Not at all."

Acevia fluttered her mandibles, humming softly as her gaze roamed over the other turian. "What do you do, Acevia?"

"I work at Saronis Applications." She smiled, propping an elbow on the bar and resting her chin in her palm, talons curled in against her mandible. "What about you?"

"I work at Citadel Souvenirs," Cammus hummed, nodding his head at Charles. "We both do. It's how I met Charles."

"Oh?" She raised a brow plate, glancing between Cammus and Charles. "How's the pay there?"

"Shit," Charles said, putting out his cigarette and killing off his drink.

"Oh?" Cammus said, starting to turn on his stool, foot sliding off the lip at the base of the bar to the floor, "Give me just a second. I'll walk you home."

"No," Charles said, squeezing his shoulder. "I'll be alright. You stay here, enjoy yourself." He tilted his head toward Acevia and winked. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."

"Thanks." He stepped away, giving them a half-assed wave. "You, too."
He turned and made his way for the door, pulling out his cigarillos. He nodded his head at the krogan bouncer on his way passed and stopped just outside the door to light his cigarillo. Stuffing his hand in his pocket, he wrapped his fingers around his razor and started walking. He wondered where Ares went, if he’d taken another job already, or if he just kept running as far away from Charles as possible. Wondered if he the asshole turian was safe. Wondered if he thought about Charles as much as Charles thought about him … and if he did, what he was thinking.

Charles still felt mad about the whole damn thing. He didn't think Ares was being very fair … but he blamed himself. Ares was right about one thing at least, Charles should've been better at keeping his shit together when Ares needed him, but he didn't deserve to be talked to the way Ares did. He told Ares he had issues and wasn't any good at the whole relationship thing, he didn't know what the fuck he was doing, but he tried his best.

So why the fuck does he expect so much out of me?

He took his time walking, dragging it out, not really wanting to return to the empty apartment. Sitting down on the edge of a planter, he opened his omni-tool, checking for probably the twentieth time that day to see if he’d missed a message from Ares. Finding nothing waiting for him, he pulled up the C-Sec tracking program and started flipping through rap sheets. He stopped on a picture of a turian named Thatius Calinar who’d been arrested twice for assault with a deadly weapon. He took a drag from his cigarillo, eyeing the turian on the screen before moving on. Thatius didn't call to him. Not the way the others did.

He stopped again on a picture of a human man named Mickey Kilpatrick. The man served time for spousal and child abuse back on Earth before moving to the Citadel. Since living on the Citadel, he’d been arrested for more trivial things: drunken disorderly, theft, and operating a skycar beyond the legal speed limits. Charles stared at the picture for a couple of minutes, finishing his cigarillo as he added the man to his mental list.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he closed the program and then his omni-tool before pushing away from the planter. He made his way back to his apartment and went inside, leaving the lights off. Eezo appeared like a ghost in the night, circling around his feet. Squatting down, he threaded his fingers through her fur and scratched, leaning in to press his head against the dog. Eezo let out a little whine and wriggled back enough to lick his face.

Patting her head, Charles stood up again and made his way to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out a Paragade and cracked the lid. He took a couple of swallows before closing it and putting it back in the refrigerator. He turned, pressing his palms against the counter and let his head hang down between his shoulders. His chest ached with the hollow feeling inside, leaving him feeling drained and exhausted, yet restless at the same time.

He made his way to the bedroom, Eezo at his heels, and stripped out of his clothes. Picking his pants up off the floor, he emptied his pockets out onto his dresser and stopped with his razor in his hand. For years, he kept the blade locked away in the dark, tucked inside his father's Alliance tin right next to the lock of Sarah's hair. He only pulled it out when things got really bad, when he needed to feel something. Since Shanxi, though, the razor went with him everywhere. He cleaned it meticulously after each kill, doing his best to get deep inside all of the crevices. He knew if C-Sec got ahold of it, though, they'd break it apart and find blood he couldn't get to, but he couldn't bring himself to ever leave it behind.

He needed to feel something.

Charles swallowed, fingers trembling.

He needed to feel pain.

Closing his fist around the razor, he pushed the heel of his hand against his forehead, closing his eyes and taking a shaky breath. Blood splashed on the backs of his eyelids, but it didn't belong to one of his kills. It was his blood, spilling down his arms and legs, pouring out of wounds far deeper than any he’d ever made on himself. Opening his eyes, he tilted his head back, looking up at the darkened ceiling and sucked in a deep breath. His pulse pounded in his temples, echoed like the deafening roar of the sea in his ears.

He looked down at the razor in his hand, the dim light coming from the bathroom casting shadows over the curve of the handle. Brushing his thumb back and forth over the cool metal, he flicked his wrist, and the razor snapped open. He turned it until light glinted off the deadly metal, feeling it call to him.

The beast purred.

Only half aware of what he was doing, Charles headed to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him before Eezo followed. He stood there, staring at the razor, avoiding his reflection in the mirror. Mouth and throat dry, he swallowed and grabbed a couple of towels off the rack before sitting down on the floor, pulling the first aid kit out from under the sink. He just sat there for a moment, the odd, almost tranquil, detached feeling settling over him. Almost more like he watched himself rather than actively participating, but he knew he could stop at any time. If he wanted to.

"Charles … you don't have to do this." Sarah's voice filled his head.
He didn't want to stop.

As soon as the blade touched his thigh, his hand steadied. He pressed a little, watching the first drops of blood well up, and then he pressed a little harder. The fresh wound sent pain signals to his brain, but it felt distant, more like a memory than the real thing. Slowly, he pulled the razor across his skin, sucking in a deep breath as blood spilled out in thick rivulets, severed nerve endings cut so cleanly it took a second for his brain to catch up with the fresh shock of pain.

"You worthless piece of shit." His father's voice, thick, oily, and acrid like poison on the back of his tongue. "Why don't you do us all a favor and just kill yourself?"

Moving the razor further up, he dug it into his thigh again, slicing it through his flesh, groaning as his mind slipped away to the place of darkness. It surrounded him, choked him, threatened to pull him under completely and drown him in blood and screams. Slithered through his veins and danced to the beat of his pulse. He rode out the feeling, soaking it in and letting it wrap itself around his soul.

"You should've died in that goddamned parking lot. What right do you have to live when Sarah's dead, you fucking faggot?"

Another cut. So much blood.

"Did you really think killing me and cutting up a few guys would somehow make your life matter? You couldn't even handle that without your skull-faced, ass-fucker boyfriend. Your life doesn't matter. To anyone, you useless piece of shit. Not even him, you're just a hole for him to fuck."

And another, far deeper than the others.

"Stop being a fucking idiot!" Ares' growl sounded so loud, so intense, Charles could almost believe he was actually there.

Tears filled his eyes, and he let the razor drop to the floor. He'd never heard Ares' voice before. Not like that, not the way he heard his father's and sometimes his sister's voices. Somehow, it hurt worse, and it filled him with shame. He pulled the towel over, smearing the blood over his leg as he tried to wipe it away, shaking as he fruitlessly tried to undo the damage already done. The blood just kept pouring, though.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He pressed the towel to the wounds, hissing through his teeth, the fresh waves of pain sending nausea rolling through him. He scrambled over to the toilet, throwing the lid up just before the first spasm hit, making him retch as the sting of stomach acid and alcohol rushed back up his throat. He fought to keep the towel pressed to his leg, distantly aware of the whines and barks of Eezo just outside the door, as he emptied his stomach into the toilet, tears still streaming down his face.

He stumbled to his bed, soaking wet from the shower and shaking. It hurt to stand, hurt to walk, but the pain kept him moving forward. Medi-gel tugged uncomfortably at the wounds with each step. His bathroom was a mess, he had to shut the door behind him to keep Eezo out of there, drawn to the scent of blood. He'd have to get up early, clean it all up before he left for work. He didn't want to go to work, but he had to. Had to, because if he didn't … he'd spend the entire day at home, laying in the dark, hating himself even more. God only knew what he might do.

Collapsing on the bed, he pulled the covers up around him, tucking them in under his chin while he tried to warm himself. He shivered, feeling weak and sick inside. Eezo sat down on the floor in front of him, letting out a soft whine. He reached out, patting the edge of the bed and lifted the covers for her when she jumped up there with him. She curled in against his chest, and he pulled the blankets back in over them, not even caring when her fur stuck to his damp skin or the faint scent of wet dog hitting his nose a minute after.

When he finally stopped trembling, he pulled his arms out of the blankets and rolled over enough to open his omni-tool. He activated an empty message and put in Ares' contact information, but then he hesitated, watching the cursor blink in and out of existence in the message box, waiting for him to type. He didn't know what to say, didn't think Ares would want to hear anything he might say anyway. But he needed to try.

"I'm sorry. I love you." It wasn't much, but even that sucked the last little bit of willpower right out of Charles. He hit send and closed the omni-tool, rolling back over and pulling Eezo in against his chest.
Planning a Murder

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Despite the throb in his thigh, Charles decided to go to the shooting range after work. He'd thought … hoped … Ares would've responded to his message, but he didn't. It was fine. Fine. He'd just focus on doing his own thing, getting better at killing. He was selfish anyway, right? If Ares didn't want to talk to him, it was fine. Fuck. It wasn't fine. It wasn't fine at all. He was a nervous fucking wreck, and he was so fucking scared Ares would never come home again.

No. He's mine. I am not letting him go. I don't know how the hell I'll do it, but I'll go hunt his ass down if I have to.

He stopped outside of the shooting range, grip tightening on his gun case. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped inside. The asari stood in front of a free-standing shelf next to the counter, just a little way to the left of the door, stocking the shelf with clay pigeons from a box next to her feet. At the back of the room, the door to the range stood open, but Charles didn't hear any gunfire.

Looking over her shoulder, she nodded at him in greeting. "Back for some practice?"

Charles nodded, clearing his throat a little before speaking, "Yes, ma'am." He stayed there, standing just inside the doorway as he watched her.

She sat down the clay pigeons in her hand and nudged the box over closer to the shelf with her foot. Jerking her head toward the counter, she headed for it, back to him as she said, "You planning on using the paper targets this time, too?"

Following her over to the counter, he pursed his lips. He was a bit curious to know what other options there were, but he figured it'd probably be best for him to stick to something simple for the time being. After a second, he nodded again. "Yes, ma'am."

"You alone? Or expecting someone else to meet up with you?" she asked as she stepped over to the safe where she kept the key cards to the range.

Taking a slow breath, trying to ease his nerves and the internal battle over Ares still being fought within himself. He shook his head. "It's just me today."

"That's fine. It's usually better when it's quieter anyways," she said as she dropped the key card on the counter. It made a light click against the glass as it landed, and she pushed it over to him. "Saelus is working back there, but he should have at least one range free for you."

He picked up the card, hesitating as he glanced back at the open door. "Oh … I can wait, I don't want to rush him." And he didn't really want an audience. "What do I owe you?"

"Raetor didn't tell you?" She lifted an eyebrow, leaning an elbow on the counter. "He's got you covered. Except for buying product, everything's free."

"I carry your fucking ass since we met, and all I ask for is time to have my own breakdown and you still make it about yourself!" Ares' words echoed in his head.

Letting out a soft huff, Charles shook his head, glancing down at the counter. "Of course he does." He glanced back up at the asari. "Alright, well, thank you, ma'am."

She waved her hand. "Stop calling me ma'am. Call me Deliana." She tilted her chin toward the range. "And you're fine. He's been in there long enough to have at least one cleared for you. You two won't even get in each other's way. And do me a favor and close the door when you get in there."

Charles chuckled, reaching up to rub the back of his neck, card tucked between his fingers. "Okay, Deliana. Thanks again." He glanced toward the opened range door and swallowed before turning away from the counter and making his way over. He stepped through the door and pulled it closed behind him, listening to the soft click and hiss as the door locked.

The turian from before—Saelus, he supposed—peeked around the wall of the second stall and hummed, stepping out and brushing his hands off on his pants. "Here to practice, I take it? I got the first stall ready for you."

Dipping his head, Charles shook his head, walking over to the table and grabbing his own pair of earmuffs. "Not at
Charles gave him a smile, though he figured it probably looked as fake as it felt just then. Picking up earmuffs and eyewear designed for a human, he made his way over to the first stall and sat his gun case down on the counter. It took him a second to figure out the kiosk, but once he did, he moved the target in closer until he thought it was at about the same distance as Ares put it before.

Turning back to the counter, he opened his gun case and ran his fingers over the pistol before slipping his earmuffs and eyewear on. He picked up the gun, watching as it unfolded itself, waiting for the pieces to all snap into place before he lifted the weapon, taking aim. Sliding his thumb over the safety, he pushed it down. He took his time, taking a few, deep breaths and lining up his shot before he squeezed the trigger. Waiting for a second to make sure the recoil wouldn't affect his next shot, he barely paid attention to where the first landed before taking his second. He found a certain peace in the muffled bark of his pistol, the recoil in his palm, the faint, tangy odor of burning metal and oxygen. It calmed something inside of him, brought the rest of the world back into focus.

Charles sat on his couch, Eezo curled in against his side, sound asleep. The news played on the vidscreen, turned down low as he moved through his list, choosing his next target. Authorities were still looking into the deaths of Aiden and Ethan, and although a handful of people were brought in for questioning, they still didn't have any promising leads.

He stopped on David Walsh's profile again, something about the man calling Charles back to him for the third time in a half-hour. His crimes weren't so bad compared to some of the others—he'd sexually assaulted an asari, threatening her with a knife, but according to her statement given to C-Sec, a drell intervened and saved her before David actually hurt her. C-Sec didn't have enough evidence to make the charges stick, so they ended up letting him go.

Something about him, though, the look in his eyes …. Charles thought David had his own beast, hiding away in the back of his mind, and it pulled at Charles. It challenged his beast. David was the one. He'd die next.

Moving through the programs, Charles tracked down as much information about David as he could find. The man worked in a skycar lot in the Edroki Plaza on the Kithoi Ward, he'd started there after the asari's accusations drove him away from his previous job in tech support at D'Vernia Solutions. Twenty-eight years old, David stood five foot eleven and weighed a hundred and sixty pounds. He was single, never married, no children, and he lived alone in a studio apartment in one of the small, residential areas of Kithoi Ward. He traveled in a personal skycar—a midnight blue Elkoss Aeromax, standard features—which he kept parked in the public garage across the street from his apartment complex.

It looked like David kept pretty regular work hours, and his routine seemed relatively fixed. Charles tapped into the man's accounts, looking over his purchases. It looked like the man spent most of his time at home and at work, very rarely did he eat out or visit bars. On his day off, he went to the theater pretty regularly, but the time of day varied. He made a lot of purchases online … mostly asari porn and video games.

Charles ran a check on David's extranet activity, having lifted his EP address from the details of one of his online purchases. The man was into some seriously fucked up shit. He found snuff vids—which that alone Charles couldn't really judge the man on, but the ones David was into all seemed to involve innocent, young asari—an extranet site that claimed to be able to teach users how to force and control a meld with an asari, and a site that talked about harvesting the blood of asari to prolong human life. Obviously, it was all bullshit, but David seemed to be really into it, and he visited those sites a lot.

His omni-tool pinged, a message notification popping up on his screen, and Charles' heart thumped hard against his sternum. Recognizing Ares' contact details, he opened the message.

"Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it."

Charles read the words, again and again, looking at them several times throughout the day. One minute they made him feel relieved, the next hurt and angry and scared. Cammus hummed, drawing Charles' attention away from the omni-tool. The turian watched him, flicking his mandibles.

"What?" Charles asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"What are you doing after work tonight?" Cammus flared his mandibles, leaning forward to fold his arms over the breakroom table.

"Planning a murder."

Charles shrugged, closing his omni-tool. "Nothing."
"Then you're coming with me." Cammus smirked, giving him a decisive nod.

"Yes, it is." Cammus rumbled, the sound light and playful.

"Uh huh." Charles turned a little more toward the turian, draping his arm over the back of the chair. "And where are we going?"

Flicking a mandible, Cammus said, "The gym."

Surprise must've shown all over Charles' face because Cammus let out a bark of laughter. Charles grinned, forgetting for a few seconds how confused Ares' message left him feeling. He liked the sound of Cammus' laughter, the dual-tone flanging adding an almost musical quality. It didn't lift his spirits the same way Ares' laughter did, but it definitely made it easier to smile again.

"Not what I expected," Charles said, turning his hands palm out, "but I have been meaning to get in there more often."

"Good." Cammus fluttered his mandibles and smiled. "I thought I was going to have to argue to convince you to go." He raised a brow ridge. "Thought you might plan to spend your whole night staring at that message and making yourself angry."

Charles huffed, pulling his cigarillos from his pocket. "You've got a little bit of a feisty streak, don't you?"

Grinning, Cammus leaned back in his chair. "Hmmm. Maybe."

Charles glanced up at the turian using the leg machine across the aisle from him. "Cammus." He waited for Cammus to look at him before licking his lips and continuing, "Teach me to fight."

Cammus flared his mandibles, rumbling just loud enough for Charles to hear across the way. "Why ask me and not your mate?"

"I did ask him, it was his idea to ask you." Charles pressed his forearms against the padding, pulling the metal bars together against the tension of the weights.

"Hmm. He doesn't want to teach you himself?" Cammus paused in his exercise to watch Charles a moment.

"He taught me a couple of things, but he's so much bigger than I am …." Charles trailed off as he brought the bars back together again.

Cammus resumed, pushing his thighs against the leg holds of the machine, drawing them together. "I don't really know anything about human fighting styles."

"So, I'll learn a turian fighting style." Charles smirked. "With a little less talons and teeth involved."

Chuckling, Cammus fluttered his mandibles and let the weights slide back into place before standing up. "Alright. Let's go."

"Now?" Charles raised an eyebrow, easing his arms back to his sides so the weights dropped.

"Why not?" Picking up his towel, Cammus threw it over his cowl.

Charles stood up, grabbing his own towel and wiping his face before draping it around his neck. "Alright."

Cammus led him through the building back to an opened floor gym, mats laid out around the room. The place Cammus took him seemed to be mostly a turian facility, though Charles did see a few other species mulling about. In the gym itself, though, he saw nothing but turians, partnered off and sparring on the mats. Feral sounding growls filled the air, pained hisses and grunts. More than a few heads turned his way as he followed Cammus over to an empty mat, and suddenly, Charles wasn't so sure of himself.

Stopping next to the mat, Cammus pulled off his shoes and gestured at Charles'. "Take those off, the cloth things you wear underneath, too."

"Socks," Charles muttered, kicking off his shoes and glancing around again, finding even more people watching him.

Cammus' mandibles fluttered in a way that made Charles think he was nervous. He stepped onto the mat, turning to face Charles before glancing around the room, meeting the gaze of a few of the turians watching. Clearing his throat, he turned back to Charles and looked him over. "We'll start with your stance. Your legs are different than a turian's, and your center of gravity won't be the same so you may have to adjust a little. It might feel unusual, but it shouldn't be uncomfortable."
He fell into a stance, one leg slid back behind the other, his body turned at an angle to Charles. His weight seemed to shift between his legs, giving him a sway as he brought his hands up, elbows tucked in against his sides. Leaving his hands open, he curled his fingers in a little, halfway to a fist. He glanced at Charles again and nodded. Charles fought the urge to look around him at the other turians in the room and studied Cammus for a second before shifting his leg back and bringing his hands up.

Cammus flicked a mandible and moved closer to Charles. "You need to relax your knees." He put a hand on Charles' ribs and nudged Charles' left foot with his own. "Bring this leg back a little further if you can." He let out an approving hum when Charles did as he asked. "You want to keep your weight moving, it'll make it easier for you to strike and counter." His toes tapped against the ball of Charles' foot, and he glanced up, meeting Charles' gaze. "Can you lift up onto this part of your foot? Not much, just enough for it to take your weight as you move."

"Yeah," Charles said, doing as Cammus asked, pulling his heels up a hair and shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet.

"Is that comfortable?" Cammus stepped back to look him over again.

Shrugging, Charles tilted his head a little. "It's not uncomfortable. Not yet, at least."

"Fair enough." Cammus fluttered his mandibles, giving Charles a soft smile. He moved closer again, putting his fingers on the back of Charles' elbows, pulling his arms out a little further so his elbows rested more on his chest and less against his sides. "Keep your weight moving." Cammus rumbled, stepping back and taking up the stance in front of Charles. "We kick as much as anything else, it'll help keep you on your feet."

Charles watched Cammus' rhythm, doing his best to mimic the back and forth motion. Cammus darted forward, kicking Charles' right leg out from under him, sending Charles' reeling back, nearly making him fall flat on his ass. Cammus moved back again, giving Charles the chance to right himself.

"It's generally not a good idea to keep your gaze fixed on any one area in a fight, but for now, watch my legs." Cammus reached down, tapping his talons against his left leg. "When you see the kick coming, shift your weight back to your left leg."

Charles nodded, finding that rhythm of movement again and watching Cammus' leg. The turian moved slower, giving Charles the chance to actually see it coming, and he shifted his weight back. The kick still jerked his leg out from under him, and it threw him off balance, but he managed to stay upright.

Nodding, Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "Good," he said, then suddenly turned his head, looking off to his left, mandibles snapping in tight against his jaw.

Charles followed his gaze and saw another turian crossing the floor, headed straight for them. Tall and broad-shouldered, his taupe plates shifted into a dark gray as they moved down his bare chest, deep green markings sweeping over his face. Bare talons clicked across the tile of the floor as he walked. Charles relaxed his stance, turning to face the man as he approached, hackles rising. Cammus shifted, moving closer to Charles' side.

The turian jerked his head back in a nod, gaze focused on Cammus as he neared the mat. "You're teaching the human to fight like a turian in this gym, you'll show me your bondmark, human." The turian stared Charles down, green eyes cold and hinting at violence. "Prove you belong to one of us."

Charles smirked, offended, amused, and a little aroused all rolled into one. He dropped his hand from the turian's wrist. Talon sliding along Charles' collarbone, the turian pushed Charles' shirt open and took a look at his bondmark.

"Because he asked," Cammus let out a low rumble, bordering on a growl.

The other turian smirked, saying something too low for Charles to pick up on while he looked down at Cammus. Charles couldn't hear Cammus' response either, but a few seconds later, Cammus rumbled and jerked his head back toward Charles. The man stepped past Cammus and onto the mat, moving toward Charles. Cammus turned to face Charles, body language a little tense but a reassuring smile on his face.

Charles remained quiet and stood still as the turian came to a stop in front of him, looking him over from head to toe. The man's nose plates twitched, mandibles flaring a little before he leaned in a little closer, taking a very obvious sniff of the air around Charles. Letting out a curious sounding rumble, the turian reached out, talon catching on the collar of Charles' shirt. Charles grabbed his wrist, furrowing his brows.

"You want to learn to fight like a turian in this gym, you'll show me your bondmark, human." The turian stared Charles down, green eyes cold and hinting at violence. "Prove you belong to one of us."

Charles smirked, offended, amused, and a little aroused all rolled into one. He dropped his hand from the turian's wrist. Talon sliding along Charles' collarbone, the turian pushed Charles' shirt open and took a look at his bondmark.
aside and looked at the scars Ares left in his shoulder. He chuffed, dropping his hand and met Charles' gaze again.

"Where's your mate?" The man asked, taking a couple of steps back from Charles and crossing his arms. He jerked his head back at Cammus. "Why are you here with another turian?"

Charles raised an eyebrow, wanting to tell the man it wasn't any of his damn business, but he kept it to himself. "Traveling. For work." His gaze shifted to Cammus, taking in the light flutter of his mandibles. "We're friends. Coworkers." Smirking again, he raised his eyebrow a little higher. "But if you're asking if my ... mate knows that I'm spending time with another man, then the answer's yes, he does, and he approves."

The turian flicked his mandibles, a faint hint of a smile shifting his mouth plates. "What you learn here, you don't take back to your people."

Charles lifted his hand in a mock salute. "Yes, sir."

Chuffing, the turian shook his head and turned, walking away. "Spirits save the turian bonded to you."

Letting out a soft snort, Charles moved over to Cammus, watching the other turian cross the floor. "Who is he?"

"Travium, the owner." Cammus glanced at him. "You still want to do this?"

"Hell, yeah."

Charles hid in the shadows of the parking garage across the way from David's apartment. He'd come by the night before, too, just to watch, but the time for watching was over. He'd already taken care of the garage's cameras, and he did his best to make sure none of the neighboring buildings caught him on vid, either. He had his bag packed with cleanup supplies, and he'd put on all the stupid shit Ares told him to wear. He carried his Stiletto III, his baton, handcuffs, and of course, his razor. He'd also grabbed a roll of tape he found in the back of his closet shelf, just in case. He figured he could use it to tape David's mouth shut or something if he needed to.

His plan was to wait for David to arrive, then knock him out and force him back into his own skycar. Charles would then drive the Aeromax to a warehouse on the Shalta Aroch Ward which was currently closed for construction. He'd already checked the place out and knew exactly how to get inside. All he needed to do was wait.

He hated waiting, especially with the beast pacing the cage inside his head, snarling and demanding to be let out. When the Aeromax finally landed, Charles sucked in a deep breath, a sudden spike of adrenaline hitting his system. Sticking to the shadows, he moved along the wall toward the skycar, pulling his baton out and snapping it opened. Crouching down, he moved between parked skycars, rounding behind the vehicles to approach David from the back.

Hearing the skycar door open, Charles stopped at the back of David's Aeromax, settling his bag on the ground and peering around the edge. He watched as the man climbed out of his skycar, the dome light illuminating his face enough to give Charles a positive ID. Rushing forward, Charles swung the baton, hitting the man in the side of the head. David fell against the skycar, and Charles hit him again, cracking the baton over the back of his skull. The man collapsed, starting to slide down to the garage floor.

Charles grabbed him, pinning him against the skycar and put the handcuffs on him before shoving his limp body into the Aeromax. Charles retrieved his bag before shifting David around, moving him further over into the passenger seat and climbing inside. He put his bag in the floorboard and started the Aeromax, casting a glance at David and grinning, savoring the purr of the beast.

David started to rouse and struggle against the handcuffs halfway there, and Charles had to hit him again. After that, the man stayed out cold. Charles got them to the warehouse, and after checking to make sure David was still out, he parked the car and opened his omni-tool, scanning for active security features around the building again, just in case. The program picked up nothing. He knew the place had to have some kind of security, but everything came up absent, so he figured the systems must be shut down due to the construction.

Closing his omni-tool, he climbed out of the skycar and bolted over to the building, moving straight for the loading dock. It took him only a few seconds to hack through the lock using the program Ares gave him, and then he hit the button next to the door, heading back to the Aeromax as the loading dock door started sliding open.

Peering through the window, he made sure David was still slumped over in the passenger seat before climbing back inside the skycar. He started it and drove it right into the warehouse, landing the vehicle next to a set of metal shelves bolted to the wall. Climbing out of the car again, he ran back to the door and closed it, leaving him with nothing but the Aeromax's lights to navigate by. The warehouse didn't have any windows, though, so there was nothing keeping him from turning on the lights.
He opened his omni-tool and activated the flashlight app, using it to find the light controls by the door. The first half of the warehouse flooded with light, and Charles made his way back to the skycar. He glanced inside the passenger side window, finding a terrified, dazed set of brown eyes staring back at him.

_Fuck._

Charles drew his Stilleto III and held it up where the man could see before opening the door. Stepping back as the door raised, he leveled the gun on David. "Get out."

David's head listed a little, and he blinked. "I don't … I don't have much, but you can have everything in my account. Just … please …"

"I don't want your fucking credits." Charles sucked in a deep breath, trying to still the beast long enough to at least get David secured somewhere where he could work. "Get out of the fucking skycar. Now."

David's lip trembled. "Please … please don't do this."

"For fuck's sake, just get out." Charles rolled his eyes, muscles between his shoulders tense, grip tightening on the gun. "I really don't want to have to shoot you."

"Just tell me what you—"

Rushing forward, Charles grabbed a fistful of David's hair and dragged him from the car, screaming. The beast roared, filling Charles' head with a rush of excitement and a desperation to spill the man's blood. David struggled to scramble to his feet with his hands bound behind his back. Charles kept a good grip on him, kicking the man in the ribs when he rolled over enough to try to sweep Charles' feet out from under him.

Dragging him over to the shelves, Charles hesitated for a moment, trying to figure out how he was supposed to get the man handcuffed to the metal bars without him fighting back. David was shorter than Charles, and he weighed less, but he was denser, stronger. While he stood there contemplating, David managed to rip his hair free of Charles' hand, rolling over and kicking him in his still-healing thigh, sending a shock of pain through his leg.

"Sonofabitch." Charles growled and hit the man in the back of the head with the butt of his Stiletto III when David flipped back over and tried to get his feet under him.

The man dropped, face first, onto the floor and let out a groan. Charles bent over him, wrapping his hand around the cuffs and used them to pull David up, dragging him back over to the shelves. He holstered his gun and pulled out the handcuff keys, moving swiftly before the man got his head clear enough to struggle. He unlocked one of the cuffs, pulling David's wrists back around the bar before securing the cuff again.

Stepping back, he took a second to catch his breath and caught sight of blood trailing down David's face from a cut across his eyebrow. It sent a hungry rush through Charles, making the beast salivate. Moving back to the skycar, he got his bag out and brought it back over to the shelves, dropping it a few feet away from David. He crouched down, digging inside until he found his roll of tape, glad he brought it after all.

With David still out of it, Charles moved over to squat in front of the man and used the tape to bind his ankles together before kneeling on the man's shins, pinning his legs to the ground. He holstered his gun and pulled out the handcuff keys, moving swiftly before the man got his head clear enough to struggle. He unlocked one of the cuffs, pulling David's wrists back around the bar before securing the cuff again.

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With David still out of it, Charles moved over to squat in front of the man and used the tape to bind his ankles together before kneeling on the man's shins, pinning his legs to the ground. Pulling out his razor, Charles flicked his wrist, the beast letting out a restless snarl when the blade slid free. He sliced through the man's shirt, pulling it apart to expose David's chest, and David groaned, head rolling back.

"You with me, David?" Charles asked, throat dry, voice hoarse.

Eyes fluttering open, David focused on Charles and immediately started squirming, trying to break himself free. Charles grinned, reaching out to take a fist full of David's hair and pulled his head back. He brought his razor to David's face, barely making contact before the man screamed and bucked, trying to tear his face away from the bite of the blade. Euphoria flooded Charles, and he dug the blade in deeper, biting his lip as he dragged the razor down the man's cheek, parting skin and fat with such beautiful ease. Blood poured from the wound, sliding down his chin and dripping onto his bare chest.

David blubbered, tears falling to mix with blood, spit pooling in the corners of his mouth. "Who the fuck are you? Why are you doing this?"

Charles hummed, moving his blade over a hair and starting to cut again, savoring the instant wails. Obviously the man—no matter how twisted—wasn't nearly as tough as the bastards who'd raped and beat Charles. No, those men made him work for their screams. It was almost disappointing.

He watched the blood for a few seconds, listening to David pant and gasp for air. "What were you going to do with that asari? She was your coworker, right? She trusted you, thought you were safe, but you tried to force yourself on her in an alley."
"No … no, I never touched her." David tried to shake his head, but it only made him whimper. "There was no proof. C-Sec let me go. There was nothing."

Charles moved to the other side of David's face, and the man flinched, trying to pull away. Tightening his grip on David's hair, Charles held his head still and cut into the blank slate of rosy flesh. The fresh blood and agonized screams made Charles' cock twitch, and he let out a little groan.

He licked his lips. "What were you going to do with that asari?"

"Nothing, I swear." David sobbed, the only thing holding his head upright was Charles' grip on his hair. "Please, stop. Please."

"Liar." Charles cut another swath in the man's face, closing his eyes and letting the screams wash over him, hardening his cock.

"I was going to rape her … and then kill her," David whispered, voice shaking.

Charles opened his eyes, meeting the man's gaze, voice cold when he said, "And that's why you're here with me." He dug the razor into the man's chest, just beneath the collarbone, twisting it back and forth until he felt it scrape across bone and jerked it down.

It tore the absolute, most delicious shriek from the man. A sound so raw and strangled, Charles knew it had to make David's throat bleed a little, and it made Charles close his eyes again while he soaked it in. Cock starting to ache, pressing uncomfortably against his jeans, Charles shifted a little and moaned. When he opened his eyes again, there was so much blood flowing from the man, torrents of it, soaking through the man's clothes and puddling on the floor around him. Charles needed to move back to keep from getting it on his pants, and he knew David wasn't going to last much longer.

Pushing up to his feet, Charles stood over the man, staring down at him, savoring the moment just a few seconds longer. Slowly, he stepped to the side, avoiding the puddle of blood and squatted down next David's bound wrists. Reaching around, he put one hand on the man's forehead, tilting his head back and to the side before wrapping his other hand around the bar to get the angle he needed. With one, clean, quick motion, he slit the man's throat.
"I miss you." Charles hit send and closed his omni-tool before he changed his mind.

Ares hadn't said anything else since he sent the message telling Charles not to worry about it after he'd apologized. Apparently, Ares didn't think he had anything to apologize for. Or express to Charles that he still cared about him. It wasn't all that surprising, though. He was Ares after all. The man spoke two languages: killing and fucking. Charles knew that going in, and he didn't have any right to really expect anything more from Ares … even if he did wish for it sometimes.

He lit a cigarillo, blowing the smoke up toward the ceiling. Mahlia came into the break room and sat down over by the news kiosk, turning it on before shifting her attention to her datapad. Charles watched her for a few seconds, his mind wandering back to David and all the terrible shit the sick fuck wanted to do to asari. Mahlia had grown on him a little, and the thought of someone doing crap like that to her pissed him off. Not that the thought of someone doing that to anyone wouldn't piss him off, but he actually knew Mahlia.

"What?" she asked.

"Huh?" Charles furrowed his brow, taking another drag.

"You've been staring at me for the last two minutes." She glanced up, meeting his gaze, an amused smile on her face.

He grinned and shrugged. "I was just thinking about you and Lindsey. How's that going? You kiss her yet?"

Rolling her eyes, she snorted, looking back down at her datapad but with a smile on her face.

"Shut up."

He chuckled, letting his gaze drift away from her as he smoked and listened to the news.

"A third body has been found," the feminine voice said, "in a series of murders some are now calling the work of a serial killer. C-Sec has confirmed that the latest victim, twenty-eight-year-old human David Walsh, died after sustaining wounds similar in nature to those of Ethan Rorschach and Aiden Jackson, both also human males."

Serial killer. Yes, he supposed he was. Charles looked at the kiosk, even though it didn't provide him with any more insight than the voice coming through the speakers. He took a deep drag, flicking his ashes in the ashtray. He knew he should've waited longer, but with all the shit going on in his head and the fight with Ares … he needed to kill David.

"Authorities have not yet confirmed the suspicion that these deaths were committed by the same individual, but they will be making a statement to the press tomorrow evening." The voice on the kiosk paused for a second. "In the meantime, it is suggested that citizens of the Citadel take extra precautions to ensure their safety. Avoid traveling alone when possible, stick to well-populated areas, and be sure to keep your doors locked at all times."

"Goddess. I hope they catch whoever is doing this, soon." Mahlia moved over to sit at the table with him, reaching over and putting her hand on his wrist. "Charles … maybe I should take you home after work tonight."

He let out a bark of laughter. "Why?"

Blinking, Mahlia looked at him like he was a simple-minded fool. "You heard what they said, all of the victims have been human men. It's not safe for you to be alone."

Charles smiled, leaving his cigarillo between his lips to lean forward and put his free hand on top of hers. "I'm sure I'll be fine, Mahlia, but you know you don't have to use a serial killer as an excuse to come home with me."

Scoffing, she pulled her hand free from his and slapped him on the shoulder. "You're incorrigible!"

He leaned back in the chair, laughing and nearly dropping his cigarillo. "If it'll really make you feel better, I'll see if Cammus will share a cab with me."

"Thank you." She folded her arms on the table, watching him for a moment. A slow, sly smile spread across her face. "You two seem to spend a lot of time together away from work."

He took a drag from his cigarillo, raising an eyebrow. "Are you asking if we're dating?"

She huffed and let out a soft chuckle. "Well, I was trying to be more subtle about it, but yes."
"No," He said, smirking, "we're not dating."

"That's too bad." She shrugged. "I thought it'd be kind of nice for you to have someone."

"What makes you think I don't have someone?" He arched an eyebrow despite the sick, twisting sensation in the pit of his stomach. For all he really knew, he didn't have anyone anymore.

"I—I don't know ...." Blinking, she waved a hand. "You've never mentioned anyone."

He shrugged, putting out his cigarillo. "He's a private person."

Travium watched them from across the gym, leaning against the wall, ankles and arms crossed. Charles tried to ignore him and the stares coming from the other turians around the room and just focus on Cammus. But damn, it was hard when he felt them watching, judging, laughing. And he knew the fact Cammus was in there with him, teaching him, only made the turian a target for snide comments, too. Charles could tell it bothered Cammus, but he refused to let it rule his actions, and Charles admired that about him.

"This time, I want you to turn your arm and grab my wrist after you push my arm aside." Cammus waggled his fingers. "Throw a punch at me, I'll show you what I mean."

Charles balled his hand into a fist, and he could tell there was something about it Cammus didn't approve of. The turian flared his mandibles, his brow plates twitching, but he didn't say anything, so Charles struck out at him. Cammus brushed his arm aside, his wrist against Charles', and then followed the movement to wrap his fingers around Charles' wrist.

"Got it?" Cammus asked, meeting Charles' gaze but still holding on to his wrist.

"Uh." Charles lifted a shoulder. "I think so."

Cammus chuckled and asked, "Do you want me to show you again?"

"Yeah." Charles nodded.

Cammus let go and waved his fingers again, so Charles threw another punch. The turian's hand darted out, his wrist slapping against Charles' again before twisting and locking his fingers around Charles' wrist. He wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to pull the movement off, but he felt ready to give it a shot, so he nodded at Cammus.

It took him three tries, even with Cammus moving slow, to get it down. After that, they spent twenty minutes with Charles doing it over and over again as Cammus picked up the pace. When Cammus seemed satisfied, he switched hands, making Charles do the same with his left.

"You're being too easy on him," a voice called from across the gym, and suddenly all sounds stopped.

Charles and Cammus turned to look, finding everyone looking back and forth between them and the gym's owner. Travium pushed off the wall, walking right across mats other turians occupied as if he didn't give a damn whether he was in their way or not, and headed straight for Cammus and Charles. Cammus took a deep breath, flaring his mandibles and glanced at Charles.

"We can go if you want to," Charles said, keeping his voice just above a whisper.

Cammus shook his head, turning his attention back to the turian approaching. "What can I do for you, Travium?"

Fluttering his mandibles, Cammus let out a confused sounding trill. "He's not … he's not a turian, though. I don't think—"

"Human." Travium cut Cammus off, moving to stand in front of Charles. "Does your mate coddle you and fuck you like a human?"

Charles raised his eyebrows, suddenly wanting nothing more than to punch the cocky sonofabitch right in his nose. "How is that any of your business, turian?"

"And my name is Charles." Leaning in closer to the turian, the muscles in Charles' jaw tightened, tendon jumping and twitching. If he hadn't left his razor in his gym bag, he could pull it out right then, flip it open and slice open the turian's throat before the asshole saw it coming. "When he comes home, I'll have him show you how he likes to fuck." Leaning in even closer, he flashed his teeth in an aggressive smile. "Or, since you're so infatuated with the fact that I'm human, I can just show you how I like to fuck."
"Spirits," Cammus muttered, and Charles saw the turian rubbing his fingers over his forehead out of the corner of his eye. Then, he gasped. "Charles!"

Charles wasn’t entirely sure how he ended up flat on his back with a turian pinning him to the mat, one hand wrapped around his throat, talons just barely digging into his skin. He’d be lying if he said it wasn’t hot as hell … but it also hurt like a motherfucker and made the beast really want to taste Travium’s blood. He managed to shift enough to slip his hand free from behind his back and wrapped his fingers around the turian’s mandible, grip just tight enough to make it clear he held no compunction about dislocating the damn thing.

Cammus sounded utterly pissed when he growled and said, "Travium, get the hell off of him!" He moved into view, hovering over Travium, tugging at the other turian’s shoulder.

Travium snarled but kept his attention on Charles. He growled, low and threatening. "Bring your mate here, human. I’ll make the both of you—what is it you humans say?—yes, that’s right: my bitch."

Charles licked his lips, tasting blood in his mouth, making his beast perk up, snapping its teeth. A slow smile spread across his face, and he stared into Travium’s eyes. "I’ll be sure to tell him you said so," he said, voice utterly calm.

Snarling again, Travium let Charles go and pushed himself to his feet when Charles released his mandible. He stared down at Charles for a few seconds before turning to Cammus. "Teach him right or take it somewhere else." Walking off the mat, he headed toward the door.

"Are you trying to get yourself hurt?" Cammus appeared over Charles, concern drawing his mandibles in tight. He squatted down next to Charles, nose plates twitching. "You’re bleeding."

Maybe.

Charles smiled, rolling over to get his feet under him again. "I’m fine."

He fired another shot and stopped to look at the hole left behind in the target. He was starting to get pretty good at hitting the chest area—at least at close range. Pursing his lips, he sat the Stiletto III down and moved over to the kiosk, using it to pull the target all the way over to the counter. He took the paper off the clamps and held it up to look at. Someone tapped on his shoulder, and he turned his head, finding Saelus standing behind him. The turian gestured at Charles’ earmuffs, so he put the paper on the counter and tugged them down.

"You know," Saelus said, fluttering his mandibles, "the holographic targets can collect data on your hits, offering a visual readout of your improvement. I can show you if you’d like."

"Uh …" Charles glanced back at the paper target laying on the counter before turning his attention back to Saelus and nodding. "… yeah, sure. Thank you, sir."

Saelus let out a soft rumble, moving over to the kiosk. "It’s no problem."

Charles watched as the turian navigated through the screens, committing the selections to memory.

"You can select a specific species as targets, randomize them, or if you prefer, something nondescript." Saelus glanced at Charles and stepped back, waving a hand at the kiosk. "You can also choose to have the most lethal areas highlighted, which helps if you’re targeting a species whose anatomy you’re less familiar with."

Charles chewed on the inside of his lip for a second and then chose the ‘random’ selection and turned on the ‘lethality targeting’. Why the hell not? He might as well learn how to kill everyone. With the way he was feeling, it was only a matter of time, anyway.

Saelus hummed, nodding as he moved closer again. "If it gives you a target you decide you don’t want, you can just hit the button to skip it. It’ll automatically change once you’ve successfully lethally wounded the target." He pointed to the ‘finalize selections’ button and said, "Just use this when you’re ready."

"Thank you, sir." Charles nodded at him.

Saelus rumbled, smiling and dipping his head before putting his earmuffs back on and moving down to the stall he was cleaning up. Charles hit the button and slid his own earmuffs back into place. Picking up the Stiletto III, he turned his attention to the holographic image of the batarian down range.

Charles leaned against Cammus’ kitchen counter, watching as the turian stirred the sliced meat and diced vegetables in the pan. He’d invited Acevia and Charles over for dinner and to hang out, even suggested Charles bring Eezo. Of course, Cammus didn’t have a clue about preparing levo food, so Charles had to supervise the process.

He wished Ares was there. It was getting harder and harder to keep himself going without seeing
Ares, without *knowing* they were going to be okay. Ares meant *everything* to him, and he always
would, there could be no going back for Charles, not after Shanxi. If Ares didn't come home … if
he left Charles … he didn't know what he'd do. He was already feeling the urge to kill again.
knowing spilling blood would help stave off the empty feeling gnawing away at his insides. But
with C-Sec on the hunt for a serial killer, news spread throughout the Citadel like a wildfire. He
really *couldn't* hunt again—as Ares so aptly called it—so soon, at least not until things calmed
down and people started to relax their guard.

He'd been spending as much time as he could at the gym with Cammus—who'd taken Travium's
warning to heart the next day, and with a little encouragement from Charles, started pushing him
more aggressively. It helped, some, kept him distracted for a little while. And going to the range
helped a little, too, but after a few minutes of pulling the trigger, it became repetitive enough for
his mind to wander right back to Ares. He still hadn't heard anything else, no response of any kind
to Charles' last message. And that was two days ago. It felt like Ares was slipping through his
fingers, and he didn't know what to do to stop it. He felt like *anything* he did or didn't do would
just push the turian further away.

"You're doing it again," Cammus said, drawing Charles' attention back to him.

"Doing what?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

Cammus flicked his mandibles and glanced up at Charles. "Getting lost inside your head and
upsetting yourself."

Chuckling, Charles reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I suppose I am."

Acevia came into the kitchen, holding Eezo pressed against her chest, scratching behind the dog's
ears. "When's he coming back?"

"Maybe never."

Charles sucked in a deep breath, chest aching. "I'm not sure."

She hummed, lifting her chin and flicking her mandibles when Eezo started trying to lick her face.
"Hopefully he doesn't stay gone too long. Apparently being a human male all alone on the Citadel
is dangerous these days."

"Yeah," Charles said, half-distracted as his thoughts started to slip back to Ares and the things
they'd said to one another the last time they were together. "Guess it's a good thing I've got
Cammus kicking my ass into shape."

"Did you see Travium today? I think he's disappointed you haven't given up
yet, but I'm sure he'll find something else to bother us about soon enough."

Acevia purred, scratching under Eezo's chin. "Maybe I should come down sometime and watch."

"Oh, I think they've seen enough of his fire." Cammus turned off the stove and moved to a
cabinet, pulling down plates. "Travium got in his face the other day, and where half the people in
the place would've backed down, Charles just leaned in closer and egged him on. "He chuffed,
shaking his head. "He's lucky Travium only took him to the mat."

"You didn't hit him?" she asked, raising a brow plate.

"No," Cammus said, bringing the plate back over to fill from the pan. "He just calmly reached up
and wrapped his hand around Travium's mandible."

"Masochistic, maybe." Cammus handed Charles the plate, flicking a mandible in a smirk, a heat
flashing through his gaze that Charles hadn't seen since the night they'd fucked.

Charles laughed, giving the turian a knowing smirk and took the plate back over to the table. "The
guy was being a dick. Throwing his weight around. I don't roll over and take it up the ass for
just anyone."

Acevia's laughter was almost loud enough to drown out Cammus' chuckle. A minute later, she sat
down at the table with Charles, sliding her plate onto the surface in front of her. "I've met
Travium, he's not very fond of humans. He fought in the First Contact War."

"Yeah, well, someone should tell him the war's over." He looked down at Eezo, standing next to
him and said, "Sit."

Eezo sat right down—far better behaved since spending a few days with Lindsey—so Charles picked a piece of meat off his plate and gave it to her. She tossed it around in her mouth, biting down a couple of times before swallowing it and wagging her tail, turning her attention right back to Charles. He smiled, reaching down to ruffle the fur on her head.

Cammus sat down across from Charles, resting his forearms against the table. "He's not the only one there who fought in the war. I should've thought about that before taking you there." He hummed, picking up his knife and fork. "We can start going somewhere else if you want."

"Fuck that," Charles said. "Unless it's making you too uncomfortable?"

Cammus fluttered his mandibles and shrugged. "If you're okay, I'm okay."

Charles laid in bed, staring up at the ceiling, Eezo snuggled in against his side. Alone, in the dark, he couldn't run, couldn't hide. His dad's voice was back, taunting him, telling him that he was too soft and that was really why Ares left. Told Charles that Ares wanted someone he didn't have to carry. Wanted someone who could stand toe to toe with him. An equal.

And Charles would never be Ares' equal.

Ares was a fucking assassin. He'd never be happy with a fucking sale's clerk. He didn't love Charles, he pitied Charles. Thought of him as a helpless pet. He'd always been helpless, though, hadn't he? With his dad. With the men who killed Sarah. With the Johns who fucked him then robbed him, beat him senseless. The Johns who got too rough and thought it didn't matter because he was just a whore. Just a whore. That's what he was: Ares' whore. Wasn't that what Ares treated him like with Cammus? Plaunting what Charles' human body could do that a turian would like?

Charles sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and shoved his fingers through his hair, pressing his forehead against his palms. His chest felt tight, and he wasn't getting enough air. Eezo whined, standing on the bed and coming over to nuzzle against his side. He couldn't … he couldn't breathe. Slapping a hand against his chest, he jumped to his feet.

He took four steps towards the bedroom door and stopped, trembling and gasping for air. He was Ares' whore, and Ares had grown tired of him, just like every other John. That's what the vidscreen and everything else was about. Payment for fucking.

Shit, Ares even said it himself in the hotel. "Consider it a payment for my instruction."

Charles amused Ares, his beast amused Ares … but just like every other John, Ares had grown tired of him. He'd let himself fall in love with Ares, gave himself over completely to the turian, and Ares couldn't give a shit less. He was such a fucking idiot!

"No," Charles said, voice cracking. "No. He loves me. He trusts me. Even if I fucked up. It's just a fight." He shook his head, pacing back the other way.

"You're pathetic. You don't even believe your own bullshit," his dad said. "He doesn't love you. The sonofabitch probably can't even feel love."

"Fuck you. You don't … you don't know him." Charles raked his hands through his hair, turning again only to shift his weight from foot to foot. "You don't fucking know him!" he yelled.

"And you think you do? What do you really know about him? You really think what little he's told you about himself is the truth? You've seen how easily he can slip into character, just become someone else. Think about it, you fucking moron."

He slapped the side of his head. "Shut up. Just shut the fuck up."

"If he comes back, it'll probably just be to kill you. One less witness running around. It's what you really want, anyway. Isn't it? Whoring around with that murderous, skull-faced bird. Cutting on yourself. Why don't you stop being a pussy and just kill yourself?"

Charles growled, throwing his hands up in the air, resuming his pacing. "Fuck you! Fuck you, you goddamn asshole! I'm like this because of you!"

A knock on the door dragged Charles from bed. Bleary-eyed and confused, feeling like complete shit, he pulled on some sweats and made his way to the door. Glancing at his omni-tool, he realized he'd only slept three hours after having been up the whole night battling his demons. It was his day off, he was exhausted—mentally, emotionally, and physically. Whoever the fuck was at the door better have a damn good reason for waking him up.

He activated the security vidscreen, finding an asari he didn't know standing outside, holding a box in her hands. Narrowing his eyes, he furrowed his brow and hit the intercom button. "Can I help you?"

The asari smiled, glancing around as if she were looking for the camera. "I have a delivery for
Charles Fairclough.

"From who?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

She glanced down at the box. "Um. I'm sorry, but it doesn't say."

Ares?

He rubbed his thumb and finger against his eyelids and took a steadying breath. Opening the door, he leaned against the frame. The asari glanced at his bare chest before meeting his gaze and holding the package out to him. He took it from her, turning it over in his hands, but just as she'd said, there was no indication of who it was from.

"I need your signature here, sir." She held a datapad out to him with a stylus.

He wedged the box under his arm and scribbled his signature on the screen before handing it back to her. "Thanks."

"Thank you! Have a good day!" She turned and started walking down the hall.

"You, too." He stepped back inside and closed the door.

He made his way back to the bedroom and grabbed his cigarillos before trudging back to the living room to sit down on the couch. Setting the box on the table, he shook a cigarillo out and lit it, staring at the package. He took a deep drag and let it seep back out of him, afraid of the plain, white box sitting on the table in front of him. He hadn't heard from Ares in days, not even to tell Charles to expect a delivery. So what the fuck was in the box?

He brought his thumb to his mouth, ripping off the edge of the nail with his teeth. Spitting it out to the side, he took a drag and held the smoke in his lungs for a few seconds. Finally, he let it back out of him, taking a couple of drags off his cigarillo before using his jagged thumbnail to break the seals on the box.

Setting it down on his knees, he opened it and looked at the black box nestled down inside. It had a picture of several different knives and tools, even a straight razor, on the front and said 'deep cleaning for all folding bladed instruments'. He took a drag, picking the box up and turning it over in his hands to read the back, his sleep-deprived mind struggling to make sense of why, after a week of silence, Ares would send him a kit to clean his razor. Not that he didn't like it, or even appreciate it, hell it was something he definitely needed … but ….

Spotting a card tucked inside the white box, he sat the kit down on the couch next to him and picked up the card. It was hand-written in turian script clean enough for his translator to tell him it said, "Tend to your fucking blade. All of it. Don't get yourself caught because you can't keep your shit well maintained."

He ran his fingers over the writing, and despite all the turmoil over the last ten days, it brought a smile to his face. Well, at least he knew Ares was thinking about him, and he'd actually taken the time to write the note himself. Charles took a deep drag, blowing it out and bringing the card up to brush against his lips. Only someone as fucked in the head as he was would get happy over such a simple, grumpy ass note, but he did.

He kept hold of the note while he finished his cigarillo and stubbed it out. Gathering the box to his chest, he carried it and the note to his bedroom. Setting the kit down on top of his dresser, he opened his underwear drawer and dug around to the back until he found the little box he kept hidden there. He pulled it out and opened it, settling the note inside next to the cracked, bloodied, prosthetic plates of Ares' he'd kept on Shanxi. He ran his fingers over the plates before closing the lid and shoving the box back in his drawer.

Even though he felt exhausted, he didn't think he'd be able to go back to sleep, so he figured he might as well take Eezo for a quick walk and then put the cleaning kit to use. He grabbed a shirt from the dresser and pulled it on before slipping his shoes on without socks. "Eezo. Come on, girl." He patted his leg and whistled, and Eezo jumped down from the bed to follow him back into the living room.

Even though he felt terrible. Once he'd finally calmed himself down the night before, he realized Eezo had moved to the corner of the room behind the bed, cowering while he yelled and threw shit across his room. It'd taken him a few minutes to get her calmed down enough to come to him, and it made him feel like the galaxy's biggest asshole. Made him feel like his father. He didn't hit her, of course, but neither did his dad at first. At first, it was just yelling and breaking shit. He wouldn't do that, though, wouldn't turn into that sonofabitch. No matter what.

Hooking the leash on Eezo, they headed for the door. "We're just going around the block, so don't get too excited. I'll take you to the park later."
Nightmares waking Charles, he reached out for Eezo, but he found the spot next to him cold and empty. Sighing, he rolled over, opening his eyes while he adjusted his pillow under his head and froze. It took only a second for the dark shape stretched out on the bed next to him to click into place in his sleep-hazed mind.

*Ares.*

Heart thudding hard against his chest, so many emotions hitting him all at once, he gasped. Relief, fear, joy, and just a touch of anger. Tears started to well up in his eyes, but he blinked them away. He hesitated a moment, doubt creeping into the mix, but then he moved closer to Ares, pulling the blankets out of the way enough to curl in against the turian's chest. Ares made a soft rumble as he wrapped his arm around Charles' back and pulled him closer, lowering his head to butt his chin against the top of Charles' head.

Charles let out a soft, relieved sigh and blinked back more tears, sleep pulling at his mind as his exhaustion somehow quadrupled in that instant. He closed his eyes, soaking in Ares' warmth and scent, and let it carry him back to sleep.

Charles woke up, but Ares wasn't in bed next to him. For a few seconds, he couldn't breathe again, thinking he must've dreamed Ares' return. His heart sank, leaving him feeling cold and empty inside. But then, he heard something move in the next room, and his heart skipped a beat. Throwing off the covers, he grabbed his sweats and slipped them on before grabbing his cigarillos off the nightstand and raking a hand through his hair. Nervous, feeling jittery, he didn't really know what to expect as he made his way into the living room.

Glancing around, he found Ares standing in the kitchen, back against the counter. Prosthetics still covered his face, a blue contact hiding the milky-white of his blind eye. He had a tube of those military rations he sometimes ate hanging from his mouth and his omni-tool opened. Bandages dotted the turian, two on his left arm, one on the upper right, a patch on his chest, and another wrapped around his waist. Seeing them made Charles want to go to Ares and search all of him for more injuries and then find a way to make them better. Still, a part of him didn't feel entirely convinced any of it was real and Ares actually stood right in front of him. That Ares came home.

Charles moved slowly, sitting down at the breakfast bar and licked his lips before lighting a cigarillo. "Hey," he said, keeping his voice soft, even though he felt pretty sure he couldn't have said it any louder just then if he wanted to.

Ares let out a long hum around the tube of food paste and closed his omni-tool. Finally looking up at Charles, he dropped his hands, gripping the edge of the counter behind him. He left the tube hanging from his mouth, and under other circumstances, Charles might've found it funny.

Lifting his cigarillo to his mouth, Charles realized his fingers were shaking. He took a deep drag and swallowed before cowering under the silence and saying, "I wasn't sure if you were going to come home."

Ares watched him a few moments before lifting a hand to take the tube out of his mouth. "You know I don't always know when I'll be back."

About to say something about the fight, Charles closed his mouth instead, simply swallowing and nodding. He couldn't bring himself to revisit that hellish night. He just couldn't, not if Ares didn't bring it up first. He still felt terrified he'd say or do something stupid and Ares would just leave again. So, he sat there and smoked in silence for a couple of minutes. "I'm really glad you're here."

And he was. Somewhere in there, amidst the fear and anger, the grief and hurt was the same, excited, little puppy he always turned into whenever Ares showed up. So hopeful and stupid, ready for whatever scraps of affection the turian might give him.

Ares hummed, tossing the empty tube in the trash and pushed off the counter. Moving to the breakfast bar, he reached across and took Charles' cigarillo out of his hand. Sticking it between his mouth plates, Ares walked around the breakfast bar and came to sit down next to Charles.

Twisting a little, he turned to look at Ares, the sight of his clove cigarillo hanging out of the turian's mouth bringing a smile to his face. "Any better than the last brand of mine you tried?"

Ares seemed to consider it before blowing out a breath of smoke and handing the cigarillo back. "Yeah. Still tastes funny to me, but it's not as bad."

Charles smiled again, a little wider than before, and took a drag. "They're not what most humans smoke, but I prefer them." He glanced at one of the bandages on Ares' arm. "Bar fight or work?"
Charles let silence sit between them for a few seconds, taking a drag from his cigarillo. The small talk just wasn’t working for him. He still hurt and felt all twisted up inside. Maybe it was selfish, but he needed to say something, do something. He needed to … reconnect. Swallowing, he slipped off the bar stool, standing right in front of Ares. He reached out and settled his hand on Ares’ cheek before leaning in and wrapping his arms around the turian’s cowl, nestling his face in against Ares’ neck. “I’m sorry, Ares.”

Ares’ chest and throat vibrated against Charles, and he laid his free hand on Charles’ back. “Yeah. Me too.”

Eyes stinging, Charles swallowed down the sob building in his throat and blinked the tears away. He stayed there for a long time, feeling his cigarillo burn down in his fingers before finally pulling away. He stubbed the cigarillo out in the ashtray and then pressed his forehead to Ares’. Thrumming, Ares butted his head back against him and turned, wrapping his hands around Charles’ waist. He lifted Charles, setting him on the breakfast bar in front of Ares.

Standing up, Ares leaned over him, easing him back onto the breakfast bar. Pulling away from the kiss, he nipped a trail along Charles’ jaw and down to his neck, licking and dragging his teeth along Charles’ skin and pulse. Goosebumps broke out over Charles, breath catching in his throat. Heart pounding against his sternum, cock already hard as a rock, he moaned. His eyes slipped closed as he took in the sensations, let them overwhelm him, but then his gaze snapped right back to Ares, afraid to even let the turian out of his sight for more than a second.

Ares growled, matching Charles’ force and running his hands down Charles’ side to cup the back of his head. Letting out a soft, needy sounding moan, Charles reached down with his free hand to squeeze Ares’ waist, trying to pull him closer. He scooted to the edge of the breakfast bar, wrapping his ankles around the man’s hips.

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ducked his head under Ares' chin, biting into the hide before licking the same spot. He nipped Ares' mandible and rubbed his face against the turian's throat. Ares rumbled, throat vibrating against Charles' cheek, as he closed the drawer of the table and scooted them back on the bed against the pillows.

"Lift up a bit," Ares said, and Charles heard the bottle of lube pop open and squeeze out into Ares' hand.

Charles did as he was told, hands never leaving Ares, and pressed up on his knees. Flicking his tongue along Ares' throat, Ares circled a finger around Charles' asshole before slowly easing it in and letting out a low growl. A soft hiss slipped through Charles' teeth, and he brought his hand to Ares' waist, kneading and pulling, still trying to get the turian closer. Ares wiggled his finger around a few times before thrusting slowly, but Charles just wanted to feel Ares' cock inside of him, wanted to feel his teeth sink into his shoulder. Wanted to feel like he belonged to Ares.

"Want to finally get me back for ruining your cuffs?" Ares asked, a hint of amusement mixing with arousal in his subvocals.

Charles licked his lips, hazed over mind taking a few seconds to process. "What do you mean?"

"I have cuffs." Ares ran his tongue over Charles' lips. "I'm willing to let you put them on me, and I won't even try to break them … unless you want me to."

Charles let his words hang in the air for a couple of seconds. It wasn't even remotely close to what he wanted just then, but the weight of the offer meant a lot to him. He recognized it as a big deal, an important sign of Ares' trust, so he said. "Okay."

Ares rumbled, nuzzling his mouth plates against Charles' temple before pulling his finger out, nudging Charles. Rolling off of Ares, he leaned back on his elbows, watching as Ares got up from the bed and moved to his bag in the corner of the room.

He dug around inside the duffel for a moment before bringing back a pair of omni-cuffs. "Open your tool, and I'll show you the code for them."

Charles opened his omni-tool, watching Ares in the orange glow. Sitting down beside him on the bed, Ares taped the small interface on the cuffs. A ping lit up Charles' omni-tool, the cuffs syncing.

Humming, Ares handed them over. "The command is four-six-zero-two to release them."

Charles took the cuffs, struggling a little to switch mental gears, and stood up, nudging Ares back on the bed. "Get comfortable."

Ares snorted and laid down on his back. "Where do you want my arms, then?"

Charles smiled down at him, kneeling on the bed next to him and took one of his wrists, guiding it up over his head to the headboard. "Up here. " Getting Ares' hands through the bars of the headboard, Charles leaned over him, securing the cuffs. "Is that comfortable?"

"As good as cuffs can be," Ares said with a smirk, shifting a bit as he settled into the mattress.

Trailing his hands back down Ares' extended arms, Charles lifted one of his knees, nestling it between Ares' thighs. He leaned over, brushing his lips over the Ares' mouth plates before nudging the man's head aside and scraping his teeth over his throat. Trailing his tongue down over Ares' neck and cowl, Charles stopped to nip at his keel. He knew he was being far gentler than anything Ares liked, but until he complained, Charles intended to take as much … intimacy as he could find at the moment. He brushed his face over Ares' chest, stopping to kiss the bandage there before moving down lower. Avoiding the wrap around Ares' waist, he nipped at the hide just above the bandage, digging his fingers in on the other side before moving down to drag his tongue over Ares' partially exposed cock.

Ares gave him a rumbling thrum, low and under his breath as he laid his head back. Shifting, he pressed more of his body into Charles' way. "You're going to have to be a bit harder. Not like I can feel all too much on the scarring."

Charles smiled, accepting his time to be soft and savor Ares had come to an end. Dragging his tongue back along Ares' cock, he covered the head with his mouth, digging his fingers in harder against Ares' waist. Ares let out a growl, sounding satisfied and aroused. Charles sucked the cock into his mouth, forming a solid seal as he slid his mouth up and down the exposed length. He moved his hands to the bandages, letting his fingertips rest there, and glanced up at Ares.

Voice thick, Ares nodded. "Do it."

Charles wrapped his hands around the bandage and squeezed, kneading and pulling more of Ares into his mouth. Ares let out a sharp snarl, bucking under Charles' hands. Although his thighs flexed, he didn't move any further. Charles could tell Ares wanted more but tried hard to stick to their rules. Tightening his grip, he curled his fingers in, digging into the bandage and scraped his teeth along Ares' growing cock. He slid one of his hands under Ares, grabbing his ass before
shifting his leg up and over a little, giving him more room.

He took his mouth away from Ares' cock long enough to ask, "Do you want me to ride your cock, or do you want me to fuck you?"

Ares hummed slowly, mandibles flicking along his jaw before he motioned with his head to the side table where the lube sat. "Fuck me."

Charles gave him a little nod but brought his mouth back to Ares' cock, scraping his teeth along the ridges. Pressing his tongue flat along the underside, he took Ares in as deeply as he could, working to keep his gag reflex in check as he swirled his tongue. He dug his fingers into Ares' waist again, not quite ready to break contact with the turian long enough to even reach over and grab the damn lube. Growling, Ares tensed beneath Charles, and he heard the cuffs rattling against the headboard.

"Fuck, come on," Ares said, tone urgent as he let out a frustrated growl, but he didn't move.

Charles released him with a chuckle. He turned his head and bit Ares' inner thigh before pushing himself up, crawling up a ways to grab the lube. He opened it, squeezed some into his hand, and then rubbed it over his cock before moving back down between Ares' legs. Using his clean hand to grab beneath Ares' knee, he tapped the back of his other hand against the turian's opposite leg before guiding them up and apart. He reached down between the two of them, sliding a finger into Ares' ass just long enough to wet the entrance and feel him relax before pulling it back out. He moved a little closer, bracing one hand on the mattress next to Ares' side and lined himself up, easing inside while watching Ares' face.

Don't leave me. Don't ever leave me.

Ares mandibles twitched, relaxing a little as he growled and lifted his head. Charles leaned in, and Ares nipped his lips, pushing against him to take more of him in. Charles kissed him, tongue slipping past his mouth plates. Once most of the way inside, he moved a hand to Ares' knee, sliding up and down his thigh, stopping to grip and massage a little before wrapping Ares' leg around his waist. He slid his hand back up, gripping Ares' waist as he seated himself completely and soaking in the tight warmth surrounding him before he started to move again.

Reaching up, he gripped Ares' crest, tugging his head back. "Look at me," he whispered, wanting to see Ares' eyes when he told him again that he loved him.

Growling, Ares smirked up at him, rattling the cuffs against the headboard. "Show me. Make me feel that hunger in your head, the one that you feed with each kill by your hands."

Charles stopped moving, a chill running through him. He felt like he'd just been slapped in the face. It was the furthest thing from what he wanted his reunion with Ares to be. He wanted to reconnect, wanted to feel like … like … like Ares loved him. He didn't want to feel the … detachment he'd feel if he went to his dark place. But if it was what Ares wanted, what Ares needed, then Charles would 'stow his shit' and give it to him. Something inside of him retreated, closed off, locking his heart away for safekeeping before it cracked into a thousand pieces.

He sucked in a deep breath, steeling himself, and let go of Ares' crest. Hiking Ares' leg up higher, he ducked his head under Ares' chin and sunk his teeth into the turian's throat. Closing his eyes, he willed up the bloody images, the freshest of them coming to mind first. He saw David, handcuffed to the shelf, face spilling blood down onto his chest. He pulled back and rammed into Ares, starting a brutal pace as he let the screams echo in his ears.

Ares groaned and arched under Charles, legs tensing and relaxing as he moved into Charles' thrusts. A growl vibrated deep in his chest, and the cuffs clanked against the headboard as he shifted, finding more leverage. Charles rumbled with his own growl, teeth digging deeper into Ares' hide, some primal part of his mind demanding the man beneath him stay still and not get away. He reached down, grabbing Ares' other leg and pulled it up, locking the ankle around the back of his thigh. The sound of his skin slapping against Ares' hide seemed distant, nearly lost to the sound of David's agony.

Ares rumbled as he arched under Charles, murmuring something too harsh for the translator to pick up over his subvocals. His legs pulled at Charles, urging him on. Charles growled again, releasing Ares' throat to push up, grabbing the headboard with one hand and gripping Ares' shoulder with the other. Some part of him knew he was pinning Ares down as much as giving himself leverage, but it didn't seem to matter as he fucked Ares harder, faster, his mind getting lost in the feel of sliding his razor through Aiden's chest.

His scrotum tightened to the sound of Ethan's bellows, balls pulling up tighter against his body. He moved faster, harder, grinding and digging himself in deeper. Blood washed down over David's chest, thick torrents flooding down his body to pool around the man. Charles pushed himself as hard and as fast as he could, barely even aware of Ares anymore. He felt so close to the edge. He brought the razor down, slashing across Harvey's face.

The beast inside of him snarled and growled, pulling against its chains, trying to break free.
Cole screamed in agony, and Charles hit the point of no return, pumping into Ares with everything he had. He pried Freddy's fingernail off with his razor, and the pressure burst, hitting him hard as it released into Ares before building again. Charles roared in ecstasy, slamming into Ares one last time before dropping his hand from the headboard to the mattress. Movements slowing as he rode out the last of his orgasm, he ground into Ares, an awareness of the rest of the world fading back in. He opened his eyes, blinking as he searched out Ares' gaze.

Ares rumbled when their gazes met, and he huffed a laugh. "Now that's how you fuck someone."

Charles scoffed but smiled, dipping his head under to nip at Ares' neck. "Not everyone likes it as rough as you." He slipped a hand down between them, wrapping his fingers around Ares' cock as he slid himself free.

"Everyone doesn't matter but me," Ares retorted with a deep growl, relaxing his legs as he laid his head back against the pillows. "You going to keep me here and let me make a mess all over the bed?"

"Fuck the bed." Charles nipped at Ares' throat again, tightening his grip on Ares' cock and sliding his hand up and down. "You're right. No one else matters but you. If this is what you want from me, then it's what you'll get."

It occurred to him, distantly, that Ares expected him to just uncuff him and be done with it all. Roll over and go to sleep without getting Ares' off as if he were nothing but a quick fuck to pass the time. It made Charles question why Ares wanted him to go to such a dark place to begin with.

Ares didn't tell him to stop, though. Letting out a low hum, he shifted his legs to push his feet into the mattress, thrusting up into Charles' hand. Charles adjusted to his pace, jacking the man off while nipping and licking at his throat. He lifted his chin as he gripped the headboard and fucked Charles' fist hard before cumming with a drawn-out snarl, thrusting shallowly until he stopped spurting across his stomach.

Charles smiled against Ares' throat, bringing his face back to Ares. He kissed him before climbing off the bed, casting a smirk over his shoulder as he left him there, still cuffed. He made his way to the bathroom and grabbed a towel, running part of it under warm water before returning to the bedroom.

Kneeling on the bed next to Ares, using a gentle touch, Charles cleaned him. He wiped Ares' cum off of his stomach before running the towel between his legs, wiping his ass clean. Charles felt Ares' gaze on him as he worked, but he didn't speak, just moved his legs and twisted a little to give Charles better access. Letting the door keeping his heart at bay slip opened a crack, he felt confusion and dread seep in.

Tossing the towel aside, he opened his omni-tool and entered the code. He crawled to the top of the bed and waved his omni-tool over the cuffs, slipping them free. Ares lowered his arms to collect the pillows and sat up, grabbing the lube and tossing it onto the side table as he rolled his wrists. Charles turned and sat on the bed next to Ares, drawing his legs up and crossing his ankles, draping his arms over his knees.

"Should have brought our smokes in here," Ares said, laying his head back on the pillows. "You should train that dog to fetch."

Charles let out a soft chuckle and climbed from the bed. He made his way to the kitchen and grabbed a couple of bottles of water from the fridge. Setting them on the breakfast bar, he picked up Ares' pack of cigarettes and pulled one out before getting out one of his cigarillos. He stuck them both between his lips and grabbed Ares' lighter, brushing his thumb over the engraving a second before flipping the lid opened and lighting the smokes. Gathering up everything, he returned to the bedroom. He leaned over the bed, turning the side of his face where Ares' cigarette hung from his mouth toward the turian.

Ares snorted, taking the cigarette from Charles' lips and took a drag. "I see you killed someone else while I was gone."

Charles swallowed, tense again. He set one of the bottles of water on the bed next to Ares and sat down, taking a deep drag from his cigarillo before cracking the lid on his own bottle. "I wasn't in a good place." He took a heavy swallow from the water bottle, keeping his gaze on the lid as he put it back on. He felt conflicted, ashamed but not wanting to make apologies for himself. Not for that. "I did a lot of stupid things while you were gone."

Ares took a drag, blowing it out. "Like?"

Charles shrugged, pulling the blanket up over his legs, hiding the cuts on his thigh from sight. "Does it really matter? David's the worst of it … they're looking for a serial killer now, so, I'll lay off for awhile."

Humming, Ares nodded and flicked some ash off his cigarette into the ashtray on the side table. "Sounds like a good idea."
Taking another drag, Charles opened his omni-tool and looked at the time. It really wasn't something he wanted to talk about just then. "I'm supposed to meet Cammus at his gym in a couple of hours, but I can cancel it."

"No," Ares said, shaking his head as he blew out smoke. "You should go." He huffed a laugh. "It's good to know you took my advice when I said you should go to him for training."

Charles turned his head to look at Ares, brow furrowed. "Of course I did. Granted Travium isn't making it the most pleasant experience, but fuck him." He snorted, taking a drag. "Maybe going in with your scent fresh on me will make him back the fuck off for a bit."

Looking at him, Ares lifted a brow plate and rumbled curiously. "Who the fuck is Travium and why would he care about my scent on you?"

Charles let out a heavy sigh and rubbed his fingers over his forehead. "Travium is the owner of the gym Cammus goes to. He doesn't like the idea of a turian teaching a human turian fighting techniques. So, the first day, he came over, and I don't know what exactly he and Cammus said to each other, but next thing I know the guy's in my face tugging at my shirt. He took a drag from his cigarillo. "Tells me if I want to be in his gym learning to fight like a turian, I'd show him my bondmark and prove I 'belong' to a turian. He's given us shit a couple of times, the last time ...."

Ares hummed around his drag, blowing it out. "And?"

"You're not going to like this," Charles said, looking over at him.

"Try me," Ares said, flicking ash into the ashtray.

Charles sucked in a deep breath, puffing his cheeks out and letting the air rush back out of him. "He didn't like the way Cammus was teaching me, so he came over and told Cammus that if he meant to teach me to fight like a turian, then he needed to teach me like a turian. When Cammus tried to explain himself, Travium cut him off. Came over and got in my face. The guy's a racist. Kept calling me 'human.'" He waved a hand. "Acevia said he fought in the First Contact War. Anyway, he asked if my mate coddles and fucks me like a human."

He paused to take a drag. "Like I said, I wasn't in a good place, so I got smart with the guy. He ended up right in my face, so I got in closer to his. Told him the next time you were here I'd have you show him how you like to fuck. Or I could just show him how I like to fuck since he's so caught up on me being a human." He glanced at Ares. "He threw me down on the mat," he looked away again, focusing on his cigarillo, "wrapped his hand around my throat, digging his talons in a little. So I grabbed his mandible, and he told me to bring you there so he could make us both his bitch."

Ares let out a sharp bark of laughter, irritation clear in his subvocals as he stood up, cigarette in his mouth. "What a fucking prick," he said as he walked toward his duffel and started to dig through it.

Charles took a heavy drag, watching Ares. "It pissed Cammus off. He was getting a lot of dirty looks already, bringing me there. People have been watching us, laughing at us both. Neither of us wants to go anywhere else, though." He took another drag. "I'd feel like letting Travium win."

Ares hummed in agreement as he pulled out a small bag. He took his cigarette out of his mouth and blew out smoke as he went to the dresser and set the bag down to dig through it. "Looks like someone needs to put the old fuck in his place, shut his fucking mouth so fast his head spins."

Charles snorted, relieved Ares didn't seem pissed at him for running his mouth and getting himself in trouble. "He doesn't seem real old. Maybe forty? I told him I'd be sure to tell you." He hesitated, suddenly uncomfortable with the idea of Ares getting worked up to go kick Travium's ass for something Charles caused. He didn't want Ares to feel like he needed to 'carry' him. He cleared his throat. "So, yeah ... I talked shit. Probably deserved to be thrown on the mat."

"I'm not denying that," Ares said, blowing out smoke as he pulled out jars of paints and a paintbrush. "When do you need to be at the gym?"

"After lunch, thirteen hundred hours." Charles looked at the jars in his hands, the uneasy feeling growing, but he stamped it down. "Are you going with me?"

"Yeah." Ares put his cigarette in his mouth and took his things to the bathroom, leaving the door open.

Putting his pants on first, Charles followed. He leaned against the door frame, watching Ares for a minute while he smoked. "I got the razor kit. Thank you."

Ares hummed around his smoke as he opened the larger jar, revealing a dark brown cream, the same color he'd used when he'd gone to Citadel Souvenirs. He scooped some out and started rubbing it onto his plates, coloring them. "Should've given you it sooner," he said around his cigarette before using his free hand to remove it and blow out smoke. "I take it you hadn't been taking it apart to clean?"
"No," Charles said, moving into the bathroom and tossing his cigarillo into the toilet. "I was afraid I'd break it." He moved over to the sink and picked up the jar of paint. "Can I help?"

"You have gloves?" Ares lifted a brow plate. "It'll stain your skin if you don't."

"Yeah." He set the jar down and went into the room, digging his kill bag out of the closet and grabbing a pair of gloves. He slipped them on his hands as he made his way back to the bathroom.

Ares had already gotten rid of his smoke, using both hands to smear the cream onto his plates.
"Just cover whatever I leave. It'll make it go by faster, and I won't have to worry about rushing."
Almost Normal

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Almost Normal

Cammus waited for Charles outside of the gym, and when he turned and spotted Ares, the turian grinned and waved. Ares lifted his head in greeting before Cammus became lost to the crowd once more. Charles smiled, realizing Cammus was the first friend he'd had in years, and it made him so happy Ares actually liked the other turian.

"Cammus," Ares said when they closed the gap, "appreciate you training him while I'm gone."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles and nodded. "Sure, I don't mind at all." He turned toward the gym's entrance and then stopped, looking back and forth between Ares and Charles. "Hmmmm. Did you tell him about Travium?"

Nodding, Charles said, "Yeah …." He glanced at Ares. "Maybe things won't get ugly? If Travium grows a brain?"

Ares shrugged but grinned. "If he's smart."

Humming, Cammus let out a soft chuckle and shook his head. He reached up and scratched the side of his face before rolling his head on his shoulders, loosening himself up. "Alright. Well, I suppose getting banned from one gym isn't a big deal. There's others."

Charles smiled, moving over to the man and throwing his arm around his shoulder, leading him inside. "You don't have to stick around."

Cammus chuffed, looking sideways at Charles with a smile on his face. "Right. Like I'd really leave now."

"I didn't say I'd be the one instigating," Ares said, following them with a hum. "But if he's so sore that he bans you, it's not something I could stop anyways."

Chuckling, Cammus glanced over his shoulder at Ares. "I'm really not worried about it either way. I told Charles after the first day we could go somewhere else. I'm not especially attached to this place, and to be honest … I'm about one or two comments away from challenging Travium myself."

Ares laughed. "Have I mentioned how much I like you, kid?"

Grinning, Cammus flicked his mandibles. "You might've."

"I kind of thought you were going to lose your shit when he threw me on the mat," Charles said, moving them to the check-in kiosk and letting his arm drop from the other man's shoulders.

"I almost did." Cammus hummed, activating the kiosk and checking them in. "But, I didn't want to risk him hurting you."

"Well, if he decides to try something again, he'll both amuse me and get more than he's bargained for. Either he'll leave you to the fuck alone or kick you out." Ares shrugged. "I can't really force him to do one over the other."

Cammus turned away from the kiosk, looking Ares over head to toe. "Everyone gets more than they bargained for when it comes to you."

Snickering, Charles waved for Cammus to take the lead and moved back to Ares' side. "Everyone gets more than they bargained for when it comes to you."

Snickering, Charles waved for Cammus to take the lead and moved back to Ares' side. He smiled up at Ares, letting the back of his hand brush against Ares' as they walked.

"What can I say?" Ares hummed, flicking a mandible. "I'm quite impressive. Not sure there are too many people out there who know what they're getting into, and if they do, then they have other problems."

Charles grinned, letting his gaze sweep over Ares. "Damn right, you're impressive. And you're mine." Saying those words again sent a spike of raw emotion through him, bringing back all the doubt and fear for just a second. He thought they were okay, Ares acted like he wasn't angry with Charles anymore, but some piece of him just couldn't let go and relax.

"I am." Ares nodded. "And you're mine, so show me where this racist prick is."

Grin widening, heart doing a stupid thing in his chest, Charles nodded his head back toward the gym area through the double doors. Cammus glanced at him, nose plates twitching and chuckled, shaking his head. He led them to the back and through the doors where at least twenty turians were partnered off, sparing on the mats. Travium leaned against the back wall, his gaze fixed on the three of them as they walked inside. Charles smirked, but he didn't say anything, following Cammus over to a mat where they kicked off their shoes.
Ares stayed off the mat, standing just near the edge with his arms crossed over his chest. A few of the closest turians stopped sparring, staring at Cammus and Charles as they moved out onto the mat. Their gazes shifted to Ares and then to Travium. Some of them snickered, others chuffed, seeming agitated. Cammus fell into his stance and nodded at Charles, so he did the same, feeling nervous all over again under Ares' watchful gaze.

Without warning, Cammus lunged at him, forcing him to defend himself and block what blows he could, though several still landed. He managed to get his hand wrapped around Cammus' wrist once, but the turian easily reversed the grip and swept his legs out from under him, pulling him off balance. Turning with the momentum, Cammus let him fall to the mat.

Charles climbed back to his feet and resumed his stance, swaying lightly on the balls of his feet. He fought the urge to look at Ares, to seek his approval, and kept his focus on his opponent. Cammus moved back in, but he shifted to the side, kicking out at the turian's back leg, forcing Cammus to shift his weight to the front and dance over Charles' kick. They were only at it for maybe five minutes before Charles caught sight of Travium pushing off the wall and making his way straight for them. He didn't stop sparing. Throwing punches at Cammus, he made him block hits for a few seconds before Cammus reversed the flow, forcing Charles to defend instead.

Travium came to a stop at the mat around the corner from Ares. "You're still being too soft on him."

Cammus stopped, turning his attention to the gym's owner. "Is this really necessary? We're not bothering anyone, just let us train in peace."

Travium chuffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're bothering me. It's bad enough you brought a human here, but if you're going to be here, do things the right way."

Smirking, Ares let out an amused rumble but kept his gaze on Charles and Cammus. "You seem to think humans don't have their own moves that would seem too soft to them but would have you on your knees, old man."

Charles thought it might've been the nicest thing he'd ever heard Ares say about humans not revolving around sex. He smiled, glancing off to the side, hoping to avoid antagonizing things further. He wanted to let Ares handle Travium however he saw fit, and he'd back Ares' play, no matter what.

Travium flicked his mandibles, turning his attention to Ares. "And I suppose you're the fool who bonded this human?"

Finally looking at Travium, still smirking, Ares nodded once. "And I suppose you're the fool who said you'd make me your bitch?"

Fighting back a snort, Charles reached over and tapped Cammus' elbow, discreetly taking a few steps back. Cammus glanced at him, and he tilted his head behind him just enough to be seen. Fluttering his mandibles, Cammus turned away from Travium and moved to stand next to Charles, angled a little as he watched the two other turians talk. Travium's weight shifted, and something about it made Cammus flare his mandibles before snapping them tight against his face.

"Your pet seems to think he can come in here and disrespect me in my own facility, and you'll clean up his mess. So yes, if that's why you're here, boy …." Travium waved a hand out to the side.

Ares turned, completely facing Travium, his own weight shifting in the same way as Travium, making Charles think there must be something behind it, something cultural he didn't know about. "That is why I'm here, old man."

"I don't give a shit if you're here or not." Travium flicked his mandible and smirked. "Kid, the fact there was a turian out there somewhere confused enough to actually put a bondmark on the human is the only reason I've let them stick around this long." He growled. "Now, if you've got a problem with the way I run my business, you're welcome to join me on the mats," he said, waving his arm out at the mat, "or I can show you the door." He moved his arm to indicate the exit.

"Either way, this is my place, and my rules stand."

Ares watched the man, a hint of amusement tugging at his mandibles, before sighing and dropping his arms from across his chest. "If you're going to insist we solve it with force …." He grinned and kicked off his shoes, stepping onto the mat. "Then who am I to complain?"

Charles snorted, and both he and Cammus moved off of the mat completely, standing on the side opposite of where Ares began. He glanced around at the audience the confrontation gathered. Nearly everyone in the gym stopped to watch Ares and Travium. Some seemed eager to see a fight, others more annoyed by the disturbance. Travium stepped onto the mat, falling into a stance Charles hadn't seen before. He didn't make a move toward Ares, though. Ares rolled his shoulders and neck before falling into his own stance, yet another Charles didn't recognize, but it still somehow seemed familiar.
Hooking his hand into a half fist, Ares closed the distance between the two of them and feigned a punch with his left before swinging with his right. Travium stepped aside, using the wrist of his left arm to shove aside the punch and slammed the heel of his right hand into Ares' chest. Charles clenched his jaw and crossed his arms, sucking a slow breath in through his nose. Ares grunted but turned with the hit, moving to Travium's side and kicked the back of the other turian's leg. The man bent into the kick, lowering his body as he swung his hand, talons curled to slash at Ares' waist.

Ares brushed the attack aside with an elbow and slammed the flat of his hand against Travium's keel, seeming to knock the wind out of the man and forcing him back two steps. Moving in, Ares kept the quarters close as he struck out at Travium's face, but the older man moved with the hit, taking the edge off the blow. Ares didn't pause as he stepped back, avoiding Travium's counter-attack.

The other turians in the room began to come closer, and Charles tensed a little more. He kept his eye on them, searching the faces for any sign of aggression. All he really found, though, looked like excitement and curiosity. Cammus hummed, shifting close enough to Charles that he felt the turian's elbow brush against his.

Travium threw another punch, but Ares used one of the first defensive techniques Cammus taught Charles. He brushed the hit aside, rolling his hand over the turian's arm and grabbed his wrist before shoving the arm aside, forcing Travium to turn his chest. Wrapping his other arm around the older man's neck, Ares stepped back, avoiding Travium's counter-attack.

"You're slow, old man," Ares said, pulling his hands up again, talons curled inward.

A silver-plated woman with charcoal markings separated from the others, walking around the edge of the mat to stand a couple of feet away from Charles. Wary, he glanced at her, but she smiled at him, fluttering her mandibles before turning her attention back to the fight.

"Just seeing what you're made of, boy." Travium lunged with a snarl, feigning a claw to Ares' throat before jerking his knee up toward Ares' waist.

Ares trapped the leg against his side and swept Travium's other leg, releasing the knee to throw Travium off balance. The turian stumbled, and although Ares could've easily followed through and taken Travium to the mat, he didn't, smirking instead. Growling, Travium rushed Ares, throwing punches. Ares blocked most of them, but occasionally he let one through, drawing a few drops of blood. Every turian around the mat, even Cammus shifted forward, scenting the air. Charles' hackles rose, hands balling into fists tucked away under his arms.

"You are bonded to him?" the woman asked, moving a little closer to Charles.

He glanced up again, noting three other turians joined his side of the mat as if they were choosing a side in the fight. Clearing his throat a little, he nodded. "Yeah." He turned his attention back to Ares and Travium.

Ares growled, sidestepping out of the way of a punch, slowing Travium's assault.

"Interesting." She hummed. "He fights like no other I've met. You've chosen your mate well."

Charles glanced at her again, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smile. "Thanks."

Separating, Travium flicked his mandibles, angry little twitches, as Ares cracked his neck and got back into position. Giving the man a teasing smirk, Ares jerked his head back, a smug lift of his chin reminding Charles of street thugs on Earth. He almost heard the 'come at me, bitch' left unsaid, and it made him laugh. Travium's mandibles snapped in against his jaw, and he let out a furious sounding snarl, muscles rippling beneath his hide. All around Charles, turians shifted in response, and his gut told him shit was about to get real.

He took half a step toward the mat before he realized what he was doing and clenched his jaw, forcing himself back as he blew a heavy breath out through his nose. The monster inside of him howled, rattling the bars of its cage. It wanted so badly to jump into the fray and tear apart the turian for daring to lay a finger on Ares.

Mine.

"Should I . . .?" Cammus flared his mandibles.

Taking another deep breath, Charles shook his head. "No." Nevermind the fact if either of them stepped onto the mat, other turians might also, but if they interfered, it'd only insult Ares. Besides, Charles had faith in Ares—he didn't need their help.

Closing the gap once more, Travium threw a heavy punch at Ares' face, but Ares' blocked it with his arm. Sliding his forearm against Travium's, Ares turned his arm and grabbed the man's wrist, dragging his arm back and up as he stepped around him. Pressing the bent arm behind Travium's
back, Ares pinned it against his chest and wrapped his free hand around the man's throat, immediately bring the fight to a stop.

Laughter broke out around Charles, the woman beside him being just one of at least twelve turians who seemed pleased by the outcome. A few others, though, Charles noticed, were eyeing Ares. Sizing him up. Everyone else pretty much just looked pissed. Charles figured it let him know who agreed with Travium's views on humans and who didn't, or at least it let him know who the turian's friends were.

Growling, Ares lowered his mouth to Travium's ear but didn't lower his voice. "What was it about you making me your bitch again?"

Travium snarled, hand darting up to claw at Ares' mandible. "You're a traitor to your people, bonding a human!"

A loud crack filled the room just before Travium's choked scream, and the beast inside of Charles purred. Ares' amused expression never faltered. He slowly released his grip from the man's throat and arm, looking down as Travium collapsed at his feet, arm clearly broken and twisted at a sickening angle. Shocked gasps sounded throughout the room before someone started clapping, slow and hard. A moment later, others took it up, clapping louder and faster.

Charles moved onto the mat, stepping over the injured turian like he wasn't even there and leaned in against Ares. A couple of turians stepped onto the mat, glancing at Ares before looking at Travium as if asking his permission to help the man. Ares jerked his chin toward the exit, and they moved over, helping Travium to his feet.

"I can take care of myself."

Smirking as the others led Travium away, Charles looked up at Ares, putting his hand on Ares' keel. He mouthed the words 'thank you'. Glancing around, he realized the females in the gym were all pretty much watching Ares, interest clear in their expressions. Ares flicked a mandible at Charles, taking his hand and leading him off the mat over to where their shoes sat.

Letting go of Charles to put his own shoes on, he looked at Cammus and chuckled. "If you're going to be banned, might as well go out with a bang. Or a snap is more like it."

Cammus laughed, grabbing his shoes. "That was well worth it. Where'd you pick up those moves, though?"

Charles sat down on the edge of the mat, slipping on his socks and pulling on his shoes. He glanced around the room again. A few turians still watched them, but even those who were angry before seemed more curious than anything else. Women still watched Ares, a couple of them seeming like they were working up the courage to approach him.

Keeping his voice low, Ares glanced around, pulling his boots on before looking up at Cammus. "When we have less of an audience, I might just tell you a story."

Charles' eyebrow twitched, but he didn't say anything. He wondered what exactly Ares planned on telling Cammus and how much of it would be the truth. Cammus hummed, nodding as if he understood the need for discretion.

One of the female turians, tall and lean with light brown plates and rust colored markings, broke away from the others and approached Ares, rumbling flirtatiously. "Impressive. I don't suppose your mate likes to share?"

Ares rumbled and looked at Charles, flicking a mandible toward the woman. "Does my mate want to share?"

"I can live with that."

Murmurs shifted through the crowd, obviously, many of those present didn't approve of the idea, but quite frankly it wasn't any of their damn business. At least no one seemed stupid enough to voice their opinions too loudly. Charles smiled at her, letting his gaze sweep over her again. Ares let out a low, aroused growl before glancing at Cammus, giving him an amused sounding rumble.

Cammus chuckled, moving in a little closer to the group. "Hmmmm. I think I'm going to head out. Maybe you'll come to my apartment for dinner?" He looked between Charles and Ares but glanced in the woman's general direction as well, seeming to imply it was cool if they wanted to
bring her, too. Finally, his gaze settled on Charles. "I could even invite Acevia over, I'm sure she'd
love to meet Aelianus."

Charles looked up at Ares with a raised brow.

Shrugging and nodding, Ares looked at Cammus. "Sounds good." He glanced back between
Charles and the woman. "Give me a minute," he said and then gestured Cammus toward the door,
and the two of them started walking, leaving Charles behind.

Turning to the woman, Charles grinned and held his hand out to her. "Charles."

She shook his hand. "I know, I heard you tell Travium. Most wouldn't stand up to him the way
you did." She flicked a mandible. "Sade."

Glancing around, he took in the handful of turians still watching them, and then he put his hand on
the small of her back and gestured to the door. "Shall we?"

She chuckled. "This will be interesting." Purring, she started walking, letting Charles set a slow
pace to give Ares and Cammus time to chat. "I'm not too familiar with humans, but I'm sure your
mate can teach me a thing or two."

Charles laughed. "We'll figure it out. I'm not too familiar with turian women, so it'll be a learning
experience for both of us."

Ares approached them as they exited the gym, Cammus already gone. People on the street
watched Ares, some giving him wary looks, others curious. Someone called out something about
Travium deserving it as they passed, and Ares nodded to them, chuckling as he stopped before
Charles and Sade.

"You ready?" he asked, pointing a thumb toward the general direction of the apartment even
though they'd be taking a taxi.

Sade purred, gaze roaming over Ares. "Very."

Charles let out a soft snort, nodding his head at Ares.

Sade was, indeed, a learning experience for Charles. She'd been quite enthusiastic, but clearly
more interested in Ares than Charles, which was honestly fine by him. Even had she been more
interested, though, Charles thought he still would've found himself sticking to the sidelines. He'd
taken on a more … supportive role, mostly watching as Ares fucked her, though Charles and Sade
did explore one another some. He just wasn't in the right mindset for it, but he didn't fully realize it
until they were already back at the apartment and clothes were coming off. Too much shit still
went on in his head, Ares occupying too much of his mind for him to focus on anyone else.

He'd let himself cum on her stomach while she jacked him off under Ares' direction, just to be
done with it. He'd felt bad, because she was attractive, and he liked her just fine, but he really just
wanted to be alone with Ares. Sade didn't seem to mind, though, if anything, he thought she
might've been a little relieved. Of course, Charles could've gotten hard again and kept going, but it
made him more than happy to just stretch out next to her, squeezing her waist and nipping at her
shoulder, watching Ares as he fucked her. She seemed to really like the feel of his skin,
commenting several times on how soft it felt, but not in the sort of teasing way Ares' might've said
it. It seemed more like she was in awe of him, of his human body, and Charles thought it was
sweet.

Not long after she'd left, they'd gotten ready and headed out to Cammus', Eezo with them. On the
way there, Charles filled Ares in on who Acevia was, and how he'd met her, though he
pussyfooted around talking too much about the first night—the night things went to shit between
him and Ares. When he told Ares about the things Acevia said the night he shared drinks with her
and Cammus, Ares chuckled, rumbling with amusement. Charles felt pretty sure he'd like Acevia.

When they got to Cammus' apartment, Charles rang the buzzer and glanced up at Ares, a soft
smile on his face. "This is … nice. Kind of … domestic. Going over to someone's house for
dinner together."

Ares hummed, mandibles flicking as he looked around. "Feels strange."

Chuckling, Charles slipped his hand into Ares'. "A little, yeah." He knew it must feel especially
strange for Ares, all things considered. "You look really good," he said, taking in the casual
clothes Ares wore, comfortable but more stylish than most of the things Charles saw him wear. He
grinned and squeezed Ares' fingers a little. "Acevia will be jealous."

Ares' mandibles clicked as he looked down at Charles. "Jealous?"

Charles' grin widened. "Mhmm."

He didn't get the chance to explain he meant she'd tease him, tell him she was jealous—it'd
become a thing between the two of them—because Cammus opened the door. Not that she
wouldn't want Ares, hell, she'd certainly seemed attracted to his scent if nothing else, but obviously, theirs wasn't a closed relationship. If Acevia wanted to hook up with Ares, Charles certainly wouldn't stand in her way.

"Hey, come on in." Cammus stepped back out of the way, holding an arm out.

Charles smiled at Cammus, letting Eezo rush past them and pull the leash from his hand. Stepping inside, he tugged at Ares' hand, leading him into the living room. Acevia stood in the middle of the floor, already holding Eezo to her chest. She flared her mandibles, eyes widening as her gaze swept over Ares.

Grinning, Charles tugged Ares along until he came to a stop in front of Acevia. He looked up at Ares, holding his free hand out toward the other turian. "Aelianus, this is Acevia." Glancing at her, he said, "Acevia, this is my mate, Aelianus."

He'd never had the chance to really, properly, introduce Ares to anyone before—if it could be called proper while the turian wore paint on his plates and used an alias—let alone as his mate. It felt weird, but also kind of fantastic. He might not have called Ares his mate, though, if not for Cammus having already referred to Ares as such while talking to Acevia.

Ares dipped his head, giving her a rumble in greeting. "Charles has told me about how you met during a bar fight." He chuckled. "Can't say I disapprove."

She chuckled, scraping her talons through Eezo's fur. "Your scent was all over him … and he fought with so much fire. How could I not join in on the fun?"

Laughing, Ares looked down at Charles. "I like her."

Charles grinned. "I thought you might."

"Charles, I could use your help making sure I don't poison you," Cammus said, stepping up just behind and to the side of him.

Letting go of Ares' hand, Charles snorted and followed Cammus to the kitchen, hearing Acevia ask Ares about the fight at the gym as he went. He leaned against the counter next to the stove, looking over the food Cammus had laid out. He recognized the pink meat as elyine, but he didn't recognize the purple meat, probably something dextro. Some of the vegetables Cammus already cut up into a bowl looked familiar enough. Another bowl held some sort of grains, something he thought he'd seen Ares eat at a restaurant at least once before, soaking in what looked like a mixture of water, oil, and spices. There laid a small loaf of fresh bread on the counter as well.

Cammus looked at a datapad, fluttering his mandibles. "The recipe says to sear the elyine, but I'm pretty sure 'seared' means something entirely different to turians than the asari who wrote this."

Snorting, Charles took the datapad from him and skimmed through the recipe before handing it back. "Just make sure the heat is high and throw it in there, I'll tell you when to flip it."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "You don't cook much, do you?"

"Nope," Charles said, dragging the word out. He grinned and shrugged. "But I'll eat just about anything you put in front of me, so don't worry about it."

Cammus chuckled, shaking his head and tossing the datapad onto the counter. "You seem like you're in a much better mood. I'm glad." He hummed, mandibles dancing around his face for a few seconds before he gently cleared his throat, turning his attention to the food prep. "I was starting to worry about you."

Charles carried his and Ares' plates over to the table, catching Ares' gaze and jerking his head to tell him to join him. Ares finished saying something to Acevia before standing up and making his way to the table. He hesitated, seeming to wait to be told where to sit, and Charles could tell it was a real struggle for him. Glancing around the table and the room, Charles picked the seat he thought Ares would take for himself if he wasn't trying to be polite—giving him a view of the door and the rest of the apartment—and sat Ares' plate down there. He glanced at Ares as he sat his own plate down to the left of the spot—putting himself in Ares' blindspot while they ate—and Ares gave him a slight nod.

Cammus didn't seem to care in the slightest where anyone sat, carrying his and Acevia's plates around the table to the two other chairs. He seated himself to the right of Ares' chair, putting Acevia to his left and across from Ares. Only then did Ares move to the chair Charles selected for him and sit down.

Cammus went to the kitchen, bringing back beers for himself and Ares, juice for Acevia, and a Paragade for Charles. He sat down, picking up his fork and knife before glancing around the table. His gaze settled on Ares, mandibles a little flared as Ares cut off a huge chunk of his bloody meat and shoved it in his mouth, humming appreciatively around it before swallowing.

Smiling, Cammus let out a soft rumble and asked, "So, how was your trip?"
Ares chuckled, mandibles flicking. "We delivered to a joint colony between the hanar and other species. Pretty boring shipment, but the place was nice enough … can't say much for the waters, but apparently, tourists love it. It's a sort of purple-blue, crystal clear."

Acevia hummed, scooping up some of the grains on her plate. "Sounds pretty. Where's this?"

Eezo came over to Charles, putting her nose in his lap. "Sit," he said quietly. He pulled off a piece of elyne and fed it to her when she sat back on her haunches before ruffling the top of her head.

"Belan." Ares set down his beer. "Pretty nice garden planet and I hear the wilderness trails are good, but with the ship," he said with a shrug, "you don't really have a chance to hike around outside the port city."

"Maybe I'll make that my next vacation destination." Acevia flicked a mandible, cutting off a piece of her meat and putting it in her mouth.

Charles tilted his head a little. "It does sound pretty." He doubted Ares went anywhere near Belan when he left the Citadel, but he wouldn't be surprised to hear he'd visited there before. "Where are you from, Acevia?"

"Palaven." She shrugged, cutting into her food. "Cipritine." Glancing back up at him, she paused with her fork in front of her mouth. "And you, were you born on Earth?"

Charles hesitated for a second and shook his head. He didn't think it was a good idea to tell them he came from Shanxi, not because of the war, but because of the dead bodies he'd left behind the last time he went there. With his recent murders grabbing so much attention in the news, he worried about someone making a connection to the killings on Shanxi. "Uh, no, but I've visited there a couple of times when I was younger." He really hoped she'd let it go and not press for specifics.

"Oh?" She fluttered her mandibles, lifting a brow plate. "Where were you born?"

Damn it.

He slapped a smile on his face and named the first place that came to mind, "Ferris Fields."

"What's Ferris Fields like?" she asked, humming.

He shrugged. "Depends on the season and where you're at. The area I stayed in was mountainous and cold." It wasn't a lie, he'd visited Ferris Fields. Spent a few months there when he was twenty.

Cammus perked up a little, mandibles flicking softly. "Was there snow? I'd like to see snow someday."

Chuckling, Charles nodded. "Yeah, there was snow."

Ares lifted a brow plate at Cammus. "You want to freeze your mandibles off? That's the strangest reason to want to visit a human colony." He chuckled. "At least have something warm to fall back on."

Cammus flapped his mandibles flicking softly. "Was there snow? I'd like to see snow someday."

Chuckling, Charles nodded. "Yeah, there was snow."

Ares lifted a brow plate at Cammus. "You want to freeze your mandibles off? That's the strangest reason to want to visit a human colony." He chuckled. "At least have something warm to fall back on."

Cammus flapped his mandibles flicking softly. "I'm not saying I want to spend a lot of time in the cold, but the idea of snow is fascinating."

Ares hummed, considering as he ate more of his dinner. "You're from the Iso Hills, right? On Taetrus?" He motioned to his face, sort of swirling his fingers around, and Charles thought he meant to reference his colony markings.

Cammus hummed and nodded. "Yes." His mandibles flapped a little. "I lived in Phaetra."

Ares nodded, taking a drink of his beer, and Charles thought he saw a hint of recognition in his eyes. "So, you'd be at least somewhat used to cooler temperatures. … Not that the hills ever get that cold, but it's the coldest turian place I've been."

Flicking his mandibles, Cammus said, "It is, which is probably why it's not densely populated."

Ares hummed to himself, nodding as he looked at Charles. "I used to have a friend there. Lived right outside Phaetra, too," he said with a nod of his chin toward Cammus.

Charles blinked once but then nodded, realizing Ares was telling him the man who took care of him after the fire actually did live outside of Phaetra. He wondered what it meant, if anything, for his friendship with Cammus. He smiled. "Small galaxy. I guess."

Cammus glanced up from his plate again and asked, "The one who got you smoking?"

Ares laughed, turning back to him. "Yeah. Yeah, that's the old bastard that got me hooked on those things."

Bringing a forkful of the grains to his mouth, Cammus chuckled. "Hmmm. Did you ever go into Phaetra? I wonder if we ever saw one another there."
Ares shrugged. "I went in maybe a handful of times. It was a long time ago, so you wouldn't even have been in basic when I was there last."

Humming, Cammus tilted his head. "Then there's a pretty good chance I was stuck in my bedroom, in trouble for wandering off, and wouldn't have seen you anyway."

Ares laughed, and the sound did that stupid thing to Charles' heart, making him flush a little. Even though there was still something uneasy and anxious in the back of his mind, at the moment, he felt happy and almost normal. He watched Ares for a few seconds, grinning.

He tore his gaze from Ares and turned his attention back to Cammus. "What was it you said your father told you? You have a wanderer's spirit?"

Cammus let out a soft, almost embarrassed sounding rumble and fluttered his mandibles. "Yeah, that's what he said."

Acevia chuckled and took a sip of her juice. "The Citadel seems to be a place for a lot of wanderers to end up. I found myself in trouble as a child for the same thing, all too often."

Cammus looked at her and smiled. "You seem settled here."

She shrugged, flicking a mandible. "For now."

"What do you do on the Citadel, Acevia?" Ares took a bite of his food.

"I work for Saronis Applications. Mostly keeping track of customer files and entering data into the system. She let out a sigh, flicking her fingers dismissively. "It's not exactly glamorous, but it pays the bills."

"Isn't that how it always is?" he asked with a chuckle, taking another bite of his dextro steak.

"A couple of years ago, I very nearly joined the Blue Suns." She grinned, cutting into the slab of meat on her plate. "That would've been interesting. Hmm. Maybe I still will."

Ares lifted a brow plate and glanced at Charles, flicking a mandible in amusement. "Like living outside the law, then? You planning on the Citadel Blue Suns or more out in the Terminus?"

She smirked and waved a hand. "I see laws more as guidelines. Suggestions, really. It's only a problem if you get caught."

Ares laughed and tipped his drink to her. "I can relate. I'm sure Charles wouldn't mind if you talked with Irene about them. Loudly."

Ares shrugged, drawing Charles' attention back to him. "The prices your place charges should be criminal, and you, " he said, pointing between Charles and Cammus, "should be held responsible for robbing people like me blind."

Cammus chuckled, shaking his head, but Charles just smiled, taking in the back and forth, soaking up the moment for all it was worth.

Acevia took a drink of her juice and said, "And, I don't know. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Chuckling, Charles said, "Mhmm. So, what suggestions have you disregarded lately?"

She gave him a playful scoff and waved her hand. "Not telling is a part of not getting caught."

"Right," Ares agreed, smirking at Charles. "And it's easier to maintain the lie of deniability when it's only you who you have to corroborate with."

Charles snorted, turning his gaze down to his plate. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you hedonists, but I am a perfectly law-abiding citizen."

Ares snorted, drawing Charles' attention back to him. "The prices your place charges should be criminal, and you, " he said, pointing between Charles and Cammus, "should be held responsible for robbing people like me blind."

Cammus chuckled, holding out a hand. "We don't set the prices, but I'm sure Charles wouldn't mind if you talked with Irene about them. Loudly."

Laughing, Charles reached down to pet Eezo. "Irene's a bitch, I wouldn't wish her on Aelianus."

Acevia fluttered her mandibles, lifting a brow plate at him. "Charles, the night we met, you assaulted two salarians, a quarian, and me."

"Prove it," he said, looking at her with a raised eyebrow and smirk.

She flared her mandibles, a twinkle in her eyes. "Fair enough."

Ares shrugged, the bottle of beer held up in a hand. "I'm sure I can convince her just like I did the gym owner earlier. I'm a very convincing person."

Charles laughed, shaking his head and cutting off a bite of elyine. "Irene would probably faint the second you looked at her and then call C-Sec just because you were there."
"Probably." Cammus flicked a mandible. "Okal on the other hand ...."

"Would find a way to convince him to rearrange his underwear drawer … not that he wears underwear," Charles finished for him, stuffing his bite into his mouth.

"I really don't," Ares agreed. "Any turian who does probably bought them from some interspecies fashion store. And they probably ride up in all the wrong places."

Charles laughed, feeding Eezo another piece of elyine. She laid her head in his lap again, and he stroked her fur, smiling down at her.

"And yet," Cammus hummed, "she'd find a way to convince you to rearrange it still."

Ares shrugged, finishing off his plate. "If there's something out there that I haven't got in the right place, then she can have at it."

Charles snorted. "Fuck that, she isn't stepping foot in our apartment."

Ares shrugged again. "Fair enough."
Yawning Abyss

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Yawning Abyss

Charles took Eezo off her leash once the door was closed behind them. Ares walked over to the couch and sat down, lighting a cigarette and opening his omni-tool. Making his way into the kitchen, Charles filled up Eezo's dishes before lighting a cigarillo. He turned, leaning on the breakfast bar and watched Ares for a few seconds. Alone again with the turian, nothing really to distract him, the waves of tension which had been coming and going all day started hitting a little harder.

Swallowing, he pushed off the bar and made his way around it, stopping to kick off his socks and shoes. He was supposed to go into work the next morning, but the thought of leaving Ares made his heart race, his hands tremble, threatened to steal the air right from his lungs. Maybe he'd call in sick, Irene be damned. He took a drag from his cigarillo and went over to the couch, sitting down sideways and drawing up his legs. Grabbing an ashtray from the coffee table, he balanced it on his knee.

"Ares … we're good, right?" He licked his lips and took another drag.

Cigarette hanging from his mouth plates, Ares looked over at him before closing his omni-tool. Nodding, he pulled the cigarette from his mouth and blew out smoke. "Yeah. We're good."

Charles smiled, but some of the tension remained, the whispers of his father still ringing in his ears. He chewed on the corner of his lip and then took a heavy drag from his cigarillo, pulling the smoke deep into his lungs and holding it there for a couple of seconds. "I think I'm going to call in sick tomorrow."

Ares took a long drag, lifting a brow plate. "Why?" he asked, smoke rising from between his mouth plates.

"Okay?" He looked up, raising an eyebrow as he took a drag.

Ares nodded and blew out wisps of smoke. "Yeah. I'll follow wherever you want to go."

"I just want to spend the day with you … unless you had something else you were doing?"

"Like what?" Ares opened the bottle of water and took a long drink.

"Mmmm." Charles pursed his lips and shrugged. "I don't know. Go to the theater. Or one of the casinos. Or, fuck, a museum. I don't really care. We can just go shoot at targets if you want. I just …" He sighed, looking down at the ashtray as he twisted the tip of his cigarillo against the glass.

"Whatever."

"Alright. Good. I'll think of something to do together, then."

"I kept my paper targets if you want to see them, but Saelus showed me the holographic targets, and I've been using those the last few days. I've got the data readouts on my omni-tool. I can send them to you. I've just been using randomized targets with that lethality thing turned on. Charles paused to take a drag and blew the smoke up toward the ceiling. "Krogan suck. Batarians, humans, and asari are simple now."

"I don't think I'd have an easy go taking a krogan down with a Stiletto."

"I'm not all that entertaining and really don't care what you do."

"He doesn't care about you, why would he care what you do?"

"Alright. Good. I'll think of something to do together, then."

"Alright. Good. I'll follow wherever you want to go."

"I kept my paper targets if you want to see them, but Saelus showed me the holographic targets, and I've been using those the last few days. I've got the data readouts on my omni-tool. I can send them to you. I've just been using randomized targets with that lethality thing turned on. Charles paused to take a drag and blew the smoke up toward the ceiling. "Krogan suck. Batarians, humans, and asari are simple now."

"I don't think I'd have an easy go taking a krogan down with a Stiletto."
his palm out. "Pretty sure I'd just end up on the ground with my skull bashed in, brains splattered all over the place."

Snorting, Ares nodded. "Good thing you aren't a krogan serial killer, then."

Charles huffed, flicking his ashes. "You been following the news?"

"I'm always following the news." Ares flared his mandibles a little. "Especially about murders."

Letting the silence sit for a few seconds, Charles let out a sigh and said, "Mahlia, Cammus, and Acevia have all acted like they need to watch out for me or something because I'm a human male." He snorted, shaking his head. "Mahlia wanted to take me home the other day so I wasn't out and about alone."

"You should let them," Ares said with a rumble. "Resistance is fine, but too much will look suspicious. You want to come across as unbelieving, proud in your ability to protect yourself, but not proud that you're the one killing people."

"Yeah." Charles flicked his ashes again and took another drag. "I had Cammus share a cab with me to put Mahlia at ease. It's just kind of annoying … but I get it, I suppose … it just means they care."

Which was a really strange feeling for Charles. He'd spent the majority of his life feeling like not a single person alive really cared about him after Sarah died. Then he met Ares, and eventually, he came to realize the turian cared about him, but he was still the only one. After Shanxi, though … it was just weird. It made him question how much his lack of friends in the past had been because of his personality faults, and what exactly it said about him to be making friends left and right since he'd taken up the most anti-social past time in existence.

Ares hummed in agreement, taking one last drag from his cigarette before stamping it out in the ashtray. Charles finished his cigarillo, too, and set the ashtray on the table. Moving slow, he pushed forward onto his hands and knees and crawled over the couch, swinging his leg over Ares' thigh and sat on his lap.

He brushed his fingers over Ares' prosthetic plates. "Can you be done hiding from me?"

Ares lifted a brow plate. "What?"

Tapping his fingers against the prosthetics, Charles said, "I don't like these, they don't feel like you. I don't feel like I'm looking at you. Talking to you. It feels like I'm talking to Aelianus, not Ares."

Ares rumbled and flicked his mandible. "I can't take them off with you sitting on me."

"Then maybe in a second," Charles said with a smile, leaning in and pressing his forehead against Ares'. He closed his eyes, and Ares thrummed, pushing his head back against Charles'. "I love you," he muttered before swinging his leg back over and crawling off of Ares.

Standing up, Ares finished his water bottle before heading toward the bathroom, stopping to lay his head on Charles' head and dragged the tips of his talons down his neck as he passed. "I'll be a while washing this shit off."

Charles purred at the touch, savoring the affection as he followed Ares with his gaze. "Want some help?"

Ares stopped and lifted a brow plate. "You're willing to try and fight in the shower?"

Charles smirked, lifting both eyebrows. "How'd we go from helping to fighting?" He nodded. "I'm flexible, I'll manage."

Snorting, Ares nodded and left the room, passing by the bathroom to head to the bedroom. "Get the water started, then. I need to grab the adhesive solvent."

Grinning like an idiot, Charles hopped up from the couch and made his way to the bathroom. "You in a cool water or warmer water mood?" He started the shower and stuck his hand under the spray, adjusting the knobs a few times until he thought he had the temperature where Ares liked it.

"K." Charles adjusted the temperature, making it a little warmer so he didn't freeze to death. Turning back to Ares, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it on the floor, leaning his hip against the edge of the counter. He watched Ares for a few seconds and then asked, "What's your favorite color?"

Ares blinked in surprise and glanced over, rumbling in confusion. "Color of what?"

Charles shrugged. "Just in general. What color do you find the most appealing?"
"Black," Ares said, going back to easing the plates off his face and setting them down on the counter. "Black goes with anything."

Humming and nodding, Charles turned back to the shower. He stuck his hand under the water again, feeling the heat level before stripping off his pants and boxers. He stepped under the water and started washing his hair, wanting to get clean real quick before Ares finished with his prosthetics. "Where's your favorite place to go?"

"The Citadel." Ares' answer came quicker than with the color question. He washed the paint off the prosthetics before finally starting to take his clothes off. "And what about yours?"

Charles smiled, running the soap over his body. "Hmm. Well, my first response is wherever you are, but I know you're not going to accept that as an answer. So … I visited this park on Nevos in the Teyolia System of the Silean Nebula when I was like … nineteen? It was fucking beautiful." After rinsing, he moved to the back of the shower, making room for Ares.

Ares stepped into the shower and ducked his head to let the water flow over the back of his neck and fringe. He rumbled as the water washed rivulets into the dark brown paint on his plates, just seeming to take in the feeling of the water. Charles smiled, picking up the jar of cleansing scrub and opened it, scooping some out with his hand. He didn't touch Ares, though, just watched the turian enjoy the shower spray for a moment.

Flicking his mandibles, Ares nodded and straightened himself. "Hand me some of that."

"Would it be bad if I wanted to withhold my answer?" Ares scooped out some of the scrub, chuckling. "I'm sure you could really think up something to challenge me if I said I wouldn't."

Charles snorted. "I'm not trying to challenge you, though. I'm … sating my human curiosity." And trying to prove to himself that his father was wrong, what he had with Ares was real. He wanted to know everything he could about Ares. No matter how small or irrelevant it might seem to anyone else. He waved his hand for Ares to turn around so he could get at his back. "Don't be a spoilsport."

Ares turned, snorting as he started scrubbing his chest. "Alright, fine. What's the next question?"

"As in forgoing the whole levo/dextro thing? Anything I taste that isn't turian or dextro would still taste like how a levo species taste it?" Looking over his shoulder, Ares lifted a brow plate.


Charles let out a loud bark of laughter, echoing in the confines of the shower and making Ares cringe a little. Cutting it out, he rubbed a soothing hand over Ares' shoulder and asked, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, 'seriously.'" Ares started rubbing his arms clean. "I heard krogan eat it, and I want to taste what they taste. " He huffed and glanced back at Charles. "But if you want something besides that, then ….” Rumbling, he glanced up at the ceiling, seeming to think about it. "Ice cream."

"Thresher maw is a perfectly fine answer, it just took me by surprise." Charles rubbed Ares' shoulder again and squeezed. "But yeah, ice cream is pretty damn awesome, if you like sweet."

"And if you also like an animal's secretions," Ares grumbled, barely loud enough for Charles to hear over the sound of the shower.

Chuckling, Charles moved lower down Ares' back, working the scrub against his plates. "What's your least favorite food?"

"I can't really answer the same way, but the only thing I've hated that I've tasted in my life was levo," Ares said.

"Yeah?" Charles glanced up, but Ares was still focused on cleaning his arms. "What was it?"

"I think she called them 'French fries,'" Ares said, making an odd grunt of a sound. "It might taste a lot better for levo species, but I was far from being a fan."

Snorting, Charles muttered, "I love French fries. Then, a little louder, he added, "So, why'd you eat them, then?"

"What did you say earlier? To 'sate my curiosity.'" Ares grabbed some more scrub and started to clean the patches of his face that weren't covered by prosthetics.

Getting more scrub on his hand, too, Charles moved to Ares' waist, hips, and ass. "What other
levo foods have you tried?"

Ares shrugged. "Lots of different alcohol, meats." He hummed and paused to duck down and
rinse off his face. "I did try a 'cherry' before because there was some human 'thing' about tying
cherry stems with your tongue. Couple of friends and me decided to see what the fuck was so
special."

Charles snorted. "And were there women there to witness this event?"

"The females had just about as much of an idea about it as we did." Ares shrugged. "One of the
guys trying it choked on the cherry, and we had to get him to cough it up, so there's that."

Humming, Charles said, "I should've specified human women. It's a sexual thing, women get
turned on by a guy who can tie a cherry stem in a knot because they think it means he'll be good at
licking their pussy."

Ares turned his head a little and lifted a brow plate, seeming to consider Charles' statement. "It's
more uncommon to find a turian who can't do that."

"I know," Charles said, grinning up at him, "but not a lot of humans can tie a cherry stem with
their tongue."

Snorting, Ares smirked down at him. "Probably because you all have such short, fat, little
tongues."

Charles stuck his tongue out at him. Scooping up more of the cleanser, he shifted around enough
to find the room to squat and started working on Ares' legs and spurs. "You probably had every
human woman there having wet dreams about you that night."

Ares snorted and growled under his voice when he said, "I have human women having wet
dreams about me every night."

Charles laughed. "That so?"

"Actually, it doesn't always stop at women … or human for that matter," Ares added, smirking at
Charles when he glanced up.

Leaning in, Charles nipped at a section of Ares' leg not yet covered in cleansing scrub. "Trust me,
I have no doubts." He kissed the same spot. "I'm a lucky man."

"Damn right you are," Ares responded, giving Charles a playful rumble as he ran the tips of his
talons over Charles' head, through his wet hair.

Letting out a little purr, Charles leaned into the touch. "I doubt anyone dreams about me." He
hummed as he thought. "What's your favorite weapon, besides your rifle?"

"My bare hands and teeth, but I'll admit those are a close tie with my blade," Ares said.
"Sometimes it varies on convenience."

"Hmm." Charles let that sit a moment as he thought of his next question. "When you were a kid
… what'd you want to be when you grew up?"

Ares rumbled, seeming to think on it as he mindlessly ran his talons along Charles' scalp. "I just
knew I wanted to be military, preferably where I could use my rifle, but the specifics weren't on
my mind at the time."

"You never wanted anything else?" Charles finished the backs of his legs and grabbed his hips,
urging him to turn.

Removing his hand from Charles' head, Ares turned and let the water run down over the back of
his head again. "Not really. I thought maybe I could be good enough to be a general, but that's
about it." He shrugged. "Military was a family thing, so I just wanted to be like my dad and his
parents and then like his grandfather," he said, trailing off with a wave of his hand.

Charles thought about that for a few seconds while he got more scrub on his hands. What he
wanted, more than anything, was to be the furthest thing away from being like his dad as possible.
Even considering it left a sour taste on the back of his tongue. He swallowed and pushed the
thought away, starting on the fronts of Ares' legs while he searched for another question. "Who
was your first crush?"

Ares huffed a laugh, chuckling to himself. "One of my instructors. She was teaching me weapons
maintenance."

Charles tilted his head back to look up at Ares, grinning at the sound of his laughter. "Yeah? Did
you fuck her?"

Ares snorted. "No. She was old enough to be my mother's mother," he said, shrugging. "I had just
hit puberty and just had my plates separate, so I didn't even know how to use it anyways."
Charles chuckled. "That's too bad." He hummed, turning his attention back to cleaning. "First fight? Outside of anything military or relative related?"

"Sidna's boyfriend, you would call it." Ares looked down, pointing to a spot covered in burns on his torso when Charles glanced up. "It's gone now, but there used to be a bite mark here. He and I got into a fight, and he bit the fuck out of me."

Charles winced in sympathy. He felt a little like he'd just tread into dangerous territory, though, hearing Ares' sister's name. "What were you fighting about?"

Humming, Ares' gaze seemed distant as he thought. "I was training, and he and Sidna came out to where I was. He started talking shit—he was older …. I don't remember what led to it, but I said his father was a—what would it be like—a dog? It's basically a Palaven version of a dog." He shrugged and chuckled. "He didn't like that."

Charles laughed, relieved to see the subject didn't seem to be upsetting Ares at all. He moved his hands down over the tops of Ares' feet before standing back up. "How old were you?"

"I think I was around nine," Are said, shifting his head out of the water and grabbing the showerhead from the holder, washing off Charles' hands.

Charles rubbed his hands together under the water and then took the showerhead from Ares, using it to rinse off the turian's legs. "How old was he?"

"Sidna is … four years older than me." Ares rumbled and huffed, sounding amused. "He was thirteen."

Furrowing his brow, Charles said, "Sounds like a little asshole to get in a fight with a nine-year-old."

Ares snorted and shrugged. "It's not as bad as it seems. Guess it's a human thing."

"Probably." He grabbed Ares' hips, nudging him back around. "Where's your least favorite place to go?"

"Palaven," Ares said, turning.

Charles hissed between his teeth. "Besides Palaven?"

Ares hummed as Charles ran the water over his back. "Taetrus."

"Fair enough." Charles rinsed off the backs of Ares' legs, too, before reaching around him to hand the showerhead back. "I can't think of any other questions right now." He could, but he seemed to be steering himself into touchy subjects a little too easily for his taste. He settled his hands on Ares' hips and leaned in, kissing his back before resting his face against him. "Just tell me something else about you."

Ares huffed. "Like what? That's pretty damn vague."

Groaning, Charles wrapped his arms around Ares all the way, clasping his hands together over the turian's abdomen. "I don't know … uhhhhhh. Where was your first mission?"

"Outside of basic?" Ares hummed and set the showerhead back in place. "I was put in a group of higher ranking soldiers. We were sent to investigate a missing weapons shipment." He shrugged. "It was pretty simple and only really had to track the group responsible to an outer colony."

Charles stayed quiet after that, just holding Ares for awhile.

After a long moment, Ares thrummed. "You haven't told me anything. At least nothing that we haven't already talked about before."

"What do you want to know?"

Ares glanced over his shoulder at Charles. "What are your plans after this? After the Citadel?"

"You won't be able to hunt as efficiently while on the move with me," Ares said, flicking a mandible. "If it's a choice between you and … hunting," Charles said, furrowing his eyebrows, grip tightening on Ares, "then it's you, Ares. Every time. It's you."

Ares rumbled, gaze moving over Charles' face before nodding. "We'll watch C-Sec to determine their amount of evidence on you. You might not have a choice one day."

Charles swallowed again and nodded. Clearing his throat, he asked, "What else? Any other questions?"

Reaching up, Ares hit the command for the shower, turning it off. "I'll think about what I want to
Reaching up, Ares hit the command for the shower, turning it off. "I'll think about what I want to know."

Charles smiled, forcing himself to let go of Ares and stepped out of the shower. Grabbing a couple of towels, he passed them over before getting one for himself. "My favorite color is blue." He started to dry the inside of his cowl. "I'll be sure to find things in blue."

Ares looked at him, confused at first, but then something clicked over in his eyes, and he nodded. "I'll remember that. I hear people like things in their color over others." He started to dry the inside of his cowl. "I'll be sure to find things in blue." He started to dry the inside of his cowl. "I'll be sure to find things in blue."

Charles chuckled, despite his father's voice whispering in his ear, telling him that he was just Ares' whore. "Okay," he said, telling himself that there was nothing wrong with Ares liking to buy things for him, even if he did go about it in odd ways sometimes. "My favorite subject in school was mechanics."

Humming, Ares reached around to wrap the towel around his back and wiped it off. "Where do you want to go?"

"Like anywhere?" Charles asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ares rumbled and nodded, drying off his chest and waist. "Another galaxy." Charles smiled as he dried himself. "See what else is out there."

Ares huffed a laugh. "There anywhere in this galaxy you want to go?"

Charles thought about it for a second. "Sur'Kesh."

"Any reason?" Ares sat down on the toilet to dry his legs.

Embarrassed, Charles stayed quiet for a moment before finally muttering, "It just looks really pretty in pictures."

Ares chuckled. "At least you didn't say somewhere with snow. Sur'Kesh could actually feel nice without running the risk of killing me." He draped the towel over his head and rubbed it over his crest and fringe. "Favorite way to travel?"

"Locally? That Esquiran was pretty damn nice." Charles ran the towel over his arms before flipping it over his shoulder and grabbing the other end, pulling it back and forth to dry his back. "Between planets … not in the cargo." He grinned at Ares. "I don't know, I didn't really like being stuck on a really small ship with a lot of different people when I left Shanxi, but otherwise … can't say there seemed to be much of a difference between one ship and the next."

Standing, Ares tossed his towels into the hamper. "Planetside or space station?"

Charles pursed his lips. "I seem to do better in well-populated areas where I can also seclude myself. It doesn't make sense, but it is what it is. Space stations are pretty good for that, but so are big cities on planets. With planets, though, it's a lot easier to get away from the noise for awhile when I need to." He took a deep breath and furrowed his brow. "I do kind of miss fresh air, rain, watching the leaves change with the weather. Going for walks through the woods."


Confused, Charles' brow furrowed deeper. "Choose for what?"

"For the planet." Ares waved a hand. "Would you choose a species-specific colony or mixed?"

"Oh." Charles thought about it for a second. "Just to visit? It wouldn't really matter. If I was going to be living there … well, that's one of the things I love about the Citadel. Everyone's here. Well, almost everyone. Not a lot of batarians, krogan, quarians, definitely no vorcha … but I've met someone from just about every species on the Citadel. Never met a drell, though, anywhere." He glanced back up at Ares. "That David guy, the C-Sec report said a drell stopped him from hurting this asari, but I've never seen a drell here."

Ares nodded. "Drell tend to stick to hanar colonies. If one was here, it was probably on business related to their service." He shrugged and stood up straight, grabbing his prosthetics and bottle of solvent.

Charles tossed his towel in the hamper and moved out of the bathroom and Ares' way. "Have you met a drell?"

"I've met one of my handfuls of drell." Ares walked toward the bedroom. "It's better not to see drell. Seeing one tends to mean someone fucked up."

Following him, Charles asked, "What do you mean?"

"Turians aren't the only ones with assassins," Ares said, and Charles snorted at the obviousness of
the statement. Ares packed his prosthetics away in the small bag he used for his disguise supplies. "Really, every species has them, but when something seems off, you see something rare, it's usually a bad sign."

"Hmmm." Charles made his way over to Ares, waited for him to finish putting his stuff up, and then wrapped his hands around the turian's waist, turning him to face Charles. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, gaze roaming over Ares without all the crap on him. He nudged Ares back toward the bed, a slow smile spreading over his face. "There you are," he murmured.

Ares snorted, backing toward the bed and holding out his arms. "Well, not all of me."

Grinning, Charles pushed him down on the bed and straddled his lap. "Give me a few minutes, I'll fix that." He covered Ares' mouth with his own, shaving his tongue past the man's mouth plates, hand roaming over Ares' scars before moving down to squeeze his waist. He brought his other hand up and tugged at Ares' crest, breaking the kiss and moving down under his chin to bite his neck.

Ares chuckled, but his voice was low, hinting at arousal. "You bit me earlier ….

Removing his teeth from Ares' neck, he licked the spot before bringing his mouth up next to Ares' ear and asked, "Is that a problem?"


Charles snorted, turning his head enough to bite Ares' just below his ear in mock reprimand. "Can't help that. That's what you get for bonding a human. I'm sure Travium would love to know you're disappointed."

Chuckling, Ares cupped the back of Charles' head. "Where's that human stubbornness? I give you a problem and you give up?" He pushed Charles' head until his lips touched his hide. "Now show me what you've learned from being bonded to a turian."

Charles laughed. "Who said anything about giving up?"

He tightened his grip on Ares' crest, tugging his head back further and sunk his teeth into the juncture of his neck and cowl, biting down as hard as he could, pressing harder still, even when it felt like his jaw was going to snap. Ares growled, moving his hand down to Charles' hip and pulled him closer. Charles ground his teeth back and forth, digging them in deeper, listening for Ares' reaction to being chewed on.

Ares rumbled deeply and tilted his head away. Running his hands along Charles' ribs, the tips of his talons left the slightest sting. Charles moaned a little, grinding his teeth harder until he tasted blood, making the beast rumble in the back of his mind. Pulling his teeth from Ares' hide, he licked up the blue drops welling up through the marks, rolling the metallic taste around on the back of his tongue before swallowing it down, taking that little piece of Ares inside of him.

Ares chuckled, the sound rough as he shifted back, looking at Charles. "Did those little teeth actually manage to draw blood?" He rumbled and flicked a mandible, licking Charles' lips. "There's hope for you yet, human."

Charles smirked, leaning back over to lap up more of the blood before kissing Ares. Pushing his tongue against Ares' tooth, he pierced it enough to draw a little of his own blood into the mix before brushing his tongue back over Ares'. He growled against Charles and scooted them further up on the bed to sit back against the pillows. Tugging his mouth away, he dipped his head down to Charles' throat to nip and lick him. Charles turned his head, offering his throat to Ares and dropping his hand from Ares' crest down to his shoulder, squeezing his waist with the other. Rumbling, Ares leaned back and ran his talons down Charles' throat and over the center of his chest.

"Sit next to me and give me your hand," he said, letting go of Charles. "I'm going to show you something."

Eyebrows twitching, Charles climbed off of Ares and sat down next to him, giving him one of his hands, palm up. Ares snorted and flipped his hand over, covering it with his own.

"What I show you, you shouldn't do to just any turian." Ares huffed a laugh as he wrapped his other arm around Charles, pulling him in closer to relax against the man's side. "You'll probably be missing a few fingers if you try it."

Guiding Charles' hand to his parted plates, he used the heel of Charles' hand to coax his plates the rest of the way open. Relaxing his grip, he moved to Charles' fingers, rubbing them along his sheath before dipping them inside. Muscles jumping and twitching, he sucked in a sharp breath but ran his hand along Charles' forearm and rumbled. Tight, slick, and warm, it fascinated Charles to feel Ares' cock start to harden against his fingertips, but he also thought the act was incredibly sweet and arousing.

"It's not sweet, it's perverse, and he doesn't give a shit about you." His father's voice grew louder in his head, but he pushed it away.
"I promise not to take any fingers off this time," Ares said, a low growl in his voice.

"Is this painful?" Charles moved his fingers a little, caressing the head of Ares' cock.

Laying his head back, gripping Charles' hip, Ares growled low and nodded. "No worse than squeezing a wound."

"But you like that pain," Charles said.

"Only if I give permission to someone, yeah," Ares said, hips lifting into Charles' touch as he tightened his hold on Charles' hip.

Humming, Charles worked the pads of his fingers around Ares' cock, his own cock starting to get hard. He slowly retreated as space inside became too crowded the more erect Ares got. He kept at it, though, until the tip of Ares' cock started to emerge from his plates. Shifting his hand, he pressed his palm against the underside and slid his fingers up and down Ares' shaft, dipping his fingers back into the seam a little to coax him out further.

Ares let out a low groan, fully erect cock slipping free completely into Charles' hand. He slid his hand up to pull Charles into a rough kiss. Wrapping his fingers around Ares' cock, Charles started stroking with slow but firm movements as he returned the kiss, tongue dancing over Ares'. He brought his other hand to Ares' head, tugging him in closer, and Ares groveled, pulling Charles over into his lap.

Charles continued to stroke Ares for a couple of seconds, but the need to feel Ares inside of him battered against his will worse than ever. He shifted up onto his knees, adjusting himself a little before bringing one leg up, pushing his foot into the mattress. Holding Ares to him by the back of his head, Charles dug his fingers into the hide beneath Ares' crest, tongue hungrily searching his out faster and rougher as he lined Ares' cock up with his asshole. Slowly easing himself down, he held his breath, losing track of the motions of the kiss as a hungry, desperate sounding groan filled his throat. Bringing his knee back to the mattress, he settled all the way down on Ares' cock.

Breaking the kiss, Ares snarled and gripped Charles' hips, squeezing a few times as he let out a rough chuckle. "No prep? Someone's impatient, it seems."

"I don't need it," Charles said, his voice thick and cracking. "I just need you." Shifting up, he slid along Ares' length until only the head of his cock remained inside. He brought his hand to Ares' face, pressing his palm against his cheek, holding his gaze for a second before kissing him again. When his tongue met Ares', he slid back down on his cock, shuddering as the turian filled him again.

Growling, Ares wrapped his tongue around Charles', gripping and stroking. He took Charles' cock in his hand, circling his thumb over the tip before slowly stroking him. Shifting his legs, he bent his knees up, cradling Charles, but he didn't thrust or move otherwise, didn't try to make him go faster. Charles picked up the pace a little but not much, savoring the slowness of the moment as something deep inside of him relaxed a little, like a knot slowly coming untied, but with it came a horde of emotions and a little ache. He brushed his thumb across Ares' cheek, turning his head a little to deepen the kiss.

Ares gripped Charles' ass with his free hand, moving the other around his cock, keeping with Charles' pace. He flicked a mandible against Charles' hand, thrumming deeply and flexing his hips, lifting into Charles as he lowered himself, pulling a rather loud moan from him. After a minute, feeling vulnerable and exposed as his eyes began to sting, love and hurt, grief and fear and joy warring within him, Charles broke the kiss and hid his face against Ares' neck. He traced the bite mark he'd left there not long ago with his tongue, kissing it before nestling his face down in between Ares' cowl and throat and pressing his chest against the turian.

Using his hand on Charles' ass to guide him, Ares continued to let Charles set the pace, stroking his cock in time with Charles' hips. Shifting slightly beneath him, Ares angled himself so that each time he lifted into Charles, his cock pressed harder against Charles' prostate. Charles let out a soft moan and started grinding a little as he moved up and down, the sensation pushing him to move faster. He brought his legs in closer to Ares', giving him a little more leverage as he lifted higher up on Ares' cock, pushing back down a little rougher.

Ares growled, leaning into Charles and gripping his ass harder. Charles knew Ares wanted him to fuck him harder and faster, he could feel it in the tenseness of the turian's muscles, hear it in the measured, controlled breathing as he fought to keep himself steady and let Charles lead. It only made Charles feel so much more. He needed things just the way they were, needed it desperately, but he'd been so sure Ares would taunt and push him into the more primal fucking they were accustomed to just like he did every other time Charles tried for something softer. He blinked back tears, taking a shuddering breath.

Rumbling roughly, Ares nudged his head with his mandible and cheek. Charles pulled back enough to look up at Ares, blinking again. Releasing Charles' ass, Ares wrapped his hand around the base of Charles' neck and pulled him closer. He pressed his mouth plates to the outer corner of Charles' eye and flicked his tongue softly against the skin, tasting the wetness gathered at the edges of his eyes, thrumming deeply as he lifted his hips into Charles.
Swallowing back a sob trying to rise up in his throat, Charles blinked back more tears, wishing Ares hadn't noticed. He brought his hand up to knead at the back of Ares' head and turned his face to capture Ares’ mouth, kissing him as much as an excuse to close his eyes as to taste Ares in his mouth. Ares rumbled into the kiss, hand moving up Charles' neck to lay his thumb on his cheek as he lapped at Charles' tongue.

Charles shifted again, pulling his legs up so his weight rested on the balls of his feet, bouncing up and down on Ares' cock at a much faster pace. Growling, Ares released Charles' mouth and licked his neck, scraping his teeth along his bondmark. Desperation wrapping an iron fist around his heart, Charles shuddered, gasping before sucking in a deep breath, pulling Ares closer. Growling, Ares bit into the bondmark, sinking his teeth in as he stroked Charles' cock with a firmer grip.

Yours.

Like the sudden crack of thunder riding right on the tail of lightning, something snapped within Charles, pushing him over the edge. Tears flooded his eyes, and he let out a loud moan, forcing himself down harder and faster on Ares. The dam opened, and Charles started cumming all over Ares’ hand and stomach. Using long, firm strokes, Ares milked Charles until drained completely as he thumped into his shoulder. Releasing Charles, he licked the blood from the wound.

Taking a few seconds to recover, catching his breath and blinking more stupid tears out of his eyes, Charles wiped his face before he started moving again. It took him a moment, but he built his speed back up. Ares wrapped an arm around him, pressing him closer to his chest as he thrust into Charles a few time before pulling Charles down onto him, grinding and snarling into his shoulder as he came.

After a few moments, Ares relaxed his hold on him and let out a tired rumble, licking the bite mark on his shoulder. Charles stayed there, stroking the back of Ares' head until he stopped licking and looked up again. Sliding his hands back to Charles' hips, Ares leaned back against the pillows, gazing searching Charles' tear-stained face.

Smiling, Charles pulled his hand away from Ares' head to brush his thumb over the turian's cheek instead. There was too much crazy going on inside of him, too much doubt and self-hating, shame, fear, and frantic desperation to hold onto something he didn't think he deserved to keep. Silently he begged Ares not to ask because he didn't think he could hold it together if he did. He stood on the precipice of a yawning abyss, and although having Ares there with him helped to pull him back from the edge a little, it also broke down what little defenses he had.

And if he didn't hold it together, he'd lose Ares forever.

And it would destroy him.

He leaned in, pecking Ares on the lips and pressed his forehead against Ares' before sitting up again. He eased off of Ares and stretched out on the bed, catching his breath and trying to lock away the emotional spillover, feeling like he was one wrong move away from breaking down completely. Ares rumbled, running the back of his hand along Charles' torso before standing up and heading to the bathroom. Charles waited in the bed, a few more tears managing to slip free, and he scrubbed them away.

As soon as Ares came back, Charles stood up and made his way to the bathroom. He closed the door behind him, sitting down on the toilet and pressing his face into his palms, taking slow, steadying breaths.

Stow your shit, Charles.

He cleaned himself up and then washed his hands, splashing a little water on his face before grabbing the towel from the hamper to dry off. He tossed the towel back inside and made his way to the living room, grabbing his and Ares' smokes from the coffee table. Carrying them back to the bedroom, he crawled up on the bed next to where Ares sat, pillows propped up beside him waiting for Charles.

Ares let out a grateful rumble when Charles handed him the pack of cigarettes and his lighter. Charles pulled out a cigarillo and smiled when Ares held the lighter out after lighting his own. He leaned into the flame, taking in a heavy drag as the cigarillo caught fire. Sitting back, he glanced down at the still healing marks on his leg and pulled the covers up over his lap. Reaching over to the table, he grabbed the ashtray and held it in his palm between him and Ares.

Moving his cigarette to his other hand, Ares tossed his pack and lighter onto the side table and leaned back in the pillows. With his hand free, he grabbed Charles and pulled him against his side, keeping his arm wrapped around Charles. He took a drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke away from them.

Taking a shuddering breath, throat burning as he choked back the tears, Charles curled in against Ares' side. He clenched his jaw, taking slow, deep but quiet breaths, doing his best to ignore the ache in his chest and the frantic insanity screaming away in his head telling him to cling to Ares and beg the turian to never leave him. Beg him to tell Charles that he loved him and needed him as much as he needed Ares.
He took a drag from his cigarillo, letting the smoke seep out of him. Ares made a soft humming sound, setting his chin on Charles' head, mandibles fluttering against his scalp. The gesture brought a soft smile to Charles, tickling a little. He took another drag, letting the smoke drift as he settled his free hand on Ares' keel.

They smoked in silence, and within a couple of minutes, Charles had his shit locked down enough that he felt he could fake it, for a little while longer, at least. He'd keep faking it for as long as he possible. Find a new way to fake it every second of every day if that's what he had to do because he couldn't lose Ares. After a bit, Ares moved away enough to take a drag and blow it out before glancing at Charles' face, the question clear in his expression, but he didn't speak.

Forcing a smile on his face, Charles said, "I'm alright. Just tired. I haven't been sleeping very well."

Ares flicked a mandible, clearly unconvinced, but he didn't push, just shifted his attention back to smoking his cigarette. Charles let the silence linger, smoking and feeling grateful Ares didn't pry. When he finished his cigarillo, he put it out and handed Ares the ashtray. Ares took a few more moments with the last of his cigarette before he stamped it out and set the ashtray on the table. Charles climbed out of bed to kill the lights, making his way back in the dark. He got back into bed and pulled the pillows down to a comfortable position before reaching over to tug on Ares' hand as he rolled to his side. Rumbling, Ares laid down and situated his pillows before he pulled Charles in against his chest. He hummed as if about to say something, but the words never came.

Swallowing, Charles steeled himself. "What?"

"I'll teach you how to stitch wounds tomorrow."

Charles blinked a couple of times, furrowing his brow, trying to make sense of the turian's train of thought. "Are you planning on wounding one of us for me to practice on?" he asked, willing a teasing quality to his tone, but it still sounded off to him and undoubtedly to Ares, as well.

Ares shrugged. "If I can't find another way to practice. You can't always rely on Medi-gel."

Letting out a soft snort, Charles shook his head against the pillow. "I love you, Ares."

"Because I threatened to cut one of us or because I want to teach you to tend to wounds?"

Charles chuckled a little, sounding a bit more like himself. "Both."

Humming, Ares tightened his arm around Charles. "I love that about myself, too."
Crash Course

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Ares holds him in the air by his throat, talons digging into his skin. He snarls, mandibles tight against his jaw as he shakes Charles, hatred filling his eyes. Blood trails down Charles' skin, and he can't breathe. He claws helplessly at the fingers wrapped around his throat, opens his mouth to try to plead with Ares, but nothing comes out aside from a strangled hiss. The turian growls and slams him against the wall, and he feels ribs snap in his back.

Over Ares' shoulder, Charles' father watches, a smug smile on his face. "I told you, you stupid faggot. He doesn't give a shit about you. Now he's tired of you and ready to move on, making you nothing but a useless fuck, a loose end to tie up."

Growling, Ares reaches up with his other hand, talons ripping right through Charles' shirt. He runs his fingers over the scars marring Charles' shoulder, flaring his mandibles as he examines the bite mark before raking his talons over the skin, cutting deep fissures through the scar. Charles' eyes burn, darkness moving in around the edges while white lights dance through his field of vision.

Ares squeezes harder, and with a near-audible pop, Charles feels the talons puncture his skin completely. Leaning in, Ares puts his mouth next to Charles' ear. "You're not even going to put up a fight? Your father's right, you are useless."

Charles jerked awake, gasping for air, hands scrambling for his throat before lashing out blindly. Fear consumed him, betrayal felt on a visceral level.

Ares was killing him.

The darkness of the room consumed him, made every shadow a new threat. He screamed, and hands wrapped around his wrists, keeping him from flailing his fists. Heart racing so hard, thinking it might explode right out of his chest, he struggled against the grip, but the long, taloned fingers only tightened around him. Ares rumbled, and Eezo whined, scratching at the door.

Fog lifting, awareness hit Charles like a ton of bricks. It was a dream, just a dream. He was safe. At home, in bed next to Ares who was most certainly not trying to kill him. Safe.

But it still felt so real, he just couldn't shake it. He stopped struggling, sucking in deep gasps of air, tears building in his eyes. Pulling away from Ares, he stumbled out of bed, nearly falling against the table. He raced for the bathroom, hip and arm smashing into the corner of the dresser on his way. He closed the door behind him and broke down into sobs, entire body shaking violently as tears poured from his eyes.

"You're not even going to put up a fight? Your father's right, you are useless."

Dropping to his knees, he lifted the toilet lid and emptied his stomach, acid burning his throat, sticking to the snot already draining from his sinuses. When at last the heaving stopped, he laid his face against the toilet seat and continued to cry. After a minute, he pulled himself to his feet and turned on the shower, climbing inside before sliding down the wall. He curled up in the corner, letting the scalding water pelt him as he hid his face against his knees. He still felt Ares' talons at his throat, digging in, cutting off his air and making his blood flow down his neck. The anger and hatred in Ares' eyes felt seared into his mind forever.

"You're not even going to put up a fight? Your father's right, you are useless."

He didn't know how long he stayed in there for, but eventually, the tears stopped, leaving him feeling hollow and numb. Staying there for a few more minutes, he turned his face to stare blankly at the shower wall, letting the cooling water wash down over the back of his head. He dragged himself to his feet and turned off the water, stepping out of the shower. After drying off, he brushed the bitter taste from his mouth and stared at himself in the mirror for a couple of minutes, making sure he had his shit under control before leaving the bathroom.

Making his way back to the bedroom, he found Ares sitting up in the dark, smoking a cigarette. He moved to the bed and sat down on the edge, his back to Ares, and lit a cigarillo. Breath shaking, fingers still trembling, he took a long, deep drag and blew it back out before saying, "Sorry, I didn't mean to hit you."

Ares hummed before exhaling. "It's fine." The hiss and crackle of his cigarette filled the silence as he took a drag followed by another exhale. "You good?"

Charles swallowed and took a heavy drag before nodding, but his voice sounded weak when he said, "Yeah, I'm good."
The only response from Ares came in the form of a rumble, but Charles couldn't tell if it sounded like he believed him or not. Charles didn't say anything else and neither did Ares. He finished his cigarillo in silence, the nicotine working to calm him a little further. After putting the cigarillo out, he checked his omni-tool and saw it was still really early in the morning. Rubbing his hands over his face, he turned on the bed and laid down, pulling the covers up over his stomach.

Stamping out one cigarette, Ares put another in his mouth. Flicking the lighter, he paused to say, "I've heard people like to talk about shit that gives them nightmares." He lit the cigarette and took a drag. "Do you?"

Charles stared at the ceiling, taking a long time to answer as he debated on whether or not he should say anything. He didn't want to burden Ares with more of his shit, but he also didn't want Ares to think he didn't trust him with the crap going on in his head. Finally, he took a deep breath and very quietly said, "You were killing me. Ripping my throat out, I think. My dad was there."

"You're not even going to put up a fight? Your father's right, you are useless."

Ares merely hummed, shifting to set the ashtray on the side table before taking another drag. He seemed at a loss as to how to respond, and Charles didn't blame him. How could anyone respond to hearing that shit?

Letting the silence linger for a minute or two, Charles decided to light another cigarillo himself. He pulled the ashtray from the table on his side of the bed over to his chest. "Doesn't matter. It was just a dream," he muttered.

"I don't know how to deal with dreams," Ares said, taking a drag before blowing it out slowly. "But I'm sure there are people out there who would say some shit about them meaning something."

Taking a heavy drag first, Charles twisted the tip of the cigarillo against the bottom of the ashtray. "Yeah ... well ... it doesn't. I have all kinds of fucked up dreams. Always have. They're just dreams, and if they mean anything, they just mean I'm fucked up in the head."

"You usually dream about me killing you?" Ares sounded skeptical.

Furrowing his brow, Charles glanced over at Ares before returning his gaze to the ceiling. "No, this was the first time for that. But, it's not the first stupid, fucked up, meaningless dream I've had by any means."

Ares hummed before falling silent as he smoked. His threatening snarl still rang in Charles' ears. The coppery scent of his own blood still filled his nostrils. His bondmark burned as if someone held a phantom brand against his skin. But the words ... the words cut the deepest.

"You're not even going to put up a fight? Your father's right, you are useless."

Forcing a smile on his face, hoping it'd carry over into his voice, Charles said, "I mean, come on. If you wanted to kill me, I'd be dead."

Ares huffed before blowing out the rest of the smoke in his mouth. "You're right."

Taking another drag, Charles let the smoke seep out of him. "See, so it's just a stupid dream. Just my own fucked up head being an asshole."

Ares shrugged, flicking ashes off of his cigarette. "If you say so."

Charles let it sit for a little bit before asking, "You going to be able to go back to sleep?"

"I don't really need the extra sleep," Ares said.

Sighing, Charles flicked his ashes. He felt like such an asshole. Things were still getting back to where they were before between the two of them, and no matter how badly he wanted to keep his shit together to prove to Ares that he cared enough to not be a burden, he just kept fucking it up. "Yeah. Sorry, I woke you up, though."

Shrugging again, Ares took another drag. "Shit happens."

After a few more minutes of silence, Charles turned his head to look at Ares. "Ares?"

Blowing out smoke, Ares said, "Yeah?"

Licking his lips to work up the courage, Charles asked, "When you have them ... are they always about the fire?"

Rumbling, Ares didn't speak for a moment, leaning over to flick his ashes before taking a long drag. "Usually. That and the time after. Had a few from some painful missions, but it's usually always the fire."

Charles thought about it for a few seconds then asked, "Do you ever have happy dreams?"
"No," Ares said.

Letting out a soft sigh, Charles said, "Me neither." He took a heavy drag from his cigarillo before tapping it against the ashtray again.

Shifting, Ares stamped out his cigarette before getting up and leaving the room. He returned a few moments later with a bottle of water and sat on the edge of the bed, drinking most of it. He butted the cold bottle against Charles and rumbled in more of a demand to drink than a question.

Charles took the bottle and sat up, putting out his cigarillo and setting the ashtray on the table before killing off the rest of the water. "Thanks."

Ares grunted in response as he hung his hands between his knees and dropped his head, apparently lost in thought.

Charles adjusted the pillows a little behind him and leaned back against them. "You alright?"

"Yeah." Ares shifted on the bed to look back at Charles. "You going to try to sleep?"

Chewing on his lip a second, Charles asked, "Will you lay back down with me, just for a little while?"

Humming, Ares stayed still for a moment before he moved, getting back into the bed and laying down. He adjusted the pillows under his head but settled soon enough, rumbling openly to Charles. Turning and tugging the pillows down, Charles scooted in closer to Ares, wrapping his arm over the turian's waist, pressing his forehead to Ares' arm.

"You didn't really answer me," Ares said, humming deep in his throat. "Were you going to try to sleep? Or just lay here?"

"Try to sleep," Charles said.

Ares was quiet and still a moment before he turned his head and rubbed the bottom of his chin on the top of Charles' head, flicking his mandibles. Charles smiled and ran his hand over Ares' stomach before sliding it up and letting it settle on his keel. He closed his eyes and tried really hard not to think about anything.

Charles paid the clerk and turned to look back at Ares, hopeful smile on his face. "Ready?"

Ares shrugged. "As I'll ever be."

Wrapping his fingers around the corner of Ares' jacket, Charles jerked his head toward the arena's entrance. "Do you want to place bets on a skycar?"

Ares hummed and looked down at Charles. "You should. I'm not going to bet on anything until I have a better grasp of the sport."

"Hmmm. Maybe a small bet." He led Ares through the doors and over to the counter where several lines were formed for betting.

A screen above the counter displayed the names of several drivers, their skycar numbers, the make and model, and any modifications made to the vehicles. Next to the driver's names were the betting odds. Charles took a second to look them over before moving to one of the lines.

He checked his account balance before finally deciding on a driver. "Basically, it's a matter of who finishes first. But there's things to consider like the driver's history, their specific car, whatever mods they might've added to it."

"So?" Ares lifted a brow plate. "Make a bet, then."

Charles snorted, moving up in the line as it progressed. "I will." He pointed at the board. "Asher Ramirez, number forty-two. He's got a solid win history, but he's made some changes to his Heliomax. Looks like he's added new mass effect boosters, but he also lowered the inertia dampeners. Still ... I think he's got a pretty good chance, and his odds are within my budget." He chuckled, moving up further in the line. "You know, after the races ... they have skycars you can rent out if you sign a waiver. They'll let you race them around the track."

Ares shrugged, rumbling as he watched Charles place his bet for fifty credits. "It's no fun when you have to sign a waiver."

Ares shrugged. "It's just so you won't sue them if you crash and get hurt."

Humming, Ares seemed to consider. "I'll have to check the fine print before I pay just to drive safe." He smirked. "Now, if I can wreck it, then I'll consider it."

Laughing, Charles nudged him with his elbow, directing him toward the entrance to the tracks. "I've seen crashes in these things, at those speeds, it's really not pretty."
"Pretty is boring," Ares said, rumbling as he looked over the faces of people in the crowd. "What's the point if there's no risk?"

"Mmm." Charles tugged on Ares' jacket a little and grinned. "I think you're pretty, and you're not boring."

Ares snorted. "You're blind."

"Nah, you're just stubborn," Charles leaned into him a little and winked. "And there's definitely risks involved with you, too."

Ares hummed, mandibles flicking as he looked over Charles' face, brow plates quirked in confusion but didn't say anything. Charles wished for just one second, Ares could see himself the way Charles saw him.

He just smiled and headed into the tracks. "Stand or sit?"

"Doesn't really matter. Not like I won't be able to see either way." Ares shrugged. "Take me wherever we can smoke."

Nodding, Charles led them over to a section surrounding the track where people gathered down on the lowest level, smoking and drinking while talking in clusters. The entire spectator area was enclosed with shatterproof glass and mass effect fields to act as barriers. Arena-style seats sat in rows a little further up in the same section, but Charles took them down next to the barriers to look at the skycars getting into the lineup. Ares pulled out his pack of cigarettes once they reached their spot and lit one, taking a drag.

Charles got out his own cigarillos and lit one before pointing at one of the skycars. "Fifty-one started out with an Esquiran. He switched to a Maxim S23 when they came out with them last year."

Ares hummed around his cigarette, looking at Charles from the corner of his eye. "Yeah?"

Grinning, Charles nodded and took a drag from his cigarillo. He knew Ares didn't really care, but he couldn't help himself. He loved skycars, loved talking about them, and Ares seemed content to let him babble on, so he did. "The Maxim S23 isn't well tested on the tracks, though. Fast as hell, but in close quarters … the driver's getting cocky. His record isn't even that good."

A salarian voice filled the comms, announcing the start of the races, and the skycars lifted into the air. Charles edged a little closer to the glass, bouncing on his feet a little with excitement. He thought he heard an amused rumble come from Ares, but he couldn't be sure over the sounds of engines revving. He glanced up at Ares, catching a slight flick of his mandible, and Charles grinned, leaning into him. The flag dropped and the skycars took off.

Halfway through the first lap, Charles pointed at a skycar. "Number twenty-seven's always driven an Elkoss. He changes up models every couple of years, but it's always an Elkoss. This Prism is pretty nice, but he's got the VI's processor overclocked. It's going to burn out on him, and when it does, his navigation's going to shit."

"He doesn't seem to be keeping up very well," Ares said, taking a heavy drag from his cigarette.

"No, but it's still the first lap." Charles shrugged and pointed at another skycar. "Number thirteen's taking the corners at too sharp of an angle. She's going to end up crashing. I think this is only her fourth race."

Ares rumbled but didn't say anything else so Charles fell silent for a little while, watching the skycars speed by as they started their second lap. Snorting, he shook his head as number twenty dropped out, pulling off to the sidelines for repairs in the third lap. By the seventeenth lap, two more skycars had to stop. Losing valuable time so early in the race was definitely not a good sign.

"Forty-eight's lagging," Charles said in the middle of the twenty-third lap. "I bet one of his thrusters is failing."

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Ares hummed, lighting another cigarette before holding his lighter out to Charles to light his cigarillo. "So is fourteen."

"Shit, you're right." Charles tapped the glass. "That red Esquiran … I can't see its number——"

"Five," Ares said.

"Five, yeah, she's about to kick in her secondary boosters." Charles took a drag, blowing the smoke upward.

"How can you tell?" Ares glanced down at him.

Charles smirked, wrapping the fingers of his free hand around the inside of Ares' elbow. "Hitched and dropped speed for a second."

It surprised him to see numbers twenty and eighteen not only caught back up after dropping out
early on but by lap fifty-four, they were pushing past a third of the skycars still on the track. Number thirty-two was still lagging behind. It wasn't much of a shock, though, the Thessian Blackwell really wasn't known for its staying power, and the driver, Faline D'Losa, spent more on the paint job than mods.

Just as the first of the skycars rounded the corner, heading back by Charles and Ares, number thirty-six took the turn too late and slammed into sixteen. The skycar spun, ramming into fifty-five and throwing it against the glass right in front of Ares and Charles, making Charles jump. Ares' hand, firm and reassuring between his shoulder blades, kept Charles from stumbling back. As far as crashes go, it wasn't so bad. Both drivers were able to keep control enough to prevent a pile-up and dropped down out of the race.

"Well, they're out for good." Charles lit another cigarillo.

Ares rumbled. "Just because of that little bump?"

"Mhmhm." Charles blew out a heavy cloud of smoke. "Regulations require every skycar involved in any collision, no matter how small, to land for full diagnostics."

The next crash was spectacular. Twelve bumped fifteen and sent it spinning, smacking into twenty-four. The midnight blue Trevaline cracked against number one, sending the black and red Elkoss Ballistics right into number forty-two—the Heliomax Charles bet on—and the Heliomax spiraled out, crashing right into the ground nose first.

"Fuck me," Charles muttered with a groan.

Charles sat at the breakfast bar, watching Ares as he laid out a crude collection of medical supplies gathered from the first aid kit along with some sutures and needles he had delivered. He'd already boiled a pot of water for sterilization and set it aside to cool. He'd told Charles that he couldn't always count on there always being a first aid kit around stocked with sterilizing solutions or even having alcohol on hand, so he needed to plan on using boiled water.

"So, what am I practicing on?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

Ares hummed as he lined up the surgical scissors and forceps. "Me."

Charles squirmed in his seat a little, scrunching up his face. He really didn't like the idea of Ares cutting himself just so Charles could practice stitching him up again. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," Ares said.

"I mean … can't we just find someone else to cut up and sew back together?" Charles smirked and chuckled at his own joke. "You shouldn't have to cut yourself for this."

"You know just as well as I do that you can't go out on the street and cut someone, then expect them to sit still while you practice stitching them up." Ares picked through the scalpels before choosing one. "You should have thought about this before you nearly cut your own leg open past where it can heal unaided."

All humor drained from Charles as he stared at the instruments in silence. He really didn't want to talk about his latest set of scars or the place his mind went to the night he made those cuts. Besides, how the hell was he supposed to know cutting himself would lead to Ares thinking he needed to teach Charles how to stitch wounds? Or slice open his own hide as a part of the process?

After a minute, Charles took a deep breath and said, "Then I'll practice on myself."

"You won't be able to focus on closing yourself up properly." Ares flicked a mandible before setting his left arm on a towel folded on the breakfast bar and brought the scalpel to his hide, but Charles put his hand on top of Ares' to stop him.

"I don't need you to carry me, Ares. It's my mess, I'll practice on myself," he said when Ares met his gaze.

Ares growled and nudged Charles' hand off of him. "I'm not carrying you, I'm teaching you. Now shut up and let me do it."

Charles huffed, putting his hand back for a few seconds as he held Ares' unwavering gaze. Finally, he clenched his jaw and shook his head, letting go of Ares. "Whatever."

Ares gave Charles a last look, flicking his mandible before pulling it to his jaw and pressing the scalpel into his hide. He slowly dragged it along his forearm. Hide parting with ease, blue blood welled up to the surface as he cut open a wound about five inches long. The sight stirred awake the beast, making it snarl and rattle the bars of the cage. Charles swallowed, taking a shallow breath through his mouth, but still, the metallic tang of blood filled his nostrils. It made his cock twitch and his mouth water, even as it made him wince.

Once done, Ares tossed the scalpel onto the breakfast bar and motioned to the water. "First step."
He sat back on his stool, giving Charles room to get to his arm. "Clean the wound."

Biting the inside of his cheek to keep his mouth shut, Charles moved to the pot of water, still hot but not boiling. He dipped the edge of a clean towel into it, squeezing it out before bringing it back over to Ares. "It's still bleeding too much to just clean it. Shouldn't I try to stop the bleeding first?"

Ares nodded and motioned to the first aid kit. "There are different things in there to slow bleeding. If it's a large enough wound, you can use your tool to cauterize." He snorted. "You probably won't be conscious if you're losing that much blood, so don't expect to rely on that idea."

Charles jerked his head in understanding but didn't say anything. Instead, he laid the towel over the wound and pressed down while he dug through the kit, finding a coagulant solution. He hated the whole thing. Hated Ares ever saw him cutting himself, hated Ares knew he'd done it again and cut himself deep. Hated Ares probably knew at least a part of it was because of him. He was weak. Useless.

He popped open the bottle with his free hand before gently pulling the towel away. Glancing at the wound, he swallowed and squirted the solution into the cut on Ares' forearm. He waited for a second to watch the blood flow ease up before getting more hot water to wash the wound with.

Ares hummed as Charles worked, watching and waiting for Charles to look at him for further instruction before motioning to the sutures and needle. "They're packed, but if you don't have that, hold the needle above fire and rinse the suture in the sterile water to clean it. Start with threading the needle."

Charles picked up the hermetically sealed package and pulled it opened, setting the needle back down on top of the plastic while he worked to unravel the suture threads. Getting one free, he picked the needle back up and held it to the light. It took him a couple of seconds, but he managed to get the thread through the tiny hole and pulled it through a little further before glancing at Ares.

Ares nodded with a thrum and looked at his injury. "Due to the size and your inexperience, we'll start with a simpler stitch. Start by going in here," he said, tapping the tip of his talon almost at the edge of the start of the gash, "and angle the needle so that it comes out here," he added, tapping on the opposite side of the wound.

Leaning over the bar a little to get closer, Charles took a deep breath and used his thumb and forefinger of his left hand to pinch the hide together. "How deep on a turian?"

"You'll feel a slight resistance for a second. Immediately after feeling that resistance break, sew up. Pay attention to the feeling because it's easy to miss if you aren't used to it." Ares huffed and smirked, but Charles really didn't think any of it was funny. "Just a little less pressure than when you put your name on me."

Bringing the needle to the outer edge of the wound, Charles pressed into Ares, trying to focus his attention on the feel of the needle pushing against the turian's hide and not the blood still seeping from the wound, making his beast purr. He wasn't quite prepared for the sudden shift in resistance, so the needle went in further than he intended when it popped through the hide. Hissing a little, he backtracked a hair before angling the curved needle up and over to catch the other side of the wound. It wasn't exactly straight as the needle pressed back up through Ares' hide, forcing him to push a little harder to get it to break through again, but it'd do the trick.

Ares rumbled, examining Charles' stitch before nodding. "Grab the forceps and use them to hold the opposite end of the suture filament. Loop the two ends and grip tightly, pulling the wound closed. Tie it off."

Charles did as he was told, clamping the forceps around the loose end of the thread and looped the needle back through the thread before pulling it down tight against Ares' hide. Tucking the needle around again, he formed a knot and tugged it, making sure it was secure. He glanced back up at Ares with a raised brow.

"Good. Cut that off and keep going with the rest. This will keep the wound tightly closed. I'll use more and take longer, but it's the first time, so it's better to do more work to get the right result."

Despite his mood, hearing Ares' purr and simple word of praise brought a soft smile to Charles' face. "Okay," he said, picking up the scissors and cutting off the thread near the knot. He moved down the cut a little ways, putting the needle against Ares' hide before glancing up. "Here? Or closer?"

Humming, Ares flicked his mandibles as he nodded. "That's good. You can give it a little more room. The thickness of my hide makes it a bit more forgiving than yours."

Grunting in acknowledgment, Charles used his left hand to hold the two sides of the wound together again and started pressing with the needle. That time, he was a bit more prepared for the pop as the needle broke through the hide. Humming a little to himself, he angled the needle toward the opposite side and pushed it through, a little more evenly than the last one. Grabbing the forceps again, he used them to secure the loose end of the suture as he tied it off and cut the
Moving on down to the next one, Charles started the third stitch. Ares watched him in silence as he worked, and it made it a bit easier for him to separate himself from the task at hand. If Ares had growled, hissed, rumbled, or winced, then Charles would be constantly reminded that Ares had caused himself pain because of him. As it was, it didn’t seem to bother the turian too much.

It took a grand total of twenty-one stitches to close the gash. When he finished tying off the last stitch, Charles set the needle and forceps down and cracked his knuckles. Wetting another towel, he wiped away the dried blood from the rest of Ares’ arm. Fanning the hide dry, Charles sucked in a deep breath. At least it was done with.

Tearing open a gauze pad, Charles positioned it over the wound and picked up the tape. Ares didn’t tell him to, but he didn’t tell him not to, either. He secured the gauze with the tape before leaning over on an impulse and kissing the gauze. Gathering up the dirty supplies, he carried them over to the sink before putting the rest of the stuff back into the first aid kit. Snapping the lid closed, he met Ares’ gaze and said, “Thanks for the lesson.”
Jasmine Shepard of the 'Targeted Interference' series is introduced in this chapter. 'The Beast Inside' is currently happening ahead of her timeline in part 2 'The Chase'. I will attempt to make her timeline match up to this some when she catches up, but I'm not making promises. It's best to consider this to be a bit of an AU to the 'Targeted Interference' series.

Charles stopped in front of the door to the apartment, opening his omni-tool to pull up the access code. Hearing footsteps, he glanced up and saw a human woman walking down the hall. Tight blue jeans hugged the most interesting curves, the strap of the bag slung over her shoulder rested between her breasts, making them stand out, and her black hair flowed down over her shoulders. Her tawny skin gave off an almost golden glow, and when she met his gaze, her smile left him feeling momentarily stunned.

He grinned at her, and he could tell by the way her eyelashes fluttered his smile had the same impact on her. He was just about to turn his attention back to the door when she stumbled and fell. Crying out, she pulled herself up to sitting and grabbed her left ankle, rocking back and forth, face contorted in pain.

She hissed. "Ow. Ow. Ow."

Hesitating, glancing between the damsel in distress and the door to his apartment, he scraped his teeth over his lip. "Are you alright?"

"I think I sprained my ankle," she said, looking up at him with damp, hazel eyes.

"Do you … should I call a doctor or something?" Lowering his arm, he took a couple of steps toward her.

"Um … no. I think I'll be alright." She started pulling herself to her feet, wincing and whimpering.

"Are you sure you don't want me to call a doctor or something?" he asked, uncertainty filling his voice.

"I hate doctors." She groaned and glanced at him. "But … I wouldn't say no to an ice pack if it's not too much to ask."

He hesitated, glancing at the apartment door again. He knew Ares wasn't home, he'd sent Charles a message about an hour before he got off of work telling him that Ares would be back later. He didn't say where he planned on going, and Charles didn't ask, just thanked him for letting him know. He felt uncertain about letting a stranger inside—even a hot chick—while Ares stayed on the Citadel. What if Ares left out something he didn't want anyone else to see?

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked." She started to pull away from him, letting out another whimper when she took a step.

"No, no. It's fine." He tightened his grip on her a little to keep her from pulling away completely and hurting herself worse. "Just uh, give me a second to go in and make sure there's nothing embarrassing laying around." He slapped a smirk on his face and chuckled.

"Thank you, Charles. I'm Alexa." She flashed that killer smile at him again when he glanced at her.

"Nice to meet you, Alexa. I'll be right back." He opened the door. "Move, Eezo," he said, nudging the dog out of the way as he went inside and closed the door behind him.
He sent Ares a quick message to let him know they had company, explaining to him a woman fell out in the hall and he’d brought her in to set her up with an ice pack. Then he gave the apartment a quick once over, making sure anything important of Ares’ was put away. Whistling, he patted his leg until Eezo came running and then closed her up in the bedroom for the time being.

Making his way back out to the hall, he helped Alexa inside and walked her over to one of the stools at the breakfast bar. "Here," he said, "put your foot up. I'll get you an ice pack and something for the pain."

He left her there and rounded the bar, moving into the kitchen to put ice in a plastic baggie before wrapping a hand towel around it. Reaching over the bar, he handed it to her and then grabbed her a bottle of water from the refrigerator. "Do you care if I let my dog out? She might get excited and jump on you, but she's not very big yet."

"Not at all." She smiled at him again, cracking the lid on the bottle of water. "I love dogs."

He grinned and nodded, rounding the bar again and passing by her to head to the room. He opened the door and watched as Eezo came racing out, headed straight for Alexa. She smiled down at the Alaskan Malamute, lowering her hand for Eezo to sniff before running her fingers over the dog's head. He went into the bathroom and grabbed the bottle of painkillers he used for his headaches out of the medicine cabinet and brought them to her.

He made his way back to the kitchen, grabbing himself a bottle of water, too. Turning to lean back against the counter next to the sink, he watched as she read over the label before opening the bottle and chasing a few out into her hand. She popped them in her mouth and chased them down with a few swallows of water.

"So, Charles," she asked, putting the cap back on the water and setting it on the breakfast bar. "What do you do?" She eyed his work uniform and raised an eyebrow.

"Uh, I work at Citadel Souvenirs." He reached in his pocket and pulled out his cigarillos, fingers brushing over the cool metal of his razor. "What about you?"

"I'm … between jobs at the moment," she said, turning her gaze to Eezo for a few seconds. The way she said it made him think it was something she wasn't too proud of. It made him wonder if she'd been fired or maybe did something embarrassing for a living.

"What's Citadel Souvenirs like?" She glanced up at him, giving him a coy smile. "They hiring?"

He chuckled and lit a cigarillo. "They just hired someone, actually. A few weeks ago."

"That's too bad." She pouted her lower lip a little and shrugged. "Do you like it there?"

"It's not terrible." He crossed the floor to lean against the breakfast bar opposite of where Alexa sat, dragging the ashtray over to the sink. Flashing his best smile at her, he grinned wider as her lashes fluttered, gaze fixed on his face. He knew he had a good smile, a damn good smile. It was his best feature, and he sure as hell knew how to use it. "I don't think I've seen you here before. Do you live here?"

"Maybe," she said, returning his smile. "I was looking at the vacant apartment down the hall."

"Yeah?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah," she said, leaning over the bar a little, giving him a peek at her cleavage. "What do you think about these apartments? Do you recommend them?"

"Uh …." He turned to the sound of the door opening.

Ares stepped into sight, mandibles snapping tight against his face as his gaze zeroed in on Alexa. Snarling, he pulled out one of his guns and pointed it at her, aiming right for her head. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he demanded, mandibles flicking against his jaw in obvious anger.

Charles froze for a second, his brain spinning out as he tried to make sense of the scene unfolding in front of him. Something clicked into place, and he turned back to look at Alexa, wide-eyed and suddenly very uncertain about the harmless-looking woman. He pushed away from the counter, edging his way toward Ares who’d started moving toward him, too.

Alexa's gaze never left Ares', though. She blinked, fear and shock making her eyes nearly bug out of her head, lips parted in a silent gasp. Slowly, she raised her hands, and only then did Charles realize her right hand had been resting in the opening of her bag.

She showed Ares her empty hands and left them there in the air. "I—I—fell, outside." Shaking her head a little, she licked her lips. "I just came in for an ice pack. I don't understand …." She glanced back at Charles, giving him a confused, pleading look.

He just moved in closer to Ares, didn't say anything or take his gaze off of the woman. The old saying 'wolf in sheep's clothing' danced through his head.
"Cut the shit," Ares said, growling as he put himself between Charles and Jasmine. His gaze flicked to Charles for a split second before he asked, "What has she asked you? What have you said to her?"

"I … I don't know." Charles licked his lips and shook his head even though Ares wasn't looking at him anymore. "We just talked about work … ."

Alexa let out a loud, irritated sounding scoff and rolled her eyes. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Put your gun away, I'm not here for you or him." She huffed, shaking her head a little. "Jesus Christ, I told you I might need him some time."

Furrowing his brow, Charles looked up at Ares, confused and trying to make sense out of Alexa's statement. It sounded a whole hell of a lot like she knew Ares, and she knew about Charles. Planned to … what? Use Charles for something at some point, and Ares had agreed?

Ares didn't look at him, though, or offer any explanation. He just kept his gaze pinned to the woman and asked, "Are you alone?"

"Can you be more specific?" She raised an eyebrow, giving Ares a look of annoyance. "Who the hell is she? What's … what the fuck?" Charles threw a hand out toward Alexa then toward Ares' gun.

Ares flared his mandibles, growling in his throat. His gaze didn't waver from the woman, and he didn't bother to acknowledge Charles' question in the slightest. "I don't think I need to spell it out," he said, using his free hand to urge Charles back out of the kitchen, turning them so their backs weren't to the front door. "You aren't one to work alone."

Her jaw clenched a little, her gaze shifting deliberately to Charles. "Does he know you?" she asked, but it seemed directed at Ares. "I mean, really know you?"

Ares' mandibles clacked as they flicked against his jaw, his voice low. "Better than you do, now answer my fucking question."

Okay, so she was definitely someone Ares' knew. And by the way Ares responded to her, she was clearly someone dangerous. Which meant … she was an assassin, too. Ares talked about another assassin before, a woman, but it'd sounded like he'd considered her a friend. Charles might not have a lot of friends, but he felt pretty damn sure pulling a gun out when you saw them unexpectedly wasn't the standard way of greeting a friend.

Either way, holy shit, what the fuck was she doing there? He swallowed, hand slipping into his pocket to wrap his fingers around his razor. He wished he'd carried his Stiletto III to work with him, too. Maybe he'd start doing exactly that.

She rolled her eyes. "Ray's on the Citadel. He knows I'm working a lead, but not who or where."

"And the other one?" The words left Ares in an agitated snarl.

Jaw clenching, she blew out a heavy breath. "Off on his own job, now put the fucking gun away. Asshole."

Ares glanced down at Charles, a clear look of 'we'll talk about this later' in his eyes as he irritably flicked a mandible. He exhaled a huff through his nose before holstering his weapon but remained standing between Alexa and Charles. Charles swallowed, ducking Ares' gaze and bent down to pick up Eezo, holding her to his chest.

"Thank you." Alexa huffed but seemed to relax a little. Then, slowly, the same wide grin she'd given Charles a moment before slid across her face directed at Ares. "It's good to see you, too," she said, voice softening.

Charles let out an exasperated sigh. "Will somebody please tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

Ares hummed and gave her a slight nod of greeting before looking at Charles. "We know one another through work."

Charles eyed her for a moment, and she gave him an apologetic shrug. "Is she the one you mentioned?" he asked, gaze flicking to Ares. "The one you consider a friend?"

"That's a damn good question." She raised an eyebrow, turning her attention back to Ares. "Am I the one you mentioned?" she asked, ice in her tone.

"Uh oh."

Charles winced. He was so going to get reamed by Ares later.

Ares rumbled at Charles. "As well as I can consider someone in this profession."

She let out a little huff of sound. "You should've told me you'd kept contact with him. I'd have
"And you should understand that I still don't trust who you work for." Ares hummed. "As long as you listen to orders, I don't fully trust you can ignore some of my more intimate secrets."

Moving slowly, she leaned over and pulled the ice pack from her ankle, tossing it on the breakfast bar. She zipped up her boot and dropped her leg from the stool. "Yeah … well, whatever. I've got work here, and you just fucked up my lead, so … thanks."

Ares looked at Charles with a considering hum. "Just what do you need from him?"

She'd started to stand but stopped, turning her attention back to Charles. Her gaze roamed over him for a second. "Information. Maybe an in somewhere."

Charles looked up at Ares, raised an eyebrow, and shrugged. If Ares seriously considered her to be a friend, and he was cool with it, then Charles didn't mind helping her out if he could.

"It's up to you if you want to offer it," Ares told Charles, glancing her way before his gaze returned. "You can hear her out and decide then, too."

"Who does she work for?" Charles raised his other eyebrow. He only asked because whoever they were, Ares didn't trust them, and it might change what he'd say to her.

"No, you don't get to know that," Alexa said, voice leaving no room for argument, drawing Charles' attention back to her. "Sorry." She gave him a slow shake of her head. "I don't know what you are to him, but you don't get to know who I work for. Not so easily."

Ares gave Charles an exasperated sigh. "You know you aren't going to get something like that so easily. Don't get cute." Rumbling, Ares stepped out of the way, leaving Charles exposed to Alexa, and made his way to the kitchen. "I'm not involved in this conversation, so don't expect to get any more information on her than what little I've told you."

Charles grumbled, stroking Eezo's fur. "Guns being pulled on people, assassins everywhere, no one wants to tell me a goddamned thing. Sure, why the hell not?" he muttered.

Alexa snorted and smirked, lifting an eyebrow at him.

He put Eezo down and took a heavy drag from his cigarillo. "What do you want to know?" he asked, studying her.

She reached out, drumming her nails on the breakfast bar, looking Charles over. "And why should I believe you won't warn whoever I'm after?"

He let out an annoyed sigh and rolled his eyes. "Look, there's maybe four people on the Citadel besides for him, he said, jerking his head back toward Ares, "who I actually give a fuck about, so unless you're telling me you're here to kill one of them, then I really couldn't give a shit less what you do."

Pursing her lips, she tilted her head to the side a little and asked, "How many of them do you work with?"

"Two." He took another drag, moving a little closer to the breakfast bar and flipped his ashes in the ashtray sitting on the edge.

Tapping her nails again, she asked, "Species?"

He raised an eyebrow and gave Ares an irritated look. He didn't understand why the whole thing had to be so … evasive. He said he'd help her, why didn't she just tell him what she wanted to know? Either she was after someone he cared about, or she wasn't. If so, he'd be able to figure it out just as easily by her not coming out with it as he would if she did.

"Turian and asari," Ares said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. "If it's either species, he won't help you."

Alexa relaxed, leaning her side against the counter, keeping Ares and Charles both in sight. She reached down to pet Eezo when Eezo nuzzled at her leg. "Salarian. I need information on a salarian named Werin Menoko."

Charles raised a brow, taking a drag from his cigarillo and leaning against the breakfast bar. "I don't know him well, he works a different shift than I do. I've only met him a handful of times. I don't really know what I can tell you about him."

"Do you know if he lives alone?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Charles shrugged. "No clue."

"What days does he work?" she asked, taking no real time to consider his last answer.

"Mmm. Same as me, actually, just a different shift." Charles opened his omni-tool and pulled up
his schedule, holding his arm out for her to see.

Alexa leaned in closer, gaze roaming over the schedule. "Send this to me?"

"Sure." He waited for her to open her omni-tool and ready it to receive the schedule before sending it to her. "You're going to kill him?"

"Is that a problem?" She didn't look away from her omni-tool as she spoke, but he had the distinct feeling she watched his every movement nevertheless.


She snorted, glancing away from her omni-tool and raised an eyebrow. "Why am I not surprised you'd want to know?"

He shrugged. "I don't even know how you know who I am."

She pursed her lips, gaze slipping over to Ares, a question in her eyes.

Ares hummed and blew out a breath of smoke. "It's not that hard to track your username," he said when Charles looked at him.

Charles glanced back at her, suddenly understanding the obvious: she'd found him the same way the first assassin he met found him. "You're on Assassins Unveiled?"

She grinned, holding her hand out to him. "TellMeNow360."

Charles let out a bark of laughter, slapping his hand into hers, regaining his equilibrium. He didn't doubt she wasn't exactly as she portrayed herself online, but at least she'd given him something he could work with. Something familiar. "Holy shit. I knew Ar … uh … I knew he couldn't be the only one on that website."

Smiling, she turned her attention back to Ares. "I assume we know the same name for you?"

"Yeah," Ares said, taking a drag as he leaned back against the counter behind him. "Among many others I use … ."

She hummed, her gaze drifting back and forth between Ares and Charles. Her eyes slowly widened before she sucked on her teeth, seeming to come to some conclusion about the two of them. "Shit." She glanced back at Ares. "I seriously didn't know … ."

Ares shrugged. "I'll take it as a compliment."

Alexa seemed to relax completely, something about her face and body language taking a drastic turn. Charles saw Ares do the same thing countless times as they moved in and out of public places. Like he'd let his guard down a little, let his alias slip away. Charles thought it was a good sign if she just did the same.

She turned her attention back to Charles and seemed to consider something for a moment before finally saying, "My name's Jasmine."

"Jasmine," Charles repeated, nodding his head. He knew it was a big fucking deal for her to supply him with her real name—assuming it was her real name, or at least as close to it as she gave anyone. "It's nice to meet you." He figured it must mean she trusted Ares quite a bit and, by default, Charles, too.

She smirked. "You, too." Standing up from the stool, she rounded the bar to stand in the doorway to the kitchen, blocking the exit. "As for Werin … he moonlights as a smuggler. Drugs, mostly, but weapons, too." She glanced at Ares. "Do I get to come hug you now, or are you going to pull your gun on me again?"

Ares hummed but stood up from the counter. "At least you asked," he said as he gave her a jerk of his head before sticking the cigarette in his mouth.

"Shut up, you love me." Grinning, she crossed the floor, moving past Charles who turned to watch her with raised eyebrows and an amused smile on his face. She opened her arms, reaching upward, and Ares stepped into her embrace. She was pretty short, so her hands mostly just rested on his shoulders as he wrapped his around her waist. "I forget how freakishly tall you are."

Charles snorted. He knew the feeling, it took three or four times of Ares dropping by before he stopped feeling shocked by the turian's size. The fact Ares let her hug him spoke volumes, Charles just wasn't entirely sure what those volumes said. He really wanted to find out.

"And I forgot how freakishly small you are," Ares retorted with a low drone around his cigarette, flicking his mandible in exasperation.

Jasmine grinned as she stepped back and gestured toward his cigarette. "I'm not freakishly small, I'm compact and adorable."
Ares hummed, clearly unconvinced as he stood up straight and flicked a mandible. Taking his cigarette out of his mouth, he passed it over to her. Charles’ eyebrows twitched, jealousy suddenly rearing its ugly head, writhing around in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t like seeing Ares share his cigarette with anyone else. It seemed too intimate, something he should only do with Charles. Stupid how something so small could make him feel like that, but it did.

She slid her fingers around the cigarette, pulling it from Ares’ hand and took a small drag, seeming to roll the taste around on her tongue before blowing it back out. She took one more brief drag before handing it back to him. Leaning against the counter next to Ares, she eyed Charles. Watching the two of them, picking apart their body language and how close together they stood, Charles pushed himself up to sit on the breakfast bar.

She glanced up at Ares, grinning as she said, “He’s cute.”

Ares snorted. “Cute?”

She drew her brows in, looking at him like she thought he was crazy. “Yeah. Really cute. And with a smile like that … damn.”

Charles blushed, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “Uh, thanks?” He wasn’t sure what made him more flustered, the fact she said he was cute, or the fact Ares didn’t seem to agree.

She grinned at him, something mischievous in her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

Ares grunted and took a long drag from his cigarette, blowing out the smoke.

“What can you tell me about Werin’s personality?” Jasmine squatted down next to Eezo who’d been following her around. She turned her attention away from Charles and Ares to dig her hands into the dog’s fur, pitching her voice low to coo at Eezo and say, “Aren’t you just the sweetest little thing ever?”

Charles chuckled. “Her name’s Eezo.” He watched her for a second while he considered her question. “Uhhh … Werin’s quiet, kind of reserved. He’s not unfriendly, just seems to stick to himself. He works from twenty-three hundred hours to seven hundred hours, and he’s been there for years, so he’s on that shift by choice.”

“How’s his work attendance?” she asked, her attention still on Eezo, smiling as the dog licked her fingers.

“I don’t know.” Charles shrugged. “I’ve never heard anyone complain.”

“Anything else about his routines and habits you can tell me?” Stroking her hands over Eezo’s head, she glanced up at him.

He shook his head. “Sorry. I really don’t know much about the guy … but maybe I can ask around a little for you tomorrow?”

Her gaze started to flick to Ares, but she stopped, lips parted in hesitation before she shook her head. “No. Thanks, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable with you risking rousing his suspicions. It might be dangerous for you.” She glanced back and forth between him and Ares. “Well, if neither of you are going to offer me something to eat, I guess I’ll have to ask myself. Le Bleu?”

Ares shrugged and looked at Charles before back at her. “It’s up to him.”

Charles hummed and shrugged, and then after a second, he narrowed his eyes. “She’s the one who made you eat French fries, isn’t she?”

Jasmine grinned, petting Eezo and looked up at Ares.

Nodding, Ares stamped out his cigarette. “She is. She also knows my opinions of them.”

“Which are utterly wrong.” She stood back up. “But, it was fun to watch, and in my defense, I was drunk.”

Ares grumbled softly as he walked out of the kitchen and toward the door. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

Charles flashed her a covert grin when Ares’ turned his back. Smiling, she bit the corner of her lip, shoulders shaking a little with silent laughter. They both followed him from the kitchen.

She stopped in the hall and asked, “You wanna see my new scars before we go?” She sounded proud of them.

Turning, Ares lifted a brow plate at her and shrugged. “Why not?”

She grinned at him and lifted the hem of her shirt, revealing a slightly puckered, rounded scar on her abdomen. Charles tilted his head a little to get a better look at it, guessing it was a bullet wound. Dropping the hem, she tugged down the right side of her shirt and showed them a similar scar on her shoulder, though smaller, fainter scars around it seemed to indicate she’d had surgery.
on the wound.

"What happened?" Charles asked.

She glanced over at him and said, "Assault rifle." She turned a soft, affectionate smile on Ares. "He helped get me to the hospital."

Charles hummed, not really caring for the way she looked at Ares. "Looks painful."

He's mine.

"It was," she said, glancing at Charles.

"Humans scar too easily," Ares said as he tapped the spot on her shoulder with the tip of his talon. "Anything else?"

She snorted, pulling her shirt back into place. "Scars? No. Stuff to talk about? We'll see."

Ares hummed and looked between her and Charles. "Sounds good. Let's go." He paused mid-turn. "Unless there's anything else under your clothes you'd like to show off?"

"Thought you said once you saw my tits, there wasn't any point in seeing them again?" She raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. "Lost my leverage, I believe is what you said?"

Ares shrugged. "Doesn't mean I'd tell you to cover yourself if you had the wild hair to show me again." He smirked and motioned to Charles. "And he hasn't seen them yet."

Charles grinned at her when she glanced his way. "Guess I should've asked for it before coughing up information on Werin."

She snorted, pushing Ares toward the door. "Maybe."

Charles ended up ordering the same thing as Jasmine—which she did without even a glance at the menu—cheeseburger and French fries. Once the waitress brought their food and left them again, he turned to her and hummed. "So … Jasmine … how long are you on the Citadel for? Is that a thing I can ask?"

She glanced at him, shoving a fry in her mouth and shrugged. "Until the job's done and I get told where I'm needed next." Her gaze flicked to Ares.

"You don't even know how long it'll be?" he asked, already suspecting her answer.

"Nope." She glanced at Ares again. "That can't be much of a surprise for you?"

Shrugging a little, he shook his head. "Not really." He just didn't know what else to ask, but he wanted to know more about her. He still didn't feel sure about her, about how he fit into the picture with her and Ares.

Ares speared a large piece of one of the dextro steaks he ordered and flicked his mandible, holding it before his mouth. "She doesn't have as much leeway as I do."

Charles thought about it for a second, picking at his fries before he asked, "So, you work for someone else?"

"Yep," she said, picking up her glass of tea and taking a drink.

"And they tell you who to kill?" He raised an eyebrow and took a bite of his cheeseburger.

She glanced up at him and blinked, putting her glass down as her gaze flicked over their surroundings. Turning her attention back to him, she gave him a blank stare and, with a dry voice, said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Charles snorted, looking at Ares and shook his head. He wondered if it was something she'd picked up from Ares. "Right … guess you're not as chill about it, either."

"You can be assured that she's not likely to answer questions I wouldn't," Ares said, sticking a big piece of the raw steak in his mouth.

"Especially poorly worded questions in public." Jasmine bit into her cheeseburger, chewing as she watched Charles. She took a drink of her tea to swallow it down. "I don't pick my assignments the way he does." She scoffed. "I don't get paid as well, either."

"Although her pension plans are probably better," Ares added with a snort, drinking some of his beer.

She gave him a snort of laughter, pushing hair back behind her ear. "Probably. If I manage to stick around that long."
"Don't like your boss?" Charles asked with a soft chuckle.

She waggled her head a little and picked up a French fry. "Something like that."

Ares snorted but didn't speak as he swallowed more of his food. Charles didn't like the dynamics, didn't like feeling like there was a shitload going on behind the scenes between Ares and Jasmine that he didn't have any clue about. Like an inside joke he wasn't in on.

"How is work at Citadel Souvenirs?" She looked up at him again and smirked. "Maybe I'll quit and come work with you."

He scoffed then smirked. "Shitty. But with your skills … I'm sure you could be running the place in weeks."

She let out a soft chuckle. "No offense, but I'm pretty sure I'd go stir crazy within a week."

"That's a bit optimistic." Ares finished off his first plate and pushed it aside, pulling the other over. "I've seen the place. You wouldn't make it that long."

"Oh, ye of little faith." She picked up her glass and leaned back, stretching her legs out to prop them on the chair between her and Ares. "Td last at least a week."

With the initial confrontation behind them, she seemed completely at ease with Ares but not quite so much with Charles. Ares seemed surprisingly comfortable around her, too. He grunted around his food, making it clear he didn't share her optimism.

"So, how'd you two meet?" Charles asked Ares.

Ares hummed, swallowing. "Hot, young, singles dating site."

She snorted, drawing Charles' attention, and she tilted her head back a little as she looked at him. "The same way you met him. Just less fucking involved. At least, I assume there was fucking involved with you. He wouldn't say for sure."

Ares glanced at Charles, his expression telling him it was up to Charles on whether or not he confirmed her suspicions.

"There was definitely fucking involved." Charles grinned, shoving a fry in his mouth, he glanced at Ares. "Still a lot of fucking involved."

Jasmine smiled, but her gaze shifted to Ares. "Good. Who doesn't love a good fuck?"

Ares flicked a mandible. "They'd have to be insane."

She laughed, putting down her glass and returning to her plate. "Yes, yes they would."

Charles let his gaze drift between the two of them for a moment. "Can I ask where you're from?"

"You can ask whatever you want." Giving him a sideways glance, she shrugged. "But I may or may not give you the answer you want."

He huffed. "Okay. Where are you from?"

She sat back in her chair again, lips a little pursed and watched him. "You first?"

"Ferris Fields." He shrugged.

The corner of her eye twitched, and she smirked. "Liar," she said, and Charles had the sneaking suspicion he'd just failed a test.

Ares sighed and set his fork down once he'd swallowed his last bite. Looking at Charles, he gave him a stern lift of a brow plate. "Don't ask something you aren't willing to give your own answer to."

Charles let out a slow breath. He glanced between Ares and Jasmine and sucked in another deep breath. The woman was important to Ares on some level, and she was the only person he'd met who seemed to know who Ares really was. The only person Ares didn't pretend to be someone else around—besides for Charles. He wanted to be a part of it, a part of Ares' life. So, he let the breath out slowly and said, "Shanxi."

She chuckled, lifting an eyebrow. "Shanxi? No shit? And you're with a turian?"

"No shit." Charles reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

Snorting, Ares hummed at Jasmine, and she looked at him. "And my father was in the war. What does that have to do with anything?"

Eyes narrowing a little, she said, "I can't tell if you're lying or not, but either way, you know damn well what it has to do with anything." She shrugged, tilting her head toward her shoulder and smiled. "Not saying I personally mind, I've slept with a few turians myself."
Ares chuckled, flicking a mandible at her in a smirk. "I take it as a personal victory to still be able to have you guessing whether or not I'm lying about shit."

She grumbled and threw a French fry at him. "Shut up. Give me enough time, I'll have you figured out."

"So, I answered." Charles raised an eyebrow at her.

"Earth." She turned her attention back to him and pursed her lips. "You should know, the more you learn about me, though, the more dangerous it is for you." She glanced at Ares. "I trust him, and I'm willing to extend some of it to you," she glanced back at Charles, "but you really should pick your questions wisely. As we've already said, I work for someone else."

Ares' gaze turned to Charles as he sat back in his chair. "She's right. Even if she chooses to lie to you, it's still dangerous because you'd think it's truth."

Charles turned his gaze down to his plate, picking at his fries while he chewed on the corner of his lip. Finally, he glanced back up at Ares. "Are you warning me or telling me to stop asking?"

"I'm warning you not to be an idiot," Ares said, pulling out his cigarettes and lighting one. "You've known me long enough, know what questions I'll answer, so you know what's too risky to ask."

Charles let out a deep breath before pushing his plate away a little and lighting a cigarillo. He really didn't, though. What Ares would or wouldn't tell him seemed to depend a hell of a lot on what mood he was in that particular day. "Alright." Deflated, he felt Jasmine's gaze on him, so he glanced at her.

She took a sip of her tea and gave him a soft smile, something in her eyes telling him she understood his frustration. "I tell you what … I won't lie to you. I'll just tell you I don't want to answer something if you go too far. Leave it at that, and we'll be good. Alright?"

He smiled at her and nodded. "Alright."

She turned her attention back to Ares. "So, what's new?"

Ares hummed around a drag from his cigarette, blowing it out. "Broke a racist's arm."

She snorted and grinned. "Nice. Too bad I wasn't around to see it. Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"Story's mostly his," Ares said, jerking his chin toward Charles. "I wasn't here for the start of it, just to finish it."

Charles took a drag and said, "A turian friend of mine took me to a mostly turian gym to teach me fighting techniques. The owner fought in the war and has an issue with humans. Kept giving us shit, said the only reason he even let me be there is because I'm bonded to another turian." He hesitated when Jasmine's eyes widened before blinking, but she didn't look away from him and a second later her expression seemed neutral, so he continued, "So … anyway, he threw me to the mat one day after I smarted off to him and told me he'd make me and Ares his bitch." Smirking, he shrugged. "So, when Ares got back, I told him."

She grinned, and it seemed like she held back a laugh. She glanced at Ares, lifting an eyebrow. "I take it you didn't just walk into the gym and break the guy's arm."

He smiled at her and nodded. "Alright."

Ares hummed around a drag from his cigarette, blowing it out. "Broke a racist's arm."

She snorted and grinned. "Nice. Too bad I wasn't around to see it. Care to share with the rest of the class?"

"Story's mostly his," Ares said, jerking his chin toward Charles. "I wasn't here for the start of it, just to finish it."

Charles nodded. It felt more than a little disturbing to have a stranger—an assassin at that—know things about him and the people he worked with. It left him feeling like he grasped at straws, having no real idea exactly what she already knew about him and what was for him to decide to reveal. She'd called him a liar when he said he came from Ferris Fields, but she seemed genuinely shocked when he confessed to being from Shanxi. He didn't know what to think.

"Hmm." She looked over Charles. "Might be easier for you to start with human techniques."

Ares rumbled, sounding interested, but didn't say anything.
Charles shrugged. "I don't actually know a whole lot of humans, my circle of friends is pretty small."

Jasmine glanced at Ares with a raised brow, a question in her eyes. He shrugged, tilting his head to Charles.

She glanced back at Charles, gaze roaming over him in a way that made him a little uncomfortable. "I can teach you a few things while I'm on the Citadel if you want."

"Seriously?" Charles' eyes widened, and he leaned a little closer to her, feeling the scales tip in her favor. "Just fighting?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking for something else?"

Charles glanced at Ares and licked his lips before turning his attention back to Jasmine. "Whatever you're willing to teach me."

She hummed, sounding as if she were considering it as she turned her attention back to Ares. "Does he go on jobs with you?"

"No." Ares hummed deeply around a drag before blowing out the smoke. "It's not safe."

"It would be if I learned," Charles huffed.

Ares gave him a stern look, a slight rumble to his vocals making it known the topic wasn't up for discussion. It hurt. Ares knew he wanted to go with him on his jobs, at least some of the time. And not just because killing people apparently got Charles' cock hard. He wanted to be with Ares. Wanted to share in his life, wanted to ... wanted to feel useful to Ares.

Jasmine snickered and shook her head. "Sorry, I'm not going to teach you anything he doesn't want you to know."

"You can teach him whatever he's willing to learn, but going on jobs is not part of the discussion," Ares said, voice gruff.

Jasmine gave Ares a soft, understanding smile, and it kind of pissed Charles off. "No problem."

He sat back in his chair, smoking in silence for a moment, feeling like the kid whose parents wouldn't let him go play with the big kids. "Fine. When do we start?"

She snorted, glancing at Ares. "I need to call Ray, let him know I'll be out for the night, but we can start tonight if you're so eager."

Charles looked to Ares for his approval.

Ares rumbled around a drag from his cigarette. "Do you want to practice at a gym or the apartment?"

Charles looked at Jasmine, and she shrugged, so he looked back at Ares. "The apartment. For now, at least. It'd be different than fighting with Cammus, at least he'd hoped it'd be, and he didn't really want an audience."

Humming, Ares nodded and flicked ash. "Sounds good. We'll move the furniture to make room, and I'll put the dog in the other room."

She grinned, turning her attention to Ares again. "Maybe I'll convince you to give me a second round?"

He chuckled and shrugged. "Sure, but full disclosure, the fight with Travium has made me pick back up on some of my official training."

She hummed. "Full disclosure, I've spent the last few weeks with Ray and Tannor, in the middle of no-fucking-where, with not a lot else to do but convalesce and train."

He chuckled and nodded in understanding.

"Who's Ray and Tannor?" Charles asked before he thought better of it. "Wait, nevermind."

Jasmine chuckled. "Nevermind is a good call."

Ares hummed as he stamped out his cigarette. "I guess we should get back, you can contact yours, and I can prepare him for what's coming."

"Sure." She nodded and raised an eyebrow. "Care if I tell Ray I'm with you?"

Ares shrugged as he stood up, flipping a credit chit onto the table. "Just don't give him our location."

She glanced at Charles, and something in her eyes made it seem like the statement offended her. "Of course not."
"Do you have something I can change into?" Jasmine asked, leaning against the breakfast bar.

Charles scrunched up his face a little, looking over her tight jeans and frilly blouse. He didn't even know how she'd gotten herself into those pants, but he sure didn't mind seeing her wear them. "Sweats and a tank top?"

"Perfect." She smiled.

He waved his hand for her to follow him, and she did. Noting the way her gaze never stopped moving, he took her to the bedroom. He opened his dresser and pulled out sweats and a tank top before handing them to her. "Do you want to change in here or the bathroom?"

Shrugging, she tossed the clothes on his bed and sat down, unzipping her boots. "Here's fine." She glanced at him. "It's good you changed into sweats, too, but you should ditch your shirt if you're comfortable. It'll let me see your movements easier."

"Sure." He turned and took off his t-shirt, folding it and putting it back in his dresser since he hadn't been wearing it for very long. Turning back around, he found she'd already stripped off her shirt and worked on getting her pants off. He blinked a few times and let out a soft, "Uh ….

She glanced up at him. "What?" she asked, pulling her pants off and tossing them on the bed next to her shirt.

He laughed and shook his head, baffled. Fighting the urge to leer, he grinned and hollered, "Ares, your friend's in here getting naked."

"How else is she going to get changed?" Ares called from the living room. Leave it to him to deliberately overlook the obvious implication.

Snorting, Charles shook his head. "I could step out ….

"Why?" She pulled on the sweatpants, far too long for her, but then she sat down and rolled them up to just under her knees—still not wearing a shirt. "You shy, Charles?"

"No … but, uh …. Yeah, I'm going to go in there now." He left the room, shaking his head, hearing her laughter trailing after him.

He wasn't shy, not really, but her complete lack of modesty unnerved him a little. He definitely wasn't used to such behavior in women. He wondered what the hell life for an assassin must really be like for a chick to just strip down to her bra and pretty-much-see-through panties in a stranger's bedroom with him standing right there—when she didn't even intend to get laid.

He made his way back into the front of the house and sat on a stool next to Ares. She came out a minute later and moved to the center of the cleared living room floor. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Bending over, she pressed her palms to the floor, stretching out her hamstrings.

Lifting her head to glance at Ares, she said, "You should put on something comfortable, too. You're not sticking to the sidelines the whole time." She smirked. "I'm going to teach him a couple of things about turians, too."

Ares hummed, grumbling as he got up off his stool and headed to the bedroom. "Don't wait up for me."

Charles huffed, following Ares with his gaze before turning back to Jasmine, not bothering to lower his voice when he asked, "He always just listen to you?"

She chuckled, giving him a wry smile. "No, of course not. But he knows I'm right. And I'm always right."

Laughing, he raised an eyebrow. "That so?"

"Yep." She stood up and pulled her leg up behind her, at first just her heel to her ass, but then after a few seconds, she extended the stretch, leaning forward a bit and bringing her foot up to her head.

He watched her, mildly intimidated … but also a little aroused. "What will we start with?"

Ares had run him through a series of stretches when they'd gotten back to the apartment, telling Charles that she'd probably be teaching him things which required a lot of flexibility. He considered himself to be pretty limber, but watching her … he swallowed, wondering what he'd
gotten himself into.

"You'll show me what you already know." She switched legs. "And then I'll go from there."

"I just know turian stuff, really." He shrugged. "I mean, I've been in fights before, but nothing trained."

"Sure." She lowered her leg and stretched her arm back behind her head. "You're … twenty-seven, right? Birthday's in a few days, isn't it?"

He shifted around on the stool, reminded again of how awkward it felt to have her know so much about him already. "Yeah."

"I'd be surprised if you made it to twenty-eight without ever having been in a fight." Winking, she smirked at him.

He smiled, the casual way she approached things helping to put him at ease. "How old are you?"

"Almost twenty-six." She switched arms, and it seemed like she moved a little slower with her right arm, didn't stretch it back quite as far.

"You're still hurt," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Hmmm. Good observational skills. Those will be useful." After a few seconds, she dropped her arm before swinging them both back and forth. She glanced up at him. "Alright, let's see what you've got."

Charles slid off the stool and moved to the middle of the floor before falling into the stance Cammus taught him, swaying a little on his feet. She paced back a little, gaze roaming over him before shifting into a stance more familiar to him than what he'd seen from the turians at the gym. In fact, he felt pretty sure he'd seen the same stance she used in a few MMA matches. She waved her hand, signaling him forward.

Advancing on her, he threw a punch, and she easily brushed it aside. She held her ground, and he threw another, but again, she blocked the hit. He tried for a kick, but she danced out of the way. He followed, picking up his pace, throwing his hits a little faster. He tried a feint, but she didn't take the bait, leaning to the side to avoid his follow up jab.

Ares walked back into the room, distracting Charles for a moment when he realized the turian didn't just change his clothes but took off his prosthetics. Grabbing his arm, Jasmine spun around him, her hip ramming against him, and the whole apartment turned upside down. His back hit the floor with a solid thud, nearly knocking the air out of him.

"Don't take your eyes off of your opponent," she said.

Ares snorted, moving into the kitchen to lean against the counter and smoke his cigarette.

Groaning, Charles sucked in a shaky breath. The floor of his apartment seemed far less forgiving than the mats at the gym. "Ow."

She smiled down at him, holding out a hand. "Consider that your first lesson."

He closed his eyes for a second, letting out another groan before taking her hand and letting her help him back to his feet. "Yes, ma'am."

"No. No, don't do that. No 'ma'am' crap." She shook her head, backing away from him a little bit and then nodded at him.

Charles chuckled, falling back into his stance. "If you say so."

"You're tall and lean which makes you fast and gives you reach. You'll want to use it to your advantage as much as possible." She moved closer to him. "Keep using this stance when you're with … Cammus?" She said and nodded when he did. "But for what I'll teach you, you need to make some adjustments. Versatility is a good thing."

Her gaze flicked to his bite mark scars, but she didn't say anything as she reached out. She settled her warm hands on his shoulders, resting outside of the scars. "Lower your center of gravity a little." She pushed down on him gently, and he bent his knees a little more. "It'll bring your face down into closer range, but it'll protect your vitals a little better." She moved his elbows in a little further. "And it'll give you a faster spring response."

She looked at his hands. "You don't have talons, this isn't going to help you much." She curled his hands in a little further but didn't have him make a complete fist. "Still the same concept, though. Keep it loose, but your knuckles and surface area, as well as your strength, are what's going to do damage here. And you don't have to worry about breaking a talon when you hit."

She stepped back and glanced at Ares. "Ever broken a talon?"

Ares shrugged when Charles looked at him. "When I was a kid." He hummed and looked at his
left hand. "Hurts like fucking hell, but adults usually have to worry more about stabbing themselves in a fist more than breaking one off."

She tilted her head to the side. "That, too. Lesson one about fighting dirty against a turian. If you can break one of their talons, do it."

Ares chuckled. "Make sure you're not fighting a turian who has thought about that, though." He flexed his hands. "You can hold your hands in a slightly different way so that when facing someone trying to break a talon off, you can turn their own grip against them." He shrugged. "Blackwatch also taught how to coat your talons. Not going to lie and say I don't have artificial strenghtener on them."

"Fuck Blackwatch." Jasmine grumbled, and Ares laughed.

"That's right, you're who he helped with Blackwatch, aren't you?" Charles asked and then winced, holding up a hand. "Nevermind, sorry. It's reflexive."

She snorted, but her gaze flicked to Ares, giving her head a little teasing shake and made a 'tsk tsk' sound. "Alright, so, just like with the other stance, you want to keep your weight on the balls of your feet and stay in motion."

Charles shifted his weight back up to the balls of his feet, feeling disoriented for a moment with the shift in his center of gravity. "This feels weird."

"You're not used to it," she said, moving back out in front of him and dropping into her stance. "Does it hurt?"

"No." He shook his head.

She grinned at him and winked. "Then stop bitching and try to hit me."

Ares let out an amused rumble.

Scoffing, Charles moved in and threw a punch, but she wasn't there when it landed. She spun off to his side and swept his leg. Having fought enough with Cammus, he lifted his leg and hopped, keeping his weight on his back leg as he pulled the other free from hers.

"Good," she muttered, but then she dropped low and kicked out his back leg, sending him sprawling. She held her hand out to him, helping him back up. "Alright, when that happens, you need to be prepared to jump over my leg. Let's do it again."

Backing away from Charles, she stretched out her injured shoulder. She glanced at Ares and jerked her head. Charles stepped back out of the way, stretching his own arms a little. Ares finished off his cigarette and walked over to Jasmine, giving her a questioning rumble.

She smiled up at him. "Just stand there and be a giant turian for a couple of minutes. I'm not going for contact."

He huffed, flicking his mandibles. Clearly, he wasn't fond of the idea of being used as a training dummy, but he stood still. She swatted at him, a playful gesture when he grumbled. Charles raised an eyebrow, still trying to figure out the dynamics of Ares' and Jasmine's relationship. She moved around Ares for a couple of seconds, her gaze roaming over him in a clinical way.

Her eyebrow twitched, and she reached out, fingertips almost touching his right forearm before retreating. Looking up at Ares, she lifted a brow. "Show me?"

He smirked and glanced up at Ares. "Alright, so on a turian," she said, waving her hand at Ares, "you probably already know the most sensitive areas?"

"I'm just acting as a giant turian at the moment," Ares teased, using Jasmine's words as he shrugged. "So you'd be better off showing what you know."

Charles stuck his lip out in a pout. "You're no fun."

"In a fight, specific to a turian: spurs, mandible, crest, and as I said, talons. All highly sensitive, and not especially difficult to damage. Turians—most turians—will be in enough pain if you break their crest they won't even be able to see straight. Doesn't mean they won't still fight. Hell, they may even fight harder, but it'll give you more control. Mandibles aren't so easy to break, but they're easy to dislocate." She glanced up at Ares. "May I?"
He lifted a brow plate. "Are you asking to grab at my mandibles?"

"I'm asking to put my hand on your mandible to show positioning," she said with a smile, "no yanking, I promise."

He hummed, lowering his voice. "Good, because if you were, then we'd be better off going to the bedroom." He bent his knees and leaned more into Jasmine's reach, turning his unscarred mandible toward her.

"Keep dreaming," she said with a snort. "In the meantime, still spoken for."

She slid her thumb between his mandible and his jaw, directing her next words at Charles, "You may feel compelled to wrap your fingers around it like this," she said, switching to curve her fingers over the top, thumb cradling the bottom, "and yank down, but it's less likely to do the trick. Their range of motion with their mandibles is greater than you might expect. Instead," she said, shifting her hand back so Ares' mandible rested in the webbing between her thumb and forefinger, "you want to get your thumb here—without losing a finger or two …" She grinned when Ares' let out an amused rumble. "… and slide it as far back as you can. I won't go as far back as I can because even just that will cause pain and pressure in the joint."

She watched Ares closely, seeming to gauge his comfort level, as she slid her thumb further back. Ares seemed pretty calm and unconcerned, apparently trusting her not to actually hurt him. Charles doubted he'd be so chill with anyone else. Sure, he'd probably let Charles do the same, given the circumstances, but he doubted he'd have let others, even Cammus.

Stopping an inch or so away from the joint, she said, "From there, you want to pull your hand away from the face, not down. You want to do it with one, very quick motion to get the joint out of the socket." She slipped her hand free from Ares' mandible before pantomiming a swift jerk to the side next to his face. Glancing at Charles, she nodded her head for him to take her place and dropped her hand.

Ares rumbled, raising a brow plate when Charles gave him a skeptical look. He rumbled in question. "You're not going to break me."

Charles huffed, covering his doubt with sarcasm. "Yeah, but are you going to break me?"

Ares exhaled heavily and flicked his mandibles in the turian equivalent of an eye roll. "Not unless you actually try to snap my mandible off, no."

Grinning, Charles moved closer, muttering a 'pity' under his breath he knew only Ares would hear. Jasmine stepped back further and a little off to the side, watching. Charles took a deep breath and slid his thumb between Ares' mandible and jaw.

She reached out, adjusting his hand and wrist a little. "Keep your arm in a straight line or you'll end up torquing your wrist when you pull."

She nodded, so he slid his hand further along Ares' mandible. The closer he got to Ares' ear, the more resistance he felt. She reached out and put a hand on his to stop him.

Pointing to a position on Ares' mandible, she said, "When doing it for real, the goal is to get your thumb to at least this point before pulling."

Charles nodded. "Okay, and how exactly does one get into this position with a turian without losing fingers?"

"Or getting disemboweled," Jasmine smirked and tapped his hand.

He dropped his hand from Ares' face. "Or disemboweled."

"Practice," she said with a shrug.

"And balls," Ares added, chuckling as he stood up straight. "Most turians don't pull that move on each other because you have to be faster to get into position than it takes your opponent to figure out what you're planning." He rumbled and flicked his mandibles a few times. "Though, we also twist them, but it takes a better grip and the talons help get a good hold."

"Which potentially snaps them," Jasmine added.

Charles shrugged. "I should've dislocated Travium's mandible."

Ares hummed and shook his head. "No. You shouldn't have. Attacking a turian's mandibles without reason can get C-Sec on your ass. Even turians don't do it to each other unless they're spineless fucks."

Charles huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't like how dismissive Ares sounded toward the whole incident. "I think I had a reason. He threw me on the mat—when I wasn't even sparing with him—and drew blood from my throat." A part of him still wanted to go slit the turian's throat, but he admitted it was rather satisfying to see Ares break Travium's arm.

Shrugging, he smirked. "But I got to watch you kick his ass, so I guess it was worth it."
Ares rumbled, seeming to consider before responding, "I guess it's a species thing ...."

Charles shrugged again, seeing no point in pressing the subject even though he felt pretty sure had it been Ares who Travium did that to, Travium would be dead. "Probably." He turned his attention back to Jasmine.

She put her hand on Ares' arm and nudged him with her other hand. "Turn around, please."

He looked her over before making a curious rumble. "Do I need to get down to your levels?"

"Nope," she said, giving her head a little shake, making her ponytail swing back and forth, "we're looking at your spurs."

He flicked a mandible—actually starting to seem amused by the whole training dummy thing—nodded, and turned away.

She turned a little and aimed a kick at his spur, pulling it just before making contact. "At this angle, not only will it hurt like a motherfucker, but if you catch it right and you're strong enough, you can break it clean off." She stepped back and waved Charles forward. "Uhhh … maybe don't actually kick, just in case. Just position yourself the same way."

Charles snorted, affronted. "I can pull a kick."

"Yes, but can you do it well enough to be damn certain you don't make a mistake and hurt him?"

She raised an eyebrow, clearly challenging him.

He hesitated a second before saying, "No."

She lifted her other eyebrow up to join the first and gave him a smug smile. Charles sighed, as happy as it made him to learn new things, he got tired of constantly being surrounded by people who were better than him at everything. Turning to the side, he brought his leg up, tilted a little as she did, and lifted his foot to about an inch away from Ares' spur. She adjusted his foot and then his hips before squatting down next to Ares' leg.

Pointing to an area about an inch up from where the spur connected to Ares' leg, she glanced back up at Charles. "It won't snap below this point." She brought her finger up a little higher. "Aim your kick here for maximum damage." She moved up to the tip. "Here for less damage but still a lot of pain."

Ares hummed and glanced down at them. "Closer to the leg will cause more damage to the nerves. You can make a turian's leg go numb from pain if you get close enough to the base. You won't even have to break it completely off at that point."

Jasmine looked up at him, a mischievous grin on her face. "But where's the fun in that?"

He snorted. "If you leave it hanging on, you can hit it more often. Breaking it off completely leaves only the one spot for pain, but having it still on, but damaged, turns the entire spur into a lightning rod of pain." He shrugged. "Just from experience fighting and breaking another turian's off."

"Hmmm. Help me up, my side hurts." She held her hand up to him. "I'd think exposed nerves and bone would make a good target to cause a shitload of pain, too, but I'll take your word on it."

He nodded and gave her his hand, hoisting her up to her feet. "Might just have been because we were trained to, but a missing spur hurts less than a hanging one. You can zone out a bullet wound" he said, and she snorted, "but you can't zone out a wound with a blade sticking out of it when that blade is constantly getting jostled by shit."

"Fair enough. I'm not going to make you bend to get to your crest, it's pretty obvious, anyway." She moved around Ares to point, though, and Charles followed her. "The further away from the skull, the easier to break. A sharp blow with a blunt object, and it'll snap. Otherwise, if you're strong enough, you can snap one off like a twig with your hands."

Ares snorted and nodded. "The middle is stronger than the two sides. It's thicker, so it's harder to break, but it has more nerves."

Jasmine nodded, too. "Once it's broken, just like with anything else, it's going to have exposed nerves that can be targeted again."

Humming, Ares glanced over his shoulder and flicked a mandible at Charles. "When you don't have the hand to just start breaking pieces off, go for smaller, but just as painful targets." He motioned to his eyes. "Eyes hurt just as much as they would you, but don't think it's going to stop someone just because you blind them." He tapped his nose plates. "A good hit to the nose will do wonders. We're very sensitive here and if you hit right in the center, you can make their vision double. You'll be doing more than just breaking their nose, you'll be stunning them for a good while until their nerves stop firing from the pain."

She put a hand on Ares' hip, turning him again. "Their dicks may be inside, but they still have a
"nerve here." She pointed to his groin at the juncture between thigh and plates. "A good knee strike here will double them over." She glanced up at Ares, waving him down, and he lowered himself. "Just as with a human, asari, batarian, drell, and maybe krogan if you're brave enough ...." She traced the outline of Ares' ear on the side facing Charles.

"You know a drell?" Charles asked, curious after his talk with Ares about the elusive species.

"I do, and you'll not ask any other questions about him," she said without missing a beat.

"Ahhh … okay." He pursed his lips a little. "Sorry."

"It's alright," she said, having not even looked away from Ares' ear. "Cupping your hands and clapping them over the ear canal creates pressure in the ear, if done right, it can rupture the eardrum." She cupped her hands and then swung them in toward Ares on either side but stopped with her hand about an inch away.

Charles cupped his hands the way she had hers, and she gave him an approving nod.

She reached behind Ares, putting her fingertips against the base of his skull. Her gaze flicked to Ares', surprise flitting across her face for a fraction of a second before vanishing again. "They've got plates here, so it's not as effective as with a human, but the plates really don't add much protection. You see how this curves here?" She glanced at Charles, and he nodded. "A solid blow here, especially with something pointed, can cause a blackout." She dropped her hand and patted Ares' shoulder, and he stood up. "Butt of a gun, elbow … whatever."

"Any more turian anatomy lessons?" Ares rumbled as he looked between Jasmine and Charles, lifting a brow plate.

Smirking, she shifted her weight to one hip and crossed her arms under her breasts. "Why? Is he bad in bed?"

"Him? No," he said, smirking at her, "but I would love to see what knowledge on turian anatomy you have in that head of yours."

"I bet you would." She chuckled then sighed. "I've got to get back. I need to go over a few things and plan. I can swing by tomorrow, though, if you want?" She glanced between Ares and Charles.

Charles nodded. "Definitely."

"Sounds good." Ares rumbled and nodded. "We'll go eat somewhere that actually has decent dextro food. Maybe get shitfaced."

"Mmmm." She waggled her head a little. "Maybe on getting shitfaced. I'll see what Ray thinks about .... I'll let you know."

Ares snorted. "So, no."

"Don't be an ass." She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "I'm here on work, remember? I have to be a responsible adult at least some of the time."

Rumbling, he nodded but let out a long, suffering sigh. "If you have to."

She grinned, patting him on the shoulder as she moved past him. "You should make time to come say hello while we're here. I'm sure he'd like to see you again."

Ares hummed, the sound both interested but doubtful. "I'll see what I can do once you have your work done."

"Oh." She stopped and turned back to Charles. "Charles, do you shoot?"

He nodded. "I'm learning."

"Hmmm." She pursed her lips and looked up at Ares. "We could take him to the arena?"

Ares huffed. "Ask him. I'm not his mother. He can do what he wants."

She snorted, stopping and dropping her weight to one hip again. "I'm not taking your … bondmate to the arena by myself, jackass." She rolled her eyes. "Do you want to go?"

Ares looked at Charles, a question in his expression.

"I don't know what she's talking about." Charles shrugged.

Ares sighed. "The arena is a way to weapons test. Instead of shooting immobile paper targets, you're firing on VI controlled programs that are firing back."

"Oh, you mean Armax Arsenal Arena?" Charles asked, lifting an eyebrow.

She grinned, giving him a curt nod. "Yep."
"You want me to go into a combat simulator …." he said, letting his words trail off, doubt heavy in his voice.

"Yep," she said, dragging the word out.

He glanced at Ares for a second before shrugging. "Okay." He shook his head. "Just don't expect much from me."

Ares hummed. "We'll get you something to go in there with that's more than a shirt and jeans. It's not live rounds, but it'll still hurt if you get hit."

Jasmine snorted. "I'm not allowed to go in with anything but street clothes." She glanced at Charles. "Don't worry, combat like that isn't really my cup of tea, either. But, it's fun."

"You use a rifle," Ares retorted. "He does not. You can go in there with street clothes." He rumbled and looked at Charles. "Unless you want to go in with a weapon you've never trained with," he joked with an amused thrum.

"Not really." Charles moved into Ares' side, wrapping an arm around his waist. "But I do kinda want to know what it feels like to be shot."

Scoffing, she shook her head. "No, you don't." She glanced at Ares. "I don't only use a sniper rifle. It's just my favorite."

"You also have years of experience avoiding bullets when he just admitted to wanting to be shot. So, no, he won't be going in wearing street clothes." He looked down at Charles. "You won't need armor but at least more protection than something like that," he said, gesturing at Charles' sweatpants and shirtless torso.

"What happened to you not being my mother?" Charles asked, grinning up at Ares, and Jasmine laughed.

Ares smirked. "If you really want to feel what it'll be like to be shot at the arena, I can go get my concussive rounds and show you right now."

Charles seriously considered it for a few seconds and then said, "Okay."

Ares pulled Charles' arm off of him and looked at Jasmine. "Wait around for this." He headed for the bedroom.

"Ares? You can't be serious?" She called after him before turning to look at Charles. "Dude, no, don't do this."

He shrugged. "I want to know."

"Jesus Christ." She rubbed her forehead.

Ares returned, Charles' Stiletto III in hand, as he adjusted the ammunition. "Pick a spot. Not your head …. I'm not dealing with you having a concussion."

Charles bit his lip, thinking it over.

"You're both insane," she said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

"Shoulder?" Charles asked.

She scoffed. "Not if you want to shoot tomorrow."

He held his hands out to the side, shoulders raised. "Well, where?"

Sucking in a deep breath, she said, "Someplace fatty or muscular, not bone. Not your abdomen, it can break a rib or rupture an organ. I can't believe you're seriously——"

Ignoring Jasmine, Ares aimed the gun at Charles' upper, left thigh and pulled the trigger.

Charles howled, doubling over as his leg buckled, taking him to his knees. He cut off the scream, sucking in a hissing breath. "Motherfucker," he said, the word grinding out between clenched teeth. He rocked forward, gaze dropping to the floor. The beast inside roared, rattling the bars of its cage.

"I told you," she said.

"You would've tensed if I waited," Ares said. "This way you know what it'd really feel like."

Jasmine started to move over to him, but his head snapped up, staring her down. Her eyes widened a little for a second, and she shifted, not quite taking a step back but almost as if she was about to fall back into a fighting stance. "Are you alright?"

He growled a little but nodded, pulling himself back to his feet. "Yeah … fuck that hurts." It also
turned him on.

Ares hummed, looking between Charles and Jasmine a moment before clicking on the pistol's safety and tucking it into his waistband. "Come on. Icing it will keep it from seizing up tomorrow."

He limped over to Ares.

"Yeah. You're both fucking nuts." She laughed, shaking her head as she turned to the hall. "I'm going to go change my clothes."

"Let the dog out of the room," Ares called after her. He turned his attention to Charles and said, "Go sit on the couch and prop up your leg."

He grabbed Ares' arm as the man started to step away, tugging him back before he got too far away. He reached up, wrapping his fingers around Ares' cowl and urged him down for a kiss. Pressing himself against Ares, he shoved his tongue into the turian's mouth.

Growling, Ares stroked his tongue against Charles' before pushing him away and toward the couch. "Sit and stay, or I'll make you wait until tomorrow for any more of that."

His jaw dropped open. "Uhh!" He sniffed and turned to the couch. "Using sex as a weapon against me now? Shit, I guess we really are bonded."

He plopped down on the couch, groaning as he lifted his leg up onto the cushions. Eezo came running down the hall and jumped up there with him, excited and trying to lick his face. Ares chuckled as he dumped ice into a plastic bag and brought it into the living room. He urged the dog out of the way before grabbing the waistband of Charles' pants, pulling them down on one side to get a look at his thigh. Ares hummed at the already blossoming bruise and set the ice pack on the center of the throbbing ache. Charles hissed at the sudden cold and the pain but didn't say anything, just watched Ares with a smile.

Jasmine came back out of the room a couple of minutes later, holstering her pistol at her back. She stopped in front of them and looked down at Charles' leg, shaking her head again. Leaning over, she kissed Ares' scarred cheek before pushing herself upright with a hand on the back of the couch. He scoffed, sounding like a petulant child who didn't want his mother's affection in public.

Ignoring Ares' sound of protest, she turned to Charles and held a hand out to him. "Take good care of this asshole. I've grown fond of him."

He shook her hand and chuckled. "He doesn't make it easy."

"No, no he doesn't." She smiled. "It was nice meeting you. See you two tomorrow. Ares, I'll message you before I head over."

Ares rumbled and nodded, standing up to walk her out. They left Charles sitting on the couch, ice pack on his thigh, and headed to the door. Eezo wriggled back up a little closer to Charles, yawning and laying her head down on his knee.

"Thanks for giving him some training tips," Ares said, his voice pitched low, but not low enough for Charles to miss in the otherwise quiet apartment.

"My pleasure," she said, just as softly. "You seriously need to tell me how you two went from a random hookup to bonded."

"Oh, it was nice meeting you. See you two tomorrow. Ares, I'll message you before I head over."

Ares rumbled and nodded, standing up to walk her out. They left Charles sitting on the couch, ice pack on his thigh, and headed to the door. Eezo wriggled back up a little closer to Charles, yawning and laying her head down on his knee.

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Ares rumbled, and then Charles heard the door open and close.

He watched the hall waiting for Ares to return, and when he saw him again, he said, "She's … interesting."

Ares hummed in agreement as he made his way back to the couch. Without making Charles get up, he dragged the couch back into place, pulling a laugh from Charles, before he sat down. "She is."

"You two haven't fucked?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

Ares huffed a laugh and pulled out a cigarette, shaking his head once before lighting it. "No," he said, taking a drag. "She's serious with another."

"Hmmm. Monogamy, then? Ew." Charles took a deep breath. "You seem to really trust her, though. Well, trust her some, at least."

Ares stayed quiet as he held a breath before slowly blowing out the smoke from his mouth. "You were jealous."

Charles huffed, embarrassed to have been read so clearly. "If I have to stay here, will you go get my cigarillos off the breakfast bar?"
Humming, Ares set his cigarette box and lighter on the arm of the couch before standing up and getting Charles' cigarillos. When he returned, he held out a cigarillo for Charles before flicking his lighter to light it for him.

Charles smiled and leaned over, putting his cigarillo into the flame, taking a deep drag before blowing it back out. "Maybe. A little."

Ares dragged over one of the side tables and tossed Charles' pack on it before sitting back down. "Why?"

Charles scratched the mostly healed scar on his forehead where the bottle the asshole threw at him hit. He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess … I just wasn't expecting any of it. You went from holding a gun on her to hugging her and sharing your cigarette with her."

Ares just hummed, taking a drag and watching the smoke as it drifted out of his mouth.

"You took your prosthetics off with her here," Charles shrugged again, trying to find a way to express himself that didn't tip over into something pathetic and whiny sounding. "That's kind of a big deal for you, it all just took me by surprise. Don't worry, though, I'm not going to turn into one of those guys who's constantly making demands or trying to insist you don't spend time with anyone else or whatever."

"I didn't think you were," Ares said, relaxing back on the couch. He dropped his free hand to Eezo's fur, and she turned, lapping at his fingers a couple of times before laying her head back down on Charles.

"Good." Charles smoked in silence for a few minutes before asking, "How long do I have to stay here to avoid the torture of not being able to kiss you or fuck until tomorrow?"

Ares hummed as if in consideration. He reached over without looking, pressing a finger into Charles' bruised leg, and Charles hissed, whimpering a little, but it just made him more aroused. "Until your smell is stronger than your sounds."

"Pfft. So, I'll just sit here and fantasize about your cock in my ass for a few seconds." He closed his eyes and did just that, cock starting to twitch in his pants.

Ares chuckled. "Keep fantasizing. Too long and I'll just go take care of myself on my own. I need a good shower."

"One, that's just cruel. Two, the day you can only go once a night is the day we both keel over." Charles grinned, opening his eyes. "How do I smell?"

Ares hummed and glanced over at Charles, flicking his mandibles. "I don't know …. How's the leg feeling?"

"Like it'd feel so much better if I was being fucked," Charles said with a smirk.

Chuckling, Ares stood up. "I still can't smell it."

Charles let his gaze roam over Ares, taking in the sharp angles, hide and plates, lingering on the scars a little longer than the rest, cock growing harder. "Liar."

Opening his omni-tool, Ares lowered the lights before pulling off his shirt in the near dark. He paused to finish off his cigarette before opening the clasps of his pants and pushing them off his hips. Charles watched him, cock growing fully erect. He licked his lips, loving watching Ares undress, even in such little light. Growling, Ares leaned over to cup Charles' face and kissed him forcefully, shoving his tongue into his mouth. Charles let out a little moan, wrapping his hand around the back of Ares' head to knead the hide beneath his crest.

Ares kissed him for a moment, hand reaching down to palm Charles through his pants. He curled his tongue around Charles before pulling away. "Come on, Eezo," he said, walking away toward the bedroom. "Bedtime, dog."

Charles let out a loud groan. "I'm not tied down to this couch you know?"

Eezo's head snapped up at Ares' whistle, and she hopped off the couch, trotting to the bedroom. Charles heard the door close and lock.

"Seriously?" he yelled.

"Go to sleep," Ares called. "You have a big day tomorrow, and I'm not carrying you through the arena."

Grumbling, Charles said to himself, "I am not sleeping on the damn couch." Grabbing the ice pack, he eased himself up, biting back a hiss as he hobbled down the hall to the door. He opened his omni-tool and hacked through the lock, slapping his palm against the door's release. "You're so mean." He limped over to his side of the bed, stripping off his pants and shorts before climbing into the bed. He rolled over and dropped the ice pack on Ares, holding it against his stomach.
Ares rumbled, amusement in his vocals as he covered the ice pack with a hand. "About time you came to bed. What took you?"

Charles snorted, pulling the ice pack away again. "I don't know, I considered staying out there. Jacking off and stretching out, but I thought you might be a little more fun."

Chuckling, Ares grabbed the ice pack from Charles' hand and forced him to roll over, putting his back to Ares' chest. He rumbled as he nibbled along Charles' neck and shoulder, the hand with the ice pack finding his thigh and pressing it back to the bruise.

Charles huffed and pushed his ass against Ares' crotch. "Please?"

"Please what?" Ares tossed the pack on the side table, freeing up his hands to slide his palms along Charles' stomach and hips.

He let out a light growl. "Fuck me."

Ares chuckled, licking and nipping along Charles' skin as he dragged the tips of his talons across Charles' thighs. Charles hissed as the talons found his bruise, then moaned. He reached behind him to wrap his hand around Ares' crest.

"I want you," he said, his voice a husky whisper.

"I know," Ares said, growling against Charles' as he moved one of his hands between them, rubbing his palm over his plates, coaxing himself out. "I can smell you."

Charles huffed a soft laugh. "Mmm. Do you like smelling me when I want you?"

"You're damn right." Ares licked along Charles' neck, pulling his earlobe between his mouth plates.

A shiver ran through Charles, bringing up goosebumps. "I wish I could smell you the same way." He tugged at Ares' crest, squeezing a little. "But I can hear it when you want me."

As if to prove it, Ares pressed his mouth right below Charles' ear and growled into his skin, hand sliding up from Charles' thigh to wrap around his cock.

Moaning, Charles shifted, pushing himself into Ares' hand. "I love hearing that sound."

Ares' chuckle sounded rough as he flicked his mandibles and licked just below Charles' ear. He moved his other hand from between them and pulled Charles back to him, grinding his erect cock against Charles' ass. "Do you want me to prep you tonight?"

Charles hummed. "If you want to."

"I just asked if you wanted me to," Ares said with a snort. "If you don't care, I won't. Just cut right to the chase." He ran his tongue along Charles' pulse, stroking his hand up Charles' cock.

Moaning again, Charles pressed his ass against Ares. "I don't care. So, cut right to the chase."

Growling, Ares ducked his head to wrap his mouth over Charles' shoulder and released his cock. He lifted Charles' leg over his own hip, putting his foot to the bed as he positioned himself up against Charles' asshole. He thrummed, biting down as he pushed inside, pulling Charles back onto his cock.

Charles sucked in a ragged breath as Ares' teeth sunk into his shoulder, and it seeped out of him in a throaty croak of pleasure. His heart slammed against his ribs, washing away whatever jealousy he'd felt before over Jasmine. Ares was his, and he was Ares'. He let out a soft whimper, pushing back in against Ares before reaching behind him, wrapping his hand around Ares' crest and squeezing.
Faux Blood

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Charles flipped through the C-Sec records, keeping tabs on his growing mental list. It looked like Kevin Briggs managed to get off on beating the shit out of his wife, Eliza, again. She refused to press charges so they let him go right after processing. If Charles didn't still need to lay low after David's death sparked talk of a serial killer, he'd be making plans to cut Kevin up nice and slow. Guess he'd just have to keep reliving his last kill a little while longer.

Too bad it didn't really do much to stop the itch or feed the beast. He wondered just how long he'd need to wait. Maybe if he did something different … got rid of the body instead of leaving it behind. The incinerators were big enough to shove a grown man into, but he'd have trouble doing it by himself. There were the protein vats, too. Ares said he dumped Cameric into the vats, and all of his soft parts were dissolved by the time they found his body.

The chime went off above the door, drawing Charles away from his thoughts. Automatically plastering a smile on his face, he glanced up. "Welcome to Citadel Souvenirs," he said before his eyes even registered the new customer.

Jasmine flashed him a smile, heading straight for his kiosk. "Thanks."

Fighting the urge to glance over at Mahlia, he blinked and softly cleared his throat. "Is there something, in particular, I can help you find?"

"No, thanks," Jasmine said, glancing up at him and smiling again. "I'm just here to look around."

"Sure, let me know if you need assistance." He took a couple of steps back down the counter, putting as much space between the two of them as he would with any other customer.

"Will do." She turned her attention back to the kiosk, flipping through screens.

Charles watched her for a second, and it occurred to him she used her left hand to flip through the screens. He felt fairly certain she was right-handed, so it seemed a little odd. At first, he thought maybe her shoulder was hurting her, but then he saw a small light slowly flashing on her closed omni-tool—which she wore on her left wrist. Some of the programs Ares gave him, like the one that scanned for security systems, made his omni-tool flash in the same way. He wasn't sure she was running a program to help her get Werin, but it certainly made sense.

"I'm going on break, Charles," Mahlia said.

Glancing at her, he nodded. "Alright."

As soon as Mahlia disappeared into the back room and the door closed behind her, Jasmine asked, "How many people are here today?"

The employee kiosk pinged, letting him know she'd added something to her purchase list, but he didn't bother to look. "Including me, three." He glanced at her and added, "The other two are people I care about." He didn't know why she came there when Werin wasn't on the clock, but if she intended to go looking around, he wanted to make sure Mahlia and Cammus weren't in danger.

"Don't worry about them. Locations?" Her gaze never left the kiosk, and her voice stayed low. She added something else to her purchase list. "Mahtia's in the breakroom right behind me." He scraped his teeth over his lip. "Cammus is in the stockroom, back through the breakroom."

"What's the lunch break rotation?" she asked.

"Uh, Cammus and Mahlia will go at the same time at sixteen hundred hours. I'll go when they get back an hour later."

"You'll be here by yourself?" She arched an eyebrow, glancing at him.

"Yeah," he said, giving her a slight nod.

"Excellent." She smiled before pressing the checkout key on the kiosk and scanned a credit chit.

He moved down the counter to look at the kiosk, a smile creeping up on his face. "Model ships?" he asked, raising a brow at her.

She grinned. "I have a friend who likes them."

"Fair enough." He tilted his head to the side. "You want me to have them pulled now or have
"I'll take them with me now," she said. "Alright." He accessed the kiosk and sent the order back to Cammus. "It'll be right out."

If Jasmine came back to Citadel Souvenirs while Cammus and Mahlia were out on lunch break, Charles didn't know about it. Being the only one there, he'd remained stuck out front, and she at least didn't come in that way. He hoped if she'd found another way in through the back, she'd avoided the cameras—preferably without messing with them in any way that'd come back to bite him in the ass.

He wondered if she came looking for something in specific, or if she just wanted to scope the place out. And if so, if it meant she intended to kill Werin at work instead of at his apartment. It seemed riskier, and it'd definitely draw more attention, but she was the professional.

Cammus sat down across from Charles at the break table and cracked open a bottle of water. "I saw Acevia at lunch, she said hello."

"Cool. So, are you and Acevia like an official thing now, or …?" Charles cocked an eyebrow, taking a drag from his cigarillo.

Mandibles fluttering, Cammus shook his head. "No, it's completely casual. Neither of us are looking for anything serious right now. Besides, I think we make better friends."

"Yeah?" Charles hummed.

Cammus flicked a mandible and tapped a talon on the table. "She's not exactly what I think of when I think of a potential bondmate."

Charles tilted his head a little. "Then what do you think of when you think of a potential bondmate?"

"Hmmm. Someone less …" Shaking his head, Cammus chuckled. "… less excitable."

Snorting, Charles raised an eyebrow again. "Excitable?" He took another drag from his cigarillo, watching the turian sitting across from him.

"Yeah." Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "Acevia is … wild. She's fun, I enjoy her company, but I can't imagine trying to keep up with her every day."

Charles laughed, leaning back in his chair to blow smoke up at the ceiling. "Keep up with her? You mean in bed?"

"No," Cammus said with a chuff, giving Charles a flick of his mandible. "I have no problem with that. I mean, hmm, she craves constant excitement. Bars, dancing, fights … theft."

"Theft?" Charles blinked. He didn't expect the last one to be on the list, but he found it kind of amusing. "Seriously?"

"Just small things. It gives her a thrill." Cammus flared his mandibles and turned pleading eyes on Charles. "You won't tell her I said anything … or tell anyone?"

"No, secret's safe with me," Charles said with a smile before taking a drag.

Cammus let out a sigh, shoulders relaxing. "Thank you."

"Of course." Tapping the ashes off his cigarillo, he winked at Cammus.

Fluttering his mandibles and lifting a brow plate, Cammus asked, "How are things with you and Aelianus?"

"Um, good, actually." Charles nodded and took another drag, blowing it out as he said, "Things are good."

"I'm glad to hear it." Cammus smiled and hummed. "I've found us another gym to use, one where I think we'll both be more comfortable. Unless you wanted to go to the place you normally workout?"

Charles shook his head, rolling the tip of his cigarillo in the ashtray. "Nah, the place I normally go doesn't have an open area with mats to train on."

"Okay." Cammus gave him a curt nod. "I thought we might go tomorrow on our lunch break if you don't have plans with Aelianus?"

"Sure, sounds great," Charles said with a smile, taking another drag.
restaurant's porch as he did when they went there with Cammus. Jasmine headed for the same seat as Ares, but she took a deep breath and held her hand out for him to sit there instead, choosing a different chair for herself. Charles chuckled and sat down in the same seat he used before, glancing at the menu.

"How's your leg?" Jasmine asked as she sat down and put the napkin on her lap.

"It's fine." Charles shrugged and looked up at her. "I won't let it get in the way." The bruising on his leg worsened overnight, but he sucked it up enough to walk without a noticeable limp. At least he didn't think it was noticeable, no one commented at work, and being on his feet all day actually seemed to help loosen the muscles.

She snorted, a smile on her face. "Uh huh."

Ares hummed around lighting a cigarette. "I already told him if he doesn't move his ass, I'll shoot him again."

"I might like it." Charles smirked at Ares. "Might be our new form of foreplay."

Jasmine laughed, picking up the menu. "For some reason," she said, tilting her head toward Ares even though her gaze stayed on the menu, "it wouldn't surprise me."

Ares chuckled and shrugged. "He might like it, but he'll still bitch about it."

"Would not." He didn't bitch about the first shot, not really. Not beyond the first few seconds after it happened.

Blowing out a breath of smoke, Ares made a skeptical hum but didn't respond otherwise.

"What's good here?"

"I had the elyine special last time. It was pretty good."

She closed her menu and tossed it on the table. "Elyine special it is." She glanced at Ares. "I cleared it with Ray, I'm yours for the whole night."

Ares snorted, rumbling around a drag of his cigarette. "Not in the way I'd hope." Flicking ash, he nodded. "What place you thinking for drinks? Someplace comfortable like Chora's or fancy?"

She glanced sideways at Ares, cocking an eyebrow. "Chora's, obviously."

"Why Chora's?" Charles closed his menu, sliding it away from him. "Not that I have anything against Chora's ….

Jasmine hummed and looked over at him. "Familiar territory. Good drinks. Hot asari."

Ares thrummed around a drag, letting smoke out from the sides of his mouth. "Dark."

"Places to take cover." She tilted her head to the side.

"A good place to get into a fight without getting kicked out on your ass." Ares flicked ash into the ashtray sitting in the center of the table and looked at the approaching waiter.

"Can I get you something to drink?" The sand-colored turian asked, humming in greeting as he dipped his head. "Or do you need a minute?"

Turning her attention to the waiter, Jasmine flashed a toothy grin at him and said, "Bring me your best rum, if you have it. If not, your best levo substitute. And a glass of iced tea."

"Mount Milgrom … and orange Paragade," Charles said and smiled at the waiter.

"I'll have to check, but I believe we do carry a couple of different varieties of rum." The waiter nodded once before glancing at Ares.

"A 'Red," Ares said, looking at Charles and Jasmine. "I'm ready to order if you are?"

Jasmine gave him a brief nod.

"I'm ready." Charles looked to the waiter to see if he was ready to actually take their orders.

The waiter pulled a small tablet from a pocket on his uniform and held a hand above it, poised and ready for the orders.

"I'll have the elyine special, and uh," Charles said, glancing at Jasmine as he handed over his menu, "I think she wanted the same thing."

"I do," Jasmine smiled, offering the turian her menu as well.
Charles watched as the waiter finished inputting their orders and left the table before digging out his cigarillos. Remembering Jasmine smoked some of Ares' cigarette the night before, he pulled one out and stuck it between his lips before offering the pack to her.

She shook her head. "I don't actually smoke. Haven't for years."

"Oh." He lit his cigarillo. "Then why'd you take his cigarette last night?"

Her lips parted, and after a second, she reached over and pulled the cigarillo from Charles' mouth. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Ares before looking back at her but didn't say anything. She put the cigarillo between her lips and took a small drag, rolling it around on her tongue. She watched him for a second, blowing the smoke back out slowly before taking another drag and handing it back to him.

"It's a trust thing," she said, shifting her attention away from him to glance over the veranda.

Ares merely hummed in agreement as he took a deep drag from his cigarette, holding it in his mouth a moment before letting it drift between his parted mouth plates.

She looked back at Charles again and said, "By letting me have his cigarette, and then smoking it again after I've taken a drag, he's telling me he trusts me not to poison him. By smoking after him, I'm telling him the same." She shrugged. "In a nutshell. There's more to it for me, but it's a long story."

Charles looked down at the cigarillo in his fingers, hesitating for just a second before bringing it back to his lips and taking a drag while holding her gaze. She gave him a soft, approving smile.

"She also knows it's because I don't just let anyone smoke my shit," Ares said, rumbling as he stamped out the butt of his cigarette. "These things are too fucking expensive to play around with."

She chuckled. "That, too. Hmmm. For me, it's also … I guess you might say a promise."

"Promise?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," she said, lifting her shoulders again. "I don't share with people I wouldn't be willing to fight for … it comes from my time on the streets."

Ares rumbled, the tone teasing as he smirked at her. "You could've just shoved your tongue down my throat, and we could've forgone the cigarette."

She snorted. "Ah, but I'll fuck people I'm not willing to fight for."

He huffed. "Who said anything about fucking? But, hey, if that's offered, too …."

"A kiss wouldn't mean the same thing to me. Although, now I feel like you don't trust me because you haven't kissed me." She stuck her lower lip out into an exaggerated pout.

Charles snorted. "He didn't kiss me for the longest time. When he did, it shocked the hell out of me."

Ares rumbled and shrugged. "Hey, if you both want me to shove my tongue in your mouths, then I won't complain."

Charles grinned at Ares, leaning over to wrap his hand around the turian's jacket and tugged him closer, voice low as he said, "I always want you to shove your tongue in my mouth."

Ares growled and smirked at him. "I know."

"Kiss me," he said, tugging Ares closer still, and Ares rumbled, pressing his mouth plates to Charles' lips and shoving his tongue in. Smiling into the kiss, Charles entwined his tongue with Ares', savoring the feel of his rough mouth plates. He slid a hand up, cupping the back of Ares' head and nipped his tongue.

"Get a room," Jasmine said, her voice playful.

Growling, Ares flicked a mandible and pulled his tongue back into his own mouth, breaking the kiss. "There's no fun in that." He sat back in his chair as the waiter returned, setting their drinks out before taking his leave once more. "And I have no problem making you feel better about trust by kissing you, too."

She pursed her lips for a second, and then, with a spark of mischief in her eyes, she pushed away from the table. Standing, she rounded the table and pulled it away from Ares instead of trying to pull his chair out. She sat down on his lap, wrapped her hand around his crest, and tugged his head back. Smirking, at his soft growl, she pressed her lips to his mouth and slipped her tongue between his mouth plates.

Charles watched, wide-eyed, jealousy rearing its ugly head again. He did his best to stamp it down and smoked his cigarillo. Flicking his mandibles, Ares growled again and shoved his mouth.
against Jasmine's lips, tongue pushing in against hers. He wrapped one of his arms around her ribs, his other hand resting on the outside of her thigh. After a few seconds, Jasmine broke away and grinned at him, patting his cheek before standing up and shifting the table back into place.

"Thanks, I do feel better," she said, sitting back down with a grin before taking a drink of her rum. Ares rumbled in amusement as he picked up the bottle of his beer and took a drink. "Of course you do. Turian tongues have many perks."

She snorted. "So does Tannor's."

"I don't feel better." Charles let out a heavy sigh and smirked. "I feel left out."

She chuckled, glancing over at him. "That so?"

"Yes." He nodded. Truthfully, it wasn't so much about wanting to kiss her, too—although he did find the thought appealing—but if she included him … maybe he wouldn't feel so challenged by the woman when it came to Ares.

She reached across the table and grabbed his shirt, pulling him in closer, and kissed him. Her tongue tasted like rum, but her lips were incredibly soft. Charles shoved his tongue back into her mouth. Reaching across, he tried to cup the back of her head, but her other hand caught his wrist and brought his hand back down to the table between them. He supposed it made sense. She'd want to be in complete control of the situation, and regardless of what she said about kissing not having the same meaning for her, she obviously wouldn't trust him as much as Ares.

After a few more passes of her tongue, she let him go and patted his cheek. "Happy?"

"If that's what you want to call it," he said with a smirk, wagging his eyebrows at her.

Ares snorted over his bottle.

"You two are kind of perfect for each other." She took another drink from her rum before waving her hand for Charles' cigarillo again.

He smirked and passed it over, watching her take a deeper drag before she passed it back. He liked hearing she thought he and Ares were right for each other because Ares was his, and he had no intentions of ever letting the turian go.

"I actually kind of like those." She hummed.

Ares reached into his pocket and pulled out his own cigarettes, putting one in his mouth while he searched for his lighter.

"If you like that kind of shit."

"Oh, you're right. What do I know of mushy, flavorless starches?" Ares hummed and flicked his lighter open, lighting his cigarette before flipping the lid closed.

"You said these weren't so bad." Charles tapped the ashes off the end of his cigarillo.

"Yeah, they weren't bad." Ares took a drag, saying, "But I didn't say I liked them over my own. Their taste is too strong, drowns out the other flavors."

"Hmmmm. Well, good thing you don't have to smoke them, then." Charles smirked and then turned his attention to Jasmine. "Is Tannor your husband or whatever?"

Ares looked at Charles, dropping his chin a little and lifting a brow ridge. He left the sarcastic 'really' unspoken, but Charles heard it anyway.

The tendon in her jaw jumped a little, but then it smoothed out and she turned her attention to Charles again. "I'm not married. I don't think I'm really the marrying type."

He realized it didn't answer his question, but he got it was one she didn't plan to answer, so he let it go. "I would've said the same thing a few months ago." He chuckled, glancing at Ares and added, "But apparently I fell in love with a giant turian."

Ares grunted around his cigarette. "Sap."

Smiling, Charles took a drag of his cigarillo. When he responded, he spoke to Jasmine even though he kept his gaze on Ares. "He loves me, too, he just doesn't realize it."

She hummed, glancing between the two of them with a soft smile on her face but didn't say anything.

Ares flicked his mandibles a few times and pointedly drank from his beer. "I'm fully aware of my own emotions."

Jasmine snorted, un成功地 hiding a smile behind her own glass.
Charles' lip twitched, but he didn't say anything else. There were way too many ways he could interpret Ares' response, and if he let himself go down the rabbit hole, he'd just tear himself up. The waiter returned, carrying a stacked tray, and set plates down in front of each of them. Ares rumbled at his plate and put his cigarette in his mouth, freeing up his hands to slice into his flatbread pizza, topped with two different kinds of meat.

"So, Charles," she said, drawing his attention back to her, "how long have you lived on the Citadel?"

He shrugged. "I've lost track but a few years."

"Did you come here from Shanxi, then, or move around?" She raised an eyebrow at him as she sliced into her pizza.

The question gave him pause. She seemed so particular about what she'd answer for him, yet she didn't seem to hesitate to ask questions just as personal. Granted, he wasn't an assassin who needed to worry about concealing so much about himself, but still …. Maybe it was some kind of test. He took a few seconds to consider her question, debating on whether or not he really wanted to answer, but in the end, he thought he might get more out of her if he gave a little more himself. It felt important to him to get to know her a little better, like knowing her would help him know Ares.

Taking a last drag from his cigarillo, he put it out and said, "Moved around … though … I guess I didn't really live anywhere for a long time."

The answer seemed to surprise her, gaze sweeping over him again in an appraising manner. "As in homeless?"

He nodded, and then something she'd said earlier clicked into place in his mind. "Is that what you meant by 'your time on the streets'?"

Lips parted, she nodded. "Yeah."

Charles stepped into the changing room, looking over the little nodes he was supposed to stick to himself, feeling a little lost. He turned around and saw a kiosk mounted to the wall with a list of species. Pressing 'human' and then 'male', he started the instructional vid. He stripped down to his boxers and started putting the nodes on himself, following along with the vid.

"Need help in there?" Jasmine's voice called through the door, light and teasing.

"Ah, no. I think I've got it." He huffed but grinned. After another minute or so, he got all of the nodes in place and redressed, including the lightly padded crap Ares got him to wear.

Stepping back out of the room, he glanced over at Ares who busied himself stuffing something into his pockets and pouches from a box on a shelf. Jasmine stood not far away, checking over her sniper rifle and her pistol. True to her word, she'd kept on her street clothes, just like Ares—making Charles feel like even more of an ass. At least Ares bought a private slot for them, there wouldn't be any cameras going for the viewers to laugh at Charles.

He moved over next to Ares. "What's that?"

Humming, Ares grabbed Charles' wrist to pull up his hand and slapped something into his palm. "Think you can throw this a good distance?"

"Probably."

"Probably?" Ares rumbled and flicked a mandible. "Or yes?"

Holding out his other hand, Charles asked, "Well, I mean, how far do you consider 'a good distance'?"

"Far enough away to not blow yourself or us up, preferably into a group of enemies." Jasmine glanced up, holstering her pistol at her back.

Ares nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, I can do that." Charles shrugged, slipping the grenade into one of the pockets built into the padding.

"Just be sure to let us know when you throw one," Ares said as he closed the emptied box and unholstered his heavy pistol, starting to check it over.

Charles pulled out his Stiletto III, looking it over and changing out his ammo block for one of the simulator cartridges the arena used.

Crossing the couple of feet separating them, Jasmine reached into a pocket and pulled something out. Opening her hand, a small, oddly shaped device sat in her palm. She picked it up between her
fingers and fiddled with it before stepping closer to Charles. "Bend down a little?"

He glanced at Ares, and Ares nodded at him. Doing as she asked, he bent down and cringed when she slipped the device into his ear.

She chuckled and stepped back. "Just tap it when you want to speak to us."

He reached up, gently touching the device. "This is incredibly uncomfortable."

She grinned. "Yep."

"Stop bitching like two children."

Ares looked down the sights before lowering his pistol and started to turn away.

Without saying anything—and faster than Charles processed in order to warn Ares—Jasmine pulled out her pistol and shot the turian in the ass. Ares snarled, the sound more surprised than pained, and he glared at her. Charles' eyes widened, gaze flicking back and forth between the two of them, expecting all hell to break loose.

She grinned, reholstering her pistol. "You're not the boss of me."

"If you'd prefer, I can cut your comm and you fly alone."

"Us?" She raised an eyebrow and looked at Charles. "Did I shoot you?"

Charles chuckled, though it felt equal parts nerves and humor, and shook his head. "Don't think so."

Ares flicked a mandible and holstered his pistol, reaching to his back for his sniper rifle. He turned away from them, holding the gun up, checking the sights and taking some time to adjust his scope. Charles knew Ares was pissed, but for whatever reason, he didn't seem interested in ripping into Jasmine. It only made Charles feel more nervous.

She smirked, strapping her sniper rifle over her back and rolled her shoulders. "Are we ready?"

Ares grunted and collapsed his rifle, glancing at Charles. "Are you?"

Charles just nodded, feeling out the temperature between Ares and Jasmine, afraid to say or do anything which might tip the scales. Ares rumbled and looked at Jasmine, giving her a nod as he stepped aside from the entrance to the simulator. She seemed oblivious to Ares' being upset with her or at least intent on not letting it bother her.

"I'll stick close to you," Ares said as he moved next to Charles. "Until you get your bearings on the field."

"Okay." Charles took a deep breath. "How exactly does this work again?"

"We'll have a few minutes to find cover before enemies will spawn. At this level, the simulator will announce the location of their spawns as well as how many remain on the field."

"Each match is three rounds, and every time, the enemies will spawn from a different point, so stay alert."

Ares nodded and motioned for Charles to head to the door and get ready. "Any other questions?"

"What happens if I get shot?"

"It hurts," Jasmine said. "And if you get hit enough, without using Medi-gel, the VI counts you as dead. So, don't."

Ares flicked a mandible. "Just use Medi-gel. We'll have enough of it."

Taking another deep breath, Charles adjusted his grip on his Stiletto III and nodded. "Alright, let's do this."

Smiling, Jasmine walked on, and the doors opened in front of her. A large area looking a lot like some of the rundown streets on Earth stretched out ahead of them, half destroyed buildings, streets, even a few parked skycars and crates. It felt weird, it looked too real to be a computer generation, but Charles knew it had to be.

She glanced over at Ares. "You got him for now?"

Ares nodded and looked at him. "Keep her at your back, but don't let yourself get too comfortable. She can watch from above, but her job isn't just to keep you from getting shot."

Jasmine smiled and pointed to the roof of what looked like a warehouse. "I'll start there, but I
won't stay there.” She lifted her hand to her wrist and hit something, disappearing from sight.
“And you won't always be able to see me.”

“Whoa ….” Charles blinked, mouth agape as he turned to look at Ares and then back to the spot from where she vanished.

"Don't waste time looking for her. You'll hear her rifle fire. Judge her relative position from there, but don't worry about her," He patted Charles' shoulder and pointed further into the simulator.
"Scan the grounds and pick out possible cover from various positions. Always anticipate where an enemy will be, and be ready."

Charles did as he was told, looking over the streets, taking in the locations of buildings, the cross streets, skycars, crates, and anything else he could hide behind. He didn't really know how to decide where an enemy might be, but he figured they'd probably be trying to find cover, too. A loud ping announced the beginning of the simulator, and Charles saw a glistening waypoint further down the path of the center street, directly in the middle of an intersection. Ares glanced at Charles and rumbled in question. Charles pointed toward a building down the street, nearer to them than the waypoint, which would give him the ability to stand behind the wall and still see the enemies approach.

Ares nodded and lifted his weapon. "Go," he said quickly as he started making his way down the field toward a skycar close to the building.

Charles ran for the building, hearing gunshots. He jumped, kicking off the side of the skycar and using it to launch himself behind the building faster than he would've gotten there on foot. Rolling a little as he landed, he popped back up and edged down the wall to peer around the corner.
Several asari wearing yellow armor rushed down the street toward them, ducking behind buildings and crates.

Glancing across the way, Charles saw Ares level his weapon, mandibles fluttering as he opened fire. Turning his attention back to the one asari he just barely saw around the edge, Charles aimed his Stiletto III and fired at her shoulder—the only thing really visible. His shot hit, and she moved further back into cover. He cursed under his breath, unable to see anyone else. He waited and watched, and a moment later, another asari popped into view. He shifted aim and took a shot, but the asari managed to get back behind cover just in time to dodge the hit.

A couple of seconds later, he heard the loud bark of a weapon coming from somewhere above. He figured it must be Jasmine. Half a second later, an asari stumbled out of cover, and Charles shot her in the chest. It didn't do any real damage, though, thanks to her armor. It did keep her out of cover a moment longer, however. He adjusted and tried to aim for her uncovered head, but hitting a moving target seemed far more difficult than the still images at the range.

"Lead your shots," Ares said, rumbling as he fired on a salarian beside Charles' target. "If you can't estimate where they'll be, then shoot their legs." He fired and the salarian's leg practically disintegrated. "Then kill them."

The asari Charles shot at already got back behind cover. He waited a minute, but none of them stuck their heads out again. So, he did something he remembered his father talking about before. Firing off a couple of rounds at the crate, he waited, trying to flush them out. Sure enough, a second later, an asari peered around the edge, right into Charles' crosshairs. He pulled the trigger and hit her in the side of her face. The simulator showed violet blood spray from her before she ducked back behind the crate, screams echoing through the arena. Charles licked his lips, the beast stirring inside of him.

A moment later, another asari ran out, heading across the street for different cover. Charles shot at her legs but missed, and she ducked behind another crate before he could fire again. A moment later, another bark of gunfire from above flushed out a salarian. The salarian didn't really look injured so much as stunned, which made Charles think either Jasmine sucked, or she intended to line up targets for him.

Either way, he didn't take much time to question it before shooting the salarian in the leg, making his leg buckle. Shifting, Charles took a shot at the salarian's head but barely grazed him the first time. He fired again, catching the salarian in the neck. It wasn't what he went for, but the faux blood spraying out distracted him from taking another shot, the beast purring at the sight.

"Flush them out with a grenade," Ares said.

Glancing over at Ares, Charles licked his lips, shaking away the blood haze filling his mind. He reached into the pocket where he'd stuck the grenade earlier and looked it over, figuring out how to activate it before glancing around the wall again. He pushed the button and lobbed the grenade out over the crates. A second later, two asari ran away from the area, and Charles shot at them. A second after that, the grenade went off, the crates exploding in the process, and he heard the pained screams of those who weren't quick enough to get away.

"They're moving in on your six," Jasmine's voice came over the comm.

Ares aimed after the escaping asari and jerked his head toward Charles' right. "Move position. Cover your flank. I'll keep them off you, then circle around and flush them down this street."
Charles nodded, slipping along the side of the wall before turning and running. He stopped at the end to peer around the edge, the sound of gunfire echoing behind him, and then he darted down the street to the next building. He made his way to the end and looked around again, finding the coast clear. He licked his lips, keeping his gun raised and stepped out, moving as quietly as he could.

Rounding the building, he jogged back down to the end and hit the comm. "I'm in place," he said.

A moment later, he saw a group of mercs backing up, moving into the street as they tried to get out of Ares' fire.

"Take cover," Ares responded, giving Charles just enough time to duck back behind the building before a grenade went off, not giving the enemies enough time to escape the blast.

Charles glanced around the edge again and fired on the wounded, writhing on the ground, trying to get their feet back under them. After landing a killing shot on a human, he turned his Stiletto III on a salarian, firing twice, once in his head, the other hitting the wall next to him.

A soft thud behind him made him jerk and turn, weapon swinging around, but a hand darted out and grabbed his wrist, knocking the gun away. Jasmine's face registered with him, and she grinned, lifting her own pistol to fire over his shoulder. He turned to look and saw she'd just killed an asari who crept up on his left he hadn't noticed. She hit the band on her wrist again and disappeared, leaving him by himself. He turned to look all around him, making sure there weren't any other enemies nearby before killing the last asari still alive at the cross-section. The simulation chimed, signaling the end of the round, and began to count down a five-second warning to prepare for the next wave.

Ares stepped out of the shadows at Charles' side and motioned his head toward their eight o'clock position. "Waypoint's that way."

Charles nodded and moved off in the direction Ares indicated until he saw the waypoint and choose new cover behind a skycar. If he thought having the chance to kill simulated enemies and blow shit up with grenades would calm Ares down after Jasmine's poorly chosen prank, he was wrong. Ares didn't act angry, per se, but it seemed painfully obvious to Charles. He saw it in the tightness of Ares' mandibles, the icy gaze, and the death grip on his rifle.

The next round seemed a little harder than the first. The waypoint created a strong, strategic positioning for the enemies to spawn. Ares and Charles got separated when a salarian set a crate they were hiding behind on fire, forcing them to run for new cover, but Ares kept it together and never let Charles out of his sight. At one point, Charles spotted a human moving into position behind Ares, and he used his comm to let Ares know, but Ares just jerked his head and kept up his rain of fire on the asari across from him flinging biotics. A second later, the human's head exploded, the sound of Jasmine's sniper rifle coming from somewhere off to Charles' right.

Charles grinned and turned his attention to the asari edging along a building at his two o'clock. He couldn't see her legs hidden behind a planter, so he took aim at her chest and head. He'd learned real quick, even with armor, it might take him a bit longer, but his pistol could tear through the ceramic. Hitting a target in the chest two or three times worked almost just as well to throw them off as hitting them in the legs once did, and it was a hell of a lot easier to hit than their legs. Sure, the legs were more efficient, but he really needed more practice with moving targets before he'd be able to dependably pull it off.

In the third round, Ares let a human get close enough to bash the merc in the face with the butt of his rifle. Blood spurted from his nose, and Ares flicked a mandible, an agitated gesture, before shooting him at point blank. Starting to get tired, Charles got hit twice, but he used Medi-gel when Ares' barked at him through the comm. Jasmine appeared down the street, hands wrapped around an asari's chin and head before she jerked, snapping the asari's neck. She let the asari's body drop to the ground and spun, flinging a knife out at the salarian across the way, embedding the blade between his eyes, and the VI chimed, signaling the end of the match.

After retrieving her knife, Jasmine walked down the street, stopping in front of Ares. She glanced over him and said something Charles was too far away to hear. Jerking her head, she gestured with her thumb back over her shoulder. Ares flicked his mandibles, nodding, and Charles started over toward them. They both turned to face him, Jasmine with a smile on her face but Ares with mandibles tight against his jaw.

"Ready for another match?" Jasmine asked, flicking fake blood off of her blade before lifting her shirt enough to stick it back in a sheath strapped around her waist.

Charles hesitated, looking back and forth between her and Ares. He was tired, and Ares seemed pissed, but Ares gave him a nod, so he said, "Sure."

"Great." She grinned. "You're going to stick with me through this one, cool?"

"Uh ...." He glanced at Ares again, getting another nod. "Okay."

Ares opened his omni-tool, and a second later, the next match began, the VI's voice welcoming
them to Armax Arsenal Arena. Ares checked his sniper rifle and headed off, disappearing between buildings down the street. Jasmine unholstered her pistol, checking her thermal clip before nodding her head toward a half-ruined building. Charles followed her as she started jogging, checking his thermal clip as he went.

"I thought he could use a little room to … stretch out, blow off some of that steam without worrying about you." She waited next to the building, waiting for the waypoint to appear before pointing it out to Charles.

He nodded in acknowledgment. "You really kind of pissed him off."

"I seem to be good at that," she said, giving him a wry smile as she waved her hand toward two skycars a few feet apart. "Go left, I'll go right. Stay low, get behind the skycar."

"Got it." Charles crouched down, running to the skycar.

Jasmine slid into place opposite of him, perched on her toes, knees nearly touching the ground as she duck-walked a little further down the vehicle before peering over the hood. Being pretty short, even with as low to the ground as the hood of the C-111 Skyline Shuttle was, she seemed able to stay well hidden. Charles not so much. But, staying just a little further back worked well enough.

Halfway through the round, Charles spotted Ares off to the left on the far side of the arena, using his knife and bare hands to rip enemies apart. Yeah … he definitely needed to blow off some steam. Charles just hoped he got it all out of his system in the arena. If he didn't … well, maybe Charles could help him work some of it off in bed.
Foundation of Fear

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Ares waved his hand at the bench seat, and Charles sat down, sliding over next to the wall. Ares sat down next to him, effectively trapping him for the time being. He didn't mind, though, he knew he was safe next to Ares. Jasmine sat down opposite of them, turning sideways and throwing her legs up on the seat, back against the wall. She smiled as an asari waitress came over to the table.

"Ramona." The asari grinned, leaning over the table and let out a soft purr of sound. "It's been awhile since I've seen you in here. Your usual?"

"Faline," Jasmine said, giving the asari the same flirty purr. "I've missed you." She chuckled and nodded. "Yes, the usual."

The asari grinned wider before straightening and turning her attention to Ares. "Hmmm. I think I've seen you here with Ramona before, too. I'm sorry, I don't remember your drink, though."

Ares shrugged a shoulder as he dug out his cigarettes. "It's fine. Horosk on the rocks."

Charles bit back a wince; if Ares ordered horosk, he was more pissed than even Charles thought. He offered the asari a smile when she turned his way. "Mount Milgrom, thanks."

"Sure thing, coming right up." She turned, putting a little extra sway to her hips as she walked away.

Jasmine looked at Ares, watching him for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and saying, "I'm sorry. That was impulsive and childish. And calloused. It was meant to be a joke, but it crossed a line."

Ares set a cigarette in his mouth. "It's fine …. Would have been better if you did it to my face instead of behind my back, though," he said as he cupped his lighter to his cigarette.

She seemed to consider it for a second and slowly nodded. "Fair enough. I didn't really think about it. You turned when the thought crossed my mind … it wasn't intentionally not to your face."

Taking a long drag, Ares let out a deep breath of smoke as he mindlessly flipped his lighter opened and closed. "Again, it's fine…."

She scraped her teeth over her lip, nodded, and looked out over the bar. Something told Charles she didn't buy the 'it's fine', but she didn't seem inclined to press the matter. Which was probably a good idea. He was just glad she realized she fucked up and was trying to apologize. Hopefully, it did some good and kept Ares from going overboard with the horosk.

"Ramona?" Charles said after a minute.

She glanced back at him. "Ramona Salazar. Last alias I used here." She tilted her head to the side. "Probably best if you use it while we're here, too."

Charles nodded, pulling his cigarillos from his pocket and stuffed one in his mouth. "Ramona it is, then." He lit his cigarillo, blowing smoke up toward the ceiling.

"Actually, do you mind if I steal one?"

"Thought you quit smoking?" He smiled around another drag, but he pushed the pack and lighter toward her.

She smirked. "It feels like a cigarette kind of day." She picked up the pack and shook one out, sticking it between her lips before lighting it and sliding them back over the table to Charles. She flipped over the second ashtray on the table and pulled it over closer to her.

A minute later, Faline returned with their drinks, setting glasses down in front of each of them. She turned her attention to Jasmine. "Do you want me to start a tab for you?"

"Yes, please," Jasmine said, leering a little at the asari.

The waitress turned a little darker blue and smiled. "No problem. Let me know if you need anything else!" She turned and left again, hips swaying.

"She seems to like you," Charles said, smirking and taking a drag.

"Mmm. I thought about taking her home a time or two, but … never got around to it." Jasmine took a drag, letting the smoke seep back out of her nose.
"Why don't you take her now?" He already knew the answer, Ares mentioned that she was serious about someone else, but the last time he tried to touch on the subject of her romantic life, she shut him down. He figured it was worth a shot to try a different approach.

"I’m … not looking for that right now," she said, glancing at him again, something in her eyes telling him not to press the subject.

_No, she's definitely not going to talk about it._

He took another drag and flicked the ashes in the ashtray in front of Ares. "So … you were on the streets? On Earth?"

"Yeah," she said, shifting in her seat a little, sitting up a little higher against the wall. Her gaze seemed to drift lazily over the crowd, but he had a feeling she paid a lot more attention than she made it seem. "Santa Fe and Corpus Christi mostly."

He hummed, considering it for a moment. "I spent some time in Seattle and Portland when I was … eighteen?"

She turned her attention back to him and took another drag, and for the first time, he saw something hardened in her eyes he hadn't noticed before, but it didn't seem directed at him. "Not the worst places to be if you're on the streets. They've got a lot of good resources for the homeless."

He took a drag and nodded. "Laws are more lax, too." It was probably one of the biggest reasons he'd stuck around the pacific northwest.

"What'd you do to get by?" she asked with a smirk.

He glanced at Ares for a second before shrugging. "Mostly just stole shit." No way was he going to tell the chick the list of charges the police could've brought against him included prostitution, grand theft auto, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and forgery. Or the fact, thanks to his recent activity, he could add multiple accounts of murder to the list.

She nodded, taking another drag, seeming to take his watered down confession in stride.

"What about you?" he asked.

She let out a long breath. "Stole shit. Robbed people." Jerking her shoulder, she added, "Stupid shit I regret." She picked up her drink, something dark and murky, and took a heavy swallow before setting the glass back down on a napkin. Something about it seemed to amuse her; she grinned and touched the napkin. Turning her attention back to Charles, a somber expression wiped away her smile. "Ended up running with the wrong people, got into some trouble … got addicted to red sand."

"Damn," he said, taking in the flood of personal information she gave him. He'd never had any real issue with drugs, managed to either avoid using them or just was lucky enough not to get hooked on the few things he did try.

"Yeah." She glanced down at the ashtray, seeming lost in her thoughts for a moment. Clearing her throat, she glanced back up, gaze shifting between Ares and Charles. "I've managed to stay clean since I was seventeen, almost eighteen, though."

"Congrats," Charles said, taking a drag. "It's not something I had to deal with, but I've seen what it can do to people. I know leaving that shit behind couldn't have been easy."

"Definitely wasn't easy." She shook her head, gaze flicking back to Ares before drifting around the bar again.

Ares set his nearly empty glass down on the table before taking a drag. "You two are such downers. I thought we'd be here celebrating our time at the arena and here we are telling sob stories."

Jasmine huffed, taking a drink from her glass. She glanced at Charles. "You did pretty good."

Shaking his head, he smirked. "I really didn't."

"Yeah, you did." She grinned and took a drag. "First time with moving targets, yeah?"

"Yeah," he said and nodded, flicking his ashes.

"So take the compliment." She winked at him.

He chuckled, lifting his glass up and tipping it toward her a bit. "Thanks."

"And you didn't get yourself shot much, so consider it a good target practice." Ares flicked ash in the ashtray before taking another drink from his glass, finishing it off.
The asari brought another glass over, whisking the empty one away without a word before disappearing again.

Charles grinned at Ares, perking up at his praise. "Yeah?"

Ares hummed and nodded, taking a drink from his new glass. "Did you take down your scores before we left?"

Biting the inside of his lip, Charles shook his head. "I didn't think to. The thing records them, though, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but you don't show up on the scoreboard unless you get a top score." She took a drag, blowing the smoke upward. "But, if you go back, you can check them when you login."

"We'll go back," Ares said, rumbling as he took a drag. "We'll just check then."

Charles smiled, dropping a hand below the table to settle on Ares' thigh. "Good. It was fun."

Ares' gaze flicked to Charles as he made a considering hum before nodding once. "Good. When I'm on the station, we'll go there instead of the range."

"Awesome." Charles took a drink, leaning in a little closer to Ares' side. "I'll still go to the range when you're not home, though."

Ares nodded, taking a deep drag. "Good. I had expected you to."

Charles huffed and smirked, his thumb brushing back and forth across Ares' leg a few times. "Of course you did."

"What range do you go to?" Jasmine asked, glancing at Ares.

"Eliat Arms Supplier," Ares said, blowing out smoke before taking a drink from his glass. "I know the owners."

Humming, she nodded. "I've been in there once or twice for supplies when I wasn't able to go to my usual spot."

"Where's your usual spot?" Charles asked automatically.

"I can't answer that." She took a heavy drink from her glass.

"Oh … okay." He shrugged and took a drink from his own.

Ares hummed and glanced toward Jasmine, holding his glass to his mouth a moment before taking a drink. "They keep quiet, and I had a job that involved working around them."

"Huh." She nodded, taking a drag and flicking her ashes. "They seemed like good people."

Charles shrugged. "They've been nice to me so far, even when I go in there without him."

"Good," Ares said, nodding as he stamped out his cigarette and pulled out a fresh one, picking up his lighter from the table to light it. "I figured they would remain professional about it."

Charles nodded. "Definitely, polite and helpful." He certainly didn't have any reason to complain; they didn't ask a lot of questions and mostly stayed out of his way, offering the occasional tip to improve his shooting.

Ares grunted around his cigarette. "Good to know there are some people out there who can keep their mouths shut."

Jasmine's brow twitched a little but she didn't say anything. She killed off her glass and glanced over, catching the waitress' eye. Setting the empty glass down on the edge of the table, she took another drag from the cigarillo. "I noticed you doing some … gymnastics shit or something in the arena a few times. What's that about?"

Charles laughed, draining his glass and sliding it over to the edge of the table next to hers. "It's not gymnastics. It's Parkour."

"Parkour?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Yeah … I don't really know how to explain it. I guess you just look at where you want to be, look at what's available to help you get there. You sort of … trace a path in your mind and go, using your momentum to get you from one place to the next. I picked it up in Seattle." He shrugged and took a drag from his cigarillo. "I can show you sometime if you want?"

She smiled before turning her lips down at the edges and nodding. "Alright."

"Don't know of many places on the Citadel you two can practice." Ares downed the rest of his glass, putting his cigarillo in his mouth as he set the glass at the end of the table. "Maybe the lower Wards."
Charles hummed and said, "So long as we don't piss anyone off enough to call C-Sec, anywhere works, really, that's the beauty of it."

Jasmine chuckled. "If they do call C-Sec on us, I'm pretty sure I can talk us out of trouble."

Ares shrugged, taking a heavy drag from his cigarette. "If you want to attract the attention. I'll stay home while you two do that."

Charles grinned, happy Ares called it 'home' again. "We don't have to do it somewhere you think we'll attract attention. I can't do the same things you'll be teaching her."

"Why?" Ares lifted a brow plate as he looked at Charles. "My body doesn't move the same way yours does. I can't do the same things you'll be teaching her."

Huffing, Charles rolled his eyes. "Uhhhh, because you're mine, and I don't always get to see you. And because she's a scary assassin lady who I barely know."

Jasmine let out a bark of laughter, raising a finger to quiet him as Faline brought over fresh drinks. Ares hummed his thanks to the waitress as he picked up his glass and took a drink. "So let me get this straight, " he said when the waitress left again, "you want me to go and watch while you two practice techniques I can't do just so you have moral support? What's in it for me?"

Charles grinned and asked, "What do you want to be in it for you?"

"To not have to sit there and do nothing while you both practice techniques I can't physically do," Ares deadpanned as he took another drink. "I could find hundreds of things more entertaining than watching you two flop on the floor like fish."

Jasmine laughed again, the sound light and airy. "Don't worry, Charles. She took a drink and sat the glass down. "I have no reason to hurt you, and a damned good reason not to."

Subvocals low, Ares flicked his mandibles a few times and looked at Charles. "If you really want me to go, I will," he said, tone serious.

Charles shook his head a little, the words 'carry you' echoing through his head again. "Nah, it's alright. If you really don't want to go, I'm sure I can manage."

Dropping it though it seemed clear he still had more to say, Ares hummed and took a drag from his cigarette, going quiet as he let the smoke filter out around his mandibles.

Face turning serious, she took the last drag from her cigarillo and glanced at Ares as she put it out. "He'll be safe with me, I promise."

Ares nodded his head once as he took a drink from his glass. "Good. Just giving him the choice if he really wanted it."

She smiled and picked up her glass, taking a deep swallow. "Indeed," she said, smirking and winking at Ares.

He merely rumbled as he fell silent otherwise, taking time to smoke his cigarette and watch the smoke drift in the air above them.

Jasmine watched the asari dancers on the bar, seeming lost in thought for a few minutes before looking at Ares and Charles, throwing a credit chit on the table. "I want to dance," she said.

Before either of them could respond, she slid out of the booth, a little wobbly, but righted herself. She moved over to the bar and climbed up onto a bar stool. The dancer on the bar next to her grinned and held a hand out to her, helping her up to the bar. She wrapped her arms over the asari's shoulders and started dancing provocatively, swaying to the music.

Charles looked at Ares and raised an eyebrow. "She seriously just did that?"

"Looks like it," Ares said, watching her as he flicked ash into the ashtray.

Pursing his lips a little in thought, Charles turned his attention back to the two women dancing, tilting his head as he checked out their curves. "She's kind of funny drunk."

"She's reckless." Ares hummed and took a drink from his glass, shifting his attention to scanning the bar.

Charles thought about it for a moment, not really seeing her as the truly reckless type. "I wonder why she's being reckless?"

Ares let out the odd buzz Charles only heard from him a couple of times before. He flicked his mandible but didn't look at Charles. "Stay here with her, then act like you're escorting your drunk friend off the bar and keeping her from embarrassing herself. Don't bring too much attention to
yourselves. Understand?"

Charles tensed a little but made a point to not look around even though he was deathly curious to
know what caused the shift in Ares. "Okay."

Ares thrummed and nodded once before lifting his glass to Jasmine in cheers before downing it.
He slammed the empty glass on the table and stood, speaking loud enough to be heard by more
than just Charles. "I gotta take a piss," he said before shuffling out of the booth and toward the
restrooms.

Charles waited long enough to finish off his cigarillo before plastering a smile on his face and
standing up. He made his way over to the bar, glancing up at Jasmine. "Ramona?"

"Do I have to?" she asked with a huff and a pout.

The asari dancer looked at Charles and smiled. "She wants to stay, let her stay."

Charles fought the urge to tell her to mind her own goddamn business. "She's got to be up early in
the morning." He turned his attention back to Jasmine. "Remember?"

Jasmine let out a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes. "Yeah ...." Squatting down, she put her hands
on his shoulders. "Help me down."

He reached up, wrapping his hands around her waist and pulled her down from the bar, holding
her upright as she swayed once on the ground.

Grinning up at him, she reached up and tapped her index finger against his nose. "Take me home,
handsome."

He laughed despite the nerves screaming in the back of his head, telling him something was very,
very wrong. Leading her toward the door, he thought she seemed far more drunk than she was a
few minutes before getting up on the bar. She put quite a bit of her weight on him, swaying with
each step like she might teeter over. Shaking his head, Charles led her out of Chora's Den and
over to the taxi stand, wondering where exactly Ares went.

"He'll find us," she said, her voice soft. "Don't worry."

He glanced down at her, realizing her eyes looked crystal clear when he met her gaze. "You know
what's going on?" he asked, voice low as he called the cab.

"Yeah," she said, shifting her weight off of him but still appearing to lean against him just as
much. "But it's not for me to say."

The cab came and they climbed inside. She told him to stop by a liquor store, saying Ares was
going to need it. He didn't like the sound of it, but he did as she suggested. He really wished she'd
just tell him what the fuck was going on.

When they stopped, she went in with him and told him to get whatever he and Ares wanted, so he
picked out a couple of bottles of horosk and a bottle of Mount Milgrom. Meeting her at the
checkout, he noticed she'd grabbed herself a bottle of rum before paying for everything. They got
back in the cab and took it to Charles' and Ares' apartment. She followed him upstairs and looked
away while he accessed his code for the apartment, though he figured she could probably get in
easily if she wanted to either way.

Opening the door, he stepped inside. "Ares?"

Charles immediately knew something was wrong when he saw Ares pacing the short distance
from the front of the balcony doors to the end of the couch, mandibles twitching and an odd
clicking coming from him. Jasmine cracked open one of the bottles of horosk and made her way
over to Ares, holding it out as he paced by her. He stopped just long enough to take the bottle
before taking a deep drink and continuing.

"Why was he there? Why? Of all the places ...." He stopped before her, mandibles flicking
constantly. "Did you know he'd be there? Is he still following you?"

She sucked in a deep breath, clenching her hands into fists, and Ares started pacing again, clearly
agitated. "I haven't been on the Citadel since I was shot, Ares. I haven't seen him since I've been
back. He's a fucking cop, and we were in his jurisdiction. Fuck if I know why he was there.
Maybe he was called in for something. Or maybe he wanted to blow off some steam, get wasted,
and fuck an asari."

"No," Ares said, growling softly as he shook his head, stopping only to take a big drink. "No, he
can't go there. That's not a place for C-Sec .... Is he stupid? What the fuck is he thinking?" He flicked his mandibles before taking another drink and putting his free hand to his forehead. "He isn't supposed to be there ...."

Snorting, the sound derisive, she turned away from him, making her way over to the breakfast bar. "Yeah, well, I'll be sure to tell him that the next time I talk to him, if I ever talk to him again." She sat down on a stool, back against the bar, and opened the bottle of rum, taking a heavy swallow.

Realizing the only thing that would get Ares so worked up was family and remembering his cousin was in C-Sec, Charles quickly put two and two together. Time to stow his shit. He took a deep breath and put himself in Ares' path, reaching for him as he paced closer. "Hey ... it's alright, you're wearing your prosthetics, so even if he did see you, he wouldn't know ...."

Ares let out a soft trill as his shoulders sagged. "Yeah .... And why would he think I'm alive? What good would that do?"

Wrapping his arms around Ares, Charles kept his voice low, soothing, and said, "He wouldn't. It's alright. We know he works in that area now, so, you'll just find another bar you like, yeah?"

"Sure." She stood up, seeming to give Ares a wide berth as she made her way after Charles to the balcony. He opened the door, closing it mostly behind them once they stepped outside, leaving it open just enough where he could hear Ares if he called. Sucking in a deep breath, he let it out in a heavy rush, pulling out his cigarillos. He lit one for himself and offered the pack to Jasmine. She didn't seem to debate for very long before tugging one from the pack and taking the lighter when he offered it to her. She lit the cigarillo and handed the lighter back, leaning over the balcony and taking a heavy drink from the rum.

He opened the door, closing it mostly behind them once they stepped outside, leaving it open just enough where he could hear Ares if he called. Sucking in a deep breath, he let it out in a heavy rush, pulling out his cigarillos. He lit one for himself and offered the pack to Jasmine. She didn't seem to debate for very long before tugging one from the pack and taking the lighter when he offered it to her. She lit the cigarillo and handed the lighter back, leaning over the balcony and taking a heavy drink from the rum.

"For what it's worth ..." she said, pausing to take a drag and look back at him, "... even if he doesn't say it, I can tell you mean the world to him." He smiled, knowing it probably looked a little sad. "Yeah ... I know."
Taking a deep drag, she shook her head. "Honestly?" She took another drag and let it out slowly. "When it comes down to it, I think he more tolerates me than likes me. But… it works for us. In our profession, it's even harder to trust another assassin. He took a chance on me, though, and he's helped me out quite a bit. More than what he probably even realizes." She chuckled. "He doesn't get me, though. And I keep pissing him off, so I guess we'll just have to see how things wind up between us in the long haul. Either way, I trust him not to betray anything I've told him, and I'll keep his secrets, too."

He smoked in silence for a minute, considering her words. "I don't think he always gets me, either."

"Why do you say that?" he asked, turning to lean his hip against the railing and watch her.

She glanced at him, arching an eyebrow. "How could you?"

Furrowing his brow, anger started creeping in around the edges. He opened his mouth, about to say something, maybe to tell her to go fuck herself, but she chuckled and shook her head.

Holding up a hand as if to stave off his rebuttal, Jasmine licked her lips and took a deep breath. "I don't mean it like that. I just mean… the things we know… the things we're trained to do, it permeates every aspect of our lives." Gaze intense, she turned a little more toward him. "We begin to see everyone we come across as a potential target, assessing how best to kill them with a single glance. We never go anywhere without being alert for threats. Our weapons are always within reach. We have to hide behind aliases and disguises so much that sometimes we start to forget who we really are."

She rubbed her fingers over her brow, gaze softening and said, "All of our relationships—those of us who allow ourselves to have relationships—are built on a foundation of fear. Fear that one day, someone will go after the people we love in retribution for a life we took." She shook her head. "And so much more I can't even begin to explain … add that to the shit he went through—I don't know what he's told you, and that's fine, I don't need to know—but it was bad. It'd fuck anyone up, make them harder for anyone else to understand them."

Charles swallowed, the things she said weighing heavy on him, skewing his view of Ares a bit. He took a deep breath. "I… I want to get him."

She gave him a soft smile and offered him the bottle of rum in her hand. "He knows. And it sounds like he's letting you get him as much as he can."

"I fucked up." He hesitated, not sure why he felt the urge to tell her anything. Taking the bottle from her, he brought it to his lips and guzzled a few swallows. "We got in a bad fight a while back, and I said some fucked up shit. I thought I'd lost him."

"He's here now." She took a drag, turning her attention back out over the balcony.

Taking a deep breath, he rubbed a hand over his face before raking it through his hair. "Yeah… I'm just terrified I'll get something wrong again."

"Listen," she said, turning to lean against the railing with her hip, facing him. "You can't do that to yourself. You can't do that to him. You can't do that to him. If you're spending every moment the two of you have together walking around on eggshells because you're worried about upsetting him, you're doing the both of you an injustice. Be true to yourself, be the person he fell for—because honey, he carved your fucking name into his arm, so he's definitely fallen for you—and things will find a way to work out."

He scoffed, picking at the butt of his cigarillo. "Maybe."

"No maybe. Definitely." She grinned, reaching out and gently shoving him. "Don't you remember I'm always right?"

He laughed, taking a drag and pushed her back. "You shot him in the ass. Pretty sure that wasn't the 'right' thing to do."

She huffed. "It was a joke. Jokes aren't right or wrong." Flicking her wrist, she waved her hand dismissively. "Besides, he pulled a gun on me yesterday."

"Can you really blame him?" he asked, smirking.

"Nope. She shook her head, taking another drag before blowing it out slowly. "I probably would've done the exact same thing if the roles were reversed, but it doesn't mean it didn't feel like a slap in the face."

Humming, he took a long drag from his cigarillo before putting it out. "You didn't know we were together?"

"No, all I knew is he'd met you once, months ago." She finished off her cigarillo and put it out in the ashtray, too. "Which is another thing that makes me say he must really care about you. He
didn't want me to know. He wanted to protect you."

He hummed again, reaching over for the bottle and took a heavy drink when she gave it to him. "Makes sense."

She snorted. "Of course it does." Squatting down, she picked up Eezo and held the dog against her chest.

Charles noticed Ares coming into the living room, prosthetics removed, and in a pair of pants with his cigarettes and lighter in his hand. He didn't acknowledge the two of them on the balcony as he grabbed the bottle of horosk, sat on the couch, and lit a cigarette, taking a heavy drag. Jasmine glanced over her shoulder, looking through the glass at Ares. Charles pulled the door opened the rest of the way and stepped back inside, and she followed him. He moved to the couch and sat down next to Ares, squeezing his knee, a little shocked at how cold the turian felt.

She remained standing and shoved her hands in her back pockets. "Ares, should I head out, or do you want me to stick around for a while longer? Have a few more drinks?"

Ares blew out a deep breath of smoke. "How long did you clear up with Ray?"

She shrugged. "I told him I'd see him tomorrow. He expects I'll be hungover so he won't be knocking at the door at four in the damn morning."

Ares' huff sounded humorless as he nodded once. "You can stick around. Can't say if the couch is comfortable to sleep on, but you're free to it."

She blinked twice, a slow smile spreading over her face. "Thanks. Let's see how much I end up drinking. If I'm drunk enough that I can't get home, I won't care what the couch is like."

Humming, he took a deep drag from his cigarette. "Good. You can sleep with the dog, too. She usually whines outside the door every night."

That's because I let her in when you're not here.

She chuckled. "I don't mind. She can be my teddy bear for the night."

Crossing over to the bag she'd sat on the breakfast bar, she carried it back over and put it on the table. She grabbed the chair tucked into the corner and dragged it over closer, sitting down opposite of Ares and Charles. Opening the bag, she handed Charles the Mount Milgrom he picked out for himself and sat back with her bottle of rum. Eezo nosed against her, and she patted her lap, letting the dog jump up there.

Ares took a deep drink from his bottle, and then he stopped Charles from opening the bottle of whiskey. "That shit won't get you drunk," Ares said, nudging him with the bottle of horosk. "Try this. Drink something worthwhile."

Charles raised an eyebrow, doubtful. The Mount Milgrom was more than sufficient to get him drunk, and the volus at the liquor store last time made it seem like horosk was a really bad idea for a human. But, he didn't want to disappointed Ares, so he accepted the bottle and took a tentative drink. It instantly lit his mouth on fire, and he nearly choked and spit it out all over the place. He managed to make himself swallow it down before coughing, face screwing up.

Ares chuckled softly but purred before setting his bottle down long enough to open Charles' Mount Milgrom and hand it back to him. Charles coughed again, hand against his chest as he sucked in a deep breath, barely catching sight of Jasmine smirking at him through bleary eyes.

He took the bottle from Ares and sucked in a deep breath. "Holy shit, how do you drink that shit like water?"

Ares actually seemed to think about it before he rumbled and shrugged. Lifting his bottle to his mouth, he took a heavy drink before chasing it with a drag from his cigarette.

She chuckled, taking a deep drink from her rum, running her fingers through Eezo's fur. "Probably tastes different to him."

Snorting, Ares looked at Charles. "What did it taste like to you?"

Charles hummed and took a drink before turning to Jasmine. "I don't think there's too big a difference in tastes. Horosk tastes like gun oil that burns your tongue, so I guess 'lava' would be apt."

"Can't say I know what gun oil tastes like, but I know what it smells like, and that doesn't smell like gun oil." She scrunch up her face. "It smells like … shit stronger than everclear. It burns my nostrils from here."

Charles hummed. "Burns your tongue' is inadequate. Try … sears off every taste bud in your mouth and causes blisters." He grumbled. "I can't even taste my cigarillo."
Ares snorted around his own cigarette. "’S no worse than ryncol, only without the stomach cramps."

"Never tried ryncol, don't want to try ryncol." Charles grabbed the bottle from Ares and took another devastatingly painful, long drink, wincing as he forced himself to swallow it and handed it back to Ares. "Yep," he said, short of breath, "that shit's terrible."

Jasmine laughed loud enough to startle Eezo, and the dog jumped down from her lap.

Rumbling, Ares shrugged and lifted the bottle to his mouth. "More for me, then."

Just the two drinks, on top of what he already had at the bar, had Charles' head swimming. "Nope. You want me to drink that shit, I'll drink that shit."

"Why? You're going to kill yourself, or go blind." She chuckled.

"Or worse," Ares said, holding the bottle away from Charles as he downed a big gulp, "puke it up and waste it."

Letting out a little groan, Charles thought it sounded like some shit his father would say about alcohol. "Fine. I'll drink this, then. And puke it up and waste it."

"Better not," she said, giving him a stern look. "That's a major no-no."

Ares hummed and set his cigarette in his mouth to free his hand before he plucked the Mount Milgrom from Charles' hand. Bringing it to his mouth, he took a drink and hummed at the taste. "Yeah, this doesn't help so much for my head as horosk does." He handed it back to Charles and washed the taste away with horosk.

"Your head's hurting?" Frowning, Charles took a drink of the whiskey.

Ares hummed in affirmative around a drag from his cigarette, blowing it out as he flicked his mandibles. He was more than a little drunk by the look in his eyes as he reached up and tapped the back of his head. "Implant is bad. I get migraines."

Confused, Charles scrunched up his face. "Implant?"

Jasmine hummed. "You haven't noticed the scar?"

He looked at her like she was insane. "He's kinda covered in them."

She snorted. "Fair enough."

Rumbling, Ares stuck the cigarette in his mouth and shifted on the couch, turning his back toward Charles. "Here," he mumbled, tapping the base of his skull. "See it?"

Charles reached up and traced his fingers over the scar Ares pointed out. "You're a biotic?"

Ares made a drawn out, groaning buzz. "Not a good one. I just get headaches from the fucking dampener."

She hummed, taking a drink. "Don't feel bad, I noticed it for the first time last night. He's tall, and with a cowl, it's hard to notice."

Shifting to sit back comfortably, Ares waved his hand. "Doesn't really matter anyways. Got the dampener to hide it, and it won’t do me any good now getting rid of it. No point in finding the scar."

Jasmine shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other, but I get it, turians have … issues with biotics."

Ares scoffed and looked at Charles. "Fucking hate them. Being a biotic is like a death sentence. And I didn't even have enough exposure to have a possibility of controlling it so, fuck it, I got a dampener."

"Why do turians hate biotics?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

Taking a drag, Ares hummed. "It goes against the concept of merit. You earn your place through hard work, but all of a sudden you have this uncontrollable force? Biotics can't be placed with regular soldiers because they aren't equal in ability. When we were still learning about what biotics could do, when the Cabal concept was thought up, the usage of biotics was usually for underhanded shit. It created a stigma of turians that were just gifted randomly with an ability that wasn't provided equally among the species that also tended to be sent to do the Hierarchy's dirty work." He shrugged and took a drink from his bottle. "It's all bullshit, but I didn't want to put up with it so I got the implant as soon as I tested positive."

Charles thought it was incredibly stupid and fucked up all at once. Biotics were an advantage, and he thought with a group of people as militant as turians, they'd like having advantages. Biotics could be controlled, it just took training, just like any other weapon. He took a drink from his
bottle. "Will it help if I rub your head?"

Ares rumbled, flicking a mandible at him, but shook his head. "It's a deep pain. The horosk and smokes help."

Pouting a little, Charles leaned over and kissed Ares' mandible. "I'm sorry."

Jasmine sat forward, putting the bottle of rum down on the table and stood up. "Chances are, he'd be dealing with migraines either way. L2 amps are known to cause migraines, on top of a shitload of other potential problems."

She took off her jacket, draping it over the back of the chair before removing her pistol holster. Setting it down on the chair, she untucked her shirt and reached beneath. The sound of velcro filled the air, and a moment later she pulled out the long, black strip of material she'd used to sheath her throwing knives. Charles didn't realize she carried so many of them, it looked like she had at least eight, and he raised an eyebrow. Picking up the pistol, she sat back down in the chair, folding the strap before setting them both on the table, pistol on top of the knives.

"You can shove the shit on the table around to make room for your stuff," Ares said with a rumble, flicking ashes from his cigarette into the ashtray. "The dog is less likely to get a hold of it that way."

She shrugged, leaning back over to push a datapad and the ashtray over a bit before sliding them a little further up onto the table, but not far, keeping them within her easy reach. She lifted one of her feet up on the opposite knee and unzipped her boot before pulling it off. She did the same to the other and tucked them under the edge of the table. Then, seeming to think better of it, she raised an eyebrow and asked. "Is she going to eat my boots?"

Charles chuckled. "She doesn't chew on much anymore. Ares just enjoys acting like she's a huge pain in the ass." He shrugged. "But … you may want to put them in the hall closet, just in case."

Snorting, she got up and carried her boots down the hall, tossing them into the closet before coming back and sitting down again. Picking up the bottle of rum, she turned sideways, wedging her back against one arm of the chair before draping a leg over the other.

"Break that chair and you're buying him a new one," Ares said, voice light and more bored than threatening. "He gets mad when you break things."

She huffed. "I'm pretty sure you just called me fat, but I'm drunk enough not to care." She rolled her head to the side to look at them. "And why wouldn't he get mad if shit's getting broken? I would."

Charles snorted. "At least I wouldn't think you did it on purpose."

Ares scoffed, taking a drink. "I didn't do anything on purpose."

"Uh huh." Charles took a heavy drink and kicked his shoes off.

Jasmine raised an eyebrow. "What'd he break?"

"He shot my vidscreen," Charles said, pointing at the new one. "But he replaced it with a better one."

"And that was supposed to be an accident?" Jasmine scoffed.

"I didn't break it if it was already broken, which it was." Ares shrugged and stamped out his cigarette, fetching his pack to light a new one. "The bullet isn't what broke it in the first place."

"It worked just fine when I left for work." Charles rolled his eyes but smiled, shifting on the couch to lean in against Ares who still felt a little cold to the touch. Raising an eyebrow, she said, "So … the vidscreen broke, and you decided to shoot it because …?"

"I was pissed off," Ares said around his cigarette before taking a drag.
Scared Shitless

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Scared Shitless

Charles woke up to Eezo snuggled in against his side. His head hurt a little, mouth and eyes feeling dry and gritty. Rolling over, he found Ares' side of the bed empty but it didn't come as a surprise. The turian left the bed far earlier than Charles most days. Even when he went to bed before Ares, and even when Ares drank as much as he did the night before. He yawned and flipped to his back, stretching his arms out over his head, pushing out with his legs to feel his spine pop in a couple of places. He let out a groan and yawned again, tossing the covers off of him.

Eezo whined and stood up, wagging her tail and sticking her cold nose against his ribs as he sat up. Chuckling, he wrapped his arm around her and squeezed her to his side, kissing the top of her head before letting her go again. He grabbed his sweats from the floor and pulled them on his legs before standing and tugging them the rest of the way up. Swiping his cigarillos and lighter from the table, he made his way to the bathroom.

After taking a piss, he brushed his teeth before heading out to the balcony, knowing he'd find Ares out there. Glancing around, he didn't see Jasmine anywhere. He stepped out onto the balcony and lit a cigarillo, taking a deep drag as he leaned into Ares' side, bracing his elbows against the railing. "Morning."

Ares hummed in greeting, taking a drag of his cigarette. Charles yawned again, bringing his cigarillo back to his lips. Eezo shuffled out onto the balcony, pressing her side against his legs.

Glancing over his shoulder, he looked into the empty apartment again. "Jasmine take off?"

"Yep."

Silence sat between them for a minute or so as they both smoked, looking out over the balcony. Charles looked up at Ares, taking a deep drag as he tried to read the turian's expression. He'd prepared himself to see Ares struggling over seeing Garrus at Chora's Den, thinking maybe Ares worked so hard to pull himself together because of Jasmine. Charles thought being alone with just him, Ares would let his guard down again and want to talk about it a little. But, despite his initial freak out, Ares seemed to be coping pretty well, for the most part. Which actually didn't feel right to Charles for some reason, but he couldn't really place why.

He licked his lips. "How are you doing after last night?"

"About as good as I can be," Ares said with a shrug.

Charles hummed, chewing the inside of his lip before asking, "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really." Ares blew out a wisps smoke toward the horizon.

"Okay ... let me know if you change your mind." Charles turned his attention out over the Citadel and took a deep breath. He wished Ares would talk to him, let him know what went on inside his head, what he needed. He still felt so lost as to how to do the right thing for Ares after how badly he messed up last time, but he desperately wanted to be whatever it was Ares needed him to be. "I have to go into work soon. Do you want to meet for lunch later?"

Ares shrugged. "Sure."

"Cool." Charles glanced up at Ares again and scraped his teeth over his lip. The one-word answers he'd managed to pull from the turian made him uneasy, felt like he missed something big, something he should be doing. If only he had a single fucking clue what it was. "There's a place over on the Tayseri Ward hosting MMA matches later tonight if you're interested?"

"Mixed species or just human?" Ares stamped out his cigarette butt before flicking it off the balcony. He grabbed his pack from his pocket and lit a new one, taking a deep, long drag.

"Mixed." Charles took another drag and reached down to scratch Eezo's ear when she stood on her hind legs, putting her front paws against his thigh.

Ares shrugged. "Why not?"

Grinning, Charles finished off his cigarillo and put it out. "Awesome." He leaned over, pushing up on his toes to kiss Ares' mandible. "I better get in the shower." Turning, he headed back into the apartment, feeling a little more optimistic. He knew getting out and doing something entertaining for the evening wouldn't fix things for Ares, but he thought it might help, at least a little.

"Welcome to Citadel Sou—' Charles' words caught in his throat when he glanced up and saw the
chime rang to announce the presence of several C-Sec officers, weapons out and ready, coming
into the store instead of customers. Ice water flushed through his veins and his stomach churned,
bringing up acid to burn the back of his tongue and throat. Warning bells went off in the back of
his head, telling him to run, and it took every ounce of his will to stay put.

Jesus fuck. I'm dead. I'm so dead. Oh my God. They're going to lock me away for the rest of my
life. I'm never going to see Ares again. He's going to be so pissed at me. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Oh … can I help you?" The alarm in Mahlia's voice drew Charles' attention to her for a second.
She stood at the other end of the counter, palms pressed to the surface, eyes wide, posture tense
and rigid.

"Yes, ma'am." The turian taking the lead moved over to Mahlia while the other officers spread out
a little, blocking the exit and looking around. "I'm Detective Aldras. We've received reports there
may be illegal weapons and substances on the premises. We need all employees on site to come to
the front and wait out here with one of our officers while we perform a search."

Werin. Holy shit, this must be about Werin. Oh, thank fucking God.

Mahlia turned her big, doe eyes on Charles, an obvious if silent plea for help.

The turian followed her gaze to Charles and flicked his mandibles. "Are you a supervisor, sir?"

Charles cleared his throat and gave the detective a light shake of his head. "No, sir. This shift's
supervisor isn't currently here, but I can contact her for you."

"Please do." Detective Aldras nodded his head, fluttering his mandibles softly. "In the meantime,
please gather anyone else here to the front."

Jerk ing his head in understanding, Charles turned and made his way toward the door to the back
room. Nerves still shook him, regardless of knowing C-Sec didn't come there for him, leaving him
feeling slightly skewed, off-center from the rest of reality. He couldn't even feel his feet moving
across the floor.

"Sir?" the turian called after him.

Charles stopped and turned to look at the detective, licking his lips. "Yeah?"

Flaring his mandibles wide, the turian pinned him in place with his dark blue eyes. "I need you to
stay where I can see you. Does the store have an intercom system?"

"Uh, no … but there's only one other person here." Charles shifted a little, glancing over his
shoulder before looking back at the group of C-Sec. "I can call him on my omni-tool?"

Detective Aldras jerked his head, so Charles made his way back to the counter. He opened his
omni-tool and put in Cammus' contact information, taking slow, calming breaths while he waited
for the call to connect. As soon as he saw Cammus' face pop up on the screen, he said, "Cammus,
you need to come up front right away."

Cammus' mandibles stilled, and he gave Charles a curt nod before cutting the call. A few seconds
later, he came through the door. Stopping in his tracks, he flared his mandibles and took in the C-
Sec officers before taking slow, hesitant steps over to Charles' side. Mahlia moved down the
counter to stand with them, too, biotic flames softly licking along her exposed skin here and there.
She looked utterly terrified, but her fear helped center Charles a little. He shifted, opening his arm
to her, and the asari moved in against his side without a word. A moment later, her biotics died
down.

"Is there anyone else on the premises?" Detective Aldras asked, looking Cammus over.

Cammus shook his head, mandibles flaring. "No, sir."

The detective nodded before looking at the other officers and jerked his head toward the back.
One by one, six men and women in C-Sec blues filed behind the counter, four heading through
the back while two looked around the front behind the counter. Charles urged Cammus and
Mahlia out of their way, moving around to the other side of the counter to wait. The asari officer
left guarding the door flared her biotics and turned to watch them, assault rifle aimed low at their
feet, making Charles bristle all over again.

"I need to call Irene," he said, dropping his arm from Mahlia. He placed the call, licking his lips
when the red-head answered, her face pinched in annoyance. "Irene, C-Sec's here. They're
searching the store."

"What?" Her voice came through in a loud enough screech to make Cammus flinch away from
the noise. "Tell them to wait, I'm on my way."

Charles brought the thumb of his free hand to his mouth, chewing on the nail for a second before
he said, "They're already looking around." He glanced over his shoulder at the asari guarding the
door.
"Damn it, Charles. You should've called me the second they showed up." She cut the call, and his screen went black.

"What's going on?" Cammus asked, rumbling softly as he moved closer to Charles. "What are they looking for?"

"They said they received reports of illegal weapons and substances somewhere in the store." Mahlia moved back in closer to Charles, too, keeping her voice low as she glanced between the two of them. "It has to be a mistake, right? Someone playing a prank or something?"

Cammus flared his mandibles and lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. "I don't know."

"Charles?" She turned her head to look up at him, eyes glassy with the build-up of unshed tears. "Are we going to get arrested? We didn't do anything wrong."

"If they search us and find my razor, I'll get arrested. Fuck, I knew I should've called in today. But Irene probably would've fired me. I seriously need to find another job. I can't go to prison. I can't. I just can't. Fuck.

Wrapping his arm around her, he pulled her back in against his side. "I don't know, Mahlia. I'm sorry."

"I want to call Lindsey," she said, her voice thick with restrained emotion.

"I need to go to the employee kiosk in the break room."

"Let's go," the turian said, jerking his head toward the back.

"Calm the fuck down and stop acting suspicious, idiot," Ares' voice filled his head, and he took a slow, deep breath.

He opened the door to the break room, gesturing at the kiosk as he glanced over his shoulder. The officer following him nodded, so Charles crossed over to the kiosk. Taking another deep breath, he did his best to still his trembling fingers and accessed the kiosk's main menu. He may not be a supervisor, but he knew Irene's code. She'd been reliant on him to pick up her slack since the beginning. He typed in her code and accessed the employee roster, pulling up a full list of everyone employed by Citadel Souvenirs, including the supervisors. He glanced up at the turian and nodded, stepping back out of the way.

"Calm the fuck down and stop acting suspicious, idiot," Ares' voice filled his head, and he took a slow, deep breath.

He opened the door to the break room, gesturing at the kiosk as he glanced over his shoulder. The officer following him nodded, so Charles crossed over to the kiosk. Taking another deep breath, he did his best to still his trembling fingers and accessed the kiosk's main menu. He may not be a supervisor, but he knew Irene's code. She'd been reliant on him to pick up her slack since the beginning. He typed in her code and accessed the employee roster, pulling up a full list of everyone employed by Citadel Souvenirs, including the supervisors. He glanced up at the turian and nodded, stepping back out of the way.

Opening his omni-tool, the turian stepped forward and downloaded the information. Fluttering his mandibles, he looked over the list and rumbled. "Head back up front."
The door behind them leading to storage opened, drawing their attention before Charles could move. A human officer stepped through, gaze locking onto the turian, and she gave him a brief nod. "Call down, let them know we've found the crates."

*Shit. This is so fucked up. Werin, you sonofabitch. I swear to God if Jasmine wasn't already going to kill you ....* 

"Get moving," the turian said to Charles, jerking his head toward the door.

Without a word, Charles turned on his heel and headed for the front, swallowing as he crossed the threshold. In his absence, Mahlia moved on to Cammus for support, tucked in against the turian's side. He turned his head, gaze searching out Charles, mandibles pulled in tight against his jaw. Charles made his way back over to them while the turian officer moved to the two asari, talking to them in hushed tones.

"Spirits," Cammus muttered a moment later, and his mandibles drooped when Charles looked at him.

"Alright, the three of you, turn around and put your hands against the wall," the turian officer said, turning back to them.


"What? No! Why?" Mahlia's voice carried a frantic edge, adding to the spike of adrenaline suddenly flooding Charles, making his pulse race, echoing in his ears.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," a salarian dressed in a sharp suit said, walking up to the door with Irene at his side. "I'm the legal representative for Citadel Souvenirs, and as such, the legal representative of Citadel Souvenirs' employees in this regard. I've already spoken with Commander Halavie and have been informed of the reason for this search. You already have your suspect for these alleged crimes, and unless I am mistaken, none of the employees you are harassing is a salarian named Werin Menoko."

Smoking a cigarillo, Charles picked at his fingernails while he waited for Ares outside of The Moons of Palaven. The whole thing with C-Sec left him on edge, and he dreaded returning to work after lunch, but he knew he needed to. It'd look suspicious if he didn't. C-Sec cordoned off part of the storage room and were still searching the rest when he'd left. The lawyer, Ristol Fumar, convinced Detective Aldras to let them take their lunch breaks, but he only let them leave one at a time. Charles felt a little surprised they didn't just close the store, but between Irene and the lawyer, they threw a big enough fit to keep the business running. He wondered if Citadel Souvenirs would be shut down permanently because of Werin's shit.

A shadow fell over him, and he glanced up, seeing Ares standing in front of him. "Hey," he said, bringing his thumb to his mouth to tear off a jagged piece of nail and spit it off to the side, and Ares flicked a mandible, nose twitching with distaste. He took a drag of his cigarillo, finishing it off before dropping it to the ground and crushing it beneath his foot. "C-Sec showed up at work today."

"Why? Were you carrying something?" Ares hummed as he moved past Charles and led them to a table of his choosing.

"Why? Seriously? C-Sec is looking for a goddamn serial killer!"

Charles huffed. "I've always got my razor on me. Been thinking about carrying the Stiletto, too, since the shit with you coming home to find Jasmine there." He licked his lips and took a seat.

"Will you take it back home for me?" He handed the razor over when Ares rumbled and nodded, watching him tuck it away in his jacket pocket. Charles felt exposed and vulnerable without it.

"They're still there, it's about Werin."

"Figures." Ares grabbed the menu and began looking through the options.

Charles glanced at Ares as he picked up his own menu and blinked, processing Ares' statement. He knew Werin was doing illegal shit, but he didn't expect C-Sec to show up at work over it—at least not to raid the goddamn place. "He's been using the store's shipping to smuggle shit."

Ares merely hummed, not looking up from his menu.

"Of course."

"You already knew, though, didn't you?" Snorting, Charles shook his head and turned his attention to the menu.

"Yep. Not directly, but I figured. Makes sense." Ares shrugged, flipping his menu closed. "Not that it was smart, but it was logical."

Rubbing his hand over his face, Charles picked out what he wanted to order and closed the menu.
before digging his cigarillos out of his pocket. If Ares suspected, why didn't he say anything to him? For fuck's sake, he could've wound up getting arrested. He could still end up getting arrested just because he worked there, too. Then what? What if they started asking him questions about other shit, or realized some piece of evidence they collected on the murders related to him in some way?

Stow your shit, Charles.

"Would've been nice to have a heads up, but I guess I should've figured it out on my own." Idiot. "Guess I probably need to stop running around with my razor on me, too." He didn't like the idea. At all. But he knew only pure luck saved him from being searched before the lawyer showed up. Letting out a heavy breath, he rubbed his hand over his face again before smirking and shrugging. "Irene's livid. I thought she was going to take a swing at one of the officers and get arrested. That would've been fun to watch."

Ares huffed a laugh as he leaned over in his seat to reach into his pocket. "I didn't tell you because you would've been anticipating it. This way, your reaction was natural."

Naturally freaked the fuck out because I thought I'd end up spending the rest of my life in prison for multiple accounts of murder. Sure. No way they could've taken that for guilt and pegged me as Werin's accomplice.

Lighting his cigarillo, Charles gnawed on the corner of his nail. "Mmm, maybe. Hopefully, with everything else, though, I didn't seem too nervous."

"Were you doing that?" Ares asked, flaring his mandibles.

"What?" Charles stopped biting his nail long enough to take a drag from his cigarillo, and Ares motioned to his own mouth, wiggling his fingers next to his mandible. Huffing, Charles shook his head. "No." Maybe a little. Mostly not.

"That's a tick of yours," Ares fluttered his mandibles, brow plate twitching. "You need to stop doing that when you're nervous."

Taking a long, slow breath, Charles nodded, knowing Ares was right. He shoved his free hand between his knees, trapping it there, and focused on smoking his cigarillo. "Yeah ...."

An asari waitress came over to the table, a smile on her face. "Good afternoon. Can I take your drink orders?"

Charles glanced up at her and said, "Orange Paragade."

She recorded it on her datapad and turned to Ares. "And for you?"

Ares put his cigarette in his mouth and opened his omni-tool, pausing to look up at her and nod softly before typing. "Cipritine Red for myself."

She flashed another smile at them both and said, "Great. I'll be back in a few minutes with your drinks and to take your orders." She turned and left them again.

"So, anyway," Charles said, shifting around in his chair and taking a drag, "should we tell Jasmine about the raid?"

"What's a flavor that disgusts you?" Ares asked, ignoring the question as he dropped his attention to his omni-tool.

"Black licorice," Charles said without thought and then raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

And why are you dodging my question?

Ares hummed and typed into his omni-tool before closing it. "I got something you're going to put on your nails. It's bitter and tastes like this 'black licorice' you're talking about."

Charles laughed both amused and secretly thinking of the gesture as really sweet, though he didn't dare say so to Ares. "I guess that's one way to do it."

"Would you rather I pull them off?" Ares said, not giving any hint as to whether he was serious or not.

Okay, sweet for two seconds.

Blowing a raspberry, Charles took a drag from his cigarillo. "Fuck no."

Ares hummed and took a drag from his cigarette. "There was a female in our spec ops training who constantly jostled her leg while she sat. Our instructor caught her doing it and, to teach her to stop, climbed onto her knees and stood on them for a few hours."

Charles lifted an eyebrow. "Did it work?"
"After a few days of it, of course." Ares flicked a mandible.

Humming, Charles took a drag, blowing the smoke out toward the restaurant. "You're not standing on my hands."

"That wouldn't work anyways," Ares said, shrugging. "I'd probably pick the nails off and salt them."

Pouting his lip a little, Charles huffed. "Be nice to me."

Ares flared his mandibles. "I am being nice. I'm helping you kick a bad habit."

"And if the black licorice shit doesn't work, what then?" Charles raised an eyebrow, smirking. "You going to pick my nails off and salt them?"

Ares hummed as if considering.

Charles blew another raspberry. "We're both pretty fucked in the head, you know that?"

Taking a drag, Ares shrugged. "We'd be boring otherwise."

"Damn right," Charles said with a smile, putting out his cigarillo as the waitress returned.

Even just being there with Ares helped to calm Charles, taking the edge off the anxiety plaguing him since C-Sec showed up. He wished he could just take Ares back to Citadel Souvenirs with him. Cling to Ares like his own personal, turian, security blanket.

The waitress sat down their drinks and pulled out her datapad. "Are you ready to order, or do you need a few more minutes?"

Ares flicked ash into the ashtray as he rumbled. "Your special …. Does it come where you can only sear the meat? Or does it get that disgusting freezer flavor?"

The asari shifted around a little, her smile faltering. "Well, The Moons of Palaven orders fresh shipments once a week, but the meat does arrive cryogenically frozen, sir. However, I haven't heard any customers complain about any unusual taste. We can prepare any dish to your liking."

Ares' nose twitched, but he shrugged. "Alright. Hard sear it, but bring some sauce for it on the side, just in case."

"Of course." She turned her attention to the datapad. "Anything else for you?"

Ares hummed a moment, checking the menu with a quick glance. "Yeah. Make that two of them."

She blinked but smiled, adding it to the order before turning to Charles. "And for you, sir?"

"I'll have the mixed meats club sandwich," Charles said, starting to bring his thumbnail to his mouth but catching himself and shoving his hand back down to rub his thigh.

"And for your side?" she asked, attention on her datapad again.

"Uh." Charles glanced at the menu. "French fries are fine."

"Excellent. I'll have those right out." She turned and left again.

He watched her go before taking a drink of his Paragade. "I thought I might see if Cammus wants to come with us tonight. What do you think?"

Taking a drag, Ares shrugged with a rumble. "If he wants to.

Despite the presence of C-Sec, business boomed. Charles figured the uptick in customers owed thanks to people being too damn curious for their own good, coming in just so they had a reason to try and see what C-Sec was doing there. Detective Aldras uncovered a total of six crates buried beneath the overflow. Charles began to question how the hell no one noticed them back when the storage room was being reorganized thanks to Okal's obsessiveness, but then he remembered Werin got called in to help with moving crap around. Still, it seemed strange no one else seemed to know anything about any of it.

He wondered if the whole thing at Citadel Souvenirs would put Jasmine off her job, or maybe just delay her making her move on Werin. Then, the pieces clicked together in his head, and suddenly he felt like the galaxy's biggest moron. Jasmine tipped off C-Sec. That was why she'd come into Citadel Souvenirs and asked him about lunch breaks, happy to hear he'd be there alone for an hour. She must've come in while the others were gone and found the crates, but why? She was an assassin, her job was to kill Werin, not hunt for evidence, right?

Fuck, what did he know? It wasn't like Ares really told him all too much about assassins. But … it also meant Ares probably knew goddamn well C-Sec was going to show up—not just that there was a chance—which was why he'd ignored Charles' question at lunch.
"Sonofabitch, he lied to me!"

"Charles Fairclough?"

Charles turned toward the voice, spotting the salarian lawyer. "Yeah?"

"Detective Aldras would like to speak with you." Ristol brushed his hand down the front of his suit. "I will be present with you doing the discussion, and it's imperative you follow my directions. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Charles pushed away from the counter, leaving Mahlia to deal with the rush on her own, and followed the salarian to the break room.

Detective Aldras sat at the break table, datapads scattered out around him. He glanced up when Charles approached the table and waved his hand. "Mr. Fairclough?" he asked, and when Charles nodded, he smiled and added, "Have a seat."

"Mind if I smoke? Figured I might as well take the chance while I've got it, we're pretty rushed up front." He reached in his pocket, pulling out his cigarillos as he sat down across from the turian.

"Not at all." Detective Aldras hummed, looking back down at a datapad right in front of him. "C-Sec's presence tends to draw in onlookers."

"Yeah, figured." Charles lit a cigarillo, putting the pack and his lighter on the table before dragging the ashtray over.

Ristol sniffed but didn't say anything, taking a seat to Charles' left—away from his cigarillo.

Lacing his fingers, Detective Aldras rested his arms on the table and studied Charles for a moment. "Mr. Fairclough, were you aware of anything illegal being stored and shipped from Citadel Souvenirs?"

"Yes."

Charles glanced at Ristol, and the salarian nodded his head, so Charles said, "No, not until you guys showed up. He took a drag, blowing the smoke up toward the ceiling, reminding himself to stay relaxed or the turian would smell it on him—and also to not bite his nails.

"Can you tell me who has access to the storage room?" Detective Aldras fluttered his mandibles.

Ristol cleared his throat. "Detective, you are well aware the door to the storage room is not locked, allowing every employee or anyone else on the premises, for that matter, potential access."

Rumbling, Detective Aldras flicked a mandible. "Allow me to rephrase: can you tell me who is assigned to work in the storage room?"

"Go ahead, Mr. Fairclough," Ristol said, giving Charles a nod when he glanced at him.

"Currently, Cammus—on our shift, anyway." Charles shrugged. "You'd have to ask Irene or another supervisor about the other shifts, I don't keep track."

"Currently?" Detective Aldras flared his mandibles.

"Yeah," Charles said, taking a drag. "He's only been here for a couple of months. Before that, there were a few weeks where we took turns pulling items and preparing shipments. Before that, I worked back there."

"I see." Detective Aldras typed something into a datapad. "And why do you no longer work back there?"

"Honestly?" Charles raised an eyebrow.

Ristol let out a soft, sputtering cough. "Of course, Mr. Fairclough. You should answer all of the detective's questions honestly."

Charles rolled his eyes, and the slight flick of Detective Aldras' mandible told him the turian held a better understanding of human speech and rhetorical questions. The detective gave him a slight nod.

"I took some time off last minute, and it pissed Irene off." Charles shrugged and smirked, glancing over at Irene who spoke to another officer over by the door to storage. "So, when I came back to work, she moved me up front where she knows I'm less comfortable."

His answer seemed to give Ristol an aneurysm. The salarian made a choking sound, blinking several times before letting out a soft croak. "I'm sure Ms. Waters had other—more justified and professional—reasons to change your position within the store, Mr. Fairclough."

"Sure." Charles took a drag, letting the smoke seep back out of his mouth as he said, "She claims it's because she hadn't replaced Lindsey yet and needed me more up front. But then
she hired Cammus, and instead of having him take over Lindsey's old job the way she was supposed to, she assigned him to the back."

"I hardly think this is an appropriate line of questioning." Ristol sniffed, shifting around in his seat.
The detective let out a low, amused rumble. "You're the one who encouraged him to expand on his statements, Mr. Fumar."

"Yes, well, perhaps we should move on." Ristol blinked, settling again.

"Of course." Detective Aldras turned back to Charles. "You mentioned a 'Lindsey', have there been any other employees, besides Lindsey, who have quit or been fired in the last six months?"

Pulling his shoulders in, Charles said, "Not that I know of, but then again, it'd be a better question for Irene." He took a long drag before flicking his ashes and resting his hand on the table, letting the cigarillo hover over the ashtray.

"You said that you were more comfortable working in the back of the store than the front." Detective Aldras fluttered his mandibles. "Why is that, Mr. Fairclough?"

Charles lifted an eyebrow, stating as a matter of fact, "I hate dealing with customers."

Chuffing, the detective recorded something on his datapad. "How well do you know Werin Menoko?"

"Not very." Charles took a drag and flicked his ashes again. "We don't work the same shift."

"You don't seem surprised I'm asking about Mr. Menoko. Why is that?" Detective Aldras flared his mandibles.

Charles tilted his head at Ristol. "He said Werin's your suspect when he got here."

Letting out an annoyed sounding rumble, the detective glared at the salarian lawyer. "I see. Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Fairclough. That's all the questions I have for you for now."

"Sure." Charles took a couple of quick drags off of his cigarillo before stubbing the rest out in the ashtray and headed back up front, letting out a long breath.
You've Killed Before

Charles grabbed two bottles of Ares' beer from the fridge and opened them, carrying them back to the living room to hand one to Cammus and one to Ares. "We've got about a half hour to kill before we head out."

"Thanks." Cammus fluttered his mandibles and took a long drink. Leaning against the breakfast bar, he turned his attention to Ares. "Did Charles tell you about our surprise visit from C-Sec today?"

Ares chuckled and nodded, taking a drink from his bottle before going to the kitchen cabinets, searching for something. "Yeah. Told me your boss nearly got herself arrested, too."

Humming, Cammus nodded and took another drink. "Too bad she didn't."

"Pretty much what I said." Charles laughed and sat down on the couch, picking up his Paragade.

Ares rumbled, not really responding as he found a bottle of horosk and poured some into his beer, swirling it around before offering the horosk to Cammus with a raised brow plate.

Cammus smirked and shook his head. "Maybe after the fights?"

Ares shrugged and recapped the bottle. "Got enough of it."

The door buzzer went off and Charles stood up, heading to the door. He activated the security feed, finding Jasmine outside. "Oh … uhhh …." He glanced back down the hall, even though neither of the men were in his line of sight, and took a deep breath. Opening the door, he held up a hand and stepped out into the hall before she said anything, moving in close enough to her to whisper without being overheard. "We've got company."

She raised an eyebrow, whispering back, "Should I go?"

"I … no, I mean …" He waved a hand. "… just thought you should know."

"Okay. Now I know." She flashed a smile at him. "So, are we going to just keep standing out here, or …?"

He huffed and smirked, backing up and turning into the apartment. Jerking his head over his shoulder, he led her inside. Cammus turned to look as they stepped past the partitioning wall, fluttering his mandibles in a polite smile. Ares hummed, tilting his chin up in acknowledgment to Jasmine, and she did the same.

Charles cleared his throat and held a hand out toward her. "Cammus, this is a friend of Aelianus'—"

"Ramona Salazar," she said, flashing her teeth at the turian in a wide grin and extending her hand.

Cammus shook her hand and dipped his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you. So, are you in the cargo transport business, too?"

Her grin widened and she chuckled, shaking her head. "No, I'm with the Alliance."

"The Alliance?" Cammus flared his mandibles, nodding his head a little as if impressed.

"Yes, sir." She glanced around, looking at Ares for a second before turning back to Cammus and offering him another smile. "It was nice to meet you, would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course." Cammus nodded, and she made her way over to Ares, talking in hushed tones.

Feeling a little uneasy about Jasmine saying she was in the Alliance, Charles started to contemplate if maybe there wasn't some truth to the statement. Impersonating someone in the Alliance seemed too risky, too likely to draw attention to someone who needed to stay hidden. If the Hierarchy had Blackwatch, why wouldn't the Alliance have something similar? She did say she worked for someone else …. 
He didn't feel real comfortable with the idea of hanging out with someone in the Alliance, even if they were an assassin. He knew some of it came from his dad, but a lot of it had more to do with who he'd become, the things he did. He knew how the military worked; people in the Alliance felt justified doing just about anything under orders, but if a civilian did the same thing … they were criminals who either needed arrested or put down.

But … she's friends with Ares, and she knows what he does. And he's technically a civilian now ....

He glanced at Cammus and jerked his head toward the balcony. "Come outside with me while I smoke?"

"Sure." Cammus followed him out to the balcony and hummed. "I'm so glad to be away from Citadel Souvenirs. I thought for sure we were all going to end up arrested."

Charles lit a cigarillo, taking a deep drag and holding it in for a few seconds. "Yeah. Me, too. Or shot. Did they really need to come in with their weapons drawn?!"

"Considering they were looking for illegal weapons …." Cammus flicked a mandible, turning to lean his back against the railing, looking at Charles.

"I guess. Shit though, it had me so freaked out." Charles took a drag, blowing the smoke out over the balcony.

Cammus hummed. "Me, too."

Looking sideways at him, Charles smirked. "You growled at one of the officers."

"It was a high-stress situation," Cammus said with a chuff. "It was reflexive." Shrugging, he flicked a mandible. "Besides, he growled at you first."

Chuckling, Charles patted the turian's shoulder. "My hero."

Cammus laughed, fluttering his mandibles and took a drink from his beer. After a few minutes, the balcony door slid opened. Charles turned, putting his back to the railing and smiled as Jasmine leaned against the door frame behind her.

"You're going to watch the fights, and you weren't even going to invite me?" She stuck her lip out in an exaggerated pout. "And here I thought we were getting along well."

Charles frowned, eyebrows pulling in tight. "I, uh ...."

She smirked, glancing over her shoulder at Ares. "He invited me." Looking between Charles and Cammus, she asked, "That cool with the two of you?"

"I don't mind," Cammus said, fluttering his mandibles and glanced at Charles.

Charles shrugged. "Cool with me." Alliance or not, she was Ares' friend, so Charles didn't plan on turning her away. Plus, he really did think she was pretty cool, and she volunteered to teach him how to fight.

"Good," Ares pushed off the door frame, standing up straight, and took a big drink of his horosk laced beer.

The fact Ares mixed horosk with his beer concerned Charles, taking it as a sign Ares wasn't doing as well as he let on. He wondered if they should be going out at all, or if he should've tried harder to push Ares to talk. He didn't want to push Ares, though, because he hated it when people did it to him, and he had a feeling pining too much would only make Ares pull away from him. And, Ares seemed intent on dealing with it himself one way or the other. After their fight, Charles worried so much about doing something wrong, he questioned whether he really knew how to do anything 'right' with Ares.

Cammus bumped Charles with an elbow, drawing his attention. He raised a brow plate at Charles, an inquisitive gesture, which probably meant he started to smell agitated to the turian. Charles just gave him a smile and a light shake of his head. He took another drag from his cigarillo and then offered it to Jasmine.

She gave him a warm smile, accepting it and taking a small drag before handing it back to him. "When's the fight start?"

Gaze flicking between the two turians, he said, "We should probably leave once they finish their beers."

She nodded, bending down and picking Eezo up. Cuddling the dog to her chest, she made kissy noises at Eezo, letting the Alaskan Malamute lick her neck and jaw. She buried her fingers in Eezo's fur, scratching along the side of the dog's head and throat.

Ares hummed and tipped his bottle back, draining the rest before dropping his head with a slight shake. "I'm done." He went into the apartment, heading to the kitchen.
Charles took a last drag before putting his cigarillo out and headed inside, too. Glancing over his shoulder, he caught what seemed to be an awkward standoff between Jasmine and Cammus as both seemed to be waiting for the other to pass inside first. It ended when she squatted down, setting Eezo on the balcony floor, staying there to pet the dog and coo. Cammus flicked a mandible and stepped inside, finishing his beer and carrying the bottle to the kitchen trash. Putting the cap back on his Paragade, Charles stuck it in the refrigerator.

Charles jumped when Jasmine slung her arm over his shoulder and pointed at the turian and human in the cage. He'd been so lost in thought, he didn't expect the sudden physical contact. He'd spent the last few minutes staring absenty at the fights while he replayed the day with C-Sec in his mind, debating his responses to the detective and questioning whether or not he'd gotten an accurate read on the detective's body language.

She leaned in, pulling Charles down a little to talk closer to his ear, letting him hear her above the crowd. "You can tell this guy has experience going up against turians by the amount of distance he's keeping between himself and his opponent. He's wary of his opponent's talons, and he's smart enough to remember turian's have talons on their toes, too. Pay attention to how he moves and where he strikes."

Turning his head, he glanced at her, smiled, and nodded before shifting his attention back to the match. She dropped her arm from his shoulder and leaned against the railing lining the entire cage a few feet out. He watched closely, trying to pick up on the details she wanted him to remember.

The turian threw a punch, overreaching, and the human fighter spun around behind him. He kicked him in the spur, making the turian's leg buckle before wrapping his fingers around his opponent's cowl. He pulled down on the cowl while pushing his foot into the back of the turian's leg. The turian dropped to his knees, growling loud enough to be heard over the crowd. Reaching back, he wrapped his hand over the human's wrist, digging a talon into the skin enough to loosen the grip before pivoting, flipping the human over his shoulder and onto his back.

Jasmine pushed off the railing, standing up straight next to Charles again and waved him down to her. "Where did he go wrong?"

Charles' gaze flicked back and forth between her and the fighters for a second before he shook his head. "I don't know."

She gave him a soft smile. "I'll show you later." She turned, leaning back against the railing so her elbows were pressed against the metal, ass out in the air.

He took a second to enjoy the sight before turning his attention back to the fight. The turian started to pin the human, but the man got his legs wrapped around the turian's ribs. Managing to get a grip on the turian's arm, he extended it out over his head as he twisted his body, making the turian tap out.

Glancing over at Ares, Charles smirked when he saw how close he and Cammus were standing. Ares ducked his head down close to Cammus' saying something Charles couldn't quite hear. Cammus fluttered his mandibles, turning his head against Ares' to respond, mandibles brushing along Ares' jaw. Everything about their body language told Charles there was a damn good chance the two turians were going to end up fucking before the end of the night. Humming a little, he reached over, trailing his hand down Ares' side. When Ares turned to look, Charles gave him a smile before shifting his attention back to the cage.

Two new fighters entered, a female turian and a salarian. Watching the two of them was like witnessing dance choreography in action. Long limbs gliding, graceful as cats, they moved around one another, flowing more than dodging out of the way of lightning fast strikes. Charles watched, entranced, barely listening to Jasmine as she talked to him about momentum and flexibility. In the end, the turian won the match, landing a blow that knocked the salarian out cold.

An asari and a human female were up next. The rules of the fights dictated no biotics could be used, and several people in the audience seemed to think it meant the asari didn't stand a chance. Charles knew better, though. He'd watched enough asari in the cages to know they had their own hand-to-hand combat styles, too. They might all be born biotics, and they pretty much all spent years learning to control and master them, but asari were a smart, very long-lived species with plenty of time to master many skills. They didn't rely on their biotics alone.

"Pay more attention to the asari," Jasmine said when he leaned on the railing next to her. "Her style is actually closer to what I've been showing you than the style the human's using."

Charles hummed and lit a cigarillo. The human rushed the asari, fists swinging fast, but the asari blocked each one, brushing the woman's hands aside with her wrists. Stepping to the side, the asari dropped low and spun, sweeping first one leg out and then the other, knocking the human off her feet. Popping back up, the asari grabbed one of the human's ankles, using it to flip her over to her stomach before straddling the woman's back, facing her legs. She locked the ankle against her chest and dropped backward, lying on top of the human and pulling her leg back far enough to hyperextend the thigh muscles. The human screamed, slapping her hand against the mat, tapping out.
Midway through the fourth match—between an asari and a batarian of all people—Charles realized Jasmine moved a ways down the railing, leaving several feet and a horde people between him and her. He raised an eyebrow, confused, and stood up straight. He was about to make his way down to her when he spotted a human man checking her out.

The guy looked huge and drunk off his ass, shoving his way through the few people who stood in his way until he got to her. Charles couldn't hear what the man said, but he recognized the look of a pissed off woman trying to be nice easy enough. Blindly, he reached over and nudged Ares, seeing her being harassed making his hackles rise.

Before he could say anything to Ares, though, the man reached for Jasmine's hip. She grabbed his wrist, twisting it around and shoving the heel of her other hand against the back of his elbow. The man's agonized cry was loud enough to be heard over the crowd. Members of all species surrounding them started to turn, watching the fight happening among them instead of the one in the cage.

Rearing back, she punched the man square in the nose before shoving him away. He stumbled, bumping into people before falling on his ass. Cradling his oddly bent arm to his chest, bright, crimson blood poured from his crooked nose. The monster inside of Charles roared, licking its chops, zeroing in on the sight of the blood. His pulse pounded in his head, cock twitching a little as flashes from his kills danced before his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he pushed it away.

An asari standing nearby hit the would-be attacker with a Stasis, and a moment later, crowd control guards pushed their way through. They picked the man up from the floor once the Stasis wore off and dragged him away. One of them talked to Jasmine for a minute, but she waved them off and shrugged. She stood there for a second longer, rubbing at her right shoulder where she'd been shot.

Turning to Charles and their group, she met his gaze and grinned, making her way back over to him. "Watch the cage, not me!"

He stared at her, mouth agape. "Seriously?"

"Yeah." She bumped his shoulder, turning to lean back against the railing. "I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself."

Snorting, he shook his head. "Clearly."

Ares chuckled and dropped a hand on Charles' shoulder. "Be careful. If you don't watch the fight like she says, you're next."

She snorted, glancing over at Ares. "Could just shoot him, too."

"That was impressive." Cammus chuffed, mandibles flaring. "Maybe you should sign up for a match," he said, jerking his head toward the cage.

She laughed and shook her head. "Nah, not really my style."

"And not really fair for her opponent," Ares said, shifting back up from leaning on the railing. "I'm heading for something to eat from the cantina. Want anything?"

"I always want something to eat," she said, flashing him a grin. "I'll go with you so you don't have to suffer through figuring out levo options." She glanced at Charles as she pushed off the rail.

"Know what you want?"

He shook his head, still looking at her like she'd just sprouted an extra head. He couldn't believe how blasé she acted about the whole thing, and a part of him wondered if it meant he was sexist.

"Just whatever you get yourself."

"Okay." She turned back to Ares and raised an eyebrow. "Ready?"

Ares rumbled and tapped Cammus, trilling and lifting his chin in obvious question.

Cammus chuffed his mandibles. "I don't know what they have, so," he said with a chuckle, "I'll just have whatever you're having." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a credit chit, offering it to Ares.

Acting as if he didn't even see Cammus' offer, Ares huffed. "Right. Two unhelpful orders," he joked with a flick of his mandible as he turned to Jasmine and jerked his chin toward the walkway.

She grinned, following after him. "Are you kidding? That's the easiest order."

He shook his head as they walked away. "I hate ordering food, so no, it isn't."

Cammus chuffed, sticking his credit chit back in his pocket. He moved over closer to Charles, mandibles fluttering lightly. "She seems nice."
"Yeah, she's pretty nice." Charles chuckled, turning to look at the current match.

Laughing and joking with Jasmine about the guy who assaulted her at the fights, Charles unlocked the door to the apartment and stepped inside, turning on the lights as he went. "I don't think he's going to be forgetting your face anytime soon."

She smirked, cocking her hip to the side when he glanced back at her. "Look at me. How could anyone forget my face?"

He let out a bark of laughter. "Someone's full of themselves." Moving into the living room, he turned on the vidscreen, switching it to the news before making his way to the kitchen.

"With reason." She huffed. "Don't think I don't know you check me out every chance you get."

"DNA from the Ethan Rorschach killing confirms the presence of a second human in the apartment the night of the murder," the news announcer said.

Charles stopped in his tracks, hand hovering in the air halfway to the refrigerator handle. Swallowing, he forced himself to close the distance and opened the door, straining to listen as he gathered drinks. His heart slammed against his chest, sweat breaking out on his forehead. Fingers trembling, he nearly dropped one of the bottles of water.

"Unfortunately, forensic analysis of the DNA provided incomplete results due to the degradation of the sample. C-Sec is unable to identify a suspect using the sample, but it has helped narrow the search to humans."

He let out a soft sigh of relief and took his time in the kitchen, wiping the sweat off of his face and trying to calm himself completely before going anywhere near Cammus. The last thing he needed just then was for the turian to get a whiff of him and start asking questions.

"Hey, need some help?" Jasmine asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, forcing a smile on his face. "Sure."

Her eyebrow twitched, and she hesitated. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good." He passed off the bottle of water she'd asked for and one of the turian beers.

"In other news: C-Sec performed a raid on Citadel Souvenirs today, located on the Zakera Ward. An anonymous tip led C-Sec to the discovery that one of the employees of the store allegedly used the store's shipping operation to smuggle weapons and illegal drugs. After discovering evidence, C-Sec arrived at the employee's home only to find him dead from a gunshot wound to his head. C-Sec is withholding the name of the employee for the time being."

Charles glanced at Jasmine as he popped the cap off of the beer and handed it to Ares who'd pulled a stool over to sit on. She didn't seem to be paying the vidscreen any mind at all, just smiled as she offered Cammus his beer. Charles let his gaze slide to Ares, trying to figure out what the turian might be thinking about the first news report. He knew Ares wasn't going to give much of anything away, though. Without moving his gaze from Charles' face, Ares turned his head toward the couch where Cammus sat, silently telling Charles to chill.

Sitting down on the end of the couch closest to Ares, Charles draped his arm over the side to rest his hand on Ares' knee before taking a drink from his Paragade. Jasmine dragged the chair over from the corner, turning it to face the couch—and the exits, Charles realized—not far from where Cammus sat. He supposed it meant she didn't really see the turian as a threat. Or, maybe, it was just a sign of her trust in Ares.

"So, Cammus, what do you do?" she asked, cracking the lid on her water bottle and taking a drink.

Cammus chuffed and pointed at the vidscreen. "I work at Citadel Souvenirs with Charles."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." She glanced at Charles, wide-eyed. "I forgot you worked there." Gaze flicking between him and Cammus, she said, "Damn, sorry to hear about your coworker …." She trailed off glancing absenty at the screen.

Charles took another sip, suppressing the urge to snort at her act. Although, he admitted if he didn't know any better, he would've bought it. "Didn't really know Werin too well." He made a point to say the salarian's name out loud for Jasmine's sake, figuring it might be easier for her to keep up her charade if she had one less thing to keep track of.

"I only met him once. I haven't worked there long." Cammus hummed, taking a drink from his beer. "I can't say I took him for the smuggling type, though. Sounds like someone wasn't happy with his services."

Ares shrugged, taking a drink from his beer. "I guess you can't really expect not to get stabbed in
the back when you work with people only interested in credits."

Leaning to the side, Charles fished out his cigarillos and lighter. "There's a chance they're going to shut the place down for a few days. Which sucks, because it means I won't be getting paid, but … I can't say I'd exactly mind the time off."

"At least it's some time away from retail," Ares said, fetching his own cigarettes and holding the box up for Cammus to see, but Cammus shook his head, waving a hand.

"No shit." Charles laughed before glancing at Cammus, reaching over and gently slapping the turian with the back of his hand across his chest. "I swear if not for you showing up, I'd probably already have walked out on the place."

Cammus chuckled, fluttering his mandibles. "After, how did you put it—something about kissing Irene's ass?—to keep your job?"

"Yeah … but there's only so much a man can take." Charles lit his cigarillo, glancing at Jasmine to offer her one only to find her watching Cammus.

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Cammus chuckled, fluttering his mandibles. "After, how did you put it—something about kissing Irene's ass?—to keep your job?"

"Yeah … but there's only so much a man can take." Charles lit his cigarillo, glancing at Jasmine to offer her one only to find her watching Cammus.

"It's actually classified." She offered him a smile. "I'm sorry."

"Ah." Cammus glanced at Charles then at Ares before returning his gaze to Jasmine. "I don't really know much about the Alliance, but classified jobs in the Hierarchy are rare."

"It's not especially rare in the Alliance." She shrugged and took a drink of her water. "Especially since joining galactic civilization." Smirking, she added, "We can be a paranoid bunch."

Charles snorted. "With our history, it's not like we don't have a good reason."

She turned her attention to Charles and winked. "Didn't say we don't."

"I suppose we have that in common, then," Cammus said with a chuckle, mandibles fluttering with humor.

"Mmm," she mumbled around a drink of her water. "I think turians and humans have a lot more in common than what most of either species wants to admit."

Charles zoned out as the conversation went on around him, half-assed listening as Jasmine began talking about the competitive natures of humans and turians. He caught part of something Ares said about humans not shying away from a fight, but Charles' thoughts drifted away completely there. Instead, he began replaying the night he killed Ethan over and over in his head, searching his memories for anything else he might've missed. Did he wipe down every surface he touched? Did he wipe down every surface he touched? Did he clean up all the blood? What about hair? What if they found a stray hair, he had no way of knowing if any of his hair fell off anywhere.

Jasmine cleared her throat, drawing his attention back to her, and he realized everyone stared at him. She dropped one of her feet from the bar beneath the stool, letting it hang a little. "Go change into something more comfortable." She glanced at Ares. "Aelianus, I'm kidnapping Charles for a bit."

Ares hummed as he took a drink. "Just be sure to water and feed him at least three times a day."

Charles huffed but smiled as he slapped Ares' leg. "I am not a pet!"

"I never said you were," Ares said, glancing over to him with a smirk. "Tell me when I said it."

Snorting, Charles shook his head and stood up. "Asshole," he said softly, wiggling his way in between Ares' knees before leaning in to kiss him. "Call me if you need me to come home or whatever?"

"I'll keep you posted." Ares craned his neck and nodded once. "Let me know if she becomes too much to handle."

Jasmine chuckled. "I'm too much for anyone to handle."

Cammus laughed and hummed.

"I'm more than willing to see just how much of me you can handle," Charles said, glancing over his shoulder at her.

She snorted, shaking her head. "Yep … you two are definitely perfect for each other."

He grinned and turned back to Ares. "Have fun," he said with a wink, keeping his voice low,
knowing the minute they left, Cammus and Ares would move to the bedroom.

Ares chuckled, a soft purr under the sound as he nodded. "I plan to," he said just as softly.

"Where are we going?" Charles asked as they walked, glancing down at Jasmine. "Somewhere to spar, or are you wanting to try some Parkour?"

"Don't know, just walking for now." She stuffed her hands in her jacket pocket and looked up at him. "You kinda looked like you could use some time to collect yourself, thought you might want to talk about what happened."

Missing a step, he stumbled, and her hand darted out, steadying him.

Fuck, what does she know? How'd she find out?

He licked his lips. "What do you mean?"

"Werin. C-sec at work." Letting go of him, she shrugged, stuffing her hand back into her pocket.

"Oh." He let out a soft chuckle, raking his hand through his hair.

She looked at him again, arching an eyebrow. "Something else happen you need to talk about?"

"No." Turning his lips down at the corners, he shook his head.

She hummed, walking a few more steps in silence before she said, "Are you sure? Because you seemed a little upset in the kitchen earlier and then again a few minutes ago on the couch."

"It's just been a long day." He let out a soft chuckle. "The whole C-sec thing drained me, but it got worse after they showed up, a million customers started coming in."

She chuckled, and then a moment later asked, "He didn't tell you C-sec would show up, did he?"

"No …" Charles sucked in a deep breath and dug his cigarillos out of his pocket. "He said my reaction would be more natural if I wasn't anticipating them."

"Hmmm." She tilted her head to the side. "He's not wrong.

You don't know the whole story. For all I knew, they were showing up to arrest me.

"Yeah." He lit his cigarillo and offered her the pack.

"I'm good." She shook her head. "Either way, sorry you had to deal with C-sec. Hopefully, they didn't give you guys too much trouble."

"Nah, not really." He stuffed the pack and lighter back into his pocket.

"Good." She grinned up at him and then bumped his arm with her elbow. "I really appreciate your helping me out."

He shrugged, brushing it off. "I didn't really do much of anything."

Scoffing, she raised an eyebrow. "That's like a thing with you, isn't it?"

"What?" he asked, taking a drag.

She pulled a hand out of her pocket and waved it around in small circles. "The whole minimize everything when someone compliments you or says thank you for something."

He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess it depends on who's saying it and what they're saying."

"Right," she said with a snort. "So … Cammus and Ares?"

Laughing, he took a drag. "Yeah, it's cool. We're not monogamous."

"Figured as much. But it's not weird with you working with Cammus?" Raising an eyebrow, she scrutinized up her nose a little.

"Nah. I like Cammus." He grinned, waggling his eyebrows at her. "The first time, the three of us hooked up together."

She snickered and nodded. "Nice."

"Yeah, it was. Cammus is a good guy, and he's been a damn good friend to me." He took a drag. "But you do the whole 'one and only' thing, don't you?"

She nodded, leading them around a crowd gathered around a man giving some sort of political speech. "When I'm in an actual relationship, yeah."
“You said you're in the Alliance,” he said, once they had a little breathing room again.

“Mhmm. Ramona Salazar is Alliance.” She smiled and waved at a little turian girl being pulled along by her mother.

“And what about you? Jasmine?” he asked, lowering his voice to say her real name.

She glanced up at him, a soft smile on her face but didn't answer him right away. Instead, she turned her head and let her gaze roam over the Citadel, continuing her leisurely pace. “I can't answer questions about who I do or don't work for, Charles. I'm sorry.”

“My dad was in the Alliance.” He took another drag, letting it out slowly.

“Yeah?” She tipped her head to the right before rounding the corner.

“Yeah ….” He took another heavy drag. “He was a huge asshole.”

She glanced up at him again, arching an eyebrow. “Was?”

He nodded, watching people mill about the ward, coming and going from stores and restaurants. “He died not too long ago.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she said, and she sounded genuinely sympathetic.

“Don't be. Like I said, he was a huge asshole.” He took a heavy drag, shrugging off the look of pity in her eyes. "Pretty sure he killed my mom.”

“Damn.” She glanced down at her feet as she walked, brow furrowing. After a few seconds, she said, “Both of my parents died when I was a kid.”

“Shit.” He stopped to put out his cigarillo on the side of a trash can, making sure the fire went out completely before tossing the butt into the trash. “Is that why you were on the streets?”

“Yep.” Looking up again, she glanced around them before her gaze settled on him. “You leave home because of your dad?”

He nodded and started walking again. “Yeah.”

They both stayed quiet for a couple of minutes, just watching the crowds as they walked.

“Other than fighting techniques, what are you wanting to learn?” she asked, breaking the silence.

He glanced down at her, taking a few seconds to consider his answer before saying, “Everything I can. I really want to convince him that I can handle going out with him.”

She hummed. “Are you trying to get into this profession?”

“Maybe … I don’t know.” He shrugged and pulled his cigarillos out again.

She held her hand out for the pack, and he shook one out for her. Putting the cigarillo between her lips, she watched him closely as she asked, “You're comfortable with the idea of killing?”

“Yeah.” He lit his cigarillo and handed her the lighter.

She flicked the lighter, holding the tip of her cigarillo into the flame. “Mmm.”

“What?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow as he took the lighter back from her and put it back in his pocket along with the pack.

“You answered too fast.” She blew smoke out toward the fake sky and turned to look at him. “It's not something you should jump into, you know? Once you pull a trigger on someone, you can’t undo it.”

Letting out a wry, huff of laughter, he said, “Trust me, I know.”

He had a perfectly firm grasp on the permanency of death. Not a day went by since his sister died that he didn't think about her, miss her, feel more than willing to give anything to have her come back. But she never would, no matter what. And now, because of what they did to her and to him, those men would never, ever come back to life again, either.

She looked up at him, seeming to study his face, expressionless. “You've killed before,” she said, but it didn't sound at all like a question.

“What? No.” He forced out a chuckle and looked at her like she was crazy. “Of course not.”

She snorted. “Liar.” Shaking her head, she said, “It's alright, you don't need to tell me about it.”

Humming, she looked back out over the Citadel.

It left him speechless and tense. Should he try harder to deny it? Should he act offended or laugh at her or what? Would it make her more or less likely to believe him? The longer he let the silence
go unchecked, though, the more he knew it was too late. His lack of immediate response told her all she needed to know.

She looked at him again after a few seconds, features softened. "You know … even if you learn enough where you could successfully go out on your own, he still may not want you to go with him."

"Why do you think so?" he asked, fighting the urge to wince. It was really the last thing he wanted to hear. He already struggled with thinking Ares didn't really want him around in a general sense; he didn't need to have it confirmed Ares didn't want him around in a specific way.

"Well, for one, Ares prefers to work alone. And … he's got … we all go someplace—mentally—when we're on the job." She seemed to struggle with finding the words to give voice to her thoughts, but it only made Charles pay closer attention. "For some of us, it's like we become detached from what we're doing, for others … we become more absorbed." She paused to take a heavy drag, blowing the smoke off to the side before meeting his gaze again. "Ares is the type to become absorbed, to … dive into the act of killing. Savor it. He may not want you to see him that way, or he might be afraid he won't be able to really do his job right with you there." She shrugged and took another drag. "He'd be worried about you. Maybe even afraid he'd hurt you without meaning to. A lot of our training revolves around building up specific, reflexive responses when we're in that mental space."

Savor it. Like me. So why can't we just savor it together? It's not like we haven't already killed together. Why does this have to be any different?

"So, what do I do?" He hated the helpless sound to his voice, hated he felt like he had to turn to someone else to figure out how to make his relationship with Ares work. "How do I get him past the worry?"

Blinking, she shook her head. Her voice came out soft, consoling, when she said, "I don't know if you can, Charles. Not without expecting him to change something that's fundamental to who he is … to what he is." She took a deep breath. "And that's not really something you do to someone you love."

They walked in silence for a few minutes while Charles absorbed what she'd said. It stung, but he saw the truth in it, too. Hell, it more than stung. It made his heart ache and his insides writhe. He realized spending his life with Ares meant spending his life waiting for Ares to come home, worrying about him, fearing he wouldn't ever come home again. Thinking Ares might find someone else out there who understood him better, someone he wanted to take out on jobs … someone like Jasmine.

"Do you still want to learn?" she asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Yes." It wasn't a question he needed to think about. He did still want to learn. Even if Ares didn't want to take him out on jobs, he could use whatever she taught him when it came time to feed his beast. And, maybe … maybe, if he got good enough, Ares would change his mind.

She nodded and pursed her lips. "I'll be leaving the Citadel day after tomorrow. I'll show you what I can before then, and if you want, keep in contact with you when I leave. I end up on the Citadel pretty frequently. If and when I can, I'll come by."

He took a long drag, watching her for a few seconds before he asked, "Why are you so willing to help me? Is it just because I'm with Ares?"

"That's a big part of it, but no." She smiled and took a drag before shrugging. "Let's just say I've got a feeling you're not going to just let it go, so … better you learn what you can from someone who can help you survive it in the end."
Chapter

Bloodbath Butcher

Chapter by MosaicCreme

"Going to stick around Cammus' place to fuck. Probably won't be back tonight. See you tomorrow."

I'd felt like a slap in the face when he got the message from Ares about an hour or so after he'd left the apartment with Jasmine. It felt even worse knowing damn well he couldn't just tell Ares he wasn't okay with him spending the entire night with someone else. Ares wouldn't understand, probably just think Charles was being selfish, overly jealous, or a 'sap'. If it was what Ares wanted, then it was what Ares wanted. Charles wouldn't tell him no. He'd just suck it up, shove his feelings aside. So, he sent Ares a response thanking him for letting him know.

Stow my shit, right?

After getting the message, Charles made an excuse about being tired and left Jasmine at the park where they'd been sparring. She'd spent some time talking to him about pressure points and running him through some exercises. He didn't think she really believed he left because he was tired, but she didn't push him for a better explanation, just gave him a smile and a nod.

He'd tried going home and going to bed, but it only resulted in him staring at the ceiling, brooding. His mind kept slipping back to the things Ares said to him during their fight and the things Jasmine told him about Ares. It all just left him feeling pissed off. Taken for granted. Unappreciated and underestimated. Unloved.

Leaving Eezo sound asleep on the bed, Charles got dressed and left the apartment again. At first, he'd strongly considered finding someone on his list to kill, but—despite the beast snapping and growling, pacing its cage—he'd talked himself out of it, knowing he really did need to lay low. And … it'd probably piss Ares off, leading to another fight between the two of them. Even if he was hurt and angry with Ares, he didn't want to create more waves.

So, he'd ended up going to the gym where he spent two hours pushing himself lifting weights until he knew there was no way he'd be able to blink without being in pain the next day. But still, the beast rattled the bars, and still, he couldn't shove away the ache in his chest every time he thought about Ares falling asleep next to Cammus, arm wrapped around the other turian. Which was why he found himself sitting in The Palisade, drowning in whiskey.

"Charles?"

He turned toward the feminine, dual-toned voice, spotting a turian with rust markings. In an alcohol-fueled haze, it took a couple of seconds for him to put a name to the familiar face. He smiled, remembering the woman unclothed and stretched out on his bed, Ares buried deep inside of her. "Sade."

Smile widening, she flicked her mandibles and came closer, stopping to lean against the bar next to him. "I thought that was you." Leaning in toward him, she nuzzled her face against his neck and inhaled, purring and making him chuckle. "Where's your mate? I smell him on you, but I don't see him here."

Laughter souring on his tongue, he took a heavy drink from his glass. "He's spending the night with someone else."

She let out a soft rumble and slid onto the barstool next to him. "You sound unhappy about it."

He shrugged, trying to brush it off and said, "Just wasn't planning on spending the night alone."

"So, don't spend the night alone." She purred again, dragging a gloved talon over his arm.

Taking a drag from his cigarillo, he glanced at her, lifting an eyebrow. She smirked, flicking her mandibles. Killing off the rest of her drink, she put the glass back on the bar and tipped her head toward the door. He took another drag, considering the offer for a second before nodding. He brought his glass to his mouth and drained it before sliding off the barstool.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and draped her arms over his shoulders, head tilting back in laughter. "We're going to fall."

"No, no. I got you." Chuckling, he ducked his head under her chin and nipped her neck, pushing her back against the wall. "Mmm. You smell nice, what is that?"

"Oh, uh, Jania sprayed the office with some flowery stuff today. I've grown used to the scent. I'd forgotten all about it." She hummed, tilting her head back a little. "You smell nice, too."
"You mean Aelianus smells nice." He chuckled again, nipping her mandible. "I know I'm covered in his scent."

"You are—and I do enjoy his scent—but I'm talking about your scent." As if to prove her point, she turned her head, nuzzling her face into the crook of his neck and inhaling deeply.

He smirked, turning his head for her a little. "Yeah?" Sliding his hand around, he reached under her thigh to rub the back of his knuckles along the much softer, malleable plates between her legs, ignoring the way the room seemed to tilt and sway around him.

"Oh, yes." She thrummed, nipping his neck and tilting her hips into his touch. "You wouldn't be here right now if I didn't find your scent appealing. It's too bad you can't pick up on my scent the same way, I think it'd remove your doubts."

"Mmm. Why don't you show me instead, then?" He brought his other hand to her waist, squeezing and kneading.

She let out a low, soft growl, biting down a little harder, dragging a groan from him. Pulling her away from the wall, he turned them toward the hall, staggering and looking over her shoulder as he carried her to her bedroom. She let out a very amusing squeal and tightened her grip on him when he stumbled, throwing a hand out to catch himself on the wall, the other still holding her up.

Laughing, she nuzzled against him. "You're too drunk for this."

"Shhh. What? No." He blew a soft raspberry, wrapping his hand back around her and grinned. "I'm the perfect amount of drunk for this."

She chuffed, flicking her mandibles and smirking with a hum. Making his way into the bedroom, he carried her over to the concave bed. He put a palm out, his other arm wrapping around her back as he carefully lowered them. She growled again, tugging at his shirt, and he pushed up to his knees, pulling it off over his head before dropping it to the floor.

Reaching up, she trailed her gloved hand over his chest. He wrapped his fingers over hers, pulling her hand away and tugging off her glove before pressing it back to his chest, curling her fingers enough to make it clear he wasn't afraid of her talons. Fluttering her mandibles, she dragged her talons down his chest, applying more and more pressure as she went, watching his face closely. He smirked, cock getting harder and starting to press uncomfortably against his pants. Her nose twitched, pulling in his scent, and she smiled.

Undoing her pants, he stood, tugging them down when she lifted her hips from the bed and purred. He hadn't really taken the time to figure out exactly how everything worked with a female turian the last time, but just then, he was too drunk to really give a damn what she had going on between her legs, so long as she let him put his cock inside something warm, wet, and tight. She sat up, removing her top while he stepped out of his own pants. Her gaze roamed over him, and he thought he saw doubt in her eyes.

He reached out, brushing his knuckles over her cheek before pressing his palm to her mandible. "You're in control here. Nothing happens you don't want to happen."

Humming, she reached out and caressed his waist and hip, running her hand over his skin in the same, intrigued way she had before. "You're so different from a turian."

He let out a soft chuckle. "You're so different from a human."

Fluttering her mandibles, she smirked, wrapping both hands around his hips and pulled him down to her, lying back on the bed. "But you have more experience with turians than I do humans."

"Not female turians." He grinned, ducking his head beneath her chin to scrape his teeth across the hide of her throat. The heat radiating from between her legs teased him, making his cock twitch against her. Running his hand down her left thigh, he pulled her leg up to wrap around his waist and growled softly against her ear. "You're my first."

Charles collapsed face first onto his bed, still drunk and reeking of sex. He was even still too drunk to care that he'd seen a C-Sec uniform in Sade's room while he was getting dressed to leave. He was sure he'd think it was a big fucking deal after he slept and sobered up. Ares probably wouldn't be too happy to learn they'd both fucked someone in C-Sec, either, but there wasn't anything to be done about it after the fact.

His omni-tool pinged against his wrist, and he rolled over, opening it and checking the message. It was from Irene, confirming the store would be shut down for a few days, so he didn't need to go into work. Closing his omni-tool, he rubbed his hand over his face and kicked off his shoes, wondering why the hell Irene thought it was a good idea to message him at four hundred hours.

Eezo whined, standing up on the bed to yawn, turn in circles, and then lay back down. He pulled himself up to sitting and raked a hand through his hair, digging out his cigarillos and lighting one. Taking a deep drag, he blew it out slow, staring off at the wall, feeling detached from his body. He wasn't entirely sure if it was the alcohol or the strain of suppressing his feelings. In the end, it
didn't really matter, and he didn't really care. At the moment, he wasn't hurting, he wasn't angry or sad. He wasn't anything.

Most of the time, when he felt like that, it made him want to cut himself. Made him want to bleed, so he knew he was alive. But just then, it didn't seem … relevant. His omni-tool pinged again, and he closed his eyes, smoking his cigarillo for a minute before checking the new message. It was from Daniel Hendricks, the lawyer handling Charles' dad's funeral and shit. A little over sixty-five thousand credits had been transferred to his account—the remaining sum of his father's liquidated assets after the funeral and lawyer's expenses were deducted.

He knew he should feel something seeing the message, but he didn't. Closing his omni-tool, he took another drag and stood up. He made his way to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water before heading to the bathroom. He put the bottle of water on the sink and took a piss before grabbing the bottle again and going back to his bedroom, leaving the bathroom light on. Cracking the lid, he drained half the bottle in one drink before closing it again and setting it on the nightstand.

Putting his cigarillo in the ashtray, he stripped off his clothes and climbed into bed, pushing the pillows up behind him. He pulled the covers up over his legs and picked up his cigarillo, taking a long, slow drag. He watched the smoke drift, catching in the soft light coming in from the opened bedroom door. As soon as he finished his cigarillo, he put it out and killed off the bottle of water. Rolling over to his side, he tugged the pillows down and pulled the covers up. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sound of Eezo's steady breathing until he drifted off to sleep.

Three monsters circle him, faces twisted into macabre masks, blood dripping from their teeth as they cackle and howl, snapping at one another to get to him like a hungry pack of wild jackals. Two others dig into Sarah, teeth and claws rending her limb from limb. Her screams pierce his ears, worming their way into his head to eat away at his mind. He yells and cries, begging for mercy, pleading with them to leave her alone.

They laugh, grabbing him and forcing him to the ground. Asphalt scrapes his arms and face, claws rip his clothes off of him. Something rough and hard pushes inside of him, sending pain lancing through him, white-hot, tearing apart his insides. He screams in agony, but it only makes the jackals shriek and cackle with glee.

His gaze catches on something shifting in the shadows, something dangerous, deadly … and his.

A ferocious growl rolls through the parking lot, and the jackals turn to look, sniffing the air and whimpering with fear. A turian steps out of the woods, scars trailing over his face, milky-white eye almost seeming to shine in the moonlight. Ares isn't alone, though. A human steps out from behind the turian and Charles recognizes his own face … but something's wrong. His eyes, they're cold, soulless, and empty. His lips pull back in a malicious grin, and he reaches into his pocket. Flicking his wrist, silver glints, his head tilting back to let out a howl. He isn't Charles … he's the beast.

The monsters cower, whining and pissing on themselves, some turning to try and run away. Ares snarls, lunging forward to grab them before they can escape as if simply by trying to retreat, they'd sealed their fates. The beast growls, rushing forward, razor arcing through the darkness of night. Blood fills the air, a crimson mist catching in the street lamps, coating Charles' nose, mouth, and throat. Seeping into his pores and filling his lungs. He watches, horror-stricken, as the beast and Ares rip the jackals apart with teeth and claw and blade.

When it is finished, Charles whimpers. "Help her. Oh God, please help her."

But the beast doesn't listen and neither does Ares. They turn to each other, chests heaving, blood-drenched, and start ripping each other's clothes off. Ares takes the beast from behind, kneeling on the asphalt, primal growls and snarls tearing through both of them as they fuck.

A few feet away, Sarah breathes her last breath.

He woke up to Eezo's wet nose brushing over his face followed by her tongue. Groaning, he reached out and draped his arm over the dog, pulling her down and pinning her to the bed and the side of his chest. He hurt all over, every muscle in his body yelling at him in protest over the slightest movement. She yipped at him, squirming and licking his arm, and he cracked an eye to look at her. Unsurprisingly, Ares' side of the bed remained empty, unslept in.

Crawling out of bed, he stopped to grab his clothes off the floor and toss them in the hamper with a groan before making his way to the bathroom. His bladder felt like it might burst, eyes felt filled with sand, and his equilibrium still seemed a little off. He used the toilet then climbed into the shower, turning on the water as hot as he could stand it before washing away the dried on residue from his night with Sade. She'd offered to let him spend the night there with her, but he just couldn't bring himself to even try to fall asleep next to anyone else. It killed him Ares didn't seem to have the same problem.

After brushing his teeth and getting dressed, he put the leash on Eezo. "Want to go to the park, girl?"
Eezo barked, jumping up to press her front paws against his thighs. He smiled at her, leading her out of the door. Stopping to lock the door with his omni-tool, he realized it was already almost eleven hundred hours, and Ares still hadn't come home. He felt sick to his stomach, but he told himself it was just a part of being hungover and not because his feelings were hurt. He wasn't going to let it turn him into a fucking mess. He just wasn't.

Stopping at a café to grab some coffee and an asari pastry, he froze, hand hovering over his omni-tool when he saw the amount of credits in his account. A second later, he remembered getting the message from the lawyer earlier that morning and swallowed, feeling even more nauseated. He paid the cashier and left again, heading for the park. He'd never had so many credits at once; he should be thrilled, but instead, he just felt … annoyed.

Mahlia sat next to Lindsey on one of the benches when he got to the park. He took Eezo off the leash, and the dog ran straight for Lindsey, barking and drawing the attention of the women. Lindsey wasted no time hopping up from the bench to kneel in the grass, throwing her arms open for the dog. Mahlia laughed as Eezo jumped on Lindsey, turning her head to look at Charles with a smile and a wave.

Crossing the grass, he forced a smile on his face and took a seat on the bench. "Hello, ladies." He took a sip of his coffee before opening the bag and pulling out the pastry.

Ares still wasn't home when Charles got back from the park. So, after sitting out on the balcony for a half hour, he took off again, going to the shooting range. He stayed there for a couple of hours, firing round after round into the holographic targets until he ran out of ammo. It did little to ease the storm rumbling inside of him. He stocked up on ammo while he was there, taking a few seconds to stare at his account balance again as he paid Deliana.

His omni-tool pinged as he left the range, and it was Ares, sending him another message.

"Finished the important shit with J, going to eat and arena."

Huffing, Charles shook his head and took a deep breath, wondering if Ares even came home at all before going to see Jasmine and whoever the fuck 'Ray' was. He hit reply and sent back, "Okay. Have fun."

Well, shit. At least he's messaging me and letting me know where he's at so I don't have to worry.

He sat down on a bench, tucking his gun case between his feet and propped his elbows on his knees. Threading his fingers through his hair, he rested his forehead on his palms. He was sore and tired, having overdone it at the gym and then again while fucking Sade before not sleeping worth a shit. Alone. While Ares slept over at Cammus' apartment. His head hurt, and he felt … no, he didn't feel. He wasn't going to feel. He was going to stow his shit and get the fuck over it.

He knew it meant he was going to have to stay busy, though, keep himself distracted. What the fuck was he going to do? He didn't have it in him to go back to the gym, and he was too hungover for the bars. He could go back into the range, but the earmuffs only blocked so much noise, and his head really did hurt. Which also meant shit like going to the theater was out of the question.

Sighing, he picked up his gun case and stood up. He walked a couple more blocks before coming to a taxi stand and called a cab. Climbing inside, he put in his address and sat back as the skycar lifted into the air. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose and pressing rubbing his fingers over his eyes.

When he got home, he put his Stiletto III up and then headed for the bathroom. Opening the medicine cabinet, he pulled out the bottle of painkillers, shaking it as he realized it was empty.

"Fuck me." He groaned, realizing Jasmine must've taken the last of them for her 'sprained ankle' the day they met.

Tossing the empty bottle into the trash, he pressed his palms against the edge of the sink and dropped his head between his shoulders. Closing his eyes, he took a couple of deep, steadying breaths, fighting back the urge to put his fist through the mirror. He pushed away from the sink and headed for the front door.

Getting in another taxi, he took the skycar to the nearest store.

He'd gone for painkillers, but desperate to cling to any distraction, he ended up spending an hour at the store. By the time he'd left, he'd ordered a bunch of groceries—both levo and dextro—as well as one of those fancy, interspecies beds the hotel had, beddings to fit it, and a shitload of pillows the kiosk claimed were designed for a turian's comfort. Might as well put his fuckhead father's credits to use. He'd also spent twenty minutes or so just browsing through other crap they had for turians, deciding he didn't really think Ares would like any of it.

The groceries and bedding were supposed to be delivered right away, so he'd headed back to the apartment to meet the delivery guy. The bed wouldn't be there until the next day, though. While putting food away, he realized he didn't really know what half the shit was he'd bought for Ares … or really even why. The turian didn't seem interested in cooking for himself, preferring to eat
Finding the bottle of painkillers in one of the bags, he grabbed his Paragade and swallowed a few of them, taking a moment to lean back against the counter and just stare off into space. After a couple of minutes, he opened his omni-tool and pulled up an extranet browsing page. He put in a search for recipes for turian dishes and found a really awesome site that'd let him enter a list of food items and then give him back different recipes using some of those ingredients. If Ares wouldn't cook for himself, then Charles would cook for him. Nothing would go to waste.

He glanced at the time, letting out a sigh when he realized it wasn't even sixteen hundred hours yet. He hadn't heard anything else from Ares, but he figured it'd still be at least another two or three hours before Ares came home. Suddenly, Charles realized even though he was upset Ares was still gone … he really didn't want to be there when Ares got back. He'd been fighting like crazy all night and all day to hold his shit together, and he didn't think he was ready to see Ares yet. He needed to wait until he felt sure he wouldn't flip out.

He needed to figure out something else to do, something to kill time and give him a chance to get a tight grip on his shit. Not really knowing where he was going, he left the apartment again and just started walking.

It was around twenty-three hundred hours when Charles finally went home again. His emotions were still flip-flopping all over the place whenever he thought about Ares spending the night with Cammus, but he was exhausted and his head was still killing him. He unlocked the door and stepped inside, stopping for a second when he found the lights on and the vidscreen playing. Sucking in a deep breath, he closed and re-locked the door behind him before making his way deeper into the apartment.

Ares sat at the breakfast bar, disassembled rifle laid out on the surface in front of him. The smell of gun oil filled the air, a scent Charles long since became used to. Ares didn't bother to even look up, so Charles just went to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water. Tucking it under his arm, he dug out his cigarillos and lit one before moving to the couch. He kicked his shoes off and used his foot to shove them under the coffee table before sitting down, staring at the news on the vidscreen.

"C-Sec has released more details on the trio of murder victims that has shaken the citizens of the Citadel with talk of a serial killer," the asari dressed in yellow and black said, giving the camera a severe look. "It appears each of the victims had a criminal record, charges ranging from child abuse to rape and murder. Some have begun to speculate that the killer may be acting as a sort of vigilante, specifically targeting men who have committed violent crimes against others, particularly women and children. Due to the level of brutality involved in these murders, members of the community have begun to refer to the killer as the Bloodbath Butcher."

Bloodbath Butcher? Could be worse, I guess.

"Did you work today?" Ares didn't turn around, holding a piece of his weapon up to look at it in the light.

"No." Charles took a heavy drag and cracked the lid on his bottle of water. "Irene messaged this morning. Store's closed for a few days."

Ares hummed but didn't speak. Taking a drink, Charles glanced at the turian, a fresh wave of hurt washing over him before he choked it down right along with his water. He put the cap on again, turning his attention back to the news and taking a long drag. He forced himself to focus on the vidscreen, and a second later, he felt relatively calm once more.

"You're upset," Ares stated more than asked, setting the piece he worked on down without picking up another as if waiting for something.

"I'm fine. Just tired. Didn't sleep much last night." Charles took another drag, using it to anchor himself, and shoved the feelings away again as he tried to pull that nothingness back around him.

"You're a shit liar." Moving again, Ares began to put his rifle back together.

Clenching his jaw, Charles sucked in a deep breath through his nose, anger making his sore muscles tight. Because snarky insults were exactly what he needed to hear just then. "I'm not a shit liar, you just don't understand humans well enough to get 'I'm fine, just tired' means 'It's not something you need to worry about.'"

Ares stayed quiet, nothing coming from his side of the room but the soft clicking of his weapon's pieces for a moment. "Fine."

After staring at the news for a couple more minutes—just long enough to finish his cigarillo and see they had nothing new to say about Citadel Souvenirs or Werin—Charles stood up and slipped his shoes back on. He was not okay; he needed to get out of there before he let something slip he'd regret. He grabbed the leash off the coffee table and whistled for Eezo. When she came running, he hooked it on her collar and headed for the door, lighting another cigarillo as he went.
Letting himself back into the apartment, Charles took Eezo off her leash. He glanced out the cracked balcony door as he made his way into the living room, spotting Ares outside smoking. Taking a deep breath, he thought he had his emotions under better control, so he kicked off his shoes again and went outside, too. He lit a cigarillo and leaned against the railing, looking out over the Citadel as he smoked in silence. Ares gave him a glance but didn't speak.

"The credits from my dad's estate came in today. " Charles took a long drag, letting the smoke drift back out of him. Small talk, he thought he could handle small talk. "I bought a new bed. It should be here tomorrow."

Ares hummed around his drag, letting it waft out of his mouth as he said, "Good. I'll make sure my things are hidden."

Charles grunted in response, falling silent again as he continued to smoke.

"You're too quiet," Ares said, stamping out his cigarette before flicking it off of the balcony. He pulled out the box of cigarettes from his pants pocket along with his lighter, plucked another cigarette out of the pack, and lit it. "You say you're 'fine', but you still act like you're not."

Pushing himself upright, Charles slapped a grin on his face—years of living with an abusive father followed by years of retail taught him damn well how to act okay when he really wasn't. "Sorry, this better?"

Ares gave him an annoyed rumble as he looked at him, but he didn't say anything, just turned away again and leaned on the balcony railing.

Huffing, anger creeping in again, Charles threw his arms out to the sides. "What the fuck do you want me to say, Ares? Yes, I'm upset, but I'm doing my best to 'stow my shit' and deal with it, alright?"

He didn't understand what the turian expected of him. Ares made it pretty damn clear he didn't like the emotional shit, didn't really want Charles putting his crap on him. So why the hell was he pushing Charles to talk? Was he looking for a reason to tell Charles how weak he was again?

"Fine."

Shaking his head, Charles leaned back against the railing, taking a heavy drag from his cigarillo. Muscles tense, agitation rising, he sucked in a deep breath, forcing the emotions back down. "It's not something I can just change about myself overnight. It's going to take time, but I'm working on it," he said, keeping his voice level.

"'Fine' means 'I'll drop it,'" Ares said, shrugging as he blew out smoke. "It's dropped."

Charles took another drag from his cigarillo before stubbing the last half of it out in the ashtray. "I'm taking a shower and going to bed. My head hurts, and I wasn't lying when I said I'm tired."

Ares took a drag, nodding. "Alright."

Heading inside, Charles went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out his painkillers. Using his hand to cup the water, he drank from the sink to swallow down another dose, hoping it'd finally do the trick. He took a deep breath and stripped, turning on the shower before stepping inside. Letting the scalding hot water wash over his neck and shoulders, he rested the side of his head against the wall and closed his eyes.
The next morning, Charles lay in bed with his eyes closed for a few seconds, listening to Ares’ steady breathing. He didn’t get up before Ares very often, but it didn’t take long for him to learn the sounds Ares made, and judging by the rhythm of his breathing, the turian wouldn’t be asleep for much longer. Moving as slow as he could, being as quiet as possible, Charles pulled the blankets back and climbed out of bed, grabbing his cigarillos from the table and the pair of sweats off the floor. He left the room, closing the door behind him to keep the noise and Eezo from bothering Ares.

After using the restroom, he lit a cigarillo and made his way out to the balcony, sitting down in the chair tucked back in the corner next to the table. He rubbed his face with his free hand, leaning back in the chair to look up at the fake sky. Taking a deep drag, he let his head drop all the way back, stretching his legs up onto the table. He still hurt, but not as bad as the day before. The pain had died down to more of a dull ache, the occasional lancing pain when he moved the wrong way. He savored it.

The solid night’s sleep seemed to have done him some good. He still felt far from happy about Ares’ choice to spend the night with Cammus and then stay out all day after, but it stung a lot less. Snapping at Ares the night before was an ass move, but he really didn’t mean to, so, he’d find a way to make it up to Ares. He didn’t say anything too harsh, at least. It sure as hell could’ve gone a lot worse.

Nearly done with his cigarillo, he heard the balcony door slide open and glanced over as Ares stepped outside, topless but wearing a pair of loose pants. “Morning,” he said, taking another drag, turning his face back up to the sky to blow out the smoke, watching Ares out of the corner of his eye.

Ares hummed, shaking a cigarette out of his pack and putting it between his mouth plates. He moved to the railing, lighting his cigarette before shifting the pack and lighter to his other hand. Flicking his ashes over the railing, Charles took another drag. “Do you have plans today?”

“Not really,” Ares said, blowing out smoke to the side away from Charles, “No.”

Humming, he glanced at Ares’ back. “I didn’t feel up for the gym again yesterday, but I spent some time at the range. Didn’t know if you wanted to go to the arena again, or if I should just plan on heading back to the gym and range.”

“Doesn’t matter. We can go to the arena, mix up tactics.” Ares rumbled, glancing down at him as he took a drag. “Thoughts?”

Dropping his legs from the table, Charles sat up and took a drag before leaning over to scratch Eezo’s ear. “If that’s what you want to do, sounds good to me.”

Ares nodded and turned back to the Citadel view. “Good. We’ll see how you work with me up top.”

“Alright.” Charles stood up and put out his cigarillo. “I’m going to take Eezo for a walk and then make you breakfast. We can go after we eat if you’re ready.”

Ares rumbled in curiosity. “Make me breakfast?” He turned to lift a brow plate at Charles. “Do you even know how to cook dextro?”

Charles forced a smile on his face, his sense of humor still not quite up to par. “Don’t worry, I won’t poison you.” Turning, he walked inside the apartment. He went to the bedroom and got dressed, heading to the bathroom to brush his teeth and run a comb through his hair before grabbing Eezo’s leash. The dog waited for him by the door, wagging her tail.

He took Eezo off the leash when he got inside, tossing it on the breakfast bar as he made his way to the kitchen. Ares still lingered out on the balcony, sitting at the table doing something Charles couldn’t see from inside. He washed his hands at the kitchen sink before opening the refrigerator and pulling out a few of the things he’d picked up at the store the day before in his desperate attempt to distract himself. Opening his omni-tool, he pulled up one of the recipes he’d found on the extranet and set to work, cutting the xemna into thin strips and seasoning it before lightly sautéing it in some oil crap from some fruit that grew on Palaven. It smelled like walnuts.

Keeping an eye on the meat, he cut up some weird looking vegetable, one of the few turians apparently ate with any regularity. It kinda reminded him of the pictures he’d seen of porcupines on Earth. The meal prep didn’t look pretty; Charles really wasn’t much of a cook—even with levo shit—but he figured since Ares practically lived off canned meat and MREs, he’d damn well eat...
something Charles cooked for him and survive. He tossed the vegetables into the pan, stirring it around just enough to coat them with the oil and give them a little heat, letting them soak up some of the juices from the meat before setting the pan aside.

"I modded your Stiletto," Ares said, stepping into the kitchen, pistol raised toward the wall as he looked at it, apparently checking its balance. "It should feel lighter and fire faster without overheating as quickly." He lowered the weapon and stepped closer to Charles, looking over his shoulder. "What are you making?"

Charles glanced up at him. "Food." He smirked, even though it still felt a little fake, and turned his attention back to cooking. "Thanks for modding the gun."

He set another pan on the burner, adding in more of the oil and cracked half a dozen treken eggs into the hot oil. Grabbing the spatula, he scrambled the eggs before draining off the excess oil. Scraping the meat and vegetables into the skillet with the eggs, he gave them a few quick stirs to add some heat back to the dish before turning off the burner. He reached up, grabbing a plate from the cabinet and dumped the contents of the skillet into the plate before getting a fork out. He turned, gently shoving the plate against Ares' chest. "Eat."

Rumbling as he took the plate, Ares offered the pistol in his other hand to Charles. "For just being 'food,' it looks familiar." He stepped back and walked over to the breakfast bar to sit.

Charles huffed, looking over his pistol. "I'll count it as a win, then."

Ares didn't respond as he speared a piece of the xemna and put it in his mouth. He thrummed, nodding to Charles before swallowing. "It's good."

Charles smiled, setting the gun down on the counter after making sure to click the safety off. "Good." Turning back to the cabinet, he pulled down a bowl before grabbing the cereal from the other cabinet and dumped some into the bowl. He poured himself a glass of juice, too, before carrying them both over to the breakfast bar, sitting down next to Ares to pick at the dry cereal.

Ares ate, letting out soft rumbles and purrs as he made quick work of his breakfast. Stopping, he licked his mouth and mandibles as he looked at Charles, rumbling softly as if in question.

Charles glanced at him, lifting an eyebrow. "What?"

Ares hummed a moment before purring. "Thanks."

"I haven't had someone cook for me in … a long time. Not including restaurants." Ares speared a piece of the strange vegetable and stuck it in his mouth.

Charles thought about it for a second, staring down at the bowl of dry cereal. "I think my mom was the last person to cook for me." He picked up a handful of the cereal and shoved it into his mouth, chewing a couple of times before muttering around the bite, "Besides for Cammus." He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "Pretty sure that was mostly because he pitied me while you were gone."

Ares hummed before quickly eating the rest of his meal. Grabbing his plate, he stood and walked around the breakfast bar to dump it in the sink. He rumbled a moment before grabbing Charles' bowl of cereal and dumping it in the sink, too, then went to the refrigerator. Charles sucked on his teeth before pursing his lips, but he didn't say anything. He figured given the conversation, Ares wanted to try his hand at not poisoning Charles.

It really wasn't necessary, he was perfectly content with dry cereal, but now his cereal decorated the bottom of the sink. And … he knew Ares was trying to be nice, maybe even make it up to him, but he had a feeling the turian didn't have any clue what he wanted to make up to Charles for. Or … he just considered it an obligation because Charles cooked for him. Either way, it was sweet, and any other day, it'd probably mean the world to Charles, but he already worked so hard to keep his other emotions at bay, it left him a little numb.

Ares found eggs, cheese, and bacon in the refrigerator and dumped them onto the counter. Leaving them, he went to the cabinets and grabbed a skillet and bowl. He set the skillet on the stove and turned it on to a high heat, rumbling as he used his teeth to open the bacon package. Spearing a slice with his talon, he set it in the skillet, lining up three more next to it to sizzle in the pan.

As the sounds of the bacon cooking slowed, Ares plucked them out of the pan, setting them on the plate. He poured the eggs into the hot pan, creating a thin layer. As it cooked, he grabbed the cheese and dropped a handful into the pan. He waited a moment before using the spatula to fold...
the eggs over and let the omelet cook for a bit longer. Lifting the pan from the fire, he tilted it to slide the omelet out onto the plate and tossed the pan in the sink. He grabbed Charles a fork and turned around, setting the fork and plate on the breakfast bar.

Charles chuckled softly, picking up the fork and stabbing the omelet. "Thank you … this is really sweet of you, you didn't have to do this." He cut off a piece and brought it to his mouth, pausing to add, "This better not poison me."

The corner of his lip lifted in a weak but genuine smirk before he put the bite into his mouth, humming in approval as he chewed. It really did taste pretty good, maybe could use a little salt, but it was good. The eggs were cooked all the way through, and the cheese melted nicely. He hummed again, cutting off another bite.

Thrumming, Ares nodded. "It's just something you do …. Makes sense, even if we can't necessarily share our food."

Charles swallowed, his stomach churning with the effort it took to fight back another idiotic wave of sadness and smiled, nodding. "We should do this more often, then." The little moment of domestic fluff right on the tail of heartache left him reeling. He'd never understand how Ares could get some things so perfectly on the mark and yet be oblivious to so many others. Then again, Charles wasn't exactly the poster child for appropriate social interactions. Hell, for all he really knew, the shit upsetting him would make zero sense to anyone.

Ares snorted. "You should wait until you actually like what I made you."

"I do like it." Charles shoved the next bite into his mouth, chewing as he glanced up at Ares. He washed it down with a drink of juice before picking up a piece of bacon. "You made bacon. Food of the gods." He broke off a piece and held it out to Ares. "Try it?"

Ares hummed and stared at it, seeming to debate it for a moment before reaching out and grabbing the bacon. He broke the piece in half before setting part of it on his tongue and held it there for a moment. Rumbling, he lifted his head to swallow. "Good. Salty." He thrummed and ate the other piece. "Better than dextro."

Charles chuckled, shoving the rest of the slice into his mouth, humming as the pork fat coated his tongue. "Pigs are tasty animals."

"A lot of animals are 'tasty,'" Ares said, flicking a mandible.

"Yeah, they are." Charles turned his attention back to his plate, cutting into the omelet again. "Bed should be here this evening according to the delivery notice. Pillows, too."

Ares leaned back against the counter behind him, humming as he crossed his arms. "Did they give you an exact time? Or a time frame?"

"Between seventeen hundred and twenty hundred hours," Charles said as he chewed.

"Between seventeen hundred and twenty hundred hours," Charles said as he chewed.

"Nodding, Ares flicked his mandibles. "We'll be done by then easily enough."

Charles hummed, lifting the fork to his mouth. "They'll haul off the old one, too."

"They better or I'm tossing it off the balcony."

Ares huffed. "They better or I'm tossing it off the balcony."

Giving him an amused snort, Charles continued to eat. He watched Ares as he chewed, battling away each little whisper of doubt as it arose, forcing himself to man the fuck up and deal with it. After a few more bites, though, Ares looked toward the balcony, mandibles moving as if deep in thought. A moment later, he pushed away from the counter and moved around the breakfast bar, stopping at Charles' side. He glanced away again before thrumming and leaning down, pressing his mouth plates to Charles' temple and giving him an affectionate, light nip.

The act made another wave of heartache wash over Charles, and he swallowed, pushing it away again. Reaching up, he pressed his palm to Ares' face, closing his eyes a second as he brushed his thumb back and forth over the turian's cheek and mandible. "I'm alright," he whispered. "I'm working on it, I'll be alright."

Ares merely purred as he stepped closer and shifted to press his forehead to Charles', nuzzling softly. Charles pressed back against Ares' forehead, brushing his thumb over his mandible again.

"I don't like when you smell like this," Ares said, flicking his mandible into Charles' palm. "Why? Why is your scent so different?"

Charles stopped breathing for a couple of seconds, drowning in trepidation. With Ares asking directly, he couldn't really bring himself to deny the turian an honest answer. "I … wasn't prepared," he started, choosing his words very carefully, "... for you to spend the whole night with someone else. It … I …" He clenched his jaw, battling the waves of emotion again and sucking in a slow, deep breath through his nose. "It stirred up some stupid shit, but it's my problem, and I'm figuring out how to deal with it …. So, don't worry about it, okay? I'm not putting this on you. It's my shit to deal with."
Ares hummed and leaned back enough to catch Charles' gaze. "You think the night with Cammus is the same as every night here?"

Taking a deep breath, Charles fought the urge to look away from Ares' eyes, ashamed for even having feelings about it one way or the other. "No. I think you spend a lot of time away on work, and sleeping next to you at night when you're here is important to me." He licked his lips. "It felt like one of the few things I got to have just for me. And … I feel like I've lost claim on some of the other things lately, so … I just wasn't prepared for it. It's still raw, that's all. I'll be alright—"

"If you say that one more time, I'm going to shoot you," Ares said with a low growl of warning before stopping and letting a long breath out through his nose. "And you haven't lost claim to anything. I wasn't sleeping next to him. I was fucking him. You think I trust him, his home, enough to sleep?" He shook his head and looked away for a moment as if to think of his words. "No. I trust here and you enough to let myself sleep. And in a bed, no less. And before you think I did that with Jasmine, I didn't. I may have slept, but I did in a fucking closet because it was secure." He hummed and crossed his arms. "I don't trust them like I do you."

Charles watched Ares for a few seconds, still batting away the various emotions creeping up, trying to strangle him. He licked his lips and sucked in a deep breath. "I love you, Ares. I know you think saying so is … sappy, and maybe it is, but I've never felt this for anyone else. I don't understand half the shit you make me feel, and I sure as fuck don't understand half the shit that goes through my head. I'm not … you can sleep or don't sleep wherever you want, kiss whoever you want, whatever. I can't say shit won't unexpectedly hurt from time to time, but I don't expect you to accommodate my drama. I'll get a grip on the stupid shit, and when something's big enough to be important, I'll let you know."

Ares sighed, rumbling as he dropped his arms and stood up. "I won't know how to understand you if you don't help me."

Panicked, Charles sat there, mouth slightly opened but no words coming out for a few seconds. "I don't … I don't know what it is you want from me. You said … Look, I know I'm more emotional of a person than what you're comfortable dealing with, and I've put a lot on you since we first met, and it's been … burdensome. So, I'm trying to … I don't want you feeling like you need to carry me, Ares."

Letting a deep breath out of his nose, Ares flicked his mandibles before walking past Charles. "I'm taking a shower," he said making his way toward the hall but stopped without looking back. "I was wrong. I can tell there's something wrong, and I need to fix it, but you won't let me. That … upsets me. I don't like it." He started walking again, making his way into the bathroom, leaving Charles sitting there stunned.

Charles' shoulders slumped, and he hung his head, confused and conflicted, feeling again like he couldn't do anything right. He glanced at his half-eaten breakfast before looking down the hall toward the bathroom. He sat there until he heard the water start running and slid off the barstool, hesitating before making his way to the bathroom door. He stepped inside closing the door behind him. Kicking off his shoes while pulling his shirt over his head, he got undressed and crossed the floor, looking at Ares standing there with his head tilted down, eyes closed. With more hesitation, Charles stepped inside with him. Leaning forward, he rested his forehead against Ares' keel and wrapped his arms around his waist, ignoring the icy water wherever it hit his skin.

Ares rumbled, his chest vibrating against Charles, and lifted his hands, laying one on Charles' back as he hit the shower command to turn the water temperature higher with the other. Charles didn't say anything, just tightened his grip on Ares, turning his head to rest his cheek against the turian's chest, letting the sound of Ares' heart calm him. Ares' rumbling shifted into a deep purr as his hand on Charles' back pulled him closer and the other cupped Charles' head, talons gently carding through Charles' hair.

After a few moments of silence, Charles licked water off his lips, and with a voice just loud enough to be heard over the water, he said, "I'm confused and scared. I just don't want to lose you." Ares hummed but his purr didn't stop. "You'll only lose me if I die."

"Then you can never die," Charles said, as a matter of fact, rubbing his face against Ares' chest and tightening his grip around his waist.

Huffing, Ares gently scratched Charles' scalp. "I don't plan to."

"Good. Then the rest … we'll keep working to figure it out." He turned his face and pressed his lips to the sharp divide of Ares' keel before pressing his cheek back against the flat side.

"No more 'I'm fine.'" Ares said.

Letting out a soft scoff, Charles said, "You either."

"I … will try."
Charles tightened his grip a little more, nuzzling against Ares. "Then so will I."

Ares hummed for a moment before laying both hands on Charles' back. "Sometimes I don't need
to talk. I need … your presence, but not talking."

Charles thought about it for a little bit, the fight they got into back at the hotel starting to make a
little more sense to him. "Okay … but … I may not always just know. Maybe you can let me
know. If you don't want to say it, then find some way to show me instead?"

"I'll try," Ares said again.

Charles gave him a soft chuckle. "Thank you." He let the silence sit between them for a few
seconds before licking his lips again and saying, "Ares … I don't feel like you like me all too
much. Tell me what you like about me?"

Rumbling, Ares ran the curve of his talons along Charles' spine before doing it again. "I can talk
to you. It's … easy. I don't know why, but I want to. I did when we first met ….

Charles sucked in a deep breath and held it for a moment. It wasn't much, but it was something.
Something to cling to and tell himself when things felt dark. He repeated Ares' words over and
over again in his head, committing them to memory. "Thank you." He shifted his arms enough to
press his hands flat against Ares' back, brushing his thumbs back and forth across his wet hide.

"I can't offer much else. Physical comfort can come from anywhere if you look hard enough … it
doesn't mean all that much … but I can show you 'me.' Not even she knows everything I've told
you, let you in on," Ares said, shifting his hands to rub his fingers into the tight muscles along
Charles' shoulders.

Wincing, Charles let out a sharp hiss before biting it off, the sudden, unexpected pain lighting up
his brain like fireworks. He let out a soft groan as his muscles started to relax despite seeming to
protest the treatment, hurting in the way that also somehow always felt good during a massage. "I
like her. Wasn't sure at first … but she's pretty cool. She seems to care about you."

Ares rumbled. "Assassins caring for one another tends to cause trouble … but she's different from
what I'd have expected."

Curious, Charles pulled back enough to look up at Ares, eyebrows dipping a little. "How so?"

"She has a kind of ethical code. It's stronger than most," Ares said, humming as he flicked his
mandibles and looked off to the side in thought. "And she trusts more than most. She'd probably
deny that, but she opens up faster than she probably should."

Charles chuckled, laying his face back against Ares' chest. "I figured it's just because she trusts
you that she opened up at all to me." He sighed. "Either way, I like knowing that I know you
better than she does. That you trust me more and feel like you can talk to me more."

Ares huffed, shifting his hands to another sore spot. "She has a way of pissing me off. Tends to
tamper any sign of trust at the time."

Voice soft, Charles said, "Seems I have a way of pissing you off, too."

"You didn't point out my scars like I don't fucking know what my own face looks like or shoot me
in the back," Ares said, digging his fingers into the sore muscle a bit harder, almost as if he were
scolding Charles.

Charles arched his back a little against the pain, letting out a soft chuckle, the shock to his system
brought on by the rougher treatment starting to stir arousal in him. "What'd she say about your
scars?" he asked, suddenly not quite as sure about Jasmine as he felt a second before.

"Something about my scars not making me approachable and that my hood wasn't helping any
with covering them," Ares said, scoffing. "As if I didn't know that."

Charles huffed. "Bitch."

Ares took a deep breath, his hands going still for a moment. "I have come to realize she doesn't
have a filter. She acts and speaks before thinking." He hummed and shook his head once. "She's
going to get herself killed one day."

Considering it for a moment, Charles hummed. "I guess I can't hate her too much for not having a
filter. Mine's got more than a few gaping holes in it. But still," he said, furrowing his brow, "it's a
fucked up thing to say."

Ares rumbled in agreement. "I say she's going to get herself killed one day because that was
almost the day."

"What stopped you?" Charles lifted an eyebrow but kept his face pressed against Ares' keel.

"Because …." Ares became quiet and still a moment. "I was tired of being a lone assassin. I
wanted to know someone who could understand as another trained killer could."
Charles winced a little. "I'm sorry I don't. I want to. I wish I did."

Ares shrugged. "This was even before Shanxi, so you didn't even know about it then."

Confused, Charles looked up at him again, brows furrowed. "Know about what?"

Ares stepped back to look down at Charles. "Had you killed before Shanxi?"

"No." He shook his head.

"Then, it all was before you knew what it was like to kill someone, to track them down, set out a plan, and kill them." Ares rumbled and tapped a talon between Charles' brows. "You didn't have that urge yet."

Charles licked his lips. "The beast." He hesitated a moment, wondering if Ares thought him insane for naming the urge he talked about as if it were something separate from himself. A lot of the time, it didn't feel like the beast was him, not really. "It's always been there, it just wasn't so strong until I fed it."

"Right, you didn't have that hunger at the time I spoke with Jasmine." Ares hummed and dropped his hands back to Charles' shoulders to start massaging once more.

Charles nodded and licked his lips again. "Did you forgive her?"

Humming in consideration, Ares relaxed his grip. "I remember, I'll never forget it … but I have given her a chance to redeem herself."

"And then she shot you." Charles' brow furrowed again.

"And then she shot me," Ares repeated. "At that time, I knew it wouldn't be worth it to kill her because she's an idiot. She can't help it."

Charles chuckled. "Is that what keeps you from killing me?" He arched an eyebrow.

"Yes. And I've grown quite amused by it," Ares deadpanned.

Charles grinned, sliding his hands to Ares' hips and gave him a gentle squeeze. "She swears she meant it as a joke."

Ares chuffed. "Then it's good she doesn't have a career in comedy."

Charles let out a bark of laughter, echoing off the shower walls before he cut it off abruptly, knowing it'd be too loud for Ares. "You should tell her the next time you see her."

Ares hummed. "I'm sure I'll have reason to, knowing her."

Letting his gaze roam over Ares for a second, his smile slowly faded. "She said something to me the other day … she said when an assassin lets themselves have a relationship, it's built on a foundation of fear."

"She's right," Ares said as if it were really just that simple.

Fighting the urge to frown, Charles shook his head. "I don't like that."

"You're not supposed to," Ares said, humming as he drummed his talons on Charles' skin. "I learned it in Blackwatch and haven't forgotten it. There's always that fear that someone, sometime, will find out about you, the you that isn't an assassin." He let out a long breath. "It happened with my family. I don't let them know what really happened because of fear of what would happen to them. It was something we were trained to acknowledge and come to terms with, overcoming that fear by doing all we could to prevent it. Sometimes that led to people depersonalizing … like I did. Besides my family—which I couldn't control—it was only me. No lovers, no children … nothing."

"You're all I have left … I don't know what I'll do if something happens to you. How will I even know? You go away for days, weeks even … and you can't always call." Charles scraped his teeth over his lip. "She said you'll probably never want to take me with you, no matter how good I get, because you'll be afraid and worried about me getting hurt."

"I can't tell you what I'll do in the future, but now, I won't take you. When you do get to that point, then ask me again." Ares rumbled and flicked his mandibles. "And, since Shanxi, I've set up a program on my omni-tool. As soon as it reads my vitals flatline, it sets in motion things for you, one of which is letting you know through message."

Charles swallowed against the knot in his throat and leaned his forehead back against Ares' keel, looking down at his feet. "It'll destroy me," he said, his voice flat but sure, stating the most obvious of facts.

Thrumming, Ares put his hands flat on Charles' back, one sliding up to cup the back of his head. "I know … but not doing this will destroy me. I can't stop just as much as you can't."
"I'd never ask you to. Don't want you to. I just want to be with you." He sucked in a deep breath. "But I also don't want to be the thing fucking you up on a job and getting you killed."

Ares hummed, vibrating against Charles through his keel. "Even if I took you to the destination, the planet, colony, or space station that my contract leads me, you wouldn't be there when I kill my target. And you'd be living just as we did on Shanxi. You wouldn't have a home … friends."

"You are my home. I care about Cammus … but nowhere near as much as I do you." Charles took a shuddering breath, feeling like he'd pushed the topic and his luck enough for the time being. "We should get out of here if we're going to the arena. And, Eezo probably found a way up to the bar and ate the rest of my breakfast."

Rumbling, Ares stepped away from Charles and shut off the water. "So long as she didn't eat the plate or fork, I don't care."

"I do, it was good, and it was mine. Plus, bacon." Charles glanced up, a soft smirk crossing his lips before he stepped out of the shower.

"Just make some more bacon," Ares said as if the solution was obvious.

"Nope." He grabbed Ares a couple of towels and passed them over before getting one for himself. "I'll just eat her instead."

Ares snorted and ran the towel over his crest and head a few times. "I don't know how to cook dog."

Charles chuckled. "I'm sure we can find a recipe somewhere, or I can just eat her raw. It won't kill me. Probably."

"Humans are strange about raw foods. You eat some things raw and some make you sick." Ares shrugged as he tossed the wet towel in the hamper. "I'll never understand it."

Huffing, Charles said, "The meat isn't what makes us sick, it's the parasites, bacteria, and viruses some animals carry. Cooking them kills off the other shit."

Ares made a buzzing sound. "That sounds disgusting."

"And yet," Charles said, glancing over his shoulder at the turian, "you eat most of your meat raw, parasites, bacteria, viruses, and all."

"Ours must not be strong enough to kill us … although, who knows, maybe humans are just weak," Ares added with a smirk toward Charles.

"Earth's evolution at its finest." Charles winked before rubbing the towel over his head and tossing it in the hamper. He felt far more relaxed than when he climbed into the shower with Ares, but he wasn't sure how much of it came from Ares working over his tight muscles and how much came from getting crap off his chest in a way that didn't seem to push Ares away.
Surrendering Control

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Charles stood back out of the way, watching as the two turians maneuvered his old mattress onto its side. He didn't like strangers being in his bedroom. Something felt incredibly off about it, so he watched them closely, paranoia making his hackles rise—which drew more than a few, odd, curious looks from the movers. Eezo whined and scratched at the bathroom door, but he needed her to stay inside and out of their way. Ares decided to hang out on the balcony while they worked, probably to avoid drawing attention to himself, which Charles understood but it left him feeling even more off-kilter.

As they hoisted the bed up, wedging it between the two of them, he stepped out of the way to let them pass. He followed the two men back out of the room and down the hall, watching as they made their way to the door. It took them a few seconds to get the angle right to maneuver the bed out of the apartment and into the building's hall, but once they'd managed it only took a few seconds before they came back inside. Returning to the bedroom, they set to work removing the box springs and frame with him right on their heels the entire time.

Once all of the old stuff sat outside, the workers brought in the new bed wrapped in a protective sheeting. Charles let them pass before following them back to the room again, watching as they took off the sheeting and set up the bed. It took a lot longer than he'd expected for everything to get moved around and set up, but looking at the interspecies bed once set in place brought a smile to his face. There was something especially satisfying about knowing he'd used his asshole, homophobic, racist father's credits to buy a bed so his turian lover—the man who killed the sonofabitch—could sleep and fuck Charles in comfort.

When they finished, one of the turians turned to Charles and handed him a datapad. "Sign here, please."

He took the datapad and signed his name across the screen before handing it back. "Thanks," he said, opening his omni-tool and tipping the two turians before escorting them back out of the apartment.

Locking the door behind them, he glanced at the balcony as he grabbed an armful of the new pillows off the couch and carried them to the back. It took him a couple of trips, but he got everything to the room and made the bed, grinning the entire time. He took a few seconds to prop the pillows up against the headboard, making it look as inviting as possible before stepping back and nodding to himself. The bowed bed came complete with a rounded, slatted headboard, perfect for cuffing someone to the bed … or letting himself be cuffed by Ares. The thought stalled his brain for a moment; it wasn't something he'd ever considered before, not even with Ares. Yet … the more he thought about it, the more it felt … right.

He made his way out to the balcony, lighting a cigarillo as he went, and leaned against the railing before glancing at Ares. "So … wanna break in the new bed?"

Ares chuckled before blowing out smoke and flicking his ashes. "Of course, but I also don't want to waste this cigarette, so you're going to have to wait."

Charles hummed, sticking his cigarillo in his mouth before moving behind Ares. "Sure, take your time," he said around the cigarillo.

Slipping his hands under Ares' shirt, he grabbed the turian's waist and squeezed. He slid his hands around to splay his fingers out against Ares' stomach and chest, rubbing the hide and plates as he leaned against the man's back. He closed his eyes, focusing on how warm Ares felt and on the rough, knotted texture of scars beneath his fingertips. Imagining the feel of Ares' tongue and teeth against his skin, he let his imagination stir his desire.

He wanted Ares to know how much he wanted him, wanted his scent to fill the turian's nostrils until he decided the cigarette wasn't worth the wait. Curling his fingers and digging them into the hide, he dragged his hands back to Ares' waist, kneading the muscles there a few times. A moment later, he removed one hand to pull the cigarillo from his mouth. Blowing out smoke, he lightly nipped Ares' shoulder, leaving a bit of a wet mark on his shirt.

Ares rumbled as he turned his head enough to catch Charles' eye. "I can only feel half of what you're doing," he said with a flick of his mandible before sticking his cigarette in his mouth and turning, forcing Charles to release him. Thrumming around his cigarette, he cupped Charles' head, sliding his fingers through his hair.

Knowing it was an exaggeration, Charles grinned and leaned into the touch. "Mhmm, but I can feel you." He returned his free hand to Ares' waist, leaning in to press his chest against the turian while pulling up on his toes, turning his mouth up for a kiss. "And you can smell me."

Ares chuckled and took his cigarette out of his mouth, holding it away from them as he pressed his
mouth to Charles', sliding his tongue inside. Still grinning, Charles returned the kiss, twirling his
tongue around Ares' a few times before nipping at it. Breaking away, he took another drag of his
cigarillo, smirking up at the man. He dug his fingers into Ares' waist, kneading and pulling him
closer against Charles.

Growling softly, Ares took a drag. He held the smoke a moment before turning his head to blow it
out over his shoulder. Turning back to Charles, he leaned down, ducking his head to lick along
the side of Charles' neck. He nipped Charles' ear before licking the slight sting, and Charles let out
a soft moan. Tightening his grip, he turned his head to give Ares better access and took another
drag, blowing the smoke past the turian.

Dragging his teeth along Charles' pulse, Ares slipped his free hand down Charles' back to grip his
hip and pull him closer. He stopped long enough to take another drag, letting the smoke drift out
between his teeth as he trailed bites along Charles' neck, using more force and following each
scrape with a rough swipe of his tongue. Shuddering, Charles moaned and pressed himself closer,
shifting his hips back and forth to rub suggestively over the turian's plates, hard cock pushing
against Ares' thigh. Losing interest in his cigarillo, he flicked it over the balcony, not even caring if
it burned someone when it landed. He wrapped his freed hand around Ares' crest, squeezing tight
and giving it a slight, steady pull.

Ares shifted his head to growl deeply against Charles' ear before pulling back enough to stick his
cigarette in his mouth, freeing both hands to slip beneath Charles' shirt. He dragged his talons
along Charles' skin, leaving bloodless welts in his wake. Hissing, Charles arched his back into the
burn, pressing his hips and cock harder against Ares. He turned his head enough to nip just below
the turian's jaw, sinking his teeth in a little harder the second time.

Snarling, Ares pulled back, taking a last, deep drag from his cigarette before flicking the butt off
the balcony. Stepping away, Charles lifted his shirt over his head, dropping it to the balcony floor
as he started walking backward, a smug smile on his face. Ares followed, unsnapping the closures
of his own shirt, loosening it enough to pull it off over his head. He tossed it somewhere in the
corner of the living room as he growled and closed the gap between their bodies.

Charles reached up, draping his wrists over Ares' cowl. Leaning in, he nipped Ares' keel, letting
his hands slide down the man's chest as he trailed his tongue along plate and hide, lowering
himself to taste Ares' stomach and hips. Using his teeth, he tugged at the closure on Ares' pants,
pulling it loose while he dug his fingers into Ares' waist.

Ares' growl deepened, and he gripped Charles' hips when he rose again, urging him down the hall
and into the bedroom toward their new bed. Charles chuckled, allowing himself to be guided,
trusting in Ares to keep him from walking into anything along the way. Biting and licking Ares'
chest, he pulled the turian's pants opened, shoving them down his hips and rubbing a palm over
already parted plates. Once freed from the tight confines of his pants, Ares' cock easily slid out,
hard and wet against Charles' hand. Ares didn't give him the chance to wrap his fingers around the
beautiful thing before pushing him down onto the bed with a gentle but firm shove.

Pushing up onto his elbows, Charles licked his lips, looking up at Ares. "Get your handcuffs," he
said, throat tightening around the words.

Ares' gaze flicked over the bed, and he huffed lightly, smirking when he looked back down at
Charles. "You finally got a comfortable bed."

Expression shifting into a soft smile, thoughts of handcuffs momentarily brushed aside, Charles
scraped his teeth over his bottom lip and asked, "Did I get the right pillows?"

Ares shrugged. "Won't know until I lay on them." He sniffed and growled softly as he leaned
down over Charles, planting a palm on either side of him, eyes dark. "But that's not what I have
planned right now."

Letting out a low, throaty hum, Charles swallowed and repeated his earlier statement,
determination seeping into his voice, "Get your handcuffs, Ares."

Ares flicked his mandible, humming as if in thought. "The real ones or the releasable ones?"

Taking a slow, deep breath, Charles said, "The real ones."

The thought made him anxious as fuck, but he felt certain, resolute. He wanted to do this with
Ares—for Ares. He wanted to show the man just how much he trusted him. Ares hummed again,
gaze flicking to Charles, mild skepticism clear on his face. Before Charles could open his mouth to
reassure him, though, he stood up straight and nodded once.

"They're with my things in the other room. I'll be right back," he added as he headed out the door.

Charles took another deep breath, doing his best to mentally prepare himself for what was to
come. He stood back up, feeling weak in his knees, and slipped his shoes and socks off before
stepping out of his pants. Crawling back onto the bed, he moved some of the pillows aside so
Ares could get to the slats on the headboard and then laid down, taking more slow, deep breaths
while he waited. Whispering memories started trickling through his head, forcing him to
swallow against the rising knot of panic in his throat and shove them away.
He trusted Ares. Ares wouldn't hurt him, not like that. Never like that. Ares cared about him—maybe even loved him, at least he liked to think so.

The decision to hunt down and kill the men who hurt him, the men who killed Sarah, came so quickly, so easily to Ares. And he'd invited Charles along, gave him the opportunity to get his revenge with his own hands and then embraced his beast when it came roaring to life. The night Charles got hit in the head with a beer bottle, the look in Ares' eyes, the frantic sounds he made as he looked Charles over … no, Ares would never hurt him. Reaching up, he ran his fingers over the scars Ares' teeth left in his shoulder.

'I'm his, and he's mine.'

Having taken his pants off while out of the room, Ares returned with cuffs in hand. The change in Charles' mood didn't seem to bother Ares, at least not enough to keep him from maintaining an erection. Growling, he looked Charles over as he approached and dropped the cuffs next to him on the mattress. He climbed onto the bed, leaning over Charles and rumbling in question.

"How do you want this to go?" Ares asked, gaze roaming over Charles again before returning to his eyes.

Charles licked his lips, all too aware of his heart rate increasing. "I need to be able to see you, at least for now." He really hoped it'd be enough for him to keep it together. He wanted it to be a good experience for the both of them, wanted to be strong for Ares.

"Do you want to be cuffed to the bed, or just cuffed?" Ares' mandibles fluttered softly.

Thinking about it for a few seconds, Charles nodded his head to himself. "Cuffed to the bed." It was how he'd cuffed Ares, and how he'd cuffed every other person he'd ever used handcuffs with … even if he'd never let anyone else put them on him before.

Humming, Ares nodded and held out a hand. Laying his palm in Ares', Charles sucked in a shuddering breath and held it, heart pounding. With wide eyes, he watched as Ares put the cuff around his wrist and tightened it, making it snug without cutting into the skin. Ares stopped and looked to him as if waiting for the go ahead. Forcing himself to breathe, Charles gave Ares his other hand without a word, ignoring the tremble to his fingers.

"Make sure you breathe. Don't pass out," Ares said with a rumble as he lifted Charles' arms to the headboard, slipping the cuff behind the bar before latching it around his opposite wrist.

Heart beating against his ribs hard enough he heard his own pulse roaring in his ears, Charles knew the smell coming off of him must be near overwhelming, but Ares didn't say anything. Swallowing again, he lowered his gaze. "I need a few seconds," he whispered, ashamed and feeling like a weak coward as he closed his eyes. "Just … just talk to me."

"About anything?" Ares thrummed and sat back close enough for Charles to feel him by his side.

Throat spasming, Charles licked his lips and nodded. Ares hummed and ran the back of his knuckles along Charles' ribs, making him flinch and stop breathing again. After a second, though, he settled into the touch.

"I was born in the spring of Palaven." Ares huffed lightly. "I think it's actually winter for Earth if I remember right. I don't remember the date, but I remember seeing the flowers every year around it." He turned his hand, laying his palm on Charles' chest, the gentle touch helping to slow Charles' heart. "I went into basic during the spring, so that's how I really know. We all go in on our fifteenth, usually within a few months according to the schedule of the nearby military outpost. Mine was the same that every turian from Cipritine went to … so you can imagine the sheer amount of people."

Charles let out a soft hum, turning his head and opening his eyes to look up at Ares. He still didn't feel completely calm, but laying still and just listening to Ares' voice definitely helped. He gave the turian a smile and said, "Kiss me?"

Purring, Ares leaned over and pressed his mouth to Charles' but stopped there as if waiting for him to take the lead. Sliding his tongue out, he licked Ares' mouth plates, enticing him to put a little more feeling behind the kiss. He might be anxious—hell, maybe more than anxious—but the point of the whole thing was to show Ares that he trusted him, more than he'd ever trusted anyone else. He willingly surrendered control to Ares where he never would—could never—with anyone else, believing if it became too much for him to handle, Ares would stop.

Ares rumbled in amusement as he opened his mouth and curled his tongue around Charles'. Growling as their tongues danced, he ran the tips of his talons over Charles' collarbone, down the center of his chest and stomach before settling just at the edge of his groin. He'd started to lose his erection in the midst of his panic, but the taste of Ares' tongue in his mouth and the feel of Ares' hide against his skin worked wonders to restore it completely … and then some. Moaning, he shoved his tongue against Ares' and shifted his hips, trying to get the turian to touch him more.

Ending the kiss to duck his head against Charles' throat, Ares finally wrapped his hand around
Charles' cock, stroking as he ran his tongue along Charles' pulse. Charles gasped, lifting his hips again and turning his head, giving Ares more room. He pulled against the cuffs trying to touch Ares—actually managing to forget for a second they were there—but the restraints didn't give, and his pulse spiked. He sucked in a deep breath, focusing on the feel of Ares' tongue against his skin, letting out an approving hum to encourage the turian to keep going.

**I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm safe.**

Ares purred against him, reaching up to grab his hand, giving it a squeeze. Charles curled his fingers around Ares', holding on tight, using the touch as an anchor until the turian decided he needed his hand again. He turned his head a little, nuzzling his face against the top of Ares' crest. Shifting, Ares ran his tongue up Charles' throat and along his jaw before curling it just below his ear. His hand around Charles' cock let go, moving to stroke along his thigh, and Charles groaned, tilting his head again, urging Ares to continue.

Releasing his hand, Ares sat up and eased his legs open, settling between Charles' thighs before leaning over to give his hand back. Wrapping his fingers over Ares' again, Charles focused on keeping his breathing steady. Thrumming, Ares licked Charles' lips, bringing a smile to his face. Lifting his head to press his lips against Ares' mouth, his tongue darted out to trace the curve of the turian's upper plates.

**Growling, Ares opened up and shoved his tongue into Charles' mouth before shifting his weight to his forearm, fingers still holding onto Charles' but freeing up his other hand. He reached down between them, wrapping his hand around both his and Charles' cocks, pressing them together and giving them a firm stroke. Sucking in a ragged breath, tongue moving against Ares' with a quicker pace, Charles groaned into his mouth.**

A moment later, breathless, he pulled his tongue back and tipped his head enough to nip Ares' upper mouth plates. Ares growled again, the sound low and thick with arousal. Moving his hand around them both, his natural lubricant coated Charles' cock, making his movements smoother as he sped up. The act was so fucking hot, and Charles loved the feel of Ares' cock pressed against his, but he still couldn't quite shake the panic coming with the loss of control, the handcuffs a constant reminder.

Ares huffed against his lips and squeezed his hand. "Do you want to take this up a notch?" he asked, smirking as he shifted to nip Charles' ear, growling against him.

He licked his lips and nodded, his face brushing against Ares. "Yeah."

Nodding, Ares sat back on his knees and lifted Charles' hips, purring softly as he slowly guided himself into Charles. Raising his ass to help angle Ares in, a soft hiss of a groan seeped out of Charles. His muscles tightened around the intrusion, taking a little longer to relax than usual, and his heart started to beat a harder again. Ares thrummed and leaned down, letting him hear the turian's aroused yet soothing subvocals right next to his ear. Pressing in completely, Ares stopped when he finally came flush, his mandible brushing against Charles.

"Oh God," Charles muttered—probably only just barely loud enough to translate—feeling momentarily overwhelmed.

Despite how different Ares felt from the humans who raped him, the feel of his cock buried inside of Charles along with the cuffs around his wrists brought the memories of the event forward. They pushed against his will, trying to sink their claws into him and drag him down. He let out a soft growl, chasing the ghosts of his past away and lifting into Ares, turning his head to scrape his teeth over the turian's neck. Tasting Ares' hide and pulling the man's scent deep inside his lungs, he focused on Ares with everything he had and started to relax.

"Slow or hard?" Ares asked a moment later, ducking his head to nip Charles' collarbone, grinding against him.

"Start slow," he muttered, rubbing his face against Ares' crest.

Ares nodded again as he gripped Charles' hips, lifting him up more as he thrust upward. He sighed as he moved, nipping Charles' collarbone harder. Moaning, Charles sucked in a breath as he rolled his hips to drive the turian deeper. He lunged against the cuffs, the urge to wrap his arms around Ares distracting him for just a moment. When the restraints caught, though, he didn't panic but let out a soft, frustrated growl.

Ares huffed a weak laugh, shifting his weight as he sped up a little. He lowered his head beside Charles' and snarled softly. "Use your mouth where you can't use your hands."

Letting out a low groan, Charles rolled his hips again. "I want to feel you against my chest," he said, his voice coming out hoarse, almost a whimper.

Ares stopped long enough to situate their bodies so he pressed against Charles. It seemed a bit awkward for the turian, but he didn't complain. Instead, he rumbled as he bucked his hips, just once, as if in question. Charles let out a soft sigh, the contact both calming and sating some deeply rooted urge inside of him, and he lifted his hips into Ares, a moan slipping from his throat as the man started to move again.
The hungry growl emanating from Ares reverberated through Charles, filling his ear and keeping his mind focused on the present. Ares picked up the pace, hand on Charles' hip kneading as he moved. Not forgetting they were there, but unable to resist the urge to try to touch Ares, Charles pulled on the cuffs again. He let out a loud groan, locking his ankles around Ares' legs and using the leverage to pull him in with each thrust, instead.

Ares huffed against Charles' ear, lapping at his throat as he slid his hand down between them to wrap his fingers around Charles' cock. Stroking in time to his hard thrusts, his pants of breath cooled the saliva on Charles' skin. He moved with Ares, doing his best to keep up with the rhythm and pace Ares set, rolling his hips and fucking Ares' hand. The occasional wave of panic and fear slammed over Charles when his awareness moved back to the restraints, but he managed to keep it mostly at bay by focusing on the fact he was with Ares and safe.

Ares licked Charles' lips, showing his tongue in a moment after with a low snarl. His kiss came hungry and rough, stroking and curling around Charles' tongue with his own. Charles did his best to give back as much as he got, trying to make it clear to Ares that despite his random spikes of fear and panic, he was still with Ares. Still enjoying himself, still willing. He nipped Ares' tongue, lifting his hips against the turian's, breaths coming a little quicker, shallower, as his need for release built. Eyes fluttering closed, images of Sarah being beaten and raped while men held him back, tight grips keeping his arms immobilized, sparked to life on the back of his eyelids. His eyes snapped open again, gaze fixing firmly on Ares until Ares became everything.

Pulling out of the kiss with a growl, Ares dropped his head to Charles' shoulder, dragging the tips of his teeth against the scar there with a thick rumble of question.

Moving his head to the side to give Ares better access, Charles sucked in a shuddering breath. "Yes, always yes," he muttered against Ares' ear. "I'm yours. Bite me. Mark me. Please."

Ares stopped panting, falling silent a moment before he snarled and sank his teeth into Charles' shoulder. He slammed his hips against Charles' ass, fucking him hard and deep,speeding his movements around Charles' cock. Charles pulled against the cuffs, desperate to wrap his arms around Ares, to dig his fingers into his waist, pull his crest, anything just to feel more of the turian. Heart rate speeding up when the cuffs bit into his wrists, he fought against the panic, grunting and lifting into Ares. The sharp sting of Ares' teeth in his skin pushed him closer and closer to the edge, the faint scent of his blood filling the air. Tossing his head back against the pillows, Charles let out a low, raw growl, bucking his hips against Ares, shuddering, and pulling against the restraints. A few more pumps and the dam inside of Charles broke with a loud, whorish sounding moan, sending hot cum out in spurts to wash over his stomach and Ares' hand.

Ares groaned as Charles spasmed around his cock. Ramming into him with a few more, hard bucks of his hips, Ares snarled and sank his teeth in deeper, pumping Charles' ass full of cum. The sounds the turian made and the feel of him losing himself kept Charles riding the high, filling him with a euphoric rush rivaling that of actually getting off. Grinding against Charles for a moment longer, mashing his orgasm, Ares pulled his teeth from Charles' flesh before slowing to a stop. His chest heaved with each breath as he shifted to reach up and unlock the cuffs, letting them fall to the floor.

Charles wasted no time wrapping his arms around Ares, taking staggered, deep breaths as he pulled the turian closer to him, panting against his ear. "I love you, Ares. And, I trust you," he whispered.

Purring, Ares flicked his tongue against Charles' cheek as he gripped his hips, easing him off of his cock. Charles fought weakly against Ares' retreat, fingers and legs tightening against the turian, trying to hold him close. Instead of leaving Charles, Ares rolled the both of them to the side and pulled Charles in against him, arms wrapping around and supporting him. He clung to Ares, rubbing his face against the turian's chest and neck, trembling even worse in the aftermath despite all traces of panic evaporating along with the disappearance of the cuffs.

Ares rumbled, soft and low, something Charles felt more than heard, as he ran his talons through his hair. "You should probably try to sleep."

Charles let out a soft grunt bordering on a whimper, still clinging to Ares. "Stay with me?" It was still rather early compared to when he normally slept, but he felt utterly drained. A part of him wanted to blame waking up early and exhausting himself at the arena, but he knew better. What he just did, what he gave to Ares, took its toll on his psyche, sapping him of energy. But it felt like a good thing.

"Yeah …." Ares hummed and paused. "Or we could spend the entire night fucking." He huffed, leaned back to make Charles look at him, and flicked a mandible. "I'll be leaving tomorrow."

Face falling, Charles swallowed. The next day was his birthday, not to say his birthdays ever carried much meaning for him, but maybe they would've started to if Ares stuck around. He wasn't surprised, though; he knew Ares must be itching to be on the move after his extended stay. He forced a smile on his face, not wanting to ruin the moment, and nodded. "Let's fuck all night."

Charles awoke to an empty bed, and he knew without even having to get up that Ares was gone.
Not just gone from the apartment, but gone from the Citadel. It didn't surprise him for Ares to leave without waking him up to say goodbye, but it still stung a little. At least he gave Ares a damn good send off.

He'd intended to roll over and try to go back to sleep, but the door buzzer sounded, and he realized it must've been what woke him up in the first place. Climbing out of bed, he slipped on his sweats and headed for the door. Rubbing a hand over his face before raking it through his hair, he turned on the security feed to find a delivery man outside. He didn't order anything else, so it made his hackles rise a little to see the human standing outside his door. His razor and pistol were both in the bedroom ….

Scrapping his teeth over his lip, he hit the intercom button. "Give me a minute, I'm not dressed."

"Sure, no problem," the man said, glancing at the speaker.

Charles made his way back to the bedroom, grabbing a shirt and pulling it on over his head. He checked over the Stiletto III before holstering it at his back and slipping his razor into his pocket. Eezo met him in the hall, following him back to the door again. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door, gaze sweeping over the man. The nametag on his shirt said 'Ron', and he held a plain box in his hands.

"Charles Fairclough?" Ron lifted an eyebrow, flashing a smile at Charles.

Nodding, Charles said, "Yeah, that's me."

"I've got a delivery for you," the man said, holding the box out to Charles, "and I'll need your signature."

Taking the box, Charles turned it over in his hands, narrowing his eyes a bit when he saw no return address of any kind. He figured it was probably something Ares had sent to him and just didn't tell him anything. He tucked the box under his arm and held his hand out for the datapad, scribbling his signature before handing it back. "Thanks."

"No problem. Have a good day." The man turned, walking back down the hall again.

Stepping back inside, Charles closed the door and looked closer at the box, finding his name and address scrawled across the surface in neat, flowing handwriting. Definitely not Ares' handwriting. Humming, he carried it to the kitchen and sat it down on the counter, grabbing a knife to cut through the tape. Flipping open the flaps, he picked up the card sitting right on top.

"I noticed you seemed interested in my set, thought you might like one of your own. Happy Birthday!" the note said in the same script.

Furrowing his brow, he set the card aside and looked inside the box, folding back the light blue packing paper. A bundle of black, cloth covered elastic sat inside, and he picked it up, recognizing it once he had it in his hands as a wraparound sheath like the one Jasmine wore. Grinning like an idiot, he glanced back inside to find another box, black and sleek, without any writing or pictures on the outside. Setting the sheath on the counter, he picked up the black box and opened it, finding half a dozen, matte black throwing knives inside.

"Fucking awesome," he said, sliding one of the knives from the box, turning it over in his hand and pulling off the blade cover. He brushed his thumb along the edge of the blade before carefully pressing it against the tip. "Holy shit, these are sharp."
Charles planned to spend his entire birthday lounging around the apartment. Even though he still wished Ares was there, it was nice to have the place to himself without the suffocating feeling of being in a fight and at odds with Ares, panicking every five minutes with the fear he'd never see the turian again. Ares did come back, though. They'd made up, even if it was a bit rocky, and things were going to be okay.

He laid on his bed, wearing nothing but underwear, Eezo stretched across his legs and his laptop rested on his chest. He'd watched a few vids on knife throwing techniques, and then he spent about an hour shopping online. Ares would be coming home to a few new outfits—primarily in black—turian designed dishes, and some fancier cleansing scrub he'd probably turn his nose up at. Charles wanted to get him something more, but Mr. Minimalism was kind of hard to shop for. He wanted … he wanted the apartment to feel like home for Ares. He wanted to feel like home for Ares.

The sound of the door buzzer brought a groan from him, but he closed his laptop and set it aside, easing his legs free from beneath Eezo before standing. Slipping on a pair of sweats and a shirt, he holstered his Stiletto III at his back and picked up his razor. The second his fingers wrapped around the cool metal, he felt his pulse jump, the scent of blood filling his nostrils and making his cock twitch in yearning. Sucking in a deep breath, he dropped his razor into his pocket before making his way to the door. He activated the security feed and smiled, finding Cammus and Acevia standing outside.

Opening the door, he leaned against the frame, flashing his teeth at them in a grin. "Hey. Well, this is a surprise."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles. "I mentioned to Acevia that today was your birthday, and she informed me birthdays are important occasions to humans, a time for celebration."

"Happy Birthday, Charles," Acevia said, grinning widely, mandibles flared.

Chuckling, Charles stepped back and waved his arm for them to come in. "Thanks. It's not a real big deal for me, just means I survived another year, but it's always nice to hear anyway."

Eezo came running out of the room, tongue hanging from her mouth as she let out happy sounding yips and wagged her tail. Acevia chuckled, making her way into the living room to sit down and invite Eezo up onto her lap. Cammus smiled, reaching over to pat Charles' back, not-so-subtly scenting the air. Charles wondered for just a second if he was taking in the lingering smells of sex, hoping to spend more time alone with Ares, or just trying to see if the other turian was around. Either way, Cammus would just have to make do with hanging out with Charles.

"He left for work," Charles muttered. "Sometime early this morning after I fell asleep." Making his way into the kitchen, he looked back over his shoulder and asked, "Can I get you guys something to drink?"

"I have a better idea," Acevia said, looking at him over the breakfast bar. "You go put on something more attractive and let us take you out for dinner and drinks."

He considered saying no for a moment, rather enjoying being lazy. He wasn't sure if he wanted to deal with crowds, especially with the beast bristling inside of him, but it only took one glance at the hopeful look on Cammus' face for him to smile and nod. "Alright. Give me a few minutes."

Making his way to his bedroom, he started digging through his closet and the dresser. A soft chuff of sound made him look up, finding Acevia leaning against his bedroom doorway, watching him. He raised an eyebrow at her, letting a smirk slip onto his face. "Did you come to watch the show?"

She chuckled, mandibles fluttering softly as she let her gaze roam over the room. "Not exactly what I expected."

"What did you expect?" Discreetly dropping his razor in the drawer, he closed the dresser and tossed fresh underwear and socks on the bed with the rest of his clothes.

Humming, she lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "There's just not much … turian here."

"Ah." He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Aelianus is pretty spartan. I'm working on him, though." Grimacing, he unholstered his Stiletto III, making sure the safety was on before setting it on the dresser. "I'm going to get naked now, fair warning."

She flicked her mandibles, smirking. "I'll leave you to it. Do that spiky thing with your hair, too. It's cute."
He laughed. "Planned on it."

Turning, she closed the door behind her, and he stripped. He'd decided on the more casual suit Ares bought him for their time spent at the hotel on the Presidium during Maela's wedding. He made it even more casual by leaving the shirt untucked, blazer hanging open, and a couple of buttons undone. After slipping on his shoes, he glanced at the dresser again, thinking about his razor. He'd gotten so used to carrying it, he hated going without it, but considering C-Sec wanted him—even if they didn't know it was him they were looking for—it probably wasn't a very good idea for him to keep the razor on him. Ares told him to treat the Stiletto III like an extension of himself, but he wasn't completely sure if Ares acquired the gun through legal means or if he was legally allowed to carry it on his person.

After a minute, he decided against taking either weapon and put the gun up in its case. He'd look into it later. Leaving his room, he killed the light and made his way to the bathroom. He turned on the water, getting just enough on his hands to slick his hair before shutting it off again. He ran his hands over his head, combing his fingers through his hair before picking up his tub of styling wax. He worked a little into his hands, rubbing it in his palms to warm it before running it through his hair, shifting and twisting strands until it looked the way he wanted it to. Washing the excess off his hands, he glanced at himself in the mirror and grinned.

The faintest hint of jealousy still bubbled to the surface when he thought about Ares spending the entire night with Cammus, but he admitted it wasn't so bad with knowing Ares didn't actually sleep there. Still, Charles would've liked it better if Ares had come home and slept next to him, but he was alright. And after the night they spent together … well, it did wonders to make him feel closer to Ares again and soothed any burn he felt over Cammus, which really went far to keep him from resenting his friend. The whole having friends thing still felt new and awkward to Charles, and Cammus was the closest friend he'd managed to make since childhood. Acevia insisted on taking them to a restaurant catering more towards humans, so he'd suggested Le Bleu. He liked the place well enough, and he knew they had dextro options. Being there without Ares and Jasmine, he didn't see any real reason to protest when Acevia made her way towards the interior of the restaurant instead of the patio. He wouldn't be able to smoke inside, but he didn't mind. The place actually looked pretty nice inside. There were murals on the walls he felt pretty sure depicted places on Earth and Thessia. He guessed it made sense; Le Bleu seemed to merge asari and human cuisine. The indoor tables appeared studier, and colorful tablecloths draped their surfaces. The soft lights felt inviting, creating a sense of intimacy, and unobtrusive music played over hidden speakers.

The turian waitress seemed unusually timid but polite enough. She kept casting him odd looks when she seemed to think he wouldn't notice, and twice she caught her scenting the air around him. Finally, he realized she was picking up on Ares' scent, and he thought it probably meant Ares fucked her at some point. He chuckled softly to himself.

"What's so funny?" Acevia asked, flaring her mandibles and lifting a brow plate.

He just shook his head and smiled. "Nothing, just a stray thought."

She hummed, looking around her, seeming to take in the sights. "I've never been here before. It's comfortable, though." Turning her attention back to him, she grinned. "Tonight's on me, so get whatever you'd like. What's the food humans traditionally eat on birthdays called? The sweet stuff?"

"Cake and ice cream," he said, looking at the menu.

Cammus hummed. "I see something here that says cake but it doesn't mention ice cream."

"Cheesecake." Charles shrugged. "It's not really the same thing, but it's a good dessert."

"Oh, no, look! They've got something called a brownie served with ice cream." She glanced up at Charles, curiosity in her eyes, mandibles fluttering softly. "What's that?"

Smiling at her efforts to make sure he celebrated the way she thought a human ought, he said, "A brownie is actually a lot closer to traditional cake than cheesecake is. It's uh, made with pretty much the same ingredients, but it's denser than cake. Brownie à la mode actually does sound pretty good, maybe after I eat dinner."

Acevia grinned, eyes filled with pride, a pleased smile on her face. "Have you decided what you want to eat?"

He didn't get the chance to answer as arms wrapped around him from behind, sending a spike of panic through him. Beast growling, blood flashed before his eyes, screams echoing in his ears. His hands clenched into fists, and he nearly struck out, but Cammus put a hand on his, humming soothingly.

"You must be Lindsey," Cammus said, flicking his mandibles as he looked behind Charles.
Charles relaxed his hands, heart still pounding out a frantic beat against his sternum. Sucking in a deep breath, he forced a smile on his face and turned to look up at the woman hanging off of him.

Lindsey grinned and chuckled before kissing his cheek. "Happy Birthday, Charles," she whispered softly against his ear.

Mahlia stood at Lindsey's side, giving him an exasperated shake of her head, a soft smile on her face.

"Thanks, Linds," he said, patting her arm still around him and returning Mahlia's smile.

"I hope you don't mind," Acevia said, voice wary, "I asked Cammus to invite your friends. I thought it would be a nice surprise."

He knew exactly why she sounded like she walked on eggshells, knew the panicked scent of fear and adrenaline pouring off of him must smell overwhelming to the turians. Turning, to look back at Acevia, he gave her a smile. "It's a great surprise, she just startled me is all."

"Sorry," Lindsey said, kissing his cheek again before letting him go. She moved to sit in a chair at his left, and Mahlia filled the space next to her.

"Happy Birthday, Charles." Mahlia folded her hands on the table, glancing at Lindsey to give the woman a warm smile when she threaded her arm through Mahila's.

"Thank you. I'm glad you guys came. This is nice." And it was, really nice. He felt almost normal.

"Acevia, you're spending quite a bit tonight, let me pitch in." Charles kept his voice low, leaning against the table closer to her.

They'd gone to Purgatory after leaving Le Bleu, and even with two extra people, Acevia still insisted on paying the entire bill. Hell, she'd even pushed for everyone to order dessert. As soon as they arrived at Purgatory, she'd ordered a round of drinks for everyone and opened a tab. He knew she made more money than he did, but he also knew the woman wasn't loaded. It didn't feel right knowing she was blowing so much money on him for his birthday, especially when he still had so much of his father's money sitting in his account.

"Not a chance." She chuffed and waved her hand, dismissing his offer.

Cammus chuckled, surprising Charles when he leaned in and nipped at Charles' neck, making heat course through him and his hair stand on end. Cammus rumbled next to his ear. "Relax and enjoy yourself."

Grinning, Charles reached over and tugged the turian's mandible. "Don't be a tease."

Honeyed eyes taking on a fiery cast, Cammus rumbled again and asked, "Who says I'm teasing?"

Grinning, Charles reached over and tugged the turian's mandible. "Don't be a tease."

Acevia laughed, sliding out of the booth to reach across the table, taking one of both men's hands in hers. "Come on, you two. Let's go dance."

Charles let out a soft groan, but he let her coax him out of the booth. "I'm not really much of a dancer. It wasn't entirely true. He was actually a pretty good dancer, he just didn't really care to dance, didn't like drawing the attention to himself, he guessed."

Acevia chuckled, flicking a mandible at him. "Somehow, I don't believe you."

He snorted but didn't respond as she led both him and Cammus over to where Mahlia swayed back and forth, hands wrapped around Lindsey's waist. Acevia tugged him around, wrapping her long arms over his shoulders before rumbling something at Cammus. The other turian fluttered his mandibles, pressing his keel against Acevia's back and reaching around her to grip Charles' hips. Cammus pulled Charles in closer until his hips pressed against Acevia, and Charles knew right then how the night was going to end.

Drunk Lindsey was fucking hilarious.

He wasn't sure exactly why the woman decided she needed to ride around the club on his back, but there she was, legs wrapped around his waist, arms outstretched over his shoulders with her fingers intertwinde. He helped support her weight and keep her from slipping with his hands wrapped under her legs. She sang 'Happy Birthday' to him, at the top of her lungs, successfully making herself heard loud and clear despite the thump of bass coming from the bar's sound system. Her knee caught a man in his ribs as Charles navigated past a cluster of people, and the human spun, a sneer on his face.

"Watch where the fuck you're going!" The man shouted, shoving closer to Charles.

The beast growled and snarled, the alcohol in Charles' system making it harder to keep the monster at bay. Lindsey's grip on Charles' tightened, and he felt her fear, making her cower and
cling to him for protection. He stared the man down, a slow, blood-hungry smile slithering across his face. The man blinked, appearing shaken as he stepped back. Inside of Charles, the beast purred and licked its chops. He continued to watch as the man backed away, stumbling into a turian before spinning and making his way through the crowd, disappearing from sight.

"What was his problem?" Lindsey asked, grip on Charles easing back to something less constricting.

Laughing, Charles shrugged, inwardly stroking the beast's head. He glanced up at Lindsey the best he could and flashed his teeth at her in a smile. "Who knows?" Moving again, he made his way to the bar and came to a stop, shifting his head a little so she could hear him easier over the sounds of the club. "What do you want to drink, Linds?"

He'd probably had more than enough himself, but he was still standing—even with the extra weight—and he was enjoying himself. He'd have just one more, though, he decided. Acevia and Cammus made it more than clear they wanted to return to his apartment with him, and he wanted to be clear-headed enough to remember every second. Not to mention still sober enough to actually get his cock hard.

"Something fruity!" Lindsey wriggled around a little, tightening her grip on his waist as she sat herself.

He chuckled and turned his attention to the asari bartender. "Mount Milgrom for me, and something fruity for her."

The asari laughed. "Right away. I'll add it to your party's tab and have them brought to the table for you."

"Thanks." He winked at the asari before glancing in Lindsey's direction. "You ready?"

She nodded her head against his and resumed her singing as he turned with her and made his way through the crowd. He stopped next to their table in front of Mahlia and held out his hands to her. Smiling softly, she settled her hands into his and let him pull her up from the booth and in against him. Lindsey let out a little, delighted sounding squeal and shifted her weight to wrap one of her legs around Mahlia and closed her hands behind the asari's neck, effectively sandwiching him between the two.

Mahlia laughed, pushing up on her toes towards Lindsey, but Charles still had to bend his knees a little to let the two women have their kiss. He smiled, something about knowing he'd played a part in bringing the two of them together made him happy. He straightened again, despite the pathetic whimper Lindsey gave him, and started to dance to the music the best he could with her still on his back. Mahlia moved with him, her gaze flicking between him and Lindsey before tilting her head back in laughter.

"My sister works in C-Sec," Mahlia said, which came as an unwelcome surprise to Charles, "and she told me tonight that Irene may be involved with whatever it was Werin had going on." She furrowed her brow, glazed eyes clouding over with momentary confusion. "I guess I really shouldn't be telling any of you this. Promise me you won't tell anyone!" She didn't relax her face until everyone gave her their nods of reassurance.

"No shit?" Charles arched an eyebrow. "Who'd have guessed? Well, if it's true—hell, maybe even if it isn't—it might mean she's out of a job."

"Goddess, I hope so!" Mahlia huffed, propping an elbow on the table to rest her chin on her hand, fingers curled around her cheek.

"You and me both." Charles chuckled, glancing at Cammus. The idea of being done with Irene for good thrilled him. Hell, maybe he'd even get reassigned to the back. He and Cammus working together would have it running like a well-oiled machine in no time.

"I certainly wouldn't miss her. Who do you think they'd have replace her?"

"Honestly?" Mahlia raised her brow. "Probably Charles."

Scoffing, Charles killed off the rest of his drink. "I doubt it. They didn't think he was management material when they brought Irene in, why would the higher ups promote him with her headed out?

"Why? You've been there a long time, you know the place better than anyone else, and your commissions have been pretty damn good lately." Mahlia shrugged. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see, but if I had to put credits on it, I'd say they choose you."

"Mahlia, I don't feel so good. I think I had too much to drink." Lindsey scrunched up her nose, turning pleading eyes on the asari. "Will you take me home?"

Giving Lindsey a soft smile, Mahlia stood up from the table. "Of course." She turned her attention
to Cammus and Acevia. "Thanks for inviting us, I had a lovely time."

"So did I," Lindsey said, pushing herself up on wobbly legs. "Happy Birthday again, Charles."

He smiled, putting a supportive hand against her side to help keep her on her feet while Mahlia made her way over. "Thanks. You two enjoy your night."

Acevia circled around his naked body, dragging her ungloved talons over his skin, letting out a soft purr. He stood in the middle of his bedroom floor, following Acevia with his gaze until she disappeared behind him, then he turned his attention to Cammus. Waving his fingers, he beckoned the man to him. Cammus fluttered his mandibles, heat filling his gaze as he stalked toward Charles and leaned into him, scraping his teeth over Charles' neck with a low growl.

Letting out a groan, Charles tilted his head and shoved his hands between them to pull open the clasps of Cammus' shirt. Acevia's face rubbed over his shoulder blades, tongue laving his spine before he felt her teeth sink into the back of his neck, retreating again before breaking the skin. He sucked in a shuddering breath, pulling the last clasp free and shoving Cammus' shirt down. He dug his fingers into the turian's waist, earning him a low rumble of sound. Shifting his head, Cammus reached down, taking Charles' hard cock in his hand and started a slow stroke. Using his thumb, he spread precum around, using it to slicken his movements and pull a moan from Charles.

"Aelianus—I'm sorry, I thought—hmmm …." Regret and something else flashed through Cammus' eyes, leaving a sinking feeling in the pit of Charles' stomach.

"He kissed you." It wasn't a question.

Charles just knew. He felt it, and it hurt. But only for a second.

He swallowed, watching Cammus' mandibles jerk with his unease. Licking his lips, he reached up and wrapped his hand around the back of Cammus' neck, tugging the turian back to him. "If he kissed you, it means he trusts you." Pressing his lips to Cammus', he trailed his tongue over the turian's mouth plates, earning him a hopeful sounding purr. "And so do I," Charles whispered against Cammus' mouth.

Opening his mouth to him, Cammus' tongue met his, sliding over it before wrapping around and tugging it back into his own mouth. Cammus reached down, taking Charles' hard cock in his hand and started a slow stroke. Using his thumb, he spread precum around, using it to slicken his movements and pull a moan from Charles.

Acevia purred, the sound pleased and encouraging as she wrapped her arms around him, sliding her fingers over his chest in the scant space left between him and Cammus. She nipped at his neck again, sending a shiver down his spine before she disappeared. A moment later, he felt her move behind Cammus, tugging at his pants. Cammus hummed and lifted one leg after the other, letting her free him from his confines. His cock slid from his plates, brushing against Charles' thigh.

Reaching out a hand, Charles caught Acevia's wrist and tugged her in against his side. Cammus shifted a little, giving her more room without breaking contact with Charles. Acevia dragged her talons down his back and over his ass, nipping at his shoulder while he kissed Cammus. After a moment, he tore his mouth away from Acevia, her shirt already unclasped, hanging open. He slid his hand inside, wrapping his fingers around her waist and squeezing. "Come hither look and flick of her fingers. Charles chuckled, sliding his hand into Cammus' and leading him after Acevia.

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They crawled onto the bed with her, and she laid back, tucking one of Ares' new pillows in beneath her head. Charles leaned over her, pressing one of his knees to the mattress between her legs and nipped at the edge of her cowl. She purred, reaching up to drag her talons lightly through his hair, tugging him closer. He gripped her waist with one hand and ducked his head under her chin, sinking his teeth into her neck.

Cammus turned a little, just enough to use his free hand to tug her shirt the rest of the way off of her before moving down to her pants. Rumbling, Acevia stepped back, a smirk on her face as she left both Charles' and Cammus' reach, slowly stripping off her own pants before backing away to the bed, giving them both all of their attention. After a moment, he tore his mouth away from Acevia, her shirt already unclasped, hanging open. He slid his hand inside, wrapping his fingers around her waist and squeezing, starting with a gentler pressure and working his way up until he saw the spark in her eyes telling him he'd found her sweet spot. Smirking, he started kneading, keeping that same pressure until she melted against him and Cammus.

Cammus stretched out on the bed next to them, dragging his talons down Charles' back, leaving welts in his wake. The beast inside stirred at the sting of pain, letting out a hungry rumble which made its way through Charles' throat. He let go of Acevia's neck and turned his face to Cammus, wrapping his tongue around the turian's when he brought his mouth to Charles'. Sliding his hand over Acevia's stomach, he reached down between her legs, running his fingers over her parting plates, feeling the slick juices seeping from the seam. They slid open easily for him, and she lifted her hips, urging him to dip his fingers inside. She let out a little gasp as he rubbed his fingers along the warm, tight walls of her pussy.

Cammus sucked a deep breath in through his nose, his tongue picking up the pace against Charles, a low growl rumbling through him. He ran his talons up Charles' thigh, the fresh sting driving his
fingers deeper inside of Acevia. She rocked her hips against his hand, egging him on as she wrapped her fingers around his cock, moving slowly at first, exploring him before getting a firm grip and stroking. Charles groaned into Cammus' mouth, moving his hips, pressing himself harder into Acevia's hand.

He pulled away, nipping the turian's mandible before saying, "Come fuck me while I fuck her."

Letting out an aroused growl, Cammus dragged his talons over Charles' other thigh before pulling away and moving to the edge of the bed. He opened Charles' bedside table and pulled out the lube. Charles turned his attention to Acevia, meeting her gaze, looking for any hint of hesitancy and finding nothing but hunger. He shifted to bring his other knee between her legs as Cammus moved behind him.

Dipping his head, he traced her mandible with his tongue before whispering, "Are you sure?"

Her mandible flicked against his cheek, and she let out a sultry purr, scraping her talons over his scalp. "Show me what you got, birthday boy."

Chuckling, he slid his fingers out of her and slipped his hand under her ass, lifting her hips to meet him as he lined himself up. He took his time, easing inside of her, giving her the chance to adapt to his alien physiology. Her eyes widened a little, a curious trill seeping from her throat, but she gave him no sign she wanted him to stop.

Behind him, Cammus' lubed, taloned finger probed at Charles' asshole, and he stilled, letting the turian slip his finger inside. Cammus hummed, resting his other hand on Charles' hip, kneading softly, urging him to take the lead. Charles cased forward, settling into Acevia, sucking in a breath at first, finding the right position for everyone, but fuck it felt fantastic. He bucked his hips, slamming his cock into Acevia, and she let out the most delightful sounding moan, lifting to meet his thrusts. Cammus took a few seconds before moving again, finding and matching Charles' pace as his fingers dug into Charles' hips.

"Stiletto III?" Acevia asked.

Charles turned from looking out over the Citadel to glance at her, raising an eyebrow. It took a second for her question to click into place in his head. "Yeah," he said, taking a drag of his cigarillo.

She hummed, drinking from her bottle of water. "Good choice."

"Aelianus chose it for me." He took another drag and pushed away from the balcony railing, sitting down at the small table with her.

"Is it your first firearm?" She fluttered his mandible softly, gaze trailing over him.

"Yeah. I've been taking it to a shooting range, and we went to the Armax Arsenal Arena a few times." He cracked open his own bottle of water and took a heavy swallow.

"Maybe we can go together sometime." She flared her mandibles, raising a brow plate.

Charles shrugged, he didn't see any reason why not. "Sure." He probably wouldn't take her to the shooting range, it could get complicated since both he and Ares used aliases there, but the arena was well populated enough not to matter.

The front door opened, and Cammus led Eezo back inside. Squatting down, he took her off the leash, and she ran straight for the balcony, jumping up into Charles' lap when he patted his leg. She nuzzled against his face, tongue darting out to lick his cheek before settling down. She was starting to get too big for his lap, at least while he sat in those chairs. Cammus came over to lean against the door frame, a smile on his face.

Acevia chuckled and stood, running her talons over Charles' scalp as she came to a stop next to him. She bent down and nipped his jaw. "I've got to work in the morning, I'm heading out. Have a good night."

"Thank you, Acevia. I had a fantastic time." He turned his head to return the nip on her mandible. "Sleep well."

She purred and straightened, moving past Cammus and into the apartment.

Cammus hummed, fluttering his mandibles. "I should get going, too. Do you want to meet at the gym tomorrow evening?"

"Sure. Call me about an hour before?" Charles raised his eyebrow in question, stroking his hand through Eezo's fur.
"Alright. Good night, Charles." Cammus pushed off the doorframe and stepped out on the balcony to rest one hand on Charles' shoulder and scratched Eezo's head with the other. He let out a soft chuckle. "Good night, Eezo."

Eezo turned her head and licked Cammus' fingers, bringing another soft chuckle from the turian. Charles squeezed Cammus' waist, gently swatted his ass to send him on his way, and muttered a good night. He watched as the two turians left and then turned his attention back to Eezo and his cigarillo. Still tipsy and a little sleepy, he finished smoking and spent a few minutes just sitting there. Petting Eezo, he wondered where exactly Ares was and hoped he was safe.

"Come on, Eezo. Let's go to bed." He stood when the dog jumped down from his lap and followed her inside. After locking up the balcony, he made his way to the front door and locked it, too, before turning off the lights.

Charles awoke in a sweat, the beast roaring in his ears, deafeningly loud. Blood flashed before him, urging him from the bed, mouth filled with saliva. His limbs trembled, fingers itched to wrap around his razor and sink it deep into someone's flesh. The last vestiges of whatever dream lit the fire inside of him faded from his mind, leaving him grasping at straws in a crazed panic. All he knew was that he'd waited too long. He needed to kill.

He needed to feed the beast.
Blackouts

Chest heaving as if he'd just run a marathon, Charles stood over the rapidly cooling corpse of a man he barely recognized as Andrew Polk—one of the men from his list, the same man he'd suggested to Ares that they kill while staying in the hotel for Ares' sister's wedding. Blood oozed, thick and slow, from deep wounds carved over every bit of visible skin, and there was a lot of visible skin. Dazed and confused, he wasn't entirely sure what happened or how he got there. But he didn't doubt the dead man in front of him was his own handiwork. Flashes of digging his blade into Andrew's flesh flashed on the backs of his eyelids every time he blinked, and the sounds of the rapist's screams rattled around inside his skull.

The beast stretched and yawned, licking blood off its chops before curling up again in the back of Charles' mind.

Rock hard, his cock pressed painfully against the seam of his pants. When he looked down at himself, he found he was drenched in blood—he didn't even have any of the protective gear he was supposed to wear when he made his kills. How the fuck was he supposed to make it back home with blood all over him? He didn't even know where the hell he was. He blinked again, panic shooting icy tendrils down his spine, making his heart race and his slippery grip tighten around his razor.


Looking up, he glanced around, pleading with his brain to focus and take in his surroundings. Dimly lit, sounds of machinery ticking and whirring through the air, wherever he was seemed closed off from the rest of the Citadel. Even though he thought the fact might mean no one saw him commit murder, it actually brought him very little relief. Feet scraping over metal grating when he shifted his weight, the whole place seemed unpolished, like it wasn't meant to be seen by the public eye. He stood on some sort of catwalk or maybe a platform, railing just beyond his reach, a dark abyss spanning out beyond. Some sort of maintenance area?

It didn't really matter if he had no clue where the maintenance area was or how to get out without being seen.

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck." Letting out a little whimper, he reached up, raking his bloody fingers through his soggy hair.

What do I do? What do I do?

Ares' growl tore through Charles' mind, followed by an exasperated huff. "Check your coordinates on your tool, figure out where the fuck you are, dump the body, clean yourself up, and get your ass home. Idiot."

Trembling, he raked his hand through his hair again before rubbing the back of his neck. Shit. If there wasn't already blood on his neck, there would be after he touched himself. Inching his way past the dead body, each step making his pants rub uncomfortably against his cock, he stared down over the railing. Sucking in a shaky breath, he squinted to get a better look.

Giant vats of murky, viscous liquid churned away down below, the smell wafting up, acrid and repulsive, burned his nostrils. It only took him a second or two to realize what he saw—the protein vats of the keepers. In fact, a few of them moved around in the low light, doing whatever the hell keepers actually did. A slow smile started over his face, knowing the vats meant he had one less problem to worry about.

Turning back to the dead man, Charles sucked in a slow, deep breath, working to steady his heart and clear his mind. He'd have to reach out to the contact Ares gave him in case he needed anything … because if ever he needed something, it was just then. It was doable, though. He could handle it. He'd freak out later, once he was home.

He sat back against the railing, flipping his razor opened and closed as he waited. With everything done, the adrenaline abandoned him, and he had nothing to keep him distracted from the thick coating of syrupy dread slowly dripping its way down his spine. It'd been so long since he'd blacked out like that, he thought it was something he'd never have to deal with again. Some odd anomaly of his abuse-filled childhood, something in the distant past, barely worth thinking about let alone ever mentioning to anyone.

What would Ares think? If shit like that kept happening, he'd definitely never take Charles out with him. Hell, he might not even want to have Charles in his life at all, think he was too much of a risk. The thought twisted in his stomach like shards of broken glass. It'd kill him. Fucking destroy Charles if Ares abandoned him after everything. He fucking loved Ares.
He'd have to tell Ares, though. He promised he wouldn't try to keep Ares out, and it was too big of a thing to let slide. Especially if it ever meant there was any chance at all of him causing something bad to happen to Ares because he had a blackout.

It'd only taken maybe ten or fifteen minutes for Ares to message him with the directions his contact passed on to him to give to Charles. Someone would bring a bag carrying a clean set of clothes, trash bags, and cleaning supplies for both himself and what he could manage with the metal grating. No way could he get down to the ground floor to clean up the puddles of blood below, but he'd glanced down there a few times and noticed the keepers were already taking care of it for him.

Whoever he'd messaged … they wouldn't bring the stuff directly to him, but because he was sort of trapped, they'd be dropping it off right next to the nearest entrance to the keeper tunnels. He'd included his coordinates and a description of his location after surveying the map he pulled up on his omni-tool. He wasn't supposed to move from his location until an hour passed since Ares' message. He guessed it was to make sure he didn't see whoever was making the drop, and it gave them time to put distance between his mess and themselves before there was any chance of him being seen.

He'd tried really, really hard while he worked and waited to remember what the hell happened … how he got there, but beyond a handful of flashes of killing Andrew, his memory was just blank. He remembered waking up at home, beast roaring in his head, but that was it. And, according to his omni-tool, that was over fifteen hours ago.

It scared him. No, 'scared' was an understatement. It terrified him. Freaked him the fuck out, but it didn't really shock him. He should've known the blackouts would eventually come back.

"I told you that your whole life," his father's voice, something he didn't hear very often anymore, piped up, making him cringe and want to cry. Before a single tear could work it's way to his eyes, Ares growled inside his head, and his father shut up.

His omni-tool chimed, and he glanced down, turning off the alert before pushing himself to his feet and slipping his razor back into his pocket. He took a deep breath and started making his way towards the door, praying to … hell, he didn't know who he prayed to, he just prayed no one would see him when he opened that door. Maybe someone like him had no right to pray to any god anyway, considering he just tortured and killed yet another man.

He'd made a trip to the incinerators before heading home. By the time he got back to his apartment, not only was he utterly exhausted, but he felt like he hadn't eaten in a week. Although he'd done a fairly decent job of cleaning himself up with the supplies Ares' contact dropped off, he knew he needed a really thorough shower, too.

Unsurprisingly, when he opened the door, he found Eezo pissed and shit all over the place, not to mention torn up a pair of his shoes. He couldn't really blame her though, he'd stayed gone for who knew how long, and he didn't even know if he'd fed her before he left. He highly doubted he'd taken her for a walk. She whined and whimpered, wagging her tail so fiercely her entire back end danced all over the place as she rushed to meet him in the entryway.

Hearing the sounds she made and seeing the distraught look in her ice-blue eyes broke something inside of him. He sunk to his knees, pulling her in against his chest and started to cry. She squirmed, twisting and turning to lick him everywhere she could possibly reach, and he buried his face in her fur. He felt like an utter and complete shit person for leaving Eezo alone for so long, maybe even starving her.

Pulling himself together, he let her go again and made his way to the kitchen to fill up her bowls. Torn between scarfing down her food and watching him, as if she expected he might leave her again, Eezo somehow managed both. He stayed in the kitchen with her while she ate, despite the reek of dog shit and piss, only leaving to clean up the mess once she finished. Still, she followed him around as he moved from pile to puddle to pile to puddle. He didn't even give enough of a shit just then to worry about picking up the scraps of shoes strewn throughout the apartment.

He left the bathroom door open for her while he showered, doing his best to make sure he got every speck of blood off of him while trying to hurry at the same time. Once he was finally dressed again, he grabbed her leash, despite wanting nothing more than to stuff his face and collapse into bed. Maybe he'd get something somewhere while he took her for a walk. "Come on, girl. Let's go."

He'd find a way to keep his shit together for Ares and Eezo.

Charles grumbled, rolling over and rubbing his eyes to clear his vision as his omni-tool chimed again. "Fuck." He sat up on the edge of the bed and looked at the unfamiliar number flashing across his screen before accepting the call.

"Mr. Fairclough?" The salarian on his screen asked, blinking.
"Yeah?" He raised an eyebrow and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Fairclough. I'm the Employee Resources Manager of Citadel Souvenirs. My name is Kelto Pravin, and I'm contacting you on the recommendation of two of your coworkers. Irene Waters has been terminated from her position of Shift Manager, and it is my job to find a suitable replacement. I have reviewed your records and seen the reports of how you took charge during the C-Sec investigation. Your peers speak highly of you. If you are interested in the Shift Manager position, I would like for you to come to my office this afternoon to have a formal interview."

Seriously? Fuck. Hell, even if I don't get the job, Irene being gone … damn.

"Absolutely." Charles gave him a decisive nod. "What time should I be there?"

"At thirteen. Galactic Standard, that is. I'm told Irene mostly used human time measurements. I don't know what your personal preference is, but Citadel Souvenirs prefers all employees to adhere to Galactic Standard Time while working." Kelto blinked again and studied Charles for a moment before asking, "Will that be a problem?"

"Not at all." Charles knew GST well enough, he just got used to thinking in terms of Earth-based military time thanks to Irene. It shouldn't be too difficult to make the mental shift. "Where is your office located?"

Kelto smiled and nodded. "I'll send you the address as well as some paperwork for you to complete before you arrive. Have a good day, Mr. Fairclough."

"Thank you, Mr. Pravin." Charles grinned as soon as the call disconnected.

He collapsed on the couch, letting out a giddy chuckle on the ass end of a heavy exhale. He'd gotten the position. It might've meant something entirely different to him a year ago, but now, it mostly just gave him satisfaction to replace Irene. Okay, and the pay raise would be nice, too. Not to mention he felt a little bit less like a loser.

Marginally.

Omni-tool chirping with an incoming call, Charles answered, face lighting up when he recognized Ares' number. He opened the call, smile widening when he saw the scarred face of the man he loved. "Hey," he said, letting the warmth sweep over him and soften the harder edges a little. "You still in one piece?"

"No, I called because I wanted to warn you I'll be missing a few pieces when I get back," Ares said, voice dry and expression practically screaming 'what a stupid question, idiot'.

Charles huffed. "Well, you would." Leaning back against the couch cushions, he decided to change the subject instead of letting himself feel defensive. "So, I got promoted to Shift Manager. Irene's gone for good."

"Is that why you're dressed in that shit?" Ares flicked a mandible.

Huffing again, Charles quirked an eyebrow, thinking Ares seemed to be in a bit of a sour mood. "Hey, you're the one who bought it." Resigned to the flow of the conversation, he nodded and added, "Yeah, I had to go to a formal interview. I just got back."

Flaring his mandibles and affecting a tone of boredom, Ares asked, "Anything actually interesting happen?"

Deflated and disappointed, Charles blinked. He'd hoped Ares might be at least a little happy for him, but apparently not. Every time he thought the two of them were making progress, Ares threw him through a loop. He knew Ares probably expected him to say something about his need to call in for help the other night, but he just couldn't bring himself to dive back down that rabbit hole just yet. So, instead, he said, 'Jasmine sent me throwing knives for my birthday.'

"Have you been practicing to actually use them?" Ares flared his mandibles a little, raising a brow plate.

"Not yet." Charles fought the urge to scoff and tell Ares to lay off and be nice. "Plan to today, though. Any idea when you'll be home?"

Ares hummed and shrugged. "No."

Letting one side of his mouth shift into a frown, Charles nodded. He'd expected as much, but he still wasn't happy about it. He sighed, a soft sound he wasn't sure carried over the call. "I miss you already." Then, because he felt his good mood evaporating way too fast, he added, "I got you some things."

"Food?" Ares asked.
Charles laughed, the response a bit surprising despite being so completely Ares. "Among other things, yeah."

"Then I just might be interested." Ares rumbled, the sound amused.

It helped put Charles back at ease, and he grinned, lighting a cigarillo. "One can hope, but it's probably not as interesting as you're thinking. Yet. I'm looking into some other things, too."

"Just how many credits are you wasting?" Ares asked, lifting a brow plate. At least there wasn't a lot of censure in his subvocals.

"It's not a waste if it makes me happy to do." Charles took a deep drag, letting it out slowly. "The bed, by far, was the most expensive thing I've already gotten." Humming, he took an even deeper drag, filling his lungs completely. "I'm … making this place a home."

Ares hummed, flicking his mandibles a few times. "Good."

Eyebrows twitching, Charles just watched Ares for a moment. It wasn't exactly the response he'd expected, but it definitely left him pleasantly surprised. He smiled and pet Eezo when she jumped up there next to him. "Thanks for your help with my thing …." He didn't really want to talk about it over a vid call, but he didn't want Ares to think he was trying to put up another wall between the two of them, either. He never wanted there to be walls between them; he needed them both to be open with each other, be able to trust and rely on each other.

Turning to grab a cigarette, Ares grunted. "Don't mention it," he said around the cigarette before lighting it.

That was good enough for Charles. "So," he said, stretching out and throwing his feet up on the table, "miss me?" He figured Ares wouldn't just come out and say it, and he'd just give Charles a smartass answer, so he prepared himself for the inevitable.

"Get your feet off the table." Ares flicked his mandibles, taking a drag. "I eat there."

Charles snorted but dropped his feet, flashing Ares a grin. "Yes, sir."

"And I don't know why humans ask that." Ares chuffed, shaking his head. "Did you miss me?" was a stupid question when you know I'll be back."

Charles sighed and rolled his eyes. "You can miss people you know you'll see again. At least we can. And someone missing us means we're wanted and cared about." He smirked and took a drag, letting the smoke seep out as he said, "Affirm me, damn it."

Only after the words left his mouth did he realize, in a way, Ares already had. The simple statement of 'you know I'll be back' actually sounded pretty damn affirming coming from the emotionally-stunted turian. He thought about pointing it out, but didn't get the chance.

Ares grumbled and took a long drag before finally saying, "Yes, I miss you."

Genuinely surprised, Charles blinked a few times, eyebrows creeping up away. His heart melted inside his chest, leaving him feeling like a puddle of lovesick goo. Smirk shifting into something softer, something he saved just for Ares, he scraped his teeth over his lip and took a drag. "Thank you."

Ares just hummed around his cigarette, taking a drag.

Not wanting to make him too uncomfortable with the emotional stuff, Charles changed the subject again. "Is there something you want for the apartment?"

"Not really." Ares flicked a mandible. "Food."

Charles chuckled. "I can do that, any specific requests?" As an afterthought, he asked, "Have you eaten today?"

Rumbling and shrugging, Ares said, "Not really."

Charles knew him well enough to know take it as an answer to both of his questions. "I'll make sure you're stocked up on good stuff when you come home. I'll have Cammus help me pick some shit out or something."

Ares rumbled again and nodded. "Get lots of it."

"As much as the place can hold and keep fresh," Charles said, a broad smile sweeping across his face. Fuch, he wanted to nuzzle his face against Ares' neck and breathe in his scent. Their last night together had been a really big deal for Charles, and even though Ares took good care of him after, he still felt a little … raw and exposed.

"None of that healthy shit, either" Ares said with a soft, grumbling growl. "If I'm off the job, I want only meats and lots of it."
Charles laughed but nodded. "I'll be sure to let Cammus know. Oh, I saw him and Acevia on my birthday, too. They showed up to surprise me, took me out for dinner and drinks. It was pretty cool. I haven't done shit for my birthday in … I don't even know how long." He didn't bother to mention Mahlia and Lindsey, knowing Ares didn't think very highly of either of them. Grinning, he added, "Then I ended up in bed with the two of them."

Ares hummed around his cigarette. "Was it good?"

"Yeah. I had fun," Charles said, a slight purse to his lips as he nodded. And it was. He'd thoroughly enjoyed himself before waking up in the night so fucking full of bloodlust he couldn't see straight.

Exhaling smoke, Ares sighed. "I need a good fuck."

Rumbling a little himself, Charles wished he was there to give Ares what they both needed. "No one around?"

Ares took a long drag and shook his head. "No one available anyways."

"That sucks." Charles let the statement linger for half a second before he said, "Doesn't help with anything now, but I'll be ready and waiting when you get home." Shit, if he knew exactly when Ares would be home, he'd be ass naked on the bed, cock hard and legs spread.

"Good," Ares said, subvocals low.

Scraping his teeth over his lip, Charles took in a deep breath. "Wish you were here, now. Guess I'll just have to take care of myself while thinking about the feel of your cock in my ass, teeth in my skin." Shit, even thinking about it that much was making him horny as fuck.

Ares sighed and stamped out his cigarette. "Fuck, this job isn't nearly violent enough, yet."

"Think it's going to get any better?" Charles asked, raising an eyebrow.

"So she says," Ares said with a huff.

"She?" Charles cocked his head a little. "Jasmine?" Having to be kept at arms distance when it came to Ares' professional life still drove Charles nuts. Probably always would. He wanted to know everything about Ares' job, and not just everything about Ares' job, but because he got off on killing, but because he wanted to be a part of Ares' life, completely.

"Yes." Ares rumbled and pulled out another cigarette. "I don't have any reason not to believe her, but the waiting is fucking tiresome. And the food sucks."

Charles didn't realize when Ares left, he was taking off with Jasmine. He guessed he shouldn't be too terribly surprised; they'd worked together in the past. Surprisingly, he was okay with it. "Ah. Tell her hello. How long is the wait? If you can tell me, anyway."

"I can't because I don't have a damn clue." Sounding agitated, Ares shrugged. "Hopefully, soon."

Charles frowned, the innate desire to keep Ares happy itching at his mind, annoying him when there was nothing he could do about any of it with the turian so far away. "Well, hopefully, it'll be gory when the fighting starts."

"With me around?" Ares chuffed and flicked his mandible in a smirk. "You can be fucking guaranteed."

Charles gave him a wide grin. "One of the many reasons I love you." He snorted. "And envy you."

"And why's that?" Ares lifted a brow plate while taking a drag and blowing it out slowly. "Not enjoying your own kills?"

And there it was. Smile faltering, Charles sucked in a deep breath. "This last one …." He remembered what Jasmine said about an assassin's relationships being built on a foundation of fear. He didn't want Ares afraid for his sake. He didn't want to give Ares any reason to doubt their relationship, and he certainly didn't want Ares preoccupied while being shot at.

"I don't want you worrying about me while you're on a job." He would tell Ares what happened, no doubt about it, but he wanted to do it when the turian was there, in his arms. At least that way, he had a chance of hanging on, getting Ares to hear him out, convince the turian to stay. "We can talk about it when you're home."

Ares sighed. "Take a cool down if it's getting too hot."

Clearing his throat, Charles said, "I was trying … didn't go as planned. I was thinking about taking a trip somewhere, getting away from the Citadel for a bit, but with this promotion, I'll be busy. Maybe being busy will help." He took a drag and added, "The guy's in the protein vats, though, so at least maybe they won't connect it to the others."
"Sounds good." Ares hummed. "Don't get too comfortable. Comfortable makes people fucking stupid."

"Yeah." Charles sighed and lit another cigarillo off the dying embers of the first before putting the butt out. "I think I need to find a good alternative outlet. Help keep things in check when I need to lay low."

"Fucking's good." Ares shrugged. "Learn to do whatever it is humans do instead of sparring."

Feeling suddenly morose, Charles scoffed and said, "Get drunk and beat their wife and kids." He shook his head, pushing the thought away. "I don't know. Drugs. Sex. Fighting. Bury ourselves in work. I'll figure something out, though, I promise."

I promise.

"Whatever works." Ares hummed and stuck his cigarette in his mouth, typing something into his omni-tool. "It's getting late, and I'm starving. I think I'm going to go find something to eat."

Charles nodded. He didn't have anything left to really talk about, anyway. "Have a good night."

"Yep," Ares said, then the call went black.

Okal's sour look when told Charles was the new Shift Manager just might've been the icing on Charles' promotion-slash-Irene-was-fired-and-apparently-going-to-prison cake. And oh, it tasted so good.

He and the other shift managers called an employee meeting to help refocus and reorganize things after the whole smuggling fiasco. Admittedly, he felt a little intimidated, especially considering he'd never even met one of the other shift managers—didn't even know he was a guy or a turian—or half the employees present. Kelto joined them to smooth the transition for Charles as well as to discuss replacing Werin's and Charles' old positions. Apparently, the way-higher-ups also wanted to add on a few employees, making sure there were at least two people working the back room on all shifts. Pravin said it was to increase efficiency, but Charles suspected it had more to do with making sure Citadel Souvenirs never got wrapped up in another smuggling scandal.

The best part about the job? He didn't have to wear a stupid uniform anymore. Oh, and, he pretty much got to set his own hours as to when he was actually at the store.

Cammus caught his eye and fluttered his mandibles, mouth plates quirking just barely into a knowing smirk, and Charles winked at him. He and Mahlia both seemed tickled pink for Charles to be made Shift Manager, and it warmed him … reminding him he actually had friends. People who legitimately cared about him and wanted to see him succeed. Wanted to see him happy.

How the fuck did that happen?

"How will this affect our hours and pay?" Safela, an asari who worked the first shift, asked.

"It won't," Kelto said.

"There won't be any deductions of any sort made to existing employees?" Raxcibius, the Shift Manager for third, asked.

"None at all." Kelto shook his head. "Citadel Souvenirs values its employees, and we feel, now more than ever, that it's vital we make that clear both to all of you and to the public."

"So, what you're really saying is Citadel Souvenirs doesn't dare upset any of us in the midst of the backlash of what Irene and Werin did?" Lania—one of the few people Charles had actually met before—huffed and shook her head. The asari was the Shift Manager for the first shift, and from what Charles gathered listening to everyone talk, it was the crappiest shift to be manager of.

"Certainly Ms. Waters and Mr. Menoko's actions play a part in the decisions Citadel Souvenirs has made, but I assure you, there was never any intention to penalize any of you for their actions regardless of whatever backlash there may be." Kelto blinked and shook his head, leaning forward to rest his hands on the table.

"When will new people be hired?" Mahlia asked, her gaze shifting between Charles and Kelto as if she wasn't sure who exactly to direct her question at.

Figuring he might as well jump into the conversation since he was supposed to be at least partially in charge there, Charles cleared his throat and said, "I'll be reviewing the applications we have on file this afternoon and setting up interviews for the second shift."

Kelto nodded. "Each shift's manager will be responsible for their own hiring and firing, just the same as always."

The first thing Charles did as Shift Manager was ask his current employees if they had anything
they wanted to change in regards to what position, days, or hours they worked. It didn't surprise him too much to learn both Mahlia and Cammus were content, nor did it surprise him to hear a list of demands come tumbling out of Okal's mouth.

The salarian—who worked a swing shift, replacing people as needed mostly—insisted she not stay past three GST on the odd days of the week. She adamantly refused to come in any earlier than one on the even days because on those days she usually worked third shift the night before and said, "Even though salarians don't sleep their lives away like humans, we do have other things to take care of."

There were other things, too, such as questioning whether or not Charles planned to reorganize the back room since he took over Irene's position. He assured her he didn't intend to. Why the hell would he? He thought the whole thing was stupid when it happened, but it was done, and there was no point in spending the time and energy it'd take to move everything back to the way it was before Okal got her hands on it.

She pressed to be allowed to spend part of her shift, when things were calm, cleaning the store 'since no one else does' and the 'dust' aggravated her allergies. Charles told her so long as she wasn't neglecting customers or her other duties, he didn't care what she did, but reminded her that, in fact, someone came in between each shift to clean. Apparently, she wasn't impressed with their skills.

Finally, things quieted down and everyone went off to do their jobs, leaving Charles feeling a little lost. The beast stirred, seeming to sniff the air around him before settling back into place. Charles sucked in a deep breath and moved back to the break room table, taking the datapad holding the applications with him. Sitting down, he lit a cigarillo and started reading the first application.

_Stay busy, Charles. Just stay busy._
Head on Straight

Chapter by MosaicCreme

Head on Straight

Being a manager wasn't so hard. Okay, yeah, two days in and things were kind of going to shit, but it kept him busy. Kept him focused. Focused was good. He hoped. Twelve interviews in two days and he realized he really didn't know the first thing about what to look for in a prospective employee. Charles lit a cigarillo, taking a deep drag before closing his eyes and tilting his head back to blow the smoke up at the ceiling.

Warm hands slid over his shoulders, and his eyes snapped open, finding the honey gaze of Cammus' eyes staring back at him. He grinned, bringing his cigarillo to his lips again. Blowing the smoke out to the side, he said, "Hey. Aren't you supposed to be pulling orders in the back?" He arched an eyebrow.

Cammus chuffed, flicking his mandibles. "Yeah … but I'm friends with the boss, so I'm pretty sure I can get away with taking a break." Pressing his fingers into Charles' tense muscles, he started rubbing slow, deep circles, making Charles groan. "Anyone promising yet?"

Grunting, Charles sat up straight again and sorted through the datapads sprawled out on the table in front of him. Picking one up for a woman—human—named Hannah Martin, he handed it to Cammus. "To work up front." Grabbing another, he waited for Cammus to sit down next to him before passing it over. "For the back. Tell me what you think. You'll be working with him."

Humming, Cammus sat down Hannah's information and picked up the datapad for a salarian man named Meerkka Solan. Charles watched him as she scrolled through the information, wondering what Cammus was doing later after work. Maybe Ares was right, and having a good fuck would help him keep his head on straight, too. He couldn't let himself get as carried away with Cammus, but damn, the turian was quite the sight with his ass in the air, head thrown back in ecstasy.

Nose plates twitching, Cammus looked up, letting out a soft, curious sounding trill as he met Charles' gaze. Taking in a deeper breath, he seemed to roll the scent a moment before setting the datapad back down on the table. He stood up, waving his fingers at Charles as he held a hand out to him. "Come on. You're carrying a lot of tension, let me help." He flicked a mandible, letting out a low, seductive rumble. "They haven't installed the new cameras in the back, yet."

Putting out his cigarillo, Charles slipped his hand into Cammus' and let the turian pull him to his feet. "You're too good to me," he said with a chuckle, free hand sliding around Cammus' waist to give him a little squeeze.

Cammus chuffed, leaning in to nip Charles' neck, voice low and gravely next to his ear. "Who says I want to do it just for you?"

Charles smirked and squeezed Cammus' waist a little harder, earning him another low rumble. Pulling back, Cammus stepped away, leading Charles by the hand to the stock room. They wove through the maze of shelves until they were well hidden from the door and would have a chance to put themselves back in order if Mahlia came looking for them. Cammus stopped, turning back to Charles and closing in on him. Charles draped his arms over Cammus' shoulders, welcoming him closer and squeezed his crest.

Rumbling, Cammus ducked his head to nip at Charles' jaw and unducked his shirt. Sliding his hands beneath the fabric, Cammus dragged his gloved talons down Charles' spine, leaving thin trails of fire in his wake. Charles hissed and groaned, his cock stirring to life, and he closed his eyes, tilting his head to the side, giving Cammus permission and access. Teeth pressed into the sensitive skin of his throat, not hard enough to draw blood, but more than enough to make the beast purr in the back of his mind.

Cammus turned, urging Charles to follow and pushed him down on a crate. Kneeling in front of him, Cammus made quick work of Charles' belt and undid his pants, freeing his rock hard cock to the cool air of the storage room. He leaned back on his palms, resting his head against the wall and letting out a groan ending in a whimper when Cammus' hot, wet tongue wrapped around his cock.

Rumbling, Cammus closed his mouth around Charles' before taking one of Charles' hands in his, moving it to his crest. Charles froze, heart slamming against his chest, memories threatening to flood his senses, and he pulled his hand away as if he'd been burned by fire. Cammus stopped, looking up at Charles, concern clear in his eyes.

Charles licked his lips and shook his head, moving his hand to Cammus' shoulder. "I'm alright. Just … triggered a bad memory." Forcing a smile on his face, he lifted his hips from the crate and squeezed Cammus' shoulder. "Don't stop."

Cammus fluttered his mandibles, an uncertain trill seeping out of him, but he wrapped his hand around the base of Charles' cock and got back to it, licking, sucking, and pumping Charles closer and closer to cumming.
“You brought cookies to our meeting?” Mahlia asked, a suppressed smile tugging at the corners of
her mouth.

“What’s wrong with bringing cookies to our meeting?” Charles pulled out a chair and sat down as
he lit a cigarillo.

Okal huffed a little, fanning the air in front of her, but none of the others even batted an eye at the
fragrant smoke. Besides, it’s not like the ventilators weren’t running.

Mahlia chuckled and took a seat next to him, picking up one of the cookies to turn over in her
hand. “What about Cammus?”

“He’s not allergic, and it’s not like cookies are exactly nutritious anyway.” Charles pulled the
ashtray closer. “But,” Charles said, leaning forward enough to point out the few that lined the side
of the box, a divider separating them from the rest, “I picked these out for Cammus, they’re
dextro.”

Cammus chuckled, picking out one of the cookies before breaking a small piece off and tossing it
in his mouth. He crunched it between the points of his teeth a couple of times, breaking it up even
smaller before swallowing. Grinning at Charles, he flicked a mandible. “Not bad.”

“Alright,” Charles said and then took a drag, gaze roaming over the group, “so, has everyone had
a chance to introduce themselves to Hannah and Meerka?” He watched as everyone glanced
around and nodded before continuing. “Good. Hannah will be working up front with Mahlia and
Okal—when Okal’s here. Meerka, you’ll be working in the back with Cammus. I’ll be moving
back and forth between both areas to check in with you periodically, but after orientation and
training, I won’t be with you regularly so if you have questions, don’t hesitate to ask the people
you’re working with.”

“It’s a little more urgent to get Hannah set up in the front, so Hannah, today I’ll be working with
you.” He turned his gaze to Meerka. “Tomorrow, I’ll be with you. For today, Cammus will be
having you stack filled orders next to the shipping door.”

Muscles burning, sweat dripping down his everything, Charles finally stepped off the mat,
nodding to Cammus to let him know he was finished. Grabbing a towel, he wiped sweat from his
eyes before rubbing it over his head and neck.

“You’re pushing yourself a lot harder.” It sounded like an observation, but coming from Cammus,
it was probably more of an invitation to talk.

“Yeah ….” Charles draped the towel over his shoulder and started stretching. “Just trying to keep
my head on straight.”

Humming, Cammus stretched out his own muscles, watching Charles with a curious set to his
gaze. “Everything alright?”

Charles flashed a smile at him and nodded as he lowered his arm from across his chest. “Yeah, I’m
good. Just adapting to the new responsibilities is all.”

And trying to make sure I don’t blackout and go on a killing spree. Just normal shit like that.

“Speaking of, I should hit the showers and get dressed.” He smirked. “And, you’re supposed to
clock in in less than an hour.”

Cammus chuckled. “You like reminding people you’re in charge, don’t you?”

“I’m sure it’ll wear off soon enough.” Charles smirked and winked at him as he turned to leave.

“Hey,” Cammus said, and Charles stopped to look at him with a raised brow. Fluttering his
mandibles, Cammus seemed to hesitate a moment before saying, "When Aelianus is gone …
you're welcome to bring Eezo and stay over at my place if you don't want to be alone." He shifted
a little, mandibles stilling. "Especially when they still haven't found the Bloodbath Butcher.”

Charles' throat spasmed a little, and he glanced down at the mat in front of Cammus' feet. "I, uh …
I don't do so well sleeping around other people, and I really don't want to sleep next to anyone but
Aelianus.” He swallowed, looking up to meet Cammus’ gaze. “But I wouldn't mind hanging out
for awhile. Tonight, after work, if you're not busy?”

Smiling, Cammus bobbed his head in a nod. "Sure.”

He'd decided to take a couple of hours off mid-day, one of the many perks of being Shift
Manager. After heading back home to eat lunch and walk Eezo, he decided to spend some time
practicing with the knives Jasmine gave him for his birthday. It wasn't exactly something he could
do in the park, using a tree or something as a target—he'd get cited for destruction of Citadel
property. So, he'd mentioned it to Saelus the last time he went to the range to work with his
The old turian offered to set him up a target at the far end of the range, something he could use just for knife throwing. Charles offered to pay them more for the accommodation, but Saelus only waved him off. He'd grown comfortable enough with the turian, and didn't really mind so much when he looked up a few times to see Saelus watching him as he tended to his own work, cleaning stalls and straightening the tables. Charles just wished he wasn't sucking so spectacularly at hitting the target and getting the blade to stick, especially with an audience.

The shuffling of deliberate footsteps sounded from behind him, and then Saelus let out a low hum. "Has anyone given you any pointers for the knives yet?"

"No," Charles said, glancing over his shoulder before turning his attention back to the target and throwing another knife. "They were a gift, just got them a few days ago."

Rumbling again, Saelus shifted a little closer. "Would you like a few tips?"

Moving down to the target, Charles gathered up the knives, meeting Saelus' gaze as he made his way back. He nodded his head and handed a knife over. "Sure."

"There are two main ways to throw a knife: by the handle or by the blade. There are variants of both, but I'll show you the basics.” Saelus flipped the knife over a couple of times in his fingers. "These are nice and sharp … whoever made them designed them to be used to slice too, if needed. Since you're not practiced, I suggest mastering throwing by the handle first."

Charles nodded his understanding, watching as Saelus positioned his fingers around the handle and did his best to mimic the grip with his five-fingered hand.

"Good.” Saelus hummed and nodded. "Pick where on the target you want your blade to land, and keep your eyes on it. For now, focus dead center.” Setting the knife in his hand down on the ledge, he moved a little closer to Charles, gesturing at Charles' arm. "Is it alright if I …?"

He prickled a little, muscles twitching at the thought of being touched by someone he didn't know all that well, but he nodded. "Yeah."

Saelus moved to stand behind and to the side of Charles, settling one hand just beneath Charles' elbow while gently wrapping his fingers around Charles' wrist. Hunching down, he brought his head level with Charles'. "You're going to pull your arm back like this.” He pushed Charles' elbow up, tugging his wrist back until it felt like he was about to swing a hammer or chop wood. "Then, you're going to come forward like this, sighting your target down the blade. When you get almost level with your target, you'll let go.” After moving Charles' hand back into position, he let go and stepped back. "Give it a try."

Charles kicked off his shoes and threw his feet up on the table, reaching over to pet Eezo who'd curled up against Cammus' side. "What do you want to watch?"

Rumbling as he thought it over, Cammus leaned over and picked up the remote, turning on the vid screen. He flipped through channels, coming to a stop on some action show with explosions and turians fighting in the background. He turned it down a little and tossed the remote back on the table.

They weren't watching for long, though, before the restlessness set in. He went to the kitchen for drinks and snacks, setting them on the table before taking his seat again. Two minutes later he was on his feet once more, wandering aimlessly from one room to the next. On his way out of his bedroom for the second time, he damn near walked right into Cammus. Gasping and jumping, he slapped his hand over his chest and laughed at himself. He looked up, seeking Cammus' gaze, ready to make a joke about how quiet turians were, but something in his eyes gave Charles pause. Mandibles flaring, Cammus let out a low rumble of a growl. "Either talk to me or fuck me until you collapse. I don't know what's going on with you the last few days, Charles, but if you don't get it out one way or another, it's going to drive you insane."

Reaching up to rub the back of his neck, Charles swallowed and shook his head. "I can't talk about it. I'm sorry, I just … can't."

If it bothered Cammus, if it hurt him in any way for Charles to refuse to open up to him, he didn't let it show. Instead, he just leaned in and scraped his teeth across Charles' neck, close next to his ear. Voice lowering an octave or two, subvocals thrumming, he said. "Then fuck me, Charles.” Gloveless talon scraping down the other side of Charles' throat. Cammus growled. "Hard and fast. Let go the way you did the first time before Aelianus made you rein it in."

Fighting the urge to succumb, pants growing uncomfortably tight, Charles shook his head. "You don't want that, don't want me to go to that place."

"Will it help you?" Cammus purred, nuzzling against Charles' neck as his hand trailed down, talons scraping over his chest but not hard enough to rip through the fabric of his shirt.
Swallowing again, Charles licked his lips. "Maybe, but it might make it worse, too. I don't know, but I don't want to risk hurting you."

"You won't hurt me." Cammus chuffed, a cocky edge to his tone. "I can take it."

Charles wrapped a hand around the back of Cammus' head and pulled back, making the turian look him in the eye. "No, Cammus. I'm not … I'm not me when I'm in that place. It's not a good place."

Cammus hummed, holding Charles' gaze for a long moment before he finally nodded. "Alright. What do you need, then?"

"To kill. To cut and bleed a man to death. To dig my blade so deep into his skin and fat and muscle that I reach bone and his screams never stop echoing in my ears. I need to feed the beast."

Forcing a smile on his face, Charles slid his hand down Cammus' neck, over his cowl and keel before taking his hand in his. Tugging at him, leading him back into the room, Charles said, "Oh, I still think fucking you sounds like a good idea."

Cammus chuckled, mandibles fluttering softly. "Works for me."

Pulling at the closures of Cammus' shirt, Charles spread the lapels, baring the turian's chest. He ran his hands over the man's keel before shoving them between his shirt and shoulders, pushing the shirt off and letting it fall to the floor. Cammus rumbled, picking at the buttons holding Charles' shirt closed. Charles ran his hands over smooth plate and warm hide, stopping to grab Cammus' waist and squeeze, tearing a ragged, rumbling breath from the turian.

Stepping away, Charles tugged his shirt off and tossed it aside before lifting the tanktop he had beneath up over his head and letting it drop. He looked over Cammus, the predator rising to the surface of the stillwaters as he stalked closer to Charles. Undoing his pants, he smirked, letting them slide down his hips and reaching for Cammus as he neared. Grabbing Cammus, he turned the turian and gently pushed him back on the bed before bending over to open his pants, carefully tugging them down.

He took his time, knowing how sensitive Cammus' spurs were, rubbing and squeezing them as he unsnapped and pulled away the covering. Cammus let out a hissing groan, plates starting to spread. Tossing the other man's pants away, Charles rubbed his hands over Cammus' thighs, working his way back up to the spot of blue peeking through the turian's plates. He rubbed his palm over the slit, feeling the slickness of Cammus' natural lubricant already starting to seep through, coating his hand in it as he coaxed the turian's cock free.

Standing up, Charles slid the same hand over his own cock, transfering the wetness and stoking his own fires as he looked at the man sprawled out on his bed. "Scoot up there," he said, jerking his head toward the pillows.

Cammus trilled and pushed himself up on the bed the rest of the way. "How do you want me?"

"However you want to be." Charles opened the drawer of the side table, grabbing the bottle of lube and tossing it on the bed next to Cammus before pressing his knees to the mattress.

Seeming to take a moment to think about, Cammus finally settled into the pillows on his back, giving Charles a hopeful look. That was a first for them, but it didn't bother Charles any, if that's what Cammus wanted. Moving between his legs, Charles picked the bottle of lube back up and squeezed some out in his hand. He rubbed some onto his cock before using the back of his hand so spread Cammus' legs further and slid a lubed finger into his opening.

Cammus purred, reaching out to drag his talons over Charles' chest and arms, leaving red welts as he looked at the man sprawled out on his bed. "Scoot up there," he said, jerking his head toward the pillows.

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Cammus purred, reaching out to drag his talons over Charles' chest and arms, leaving red welts in his wake and making Charles' cock twitch and ache to be inside of the turian. Pushing a little deeper, Charles made sure Cammus was good and relaxed before pulling his finger free and lining himself up. He met Cammus' gaze, silently asking for consent, and the turian lifted his hips, pushing against Charles, rumbling low and deep in his chest. Easing his cock inside, Charles tipped his head back, letting out a growl of his own as the tight, hot, wetness surrounded him.

Well spent and exhausted, Charles rubbed his face on the pillows, rolling over and throwing an arm over Eezo. Sleep pulled at him, dragging him down into the dark abyss, but as he started to drift on the buoyant currents of sleep, the beast stirred. Eyes snapping open, Charles pushed himself up, raking a hand through his hair. Eezo whined, and he looked down at her, sucking in a deep breath.

Leaning over, he kissed the top of her head. "Sorry, girl. I can't sleep yet."

He rolled over, crawling out of bed and making his way to the shower. Turning on the water as hot as he could stand it, he stepped inside, hissing at the sudden, stinging shock of heat. Throwing an arm up against the wall, he pressed his forehead to it and squeezed his eyes closed, taking slow, deep breaths. Blood splashed on the backs of his eyes, Andrew Polk's screams bouncing off the inside of his skull as images of his last prey's death resurfaced from whatever depths the beast kept them.
The beast stalks Andrew clear across the Citadel, watching where he goes and who he speaks to. Waiting. Impatiently waiting. The thirst for blood leaves his throat parched. He wants to stab and slice, strip away flesh and muscle, wants to dig down deep and rip the entrails from the man's body.

How does Charles do it? How does he stay so calm when it's right there for the taking?

The man deserves it, deserves everything the beast will do to him and so much more. He's a rapist. A sick fuck like the assholes who raped and killed Sarah. Who hurt Charles. Oh, their screams were so delicious. He can still feel the heat of their blood on his hands and face, drenching his clothes to slide down his body, and he wants more. Needs more.

It's so easy, too easy, to convince the much larger man to follow him into the keeper tunnels. The beast taps into Charles' past, pulls out all of the old tricks to lure Andrew in, playing on the man's desire to dominate. Even if he isn't interested in paying for sex from men, he's interested in hurting men. Hurting women. Hurting anyone he can to prove to himself that he holds the power. It's all the beast needs to bait his trap.

Smile and flirt, bat his eyes and draw in his shoulders, making him look even smaller, weaker ... easier prey. And Andrew leers at him, his own monster licking its fangs from behind his eyes, hungry and ready to pounce. The man's so cocky, so sure of himself, he doesn't even bat an eye when the beast opens the door and gestures him inside.

Before the door even closes all the way behind him, the beast pulls out the baton, snapping his wrist to expand it and lock it in place completely before hitting Andrew over the back of the head. The satisfying crunch as metal fractures bone sends a wave of pleasure straight to the beast's cock. Andrew collapses, becoming nothing more than dead, bleeding weight on the tunnel floor.

Grabbing the man by his ankles, the beast drags Andrew farther into the Citadel's hidden network until he catches an acrid scent. Dropping Andrew, the beast moves to the edge, looking over the railing, and he spots the protein vats down below.

Perfect.

Eezo whined and scratched at the bathroom door, snapping Charles back to the present. He sucked in a gasping breath, shaking, cold deep in his bones despite the hot water still washing down over his back and head.

Fuck me.

He scrubbed his hands over his face before tilting his head back under the water, letting it roar in his ears, trying to wash away the throbbing in his skull. He had to find a way to keep the beast in check, to keep himself from going back over that edge. He ... he had to get away from the Citadel for a little while. Go somewhere where he could take the leash off for a bit, let the beast run itself out. Maybe that would help. Maybe it was what he needed. And then, he'd put the leash back on, but ... but take the beast out for regular enough 'walks' that it didn't feel like it needed to force its way out and take over.

What if I can't get the leash back on?

"Then I'll find you and put it back on you," Ares' voice said in the back of his head.

Charles took another deep breath and nodded his head. "Okay."

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