

The Shepard

by Galexz

The Reapers are bearing down on the galaxy. Organics' survival hinges on the ever elusive Catalyst. Garrus Vakarian is sent to find it, but instead finds something more. For 50,000 years she slept: The greatest human to have ever lived, the most brilliant tactician, the most inspiring leader, and the most lethal soldier mankind had ever produced. He found Shepard. (kmeme prompt)

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1. Prologue

Author's note: Hello everybody! For those of you that know, I have resurfaced! This story was originally posted on the kmeme and has yet to be updated recently. The reason for that is that I felt the story was going in the wrong direction. I have done some major edits and finally am ready to post my new and improved version! This chapter was beta'd by Pestommonkey (many thanks!) a while back. I think you will all be very impressed with the changes.

The plan is to post the first week of every month, so please follow me for updates! There won't be any more long hiatus and this will be completed. You may ask why I just don't post everything at once? Well, frankly, I want to give myself a bit of a buffer so I don't disappear again.

This story has consumed my life, and I am very happy to share it with all of you. As always, please read and review. Critical comments are always welcome. I love hearing from you!

The cover art is Charlize Theron, she's my Shepard when I'm writing this story (check her out in "Crossfire", that did it for me) If anyone wants to make a specialized art, let me know I fail at artistic endeavors. If you have a different Shepard in mind when you read, shot me a picture, I'd love to see it!

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** The Shepard - Prologue **

"In the years since the war, I have often been asked why the humans did it. Out of everything they could have done to prepare the next cycle for the Reapers, why did they chose to leave us Shepard?"

I ask you why not. Clearly she was all we needed." - Interview with Dr. T'soni, 2561

Arcturus Station - 48,000 BCE

Arcturus never truly slept, being the last great watchman over humanity. The late hour, however gave Admiral David Anderson some much needed privacy. The last few hours - his arrival on the station, the meeting with the council and their decision - played over and over in his head. He needed space, he needed perspective.

What better to place to find that than in the heart of Arcturus: The Archives.

Until the war, the Archives had actually been three separate complexes: Eden Prime, Earth, the Citadel. They had been glowing examples of how far mankind had come since taking to the stars. And one by one, they had fallen. What little could be salvaged had been incorporated into Arcturus during the expansion fifty years ago. The data chambers were built directly onto the core of the original station, turning the outdated technology into an athenaeum that was all but sacred. It had seemed fitting, incorporating all of humanity's failures and hopes into one sanctuary.

The halls of the Archives echoed softly as Anderson walked through them. Motion sensors picked up his movement as he passed, activating holo vids and related articles. A flickering hologram caught his eye and he paused for a moment to watch.

Codex entry: Dr. Josephine Silva.

Silva was the granddaughter of the great Mateus Silva who was the first to discover the ruins on Mars. Following in her grandfather's footsteps she became an archaeologist specializing in the protheans. Her tenacity led to the discovery of new beacons that had been left by ancient race. The technology had been purposefully hidden deep underground, away from ancient cities. The mystery of these beacons took years to decipher, but Dr. Silva's team identified the looming Reaper threat almost fifty years before the first sentinel appeared. During her time many had called her crazy, but with her family's fortune she had put together an archeological team dedicated to gathering information about the looming threat.

The following is a transcript of her first meeting with the human Council.

Silva: We all know that the prothean dig site on Mars made it possible for us to develop faster than light travel and mass effect field technology. That is just the tip of the iceberg! The discoveries we've made there are-

Councilor Jones: Get to the point Doctor.

Silva: I think I know why the protheans were on Mars.

Councilor Hudson: We already know that. They were studying us.

Silva: Yes, but we didn't know what they had planned for us, or even why they left. I found a data drive that talks about their observations and in it they mention something called the Reapers.

Councilor Jones: What are Reapers?

Silva: I think they were the ones that wiped out the protoheans. A synthetic race that lives deep in dark space.

Councilor Morris: That's all well and good Doctor, but why do we need to know this?

Silva: Because I think they are coming back.

End of transcript.

The hologram ended and Anderson sighed. That archeologist had been right, the Reapers had come. However, it had taken too long for the higher ups to listen. By the time the Alliance brass had come around, it had been too late. The Reapers had descended on them like a hammer.

Anderson shook his head and walked on. There was always the "what-ifs" that floated around. What if they had listened to Dr. Silva? What if they had prepared more? He wasn't much of a fatalist, but he had been on the front lines. They were technologically outmatched by the Reapers in every way imaginable.

Another room lit up as he walked by. The hologram was a picture of Admiral Bizri, the head of Alliance Headquarters when the Reapers first attacked.

Codex Entry: The Outer Rim.

The Outer Rim was the furthest reaches of human colonies in the Milky Way. Even with the use of the mass relays the trip was well over a week from the Earth to the nearest colony of Mindoir. These colonies were made up of scientists and terraformers, preparing the way for later human habitation. The colonies distance from Earth combined with a proximity to deep space made them easy targets for the first Reaper attacks, by the time that word had reached Earth there was little time to mount a defense. Admiral Nala Bizri mobilized the Eighth Fleet, but they too were lost.

The following is a transcript from Alliance Communications in Vancouver.

Specialist Richards: We've lost the Outer Rim.

[The Admiral looks up. The room stills.]

Admiral Bizri: What do you mean, Specialist?

Specialist Richards: There are no communications coming through. They've gone dark.

Admiral Bizri: What about the Eighth Fleet?

Specialist Richards: A few distress calls came through, but we've lost their transmitters. All of them.

Random Voice: NO!

Admiral Bizri: [The Admiral slams a fist down on the table.] Damn it.

End Transcript

The first attack had cut through their defenses and they had lost the colonies.

The loss of the Outer Rim was the first thing they taught in training, every recruit knew about it. The Reapers had systematically destroyed the communications relays. During the chaos, the Reapers had cut down the Eighth as they tried to defend the communication hubs. The fleet had been too spread out to do much of anything and in a few days as humanity had lost everything past the Nemean Abyss.

In recent years Anderson had taught the basic tactics class, it had become something of a speciality of his. His war tactics and understanding of Reaper movements had been what had earned him his promotion to Admiral.

What good had it done, he thought, if the council still makes decisions without consulting the military branch?

Another room lit up as he stormed along, lost in his own thoughts. This hologram wasn't a Codex entry, but an actual video from the Alliance News Network.

"According to sources, Jump Zero has finally fallen after 30 consecutive days of siege by the Reapers. Admiral Nelson had this to say on the matter: 'The loss of the Gagarin Station is a major blow for the Alliance, but the Mars defenses are still holding. For now, refugee transports have to be put on standby until we have identified a safe way for them to travel through the Sol Relay.'

He refused to say more on the matter, but our reporter on the ground in London had this to add: 'The city has all but been evacuated and people have headed towards the hills. All that's left are the marines and a few militias that have taken to guerrilla warfare. The fighting is from house to house, but hopes are still high. Even with the news that Jump Zero was lost, the successes at Mars are constantly bolstering the troops. If Mars can hold, then maybe Earth can as well until the reinforcements arrive.'

This reporter hopes they will soon. For the Alliance News Network this is Emily Wong reporting."

Anderson shook his head. The Fall of Earth had been devastating. If it had been a quick process it might have caused less damage. The siege on the Sol system had been long and drawn out. It had taken almost 10 years before Earth finally succumbed and with it, many

soldiers lost the will to fight. In a war like this, morale is more important than anything. He hadn't been born yet when Earth fell, but he had seen what soldiers did when they felt like everything was lost. It did more damage than a gun ever could.

In the years following the loss of Earth, the Reapers swept across the galaxy causing a rift between the vast civilization. The colonies' core relays were connected by a few threads.

Even without hope, man's desire to live persevered and the relays stayed open. The fact that he was here was a testament to humanity's will to survive. Generation after generation of humans were born into the war and now there wasn't a single man, woman or child alive who had known a world without the Reapers. Surprisingly, that fact had been a turning point in the war.

Humanity continued to surprise him.

The shock of the first attacks faded into a distant memory and while each defeat was heartbreaking, it was routine. Each victory was a reason to celebrate, and each celebration strengthened their resolve. A new generation of soldiers rose from the ashes of defeat and the Second Wave was set in motion.

The room across the way flickered to life as if reading his thoughts.

Codex Entry: The Second Wave

The Second Wave began almost 100 years after the initial attack of the Reapers. It began on Benning, the planet closest to Arcturus Station. What should have been a crushing defeat and the end of the Alliance turned into one of the longest and well known battles in the history of the Reaper War.

The military defense was headed by Captain Osoba. With a small military presence, he inspired the local farmers to take up arms and they were able to hold out until Arcturus could fend off the invasion. Together the incoming forces and ground militia were able to force the Reapers to retreat. In the wake of the victory, emotions ran high and Osoba took advantage of it and lead a huge recruitment drive.

The following transcript is from a rally on Eden Prime.

Captain Osoba: We need you. Every single one of you. We can no longer hide on in caves and bunkers, hoping and praying that the Reapers won't find us. We need to fight!

[A cheer roars through the crowd.]

Captain Osoba: Benning showed us that if we come together, we can push the Reapers from our doorstep.

[Another cheer.]

Captain Osoba: I am done living in fear! I will not wait passively for my death. If I go, I will take one of them with me!

[More cheers.]

Captain Osoba: We can do this. We can win!

End transcript.

Anderson walked on.

Captain Osoba had been pivotal in the success at Benning, and he was a personal hero of Anderson's. His determination in the face of adversity, the way he rallied his troops and the civilians to create a cohesive and successful counterattack to push back the invading Reaper ground forces was legend. Then, as if that hadn't been enough, the Captain had set out on a massive recruitment drive and succeeded.

Paths between colonies were strengthened, the Alliance fortified and expanded Arcturus and the war continued. The Reapers' conquests slowed and humanity's victories increased.

For a while, people began to think they might actually win this war. Anderson had been born during that time, in fact a lot of people had. The general elated feeling and multiple successes had led to a huge baby boom, and now most of those babies were soldiers.

Osoba would be proud, Anderson thought. Then the smile on his face left as the next holo started. It was another recording.

Alliance Records - Communications

To: Personal unit 12.24093.43

From: SSV Hastings via bridge QEC station 12

Cpt. Shepard: Donnelly, what did you find?

Cpt. Donnelly: Its...it's already over.

Cpt. Shepard: What do you mean?

Cpt. Donnelly: Most of the basic communications were blocked but...we intercepted this on the QEC. Shepard..I can't. Just listen.

Unknown: If anyone can hear thi-Oh God. They're coming. Close the door! CLOSE IT!

[Unintelligible screeching. Metal scraping against metal as something is dragged across the floor.]

Unknown: Shoot it!

[Four shots fired. Sobbing in the background and labored breathing.]

Unknown: If anyone can hear this, we're trapped in a clinic on level C38. There's 10 of us and...What's the point? No one's coming. We're all going to- [Slap] Fuck you Jeremy. Just fuck you.

Cpt. Shepard: What's the timestamp?

Cpt. Donnelly: Two days ago.

Cpt. Shepard: I'll forward this to the Admiral.

Cpt. Donnelly: They've been fucking with us Shepard. Right under our noses and we didn't...couldn't...

Cpt. Shepard: I know Donnelly. I know.

End Communication

The Fall of the Citadel. He had been there for that one, commanding the *SSV Tokyo*. The order to retreat hadn't come from Captain Donnelly, it had come from Captain Hannah Shepard.

That day had earned her promotion to Admiral, but she had hated every moment of it. It was why she stayed on a ship until the day she died. It was why they had been such good friends. Both of them wanted to be out there, and while Anderson's strengths kept him on Arcturus, Hannah's had kept her on the front lines.

The Citadel hadn't been the last human fortification lost in recent years. Eden Prime fell 15 years ago. Elysium 10 years after that and, most recently, Tiptree. Arcturus was the last well fortified position and the Atticus Stream had only one safe path of retreat remaining. There were systems completely lost and the Reapers were closing in.

If Hannah was still alive she would have been down here with him, pacing the halls in the middle of the night, racking her brain for anything that would help them out of their current situation.

Hannah wouldn't let the Council go through with this.

The Council and their team of scientists had come up with a plan. He had just been informed a few hours ago. He had never gotten along well with politicians, but this had been the icing on the cake of their stupidity. They wanted to send a weapon to the future to aid in the next cycle's war against the protheans before they had tried to do the same thing, preserving their race by putting thousands of their best scientists, soldiers and leaders into stasis, but the Reapers had found them and wiped them out systematically.

According to the Council, humanity wouldn't make the same mistake. Only one human with all the knowledge of the war would be sent into the future; a guiding light for the next apex species to follow. The candidate had already been chosen: Commander Jane Shepard, Hannah's daughter. They were going to take her off the battlefield and freeze her.

Why? *Because humans are a bunch of vindictive assholes*, Anderson thought, finally stopping. Staring back out at him in a haze of blue light was Jane Shepard. Younger in the video than she was now, she was being awarded the Star of Terra. Hannah stood next to her as proud as ever.

The Shepard family had been a gift to mankind. From John, god rest his soul, who had died saving Horizon, to Hannah, who had sacrificed her ship so the Second fleet could retreat. Jane, their only daughter, was the hero of Eden Prime, Elysium and Tiptree. She was the best soldier he had ever seen.

She deserves better, Anderson thought as he watched her awkward acceptance speech. Public speaking had never been the woman's strong point. It hadn't helped that she was only seventeen at the time.

A man's voice echoed in the metal halls. "I thought I might find you down here."

Anderson looked up at the voice. He had missed the sounds of footsteps, but then again Admiral Steven Hackett had always been light on his feet. The man held a bottle of scotch and two glasses and took a seat on the floor, albeit it slowly. The war hadn't been kind to either of them.

With a raised eyebrow, Hackett looked at his friend. "Aren't you going to sit down?" He asked.

"I don't know," Anderson said, looking warily at the ground, "I'm not sure I'll be able to get back up."

Hackett laughed, and even though he protested, Anderson was already sinking down next to the other man.

"Learn anything?"

Anderson shook his head. "Just that politicians always make the same mistakes."

Hackett unscrewed the lid and poured them each two fingers of the fine alcohol. It was hard to get anything good these days. Something like this would have put Hackett back a few hundred dollars. That is, if he hadn't inherited it.

"I don't like it any more than you do," Hackett sighed. "If Hannah was still alive, you think she would go through with it?"

Anderson took a sip, letting the golden liquid burn down the back of his throat. "Of course not. She was already convinced that her daughter was pushing herself too hard."

Hackett raised an eyebrow. "You don't agree?"

Anderson returned his gaze to the young woman outlined in blue.

"Shepard all but ran herself into the ground a few years ago, sure, but I think losing the *Cairo* put a few things into perspective for her. She dove into the *Normandy* project, picked her team and her targets. She's not just blindly fighting anymore, she's leading the best damn squad we have out there. Hell, she's probably one of the only reasons we haven't lost this war yet."

Hackett chuckled. "You sound like another one of her fans."

Anderson smiled. "You could say that, but I like to think I know her a bit better than some. Have you heard the stories they're telling?"

Hackett nodded. "My favorite is the one where she killed a Reaper with only a knife - climbing up its leg and pulling out its circuitry until it finally keeled over."

"I hadn't heard that one yet." Anderson laughed, swirling his drink around, "I'm partial to the one where she drove a Mako filled with explosives off a cliff and straight into a Reaper."

"Didn't that one actually happen?"

Anderson nodded. "It did."

That had been one hell of a mission report to read. Shepard had saved three cargo ships carrying refugees that day. He still didn't know how she made it out of there alive. He didn't know how she made it out of most situations alive.

"Steven," Anderson started. "The point is, we need her out there. Not just for her surprising knack for killing Reapers, but for the morale she brings to the soldiers. They thrive on her victories, her passion. She's a hero. If we take that away..."

"I know," Hackett said, finishing the last of his scotch. "But this war is all but over. You know it. I know it. Humanity had its time, but Project Light isn't about us. It's about the future. By giving Shepard a second chance in a young war with more supplies, more troops, we give her a fighting chance."

Anderson stood up and tossed the last of his drink back.

"You're making a lot of assumptions. A lot of things can change in 50,000 years. Her pod might not make it. The next sentient species might not find her or if they do, they might just kill her instead of talking to her. There are too many factors that we can't account for!"

"I agree, but I still support it."

"Why?"

Hackett looked back at the holo vid that still flickered before them. Admiral Mikhailovich was giving a speech about honor and bravery. It hadn't been worth listening to the first time, and it still wasn't.

"Knowing that she's out there gives me hope that there is still a chance to beat the Reapers."

"Even if we sacrifice everything else?"

Hackett sighed and poured them each another glass. There was no point in saving the liquor for another day anyway.

"The Reapers have taken the colonies in the Asgard system. They are amassing a fleet to move on the relay."

Anderson's head shot up. "What? Why wasn't I informed of this? If we lose that cluster then Arcturus will be isolated from the rest of our forces. We'll need to-"

"The retreat is already alpha-site in Sentry Omega is already receiving the refugees from Benning. The Fifth Fleet will be staying behind in an attempt to maintain control of the Asgard relay."

The Fifth Fleet was Hackett's fleet. Anderson watched his friend down the the alcohol in one gulp. He hissed and poured himself another. They both knew that the mission was suicide and they both knew that if it failed, then the only human strongholds were a few scattered garden worlds and key fueling rigs. Without Arcturus and the centralized military that it provided the war was going to go from bad to worse in a matter of a few months.

He finally understood why the Council seemed so defeated and desperate.

"Damn," Anderson said, downing his glass in one move as well. "This really is the end isn't it."

"Maybe." Hackett poured them each half of what was left of the precious liquor. "Who knows what the future has in store for us, but I do know one thing." Anderson looked at his friend in question. The older man smiled and tilted his glass towards him. "As long as Shepard's alive, the Reapers are going to be in for one hell of a fight."

Anderson chuckled, tapping the two glasses together. "The best yet."

Oma Ker - 48,000 BCE

PX-139 was a small rainforest like planet situated halfway across the galaxy from Arcturus. It would have been a prime location for a colony except for the fact that the life-forms were dextro-amino based, so humanity decided to forego mass colonization. There had been a few redeeming qualities about the small world, including its strategic location on the edge of Reaper occupied space.

A single military outpost was hidden in the vast array of underground caverns, enough for the Reapers to miss if they scanned the planet. It was the perfect place for small ships looking for a refuge as they escaped from the hell behind enemy lines. The secrecy and

proximity to Reaper space made it Shepard's favorite place to dock. There weren't many supplies, but the *Normandy* was just fine for the few days. PX-139 seemed to be one of the only safe havens these days.

"Shepard," Admiral Anderson said, walking up next to her. His face was illuminated by the glow of the war map. The thing was more red than anything these days and sometimes it felt like whatever she did, that wouldn't change.

"Sir," she acknowledged, surprised to see him out here. It was rare to see the Admiral so far away from his outpost on Arcturus station, and with the battle for the Asgard relay on the horizon, it was outright shocking. "What are you doing here?"

He sighed and leaned against the map. "I've been ordered to the alpha site. There is a good chance we are going to lose Arcturus."

Shepard exhaled. She didn't want to think about what it meant if they lost the station. Her mind went in another direction, grasping for anything that might help them. "Any word on the Crucible?"

Anderson shook his head, "We still don't know what the Catalyst is and with the Mars archives lost, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Dammit."

Most people didn't know it, but the Crucible, an ancient weapon designed by countless creatures over countless cycles was their best bet. Hit and runs weren't cutting it and with the loss of more colonies every day, the people needed something to hang on to, something to hope for.

"Don't Shepard" he said. "It's not your fault that we're losing this war. Hell, we'd all probably be dead already if it wasn't for you."

She looked up at him. "Sir, you give me too much credit."

"No I don't, and I told you, it's Anderson." He got a smile for that one, something incredibly rare these days. "I don't know if you understand the difference you've made in the last few years. People are rallying, rising up because of you. Holo's of the *Normandy* are being passed around the colonies and I hear soldiers telling stories about you in the mess hall as they eat. You've brought the fight back to humanity, something we desperately needed."

"You're going to make me blush."

He laughed. "That would be the day. I think your ego prevents you from showing any weaknesses."

"It's not ego, it's confidence. At least that's what my mother used to say."

That sobered up the mood quickly. The smile left Shepard's face and she gripped the side of the table until her knuckles were white. The *SSV Orizaba* had been destroyed a month ago. There were no survivors.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother. The Admiral was a good woman and a good friend."

Taking a deep breath she released the table. Emotions were best kept to yourself. *A soldier is a symbol. If you want people to believe in you, don't let them see you flinch.* Another lesson her mother had taught her.

"Thank you, but I'm sure you haven't come all the way out here to give me your condolences. Is there something I can do in the upcoming battle? The *Normandy* is ready to lead a pack in if you-

He held up a hand. "I have another mission for you, Shepard. I've received word that the Council have decided to go through with a dramatic plan to preserve everything we've learned about the Reapers and past cycles. Inspired by the protheans they are going to create a series of beacons in hopes that the next cycle will be better prepared for the invasion. What the Reapers have done to us and to others before us can't be allowed to happen again."

"Sir?" Something didn't feel right to Shepard. She hated the idea of giving up, and that is exactly what it sounded like the Council was doing.

"We are compiling data, artifacts and weapons. Anything to give them an edge. And you."

"What?"

"The information will only help them if they believe it. We didn't believe the protheans until the Reapers were on our doorstep. That's where you come in. You can, and will, get sentient species' of the next cycle prepared for the onslaught. That's your greatest weapon Shepard, the power to inspire."

"But the fight is here!"

"The fight is over!" he snapped. "Look around you! Earth is gone. Eden Prime is gone. We've lost the Citadel and ninety-five percent of the galaxy is occupied. Arcturus is our last stronghold and the Reapers are on our doorstep. This cycle is lost. Humanity is lost."

Shepard grabbed him by the collar. It was against protocol, but she didn't give a damn about court martials. If they wanted to throw her out of the military they could. She'd take the *Normandy* and raise an army of her own.

"Not while I'm still breathing," she growled through clenched teeth.

"I thought you might say that," Anderson sighed, pulling her hands off his collar. "But this isn't a choice Shepard."

From this distance she couldn't defend herself. His punch hit her solidly in the gut. It winded her, but shouldn't have put her down. She swayed backwards, confused, staring at the syringe that stuck out of her uniform.

Her mouth was heavy as the sedative took effect and she couldn't get the protests past her lips. With darkening vision she fell to her knees, vaguely aware of Anderson catching her.

"Give them hell, Shepard, for all of us." He whispered and then there was nothing.

Chasca - 2174 BCE

"Are you reading that book again?" Dr. Olena asked Liara over the soft sound of her piano. The asari archeologist blushed, and put the data pad down. They had been stuck in the pre-fabs for almost three days now thanks to the storm. Liara had been getting restless, going over the notes she had on the dig, hoping that something new would emerge. That way when they could finally get back to work, maybe they could find something worthwhile.

"You say it like it is a bad thing."

The salarian doctor shrugged, but smiled at the asari. "You're young and eager. That's not a bad thing, but there is nothing we can do right now. So relax. Staring at the reports from the past two weeks won't tell you anything new."

"You don't know that." Liara sighed. "There could be something I missed; something that could tell us more about the weapon-"

Dr. Olena laughed and stopped playing. "You are assuming the Shepard was a weapon."

"You don't?" Liara asked, staring at the salarian.

The doctor shrugged. "There are many theories about it. What it was - a myth, a religious figure, a weapon - is one of the greatest mysteries of the collapse of the human empire."

Liara nodded. She had read the books. All the books. It was what she had written her final dissertation on at school. It was how she earned a place on this dig. The human ruins had turned up a data disk with mentions on the Shepard and she was determined to decipher as much of the damaged thing as she could.

So far, nothing else had come up to shed light on the elusive identity of the Shepard. None of the scholars had reached a consensus. The Shepard was first referenced in the later periods of the collapse, right before the humans disappeared. There were thousands of different tales. Some accounts talked about the Shepard 'raining down fire' on the enemy and others talked about the Shepard bringing 'salvation to the weak'. It was all very exaggerated and disjointed. Perhaps that was what drew her to the subject in the first place. The greatest mystery of humanity.

No one really knew why the empire collapsed. Scholars knew of a war against an unknown, but very powerful enemy. Liara knew that the Shepard was the key. If she could

unravel that mystery then perhaps she would finally know how the greatest civilization in the history of the galaxy had fallen.

"What do you think it was?" Liara asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. She loved to talk about the Shepard and it would get her mind out of the circles it had been going in for the last three days.

Dr. Olena sighed. "I think it was an idea. A story they told little children at night to protect them from the demons that lurked in the darkness. We know that the collapse was a brutal time. It makes sense that they would create something to protect them from things beyond their control."

"You're making reference to the Niacal site."

Dr. Olena nodded. "Among others. The writings are just so...fantastical. The colony there escaped from certain doom because, and I quote, 'Shepard didn't fear the flames. Shepard doesn't fear anything. I won't fear either.' That was from the soldier who flew the colonists to safety. How could that be about some gun?"

Liara shrugged. "A weapon can be anything. It isn't limited to a gun. It could be a ship, a virus, an AI, or-"

"An idea," Dr. Olena cut in. Liara paused and thought about this for a moment and then nodded.

She wasn't about to give in though. "What about the Cyone archives?"

Dr. Olena was silent, her fingers drifting back down to her keyboard. Soft music began to fill the small shack. "If you want to bring up the Cyone archives then we'll have to discuss the Gellix articles."

"Which," Liara smiled, "Will mean we have to talk about the ruins at Chalkhos." The salarian nodded and Liara closed her eyes. "And when we have finished the debate, perhaps you can teach me that song. I like it."

That got a small smile out of the salarian. "Perhaps I can."

2. Rebirth

Author's note: Hey ho!

It's that time of the month again. A new chapter of The Shepard is here for your viewing pleasure. I would just like to take a moment to give a quick thanks to everyone who fav'd, followed and reviewed. I've never had this much love for a story before. Hopefully this will live up to your expectations. Today's installment: Garrus meets Shepard! This is one of my favorite scenes in the whole story and actually the very first one that popped into my head when I read the initial prompt.

Disclaimer: Bioware owns all the characters and the universe they live in.

****The Shepard - Rebirth****

"There is much poetry written about the beauty of birth and the strength of the mother. While all this is true, it is also a violent and traumatic act for the child. Ripped from the comfort of the womb and thrust into the unknown, it is no wonder that children cry out in fear at the first taste of freedom. Is that how Shepard felt - stripped of her people and world? I saw confusion in her eyes, but instead of a panicked child, her rebirth bore only a weapon, tempered to perfection and ready for war." - *Reflections of the Reaper War*, by Matriarch T'soni

The *Intrepid* - 2186 CE

No one can really know where their life is going when it starts. There are hundreds of possibilities and infinite variations. If someone had told Garrus Vakarian that he would be the principal figure in a fight against a race of highly developed synthetics hell bent on the complete destruction of all sentient life in the galaxy, he would have been skeptical.

He still might be.

"What do you mean *stuck*?" Garrus asked, running his hands over his face. He stared at the holographic projection of General Septimus Oraka. The transmission was gritty and cut out from time to time, but it was the best they could do. Quantum Entanglement Communication was the most efficient way for fleet to organize but it was expensive and have one major flaw: everything was routed through a central system on Palaven's moon, Menae. If Menae fell then the Hierarchy would have to fall back on comm buoys. Currently the moon was still standing, but the Reapers were pressing the attack and consequently communication blackouts occurred.

"Exactly what it sounds like." The general hissed. "Our engineers are missing some key components of the Crucible. Dr. T'soni was right, the plans are incomplete. The file was corrupted when you took it from the Facinus AI. It's impossible to finish without some major guesswork and the technology is so far above us that we aren't even sure *what* we are building."

Facinus always had a backup plan. The group of separatists believed in turian isolation and domination over the other species of the galaxy. They had hidden underground for years and built up a network of undercover bases and stations where they performed heinous experiments to "advance turian ascension." Between terrorist attacks, political ploys and outright sabotage they were, in essence, the biggest pain in Garrus' ass.

Garrus sighed. "So, what? No giant gun to quickly end the war?"

"Apparently not, unless your asari friend has any other human archeological sites that she wants to investigate."

Garrus got the hint. "I'll talk to Liara."

"Good. We need something or else..." Oraka trailed off, unable to say the thought that lingered even in the back of Garrus' mind.

"How's the situation on Palaven?"

"Last I heard from General Victus, things on the ground don't look good. They've been pushed back from most of the major cities and the troops are scattered. Something big is going down in the capital, but they aren't sure what yet. I don't know how long Victus can remain in Cipritine."

"And our support?"

Oraka growled and hit something off screen. "The asari are still too busy 'fortifying' Thessia, the salarians have agreed to a summit, but fat chance that will accomplish anything. The quarians aren't responding to communications and the korgans refuse to even talk to us. We're on our own."

Perfect, Garrus thought irritably. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"Get me more information on the Crucible. And figure out what the hell Facinus is doing."

"Yes sir."

Garrus was eating some Barakian stew in the mess hall when Liara sat down in front of him, looking pleased with herself. The spoon hovered in front of his mouth and she waited silently. Apparently he wasn't allowed to eat and listen.

He pushed the food away from him and folded his arms.

"I've been going over some of my old notes from the university and I think I might have found something." She started, sliding a data pad over to him.

Finally, Garrus thought. *Some good news*. He reached out for the data pad and began to look over the contents.

Liara continued. "Some of the dig sites at Oma Ker indicated that this was a military base during the collapse of humanity. If we want to find information on a weapon I'd start there."

"Oma Ker?" Garrus said, skeptically. It had been one of the largest turian colonies, second only to colony had been devastated when Saren Arterius attacked with his army of geth - and all for that damned beacon. Thinking about him and that beacon still made Garrus unconsciously tense up.

Oma Ker had been the start of all this. He had chased Saren across the galaxy, only to be thwarted on the Citadel. Sovereign, the Reaper scout, had been defeated but his turian agent had escaped and now headed up Facinus. One day he was going to kill that bastard

and it was going to feel great.

"Wouldn't the archeologists have found something useful when they uncovered the beacon?" Garrus said, his eyes skimming over the map of the dig site. Most of it didn't make any sense to him and he gave Liara a questioning look.

"No." Liara said patiently. She reached over and changed the screen to show a map of the planet's surface. "The military base is on the other side of the planet, set into a series of underground caves. The beacon was found close to the settlement, as far away from the base as possible. It's almost like the humans wanted the beacon to be found but not the base."

"Any chance we'll find something useful?" It sounded like a long-shot to Garrus, but he would take anything right now.

"Who knows." Liara sighed and sat down next to him. " But it's all I've got. All my informants are looking into this, but Facinus is doing the same thing. We are fighting on two fronts here and we are losing both."

He turned his attention back to the data pad and grumbled. "I've noticed."

Nihlus Kryik walked with determination through the security check points on the *Intrepid*. Truthfully he hated the things - finding them a waste of space and time on the frigate. There were many things that the Hierarchy did that he disagreed with. Its probably why he hadn't lasted long. How Garrus had survived in the military was still beyond him.

Everyone agreed that the two turians were cut from the same cloth - determined, impulsive and didn't give a damn about the rules. It's why they got along so well on and off the battlefield. Yet Garrus had survived in the military, much to his father's displeasure while Nihlus had gone into C-sec to get away from the oppression of the Hierarchy. C-sec still was full of red tape, but it wasn't the Hierarchy. Citadel law afforded more freedom than those of Palaven and he thrived there. Investigations were his strong suit and it gained him the recognition needed to become a Spectre.

Spectres were free to do what they wanted - men above the law, every law, including Palaven's. The freedom meant he had been able to pursue the Reaper's uninhibited together with Garrus - one of the only turians to ever gain and maintain his respect.

In the dim red lights of the war room, Nihlus spotted his friend hunched over the central holographic map; the same place he had been every day since this damn war started.

"I was just talking to Specialist Kato," Nihlus said as he entered the war room. "He intercepted a signal from Oma Ker. It's scrambled, but it has a Facinus identification."

Garrus looked up from the terminal and growled, "Of course it does. Because it's not enough of a challenge to land on a Reaper occupied world to secretly search an abandoned archaeological site for salvageable human data."

"This is all for you, you know. You sat on your ass for six months in a jail cell. We need to make sure you're still up to the task of saving the entire galaxy. Think of this as a trial run."

Garrus had been incarcerated for his own protection after destroying a mass effect relay and the nearest star system. It had been desperate, but it had delayed the Reaper invasion for over half a year. They had hoped to prepare the galaxy so they would have a fighting chance against the Reapers, but no one listened. Three hundred thousand Batarians died for nothing. The only consolation was that they didn't have to live through the war.

Batarian space was hit first and hit the hardest. The Hegemony had been decimated and survivors were trickling into Citadel space, but their homeworld of Khar'shan had fallen silent and stayed that way.

"Lost your confidence in me already?" Garrus asked, his mandibles flared mockingly.

Nihlus responded in kind, his voice deadpanned. "Who said I had any to begin with?"

"Ass." Garrus said and then sighed staring back at the terminal. It was a map of Oma Ker. Much of it was covered in red dots - location of Reaper attacks. Most of the infrastructure had been destroyed, but the section where the site was located was far outside any city limits meaning most of the area seemed free of Reaper forces.

"What's the plan of attack?" Nihlus asked.

"Well," the other turian said, his mandibles clicking in irritation, "I had a stylish and flawless plan, but it probably won't work now."

The Spectre snorted. "Flawless?"

"Always. Have you been on my missions before?"

"Have you?"

The two stared at each other for a moment and then smirked. "Dammit Nihlus," Garrus cracked, "I've got nothing here. If Facinus is on the ground this one might have to be touch and go."

"Well, at least Lieutenant Neros has a plan for getting us down there."

Garrus groaned. "You talked to her already?" Nihlus shook his head. "Dammit Kato."

Specialist Felix Kato was head over heels in love with the pilot of the *Intrepid* and was always telling her anything he thought would impress the cold woman, but nothing seemed to get more than annoyed look out of her.

Flight Lieutenant Torcia Neros was the best damn pilot in the entire Turian fleet. No one disputed that. She was an exemplary citizen and military officer, a perfect turian. Some days Nihlus appreciated that, some days he envied it, but most days he wanted to smack

her just to get that stick out of her ass.

A bit hypocritical of him? Yes maybe - but he didn't really care. As far as he was concerned the rules were meant to be broken. Especially rules created by all powerful committees that turned a blind eye to save their own political hide.

Torcia though, she followed her orders to the letter and commented on his shortcomings often. Why she had stuck with the two Spectres for the last three years was beyond him. He wasn't going to analyze it too closely though, she had gotten them out of enough close calls to warrant herself a bit of privacy on the matter. That and he had learnt early on that she wasn't looking for any type of relationship outside of their professional one. Kato however, hadn't gotten the memo yet.

"She and EDI have been helping Kato identify the subroutines in the signal."

Garrus sighed and looked back at the screen. "At least they figured it out before we got there. EDI, how far out are we?"

"One hour and 12 minutes Commander." The AI responded. Nihlus was glad that the Hierarchy hadn't gotten rid of her with all their other ridiculous changes to the *Intrepid*.

"Alright. Nihlus, I want you and Liara kitted up and in the hangar in one hour. Let Lieutenant Victus know that he's in charge while we're groundside."

Nihlus raised an eyebrow plate. "Victus? Are you sure?"

Garrus shrugged. "The boy's going to have to get his feet wet sometime."

"In Reaper infested territory with Facinus ground teams?"

"Sounds good to me." Garrus said standing and walking towards the exit. "It's easier than the my Spectre evaluation, unless you forgot."

"How could I." Nihlus growled.

It had been here, at Oma Ker. They had been there to collect the human beacon but they weren't alone. Saren and his geth army were already there. Saren had been his mentor in the Spectres and a close friend. His betrayal had hit Nihlus hard and it still was a sore spot, figuratively and literally. The gunshot wound in his shoulder still bothered him from time to time.

"A rogue Spectre, Sovereign and an army of geth. It's hard to forget." The bitterness dripped from Nihlus' words.

Garrus paused before the door, but didn't look back. "Yes, it is."

Location Oma Ker - 2186 CE

The lush forests of the temperate world were a stark contrast to the other occupied colonies Garrus had seen. Oma Ker had a significant population, but most it was centered around the spaceports leaving much of the world still covered by vast tracts of undeveloped land; land untouched by the Reapers

From where they landed, two fully armed Facinus guards could be seen at the entrance of the dig site.

"Most of the base is located underground in a series of caverns," Liara explained as they scouted the area. "On the other side of the mountains, there's a landing site. If I were Facinus, I would start there. It leads straight down to the main computer room. There are intact archives, but much of the data is locked. Not much has been done with it since the initial excavation due to the heavy encryption. If there is anything to be found, it will be in those drives."

"So where are we then, the back door?" Garrus asked, popping an armor piercing round into to his Widow sniper rifle. To his right Nihlus did the same.

"Exactly," Liara said.

Good. Sneaking around the back always made things easier, especially when the main force was preoccupied. "How far does that put us from the main computers?"

"We'll be coming in from the lower levels. This entrance was apparently an escape route directly into the forest. It leads to the crew quarters and from there we'll have to navigate up a few levels to get to the computers. The good news is that we we we will be coming at it from behind and can bypass the main docking area completely, so hopefully we can get in and out without attracting too much attention from Facinus."

"Sounds optimistic to me." Nihlus grumbled.

Liara glared at him. "Do you have a better plan?"

"No. It's a good plan, really." He said, leveling the sights on his sniper. A few adjustments for wind and distance and he was ready. "Just preparing myself for when this goes to hell."

Two shots and two kills.

"Kill stealer." Garrus grumbled and Nihlus smirked, pulling the sniper back and collapsing the lightweight model. They wouldn't have use for the long range weapons in the compound.

"Don't worry." Nihlus said, slapping him on the back. "I'm sure you'll get your chance. This is one of your plans."

"Nope. This one is Liara's remember. You can't blame this on me."

Liara sighed. "Your confidence in my abilities is reassuring."

Nihlus smiled at her softly, letting his mandibles fall open. "Trust me, it's not you. Garrus just has a habit of blowing things up around him."

The other turian pushed past him, glaring playfully. "I know that you are referring to the Jarrahe mission. That doesn't count."

Nihlus followed, checking the safety on his assault rifle as they walked. "You just say that because you don't want to admit you're the reason that station's abandoned now."

Garrus pulled his assault rifle out as well. "That's not what the official report says."

Nihlus snorted. "Since when do you believe any official reports?"

The other turian shrugged as he stepped over the two Facinus bodies, "Only the ones that highlight my amazing sniper skills. Those are accurate."

Nihlus pressed his back against the side of the door while Garrus took point. "We are going to have a talk later about what you deem accurate."

Garrus cocked his gun and rolled his eyes at his friend. "Jarrahe still doesn't count."

"What happened on Jarrahe?" Liara asked, falling in line behind Nihlus.

"Rogue VI and Garrus. What more do you need to know?" Nihlus smirked and then the three plunged into the darkness of the old base.

"This seems too easy," Nihlus whispered as they walked slowly through the stone corridors. The acoustics were terrible and even Nihlus' whisper echoed through the hall.

"I agree," Garrus said quietly. All the Facinus forces were paired off and scattered through the base. It was like they were searching for something but had no idea what.

"The main terminals are through there," Liara whispered, looking over the schematics on her omnitool. She pointed down a hall to their left. Hushed voices echoed down the hall and the three of them instantly fell silent.

Liara hung back as the voices got louder with Garrus taking point and Nihlus one step behind him on the opposite side of the passage. The room had large windows, darkened over time with dust and dirt. Holding up his hand, the others stopped. A quick scan showed four soldiers and a set of large computers.

His eyes lingered on the terminals. At first glance Garrus didn't think that there was much difference between their current technology and the human paleo-tech. These machines were 50,000 years old and they looked just like modern supercomputers. It shouldn't have been such a mind blowing realization, but it was. So much of their world was based on human advancements, it was somewhat terrifying.

Garrus motioned Liara forward. She threw out a quick and powerful mass effect field that had the soldiers flying into the hallway with a startled shout. Grabbing one out of the air,

Garrus snapped the turian's neck. That silenced him quickly. Turning, he activated his omni-blade and ran it through the sensitive flesh of another body. Blue blood flowed over his hands, warm and sticky; the only signs that these men were still turian. He had seen what Facinus were doing to their troops. The cybernetic implants wreaked of Reaper tech.

Liara stepped over the still bodies and walked into the room. The computers gave off a low hum and a dim light, indicators that they were still functioning after 50,000 years. If humanity knew how to do one thing, it was build things to last.

The asari sat at the terminal while Garrus hovered over her. Nihlus stayed by the door, taking up a lookout position. Liara scanned through the scattered data pads covering the consul, muttering to herself, "Facinus tried to hack the main data caches, but they couldn't get to it. Something about 'DNA'? If this was a biological lock it would explain why previous scientist couldn't access the files. Whatever is in here must be pretty important."

"DNA? Seeing as we aren't human doesn't that mean that *we* won't be able to get in as well?"

"Yes, but..." Liara trailed off as she picked up a data pad on the counter containing some hastily scrawled notes from the Facinus scientists, "They found a repeating message. It keeps saying something about...oh Goddess."

"What?" Nihlus snapped from by the door.

"The Shepard." She whispered, her eyes wide.

"I'm sorry," Garrus said, "You lost me."

Liara opened her mouth once, but nothing came out. Shaking her head she composed herself, "The Shepard is a myth. Something that we find references to at dig sites across the galaxy. There's many theories about what the Shepard is - a religious icon, a weapon, a story - but it comes about first in the later periods, right before the humans disappear. There are thousands of different tales. Some accounts talk about the Shepard 'raining down fire' on the enemy and others talk about the Shepard bringing 'salvation to the weak'. It's all very exaggerated and disjointed."

"You seem to know a lot about it Liara,"

"I should," She said smiling, "I wrote my thesis on it."

"So we need to find this enigmatic idea to unlock the computer?" Nihlus deadpanned.

"They were looking for it," Liara explained, unable to hide the excitement from her voice, "Here on the base. That's why all the guards have been so scattered, they're searching for it!"

"Any idea where we should start looking?" Garrus asked, folding his arms over his chest. It was a small lead, but this whole mission was resting on a dream and a hope anyways.

Liara flipped through Facinus' notes, "The translation was incomplete." She opened her omnitool, "But the excavation was stopped once they found the computer room. There are some doors that they couldn't get through. I'd say we start there."

"Wait, if the scientists couldn't get through then how can we?"

"They were worried about preserving the dig site, I'm not," She cringed as Garrus stared her down, "Alright, I am, but this would be the find of a lifetime! *The Shepard* - I'm willing to blow up a few doors to find that."

Nihlus laughed, "Garrus, I think we've been a bad influence on her."

"There," Liara pointed to the heaping rubble on their left, "That's where they couldn't get through."

"Looks like someone did," muttered Garrus pulling out his assault rifle. They hadn't run into any guards in the last few minutes. Something was off about the whole situation - small Facinus troop, barely any guards and no radio communications. Either they hadn't thought to be here that long or there was going to be a big surprise at the end of the tunnel. It was the archives on Feros all over again.

Liara understood Garrus' anxiety, but she couldn't bring herself to slow down or stop. Somewhere through this corridor was the Shepard. She was sure that Nihlus would criticize her on her excitement and disregard for safety, but he just kept her close as she peaked in every room they came across. Most of them were filled with empty ammunition reserves and worn out replacement parts, things that would have piqued her curiosity before, but she kept moving. Especially since it seemed as though the stockpiles had been rifled through recently. Facinus was one step ahead of them and if they got their hands on the Shepard, who knows what damage they could do with it.

Or to it. Goddess, she didn't know what was worse.

She knew the two turians didn't quite understand her blinding enthusiasm, but the Shepard had been more than her thesis, it had been the very reason she had gotten into human studies at university. Dr. Aziz's book on the Collapse had a chapter on the Shepard. She believed that the Shepard was a religious icon created by humanity to deal with the reason behind the fall of the civilization. The way she had talked about the weapon/artifact/religious idea was uplifting and terrifying all at the same time. The Collapse was her favorite era and the Shepard sat at the center of it, embodying everything of the time.

With every empty room and dead end they came upon, Liara became more and more anxious. They hadn't found the Facinus squad or the Shepard. Had it been removed already?

No. Of course not. She thought, *If Facinus had found it they would have left already.*

Liara kicked an empty storage bin in frustration. Time was of the essence here - the *Intrepid* was only able to remain in stealth mode for so long before the heat had to be dispelled - and after almost an hour of searching they weren't any closer to their goal.

It bounced off the wall with a hollow ping and she turned to leave. Nihlus on the other hand stepped forward and placed a hand on the wall, "Did you hear that?"

"What? Garrus asked, stopping to look at the other turian.

"A hollow noise."

"It was an empty bin Nihlus," Liara growled. She shouldn't be so snippy, but they had to keep moving.

The turian glared at her and knocked on the wall, "It wasn't that. It was the wall."

There was a hollow sound again, this time softer. Liara pushed past him and knocked on the stone herself to confirm it. She felt something give as she repeated the motion, but this time with more force.

"There's something back here." She said. Her biotics flared as she pushed the slab backwards. There was a grating noise and then a click as the stone slid and opened to a hidden room.

It was small, but held a single door, a console and a window. Liara stepped in, remembering to breathe again. Through the glass she could see a large black tube as tall as a turian and as wide as a krogan. There was a light on it, blinking slowly, meaning it had power.

The console turned on the second she got closer. She sat down and stared at the screen, the words flying across the terminal quickly, but they faded into a set of graphs. A sharp beep filled the room with a steady and familiar rhythm.

"Goddess, this can't be right," the asari mumbled staring at the screen. Her hands flew across the keyboard pulling up other graphs and data. But it was right, "It's not a human *artifact*. It's a human!"

"What?" Garrus asked, leaning over her shoulder.

"That thing in there, it's a pod. With a human inside!"

"Like those stasis pods we found on Ilos"

"Yes," She breathed, still unable to believe it, "But unlike those this one has power! He's been in there for the last 50,000 years!"

A human, a real, live *human*. He could access the sealed data terminals. He could help them finish the Crucible. He could...

Liara didn't finish the thought. Her fingers already starting up the resurrection process. It was imperative that they got him out of there before Facinus found them - or worse the Reapers.

The door hissed as the warm air flooded into the vacuum of the stasis pod. Cool air was displaced and flowed outward, obstructing their view as the the conflicting temperatures fogged up the window. From her spot outside, Liara could make out a form - stock still in the mist.

Her heart stopped for a moment, excitement coursed through her veins and her mouth dried as she stared past the haze desperately trying to seeing the human in the room. It had been her greatest wish as a child - to meet a human and learn from them. Her mother had laughed at her and she knew she was crazy, but a girl could dream.

And now, the dream was a reality.

What would they sound like? Would they approve of the how the universe had evolved? From what they had figured out about humanity they were a fairly peaceful race having no other intelligent species to war with. Their central council ran everything leaving many people time for exquisite art and stories. What kind of man was this that deserved to be preserved? A leader? A scientist? A philosopher?

Liara jumped as a hand - five fingered and pale - hit the glass, wiping away the condensation and giving her a view of two steel grey eyes, as piercing as a turian's and as deep as an asari maiden's. For a moment the world stilled as Liara lost herself in their depths. The eyes focused and then narrowed, taking the asari aback before they vanished, the opaque window obscuring the human's movements.

"He's heading for the door!" Liara cried, dashing to the barrier on the right. She threw open the door and stepped into the cool room. Her only thought was to calm the newly awoken human. Of course he would be confused and disoriented. She was a naive fool to think that things would work out perfectly - a small girl's dream hardly translates to reality.

Inside the mist had dispersed, leaving a clear view of the small chamber - but no human. A startled cry of "Liara" had her turning to see a blur of gold and black strike her down. The punch was quick and powerful, stunning her and sending her to her knees. A hand on the shoulder had her spinning and pinned in a second. Nihlus stepped into the room, shouting at the human - a *female* human - with her arm on Liara's throat. The asari thought to yell, tell them not to shoot the human, but more than the forearm on her throat stopped her. A silver pendant hung from the woman's neck, and though Liara couldn't make out all of it, one word was easy to spot after years of reading it over and over again.

'Shepard'. This woman was the Shepard.

Dr. Aziz had been right - she was a goddess.

At first there was only the darkness. Shepard knew nothing but the vast nature of the cold black that enveloped her. All sense of time was lost and trying to grasp it was like trying to catch smoke. Even though the light was desired, its jarring return still illuminated nothing. First it was just a pin prick of thought echoing in her mind, a knowledge that something was not as it should be. Instinctively she began to catalogue her body - fingers and toes, legs and arms. She felt as if she moved through gelatin - her muscles contracting, but her body restrained. She breathed deeply through her mouth but found only the liquid cold instead of relief.

Fear.

It was all consuming and she fought to get out of the prison she was in. Every second the matrix around her loosened and she could finally, after an eternity, swing an arm or kick a leg. Her lungs instinctively gulped for air, but only found more of the suffocating liquid. In a rush it all fell away and she collapsed as gravity returned.

Violently her body removed the liquid from her lungs. Coughing, throwing up, coughing some more. Her head was too weak to lift itself as she pushed the violating liquid from her body and replaced it with sweet, sweet air. The silence was filled with the sound of her breath - heavy and short, vibrating with effort.

Finally the heaving fits stopped and she could do a survey. Her eyes clenched shut at the harsh light of the room, but she had caught a glimpse of her surroundings and it was alien to her. Years of military training kicked in and Shepard knew she must get up. You were vulnerable on the ground.

Her body was weak from disuse. How long had she been out? As she pushed herself from the floor she could feel the heaviness of her arms and legs. They weren't weren't as strong as they should be, but the adrenaline was covering for that. It coursed through her body as her mind raced.

Clear your head soldier.

There were four walls. The room was small, but she could make out a window thick with fog. Was it a cell? Is that why no one was here with her? Is that why she was alone?

Clear. Your. Head.

Shepard slipped the first time she tried to get up, but with every step she felt more confident. Her legs still strained with the exertion, but they obeyed her will and moved forward. One step, then another and she was at the wall. The sound of her hand was loud as it slapped clumsily against the glass, but she was able to wipe away the condensation and get a glimpse past the fog.

Blue. The two eyes staring at her from the other side were blue. The skin around them was blue. Everything was *blue*.

Shepard reeled backwards, shock over riding her senses. She had never seen so much blue.

It wasn't human.

She was alone in a cell and the other thing on the side of the wall wasn't human.

Where the hell was she?

Where the hell was Anderson? She had been talking with him and then...Her hand instinctively went to her side where the needle had been inserted. He had drugged her. *Our last hope*. That is what he had said.

The same question popped into her head again, this time heavy with implications. How long had she been out?

Suddenly, she had the urge to throw up again.

Some part of her brain, the logical and rational part, told her that the appearance of this alien meant that she had been asleep a long time, perhaps too long. She pushed that thought away. *No. Anderson is alive. My ship is here, with my crew. The fight isn't over.*

It was a desperate thought but the only one she could handle without emptying her stomach.

She needed answers and there was only one way to get them. Clinging to the hope that her crew was still alive Shepard pushed her body towards the door. Her first priority was to get past the alien and determine her exact location; weapons and establishing communications were next. Angling herself into the shadows, she waited. It was likely that the aliens outside were armed and armored while she was weaponless and clad only in a set of black skivvies.

The blue alien entered and looked for her, but didn't see the commander until she was upon her, pinning her to the ground. This close, the amount of blue skin was overwhelming. She had never seen an azure alien before.

Shepard had questions on the tip of her tongue, but the click of a gun by the door brought her back to reality. She looked up and saw another species, very different from the first. While the blue one looked almost human, this one was tall, armed and clearly deadly. His very presence put her on edge and her body tensed unconsciously.

Piercing green eyes watched her every movement with caution as it chirped, growled and, as best as she could tell, spoke to her with a flanged voice. The words were incomprehensible, but the tone was clear: Get the hell off of the girl.

Slowly, Shepard removed herself, crouching over the blue alien. Outside she could see another one, armed as well as the first with some type of rapid fire gun. She didn't recognize the design, but it seemed simple enough.

She needed to get her hands on it.

Thankful that her body seemed to finally be moving somewhat normally and high on her fight-or-flight response, Shepard leapt at the alien. He swung at her with the butt of his rifle, but Shepard blocked it and went for the only unarmored part of him she could - his neck. A quick swipe to his windpipe and his defense crumbled. She grabbed his fringe and tossed him over her shoulder next to the blue alien. As he went sailing, the gun fell from his hands at her feet.

Shepard reached down and picked up the rifle, kneeling as she pointed it at the third one. He was probably the smartest of all three, and in a universal sign of surrender, put his gun on the ground.

With her weapon still trained on the the alien, she backed out of the room and bolted.

"We need to find her," Liara said as she pulled herself off the floor.

"Agreed," Garrus held out his hand, "She could do some real damage out there." He smirked at Nihlus. The other turnian glared, his mandibles twitching in annoyance.

"Not another word."

"I didn't say anything," And yet the amusement was dripping from Garrus' voice.

"Or do anything as I recall." Nihlus snapped.

"HEY!" Liara interrupted, "You don't understand. That isn't just some human, it's THE Shepard, and if the stories are to be believed, humanity's greatest hero."

"Oh, well," Garrus sighed, "Probably should keep her from being killed by the other Facinus troops then."

"Yes," Liara sighed, "We probably should."

"She'll probably head to the main computer room," Nihlus said pulling out his pistol and glared at it, wishing it was his assault rifle.

He had been bested by a 50,000 year old woman. Glancing at Garrus, the other turian smirked and Nihlus knew he was never going to live it down.

Shepard moved through the facility cautiously but quickly. It was easy when you knew this base like the back of your hand. She had come out in the armory, but a quick searched showed that it had been cleared out a long time ago.

As she moved through the hallways, her thoughts turned dark. No one was here. There were no alarms, no people and no bodies. If alien intruders had invaded the base then they had cleared it out long before they had found her or they had found it abandoned. Either way it didn't bode well for the small sliver of hope that she clung to so desperately.

The corridors felt off. Dust, cobwebs and broken lights prevailed as she walked towards the computer room. It was strange walking through the empty halls. Last time she had been here so had her crew. Joker had been down in the hanger overseeing the repairs with Specialist Traynor, James had been regaling the soldiers stationed here with tales of their last mission and Ashley had been elbow deep in the armory. There had been life here.

Life beyond the invading plants that grew through the cracks in the wall.

Voices up ahead stilled her. She willed her breath to slow and was actually thankful for being dressed only in her underwear; her armor had never been this quiet. Straining her ears she tried to hear any discernible words, but they were only the clicks and growls of the other alien. Moving quietly, she slunk into the room to her right and let the aliens pass her by. They were different from the three in the storage rooms; these wore helmets and uniforms. Perhaps those three had been the leaders?

If that many of them were here then they had to have some type of transportation. It shouldn't be too hard for her to procure a vehicle and get out of here. It was clear that her team wasn't here, but she still held out hope they were somewhere else. The ship had to have some type of communication she could hack and get hold of the *Normandy*.

First things first, she had to figure out what the hell was going on. She only hoped that they hadn't accessed the main computers yet. If they had tried then the safety protocols would have wiped the databases and she wouldn't find any answers.

With the patrol out earshot, she moved again, heading up the hall towards the main communication center.

Outside the room there were four bodies, all with the same uniform. Shepard frowned, the situation becoming more complicated by the moment. Something caught her eye as she stepped over the bodies. One of them, with his neck turned unnaturally - or what she assumed was unnatural - had lost his helmet in the process. His eyes were still open, bright and glowing with cybernetics.

Reaper tech. She would recognize it anywhere.

"Fuck," She cursed softly and took off the helmet of the other three. They were all 'upgraded'. It was the same thing Cerberus had done to their troops. Indoctrinated bastards.

These aliens, who ever they were, were clearly the enemy.

Shepard sat down at the communication's terminal. There was data pads everywhere, the computer was already on and the system flashed a warning.

"Error log:

1223.232.4487.1

ERROR /bioscan/cmdr (result unknown)

Automated response

Flash wipe initiated.

D:\1.1235.3 wiped

D:\1.1235.5 wiped

D:\1.1235.7 wiped"

"Shit" Shepard hissed, the fools had tried to hack the computer. The error message played across all the screens; over and over and over again. They had tried to hack it multiple times, if anything had survived the initial hack, it was probably gone by now.

She was about to get up and leave when something caught her eye. Between every hack attempt was a command.

" complete

D:\5923-AC-2826

Access Y/N"

The cursor blinked softly by the 'N'. Shepard wasn't a tech wiz but she knew her service number. Someone had left her a message. Hesitantly she reached out and typed in 'Y' and hit enter.

A blue laser shot out of the screen and scanned her. Every screen flashed white and then they all read a single message.

"ID confirmed. Hello Commander Shepard."

Nihlus shot the two Facinus patrols they ran into, no longer caring about being stealthy. They came from the upper levels which meant they hadn't run into that woman. If they had, in all likelihood they would be dead.

It also meant that Shepard was still alive. A good thing too. Liara and Garrus both wanted information from her. Not him though. Nihlus just wanted one good punch.

Just one.

"Shepard," The hologram of Anderson said, his skin blue and transparent. He looked out past her, probably to where the camera had been placed. The message had started up the second she had tried to access the user interface.

"If you are listening to this," He continued, "Then we lost. I can't tell you how it finally ended as this base is to be resealed upon my departure, but you deserve some sort of closure. When I asked the Council what additional items were to be left with you they said nothing in hopes of keeping you off the Reapers' scanners. I've known you to make a lot

out of less, but I thought you might like a head start.

"Specialist Traynor and Dr. Lawson created an ghost drive for you. I asked them to put the history of the war on it. It's all there: military tactics, weapon advancements, schematics, training plans. To fit everything we had to compress it down to the bare bones, but I did manage to leave a bit of space for some personal effects: messages from what's left of your crew, a few of your favorite audio tracks and a photo of your family. It was your mother's favorite. She showed it off to anyone who wanted to see a picture of you, even to people who didn't.

"Hopefully this finds you well Shepard. If the aliens that revived you are anything like us, it was probably a team of scientists and civilians. Call me optimistic," He smiled, "But I bet you haven't shot them yet. You never had the best diplomatic skills, but we sent you there to guide them, not kick their asses. The beacons that lead them to you had a warning about the Reapers. Help them, who ever they are, to be prepared for the coming war. If you are lucky you will come centuries before the Reapers even show up. If not, well, you know what to do.

Good hunting out there Shepard. Anderson out."

The vid shut off and the screens came to life. They were empty except for one small icon in the middle of the screen with her service number underneath it. She sat there numbly looking at the unsuspecting icon, willing it and the message she just heard out of existence.

We lost.

The words echoed in her head. Everyone she ever knew, ever loved was gone. Kaidan, Ash, Joker, Anderson, Vega, Cortez, Miranda, Jack, the list went on and on. One by one she listed them in her head as she stared numbly into space. In the silence of the room she wanted to curl up and cry. She wanted to rage and yell. She wanted to shoot something. Footsteps echoed off the stone wall and she cocked her gun.

Those Reaper allies would do.

Nihlus wasn't going to take any chances this time. The human was fast, faster than he had expected, and very well trained. Even with her diminutive size, she had thrown him over her shoulder easier than his instructor had in basic training. That had been the last time he had remember the vertigo inducing sensation and he had hated it back then to.

The snickers and the stares as the other students looked down at him - an outsider, unworthy of the honor of service - they thought he belonged there, on his back and at their feet. It had been humiliating and infuriating. Lashing out only got him tossed and pinned again, his instructor leaning in close as he pressed his talons painfully into the nerve cluster at the base of Nihlus' fringe. "Anger is blinding. Pride is limiting. Ignorance is deadly. Only a fool fights with these tools. Are you a fool?" It was whisper full of irate subharmonics so low that no one but Nihlus could hear. Out of the corner of his eye the turian looked up at his teacher who stared out at the crowd of students with a disgusted

flare to his mandibles.

Fools. They were fools.

Nihlus never gave them the pleasure of looking down at him again, figuratively and literally.

Shepard had stared at him too, her eyes calculating for size, speed and balance. She had seen it all in the space of a second and even though she had never seen a turian before, she knew how to compensate for his reach, height and weight.

A perfect soldier - calm and collected.

She isn't a fool.

And he wouldn't stare at her from his back again.

A growl rumbled in the back of his throat as he gripped his gun tighter and switched off the safety. Lost in his own world, he jumped when Garrus put a hand on his shoulder, "You know we need her alive."

"I can do alive." Nihlus said.

Garrus' hand tightened, "Nihlus."

The other turian sighed, "I know, I just..."

Garrus nodded. He understood, he always understood. Neither of them fit in with the Hierarchy very well - taking orders wasn't their strong point.

Liara stopped them and glanced around the corner, "I hear something."

Garrus and Nihlus looked at each other in silent communication. Nihlus gave in sighing and put the safety back on his gun. The other turian's mandibles flared in relief and he released Nihlus' shoulder with a reassuring squeeze.

"You know I hate you right?" Nihlus murmured as Garrus took point.

"Yes."

The dirty glass that separated the computer room from the hall shattered as they passed by it. Garrus cursed, how the hell had she seen them through the opaque window? Crouching in the shattered glass, he waited for her to make the next move, straining to hear any movement in the adjoining room.

Silence. She's patient.

Shifting, he turned to face Liara. In any other situation he wouldn't have said a word, but Shepard knew exactly where they were and how many of them there were. There was no element of surprise or tactical advantage available to him at the moment outside of her

inability to understand them, so a few words wouldn't hurt.

"I need her disarmed Liara," He said, "Pull her, push her, I don't care, but if you don't get that gun away from her I *will* shoot her."

Liara swallowed and nodded, her skin glowing blue with dark energy. Garrus stood up to lay down cover fire, but was knocked backwards as the butt of Shepard's gun came flying out from around the corner. *When had she moved?*

Liara released her energy as Shepard reached forward to grab Garrus' cowl, forcing the human back with reckless speed and slamming her into the wall. The force of it still didn't cause Shepard to release her gun, but it surprised the human, her eyes shooting up to focus on Liara, ignoring the turians.

Garrus wiped the blood from his mouth and watched as Nihlus vaulted into the room, landing squarely between Liara and Shepard. His gun was raised, but Shepard spared him only a passing glance, staring down the asari who still glowed.

The mass effect field wrapped around the human effectively pinning her to the wall. There was no escape from the dark energy as it pressed her into the stone.

"The gun Nihlus," Garrus said, walking into the room. The Spectre sighed and took the weapon from her grasp, "Liara we need a way to communicate."

"I can't hold her and write at the same time," Liara said, her voice straining. It was easy to create a forceful biotic field and crush an enemy but controlling a stasis field was harder, especially when trying to immobilize parts of the body instead of the entire entity.

"Nihlus," Garrus nodded, putting his gun away. The other turian followed his lead, latching one hand under her shoulder and the other on her arm, forcing her forward and onto her knees as the blue energy dissipated.

Shepard fought the second the field collapsed, pushing back with surprising flexibility and strength, but she didn't even manage to gain a foothold before Nihlus twisted her arm forcing her back to the floor.

Nihlus and Garrus held Shepard hard even when she stopped struggling. Even motionless, her body was taut and ready for any opportunity, any weakness. Pinned as she was, Liara was amazed that she looked more dead than on her knees than the two large turians holding on to her.

"Liara," Garrus said snapping her attention away from Shepard's intense gaze, "Now."

"Can't we just knock her out and take her back to the *Intrepid*?" Nihlus grumbled, his hold tightening. Shepard's gaze whipped to him and he glared right back at her.

"No," Liara said shaking her head. She had seen the damage this woman could do in close quarters and having her on a ship - confused, scared and that close to modern weaponry - could be disastrous. "Not until we earn her trust."

The Shadow Broker turned to the data pad and proceeded to type out a message. No one knew what the human language sounded like. There were some theories, but frankly most of the actual attempts were feeble at best. She just hoped her rusty human was passable.

A single word - "Friend."

She showed Shepard and the woman looked at the script and then up at Liara, her head cocking to the side. Liara swallowed heavily - was it wrong?

She tried again. This time - "Ally."

Shepard stared past the datapad and up at Liara. She could tell that the woman was thinking, but her thoughts were hidden behind an iron mask and tight lips. The human's steel eyes shifted to the Facinus troops on the ground and then back to the two turians holding her. Liara followed her gaze and understood. Shepard thought they were with Facinus.

"No." Liara whispered, kneeling in front of the woman. She shook her head and made an 'x' with her arms, hoping that the term in some shape or form would translate. The look she got in return from the human was still distrustful.

"Here," Garrus said, "Let me try."

"By all means," She sighed.

Garrus looked at Nihlus who nodded in return. He was going to let go. Liara tensed as Garrus released one hand, reaching for his gun. Shepard twisted in the loosened hold and for a moment Liara thought she might escape. Nihlus struggled to retain his grasp on her but Shepard got in a good shot, slamming the back of her head into his nose.

Nihlus hissed and rotated her arm unnaturally, eliciting a similar response from the human. She stumbled and he reached around grabbed her other arm, holding her tightly to his body. Compared to the turian she was small, similar to an asari, but Liara had never seen an asari so physically strong before.

"Got her?" Garrus asked cautiously, one hand still hovering over his rifle.

"Yeah," Nihlus ground out. Shepard finally stilled again, glaring daggers at Garrus.

Taking a step back, Garrus pointed at himself and then pointed his gun at one of the Facinus troops, cocked it and shot the dead trooper. The sound cracked loudly in the small room. Liara held her breath as the steel in Shepard's eyes melted away and was replaced with lightly hidden curiosity.

Liara stepped forward again, holding up the data pad again and gestured to herself and then to Shepard. The tension in the woman ebbed a bit as she nodded slowly.

She understood. By the Goddess...

"Let her go," Liara whispered, not daring to look away from the woman.

"What?" He hissed, mandibles wide in shock.

"Do it," Garrus interrupted. It was an order, not a request. Nihlus' audibly clicked his mandibles in annoyance, but complied.

Shepard slowly stepped away from the turian, glancing back with her eyes resting on Nihlus' gun. He glared and placed his hand on hilt in warning. Liara wanted to yell at him, punch him, something, but she knew it was pointless. Nihlus was on guard, and while she wanted to trust the human, a part of her appreciated the distrustful turian. If Shepard bolted again then they would lose the ability to access the data and finish the Crucible.

She half expected the woman to reach for a data pad, but instead she went to the fallen Facinus trooper. She pointed to his face and started rambling off something. She gestured to his eyes and cybernetic implants, her voice flowing softly. Liara blinked, but couldn't focus as she was in awe of hearing, actually *hearing* the human language. It had a strange lilt, smooth and guttural at the same time and the woman's voice was lower than she had imagined with a husky hint to it.

When Shepard turned back to the group she had an expectant look on her face.

Garrus looked to Liara in question but the asari had nothing. The sounds had been so different than anything she had expected. It had made identifying words virtually impossible.

There was a flash of annoyance across the human's face and she scowled. Standing, she held her hand out with her palm up. The Garrus looked down at her hand and then back up at her. The woman rolled her eyes and pointed at his gun.

"You want my gun?" Garrus asked. Shepard stared at him.

"No." Nihlus growled. "We can't-"

"Quiet." Garrus cut him off. Cautiously he handed her his small side arm. The human nodded in thanks, turned and fired three rounds into the dead trooper. She looked back at Garrus in question, ignoring Nihlus who had moved at the first shot, his gun an inch from her head.

Blue blood and black oil oozed from the head wounds. It reminded Garrus just how far from turian that Facinus had become. Shepard squatted down, running her fingers through the blood and she began to write something on the floor. When complete she gestured to it and said a single word.

Garrus squinted at it, tilting his head slightly. "Liara?"

The asari shook her head. She didn't recognize the word, but she pulled up her omni-tool and took a picture of the word. "Glyph," She said, accessing the Shadow Broker network,

"Can you find any references to this in archives on Thessia?"

There was a small whine before Glyph's voice came of the com, "There are multiple references to the word on Namakli. One includes a picture. Would you like me to pull up the information for you Dr. T'soni?"

"Yes please."

The photo was projected holographically over Liara's wrist. It was of what appeared to be a cave drawing of a Reaper. Shepard stood and walked towards the asari. She pointed at the picture and said the word again.

"Yes." Liara said slowly, nodding. "Yes, those are Reapers." Shepard said it again and pointed at the dead trooper on the floor. Liara nodded again. Yes, the Reapers were here and yes, he worked for them. It wasn't the complete truth, but it was close enough.

Shepard glowered and gripped the gun tighter. Apparently that wasn't what she wanted to hear even though it didn't seem shocking.

The human put the gun into her black smalls, glancing at Garrus, daring him to take the gun from her. Nihlus frowned, but didn't say anything. She reached back over to the computer and with her blood soaked hand she drew a circle around the icon in the middle of the screen.

Garrus frowned and inched closer to the monitor. "That wasn't here before."

Liara pushed past him and stared at the screen. He was right. Before there had been lines and lines of code, but this time the screens were empty save for the one file.

"She accessed the computer." Liara breathed out.

"Can we download it?" Garrus asked.

"Yes." The asari said, her omnitool already glowing under her fingertips, "I'll link it to EDI so she can start sorting through the files."

"Good. We'll head back to the *Intrepid* now. Nihlus and I will scout ahead and make sure the path back to the shuttle is clear. You, uh," He glanced back at the human, "You convince her to follow."

Liara sighed. That would be easier said than done.

3. Preconceptions

Author's Note: Wow, this is a week late in posting. Sorry everyone. It comes on the back of some good news, at least I hope it is good news, and some not so good news. So the reason this chapter was delayed in coming out is that my friend and sounding board looked at the originally structure of this chapter and told me that it was "poorly

constructed" and "confusing". My jaw dropped to the floor and we talked about it for a while. In the end I agreed with her (damn you logic!) and had to make some major changes to the chapter and some later scenes.

So here's the bad news first: For all of you that have read this story before, most of this chapter is going to seem old hat. Pretty much everything I wrote as supplement has been removed.

And here's the good news: The new stuff has been removed from this story and will appear in another one! Most of what I added was back story for Shepard. Her life and struggles before she was frozen, something that I have thoroughly enjoyed writing. I was struggling to find ways to put it in this story and have things progress in an easy to read manner. So I just decided to give it it's own spotlight. I have yet to decide if I will post it concurrently with this story or afterwards. Thoughts?

So yeah, new story coming your way. So, be on the look out for "The Soldier"

Disclaimer: Bioware owns all the characters you know and love. We'll see if you love mine at the end of the story.

** The Shepard - Preconceptions **

Religion is a crutch. It rises from the hearts of people who need to place order where there is none and explain the unexplainable. The asari ventured out from our world and found a alien universe and yet it was known to them. So our Goddess become united and all encompassing. The turians required honor and their spirits of their ancestors lived on in their ranks.

No one knows what caused the Collapse, but humanity's world was suddenly full of war and death. It is only logical that they would turn to a goddess, burning with fire and passion to protect them in their hour of need. The Shepard was everything that humanity lacked, personified in one perfect figure. - *The Collapse*, by Dr. Velera Aziz

Oma Ker - 2186 CE

Liara glanced up from her omnitool, desperately trying not to stare at the human, but failing horribly. She couldn't get over the fact that there was a *human* not five feet from her. Her eyes were inherently drawn to the similarities and differences between her preconceptions and the reality that was Shepard.

Theories about human society had centered around a peaceful culture of explorers and scientists. The Citadel had been central to this theory and the ease of asari colonization had cemented the idea that humanity had not feared invasion. The writings they had found and the technology discovered had been centered around mass effect fields and their application in exploration. What little they had discovered about the Collapse never prepared her for this.

It was clear the Collapse had been a turbulent time for humanity. This was agreed on by most scholars. A popular theory was that some internal conflict had brought war to the peaceful civilization that they were unprepared for. The few military bases they had found, like those of Oma Ker, were small in comparison to the massive structures of the turians. When studied in the context of current societies, it was easy to believe that the humans had an underdeveloped military and relied heavily on their technological advances.

Ilos had solidified that idea for her.

Row upon row of scientists were preserved there to wait out the end of the war and then rebuild society. Scientists and civilians, not soldiers. It had been a desperate move brought on by a people overwhelmed by the brute force of the Reapers, something she could sympathize with. Never in her wildest dreams had she believed that humanity had developed weapons and armaments.

Yet here she was, looking at a paragon of military prowess.

Shepard knelt over the corpse of the turian, removing his armor and guns in a methodical manner that spoke of years of training. Her hands searched for pockets and claps, raiding his body for supplies and information. There was little to no hesitation as the woman inspected elements, as if she had seen each and every one before. She had already demonstrated her skill at hand to hand combat and now she handled a pistol like it was second nature to her.

Every movement was practiced and precise, it made Liara question every text she had ever read on the Shepard. Stories that had once caused debates among the academic community suddenly made sense. She believed she understood what had happened to humanity in the Collapse once the Reaper's involvement had been revealed; they had fallen quickly to the synthetics. Looking at the new information in front of her she realized how much she had missed. Humanity had not gone quietly. They had fought to the last man and they were still fighting.

Liara watched as Shepard found the soldier's stashes of ammunition and in one fluid movement she had removed the magazine and ejected the round from the chamber. It flew through the air and she snatched the small bullet before it hit the ground. Their eyes met and Liara saw the distrust and suspicion there. The audible click of a new heatsink startled the asari and she felt the threat lingering in the simple movement.

Shepard would shoot her if this was a trap.

Liara's heart sped as her eyes darted to the gun held tightly in the human's hands and then back down to her omnitool. Any and all potential translations fell from her as the woman stared her down. Her mouth went dry and her fingers trembled over the holographic keys, as her mind scrambled for purchase.

Say something. Anything!

Her commlink crackled with an open channel and Garrus' voice was low in her ear. It made the asari jump.

"All clear and the shuttle is on its way. You can bring Shepard now."

"Alright." She whispered, her voice cracking.

"You alright Liara?" He asked.

She nodded and then realized he couldn't see it. "I am. I'm just...overwhelmed."

Overwhelmed by this situation. Overwhelmed by this war. Overwhelmed by this woman.

Garrus' warm laughter echoed over the comlink. "I bet. Just don't go trying to dissect her brain."

A metallic click let Liara know that Shepard had just chambered the first round. Her gun was primed and ready. Dissecting the human's brain was the last thing on the doctor's mind.

"You don't have to worry about that Garrus." Liara said. "We're on our way."

She knew she was shaking, but Liara walked past the woman with the gun and the steel eyes and headed towards the shuttle. While the woman didn't trust her, Liara trusted Shepard. She trusted that Shepard would follow because it was the only choice she had.

The shuttle ride was bumpy. It was cramped. Everyone was staring at Shepard and with the adrenaline wearing off, the weight of everything came crashing down - physically and mentally. A bullet to the gut felt worse, but that was of little consolation.

Sitting there in her skivvies, wet and cold, Shepard tried to take her thoughts off the last few hours. Each time she tried to focus on something else - the shuttle, her companions, her physical state - it only caused her mind to wander back in a circular and destructive spiral: humanity was gone.

Everything she had fought for, had been willing to die for, was *gone*.

Yet the war continued. Another cycle, another species on the brink of total annihilation, and her.

Her hands shook from where she grasped them in her lap, perhaps from nerves, perhaps from the systematic shock of being cryogenically frozen, but it was an outward sign of weakness. Glaring at the offending limb, she clamped her other hand on it to hide it from view to both the aliens and herself. Acknowledging her fractured psyche would only lead to tears and she would not cry in front of these strangers, these 'allies'.

Allies.

That word left a bad taste in her mouth. Anderson had been her ally, her friend, and he had betrayed her. He hadn't even given her the choice. He forced this on her. For the first time since Eden Prime Shepard felt small. Unconsciously her hand reached up for her dog tags.

There were three hanging from the silver chain, one for each Shepard.

She closed her eyes and took a sobering breathe. Her mother's words floated to the forefront of her thoughts in a comforting embrace: "*Chin up. You are a Shepard. We fix things with tools not tears.*"

Emotions would have to wait.

There was still a war going on, and she was still a soldier. It wasn't much, but it was enough. It had to be.

The *Intrepid* - 2186 CE

"Commander Vakarian," Tarquin Victus saluted as the shuttle doors opened, "There is a message from..." His voice trailed off as Shepard stepped off the ship. Dressed as minimally as she was, she still exuded an air of command and confidence. It was as if this whole situation didn't phase her. As the lieutenant stared at her, she stared right back with an eyebrow raised in question.

Nihlus shook his head and pushed past them, "I'm going to take a shower. You know where to find me if you need me."

Garrus nodded. He could tell that his friend was still upset with the events of mission, but he would calm down. The current issue was the young lieutenant, and it was less of an issue and more of an amusement.

"Tarquin, you can close your mouth now."

The turian snapped his jaw shut audibly, "Umm, sorry sir. I just...What...? Who...?"

"This is Shepard," He gestured behind him. She stood with belied ease - three steps behind and one to his left: the same distance she had been since their shaky truce. It was just far enough for her to escape his reach and produce an effective counter. *Still on the defensive. Not that I blame her.* "She's the last human. I'd introduce you to her, but unfortunately she doesn't speak any language recognized by the translators."

"Oh." The lieutenant still hadn't looked away.

Shaking his head, Garrus slapped the turian on the shoulder, "You had a message for me?"

"Yes!" Tarquin said, finally pulling his attention from the woman, "Councilor Sparatus has asked us to report to the Citadel immediately. He refused to tell me why but wanted you to call as soon as you got back."

Interesting. "EDI?"

"Yes commander?" Came the synthetic voice.

"Tell Lieutenant Neros to set course for the Citadel."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, and EDI?"

"Yes?"

"I want you to make a translation program your top priority. As amusing as it is, I would like another way to communicate besides bullets."

"Of course. I will start to compile all texts concerning the translation of the human language. What would you like me to do with the data that Dr. T'soni uploaded to my databases from the planet?"

"Take a quick look through it. If you see any thing related to the Catalyst tell me immediately, otherwise hold off. Most of it will probably be useless until we get a proper translation protocol in place."

"Are you sure?" Liara asked from beside him, "There are some notes I have from some lesser known digs. I will get Glyph to start pulling all references from my Shadow Broker database but there is no telling what we have misinterpreted over the years. An accurate translation algorithm could take a very long time."

"EDI, how long do you think it will take?" Garrus asked.

"Basing it on other language algorithms will cut a significant amount of time. I should have a basic program in a few hours."

"Good. In the meantime," Garrus glanced back at his newest crew member, "Find her some living quarters and a change of clothes."

EDI interjected, "There is adequate space on the engineering deck in the starboard cargo hold."

"And I have some extra clothing that should fit," Liara added.

Garrus nodded and nudged Tarquin who had gone back to openly gaping at the human, "Come on Lieutenant. We have a councilor to call."

Taking a deep breath Liara turned on the human. The threatening air around the woman had dissipated the second the turians and shuttle had come into view. It was as if Shepard specifically didn't trust *her*. It made the asari uncomfortable.

One of many things actually.

Shepard wasn't the only on edge. It was hard to think around the human. Her mind splintered in twelve different ways. Everything from curiosity to fear and every spectrum in between. Her whole being was consumed by the mystery that was Shepard.

And Liara was attracted to mysteries.

Scantly clad as she was, Liara could see the ripple of muscle under Shepard's skin as she moved. It was hypnotizing. Her skin was fair and reminded her of the spring flowers on Thessia, no other living thing had the same coloration. And her head, the fringe was a different color, paler than her skin but caught the light like water caught the sun.

Her lips were red, and her eyes were...staring right at her and the edge was back.

"We should get you some clothing," Liara muttered hurriedly, embarrassment seeping into her very core.

Perhaps clothing would help both of them calm down.

Shepard watched as the blue alien fumbled around the bathroom, showing her how the water worked, where the towels were and soap. She tried not to show it, but Shepard was incredibly relieved that they still used water for showers. All she wanted to do was soak in a hot shower and wash the cryogenic residue from her skin.

The other woman put down some clothing by the sinks and began talking rapidly again, fumbling in what Shepard could only call embarrassment. Nerves translated across species and the purple tipped ears helped.

Watching the woman there was an air of awe around her. It was surprising giving the novelty of their relation, but Shepard had seen it before. *50,000 years ago*. This woman wasn't the first to sneak glances in her direction and struggle for words. She had seen many privates and servicemen look at her with that wide eyed look.

Logically, it shouldn't have surprised her. The others looked at her in shock, but this look was different. This woman looked at her like she *knew* Shepard. It was just another reason to keep a close eye on the alien.

The alien that could pin her to the wall without even touching her.

Shepard closed her eyes and could feel the energy drifting over her skin, burning where it exerted pressure against her arms. It reminded her of the feeling of passing through the relays, like her body was accelerating even though she wasn't moving. She had never seen anything like it before.

Her eyes trailed over the woman looking for any signs of the blue energy but the bumbling alien was no threat right now, too absorbed in whatever she was talking about. Shepard didn't understand the smooth lyrical words anyways and the shower beckoned her softly from the back. Truthfully she wanted the alien gone. The day had worn her thin.

The woman continued to talk and Shepard reached the end of her patience. She started to strip, placing the black bra on the sink next to the other clothing. The small squeak she heard behind her indicated that the alien probably wasn't as comfortable as she was with open shower stalls. Basic training and ship life had effectively removed the awkwardness of public showers.

Still...

Shepard glanced over her shoulder at the blue woman, her whole face purple and her azure eyes wide.

It would help if she didn't stare.

An eyebrow raise and a small cough finally got the alien's attention and she turned abruptly, muttering something to herself. Shepard almost felt bad for a moment and wondered if the other two aliens would have been more composed.

Somehow, she felt like this was all the privacy she was going to get so she finished get undressed, placing her underwear and hair tie with the bra. Shaking the tight bun from her head, her hair fell awkwardly, crinkling under her hand due to the residue from the cryopod.

Stepping under the spray, Shepard instantly felt more human. The dirt washed away and for a moment she could forget; forget the alien by the door, forget the fate of humanity, forget how much time had passed.

The door opened and closed with a hiss. Shepard turned surprised, but not unpleasantly so, to find the alien woman had left. Finally alone, she let herself relax, as much as she could with the day's events.

The water beat down on her stiff muscles and she rolled her shoulders feeling a few knots melt away. The soap the woman had let for her was sweet and unlike anything she had ever smelt before.

Alien.

Frustrated with her swirling thoughts Shepard slammed her hand into the wall. The impact that ran up her arm was sobering. Turning off the water with a furious twist she ran a tired hand through her wet hair.

Get your head on straight.

There were more important things to think about: how far along the Reapers were, where to get armor and guns, and how the hell she was going to talk to this crew.

Quickly she prioritized a list in her head, starting with getting dressed. She reached over for her skivvies, but they were gone. So was her hair tie. All that was left was a green and white dress and no bra.

Perfect.

Location Oma Ker - 2186 CE

Brutus Kuril stared at the dead turians at his feet with disgust. It had been a simple mission: retrieve information on the Crucible. The information was locked, but they found a key: The Shepard. Something about it had caught Saren's attention and he wanted it, badly.

This 'Shepard', whatever it was, apparently had attracted someone else as well.

Kuril opened a line to Saren, "It's me," He said, kicking the soldier over. The head rolled to the side awkwardly and the glowing eyes stared back at him, "It's not here."

"And the data?" Saren's voice drifted over the line.

The turian glanced over dead terminal, "Gone."

The growl that answered him spoke of promise. "Find it."

"I will." *Or else.*

The *Intrepid* - 2186 CE

"Councilor Sparatus," Garrus said with hands clasped tightly behind his back. The two of them didn't have the best history together - years of distrust, political posturing, and hiding evidence - but with the start of the Reaper War they created a begrudging respect for one and other.

"Vakarian," He nodded, his blue form shimmering over the the QEC. "There has been a development with the Salarians."

"What kind of 'development'?"

"Dalatrass Linron wants to hold a peace summit. She won't admit it, but salarian interests are being lost. It's only a matter of time before the Reapers turn their attacks on the Sur'Kesh."

"So she's looking for help now?"

"Yes."

Garrus shook his head. *Allies are only allies when they needed something from you,*
"What do you need me to do?"

"The Primarch has made it off Menae, barely," The councilor growled, "The ship arrived heavily damaged and they are in need of a new one. The *Intrepid* is the fastest ship in the fleet and with your stealth capabilities it's the safest. You will host the summit."

That's not all. "What aren't you telling me?" Garrus pushed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Sparatus stared him down, but finally crumbled, "Fedorian," He hissed, "Wants to include the krogans in the summit."

That surprised Garrus. The salarians and krogans never got along, unless you counted Grunt and Mordin, but that didn't always go smoothly. "Really?"

"Yes, and the strongest clan has responded to his request - Clan Urdnot."

Ah, there it was. "Wrex."

"Yes. *Urdnot Wrex* . Keep him under control."

Garrus smirked, "You don't keep him 'under control.'"

"I don't care Vakarian." Sparatus snapped, "Whatever happens we *need* salarian support. The asari have already backed out. They heard about the krogans. If the Dalatrass wasn't so desperate she wouldn't even been coming."

"I'll do my best."

The councilor nodded. "Good. The Primarch is counting on you. We all are."

Liara looked over some of the texts that EDI had pulled for the translation program. Some she agreed with, but many had been debunked years before. Her language professor would probably laugh at her for considering some of the books, but with an actual human here...what if everything they knew was wrong?

Tarquin sat down across from her, holding onto a warm tisane and clearly a bit uncomfortable. She looked at him over the top of the data pad patiently waiting for him to say something. He opened his mouth once, but then promptly shut it again.

Putting down the pad and crossing her arms Liara softly asked, "How did the talk with the councilor go?"

"I wasn't...I mean...well. It went well. I guess."

Liara sighed. He was a good soldier, but still a bit uncertain, especially after the incident at the Chatti Outpost. She had heard all about it - his father raised him to Lieutenant and gave him command of the 9th platoon. His record was strong, but many people questioned his ability to lead saying that his father had advanced him too soon. Then the 9th platoon went to investigate the Collector attacks in the Terminus System, but couldn't protect both the civilians and the intel. He had to make a choice.

He chose the intel.

Looking over the report Liara agreed that had been the right decision, but Tarquin clearly questioned himself, especially since Garrus took down the Collectors before the intel had been of any use. He had been a strong leader, but losing so many for basically nothing had undermined his confidence in a serious way.

"Was there something I could do for you," She pressed as he continued to fidget.

"The human - Shepard - she...it...well," He paused and breathed deeply, "I was surprised she was so...well like you."

Liara smiled. *So was I.* "What had you been expecting?"

"Collectors."

"Ah." She hadn't actually *seen* them, but she knew what they were - slaves to the Reapers born from eons of forced experimentation on humans.

He sighed and stared at his drink, "I know it's stupid, but when you first brought her on board and Commander Vakarian said she was human...well, I couldn't really process it. Humans and Collectors are different, I know, but I hadn't really been able to separate them in my mind after..."

"After you found out what the Collectors really were." Liara finished. Tarquin nodded. "What did they look like?"

"Much flatter," He smirked, "Bare heads, not that shiny fringe. All tall with more muscle. And no eyes just...blackness."

Liara shivered, "That sounds..."

"Terrifying?"

She nodded.

"And nothing like Shepard...right?"

Smiling she nodded again, "Right. Shepard's not particularly terrifying, well, unless you're Nihlus. I think she might have scared him a bit."

"Liar," Came the deep dual tone voice from behind. Liara turned and smiled innocently up at the turian in question as he came to sit next to her. Gone was the heavy armor from earlier and in its place was a set of practical civilian clothing. Being a Spectre he didn't have a uniform like the rest of the crew, but he still opted to wear something besides blood stained armor around the ship, per Garrus' request actually. Apparently his Spectre status in combination with all those bullet holes made some of the crew uneasy.

"She's only human and bleeds like the rest of us." He said crossing his arms and glaring playfully at the asari.

"Are you sure? With those skills we might never know what color blood she has"

Nihlus smirked and leaned in closer to her, "Do you want to know? I'd be *happy* to get you a sample." Liara smiled and pushed him back, "Where is she by the way?"

"Still in the shower," she said blush rising to her cheeks. *And I just stopped thinking about that too.*

"Not any more," Tarquin mumbled over the tisane he had raised to his lips. The ceramic cup sat there as his eyes widened at the sight. Liara and Nihlus turned to see her, still slightly wet but dressed.

And apparently angry.

As soon as she got to the table she started gesturing and talking fast. Liara blinked, but couldn't focus on the words. She was in awe of Shepard's fringe. It had changed shape and was down around her shoulders. The woman kept running her hands through it to keep it from her face as she gestured to other regions. She had thought it was hard like the turian's and asari's, but it most certainly was *not*.

Was it as sensitive as theirs?

Tucking some of the still dripping locks behind her ear, Shepard's display finally ended with an annoyed look.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tarquin said. Liara glanced at him and saw his eyes firmly fixed on the constantly changing head of the woman. Bending a turian's fringe in anyway was excruciatingly painful. No wonder he was a bit perturbed.

But she was fascinated.

Looking back on the next few minutes, Liara had to admit it had been stupid. Incredibly so. She had seen what Shepard was capable of planetside and their current truce, as fragile as it was, gave her no right to *touch* the soldier, but she did. Liara reached over to touch the limp locks curiously. There weren't any other species that she had ever seen with such flexible structures, and like everything else concerning Shepard, she seemed drawn to them.

As her finger brushed them, Shepard's hand darted out and grabbed hers. The sharp twist brought Liara to her knees in a fast and painful movement. Ligaments strained and tendons pulled, but only to the breaking point and not beyond. She gasped in shock and pain, barely registering the clipped words coming from the human.

It had been an instinctual reaction. The blue alien had moved in the corner of her vision, reaching out and *touching* her hair. Anything moving in her peripheral vision in a hostile environment was automatically a threat, especially if it was moving towards her. Reflexes like that were what kept her alive this long.

Not a good way to make friends though.

Before she could register an apology the spiked alien with the white markings had moved. He grasped her wrist and pulled her off the blue one and she let him. It wouldn't do well to start a fight now with so many uncertainties.

At least that was what her logical mind had said. Her pride however said something completely different as he pulled her towards him, twisting her wrist as he spoke. She had no idea what he said, but from the way his grip tightened on her wrist she knew it was meant to be intimidating.

But she was Commander Shepard and she would not be threatened.

Stepping forward she rose her knee quickly with every intention of kneeing him in the gut, but the dress got in the way inhibiting her movements. She stumbled forward a bit and he took advantage of her clothing malfunction and pinned her to his chest.

If any of her old crew could see this...*God, Joker would have a field day.*

They were face to face and Shepard stared back at Nihlus, her eyes narrowing as he smirked. The dress had gotten in the way and though most people hadn't noticed it, he certainly had and took advantage of it. The hold he had on her was tenuous at best and he moved to readjust and finish the battle but Shepard clearly wasn't in the mood. Dropping down, the dress bunched around her thighs and she swept a leg forward catching Nihlus' ankle causing him to stumble backwards. As he fell she twisted under his arm and righted herself. With a firm pull her hand was free and Nihlus was on his ass - again.

I hate her.

Shepard looked up from the spiked alien who was clearly angry over her handling of the blue lady. He was protective of her. *Interesting.* She would have to be cautious. He was fast and clearly well trained. That combined with a quick temper could be explosive.

Hair had fallen in her eyes and she glared softly at the offending locks. This wouldn't of happened if the blue one hadn't taken her hair tie. Or her underwear. God she hated this dress.

Crossing her arms she stared at the alien on the floor daring him to make another move.

He's not that stupid.

No...wait. He was.

I hate her.

I hate her.

I hate her.

It had become a mantra as he glared at her from his position at her feet. Every bone in his body told him to stop, to let it be. It was clearly a miscommunication that would be rectified in the morning. All the threat he had witnessed the moment before had gone from her body and now she was focused on him with a condescending stare.

His pride yelled for him to get up and kick her ass. Garrus wouldn't approve of his XO's behavior. *He* wouldn't have approved of his behavior, but all logic was driven from his mind with the half smirk Shepard gave him.

With a snarl Nihlus barreled into her driving the two of them to the floor. His spurs got tangled in the fabric of the dress, but it also helped to keep her legs confined. He pulled back an arm to punch her in the face, but it sailed right as she dodged it and connected hard with the floor.

In the back of his mind he could hear Liara's protests, but he was too focused now the woman below him and his wounded pride.

The crack of fist against the metal floor was loud in her ear. It grazed her cheek and she could feel the raw skin redden with inflammation. If he didn't want to end this, then so be it. Clearly he needed a good beating and she was in the mood to give one.

Her hands were free and she grabbed the sides of his head holding it in place as she head butted him right between the eyes. His face was harder than hers and it sent her skull ringing for a moment, but a broken nose was always worse. He cursed and pulled back as blue blood spurted from the injury.

His distraction was her advantage and she shimmied the dress up, willing herself to focus on the fight and not the fact that she was going to give everyone watching a show. Her legs now free flexed and bucked her hips up and him off of her. She jumped up and grabbed him - one arm on the cowl and the other on his arm - hauling him to his feet and towards the wall.

A loud roar caused her to pause just enough for another person - the spiked alien with the blue markings - to pull them apart.

"ENOUGH!" Garrus bellowed, peeling the two away from each other. He had already been heading towards the mess hall when EDI informed him about the altercation between Nihlus and Shepard, but whatever he had been expecting it wasn't Nihlus about to be thrown through the med bay windows.

Glaring at both of them he snapped, "What the fuck is going on here?" He shook Nihlus slightly as the other turian stared at him through tear filled eyes, but said nothing. Garrus turned his piercing gaze at the human but relented when he realized he would get nothing out of her.

"Don't think you're getting out of this just because you can't understand me," Garrus snarled at Shepard as he let her go. The woman cocked her hip and crossed her arms not even trying to look innocent.

"It was my fault," Liara spoke up, "I was just curious about her fringe. It's so...flexible."

"Disgusting is more like it," Tarquin murmured to her right. Garrus shot him a look that shut him up immediately.

Liara continued, "She lashed out at me and Nihlus intervened. I don't think she would have hurt me."

"How do you know?" Nihlus spat.

"That's enough!" Garrus roared still holding his friend tightly by the cowl. The other turian finally relaxed and turned his gaze downward; a sign of submission, "Until we get that translation program up and running, do *not* touch the human."

Liara stepped forward, "But Garrus-"

"No buts Liara. You're lucky she didn't break your arm, or worse your neck. She's a soldier, not a pet or experiment."

"I wasn't..."

Garrus finally let go of Nihlus and tossed him one of the Mess Sergeant's cleaning rags, "And get her out of that dress. I don't think it's helping to make her feel comfortable."

"What do you want me to get her?" Liara said annoyed, "I don't have anything else that will fit her, she's smaller than me and that won't do with armor."

"Nihlus," Garrus said turning, "Clothing."

"What? Why?" The other turian protested, pulling the now blood soaked rag away from his face.

"Consider it a peace offering. I have a feeling that if I let her she would have smashed your face through the med bay window. She still might. Spirits, *I* still might." He snarled. Nihlus glared for a moment and then pushed past him for the crew quarters.

Garrus stared back over his shoulder at Shepard, whatever information she held better be worth all of this.

Shepard stared at herself in the mirror.

She had been surprised when the alien with the white markings (and broken nose) handed her a new set of clothing. His mandibles had flared and he bared his teeth with a hiss, but nothing more under the watchful eye of his commander.

The clothing fit horribly, but if she rolled up the sleeves and the pant legs, they would do. The large opening for their head and cowl meant that the neck was enormous, but if she angled it just right, it drapped off a shoulder and didn't show much cleavage. Not bad but not great and still better than the dress.

Now if she could just get a bra.

"Apparently," She lamented to her reflection, "In this cycle there is no underwear in outer space."

4. Understanding

Author's Note: Sorry for the delay on May's chapter. Finals took over my life and then I got lost in another fandom for a bit. Oops. Anyways, here's this month's chapter, still published in May (barely.) Next month everything should be back on schedule (crosses fingers) and you all should get two chapters in rapid fire succession! Look forward to that.

A couple of things I wanted to address here:

1) Many people have asked if this is going to be a Shepard/Liara story. I'm sorry but this is **NOT A SLASH FIC**. I know that this will dissuade some people from continuing, while others are relieved. I will say the same thing I said over on kmeme: If someone wants to take this premise and write a slash fic, feel free. I think it would be great. This story however will NOT go in that direction. There will be some crushing on Liara's part since in the game Liara was attracted to Shepard, in part (I believe) because he had prothean visions and she's totally in awe of Javik when she first meets him. I've fused these two reactions into one and will continue to do so creating amusing and uncomfortable situations for Shepard.

2) Also, this will not be a Shepard/Garrus story. Sorry. (Trust me. I thought about it.)

3) Some people are confused about who Facinus are. Here's the quick and dirty: Facinus is the turian equivalent of Cerberus! They are pro-turian and later become indoctrinated. Their leader is Saren Arterius! He survived the Citadel and took over the group. They were the ones who brought back Garrus after he died in the Collector attack over Alchera and they are the ones he worked with to bring down the Collectors. Details about *how* Saren took over the group and their ultimate plans will be unveiled as the story goes on.

Alright. I think I covered all my bases here.

Enjoy the story!

Disclaimer: Bioware owns all the characters you know and love. We'll see if you love mine at the end of the story.

** The Shepard - Understanding **

"The hardest thing to see is the reflection of yourself in the eyes of your enemy. It is easier to think of them as heartless, but they are not. They have feelings, desires, dreams. This moment of understanding is the hardest because you know and they know that if you kill each other, you are also

killing yourself. To follow the path of Justicar means to kill yourself slowly until there is nothing left but justice." - Samara, 2186

The *Intrepid* - 2186 CE

Shepard.

The sound reverberated through her, echoing over the pounding of her traitorous heart. It beat in time with her footfalls and belied her feelings of fear. She ran faster, sliding down the hill as the laser blasted behind her and propelled her forward.

You are arrogant, but you will learn.

There were bodies, piled high but very neatly. Organized by their states of decay and destruction. These were the unwanted and the useless - those unable assimilated. They were all adults; the children were always processed separately.

Submit now.

A massacre; it was the only way to describe it. The colony was gone before the *Normandy* had landed. 300,000 civilians and marines massacred. In the distance there were screams: women, children, men...

We are the beginning.

A husk rounded the corner dragging a soldier behind him. It stopped, stared at her - through her - and screamed. The sound wasn't human. It was synthetic, with a soul shaking vibrato that filled her veins with ice, but lighter than the deep baritone in her head and less debilitating. Her fingers easily found the trigger on her rifle and fired a short burst.

You are the end.

It should have fallen, the glow of cybernetics dimming to nothing, but it charged. Each round found their target, but the husk continued to move, only stunned momentarily by the barrage of bullets. Mechanically, Shepard reached for another gun as the rifle jammed from overheating. Her even breathing quickened as she backed up, stepping on and over bodies to escape. There was no escape however - her body was slow, moving as if through molasses, but the husk had no such problems.

It caught her. Shepard hit the husk with the butt of her pistol as it hauled her up by the throat. The blue glow of the cybernetics bled out to red and it dragged her kicking and screaming to the nearest spike.

Eyes gleaming, it spoke with a voice hauntingly familiar and corrupted, "You escaped us before Shepard, but not again." And slammed her down.

As her world faded she could see the ripped uniform hanging from the husk's body. Through the caked blood, oil and dirt, she could still make out the insignia on the

shoulder: five stars on top of a gold bar, and a name embroidered in gold: Fleet Admiral Anderson.

"Embrace perfection."

Shepard jolted awake, her hands grasping at the fabric of her shirt. It was intact. Her stomach was whole. A dream. *Only a dream.*

Flipping her legs over the side of the cot, she flexed her toes over the cool metal of the deck. This was reality. It grounded her as she shook off the last vestiges of the nightmare.

And yet...

Anderson had died, but she did not know how. *What if...?*

Growling she got up and paced around the small room. They had brought her down here and presented her the space with a cot and blanket. In the back of her mind she noted that the aliens hadn't wanted her sleeping with the rest of the crew and filed it away with everything else she knew about her new friends.

Fucking little.

She glanced at the cot. Sleep wasn't going to come easily again after that dream, or at all. What she needed right now was a distraction. She needed to go for a run. She needed a punching bag. She needed *something*.

"Good morrow Shepard."

She jumped, sinking into a defensive stance at the disembodied voice. The voice that was speaking in *english*.

"Shepard, my apologize. My internalized reads showed that you were awoke. I shall make introductions. My name is EDI. This vessel's aboard automatic fake intellectual."

The words were broken and incorrect, but they were words. Words she understood.

"Fake intellectual? You mean artificial intelligence?" Shepard asked sitting back down on her cot.

"Correct. Was that not what I verbalized?"

"No."

"My apologize. The program is still potholed. I will make improves in the future, with your assistant of course."

Shepard sighed and rolled her shoulder. A bad habit she had picked up after she had shattered it during a mission. Dr. Chakwas always gave her that reprimanding look every time she did it.

There was silence for a second before the AI spoke again, "Are you maimed?"

Maimed... "Hurt?"

Silence. "Yes. Are you hurt?"

"No, just a bit stiff."

Another pause, "There is a facility for exercise. I will direction you, for your pleasure."

Shepard almost laughed at the horrible english, but damn if it wasn't nice to understand something that wasn't a recording. The absurdity of the situation came crashing back down on her like a ten ton bomb.

"You mean a gym," She said, "And yes, that would be fantastic."

The door to her room slid open, "Follow me."

Shepard got up to leave and noticed a small black bundle just outside her door. Reaching down she picked it up to find her bra and underwear with her hair tie lying delicately on top. The blue one must have put it there during the night.

This day was definitely starting off better than yesterday had ended.

Nihlus looked out the window. The observation room was empty. It was usually packed at this hour, but the crew had given him a wide berth after the altercation in the Mess Hall. He fist clenched against the glass. Even with the environmental controls and the 8 inch thick pane, he could still feel the vacuum of space siphoning the heat from his hand.

It cooled more than his palm, it also cooled his head

As much as he hated to admit it, he knew he had been in the wrong. Shepard had gotten under his skin. She had done it with such ease that it made him sick to his stomach. He thought he had long conquered his hubris; between Saren's betrayal and his failure on Omega, he thought he would have learned.

Spectres live short lives, shorter still if you were stupid about it. Nihlus had seen it before, a Spectre who let emotions get in the way of a mission, who let the mercenaries get under their skin and they had died for it. He fought, learnt and became better - better at seeing weaknesses and exploiting them, better at removing himself from the situation and going for the kill shot.

Yet here he was making the same mistakes again.

The door opened with a soft hiss and Nihlus glanced at the intruder through the reflection on the glass.

"Are you ready to stop brooding or should I leave you alone with your scowl for a while longer?" Garrus asked, sitting down on the couch. He smirked, but his eyes were still hard.

Garrus was a friend, but also a commander, *his* commander. He would put Nihlus on ass if he needed to.

They both knew that it might come to that.

"Unless you've come to relieve me of my post, it would be best if you left. I might say things we'll both regret."

Garrus leaned forward on the couch and rested his head on his hands. Gone was the smile from his countenance. "If there is something you want to say, then say it."

Nihlus turned and folded his arms across his chest. "What's the point? You already know where I stand."

"Actually, no, I don't. Contrary to popular belief, I don't know everything. All I know is that my XO snapped and started a fight in the Mess, a fight he almost lost. Now he's holed up in the Observation Lounge and the crew is terrified to come near him." Garrus rubbed his face and looked back at his friend. "What is going on? I haven't seen you act like this since Omega."

Nihlus shifted awkwardly. He had hoped that Garrus wouldn't bring up Omega. It was something he was trying to forget. Unconsciously his hand came up and rubbed his chest. He shouldn't have survived that sniper, but he had, thanks to Garrus. It was just something else he owed to the Turian.

Garrus had come in with guns blazing as Nihlus was on death row. High on stims, low on concentration, by all rights he should have been dead. Spirits, he thought he had been when he spied the supposedly dead Spectre. He had even shot a few concussive rounds at the vision in hopes to expel it from his sights, but they hadn't and Garrus had made his way into his safe house and saved his life.

Pride had gotten him into that situation in the first place.

Two years before he had been angry at the Council but refused to leave their service. One mission had been to follow an escaped criminal to Omega. He took down the convict, a high level Blue Sun, and a few others along the way. It had felt good. It had felt like he was doing *something* to help the galaxy instead of sitting around watching the damn politicians blatantly ignore the threat staring them in the face.

So he stuck around and shot a few more mercenaries. Then a few more. Then a lot more. And not just Blue Suns. The Blood Pack and Eclipse didn't escape the blood bath.

For two years he fought them.

For two years he outsmarted them.

For two years he thought he was invincible.

Nihlus was the top of everyone's hit list. He knew that one false step, one mistake and they would have him, but he didn't care. Nihlus *knew* he was better than all of them put together. *Let them come*, he thought - no, desired. He wanted to see them fall at his feet.

On Omega he was judge, jury and executioner. He did not bow to the whims of corrupt bureaucrats or feel the oppression of the Hierarchy. Here, he was powerful.

Then he made a mistake. A five foot ten, green eyed mistake. Her name was Nyreen Kandros, second in command of the Talons, and she was beautiful. They were a small group looking to change Omega, just like he was. He hadn't wanted to join but eventually she had swayed him over.

For a while life had been good. Life had been great.

And then he had gotten sloppy.

He trusted her intel, trusted her crew and trusted her. He stopped double checking the plans, looking over exit strategies, confirming sources and it came back to bite him in the ass.

They had information that Garam, the head of the Blood Pack, would be coming to oversee a job personally. They expected the guard to be heavy but nothing the crew couldn't handle. The information had been faulty though, someone had betrayed them. It wasn't just the Blood Pack, it was every gang on Omega: the Blue Suns and Eclipse had joined in.

It had been a massacre.

The small contingency of Talon troops had been wiped out in a matter of minutes. The kill box had been perfectly constructed. Nihlus had seen it all from his perch. As the best shot, he had been assigned as the sniper to cover their exit, make a path for the main group and update the plan as necessary. There had been too many mercs and not enough bullets. So he watched as the crew and Nyreen had been overrun.

The mercenaries weren't satisfied with that though. Garam had personally hounded Nihlus through the streets of Omega to his safe house. The turian had barely made it, but to his credit, so had the krogan.

He had been locked in that safe house for five days, picking off mercs that tried to cross the bridge. Then, as he thought it was all over, Garrus came in with guns blazing tailed by Facinus.

Trust had been hard to come by those days. It still was. He trusted Garrus and he always would, but now Nihlus never let his guard down. He double checked every plan, every piece of data. He wouldn't allow himself to fall into another trap. He wouldn't let his friends be butchered for his mistakes.

Nihlus knew he wasn't going to get out of talking tonight. "It's Shepard. How do we know that she's really who she says she is."

"In case you haven't been paying attention, she hasn't really been saying much of anything."

"You know what I mean." Nihlus snapped. "It is convenient that we found her in a base full of Facinus troops. How do we know she isn't another one of Saren's AIs? Look at all the damage Dr. Eva caused on Feros. Sidonis is still recovering on the Citadel and she was ground side. Think of all the damage Shepard could do on the ship!"

"I think you are over reacting." Garrus said, but Nihlus knew he had thought about the possibility too.

"Let's say she is a human. She clearly isn't something we can control. You saw what she did in the Mess Hall. She almost took off Liara's arm over nothing."

Garrus rubbed his face. "A miscommunication. It was bound to happen without a translator program."

"I don't trust her." Nihlus snapped. "And I think it was a rash decision to bring her aboard."

There he said it. He called Garrus out.

"You don't trust the porridge that Lt. Ceasat makes for breakfast."

Nihlus frowned. "That isn't food and you are changing the subject."

Garrus stood up. "I know that you are concerned. I'll be the first to admit that your standoffish and distrustful nature has saved us more than once, but I *need* you to trust me on this. We are losing this war. Palaven is holding on by a thread and they are spreading our forces thin by pressing against the colonies. It's likely that this summit with the salarian Deletrass will fail which means no reinforcements. I know that I am grasping for straws and chasing ghosts, but they are all that we have. The Crucible is our last hope and hope will only get us so far."

He put his hand on Nihlus' shoulder and squeezed. "If we want to survive this war we have to stick together. Please tell me I have your support on this, and if not that, at least your promise to wait until we have a translation program up and running before you try to throw Shepard out an airlock."

Nihlus sighed and unfolded his arms. "You have it."

Garrus smiled, his mandibles flaring happily. "Good. Think you can come out of here now and stop scaring the crew? Some of the new ones we picked up on Palaven haven't gotten used to your ugly mug."

"Ugly?" Nihlus said indignantly, "I'm not the one who lost half his face to a rocket launcher!"

"At least I have an excuse. You were just born that way."

Garrus backed out the door as Nihlus took a playful swing at him. The tension had all but left his body. Garrus had that effect on him. He would follow that turian to the ends of the universe in the blink of an eye.

He would follow Garrus' decision, but that didn't mean he wouldn't keep an eye on Shepard. After all, it was his job to cover his friend's six.

Nihlus rolled his shoulders and decided to head down to the gym to work out the last bit of stress and think over the days events.

A relaxed body leads to a relaxed mind, and he needed his mind sharp if they were going to survive this war, let alone this *human*.

Nihlus paused as he walked out the elevator. It was early in the morning and most of the crew was asleep save for the third watch. That meant he could work out everything - his stress, his embarrassment, his frustration - without an audience. Determination fueled him and he wasn't going to leave this gym until he could think clearly again.

However, he wasn't prepared for the small gym area to be occupied by the cause of his tension. Squashing the rising anger at the sight of her, Nihlus took a deep breath. *I will not throw her out an airlock. I promised.*

It would be a stupid idea anyway. He had seen what rage-filled, blind attacks did against Shepard. Garrus had been right, back in the Mess Hall she almost wiped the floor with him. He had been outclassed and outmatched from the beginning and not solely because of her. He had let his emotions rule him. Pride and anger were things he often used to get his opponents to make a mistake and he would be hypocritical if he believed himself immune.

No, if he ever was forced to engage Shepard again he would do it on his terms. For now he would watch her and learn. He let his mind and body settle, letting his Spectre training take over.

Nihlus' loose top had been tossed aside and her fringe was once again bound tight against her head. Sweat dripped down her back as she ducked and bobbed, moving with ease around the punching bag. Forcing himself to watch her with a critical eye, he noticed many things about the human that he had missed before.

Faint scars littered her body - gunshot wounds, burns, and what appeared to be claw marks - showing that even she wasn't indestructible and emphasized her experience. *She's a survivor*. Her right shoulder didn't have the same power to it when she jabbed and she tended to guard it, attacking with her left. The bag swung with every punch, but not like when he had seen others work with it - himself included. Shepard was weaker than him. *But she makes up for it with technique and speed.*

Her breath was deep and controlled as her arms moved in quick graceful arcs, striking the bag with lightning fast speed and returning to a guarded position. Even from here he could see her muscles shifting under her skin, tightening and stretching with each movement but still fluid and soft.

Dodging an imaginary punch, Shepard shifted and put all her weight onto her right leg extended her left foot along the floor in a sweep. He had seen flexible asari, but this was impressive. She was barely an inch off the floor and smoothly transferred her weight to the other leg without raising. It was fast and she would have ended on the opposite side of the enemy - them on their back, exposed to Shepard's killing shot. The demonstration of body control and pure strength gave him flashbacks to their skirmish on Oma Ker.

If Liara hadn't used her biotics Shepard probably would have killed him. If she had gotten a grip on his cowl it would have been over before he even knew what had happened.

Turning, she prepared another movement, but saw him and stopped, straightening slowly with the same control as her other movements. Her body was relaxed, but her eyes were ever watchful.

Nihlus recognized the look in those steel colored eyes. Analytical, cautious, tense. She was more like him than he had realized.

And that was dangerous.

She was a powder keg ready to go off, but unlike him, she didn't have a commander to quell her urges, a friend to calm her nerves. She was alone with nothing to live for and was ready to die.

It was him; trapped in that safe house on Omega, hoping to take out as many enemies with him as possible. He shuddered, finally understanding all the concerned looks and cautious words Garrus had given him.

This would have been him without his friend.

And he pitied her.

Shepard watched the alien curiously. Everything about him was different. There was a calmness to him that had been absent before and an purpose in his stance. He didn't move and there was no reason to believe he wanted to fight her.

He only wanted to watch.

She was acutely aware of his eyes roaming over her body. It wasn't sexual, but it still made her tense unconsciously; it was the look of a soldier searching for a crack in the defenses of his enemy. He was making calculations with the sophistication of an expert tactician.

Perhaps she had been wrong about him.

Shepard turned, returning to her workout. If he wanted to watch, let him watch. It didn't matter in the end. Her enemies and allies always underestimated her.

And, part of her wanted him to see. This was a new world, a new war and she wanted them to know exactly who she was - *what* she was. There were no preconceptions, they knew nothing of the woman before Eden Prime. She didn't have to explain her actions to them, she only had to *be*.

The dream came to the forefront of her mind again. The image of Anderson, corrupted, speaking to her darkest fears. She had fought the Reapers for so long, trying to protect as many people as she could, but they had still won and she knew *exactly* what happened to them.

The factories of Eden Prime, the smell of melting flesh and the sound akin *pleasure* reverberating in the chest of the husks as they fed, echoed in her mind. She had seen what Reapers do to their enemies, and worse, their prisoners.

She picked up the pace of her assault. Her punches hitting the bag in time with her heartbeat.

Here, she could be anything she wanted - a civilian, a consultant, a by-standard - but there was only thing she wanted to be.

I will be their downfall. I will be the death of the Reapers.

This time around she wouldn't be fighting to save lives. This time she would be doing it to take them.

Nihlus sat still, watching her move, cataloging her reach, her strengths and her weakness. She was all about control - controlling the opponent, controlling the battlefield, controlling the fight.

Then she lost control.

Gone were the precise movements and the calculating eyes. Her feet were firmly planted and she beat the bag. She beat it to the point of breaking and then beyond.

Sand began to trickle out of the bag. Shepard had stopped, staring at the white grains. They made small designs on the white mat as the bag swung back and forth in front of her.

Cautiously, he rose from his perch and approached the woman. She didn't move or acknowledge him as he approached. She didn't even look at him until he reached out and stopped the swinging punching bag, the sand flowing out from the small hole beneath his fingertips.

She held his eyes, neither daring to blink.

His arm felt heavy under her watchful gaze, and Nihlus let it drop. He could feel the grains of sand that wedged themselves between the plating of his hand and he unconsciously

rubbed them together. The small particles were rough and annoying under the pads of his fingers and they were hard to dislodge due to their wetness.

Wet?

He glanced down at his hand and saw the small drops of red that stained the white granules on his skin. Shepard followed his gaze and then both their eyes shifted down to her hands. The pale skin was torn open and red droplets bubbled, falling the floor with a muted splash.

"You're bleeding." Nihlus whispered.

EDI must have heard because her voice echoed over the comm system causing the two of them to start. He didn't recognize the words, but Shepard shook her head and rubbed the back of her hand over her hips. The blood left a bright red trail across her skin.

"Shepard believes it is minor and does not require any medical attention. Would you like me to call Dr. Actus as a precaution?" EDI said.

Nihlus shook his head, "No. I'm sure-wait, *Shepard* thinks it's minor?"

"Yes," The AI responded.

"She told you this?" His eyes went wide as he stared at the woman across from him. Her eyes narrowed cautiously.

"Yes."

Nihlus took a step back, glancing at the ceiling as if he could see EDI there. "How long have you had the translation program online?"

"Two hours, 13 minutes and 42 seconds. But it is very rudimentary. There are many missing words and improper grammatical structures. I'll have to -"

Nihlus cut her off, "But you can talk with her?"

"Yes."

He glanced back towards Shepard then walked over to the armor lockers opposite the shuttle he rifled through his things. Garrus often made fun of his tendency to keep old armor parts, gun upgrades and parts for omni-tools, but Nihlus was always glad to have backups and spares. Grabbing the old Polaris III from the top shelf he let out a triumphant trill. Omni-tools were fairly common these days but he would bet that no one around here kept extras on board.

Garrus was going to owe him for this one.

Nihlus turned and saw Shepard leaning against the shuttle, watching him with open curiosity. She seemed more relaxed than she had a minute ago, but the tenseness in her

shoulders belied the air of carelessness. Still, the underlying rage he had seen was gone and the cold soldier was back. Whatever thought she had lost herself in had vanished. That was a good thing too, since he was about to break Garrus' latest rule: No touching the alien.

"EDI, can you tell her that I am not going to hurt her? I just want to give her this." He held up the omni-tool. It didn't look like much and he could see Shepard eyeing it wearily as EDI spoke. The woman frowned but then nodded slowly.

Nihlus took a deep breath and reached out slowly for her hand. He felt the warmth of her skin under his palm and sighed softly, thankful that she only raised an eyebrow in question instead of punching him in the face.

He slid the small bracelet onto her wrist and he could feel her eyes on him, waiting for him to do something wrong. *No pressure Kyrik*. His mind wandered back to the Mess Hall and how fast she had reacted. Pressing the activation button, the loose metal snapped tightly to her skin and she started, pulling her hand back from his roughly as the distinctive orange hologram appeared over her wrist.

"It's alright," He said soothingly, though to her it could sound like some kind of horrible screeching sound. Nihlus shook his head, "EDI can you start uploading the translation software to her omni-tool?"

"Of course."

Reaching out, he held out the earpiece - a small circular speaker as thin as skin and just as breathable. On turians it fit right next to the auditory canal, but on humans they probably fit next to the ears. At least that's what he assumed those things on the side of her head were.

Shepard glanced down at his hand and the orange speaker dubiously. He pointed to the side of his head and then moved towards her ear in what he prayed was a non-threatening way. Shepard tensed by made no other movements as he gently turned her head to the side. Some of her flexible fringe fell over her ear and he brushed it away, amazed at the almost silken feel of it under his fingers. He fixed the speaker just in front of her ear and waited.

"Upload complete."

He nodded, "Can you understand me?"

Shepard blinked and cocked her head to the side, "Barely, but yes."

Well that makes things much simpler. "My name is Nihlus Kyrik," He held out his hand, "And this is the *Intrepid*."

Shepard reached out after a moment and grabbed it firmly, "And I have being Commander Shepard. Pleasent."

Nihlus blinked at the last word, "Excuse me?"

"This is only one of many transitional issues. It is unsurprising, but with continual use I will be able to upgrade the database for a more coherent speech pattern," EDI cut in.

Of course. Nothing is ever easy.

"This implement," Shepard said gesturing to the omni-tool on her wrist, "Will it able myself to commune with all? Even the azur woman?"

Azur... "Liara? Yes. Even her."

"Good. We must to have talk of borders." She glanced over at Nihlus, "And you Kyrik have much to talk to me of Reapers."

To say that he had been surprised when Nihlus had walked into his cabin with Shepard in tow would have been an understatement. After the incident in the Mess Hall, Garrus was sure that it would be awhile before Nihlus would be able to look at Shepard without glaring. The turian had always been full of surprises, and Garrus had to admit, had changed greatly since they had worked together to bring down the Collectors.

Leaning back in his chair, Garrus glanced over at Nihlus who lounged silently on the wall. He had been just as quiet as the human currently sitting on the couch. It was amazing how similar they both were, sharing an intensity born out of battles and losses.

Suddenly Garrus was struck with an intense desire to talk with his father and Solana.

The blue glow of the fish tank illuminated his room. In the beginning, the idea of having a fish tank in his personal quarters seemed ridiculous and frivolous, but after awhile it the soft light became comforting, reminding him of the sparse reprieves during the war. However, Garrus noted, the soft glow seemed to take on a different light as it played in Shepard's eyes.

Her body was relaxed when she had sat down, but everything about her tensed during his briefing of the last three years. Even from here he could see her knuckles whitening with every word and the way the soft light became a fire in her sharp eyes. The more he had said, the worse the situation seemed, if that was even possible: A galaxy filled with inner turmoil, backstabbing politicians and terrorist groups, a Reaper invasion and a far from complete weapon.

Victory seemed plausible in my head. A pipe dream at best, but still he held some sliver of hope. He had to. If he didn't then who would?

Shepard shifted and sighed, her hands coming to rest lightly against her lips in a pensive motion. Her movement caught both his and Nihlus' attention, drawing them back into the moment. Her eyes shifted and caught him in their sights: all steel and strength. For a moment he was taken back by the unwavering determination in that gaze. Even after dumping a list of impossible odds at her feet Shepard did not falter.

It was the look he had given others as they stood between him and Saren. It was the look he gave Saren when he blew up the Collector's base. It was the look he had almost lost when he saw Palaven burning.

Shepard knew the destruction of the Reapers first hand and she still stayed strong.

No wonder they told stories about her.

"How longer until the Crucible is completion?" Shepard asked, her voice load in the quiet room.

"Three months," Garrus said, "If we're lucky. There is still the problem of a power source. The plans we recovered show everything but the data source. I was hoping you could help us with that."

"Apologies. When I was freezed, the Crucible was deficient. We were without the Catalyst - a power supply. I possess no thoughts on the character or locale of the Catalyst. If there is any informative than it is in the data established with me."

"But it was your design!" Nihlus protested, speaking for the first time.

Shepard shook her head, "Not ours. It is protohean...but not protohean. Each revolution aggregated to the design, but each revolution's build was failure."

Garrus glanced at Nihlus who shook his head, "Protohean?"

"Those who came before." *Like humanity came before us.*

"Great," Nihlus bit out, "So we have nothing then?"

"No," Garrus sighed, running his hand over his face, "We go through with the summit."

"You really think the Krogans will agree to an alliance with us and the salarians?"

"Wrex wants something. I don't know what, but he wouldn't have agreed to Fedorian's idea in the first place if he didn't."

Nihlus grumbled, "I have a good idea what that 'something' is."

Garrus shot him a look, "A cure for the genophage is impossible right now. It would take years."

"This is Wrex we're talking about," Nihlus said, his voice amused, "He always has a plan."

It wasn't like the thought hadn't crossed his mind. Nihlus was right, Wrex always had a plan and his determination to find a cure for the genophage was well documented. He was the smartest krogan Garrus had ever met, especially when compared to Grunt. Good kid, but a bit thick-headed. It was in all likelihood what Wrex wanted, but the question was, could they give it to him?

He wasn't ready to give up on the Crucible though. Sliding his gaze back over to Shepard he asked, "Think you could go through all the data we found with you and see if humanity found anything else out about the Catalyst?"

She nodded.

Amazing. Shepard won't give up. Ever.

They had gotten lucky with her. Perhaps they would get lucky again.

5. Ilos

Author's Note: Hey guys. Look I'm not dead! I am however busy as all get out and totally absorbed in a few other fics (not yet published). I'm trying to finish them before I post them because I feel so guilty about not finishing things! I will not give up on this fic, but I as I have mentioned, one of the stories that I am writing (an often absorbed in) is actually the prequel to this. I love this Shepard and this universe so much, but what I like the most about it is the background. If you couldn't tell, the first chapter has been by far my favorite and I am loving the work going into the prequel. Because of that, some things in this story probably won't make too much sense or will only be touched on briefly. That's because I don't want to spoil too much of the other story!

Anyways, as always I am very touched that you guys have reviewed, followed me and are still reading this story! I hope some this was worth the wait. I won't promise anything anymore (that was stupid of me), but just know that I am still here and still writing.

Disclaimer: Bioware owns all the characters and the universe. Mine included.

** The Shepard - Ilos **

"Location: Milky Way / Pangaea Expanse / Refuge System / Second planet - Ilos

Mission Report: We descended into the city, a tight landing spot for our pilot, but we had to get behind the enemy's front line if we were going to catch up to Saren's front guard. It wasn't hard to figure out where he was going, we just followed the geth through the ruins. Dr. T'soni was able to determine that the complex we were in was a laboratory, but the architecture was completely foreign. It was not reminiscent of humanity, however there were aspects that were spoke of human involvement. The lab showed experimentation on what can only be assumed to be human subjects, mixed with some type of cybernetics. We moved down, deeper into the catacombs, engaging the enemy often. Saren's position was heavily fortified, with geth armatures, rocket troops and shock troops. We were only able to catch up to his front guard with the aid of the human VI, Vigil. Vigil was left to guard the Conduit, a prototype mass effect relay. He was waiting for someone, calling us "expected". The scientists of the small

outpost had worked diligently until the end of the war to perfect the relay, and even then it wasn't completed. They left through the incomplete relay, "ready for her to light the way for us." - Declassified file 798324B - Preliminary Mission Report: Ilos - Commander Garrus Vakarian.

The Intrepid - 2186 CE

Liara stretched out on her bed, datapad clutched lightly between her fingers. Glyph had politely reminded her earlier that it had been almost 24 hours since she had slept. The polite reminder continued for the next 10 minutes before she gave in. It was incredibly annoying but she had programmed him that way, knowing that she would ignore the alert if possible. Still, sleep had eluded her and Liara used that as justification to go back to reading the files that EDI had recovered from the surface of Oma Ker.

She had been so excited to learn more about humanity, but to her surprise and disappointment, there was very little, if any, mentions of their culture. There were schematics on weaponry, summaries of battles and troop deployments and more military jargon. There was nothing in these files except for war.

And almost nothing on Shepard.

With a sigh, Liara turned onto her back, staring at the ceiling. It took her eyes a minute to adjust to the darkness, but she was able to make out the tiles, some newer than others – scars from the *Intrepid's* trip through the Omega 4 relay.

Perhaps scars were all that was left of humanity as well. The Reapers left wide wounds on her world and they had only been here a few months. She couldn't imagine what would happen if the war lingered on for generations. She wasn't sure how long it had gone on, but Liara was confident from what she had gleaned from the data that the war for humans had been significantly longer than any scholar had theorized. With the quick decay of culture and the all but complete destruction of the society, it had been proposed that humanity had fallen in a generation or two. Granted, no one really *knew* how long a human lived or how long a generation was, but the it still seemed fast; especially on an archeological time scale.

However, humanity's war had apparently lasted well over a *century*.

Longer than I have been alive.

Could they hold out that long? How had the humans done it? And Shepard, did she know of a time before the Reapers or was she born into the war? How old was she?

The questions swirled in Liara's head and she knew rest would not come to her soon. Groaning she threw off the covers and made her way to the Mess.

Perhaps a cup of tea would calm her mind enough to let her sleep.

Shepard reached back into the cooling unit in the corner of the mess, hoping that this new box would contain something edible. After her meeting with the two male aliens - *Kyrik*

and Vakarian, she corrected herself - her stomach had grumbled with a vengeance. Whatever lingering nausea the stasis caused had been replaced by a fierce hunger. She hadn't eaten in 50,000 years and her stomach wouldn't wait one second longer.

Tentatively she peeled back the lid of the box and then quickly shut it again. If everything in this cycle smelt like *that*, she might never eat again. She turned to place the offending 'food' back in the cooling unit. Perhaps something in the cabinets would prove remotely edible.

A small sound caught her attention as she reached into the cooler and she turned. There, in a what appeared to be a large sleep shirt was the blue alien, her eyes wide and her mouth open.

What had Nihlus called her? Lynn? Lisa? Leigh-Anne?

Before Shepard had a chance to ask, the blue woman's eyes shot down to the box in Shepard's hands and gasped.

"You shall not ingest that!" She said, reaching for the container and then pausing. She glanced back up at Shepard and then bit her lip softly, cautiously. They both remembered the last time the woman had reached out towards her.

That wasn't my fault. Shepard thought defensively.

Taking a deep breath, she remembered Anderson's message to her. *Be diplomatic.* At least he had been right on one account: She hadn't shot them yet. Slowly, she handed the box to the woman.

The blue woman sighed in relief and then the words started. They streamed from her mouth like a babbling flood of gibberish.

Liara took the box from Shepard.

"I am very glad you didn't eat that. You would have been in the toilet for a week! At least," She peaked back at Shepard as she placed it on the counter. "I think you would. I assume that since you look like an asari... "

Liara shook her head, not really expecting the answer. "Nevermind. I'm sure that you have absolutely no idea what I am talking about." She reached up into the cabinet with the red label on it and pulled down some protein pouches, going straight for the box at the back. The honey flavor was one of her personal favorites - she always did have a bit of a sweet tooth.

She handed it over to Shepard along with a glass of water. "If you like that, and don't uh, have *issues*, you should only eat things with the red labels on it. That is the one for levo species. Eat anything else and you might be in the Medbay for a while. That is the worst case scenario of course. For most, the taste is completely off and they don't receive any nutrition from the food. It just passes through your system. Hopefully you will be part of the later group."

Liara chanced a glance at Shepard who just rose an eyebrow. The blue woman sighed. "I'm babbling, I know. Sorry."

She turned and started to prepare her tea, smiling softly when she heard the metallic rip of a wrapper. It was a good sign that Shepard trusted her enough to take food from her - an improvement really, especially when she took into account the fact that the woman had almost broken her wrist earlier for touching her fringe.

The soft smell of Simoon flower and Ithorian vanilla filled the Mess Hall and Liara settled into a seat across from Shepard. She sighed, openly watching the woman across from her munch quietly on food. "I feel like I have made a habit of assumptions with you. When I first saw you I thought you would be...well, something else. A scientist perhaps, like myself. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. If this war goes the way it did in your time, what would we do?"

Would they aid the next cycle? Would it be with words and warnings, like the broken beacons? Would it be with a weapon like Shepard? Would they try to outlast the Reapers like the small group of scientists on Ilos? What *would* they do?

It wasn't a question Liara particularly liked thinking about, but after she acknowledged it, the idea wormed its way through her conscious until it held a tight and terrifying hold on her thoughts.

"If we lose this war..." She trailed off, glancing at the human silently sipping the water. "I hope," She swallowed hard, "If it comes to that, I hope I'm not alive to see it. I know what they do to the people they conquer, the *monsters* they create." They had seen how the turians were turned into mindless foot soldiers for the Reapers during the campaign against Saren and the Geth. The screams of those creations filled her mind and haunted her sleep for years. Now the war had started and what she had seen in the last few months - krogans, salarians, even some sorts of hybrids - would stay with her until she died - and she had yet to see what the Reapers had planned for the asari.

I don't know if I can handle it.

"I'm sure things were just as dismal in your time. It must have been for them to send you so far into the future. I saw it, in the files, humanity sent you to us. They called you their 'light in the darkness'. At least, I think that is the correct translation. Did you know you weren't their only attempt? We found stasis pods on Ilos; a small group of scientists. The VI there, Vigil, mentioned that the humans had been a small research outpost. It had been expecting us, but more than that, I think it had been expecting you. Would this all have changed if we had found you instead of the research station? Did we completely miss you somehow? Did-"

Liara realized she had risen from her seat. Shepard had stopped eating and was cautiously staring at her. The asari blinked, and sat back down.

"It feels like all this is just so far beyond me. There are too many questions and I admit that I have grown accustomed to having all the answers - spoiled, actually. Being the Shadow Broker has made me forget what it was like to know a mystery that is out of my reach." She laughed bitterly, staring into her cooling mug of tea. "I've got all the secrets of the galaxy at my fingertips and I still can't figure you out."

Shepard slid the empty glass back towards the asari and nodded her head. Liara took it as a thanks, wishing again that EDI had finished the translation program.

The human paused as she was leaving the mess and turned back.

"Thank you."

The voice that came through the translation program lost much of its harsh edge, leaving only the smooth overtones. The words created a fog around Liara and all she could do was gape as Shepard left the Mess.

Shepard returned to her the small chambers in the bowels of the ship. Her stomach was not completely satisfied, but it would suffice. A small sarcastic voice rang out in her head sounding suspiciously like Ash. *Well, at least you won't starve to death.* It would have been a sad, sad way to go with everything she had lived through.

She slumped into the bed and stared at the ceiling.

She had understood one third of what the alien had said. Many of the words hadn't even had a translation and she heard the same lyrical language that had greeted when she awoke. It was going to take a while for this program to be fully functional, that was painfully clear.

However, there had been something that had caught her attention. Garrus had mentioned it as well.

"EDI?" Shepard asked into the dark room.

"Yes Commander Shepard?" Came the synthetic voice.

"What is Ilos?"

"A planet. Commander Vakarian ascertained it when to pursue Saren. I has limited data on the mission. Much of the data was destruction when Commander Vakarian passed. The Council wanted to inter knowings of the Reapers with him. I can allow you accessory to the data if you desire."

"Yes. Thank you." Shepard yawned. "In the morning."

She was too tired to think of anything else right now. Perhaps this time she would sleep and wouldn't dream. It was only wishful thinking though. She hadn't sleep peacefully in years.

Liara had barely slept a wink. After the realization that Shepard could communicate with her, the doctor had tossed and turned trying to think of what to ask first. She was impressed with her restraint. She had almost run after the human, but thankfully didn't.

It was first shift now and Liara's curiosity had overwhelmed her politeness. She had run down to engineering but found Shepard's bunk empty, so she began searching. It hadn't been too hard, she just followed the whispered turians.

Exiting the elevator on the crew deck Liara found another couple of officers chatting in hushed tones in the corner.

"Is it true?" One whispered.

"It is!" The other said, his voice excited even for the early hour. "I saw it earlier. It was so...pale."

The other turian shuddered, "A real human. I can't even imagine. Why is it here?"

"Who knows. You know Vakarian, he's never does anything by the book."

The other turian pushed off the wall. "Just keep it away from me."

"Why?"

The first turian glared, his mandibles flaring. "You're new, so you wouldn't know. Just keep it away from me."

The second frowned and went to ask again, but Liara stepped in. "Lt. Arrian," The angry turian turned to her, "You are wanted down in engineering." That was a lie, but he didn't need to know that

Arrian saluted to her, most likely out of habit than out of respect, and left. She turned to the other one. "Private Crandor, I'm sure you don't realize but Lt. Arrian and a handful of others have a history with humanity." The turian frowned so Liara continued, "They were with Vakarian when he went through the Omega-4 relay."

The turian raised an eyebrow plate. Liara sighed. Some turians were so thick headed. Or perhaps it was just a male thing.

"Collectors are humans, or were before the Reapers got their hands on them." Crandor's eyes went wide and looked back towards the direction that Arrian left then swung towards the Observation Lounge. It was a look of understanding and fear. That wasn't her intention, but at least he would know better than to pester the engineer again.

And she had a good guess where Shepard had headed to next.

As Liara drew closer to the open door of the Observation Lounge, she could hear more voices. One was distinctly flanged and the other was delightfully smokey. She had finally found Shepard, and apparently the woman was having a hard time understanding the

holographic interface of the omnitool.

"I belief you created a translation protocol." Shepard growled, gesturing to the screen in front of her.

"I have Shepard." The AI responded. Liara almost believed she could hear a hint of irritation beyond the flanged, synthetic intonations. "It is just rudimentary."

"Imperfection my ***". Liara blinked. She hadn't understood the last word. Apparently there wasn't even a term for the program to reference. "I cannot comprehension majority of this file."

"Many of the words do not have a translation available in your language. You will have to work it out and update the program as you go."

Liara could hear Shepard mumble something under her breath, but couldn't make it out.

"I could help." She all but blurted. Shepard turned sharply and eyed the woman warily. Liara blushed under her stare. "I mean, that is, if you would like some help. I would understand if you didn't. This is all very-"

"Stop." Shepard said. The woman rubbed her temples warily. "You speak too swift. I cannot comprehension."

Liara blushed harder. "I'm sorry."

"Sit." The woman said, gesturing to the couch. Liara did so happily. She couldn't stop the broad smile from her face. She was *finally* going to talk with Shepard.

"Back on PX-139, you saw me as if you knowledge me. How?" Shepard asked. Liara blinked. She hadn't expected *that* to be the first question.

"I...?" Liara thought for a moment. "Oh yes. I do *know* you. Or of you, at least."

Shepard repeated her question. "How?"

"I am, or was, an archeologist. I studied in humans - their culture, history and art." Liara smiled shyly. "I specialized you actually. I have read every reference to you we have found."

"Me?"

"You are often mentioned. However, I think our translations were often wrong since no one actually believed you had ever really existed, let alone been a human. The most popular theory was that you were a weapon." She glanced at the woman's war torn body. Shepard was all scars and muscle. "That theory probably wasn't that far off."

Shepard said nothing, staring out into space. Silence fell heavy in the cabin for a moment. Liara shifted in her seat awkwardly.

Shepard sighed. "Ask." The word was a heavy as her voice.

Liara jumped. "Excuse me?"

"You have more inquiries. Ask."

A smile blossomed on Liara's face. She leaned forward. "What is your name?"

"Commander Jane Shepard."

"Jane," Liara breathed out. She knew the Shepard's first name.

Shepard frowned and corrected her. "Shepard."

"Yes, of course." Liara amended, trying to stay on the woman's good side. "My apologies."

Shepard felt like a coward.

She glanced out past the doors of the CIC, her eyes looking for the asari. It had been three days since she had officially met Dr. T'soni and three days since she started trying to avoid her.

What she had learnt about the doctor is that the woman was the only scientist on the military ship, and a so called "expert" on humanity. Shepard snorted softly as she stepped onto the bridge. It was clear that very little was actually known about humanity. It wasn't surprising, considering how humanity had all but vanished from the galaxy, but the gap in knowledge was starting to grate on her.

More specifically, T'soni was starting to grate on her.

The asari tried to seek her out constantly with a stream of questions at the ready. She didn't seem to understand the terms "succinct" and "brief." Every answer lead to three tangents and every dismissal apparently sounded like "Yes, please continue to pester me."

It was exhausting.

It had been hard to even get a question of her own in. If Shepard wanted information, it was much easier to get it from EDI. The AI was proving to be very patient and a fast learner.

"Good morrow Shepard." Came the flanged voice over the com.

Shepard smirked as she walked through the bridge. "Hey EDI."

"Dr. T'soni is currently in her chambers. The CIC is void."

Case in point. Shepard thought. The AI had realized that she was trying to avoid the asari early on and was helping her out - mostly. She was convinced that EDI sold her out from time to time. At those rare moments program almost sounded *guilty*.

Shepard slid into one of the open seats in the cockpit. She nodded to the turian pilot - *Neros*, she reminded herself - as she opened her omnitool. The turian female didn't want to talk - ever - and tolerated her presence, if just barely. The only reason that Shepard knew her name is because EDI had introduced her. EDI seemed quite fond of the pilot, and was only one of two with whom the turian seemed to be friendly. Her cold demeanor kept almost everyone else at a distance, including the asari.

The bridge was quickly becoming a miniature sanctuary for the human.

It wasn't only the quiet that Shepard craved, but strangely, the silent company of the pilot herself. *Neros* reminded her of Miranda Lawson, head of the Alliance Research and Development department. They had worked closely together designing the *Normandy*, and Shepard considered her a friend. She had been one of the only people to truly understand and accept Shepard.

Smart, confident and driven - they were the same woman, just a different body

The omnitool was proving to be very helpful as well. She had the small, glowing orange screen open most of the time. With the major gaps in her knowledge of the situation, access to the extranet had been crucial. One thing however was very clear: the Reapers had caught them off guard and the rest of the galaxy was now struggling to cope.

And from what she read they weren't coping that well. She was literally itching to get back out on the battlefield, but there was nothing to do but read and wait. Her only relief was the late night sparring sessions with Kyrik. He would come in and watch her for awhile and then take the mat. From time to time he got in a good hit, and she was surprised, especially when compared to their first encounter. He learnt fast, thinking on his feet and never using the same string of attacks.

He reminded her of James Vega, her LT on the *Normandy*. But he was better. *Much better.*

This cycle was so similar to hers; it was hard not to compare the two. Each similarity glared at her as she walked the halls: the same gun design, electronics, eezo drives and armor. It was easy to get lost in memories and pretend - pretend that Joker was at the helm, that Ash was sparring in the cargo hold with Vega, that Gabby and Ken were arguing in engineering about silly maintenance issues, that Dr. Chakwas was fussing over her every cut.

It made all the difference so much harder, harsher and more isolating. A constant reminder that this wasn't her time, her friends or her ship. She felt like a joint that had been forced out of place: throbbing and only getting worse over time.

The only remedy was work, but there was so little for her to do except study; immerse herself in the culture, history and ways of the new cycle and bury herself further into the differences.

And every time she felt like she was on solid ground, the universe flipped her the bird, throwing her violently back 50,000 years.

There was a chime and the com opened. Shepard glanced up at the pilot and then out the cockpit window. There, through the thick purple clouds of the nebula, the Citadel appeared. The silver plating shone with an inner light and each arm sparkled with the indication of life.

Shepard swallowed hard.

Fuck you too universe.

The door the the elevator opened and Nihlus and Garrus looked up from the data pad they were debating. Liara nodded to them as she entered.

She smiled. "Nihlus. Garrus. How are you?"

"Good enough." Nihlus shrugged, wincing as he did so. Garrus chuckled and Liara frowned skeptically.

"How are the late night sparring sessions going with Shepard?" She ventured, somewhat confused.

"Painfully, but I think we are making progress."

"Shepard certainly is." Garrus smirked. Nihlus glared.

"I believe I'm missing something." Liara said.

Nihlus opened his mouth to protest but Garrus beat him to it. "Shepard took Nihlus out last night in one blow."

Nihlus snatched the datapad from the other turian, growling. "It was well into the match."

Garrus smirked. "It was still one blow. A perfect KO."

"She didn't know what she was doing."

"You were still in the Medbay clutching to the bed like it was your mother's carapace." That one earned Garrus a not so friendly punch. He just laughed it off. Liara was even more confused.

"How did Shepard...Unless she..." Liara trailed off. She watched as Nihlus' neck flushed blue and he rubbed the back of his neck tenderly. Her mouth formed a perfect "Oh" as the realization hit her, causing Nihlus to blush harder.

"She didn't even mean to do it. I'm pretty sure she was apologizing the entire way to the medbay. Most of it got lost in translation."

Shepard had hit Nihlus in the posterior nerve bundle at the base of their fringe. It was the only way to take out a turian in one hit. The bundle was an evolutionary compensation for the thick, nerveless carapaces that covered most of their body. It was a pleasure - and pain - center for turians, but it was extremely hard to find unless you were looking for it and extremely close to your partner.

Liara's face fell a fraction. Both the turian's noticed it.

Garrus coughed, glancing at Nihlus. "So Liara, you must be excited about the progress with the translation program. Talking with a human has been a dream of yours, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, it is, though Shepard isn't what I expected." She sighed. "I don't think she likes me very much and I get the impression that she is avoiding me."

"What?" Nihlus asked.

"I think EDI is helping her."

Garrus crossed his arms. "EDI?" He asked to the ceiling.

"Yes commander?" Came the reply.

"Are you helping Shepard avoid Liara?"

There was a long pause. "I am merely answering her enquiries as to Dr. T'soni's location when asked. Is that...wrong?"

Garrus sighed. "No EDI." He couldn't help but think that the AI was lying to him. He didn't know if he was amused or annoyed. She was becoming more and more independent by the day. She even tried to joke with him yesterday.

He turned back to Liara and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm sure she'll come around once you talk to her for a while." He smirked. "And I have the perfect way for you two to spend some *quality* time together."

Liara's soft footsteps echoed in the hallway leading up to the small cockpit. Shepard had come to recognize the asari's footsteps as the turian's were fairly heavy footed compared to the smaller woman.

She sighed.

"You should recognition this. We shall be boarding the Citadel sooner. One of the crowned trophies of your race." Liara said as she approached, her hand on the back of Shepard's chair.

"Making final approach." Torcia announced.

Shepard's stomach dropped.

Liara leaned forward, her face close to Shepard's and her eyes alight with curiosity, "So, does it appear the similar?"

The asari was practically beaming, still so innocent in her perception. Shepard had learnt that Liara, at 106, was still young for her race and she could tell. The hardest part of the Reaper War was the constant knowledge that there was no safe harbor, that there was nothing outside of their reach and that inevitably, you would either die or be victorious. There was no surrender, no quarter, no prisoners of war.

It something that Liara hadn't quite grasped.

It was a lesson she had learnt first hand.

"Yes." Was all Shepard said.

Liara frowned, clearly wanting more. "Perhaps we can discussion the historical references when we disembark." Her voice was so hopeful.

Shepard blinked. "Disembark?"

Liara smiled again. "Yes, we are to go acquiring. You need armaments."

"We should start below at the *****" Liara said, walking through the docking bay. She kept talking, but Shepard wasn't listening. Her eyes were busy traveling over the silver plating that covered the walls. It was the same. Exactly the same.

Her hands itched to reach out and touch the walls - just like when she was a child.

"Jane! stop running!" Her mother said, laughing softly as the girl ran to the edge. The eight year old's eyes were fixed on the pools of water in front of her. She had never seen any space so large before, let alone that much water!

"Mom, we could fit the whole ship in here!" She said. Her hands splayed out wide as she twirled in circles. She could spend hours in here and not even get to the other side of station.

"Shepard?" Liara asked, bringing the human out of her memories. "Are you well?"

"Fine." Shepard grumbled, sticking her hands into the waistband of the overly large pants. "You were saying something about guns?"

Fedorian sat there quietly listening to Garrus Vakarian talking with the Councilor. The plan was simple - meet and convince the salarian delatress to work with the krogans, no matter the cost.

Sparatus didn't have faith that it could be done but Vakarian did. It was a blind faith too meaning he was hiding something. He knew something that he wasn't telling the councilor and it had to do with the krogan they were to meet.

He had done his homework on Wrex Urdnot - a progressive krogan if he had ever seen one. Smart, ruthless and dedicated to finding a cure for the genophage if the mission reports from Virimire could be trusted. This was the prime moment to achieve that goal - his enemies begging at his feet for aid. Fedorian knew exactly why Wrex had agreed to this meeting - and he was going to give it to him.

The krogan had a quick reproduction rate and long life spans, two things that would be crucial in the long run if they wanted to win this war and Fedorian wanted to win. On Menae he had seen Palaven burn, the greatest civilization in the galaxy, crumbling under his watch. He wouldn't - couldn't - let that happen, no matter what the cost was.

Could they trust the krogans? No, but they couldn't do this without them. He needed allies. Palaven needed relief.

The delatress wouldn't like this at all and she wouldn't give in without a fight. She was renowned for her intelligence and he knew that she would have a backup plan, but so did he. Neither species was willing to let the krogan run free after last time. They had proven that before and after this war was won he would talk with the delatress.

If she would not work with him, he had other solutions, older solutions.

Fedorian stared at the Spectre over the top of his clasped hands. Vakarian was a logical turian but was easily swayed by his feelings for his friends. He would never agree to it. A naive idealist to the end. *No, he wouldn't understand.* Turian place in the galaxy had to be preserved, uplifted even.

The delicate balance between the three council races was so precarious that it could fall during this war and if it did then the turians would come out on top. The salarians knew it and that was why the delatress agreed to meet with them. With the batarians all but destroyed, the quarians out past the Veil, the asari hiding on Thessia, who was left but the turians to rise up and deliver order to the masses?

Turians were far from perfect, filled with their own demons and shortcomings, but because they operate as a whole - disciplined, honor bound, dutiful - they would lead by example. Saren has it wrong, this was how you ensure your race's well deserved supremacy: not with a gun or a bomb, but with a pen and a vision. That way they never see it coming.

It was the way of war - there can only be one victor and turians are bred for victory.

"Vakarian," the Primarch cut in, stopping their discussion on the logistics of the Primarch's escort, "Do you think all this is necessary?" Sparatus wanted him to carry a fully dedicated squad of seven with him at all times: armed to the teeth and protective to a fault. It wasn't a sign of trust, it was a sign of fear and Fedorian would never fear a krogan.

Garrus shook his head, "No sir, my team is the best. There isn't a being alive that could touch you while you're on the *Intrepid*."

"You're going to be dealing with *krogans*. They're just a bunch of brainless mercenaries for hire!" Sparatus snapped, his mandibles flaring in indignation.

"Wrex isn't like that! He knows what's at stake here. You want his trust then trust me and my team. Between myself, Nihlus and Shepard there-

"Who?" Fedorian cut in, his curiosity piqued. That name hadn't been in any of his files and he hated being uninformed. It lead to mistakes and failure.

Garrus winced and glanced over at the councilor, "That, uhh, was the other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

"Vakarian," Sparatus hissed, "Spirits help me if you want the Primarch to get onto a ship with no escort in the presence of another one of your assassin friends."

"No," He held his hands up in defence, "She's not an assassin. That helpful information cash we found on Oma Ker, it was, umm, more tangible than we thought it was. It wasn't just information, it was a human."

Liara lounged against the railing in the Presidium's markets. They had come here a few hours ago to fit Shepard for some armor, but Liara had long ago given up trying to keep up with the human. The questions that she asked were so detailed that most of the merchants had even given up trying to sell her anything, they just got out of her way as Shepard inspected everything thing with agonizing detail.

Most people just saw an upgrade and bought it, not thinking about how it fit into the standard armor, but she wanted to know everything about the piece; from the material's weight to the force resistance. Shepard didn't even give the piece a second glance if the unit was lacking in fundamental protection, even if it had the best shield unit available. It was the act of a survivalist, looking for the backup plan for when the generators died. Was the war really that bad in her time?

It had taken almost three hours for them to create an armor that was up to her standards and Shepard had pieces from almost every manufacturer; some she was already purchased upgrades to. And, out of all of this, the most surprising thing was how little she had spent on the highly customized set.

Liara smiled softly as Shepard argued with another merchant. She was every sales associate's nightmare, refusing to pay full price for anything and somehow, to everyone's astonishment, getting them to lower the price. Her technique varied from storefront to storefront, but she always got her way in the end.

I almost feel sorry for the Reapers.

Slamming the gun back on the table, Shepard began to take apart the pistol, her deft fingers taking apart the foreign object with an efficiency and effortlessness that would have made Garrus jealous. It was impressive, even with all the technological differences between their two cultures she had picked up the main points very quickly. She growled at

the salarian shopkeep and waved the barrel in his face, spouting some poorly translated phrase about the steel barrel.

Three other heavy pistols were on the table along with a few upgrades and the two of them started piecing together something that made Shepard smirk and hold up to the light, admiring it softly. Liara was sure it was piece of art, just like the rest of the weapons she had put together in the last hour and just like the rest, Liara was sure Shepard would get it for well under the listed price.

If they got out of this alive, Shepard should really go into weapon development. Whatever group got her would really have an edge in the market.

If we ever get out of the market.

After the weapons there was only one place left to go.

I bet Nihlus will be happy to get his shirt back.

Shepard was tired of this. They had been running around the Citadel for hours now. Granted, it had been nice to get off the ship and get her hands on some proper armor again, but there were some severe setbacks in technological advancements and she had to create a hodgepodge of parts to make anything that look remotely decent.

All the while, people were *staring* at her.

She had gotten used to it before: the looks, the sideways glances, the not so subtle ogling, but it had been different. People had stared at her out of awe, admiration and gratitude. These beings only saw her as *alien*. Their eyes radiated curiosity, but more than that there was fear and disgust.

Liara dragged her into a store, muttering something about a new wardrobe and truthfully Shepard didn't really care, what she had was sufficient until she received her new set of armor. That was the original purpose of this trip off ship, then the stares had started and Liara started *wandering*.

Shepard shifted from one foot to another in annoyance as one of the blue aliens - *asari* - tried to hide her open gawking behind a shirt. A hooded shirt. Shepard blinked and walked over towards the rack. The asari gasped and ran off, dropping the shirt.

Bending down to pick it up, Shepard was assaulted with a familiar smell. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she was transported to a different time - a safer time. Reaching out she grasps the jacket in front of her it was *leather*, soft and supple.

How-? No, she didn't really want to know how because then she would know how it was different. A small childlike voice rang out in her head, asking, no, begging her to take it. It wasn't *his*, but she could pretend.

Her hand reached up and clenched her dog tags.

She grabbed the jacket and the hoodie and a few other articles from the well fitting articles from rack and changed. She ripped the tags off the clothing and handed them to the shocked sales associate on the way out. Liara could handle the money. She just needed to get out of here.

She just needed to *pretend*.

Liara called out to, but Shepard just threw up the dark hood and disappeared into the crowd.

Shepard had been wandering without purpose as she lost herself in the memories. She had only been on the Citadel once before. Back then she had been wide-eyed and innocent. The large hall ways and tall buildings were more impressive than anything she had ever seen and her young brain had barely been able to comprehend it at the time.

It had been a fond memory, even though she did end up grounded. Her mother had been furious when Shepard had wandered off. She smiled softly at the memory. If she really wanted to, she could probably trace her footsteps from that day. That was how similar the space station still was.

After all this time - the destruction, the rebuilding, the new races - it was still the same.

The Cycle cannot be broken, Harbinger's voice echoed in her head.

Pulling the hood down farther over her head, Shepard plowed forward, ignoring the annoyed aliens she passed. In that one thought all reminiscent thoughts flew from her mind. All she could see now was the architecture of the Reapers. They had controlled everything from the beginning, even the war was by their design.

Even she was their design.

Liara sighed in frustration. She had lost Shepard hours ago. As soon as she could, the woman had just vanished. A part of her knew she shouldn't be annoyed with Shepard. The woman had clearly been uncomfortable with all the attention.

Not that Liara had made it any better.

She wanted to kick herself. She had been pushing Shepard for answers, questioning her at every opportunity, but she was a scientist. It was in her nature. Shepard had been polite thus far, but Liara had seen something in her snap right before she vanished. Liara had to make it right.

That is, if she could find her.

After walking into a few shops and asking around, Liara realized the futility of her actions. Most people didn't even know what a human looked like and Shepard clearly didn't want to be found. It didn't stop the asari from looking though.

Liara had been searching through every walkway, alley and in every store on the Presidium, hoping that the human hadn't headed towards the Wards. If she had, then all Liara could do was hope she could make it back to the Docking Bay.

Liara hadn't been looking where she was going when she ran into the turian. He hissed something insulting at her and unconsciously her biotics crackled. Truthfully, she really didn't even know what he had said, but she did recognize the look on his face: fear.

Disgusted with herself, the asari fled the scene. When had she become like this? When had she come to recognize and accept the look of fear on people's faces around her?

She paused and looked up. She had stopped in front of the small mass effect relay. A bitter smile ghosted over her blue lips. *Saren*. That was when she had changed. Caught up in the chase to stop her mother, she had never stopped running.

Did she regret it?

Just past the relay Liara saw the huddled form of the human woman, her face shadowed by the hood of her jacket. She was sitting quietly on a bench, just staring at the relay. A wave of relief flooded the asari.

All the running had lead her to Shepard: the woman that defined her life for more than 40 years. So no, she didn't regret it, she couldn't. Deep down she was still the same asari at heart, looking for the answers to the universe's toughest questions.

And it still appeared that Shepard had all the answers.

Liara sat down next to the human and waited for her to talk, wondering why this relay had stopped the woman.

"The Reapers taken the Citadel." Shepard said after moment. "We thought it locked up, but they taken it. No person known how, but now I do." She leaned forward on the bench and Liara could see her hands clenching. "They had a relay, a working relay and they usaged it. 14 million humans died that day. We could only observation. ***** Reapers."

Liara didn't know what to say. She had thought that the humans on Ilos had made the Conduit, but Vigil hadn't ever directly said they had, only that they had *used* it. Had that small outpost been something else before the humans had gotten to it? It had explained why that outpost had been so singular, so different from any of the other architecture they had found at other digs.

"You didn't know about Ilos?" Liara whispered. Shepard's head shot up and the human stared at her hard.

"Ilos." Shepard repeated. "Vakarian spoke that. Tell me of that."

Shepard listened as Liara spoke about the mission. About how they found the Conduit and it lead them to Citadel and to Saren. Most importantly she told her about Vigil and the

scientists.

From what Shepard could gather, Ilos was a prothean outpost, hijacked by human scientists and filled with more of the stasis pods. Perhaps it had been the original source of the stasis technology they had used with her. She had heard about underground bunkers with thousands of prothean corpses, killed because they had lost power.

That is why they sent me. Just me. She realized. One person was a lot easier than the keep alive than a few hundred. That was probably why that outpost on Ilos had been lost. There were too many scientists for their power source.

"Why were they there?" Shepard asked.

Liara smiled. "I believe they were awaiting you."

They were waiting for me to save them. Shepard thought. The very last humans had been here, probably dying a horrible death because she hadn't gotten there fast enough. *More people I couldn't save.*

You can't save everyone. Her father's voice echoed in her head. She buried her face into the leather of the jacket and pretended it was more worn, three sizes too large for her and still faintly smelt of his cologne.

I know. Doesn't make it any easier though.

6. Politics

AN: Miss me? I know I've missed you guys, so I'm just going to leave this here.

Disclaimer: I own nothing, and Bioware owns everything. Including all my feels.

****The Shepard - Politics****

"Shepard? Heh. I liked her." Urdnot Wrex, interview for GNN - 2188

Shepard could feel the change in the ship. The air of anticipation and nervousness was palpable - the whole crew was radiating it. Especially the pilot. She had snapped at everyone and even Felix was giving her a wide berth.

They were picking up a guest - the Primarch - and then heading off to a summit. Kyrik had spoken about it with detachment, like he knew the whole thing was doomed to failure. From all that she read it very well could be, but Vakarian was putting his faith into it - and that meant something.

Among her reading she had pulled the turian commander's files. They were impressive: taking out an elite terrorist group, saving the Citadel from the Reaper's front line, taking out the Collector base. He had good instincts so she would follow his lead in this; besides, politics were never her forte.

It feel strange giving the reigns to someone else. For so long she had been given freedom to do what she wanted, a right she had earned after many hard won battles. They had given her the best frigate in the fleet with the condition that she use it to pierce a hole in the defense of the Reapers, and that's what she had done. This ship had similar capabilities. It wasn't the *Normandy*, but it was fast and had a significant amount of firepower and shielding.

The *Intrepid*, unlike the *Normandy*, was weapon that was being used for political plays. *Idiots*, she thought. There was more at stake here than who could get the most out this war. These bureaucrats failed to understand how different this situation was: this wasn't a war, it was surviving, holding on by the skin of your teeth and hoping that you'll live to see tomorrow. The bickering was hampering more than helping, and the soldiers fighting on the front lines were the only ones who understood the gravity of the situation.

Humanity hadn't been without its issues, groups within the crippled civilian government and even with the Alliance military thought there were other ways to deal with the Reapers. They used secret agents to drive wedges between friends and families, to sabotage projects and destroy communications.

Cerberus had been led by the Illusive Man, an indoctrinated individual that believed the Reapers could be controlled. Not many people knew about the connection between him and the Fall of Eden Prime, and most never would. Humanity needed to stay together, to trust each other, and public knowledge of indoctrination would cause widespread panic.

No, humanity had been far from perfect, but they had held their own for over a century and this cycle was in disarray after only a few months.

This summit had to work. Humanity had put it's dying hope into the Crucible and look where it had gotten them. *Speaking of which...* Shepard thought turning on her terminal and opening up the files from PX-139. She had promised Garrus she would see look to see if Anderson had left her any information on the Catalyst before the Primarch came aboard. He wanted to present the man with *something* if this all went to shit.

EDI announced the arrival of the Primarch, and the whole room came to attention. Shepard could hear the nervous trills of the turians and see the fluttering of their more mobile facial features. From what she had learnt, the Primarch was the head of turian government.

She stood respectfully by the pilot, as he entered the bridge, followed closely by a small diplomatic party and Vakarian. She expected the Primarch to pass them by with all pomp, but he stopped dead at the sight of her, his face impassive, but she didn't miss the flick of him mandibles and the way his eyes tightened as they glanced over her.

"You have being Shepard." His voice as emotionless as he tried to to appear.

To be polite and respectful she should salute, but his poorly hidden disgust kept her from doing just that.

"I am." Shepard kept her voice just as detached, but where he failed, she succeeded; completely control of her body and her face.

Primarch Fedorian's mandibles flared gently at the blatant disrespect, and she smirked softly. A part of her dared him to make her salute - to demand respect - but he didn't, dismissing her as his gaze darted over to the turian next to her.

His eyes traced her every move as Torcia tensed. Their markings were different, but so much else was the same: color of the plates and eyes, the shape of the mandibles and even the very air by which they carried themselves.

Well, Shepard thought, that explains her mood.

Having family with this distinction always caused pressure: pressure to be great, to be perfect and to never, ever fail. It was the most challenging type of pressure - Shepard knew that from experience.

Fedorian growled something low and deep causing Garrus to look at him and Toci to visibly flinch. It was beyond Shepard, but she could still hear the authoritative sting in his words, "We'll talk later."

It was the first time Shepard had seen the proud pilot do anything but stand tall.

Nihlus sighed, rolling his neck as the elevator slowly descended. The last few hours had been hellish. Dealing with diplomats, diplomat's assistants and the assistants of the assistants, was far beyond his job description. It didn't help that Garrus had given most of the grunt work to him, not that he envied the commander's job of dealing with the Primarch himself.

Fedorian wasn't particularly loved, but he was respected. He was a turian who got results through devious means and backroom deals. Most of it was speculation, but rumors spread quickly in the higher parts of society and that of course trickled down to the lowest rungs. Information was important and Nihlus always had his ear to the ground. Some of the things he's heard in his years in the Terminus System haven't bolstered the reputation of the Primarch, but it was hard to argue with the outcomes of his dealings.

The Primarch's very presence alone had the whole ship buzzing, some trying to catch a glimpse of the turian, some trying to get out of his way. Nihlus had been standing on the bridge with Felix when the Primarch boarded and he had seen the way the other turian's jaw all but dropped at the sight of the man. It was clear that Felix hadn't known about Torcia's relation to the Primarch, probably no one outside of himself and Garrus had known, but the family resemblance had been impossible to miss.

Nihlus shook his head. Poor Felix. He was a good kid, but had horrible choices in women.

The elevator stopped and Nihlus exited, ready for a chance to unwind but paused at the empty gym. For the last three nights he had come in to find the human using his mat. No one else on the ship liked being in here this late into the night cycle and before Shepard's

appearance, he preferred it that way. He had, however, taken to watching the woman using the mats and punching bags. He was learning a lot, not that he would admit it to anyone, and the late night spars were helping him sleep.

The quiet was a change.

It seemed like forever since he had been alone with his thoughts. Nihlus deposited his shirt at the edge of the mat, stretching his legs then back and taking up position at the punching bag. His movements were fluid, his punches strong, but his mind was elsewhere - tied up in the potential impact of the summit, the Dalatrass - who they were meeting the day after tomorrow - how he was going to deal with more politicians.

He had come here to unwind, not keep *worrying* about things. Before he could even think about it, Nihlus went right back into the elevator and headed to the engineering deck, leaving his shirt behind.

The hum of the engines reverberated through the walls of the small room that Shepard called home. It wasn't loud, the sound was more of a vibration that she could feel through the soles of her feet as she walked around the room. It was something she had noticed as she paced the room at times after her nightmares. EDI had been kind enough to stop suggesting ways to get her to sleep and left her to her thoughts.

Idle thoughts lead to idle hands. It was something her mother used to say before she shoved some book, gun, or tool into her hand. It was why she asked for the weapon's bench that they had installed in her small quarter.

Shepard sat cross legged at the bench, taking apart and reassembling her newest armaments. Especially with all the specific upgrades she had asked for, it was wise to know her guns inside and out, from balance to kickback.

She was messing with the sights on the assault rifle when her door hissed open. Setting the gun down lightly on the table, Shepard looked at her visitor with open curiosity - the only person who came looking for her was Dr. T'soni, and EDI knew to warn her if the good doctor was on her way.

Nihlus leaned against the door frame, glancing around the room for a moment before landing on her, "You were absent from the gym."

Shepard frowned slightly, "I thought you might be busy with the Primarch. I didn't think I would be missed."

Nihlus straightened at the statement, "I would not utilize the idiom 'craved'."

Shepard blinked and sighed. *I think I need to spend some more time talking with EDI.*

"Yeah, probably wouldn't use that word either." She stood up and straightened the oversized shirt on her shoulders. She had a bag of appropriately sized clothes in the corner, but she still liked this one. It was warm and hung off her shoulders just so, like the shirt she had stolen from Kaidan and had never returned.

She noticed him eying the clothing, "Just because you seemed to have lost your shirt doesn't mean you get this one back."

Nihlus blinked and then laughed. It was the first time she had heard it - a deep chuckle, rumbling up from his chest, "You do have realized that is my vestige."

"I know." She said walking past him, not hiding the smirk on her face. It was a challenge and a thank you. Guns could only occupy her so much. The only time her mind was truly clear was in the middle of a fight.

Nihlus fell in step quickly, "Will you ever return it to myself?"

"Sure." She said, smirk turning arrogant and just slightly playful, "If you can take it back."

Nihlus' mandibles dipped and opened wide. It was the same look that Felix got whenever he came up to the cockpit to talk with Torcia. *A turian smile*

"Challenge accepted."

CE 2186 - Location Unknown

In the darkness, there were still shadows just at the edge of his vision. Thick and black like oil, they congregated just out of sight but he knew they were there. They were always there.

Opening his eyes, Saren stared past the holographs on his screen.

Control. Just a bit more and he would have control of this war - of this universe. While the rest of the galaxy was consumed with survival he knew better, he had seen beyond the veil of the Reapers. Indoctrination had washed over him like acid, burning away all thought and reason. The Reapers commanded and he obeyed. Their will had been his will, their dreams were his dreams and he saw more than they wished.

In the haze of the pain he had seen the Crucible, all but complete and as hard as steel.

The comm link pinged, alerting him to an incoming call.

"Report."

"Sir," It was Kuril, "I found her."

"Where is she?"

"On the *Intrepid*."

Saren's eyes narrowed. "Vakarian." It came out more of a hiss than a word. Even when working together, their relationship had been hostile at best. True, the turian had freed him from the Reaper's control, but destruction of the Collector's base had put his plans

back years.

"Your orders?" Kuril's voice cracked over the comm.

"Leave her," *For now*. "Vakarian will come to us."

"But-"

Saren cut him off, "You have other issues to deal with."

A pause, "Of course sir."

Saren closed the comm link and stared at the plans for the Crucible in front of him. It was only a fragment of the whole, but it didn't matter. The Council and the Hierarchy would build it for him and when they were finished, he would take it from them.

And he would take the alien from Vakarian.

In the end he would have control - of the Council, of the Hierarchy, and of the Reapers.

This time they will be the ones kneeling.

CE 2186 - The *Intrepid*

Dalatrass Linron stared hard at the Primarch as he talked, a part of her hoping, no matter how improbable, that the man would spontaneously combust. The turian was manipulative, cunning, and desperate - a dangerous combination. She must be desperate too, to agree to meet with a krogan ambassador.

It was a meeting that she knew would result in nothing, but it was the only option. There was only one thing she could think of that the krogans wanted and she would never give it to them. Besides, it would take too long.

No, she wasn't here to talk to the krogans, she was here because of the Primarch. The turians had come through for the Council before, after grave mistakes by her ancestors and, as much as it made her stomach turn, she would at least hear their plea.

Unlike the Council, she wasn't blind - just cautious. The reports from the STG were fairly clear. Kirrahe had sent some incriminating evidence from Virmire a while back. There have been more and more files of Reaper threats that had landed on her desk. Mordin Solus gave her an entire speech about the Collectors and she was inclined to listen to him. He was one of the greatest salarian minds alive today, even if he was on the crazy side.

She had known what was coming, even if everyone else didn't and that was the only reason she is here. The krogans could be helpful, if they were controlled, but history had shown that they could not be trusted. If this Krogan was reasonable than perhaps they could come to an agreement on the matter. Fedorian was right, the galaxy had to work together if they wanted to survive.

So she would wait and listen as the Primarch prattled on. He wouldn't really say anything of import until the krogans arrived anyway.

Wrex boarded the ship with flourish and command. He had been built for leadership and finally had it. The information on his omnitool burned a hole through his arm and it brought a smirk to his face. Now was the time for the krogans to redeem themselves. He should have known it would be at the hands of Garrus, especially after Virmire.

That turian deserved his respect. He had earned it and proven himself a friend and brother to Wrex time and time again. If other turian's had half the quad that Garrus did then perhaps this would have been settled long ago.

Wrex wasn't stupid. He knew that much of the blame was placed squarely on the shoulders of idiots like his brood brother Wreav. That krogan would have the his people on a warpath before the Reaper's corpses were cold. It's a good thing that Wrex didn't give a damn about him - if he ever made a move against Wrex then he wouldn't be around for anyone to care about.

The small unit that followed Wrex through the docking bay stayed two paces behind him, it was sign of respect and he wanted the other races to know that he had the power to demand it out of others of his kind. The two behind him weren't just grunts, they were the heads of other clans; not the two strongest, but two that pledged their loyalty to clan Urdnot.

There was an equally small welcoming party of turians. Three to be exact, two of which were well armed. Wrex didn't recognize any of them. One stepped forward.

"Urdnot Wrex?" He asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Wrex said, crossing his arms and staring down the officer. He was small, even for a turian, standing a good foot and a half below the krogan, including their humps; small enough that he had to look up slightly at Wrex. Wrex smirked cruelly down at him, seeing the hesitation in his step.

The turian however didn't flinch and spoke with bravado, and for that Wrex had to appreciate him a bit. Being scared was one thing, but refusing to back down was another, "I am Lieutenant Victus. Commander Vakarian and Primarch Fidorian are talking with Dalatrass Linron in the conference room," He gestured behind him towards the elevator, "I will escort you, but your..." And he stumbled over the term, "Krantt will have to stay here."

Wrex snorted, "They are not my krantt. You have to be of a higher quality for that honor," He heard the soft growls behind him, but the krogan paid them no mind. If they wanted to start something then so be it. Urdnot was the strongest clan on Tuchanka and if they wanted to challenge the claim, they were welcomed to try. "I don't care what you do with them, just make sure they don't tear apart your guards. Neither of them are particularly *happy* to be on a turian ship."

Victus straightened immediately and glared at the sneering krogan. This one had a quad - small, but still a quad. He should have known that Vakarian would only surround himself with the best, "I'll see to it personally."

"Heh. See that you do kid." Wrex said.

"Follow me."

Victus turned on his heel sharply, a perfect 180, reminiscent of strict turian discipline. He was a military brat if Wrex had ever seen one. If this had been the old *Intrepid*, Wrex would have told the kid to pound a varren, but the new ship wasn't the same. The layout was similar, but different enough that he needed some direction, so he followed.

As they walked towards the elevator Wrex paused, feeling someone's eyes on him. On the overlook one floor above them he spotted someone - not asari, but not anything else he had ever seen. She looked at him, *down* at him, and there was something about her that made him look again.

"Huh." He said. Victus stopped and looked up as well.

"That's Shepard." The turian said, nodding to the figure, "A human."

That caught Wrex off guard. "I thought they were all dead." He said.

"We thought the Rachni were all dead too but you and the Commander found one on Noveria. We discovered her in a stasis pod on Oma Ker."

Wrex shook his head and started walking again. "We're fighting a war against an ancient enemy with ancient allies now? Makes me feel young." He looked back at Victus who was still staring up at the human with an odd expression on his face. *Turians*, Wrex thought. "Come on kid. Don't want to keep the Dalatrass and Primarch waiting. They've got less patience than a varren in heat."

The turian's mouth fell open and Wrex smirked, "That's probably the nicest thing I'll say about those two."

The blood drained a bit more from the skin beneath his plates, making his face as pale as his markings. It made Wrex laugh darkly.

At least I'll have some fun here.

Garrus found it hard to listen to the updates on Palaven. The Primarch went through them with a robotic efficiency, outlining the destruction of Cipritine, the devastation of the space fleet and the complete annihilation of the Menae outpost.

Three million turians were lost on the first day. Five million the second.

The figure was hard to swallow.

While the death toll was staggering, the supplies that were to be debated and hopefully agreed upon were just as unbelievable. With every loss that the Primarch outlined, the repairs that he recommended were mind blowing. Garrus knew that the Primarch was starting out high so that he could give something away during the talks, but he was surprised that the Dalatrass hadn't outright laughed at the other turian yet.

And through all of that, the Primarch hadn't once mentioned reinforcements. That meant he was betting on krogan support.

And if Garrus had noticed that, the Dalatrass had as well.

He couldn't wait for Wrex to show up.

"The krogan have no right to make demands!"

Lieutenant Victus stood guard silently by the door listening to them debate the terms of the treaty. The krogan hadn't waited long, opening with the demand they all knew was coming: curing the genophage, and it was clear that he wasn't going to back down.

Their shouting escalated and Wrex was true to his word - some of his more choice phrases made the turian blush. He was glad that he was facing away from the diplomats, it wouldn't have been good if they saw him with his mouth hanging open as it was.

How his commander kept things calm was beyond him, but that has always been one of his specialities. Especially when it came to the impossible. A few years ago the Dalatrass wouldn't have even met with the krogans, but the Reapers changed everything: old alliances, new wars, and death counts that couldn't really be counted.

They had even changed him.

He had been on Fehl Prime when the Collectors came for the colony. He saw what the slaves of the Reapers could do and when Commander Vakarian told him what the Reapers were doing with the captured colonists, Tarquin felt like he would be sick.

It was made all the worse because he had chosen to sacrifice the colony in hopes that the intel would save more lives. He thought it had been a calculated loss, but it hadn't. Vakarian destroyed the Collector base before the Hierarchy could mobilize and all those turians that he had abandoned had been liquified for nothing.

"Victus!"

The turian started from his thoughts, "Yes sir?"

"See to it that the krogans have accommodations. We're going to Sur'kesh." Vakarian strode past him on his way to the War Room with Wrex and the Primarch on his heels.

Wrex sent him another smile as he walked by and the turian's stomach dropped. Sur'kesh was five days from here. Five *days*. Keeping a group of krogans under control for a few hours was much easier than keeping them contained for a few days. And he had said he

would "see to it personally".

"Me and my big mouth," Tarquin grumbled as he made his way back to the Cargo Bay.

Five days was a long time. Longer when there were two groups of militaristic forces with a history of brutal warfare. Especially when one group was instinctually confrontational and territorial.

Battle scars and hormones never mixed well together.

It would have been a miracle if nothing happen on the journey. To make it three days before a confrontation was impressive. Lieutenant Victus should have been applauded for his efforts, even if in the end they were futile.

As with any powder keg, it only took a spark- a wrong word, a misinterpreted look – and everything went to shit.

"Out of my way turian." Suvnek Grall ground out. He was a krogan on a warpath, heading straight from the cargo bay to the mess hall. The three krogans, minus Wrex, spent their time in the lower decks, as far away from the turians as possible and surfacing only to scavenge food from the levo rations they picked up from a re-fueling station on their way to Sur'kesh.

Grall was smaller than Wrex by a good six inches and 50 pounds with a small hump and barely fused cranial plates. Younger in age and experience, he had still raised to the rank of clan leader after his father had died. His battle prowess could not be denied and he wore his scars proudly, as all krogan did.

A tussle had broken out in the cargo bay earlier that day and it had his blood singing. It only enhanced the edge as the turians eyed him wearily and with a bit of disgust.

"I have a name." The turian in question replied. Torcia stared at the krogan, her eyes sharply outlined by black of her markings making them that much more pointed as they glared him down.

She had just been waiting for the elevator with a group of technicians trying to return to the CIC. The doors had opened and the krogan had all but run them down. The others stepped to the side with annoyed clicks and whistles, but pride wouldn't let her step down – especially with her uncle on the ship.

"Your name is not worth knowing."

"You know nothing about me." She hissed, stepping into his space. She was angry – with her uncle, herself, the damn krogans who thought they owned the ship. She didn't care about Lt. Victus' orders. He had insulted her and she wouldn't let it pass.

"You are turian. That is all I need to know." He snarled.

"I have seen more battles in the last four years than you have in the last four hundred. If anyone doesn't need a name, it's you."

The krogan growled and stepped forward into her space. She could hear the woven armor of his gauntlets creak as hands clenched into fists at his side.

"You know nothing."

"You are a krogan. That's all I need to know." She echoed his words, knowing the insult she had just thrown at him. Her sharp tongue often got her in trouble just as often as her hubris did.

Torcia didn't have time to react as the meaty fist came up and connected with her face. She wasn't a fighter. Her meager combat training had totaled in the basic use of a pistol and activation of her omni-tool shields. It was enough to hopefully keep her alive until help arrived. Neither would aid her in close quarters with a fully armored krogan.

She stumbled backwards and Grall surged forward yelling as he raised his fist for the next punch. It didn't connect with her. The fist was diverted and he was spun around. He blinked and stared back at the doors of the elevator.

"Take the elevator back beneath to the hold and freeze your cranium."

The words were broken, but the command was evident, he turned his head to the side looking back over his shoulder. There was the human – the one he had seen lurking around the windows overlooking the cargo hold. Behind her was the turian, clutching her eye as blue blood oozed from a break in the plating. Another – male – was tending to her.

Grall shifted his gaze to the human, "You are not my clan leader, my battlemaster or my milk mother. Do not order me."

"Then I shall proceed to askance. Kindly depart." She said, crossing her arms looking all too calm and collected for him, "Depart with your dignity full. Your accolade is defended and your muscle proven."

Grall growled and stepped towards her, but the click of a safety caught his attention. Standing by the elevator door and holding it open was the Nihlus – the Spectre. Grall had heard of him, if being a Spectre wasn't bad enough. His hand played over the pistol strapped to his leg, and Grall knew he would use it.

"I'd listen to her. She only asks nicely once."

He wasn't stupid. He was outnumbered, and outgunned. Grall obliged, determined to carry his gun with him from now on, no matter what Wrex had ordered.

"Stay out of my way next time turian," the krogan spat. "I only ask nicely once too."

Shepard watched as the lumbering krogan stomped back into the elevator and left. The tension in the room had been palpable when she had emerged from T'soni's office.

Turians pressed against the wall and then Lt. Neros had gone flying. Her first instinct had been to stop it and he thought that went along with it, as wrong as she knew it was, had been *'not on my ship.'*

This wasn't her ship. This wasn't her crew. This wasn't her command.

She glanced over at Nihlus, "Thank you."

He nodded, "Any interval."

He glanced over her shoulder at the pilot, who with the help of Specialist Kato has finally standing up.

"You are luckily." He said, "If that had been a biotic, he would have fractured your nape."

She heard the annoyed trill and Nihlus sighed, "I'm going to go locate Garrus. He shall desire to know that there perchance will be a quarrel in the Cargo Bay."

Shepard nodded and then he too left. The hustle and bustle of the mess hall had begun again - louder than usual with harsh whispers and some cheers. Torcia sat in a chair, brushing off the help of Kato who ran off to get medical supplies from the Medbay. A few turians patted her on the shoulder as they walked by and some gave her a wide berth.

"You could have gotten killed." Shepard said, sitting across from the pilot. Torcia sat up straight, trying to put on her usual cold composure, but wincing as her faceplates shifted and the blood started oozing again.

"I had the situation beneath my mastery."

Shepard crossed her arms as she stared the turian down, "Of course you did. You always have everything under control, don't you."

Torcia was silent. Shepard sighed, "Asking for help isn't a weakness you know."

The pilot's mandibles flattened against her face as she turned and stared off into space, "Then you do not comprehend my familial unit." There was a distant sorrow in her tone, a regret that Shepard recognized. She had put the world on her shoulders once – still did.

"Moreover," The turian continued, her tone much more forceful, "I never demanded for your aid."

"I'm sorry I damaged your pride by saving your ass," Shepard ground out, annoyed with the woman's damned hubris, "Next time I'll leave you to your beating."

"You could no do that!" Came a deep voice, somewhat shocked. The two woman turn and saw Kato, his arms full of bandages, disinfectants and numbing creams. There were so many that he struggled to keep the awkward bundle secure. It was a ridiculous sight, but so very him.

He sat down and stared at Shepard with a wide-eyed, innocent and hopeful look. She had seen that look before, "You are THE Shepard. The legendary swashbuckler who came to the assist of the lost and the ill-fated."

Another fan. Damn hero-worship.

"You've been talking to T'soni haven't you." She ground out.

Kato fumbled with opening an antiseptic wipe, "When she mentioned there was literature concerning your exploits, I admit, I was curiosity. I perused the extranet for apropos articles." He dabbed the medicated fabric against Torcia's forehead and she hissed, "Sorry." The other turian batted his hand away, but he just grabbed her wrist and held her there. They glared at each other for a second and then Torcia submitted, crossing her arms and staring down at the table.

He grabbed her chin lightly and turned her head so he could get a better angle to clean the wound. Shepard was surprised that the pilot had given in. She had been under the impression that she found the Specialist's attention annoying.

It seemed private, so Shepard stood to leave, but Torcia gave her a look that begged her to stay. *Interesting.*

"I am curiosity," Kato continued, blind to the exchange between the two women, "Did you in reality conquer a Reaper with nothing save a knife?"

Shepard blinked, her eyebrows raising in surprise. She hadn't heard that one yet. It also didn't help that the translation software was far from complete.

She settled back into her chair, "I'm going to have to say no, but I did drive a Mako into one filled with a few hundred pounds of explosives."

Both turned to look at her, this time they weren't the only ones with intrigued looks. She noticed that the noise of the mess hall had dimmed while the crowd had not. Glancing around Shepard saw she had caught the attention of a good portion of the room – some openly staring and others trying to look out of the corner of their eye.

Well a story was good for morale. She didn't like talking about her exploits, since more often than not they ended with failure, but she had learnt that talking about the victories – with a dash of spice and flare – did wonders for a crew. In a war that seemed unending and unwinnable, every victory, even the small ones, mattered.

"Lieutenant Vega and I were looking into a strange distress beacon..."

Nihlus walked into the war room and shook his head. Wrex and the Primarch were having what many might call an argument, but this was Wrex and he was being polite. Nihlus had seen the krogan when he wasn't. It usually ended up with someone dead. Wrex had a lot of control for krogan, it was probably how he had become one of the most powerful clan leaders on Tuchanka.

"You are already planning how you are going to butcher the krogan troops before we've given you our full support. Typical." Wrex said, his voice tight.

Fedorian glared, "You promised us troops-"

"When we have a cure for the genophage," Wrex cut in, glaring right back, "That is what you should be focused on. The salarians aren't going to just roll over and give the females to us."

"We have 2 more days of travel before we get there, it should be spent productively," Fedorian growled, Nihlus could see the tightness in his mandibles as he walked down the stairs. Garrus shot him a tired, begging look but Nihlus just shook his head. If Vakarian was tired now, he wasn't going to appreciate the news that Nihlus was baring.

"You're right," Wrex said, crossing his arms, "More productive talk would be HOW we are going to synthesize a cure once we have the females. Troop movements, deployment options and supply chains can be dealt with later, once you've held up your end of the bargain."

"Krogans are so short sighted," Fedorian grumbled, "We don't even know if the cure will even be feasible in-"

Wrex cut in again, all diplomacy gone from his voice, "You better hope it is or else-"

Garrus stepped between the two men, "Alright, that's enough. Primarch, I will be happy to go over the supply chains with you, unless," He glanced over at Nihlus, "There is something else that I am needed for."

Nihlus sighed, "I just came from the mess hall. There was a confrontation between one of the crew and the krogans," He held up his hand before anyone could say anything, "It has been dealt with, by Shepard actually."

"Shepard?" Garrus asked, surprised.

"Hmm," Nihlus nodded, "She's better with people than I thought. I don't think there will be anymore problems."

"I disagree Nihlus," EDI cut in. All heads swiveled upwards as if they could look at EDI's disembodied voice directly, "The krogan in question departed the mess hall and returned to the flight deck. However tensions has risen between the krogans in the cargo bay and Lieutenant Victus is so far unsuccessful in calming them."

"Great," Garrus rumbled and looked over at the Primarch, "Sir, I must see to this."

He waved him off and Garrus shot Wrex and Nihlus a look, "and the two fell in line behind the commander."

"I don't think I've ever seen you so polite in my life," Nihlus commented to Garrus as the doors opened in front of them. Wrex smirked, letting out a small laugh.

"You should have seen him earlier. Like a varren being lead by a piece of pyjak meat. Did you lose your backbone in jail Vakarian?"

Garrus didn't turn to look back at the Krogan, but they could feel the annoyance coming off him in waves, "Did you lose yours while sitting on your ass?"

"Heh," Wrex chuckled darkly, "Glad to see the Primarch hasn't completely broken you. All of your ass kissing made me want to punch something."

"Me too."

"Commander," EDI said, as the elevator doors opened, "The violence has escalated. Lt. Victus will require medical aid."

"Noted." Nihlus said sardonically as the scene unfolded in front of them. Victus was on the floor, clutching his arm that bent at an awkward angle. It was likely broken and the shoulder joint didn't look to be in good shape either.

The two krogans that Wrex had brought with him were in a fist fight with their team of turian guards. So far, the krogans looked to be winning.

Garrus, for the third time today lamented the situation he had landed himself in.

Save the galaxy a few times and you get stuck babysitting politicians. He thought. *Is it bad that I miss the geth right now? At least with them you knew where you stood.*

Dealing with the Primarch and his blatant dislike of other races – not to their face, at least most of the time – bleed through everything and dealing with him had pushed Garrus to the edge in the last few days. He was a soldier, not a politician, but here he was forced to broker peace agreements between age old enemies. He was lucky Wrex was representing the krogans; anyone else and he might have shot him.

Wrex didn't particularly *need* these other two to secure a deal, did he?

Too bad he couldn't deal with the Primarch that way. No, dealing with the Primarch meant meetings upon meetings, holding your tongue – yes, it was possible for him to do that – and dressing at all times in his dress uniform. It wasn't made for combat, with its stiff fabric and aesthetically pleasing cuts.

He felt exposed but was too angry to care. He was angry with the Primarch, with the Dalatrass, with the war, and with his inability to do *anything*. He couldn't save his home, his parents and his sister were still M.I.A., and he had heard a few of his friends had already perished.

This however, was something he could solve. Garrus shrugged out of his dress jacket, all but tearing the buttons off. He couldn't stop his mandibles from twitching in irritation as he stalked forward, flanked by Wrex and Nihlus, "You just had to bring along a clutch of irritable children with you, didn't you?"

Wrex chuckled next to him, clearly enjoying the situation a bit too much, "It was a show of power, something you'll have to prove now."

"I haven't been sitting on my throne for the last six months," Garrus shot back, a playful note seeping into the irritated tone, "At least this will give me a chance to see if you have gotten soft."

"No," Wrex said, "You've been sitting in jail, a very well fed jail." He glanced down at Garrus' waist, "Of all the turians I had to befriend, I pick the one who can't stop eating."

Garrus opened his mouth to retort but stopped when one the turians went flying towards them. Nihlus awkwardly caught the private. The poor girl was unconscious.

"EDI," Nihlus said, alert the med bay that they are going to have incoming. No fatalities. Also, get them to send down a team to deal with the krogans."

"The Med Bay is prepared, however, my scans shows that the krogans are uninjured."

"For now." Nihlus growled.

He pulled his pistol from the holster at the base of his back. Standing, he shot the krogan closest to him. The krogan, who had been fighting with two turians, turned to look at him.

"Come and dance." Nihlus said, activating his shield. The krogan, well into his blood-rage at the moment, obliged. He spared a glance at Garrus, but saw Wrex with him. Good, without his armor, Garrus would have a hard time with a hormone-fueled krogan - even on his best days.

Movement out of the corner of his eye, Nihlus saw his opponent charge. "Oh shit!" He hissed, throwing up his shield just a second before the charging krogan connected with him. The breath flew from him in a whoosh, and Nihlus cursed.

Idiot. Good thing Shepard isn't watching this. I would never live it down.

Garrus and Wrex moved past him to engage the other krogan. Wrex took point, charging the loner and putting a shoulder into the smaller krogan. Wrex was far larger and clearly stronger as well.

The smaller krogan went flying and Wrex stopped on a dime, standing between the groaning krogan and the injured turians. Garrus snapped out orders, and his soldiers left, grabbing their injured and retreating upstairs.

Grall stumbled backwards, his grip on the turian easing and eventually releasing as Wrex slammed him backwards. He had come down earlier, angry and hungry. His pride hurt and his annoyance coming off of his like waves, it was infectious. The turian guards had tried to calm him down, but it only served to enrage him more. Once the first punch had been thrown, Nakmour Kung, head of clan Nakmour, joined in the fight gladly.

Grall had sent their guard, Lieutenant Victus, flying and he had landed with a satisfying crunch. It was like a damn had been released and the others began to trade blows. Kung and Grall were the leaders of clans, and had deserved more than being locked in the cargo bay like animals. Their anger had been building, looking for an outlet and being curbed only by Wrex's threats.

They had only needed an excuse to unleash their rage and this had been it.

A part of him had known that Wrex would come to deal with them. He wouldn't let the smaller clans have any more power than he allowed, keeping them all at peace and all equal – equally submissive to the Urdnot clan.

But the others had surprised him, charging recklessly in the fight and then hitting him hard – harder than he thought a turian could manage. It brought white light to his eyes. Shaking his head, Grall watched as the larger krogan stood over him, cracking his knuckles in threat.

Grall's rage boiled just underneath the surface and he surged towards the krogan, but Wrex had been ready for him and the larger krogan gave into his own anger, unleashing a torrent of fists and pain on the krogan.

Garrus could have stopped him, and he probably should have, but these were Wrex's people and his to deal with. The sharp snap as armor hit his plating, faded into wet slaps as blood seeped from the now unrecognizable face. Wrex kept hitting and Garrus had to turn away for a moment.

He watched Nihlus deal with the other, putting more bullets into his legs until the krogan's healing factor finally gave way and he collapsed. A series of kicks to the face and mercifully the krogan finally passed out.

Wrex stepped up next to him and Garrus tried not to notice the bright orange splatters on the krogan's armor - or the blue and orange ones on his shirt.

"I assume you left him alive."

Wrex nodded. "He understands his place. This won't happen again."

Garrus walked away, stopping only to grab his coat. "See that it doesn't."

"The fleet couldn't get a clear shot on the Reaper with the refugee ships so close, and neither could I. The jamming signal was too strong," Shepard said, sinking back into the chair. Everyone in the room leaned in closer, "So I took one look at Vega and kicked his big butt out of the Mako, hit the thrusters and launched the whole thing off the edge of the cliff. It hit the Reaper, the nukes exploded and it stumbled. It stunned the Reaper long enough for the refugee ships to clear the area and the fleet unleashed hell on it. The whole valley was obliterated."

Torcia blinked. She hadn't meant to stay for the whole story, but it had been...so engaging. Except for Sovereign, not one single Reaper had been felled, and Sovereign had required a

salarian, asari and turian fleet just to accomplish that. She had a new respect for the humans.

"How did you make it?" Felix asked breathless. His whole attention was on Shepard. It was the perfect opportunity for her to sneak off, now that his clumsy first aid attempt had finished, but she was curious for the answer.

"Well," Shepard said, her tone implying that it really hadn't been all that impressive, "I abandoned ship before the Mako dove off the cliff and rejoined with Vega. We hardly dove over the edge of the ridge – fried shields, parts of our armor molten, but we made it. The idiot was orating about it for weeks."

"Wow," Felix breathed, finally sitting back in his chair, he gave a dazzling grin at her, "That's just...wow. I'm glad you're on our side!"

Shepard just nodded and stood, "We'll win this war. I give my oath."

Felix turned his attention back to Torcia, making her shift in her seat a bit, "I think we'll be fine as long as some people don't try to take on Krogans anymore."

Torcia opened her mouth to say something, mostly likely angry and short as usual, but the sight of the elevator opening and a crew of 6 turians, one unconscious took all the words from her. She recognized them, they were the team sent down to guard the krogans. A sick feeling swept over her - guilt, shame, disgust - somehow she knew *she* had been the cause of this.

Without a word she ran over and took Victus' other shoulder under hers and helped them towards the medbay.

The light hearted mood that Shepard's story had instilled on the Mess, was gone as everyone caught sight of the team.