

**THINKER    TRAITOR**  
**SOLDIER    SPECTRE**



A  
**MASS**  
**EFFECT**  
novel

**BY SMEHUR**

## Chapter 1 - Adrift

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One day in the third quarter of 2172, Captain Tirren of the STG reported an incident so incredible that he was initially suspected to be making some kind of a joke.

Marked URGENT:GENOPHAGE, the report stated that only hours earlier, a top-secret military research facility located in the largely uninhabited Dio-Oroch nature reserve on Sur'Kesh had been assaulted by a small multi-species team led by a krogan identified as Warlord Okeer. The assailants had arrived in a standard shuttle after disabling the regional anti-aircraft defenses and cutting off all communications to and from the facility by means unknown. In the time it took the STG to notice the facility had gone silent, Okeer and his men had decimated its security forces and murdered all the research staff. Arriving at the scene a minute after the assailants had departed, the STG team that was sent to investigate discovered that Okeer had effectively stolen all the classified research data stored in the facility using a highly sophisticated VI to encrypt the data and all its backup copies with a biometric key.

The STG was able to track Okeer's shuttle to the nearest civilian spaceport and determine that he had taken off from Sur'Kesh in the fast attack craft, the Wisp, equipped with all the permits required in Council space, alone. His collaborators were found dead on the abandoned shuttle. One of them was identified as Lieutenant-Commander Marsh of the STG, who had been missing in action for three years and presumed dead or defected. His involvement could explain Okeer's miraculous success in bypassing some of the highest security in Citadel Space.

At the time the report was received and verified by the ST&R, the Wisp was still in the Pranas system, but she was expected to reach the mass relay before any of the salarian ships could respond in an appropriate manner. By fortunate coincidence, one of the top agents of the ST&R happened to be in the vicinity of the Pranas relay in the Widow, on the way back to the Citadel from an unrelated mission, and promptly committed to the task of apprehending Okeer.

The agent was Saren Arterius. His ship, the Virial, was a Giliath-class corvette favored by the turian cabals for speed and maneuverability. According to the specifications, she was supposed to be 2% faster than the Wisp in FTL and only 5% slower in normal space. But the observations contradicted the theory. Even after taking into account that one ship was brand-new and the other was getting old, the Virial was supposed to be gaining in FTL, no matter how slowly—not *lagging*.

Saren pulled up the schematics for the Wisp and had the on-board VI compare them to the customs scans taken on Sur'Kesh. And indeed, the parameters of the mass effect core seemed to have been tampered with. To increase fuel intake efficiency at the cost of

range. His inclination, to blame the STG for failing to include this detail in their report, was moot, as learning about it half an hour earlier would have changed nothing. He watched the two ships on the navigation console: the red pointed triangle leading and the blue one following on a course for the Caestus relay. Their relative motion was imperceptible, but the numbers did not lie. Even the smallest advantage in FTL could affect the outcome of the chase significantly.

The Virial's kinetic barriers cut through the glowing gas of the Serpent Nebula, setting it alight and painting the bridge with colors of daybreak. Saren could see his ghostly reflection on the viewport.

He tapped the comm link once more. "Okeer. It's not too late to stop this nonsense. Surrender at once and I might let you live."

Okeer's laughter boomed through the speakers. Saren cringed and lowered the volume as soon as the upload started. "Or what?"

"Or I'll blast you to pieces."

More laughter. "If I die, you'll never recover the data."

"I could live with that." The upload was almost done.

"Empty threats do not become you, skullface. You won't—oh."

The comm link blinked out abruptly. But the upload had completed. Saren tapped the dead link. Nothing. He waited a few seconds before trying again, and there: the Wisp's telemetry started streaming in—as unformatted text. Okeer must have interrupted the software setup. Still, it was better than nothing.

"Virial, can you read his fuel level from this?"

"Affirmative," the Virial's VI said. "Current fuel volume relative to fuel tank volume: 28%."

"Will it be enough to get him to Invictus?"

"Affirmative."

Of course. Okeer wasn't stupid. "Status?"

"Disengaging FTL drive in forty-three seconds. ETA to Caestus relay, seventy-five seconds."

He sat in wait for the FTL engine to unwind. Should he put on his helmet, just in case? It was nowhere in sight. He debated with himself about the probability of actually needing

it, then unbuckled from the pilot seat and went in the back to fetch it. He planted it on the console and buckled up again. Just in case.

Okeer was anything but stupid. What if he was to set up an ambush, going behind the relay in order to shoot the Virial when she emerges? Unlikely. There wasn't enough time for complex maneuvering. No, he would probably fly straight for the planet. The Wisp was designed for steep re-entry. Once she started the suborbital descent, there would be no catching her. The planetary defenses would shoot her down, but Okeer would eject by then and crash somewhere in the jungle and good luck finding him there!

It wasn't an option.

The Virial fell back into normal space. Saren searched the viewport and caught the soft blue flash of the distant relay as the Wisp passed through. He was no more than a minute behind.

"Approach vector acquired," the VI said. "Relay jump in thirty seconds. Countdown options..."

"Silent countdown," Saren said. "Link me to the comm buoy as soon as we clear the relay."

"Link with Invictus comm buoy pending."

The straps tightened around Saren's chest and shoulders. He forced himself to relax back into the seat, but his heart hammered as if he was chasing Okeer on foot. His hand hovered over the console, ready to override the autopilot at the first sign of trouble. The relay lit up in a dazzling burst of light, growing larger and larger until it could no longer fit the viewport. Saren closed his eyes and held his breath. A moment of stillness, a brief peek into the void, and thousands of light years skipped by in a heartbeat.

When he opened his eyes, the bile-green disk of Invictus was fifteen degrees wide in the viewport.

"Jump complete," the VI said. "Link with Invictus comm buoy pending."

"Tactical overlay."

A coordinate grid projected over the viewport. The red and blue triangles raced along the trajectory for suborbital descent. Saren tapped into the haptic interface and the distance meter appeared, increasing mercilessly. Okeer was descending at a steeper angle and much faster than Saren would dare. Their projected paths diverged completely near the surface.

"Link status?"

“Link with Invictus comm buoy pending.”

“What’s taking so long?”

“Planetary security protocols may take up to... Link with Invictus comm buoy established.”

“Patch me in with the command of the Justice. Flag as urgent.”

Justice, the turian dreadnaught, was a yellow octagon on the tactical map, lumbering in the planet’s L4 point.

A woman’s voice sounded through the speakers. “This is the TMS Justice. Identify yourself and state your business.”

“This is Saren Arterius with Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. I’m in pursuit of a ship on steep suborbital descent. I need you to bring it down—safely.”

“Verification in progress... Verified. Welcome to Invictus, Spectre. We can try to disable the target with a disruptor torpedo before it reaches the atmosphere, but unless you change course or speed, you will be caught within the blast radius.”

“I’ll slow down,” Saren said, and his fingers were already dancing on the console. “Do it now.”

“Acknowledged.”

The dreadnaught was too far to actually see through the viewport, but the disruptor torpedo was visible as a hairline trail of yellow off to Saren’s right. He tracked it on the tactical map, an arrow converging on the path of the red triangle with agonizing deliberation. It wormed closer, and closer, and finally, the red triangle disappeared.

And reappeared on a new trajectory.

The VI and the voice from Justice started talking at the same time.

“Warning. Vehicle on collision course....”

“Partial hit. We confirm minor damage....”

Saren cursed. Collision course? Really? The Virial’s thrusters fired up as the VI executed the default evasive maneuver and his stomach lurched in protest. If only he could shoot down the damned krogan, everything would be so much simpler. A part of him wanted to. What did he care if salarians lost a lifetime of research? He could afford one mission failed in his spotless service record. And the Galaxy would be better off with one deranged krogan criminal less.

“Collision imminent in... one minute seven seconds,” the VI announced.

“Do you copy, Spectre?” said the voice of Justice.

Saren frowned and retracted the hand that was halfway to the main cannon controls.

“Negative, Justice.” Saren switched to a different pattern of evasive maneuvers. He knew Okeer wouldn’t kill himself. But if he was to eject just before impact, he could still link into the comm buoy using his omni-tool and bribe someone to pick him up. Invictus certainly didn’t lack the sort of people who’d welcome the credits for whatever dirty work. “Repeat.”

“I repeat,” said Justice, “we’re registering an increase in the energy output of the vehicle. They’re targeting your propulsion systems.”

At that, Saren finally glimpsed the Wisp through the viewport. She was still far away, but her torpedos, sparkling white and blue like malicious little eyes, were closing in quickly.

“Virial, launch decoys,” Saren said. Adrenaline flooded him in a sudden surge, breaking through his strange detachment.

“Decoy bundle, launched.”

The missiles veered away from their linear path, going after the decoys. The decoys caught one missile, then the other, but the Virial was affected by both blasts. The cabin and everything inside shook and tilted, then overturned and started spinning. Saren’s helmet took flight and hit him in the forehead. The lights twinkled in and out a couple of times before settling on a dull orange, indicating lack of power.

“Status!” Saren barked, struggling to keep his last meal down.

“Main power supply failure. Auxiliary generators online. Navigation online. Propulsion offline. Weapons online. Shields at sixty percent. Life support online...”

“Enough!” The spinning was making him dizzy. He reached for the control panel and closed the viewport. “Justice, what’s the situation?”

“The target has disengaged and returned to its original trajectory.”

“Shoot him with another disruptor.”

“Negative, Spectre. It... would appear... that our torpedo targeting protocols are incompatible with the IFF signature of your decoys. They would be targeted instead. We apologize for the inconvenience. Should we use conventional weapons?”

Saren pressed his mandibles tight to hold back a growl. Having the entire senior crew of the Justice summarily executed for failing to keep their damn backwater VIs up to date

would be highly satisfying, but hardly constructive at this point. He forced himself to unclench his jaw and take a deep breath. Calm down. No more mistakes.

“No,” he said at last. “Let him land. He might eject and let his ship crash. Have air and ground teams ready to sweep the area and secure the crash site. The subject is a krogan, biotic, alone but armed and very dangerous. I want him alive. I repeat: alive. Make sure they get that.”

“Acknowledged, Spectre. Our scanners indicate your propulsion is offline. Do you need assistance?”

Saren snarled and struck the nearest bulkhead with an armored fist.

## Chapter 2 - Quagmire

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Nihlus gaped at the settlement, unbelieving. Primitive boats lined the riverbank along the makeshift docks, and wooden huts with straw roofing riddled the coast like warts. At least a couple hundred people lived here, hiding from the tropical heat in the shades of the giant ganut trees. Some trunks sported ladders leading up to abodes inside the trees and on their lowest branches, thick enough for two grownups to walk astride. Ignoring a couple of worn prefabs and a water dispenser that stood in the center of a clearing like a phallic monument, the village could've been an elaborate stage for a pre-contact movie.

From atop the little knoll on the west edge of the clearing, he could see far upstream the great river Ibiss. Her opaque, sluggish waters flowed toward him. The rippling reflections, dark blue from the evening skies in the east, and bright, fiery orange from the setting sun, caught between the solid margins of deep jungle green, made for a scene of peace and serenity that might have been beautiful if not for the wretched props and actors.

The villagers were mostly women and children of different species: humans, asari, batarians, drell. But they all looked disturbingly alike, wearing colorless rags over dry, bony bodies, wearing absent expressions on sagging faces of unhealthy hues. Malnutrition, rampant imported diseases, and worse than that, a sickening lack of hope.

He would have to report it. The thought made him want to fall through a wormhole and never be seen again. His unit had stumbled upon the settlement while, uhm, taking some liberties with their orders. They were supposed to scout sector A-843, further down the Ibiss, looking for illegal mercenary assets. But they had already combed that area in painful detail on a previous assignment and came back empty-handed. That Major Thadon Eraquis, their CO, would send them there *again* was further evidence in favor of his utter fucking incompetence. And so, after moving out westward from the LZ like a good boy, Nihlus led his men back in a circle around it and headed east instead, to scout sector A-844, where they had never set foot before.

He had done this sort of thing many times during his two years of service as an NCO in Invictus Infantry Corps. Mostly he managed to get away with it. Faking reports became laughably easy once Duon, his tech specialist, had taught him how to access the GPS data recorded by his omni-tool. Satellite maps of the jungle were a joke, and the only available ground-based surveys were the ones made by the IIC patrols. Which was to say, by him and his men when entering virgin territories. By default, they kept radio-silence and were not required to send real-time updates; not so much out of fear of discovery or interference, but because the repeaters were few and far between in the marshlands of



the Ibiss basin and the signal was often iffy under the trees. Usually, all he had to do was say they found nothing. And usually, it was the truth.

But not today.

Mirene, his second in command, and Pan, the squad medic, had made their way to the fountain in the center of the village. Nihlus watched them converse with an extremely pregnant asari. There was gesturing and shrugging, and much more headshaking than nodding. To his right, down the slope, Duon stood together with Farril, their combat engineer. They were pointing out landmarks to one another and looking at their omni-tools. Vezeer, the heavy-weapons specialist, was nestled comfortably between the hardened roots of a nearby ganut stump, with his head tucked deep in his collar and his M-90 Thunderstorm cradled between his knees. Napping. On the other side of the knoll, Lantar was making friends with a small band of alien children. He was the youngest in the unit, barely eighteen and fresh out of training. Nihlus smiled.

“Strip him and he’d fit right in,” Theeka said.

Nihlus glanced at her over his shoulder. Or at least, that was his intention. She was balancing atop a small, flat rock with her helmet under one arm, and the other stretched sideways for balance. The sun outlined her slender figure with a golden glow, and she seemed to float in it. Her eyes shone from the shadows of her face with a light of their own and the gentle sky-blues of her Credo markings looked darker and more striking than usual. So, yeah. He ended up staring. Thinking, *I’d much rather strip you.*

And she stared back. She knew how lovely she was. How she made him feel. He made no secret of it.

“See something you like?” she said. She turned to face him and lowered one foot on the ground.

“Fuck, yeah.”

That startled her. They grew bolder with each round of the game, but this was a bit ahead of the schedule. A calculated move, to break through her guard. Worked like a charm. Now was the time to strike.

“You still seeing Thadon?”

She deadpanned, then clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes away. Yeah. That’s what he thought. Maybe he had won this round, but he could never win the game. It was rigged, and he felt no guilt for taking pleasure in the small cruelties he sometimes inflicted on her.

Farril approached, eying the situation warily over the top of a map still displayed on his omni.

“She started it,” Nihlus said, loud enough for Theeka to hear, as she promptly confirmed with an exaggerated sigh of annoyance.

Farril lifted his hand and shook his head. *Leave me out of this, please.* While the others oscillated between amusement and indifference regarding the little drama Nihlus and Theeka arranged for everyone’s viewing pleasure every once in a while, Farril found it distasteful, and missed no opportunities to remind them of it.

Nihlus deflated. “What did you find?”

“Nothing. No vehicles, no machinery, no weapons. Far as I can tell, no comms either.”

“No weapons,” Nihlus echoed. It meant the villagers were paying someone for protection. But whom, and in what currency? And where were they now?

Oh, he had a pretty good idea. But without any *illegal mercenary assets* in evidence, his ideas weren’t worth shit.

Farril nodded, giving him a long, gloomy look. He turned off his omni and sat heavily on the ground.

Nihlus grunted and wiped the sweat from the back of his neck. Months in the quagmire around the Ibiss had made the gesture automatic, like blinking or breathing. The sweat tickled between the plates and stung where he’d scratched before, distracting him. Every exposed bit of his skin was covered with insect bites, and worse. He had a dark suspicion that some fungal infection was flourishing under his crest. There was no way to stay dry in the jungle, especially this close to the river, where solid ground was as sparse as sunlight.

They had been in the field for almost a month now, playing hide-and-seek in the bush with merc patrols, sometimes passing within earshot. They hadn’t had a single engagement. The only time they had to raise their weapons at all was when a pack of bachelor togo-lizards chanced upon their camp at night. They mostly slept in full armor, averaging three hours a day—and if not for the stims, antibiotics and antihistamines, they would have succumbed to exhaustion and disease after three days, not three weeks.

He was about to sit down himself, when he saw Mirene walking back. Pan had gone into one of the huts with the asari, no doubt to tend to the worst of diseases and injuries. Seeing Mirene’s face was enough to make Nihlus cringe. The sun set her amber eyes on fire and she looked primed to vaporize someone with them.

“You’re gonna love this, Sarge,” she announced from afar, then kept him in suspense until her angry, long strides brought her within talking distance. “They’re living ‘natural lives’. You know, foraging, hunting and fishing for food *they can’t eat.*” She looked around to see if her raised voice has gotten the attention of any villagers. But only the

children Lantar was playing with looked up for a moment before going back to their game. Mirene took a deep breath. "Supposedly, they bring in basic supplies from Farinatti once a week by boat. Which is conveniently out doing the round trip right now, so they can't show it to us. And Hiel—that's her name—doesn't know the name of its captain or any of the suppliers, of course."

"Uh-huh," Theeka said. She'd stepped closer and was almost touching Nihlus. He gave her an accusatory glance, but she pretended to pay no attention. "And how do they ward off predators? With shovels and fishing sticks?"

"Supposedly, nothing has bothered them since they settled here. And how long ago was that, I asked? And she asked me what year it was. No joke. And when I told her, she went so pale in the face, Pan had to rush her inside."

"Right," Nihlus muttered. "Because 'natural lives' don't include the extranet."

They traded uneasy glances. Duon, who too had approached to hear Mirene's report, cleared his throat discreetly. "For what it's worth, I didn't detect any emissions I'd expect from subcutaneous cybernetics."

"Meaning?" Theeka said. The hard edge to her voice could've been a leftover from the exchange with Nihlus, or just her default dislike for Duon, who, in all fairness, did tend to flaunt more big words when she was around than otherwise.

"They're not implanted," Mirene translated.

"Oh."

"Little good does that do if they won't admit they're being held here against their will," Nihlus said. "We can't relocate them by force."

"Maybe on account of non-sanitary conditions?" Mirene mused. "Endangering the health of the children?"

"Let's see what Pan says."

Pan was heading toward them in Mirene's footsteps, but where she had steamed with fury, he seemed just tired and depressed.

"Is Hiel ok?" Mirene asked.

"Oh, sure. In this weather, you don't need to be pregnant with twins to faint." To make a point, he pulled out his water bottle and drank. *Remember to stay hydrated!* "Not her first time, either," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His combat gloves were sticking out of his pockets. "This is her sixth pregnancy. In the last decade. As near as she can tell."

“Holy shit.”

Nihlus looked at the children gathered around Lantar, who was teaching them how to fold dry ganut leaves into toy planes. Only one of the children was an asari. Acid rose from his stomach.

“But how do you think...” Theeka frowned and stepped closer. “You can’t *make* an asari get pregnant unless she wants to, right?”

“Who knows what they tell them. Maybe she thinks she’s doing it to save her friends, or her partner, or her kids. They don’t even know how long they’ve been here, for fuck’s sake. Sarge,” he said after a pause. “We have to report this.”

Nihlus closed his eyes and massaged his forehead. “I know.”

Of course, he had been caught interpreting his orders too liberally before. So far it had been tolerated, because Nihlus had a way of producing results when least expected. Results people up the chain of command could brag with on the extranet. None of that goodness ever spilled over on him, though. He got yelled at and reprimanded and insulted. And when he yelled (and on a few occasions struck) back, he got demoted and transferred and robbed of half his fucking earnings. Which was how he had ended up on Invictus in the first place, this muddiest of all backwaters. Careers came here to die. Never mind that his had been a stillbirth anyway.

“This is gonna be Wolta squared,” Duon said, obviously thinking the same.

Pan snorted. “Can’t get any worse than it already is.”

“Sure can,” Theeka said, “if Nihlus broaches it with his usual charm.”

“I ain’t kissing Thadon’s butt.” *Though I bet you’d like to see that.*

“I’m not saying you should.” She didn’t have her asshole face on anymore, so Nihlus grudgingly listened. “He’ll have his hands full with this shit. Just don’t be a dick to him and he might let it slide.”

“That’d be a first.”

“Nihlus.”

“Alright, I heard you.” He became aware that he’d crossed his arms over his chest. He probably sounded super-defensive too. Not for the first time, he wondered what he’d do if—well, more like *when*—they kicked him out of the army.

It probably wouldn’t happen today. This uncharted place was, after all, a *result*. An important one. The long-crests at the HQ would figure out how to get these people out of

here, and how to get them to testify against the Blood Pack. Who else? The Blood Pack owned the jungle. They guarded the village from wild beasts and kept it supplied with food and medicine. And the villagers paid in the only commodity they seemed to be producing in quantity—children.

Nihlus subdued a growl of disgust. Invictus. Worse than Omega.

He could make a difference here, however. By finding the Blood Pack base, which they lovingly called the Shithole, since that was the official objective of this whole bloody half a year's campaign. But it wasn't *here*. It couldn't be near the river. It had to be underground, and that required *solid* ground. Farril had explained it to him: you build shit in the mud, you get sinking shit. Yet Thadon kept sending them to scout the shoreline.

No wonder it was worse than Omega. From what he'd heard, Omega had competent management.

"It's gonna get dark soon," Theeka said, waking him from the reverie.

Nihlus glanced back. She was right. The others had scattered around. Pan had said something about surplus medigel and stalked back to Hiel's hut by the fountain. Mirene and Duon had gone to the docks. Lantar's new friends had been called home—all except one.

A little human girl asked him something, and he pointed at Nihlus in reply. Next thing, she ran up the knoll and extended her skinny arm, apparently bringing Nihlus some offering. Behind her, Lantar shrugged apologetically. Nihlus sighed and knelt on one knee to be able to look at her.

"You're pretty," the girl said, very serious, looking at him with oversize, hungry eyes. Then she chuckled and started turning left and right on her heels. Her hair was matted and her feet, filthy. Still, Nihlus couldn't help but smile.

"Are you smiling?" she said, mimicking his outspread mandibles with her many fingers, while still hiding something in her right palm.

Nihlus spread his smile even farther. "Yes. This is how turians smile."

"This is for you," she said. "It's like your eyes."

He opened his hand to receive the gift. It was a pebble of pure, transparent green. Probably an ancient piece of glass, polished by the elements and the passage of time.

"Thank you," Nihlus said. Her tiny pink hand lingered between his huge, armored fingers, and the contrast melted something deep inside him.

“When I grow up, I’ll marry a tu-ri-an like you,” she said and laughed in a burst of glee, then abruptly turned around to run in back toward the nearest huts.

Theeka chuckled. “Finally, you found your equal in maturity. Willing too! You should take her number.”

“You’re just jealous.”

She groaned in mock annoyance.

“Oh, come on,” Lantar said. Walking up to them, he had apparently witnessed the exchange. “That was cute as fuck. Admit it.”

“I don’t do cute.”

“Oooh, I don’t do cute.” Lantar gathered his brows and tightened his mandibles in a surprisingly lifelike imitation of Theeka’s expression. “I’m Corporal Nantis, I piss liquid helium and shit dark matter, so don’t you dare go cute with me, private!”

Nihlus laughed, but when he looked at Theeka and saw how serious and sharp her features became, his first thought was that they had definitely been out for too long if such a joke could anger her. She usually tolerated Lantar better than most.

But then something told him it wasn’t the joke.

“What is it?”

“Can’t you hear it?”

He realized he *could* hear it. A low hum, so deep that he could just barely feel it plucking the air in his vocal cavity at first. But it was getting louder fast and its pitch was increasing. Whatever it was, it was coming their way, growing closer and more urgent with every heartbeat, turning from a hum to an earsplitting roar. Nihlus instinctively covered his ears just before the sonic boom.

It was a spaceship on a steep descent. Landing? More like *crashing*. Theeka was speaking, perhaps even shouting, but he couldn’t hear her. She pointed south. He looked up, and there! He caught sight of it, a fireball with a thick halo of white and gray behind it, hurtling their way at an impossible speed. It was looking *right at him*. Shit shit shit! He threw himself on the ground and covered his head. Of all the ways to die—

The meteor thundered over them, low enough to engulf the clearing in smoke reeking of oil and burnt plastics. It crashed in the jungle on the other side of the river. Nihlus felt the ground shake, but the anticipated boom never came. The explosion must have been smothered by the dense growth, and all that was left of it by the time it reached the vil-

lage was a gust of dry, hot wind. A column of black smoke billowed from the spot. What were the odds that it had crashed right into the Shithole? A man could dream.

As he got up on his feet, still half deaf and slightly unbalanced, a V formation of Gampsonics whistled over the scene in low flight. Had they shot the ship down? He hadn't heard the shots, but it might have happened at a higher altitude.

There was much commotion in the village, with the civilians converging on the docks to stare across the river, hands shielding curious eyes from the piercing rays of the setting sun. Nihlus put on his helmet and said, "To me."

He brought up the tactical overlay on his visor and scanned the area. There was nothing to indicate a threat, but he no longer felt safe. Motion in the air above caught his eye. Something floated way above the foliage. Something colored in bright reds and greens. A parachute.

"Incoming from the north," he said, pointing up with his hand.

"The pilot must've ejected," Vezeer's voice said over the intercom, still gruff from sleeping.

The parachute was still a couple hundred meters above the ground, but it looked like it was going to land right on top of them. "Let's get these people out of here," Nihlus said.

His men fanned out over the clearing, herding the civilians away from the river and under the cover of the trees. The villagers reacted readily to shouting and tugging. It wasn't the first time armed men were telling them what to do. Nihlus made an absent note of it, then peered toward the parachute. It was almost directly above him now, and it was difficult to estimate its speed and heading. Just in case, he walked over to the ganut stump where Vezeer had been sitting earlier and took cover. He extended his sniper rifle. The target was moving faster now, carried toward the water by invisible air currents. Nihlus was trying to catch it through the scope when his earpiece boomed.

"Kryik?"

Nihlus did a double take. "Major?"

"Status update."

Ah, crap. So much for his plans on easing Thadon into the subject. "Yes, sir. Right away." He had to lean the rifle on the bipod to access his omni. His heart rate spiked. "I uh... we're uhm..."

"I can read the map just fine. Unlike you, because you wouldn't be two sectors away from your scouting zone otherwise."

“Uh... yes, sir. But I can explain—”

“Save it, Kryik.” Nihlus could hear Thadon’s mandibles chafe and became aware that he was biting one of his own. “A ship just crashed close to your position. Did you see anything?”

“Yes sir. It went right over our heads.”

The parachute was now less than a hundred meters high. Nihlus scanned the area again. There were still many civilians scrambling over the clearing, some entering the huts, which would put them in the line of fire if the pilot proved to be threat. His people were hurrying them up, but there was no way they’d clear them all before the parachute landed. At least there was plenty of cover.

“The pilot may have ejected,” Thadon said.

“Yes sir. Got him in my sights.”

“Listen, Kryik. It’s a krogan, a biotic, very dangerous.”

Whoa. What the—

“You must apprehend him alive. I repeat—alive.”

Less than fifty meters. The pilot was going to land right between the huts nearest to the river and the knoll wasn’t high enough to give Nihlus a clear shot. He turned to see if he could gain more altitude, but there was nothing within reach. His men were still up and about. Get into cover, guys, come on.

“Kryik, acknowledge.”

“Yes sir, get him alive.” Anything else? A blowjob?

“Don’t screw this up. It’s important.”

Oh, I bet.

“Come again?”

“Understood.”

Thadon huffed and dropped the line.

Nihlus peered through his scope. The parachute was now only a few stories above the ground. Something was very wrong with it, though. A bipedal form was tied to it alright, only it was no krogan. The helmet was open and... there was nothing behind it. An emp-



ty space suit. Still, something was pulling it down at a good pace. Something... Nihlus felt panic crawl under his crest.

“Down! Down! It’s gonna blow!”

## Chapter 3 - Landing

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Okeer lifted the visor on his helmet and sniffed the moist air, observing the surroundings. Squat trees with smooth, wide trunks were spaced evenly in every direction. Their sturdy, large leaves had played a key role in letting him reach the ground in reasonably good shape, and he saluted them with a chuckle. The darkening sky could only be glimpsed through the gaps between their sprawling crowns, high above. Varied undergrowth—some of it as tall as he—crowded every available patch of the soft, porous ground. There was a heavy, moldy smell coming decidedly from the north. Water. Wortag had mentioned a river.

Satisfied in knowing where he was, or at least, where to go, Okeer checked his omni-tool. He'd calibrated his kinetic barrier to generate a strong field along his arm at the expense of everything else. A dubious decision. If he were to die, the data he'd stolen from the salarians would all go to waste. Marash had made sure of it. He'd acquired the encryption algorithm from batarian slavers and it bore the signature of their evil genius. The only way to generate a key was from the unique pattern of Okeer's pupil dilation, which couldn't be replicated in case of his demise.

Too bad Marash had to die. Sure, he had been old anyway—for a salarian. And so guilt-ridden that he had seemed *relieved* to die by the hand of a krogan. But he had been useful, and he had been a true ally. Last but not least, he had been amusing, which was so much more than could be said about the rest of that bunch. Pitiful charade, the whole deal.

Okeer started moving in the direction of the water, ignoring the symphony of aches in his bruised body. The light was getting dimmer and it would be good to reach the river before dark. He had been to Invictus before. A long time ago, two hundred years or so, but he remembered his unfortunate adventures in the jungle rather vividly. He quickened his pace. The ground gave under his weight, and his foot sunk through the treacherous webbing of roots into the mud beneath. Bah! It was clingy and disgusting, and he felt the chill even through the armor. As he struggled to extract his limb, movement from above attracted his attention.

He froze and peered up, trying to catch it again through the foliage. He knew what to expect or he'd never have found it again: his parachute, with its happy colors, floating down from the sky at its safe, leisurely pace. It too was going toward the river, carried on some wind Okeer could not feel. Perfect. Wortag would know not to touch it, but if there was someone else looking for him (and that snake, Saren, would no doubt arrange it), they'd have a blast. A blast, haha! All in all, this endeavor had been going rather well so far. A nice exercise for his old bones.

After some hurried dragging through the mud, he noted a change in the light. The treeline was near and the scent of water stronger. There were other scents he could tell apart now. Smoke, food, trash. Some village? Wortag didn't say anything about a village. Okeer proceeded with a bit more caution, touching the shotgun he carried as a side-arm.

He stole to the treeline. Sunlight breaking through the stuffy shadows of the jungle made him squint. Alarmed voices came from the east. He pressed his back against a tree and took a quick look at the riverbank.

There was, indeed, a ramshackle village strewn over a clearing, the first huts no more than fifty meters away. His parachute was just about to touch down near the edge of the water. Long-limbed figures in camo armor were running around, collecting some piss-poor looking folks and herding them toward the trees. Pffff. Turian military.

Not that it mattered. Okeer snickered in anticipation. His "bomb" was actually a MU80 missile from the Wisp, rigged to go off when it stopped moving. He was far enough. Any moment now...

"Down! Down! It's gonna blow!"

In the last glimpse before ducking into cover, Okeer saw the turians throw themselves on the ground. A loud clank came from the dock when his strawman finally landed, and then it exploded with a satisfying pow-wow.

When Okeer peered out again, there was a nice circular pattern of destroyed huts on the beach. Some wailing ensued, but not much. The turians had managed to remove most of the civilians in time. Still, it was good fun.

He'd simply stay hidden, he decided, and wait for Wortag. Wortag had a gunship. With Okeer's biotics, that should be more than enough to deal with the turians. Fucking turians everywhere.

"Hello," said a tiny voice and Okeer jumped. An extremely small human child was standing in front of him. "You're not a turian," it said.

No shit.

Okeer weighed his options. The child was out of reach. It would probably scream if he lounged at it. To waste a biotic attack on something so light and squishy would be silly, and also guaranteed to attract attention. Okeer was confident, but he wasn't stupid: he could not stand against a whole squad of turian soldiers. And perhaps there were more of them out of sight.

"I'm a krogan," he said, keeping his voice down. "Never seen a krogan before?"

The child shook its head.

“Why don’t you come a bit closer so I can look at you? My old eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

“You look mean,” said the child. “Your eyes are small but your mouth is big.”

Perhaps he should just shoot it. No, no, that’s no good—you’re trying to hide, remember? But as his hand went to his belt during these deliberations, the child started walking backward. It knew about guns. Damn. Okeer leapt with all his might, and almost managed to land on the child, but it jumped away and sure enough, screamed loud enough to wake the dead. Okeer cringed and scrambled up, some adrenalin finally squirting through his old veins to assist his efforts. He caught up with the child, grabbing it by the scrawny throat. It was about the weight of his MU80 and its head was roughly the same size as his fist. Pathetic little thing. It was wriggling in his grasp, and he was about to squeeze and end its misery, when, predictably, a turian voice sounded behind his back:

“Put the child down or I’ll blow your brains out.”

Okeer froze. Several pairs of footsteps closed in, and two skullfaces stepped in front of him, sizing him up and aiming for his head and chest with their rifles. The one who’d spoken was somewhere behind him, but Okeer didn’t need to see his face to know that the threat was empty. Okeer had known many, many turians in his long lifetime. Old and young, good and bad, painted and “barefaced”—he’d seen them all. And he’d learned that they were invariably poor liars, aside from a handful of deviants. The undertones in their irritating, vibrating voices told it all, for those who knew how to listen. And this turian was especially bad at it.

“How about this, kid,” Okeer said. “You put your gun down and call off your dogs, and I won’t snap its neck.” The child was wriggling in his grasp, making hissy noises. He squeezed a bit tighter to demonstrate his intentions. One of the turians in front of him was a female; she didn’t even flinch when the child started trashing. She’d shoot him without a second thought, he concluded. He gave her a wink, and she showed him her teeth.

“I can’t do that,” the turian leader said. “But if you let the child go, we can figure something out.”

Figure something out. Fucking teenager. The child stopped thrashing and its face assumed a sickly pallor. The glossy blue eyes were pleading. Okeer made a grimace at it. He remembered the times before there were humans wherever you turned. Good old times. They were a pest and almost as annoying as turians.

“Listen, kid,” Okeer said, looking at the child, but talking to the turian. “I didn’t come here to make trouble. I don’t want to fight you, and you don’t want to fight me either, believe me. So, how about we just go our separate ways, eh? I’ll keep this,” he dangled

the child, "as a guarantee of your good behavior. But I'll let it go when... uh... when I'm out of your range. What do you say?"

"Yeah, right. Here's what I propose. Let go of the child, and we won't shoot you. I give you my word."

"Fine," Okeer said. His ears had picked up a hint of the sound he'd been expecting. "I'll put it down."

"Slowly."

Sure. He started lowering his arm, turning around to face his captor, in deliberate slow motion. The turian leader was crouched several feet away with a sturdy stump guarding his back, and a rifle trained on Okeer's head. As the child's little feet touched the ground, the turians heard the sound as well and started casting their eyes about.

"What now," said the female, but the leader still kept Okeer in sight. Okeer smiled at him courtly, opening his hand with a flourish. The child dropped out like a ragdoll. It had stopped breathing some time ago.

"You sick bastard," the leader growled. One didn't need to be a thousand and a half to know when a turian was angry, and this one wanted to pull the trigger so bad it was almost touching. But he didn't, and Okeer chuckled.

"You can still revive it if you care so much," he said, making the first step away from the trees. It will be easier to board from the clearing. Also, there was a rotting trunk close by that could serve as cover.

"Don't you move another muscle," the turian said through his teeth, his aim following. "Pan, help the girl! Mirene, that's a gunship coming! Spread out!"

Okeer was still chuckling, inching toward the shore. You won't shoot me, will you, skull-face? Saren told you to keep me breathing and you wouldn't want to act against your orders, would you? That would make you a bad, bad turian. You people can't shit without being told what to do.

Wortag's gunship appeared in the west above the river and the roaring of its engines suddenly drowned out all the other sounds. It was painted green and brown and had a mess of branches and shit stapled all over for camouflage. What a joke. Okeer laughed out of the lightness of his hearts. It was all going rather well indeed.

Then the turians opened fire at it, and it fired back, and all of the sudden the air was filled with rounds going in all directions. Okeer's tactical expertise and centuries of experience shrunk down to two options: jump into cover, or launch a biotic attack? His instinct decided as he noticed that the turian leader was still aiming for him, unfazed by the heavy rain of fire the gunship was laying down. Okeer slashed his hand forward, and

a deadly wave of dark energy shimmered in its comforting blues, rolling wide toward the trees. When it hit, it picked up both the turian and his female in the air and threw them back like toys.

But not before the turian's round hit Okeer. It went into the neck under his chin and all the way through into the spine, a hot lightning streak of pain and disbelief and disgusting weakness that made his knees collapse. Fucking skullface did it after all... should have told him my shields were screwed.

And then the world went blurry as his primary organs shut down one by one.

## Chapter 4 - Old Friends

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Saren's escorts had deposited him in an empty meeting room in the headquarters of the Invictus Legion, located in the heart of Hierote, the largest city on the south hemisphere and the de facto administrative capital of the colony. The HQ was a tall and slender spire of asari design, all rounded edges and convergent curves, looking down upon the squat, angular buildings that surrounded it with the condescension characteristic of its architects. The artificial lake around it mirrored the strange, deep-blue darkness of the evening sky. Everything else, as far as the eye could reach, was the same desaturated orange as the desert sand. Even the trees.

He had been standing by the window for many minutes, watching the city outside start to light up, and brooding. Saren didn't like to wait. Disregarding the incident with the IFF protocols, the local authorities seemed efficient enough. Under three hours to dock with his spinning ship, pick him up, land him on the planet and fly him here, which was quite a bit better than what he had expected. But somehow that made this wait more annoying, not less.

He realized he had no idea who commanded the Invictus Legion. Years had passed since he'd been in this sector and his substantial capacity to remember irrelevant information delivered only vague recollections of a relatively recent change of command. He started to look it up on his omni when the door to his left finally opened.

"It was about time—" Saren froze in mid-motion. Were his eyes deceiving him? He blinked a few times, but it was no apparition. Of all the people he could have possibly imagined meeting on this mission, the one at the door was by far the least likely. Surprise had hit him like a punch in the chest and he couldn't find his voice, moving his mandibles soundlessly like some wet-behind-the-crest cadet on his first debriefing. "Baratus?"

"Saren Arterius," Baratus enunciated. He stood in the doorway and stared, as if facing, at long last, the indisputable evidence of some unbelievable phenomenon. "It is good to see you again."

Saren's was at a loss for words. What were the odds? He hadn't seen Baratus, nor heard from him, since the day he'd become a Spectre, and hadn't spared him more than a fleeting thought in what must have been years. Mortifying as it was to realize it, he'd effectively forgotten all about his old friend and benefactor, despite the unforgettable circumstances of their initial acquaintance and subsequent association. To meet him here, now, in the middle of this... most delicate situation... was so incongruous he couldn't wrap his mind around it for many long, agonizing seconds.

“It is—” he cleared his throat. He intended to follow it up with *good to see you too, old friend*, but it refused to go out. Instead he just turned around to face Baratus fully, struggling to collect himself. “It is.”

Baratus gazed at him for another beat, then smiled and nodded his head. He stepped into the room, letting the door close behind him. How strange to think that this was one of the few people in the entire Galaxy who Saren used to have no reservations around. Obviously, it was no longer so. He was jarringly aware of the expectation to show, and read, *feelings*. And of his inadequacy for the task.

“You must be shocked to find me here, after all these years,” Baratus said at last. “More than a decade, isn’t it?” He took a few more steps forward, until they were at an arm’s length, and measured Saren from crest to toe. “You look splendid, simply splendid. You’re taller than me!”

His unguarded awe broke through the membrane Saren was encased in. Before he could think himself out of it, he closed the distance and briefly embraced Baratus, tapping his shoulders. He was indeed the taller one now.

Baratus laughed, returning the gesture. They stepped back, then, and regarded each other with a bit more ease. He didn’t look a day older than Saren remembered him. The texture of his plates was a little rougher, and the ambitious glint in his eyes a little softer. But his posture and movement showed no signs of aging. His dress was impeccable, and his Monasta markings, freshly applied, were as striking as ever. He looked remarkably well.

“You’re taller than your brother,” he said.

Saren shook his head without thinking.

“Oh, I’m quite sure of it,” Baratus insisted. “I never had to look up in his eyes. Though I always looked up to him.” His smile became grave by degrees, and finally disappeared. “You’re also older—”

“Than he ever lived to be,” Saren finished for him. Strangely enough, he didn’t feel compelled to try changing the subject.

“It might sound far-fetched, but not a day goes by that I don’t think of him, and of what happened to him. Even after all this time.”

“I believe you.”

“I haven’t set foot on Palaven for years. I heard they planted lovely gardens around the monument.”

“I preferred it when it was bare. Too many people go there now.”



“Do you?”

Saren said nothing.

“Forgive me,” Baratus followed up in a hurry. “I forget myself. It’s not my place to pry.”

“It’s fine.” It’s been too long since he’d spoken to anyone about personal matters. And he’d never been good at it anyway. “I go whenever I’m on Palaven. But that’s not often.”

Baratus nodded slowly. “Let me guess. You established an official residence on the Citadel because it seemed practical, but you ended up living on your ship.”

“Something like that.”

They stood in companionable silence for a while. Mention of his ship reminded Saren of his purpose here, but he didn’t feel like rushing the topic. The occasion was exceptional enough to warrant a momentary respite.

“And you, old friend?” he ventured. “What brings you to Invictus?”

Baratus lifted his browplates. “Brings me? Oh. I suppose you don’t know, then. I’m in command of Invictus Legion, such as it is.” He smiled apologetically. “I heard about your... encounter with the Justice. She’s going to be decommissioned, you know, and it’s not at all clear when and if we’ll be getting another capital ship to replace her. So she’s still armed, running on a skeleton crew. If you don’t count the retrofitting teams, that is. They’re turning her into a museum.”

“That explains a lot.” Saren suddenly remembered that Justice had taken part in the orbital bombardment of Shanxi, and she had been old at that time already. It was no excuse, of course, but he didn’t mean to pursue the incident anyway, apart from putting in a biting remark or two in his mission report. Perhaps he’d drop it altogether. “But it doesn’t explain how you ended up here, of all places.”

“It’s a long story,” Baratus said, but then took a deep breath and went on to tell it after all. “My tenure on Palaven ended a year after your induction into ST&R. Went back and forth between military intelligence and internal affairs until this position came up a couple years back. It was a promotion I couldn’t refuse, and more than a worthy challenge. Invictus is a mess, Saren, but it was an even bigger mess before I took over. Bear that in mind when you make your requests, as I’m sure you must. I’ll do everything in my power to comply, but...”

“I understand.” A part of Saren wanted to press for details, both personal and political, but it was a conversation for some other time. “I won’t ask for much. I need my ship hauled to the spaceport and fixed. Ground and air support ready at my call. Unrestricted access to information, no questions asked, the usual.” He paused. “Having someone to rely on in charge of local affairs is a more valuable asset than a dozen dreadnoughts.”

Baratus snorted. "That's a stretch. But I'll take it."

"So." Time to do business. "What's the situation?"

"Well." Baratus clasped his hands behind his back. "I have good news and bad news."

"Give me the bad first."

"Your krogan might be dead."

Saren had prepared himself for this outcome, but it still felt like a slap in the face.

"He may have survived," Baratus added deliberately.

"You don't know?"

"The Blood Pack took him—dead or alive. I had a spec ops team in the exact area where he landed. They were instructed to take him alive, of course. But the Blood Pack brought in a gunship and there was an all-out battle. And as you know, shit happens in battle."

"This is no joke, Baratus," Saren said. "Billions of lives may depend on it." His voice had all the requisite inflections, but he wasn't nearly as outraged as he was supposed to be. The same doubts that had almost made him shoot the Wisp down himself, surfaced again. It would all be so much simpler if Okeer was to die.

"No doubt," Baratus said, raising a hand in defense. "All I'm saying is that the situation went out of control despite everyone's best efforts. I take full responsibility, for what that's worth."

"How can the Blood Pack fly a gunship? This was still Hierarchy territory the last time I checked. Not Omega. Don't you have AA defenses?"

Baratus tightened his mandibles. "Of course we do. And I don't know. They probably fly under the detection altitude. That's hard to do in the jungle, except over water. I can't tell you anything for sure because it's never happened before. At least to my knowledge."

"You said they took him. Where?"

"Their base of operations, I would assume. And before you ask—I don't know where that is."

"What *do* you know?"

An expression Saren had seen a great many times when dealing with local authorities—one of frustration, annoyance and defiance—flashed over Baratus' face. Saren did not

mean to offend him, but he wasn't going to apologize. Billions of lives *did* depend on this.

"We know it's in the same general area where your krogan landed," Baratus said through clenched jaws. "We may be able to pinpoint the precise location from the navigation systems or the comm logs on his ship."

"The ship survived?"

"Yes. And the crash site is secured. That's the good news."

It wasn't. Not at all. But Baratus didn't need to know that. "I want to examine the wreckage myself. I don't want anyone else touching it until then."

"I'll see to it."

"Good."

They stared each other down for several more shallow breaths. Then Baratus stood down. He snorted, smiled, and finally laughed. "It's been a long time since I've been around anyone with the authority to question me. An unpleasant exercise, but a good one, I think. You have every right to be appalled by the situation here. Everyone knows about Invictus, but few realize how bad it is until they see it for themselves. Whereas we who live here have become too accustomed to it, I suppose. Perhaps your presence will stir things up, eh?"

"I'm not here to police Invictus," Saren replied. "I'm not here to police you either. I don't care how bad the situation is, or who's responsible for it, as long as neither stands in my way."

Baratus studied him long after he'd ceased speaking. "I don't remember you being this annoying," he said at last.

Saren smirked. "I rarely spoke my mind when I was young."

"You rarely spoke, period."

"True."

The light fixtures along the walls turned on by degrees, a gentle reminder of the inevitable passage of time. Saren glanced through the window. It was almost completely dark outside.

"I said I didn't care, but—what *is* the situation? Unofficially."

Baratus heaved a long sigh. "We keep the cities safe and the orbit clear—but just barely. The tropical belt is no-man's land. Mostly ran by the Blood Pack, with a few other

groups fighting each other for scraps. We don't have the resources or the manpower for large-scale operations and the jungle is a logistic nightmare. So we train our people for guerrilla warfare and choose our battles carefully. On the bright side, the civilian population has stabilized lately. But the bad reputation keeps off-world investors well away and, as you know, development funds prioritize newer colonies. You can't have both the omlet and the egg. Looking at the support we receive, Invictus might as well be abandoned already. Unofficially, it's what any government in their right mind would do. But not ours."

"Long live the Hierarchy," Saren murmured.

"Long live the Primarch."

They exchanged a glance, then saluted as one. A long-forgotten feeling of common purpose and belonging made Saren's spinal plates rise.

"It really is good to see you, old friend," he said. "If I get the chance, I'll put in a word for you. See that you get a new dreadnought, at least. And the latest software updates."

Baratus laughed. "That would be appreciated." He seemed to have more to say, but suddenly he froze and his hand hovered over his earpiece. Then he nodded, as if listening to someone on the other end.

"I see. Is he hurt?" More listening and nodding. "Alright. I'll be there in a minute, with the Spectre."

"Is it Okeer?"

"No," Baratus said. "The leader of that squad I mentioned. He's back and ready for debriefing. I thought you might want to supervise."

Saren remained motionless. He didn't want to debrief some stranger any more than he wanted to go to the jungle and hunt for Okeer on foot. He was hungry and tired and distraught by this unlikely reunion. Memories he had stashed away more than a decade ago flashed before him as if it had all happened yesterday. He wondered if Baratus still kept Desolas's practice sword. Closing his eyes, he could smell the blood staining the edge of his own, from that last time they had sparred together, and he had gone too far. Was he going too far now?

When he opened his eyes, Baratus had a hand on his arm. "How about a dinner after? Catch up properly?"

"I'll have to move out as soon as possible." He stepped away from contact as gently as he could, but Baratus pulled back as if burned. "We can arrange it when I'm done with the mission," Saren added, trying for a softer tone.

“Of course.” Baratus coughed and straightened his shirt. “After you, then.” He gestured at the door.

Saren stayed where he was.

After a moment, Baratus laughed and slapped his forehead. “Right. Told you, it’s been a while.”

He turned on his toes and led the way.

## Chapter 5 - The Barefaced

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Nihlus shifted from one side of his contused body to another and grunted. He was sitting on the hard floor of the evac shuttle with his back propped against its nauseatingly vibrating hull, trying to find a position such that nothing hurt. A futile effort. The biotic blast had slammed him against a tree, and he was saved from a broken back or worse by pure luck.

He wasn't feeling so lucky now. Three broken ribs and a hairline fracture of the sternum. Nothing medigel wouldn't fix, but he couldn't afford a dose that would staunch all the aching. He had to be clear-headed when he faced the music.

The others were more or less ok. Theeka had taken the full force of the blast too, but it threw her far between the trees and into shrubbery. Lantar had taken a round in the chest, but the armor had stopped it, and he was only bruised. Farril got his face singed in the missile explosion in consequence of wearing an open helmet. He was fortunate to get away with nothing more serious than burned facial paint. Black in place of airy green made him look weird. Strangely intense and, in honesty, kind of hot.

The others were fine. Most of the villagers were fine as well.

The little girl was dead.

Nihlus took off his gloves and groped for the green stone the girl had given him in the pockets of his underweave. He started turning it over. The overhead lights in the shuttle made its gleam cold.

*You should have shot the krogan immediately. Your indecision killed a child.*

The thought punched him in the gut, and he had to squirm for air. Several heads turned and he pretended his back was hurting. When he closed his eyes, he could still hear the mother's inconsolable wailing.

Had he managed to save the child, he might have been able to rationalize his subsequent actions. Instead, he couldn't stop thinking of all the various ways in which he'd failed. Today and in general. He had shot the krogan, disobeying direct orders, *after* the girl had been killed. The Blood Pack had won the battle and taken the krogan's body to the Shithole, which he hadn't been able to find. "Don't screw this up, Nihlus, it's important!" That's what Thadon had said. And he screwed it up. In every way imaginable.

The green stone stared at him, full of silent judgment. You killed a child today, and you're thinking about your miserable excuse of a career? Way to go, Kryik, my man.

If only he could tell himself that her death hadn't been in vain. Or swear in all honesty that it would be avenged. Or if he could just brush it off and not be bothered. Like Theeka. Theeka, who was blissfully snoring across the way with not a care in the world. She hadn't blinked when the little girl's body hit the ground with that sickening damp thud. Perhaps because the child was human. Didn't make a bit of difference to Nihlus.

"What's eating you, Sarge?" Mirene asked. She was sitting on the floor next to him. Everyone except the two of them were either sleeping or trying to.

"Can't relax," he lied. "Everything hurts."

"Uh-huh. And I'm a krogan princess."

Nihlus pocketed the stone. Mirene's eyes followed his movements with a calm focus. She wore the crimson colors native to Taetrus. He couldn't memorize the name of the pattern even though she had repeated it to him at least thrice. But he could recall the details of half a dozen official variations off the top of his head, no problem. If he ended up without a job, maybe he could try to set up a paint shop. Carve himself a niche in the business with multi-color stuff, alien motifs, barefaced people, all the taboo shit the traditionalists shunned. Get cheap colors for credits he'd borrow from friends he didn't have. Work out in the streets. Likey sleep there too. Yeah. Sounded like a plan. Fucking brilliant.

"Do you suppose," he said, "if we hadn't been there today, that—nothing would have happened? You know, the bomb, the battle..."

"The human child?"

"The human child."

Mirene stared at him for a few seconds, as if waiting for an elaboration. "Are you serious?"

He shrugged.

"Spirits, Nihlus. Sometimes you're so naïve it's not even funny. Or maybe just plain stupid."

"Ah, so it's Nihlus now?" He didn't mind the informal address, but he hated when she talked to him like he was a kid.

"Sorry, Sarge. But it's true. What would've happened if we hadn't been there? Hm, let me think. The bomb... it would've gone off anyway, and probably there would've been a bunch of people on the beach crowding to see what it is. My guess... ten to thirty fatalities right there? The battle... Well, ok, I'll give you that. Maybe there wouldn't have been

a battle. But then we wouldn't know that the Shithole is within a fifty-klick radius of the village."

"Only if that's where the gunship came from, and if it took off right after the crash, and we don't really know any of those things, now, do we? And even if we did, how is a fifty-klick radius a good thing?"

"It's better than nothing, no? We covered more than that in the past few months."

Nihlus huffed.

"The child would've lived to see another day," she continued, nodding. "But eventually the Blood Pack would pick her up. The punchline: if we hadn't found the village, they'd keep selling kids to slavers. Think about *that*."

"Always the voice of reason." Nihlus gave her a thin smile. Mirene was the second oldest in the squad, after Vezeer, and the only one with an academic degree. It was a shame pre-contact history didn't count toward a commission. She was among the most capable and well-trained soldiers Nihlus had ever met, and she had a way to put things in perspective.

"Here's another challenge, then," he said after a while. "Thadon's going to court-martial my ass beyond the Veil and back for insubordination."

Mirene laughed. "You think you're that important?"

"No. But I think he hates me enough."

He thought back to his first day in the IIC. The recollection of getting acquainted with his new CO was painfully vivid.

"I see you're a good soldier, Kryik," Thadon had said. "Your ability scores are enviable and your tactical expertise, or talent, or luck—whatever you want to call it—is impressive. In a way, I'm glad to have you. But let me make one thing very clear: I'll take no bullshit from you." He waved a hand over Nihlus's file, displayed on the console; likely the most checkered service record he ever had the misfortune to see. "Here's the deal: I'll take a risk and entrust you with one of my best units—and you won't question my orders under any circumstances. Are you picking up what I'm putting down?"

"Yes, sir!" Nihlus said. And by the Spirits, he meant it.

But it turned out that Thadon pertained to a very broad definition of trust, and a very narrow one of a direct order. The degree of control he insisted on made it impossible for Nihlus to operate effectively. His initial respect for Thadon soon wore thin, and then dissipated altogether after Wolta. Wolta had been one of those results worthy of extranet headlines but it changed nothing in their relationship. Thadon kept treating him like



trash and apparently never lifted a finger to try and—gasp—*reward* him. Or, Spirits forbid, *promote* him. People got promoted left and right for crap that was nowhere near as significant, but his name never came up. Just like in all his previous posts. That's the life of an outsider in the turian army for you.

"The Major doesn't *hate* you," Mirene said. "He's just scared you'll drag him down with you."

"Why, thank you so much for the vote of confidence."

"What, did you want a collar to cry in? You don't get to climb the ranks by playing the smartass all the time. Either suck it up and do as you're told, or live with the consequences. Just don't whine about it. It makes me wanna hit you."

"Oh, I'd like to see you try."

Mirene elbowed him in the side. She was rather gentle, all things considered, but he had broken ribs in there. "Ow! Fuck!"

Several pairs of eyes blinked open, and several growls later, closed again.

"Sorry, Sarge," Mirene said. "You asked for it."

They sat in silence for a bit. Nihlus didn't really want to talk, but he didn't really want to be left alone with his thoughts either. Mirene looked like she had something in mind, so he invited her to speak up with a gesture of the chin. Anything to keep his mind off the girl.

"How come you never applied for the Spectre program?" she said.

Ah. That. He knew it was coming. There had been whispers about it behind his back from the first day he'd joined the squad. Strange how nobody had thought to just come out and ask him until now. It wasn't some big secret. It was just...

He sighed. That hurt. He shifted. That hurt more.

"I did," he said at last. "I do. Every semester. Never even got a note from a recruiter."

And that, that hurt the most.

"Shit."

"Yeah."

It was one of those immutable facts of life: even if there was a turian recruiter willing to ignore his place of birth, there were none who could ever see past the red stamps in his file. Insubordination, contempt, assault on a senior officer, brawling, failure to conform

to the doctrine, failure to integrate into a unit, improper conduct degrading unit cohesion—every offense, shy of all-out mutiny, had a place in his record. They only kept him around because, when all else was put aside, he could get the job done.

Not anymore!

It was a long ride to Hierote.

The shuttle dropped him on the landing platform on the 128<sup>th</sup> floor. The view from there was gorgeous. Hierote sprawled in every direction with its glass domes and flickering lights. Shastina's Gate, nearly ten clicks away, was clearly discernible if one knew what to look for. It meant the weather had been fair during the day, with no wind, and no sand. It also meant there would likely be a sandstorm during the night. But there were no signs of it yet. In the west, toward the starport, the sky was a magnificent pink, crisscrossed with dark aircraft trails and thin, translucent clouds.

Nihlus took a deep breath—it still hurt, dammit—then turned his back to the city and marched inside. As he went through the busy, brightly lit hallways, leaving crumbs of dried mud on the carpets and making people turn after him with wrinkled noses, his apprehension evolved into a nauseating anxiety more alike to battle readiness than to any sort of thoughtful attitude appropriate for civil discourse. They should've let him take a damn shower if they wanted him to be civil. He didn't even get the option to stop by the med-bay for a proper checkup. The dead krogan was too important to wait.

During the elevator ride to the command offices, he studied his reflection in the mirror and brushed several specks of greenish muck off his face, trying to ignore the thumping of his heart. His colors wanted reapplying; his skin tone wanted a good night's sleep. There was a thing that could fix that, though. Without a second thought, he brought up his omni and administered himself a shot of stims. By the time the elevator stopped, he was charged as a thundercloud.

Killing the krogan had been the right thing to do. Child-murdering sons of bitches had no place among the living, not on his watch. He was *glad* he killed the krogan.

The Command Center was a cavernous room dominated by a round table with an immense, two-meter holo of the planet in the center. Around it were numerous workstations, shimmering in a myriad of colors. It was all just for show, of course. The actual CIC was underground. The big-shots liked their offices with a view, though, and the extranet reports looked better in natural light.

A dozen crests turned to see who made such a rude entrance. He paused to let them have a good look at him, and to scan the space. Other than the entrance he had just come in through, there were two others, on the far left and right, and each was guarded by

two soldiers, a total of six. Nobody else in the room had armor, and while some carried sidearms, most were unarmed. Good to know such things. Just in case. He grinned at the audience and strode toward Thadon's office.

And Thadon was just about to leave it. They almost collided head-on, and Nihlus bore enough momentum to make Thadon recoil and curse. He was tall, but not as tall as Nihlus, and packed less mass inside his wiry frame. Simple cobalt colors marked his face, one of the many variations on the Qarido design, native to Palaven.

Nihlus stopped short and stood at attention.

"Damn it, Kryik, look where you're going!"

"Sorry, sir."

Thadon stepped back and gave Nihlus a dissatisfied look-over. "You look like shit," he said. "And smell even worse." His ungloved hands had landed on the chest-piece of Nihlus armor and he was wiping them on his pants.

"Sorry, sir. Didn't have time to groom." As you damn well know.

Thadon snorted. "At ease."

Nihlus relaxed his stance, clasping his hands behind his back, with feet wide apart. He was satisfied to note that nothing hurt anymore. The stims were the crown achievement of Galactic society.

Thadon went behind his terminal and tapped the comm. "Sir? Kryik is here. Just in, directly from the field."

"I see," said a voice from the other side. The *General's* voice. "Is he hurt?"

After the most cursory of glances, Thadon said: "Doesn't look like it, sir," without bothering to wait for Nihlus to nod, or Spirits forbid, *say* something. Asshole.

"Alright. I'll be there in a minute, with the Spectre."

"Yes, sir."

Nihlus had been wrong to think he couldn't possibly get more anxious. Why wasn't Thadon giving him a lecture? Why did his debriefing require the General's attention? And... did he really just hear that there was a Spectre involved? Or was his stressed-out, exhausted mind, affected by both medigel and stims, playing tricks on him? It was certainly conceivable. He had been wanting to meet a Spectre, a real Spectre, since he was a boy.

"Sir? What's going on?"

Thadon didn't look up from whatever he had been doing on his desk—stacking some hard-copies into neat, parallel piles for some fucking reason. It took him a long time to reply.

“It's not your place to ask, Kryik, and it's not my place to answer. Wait for the General. And watch that tongue of yours.”

“I didn't *say* anything.”

“Not yet.”

Nihlus gritted his teeth. *Just don't be a dick to him*, she had said. Who was being a dick now, eh?

“You didn't report any casualties,” Thadon said. That translated to: I heard you sent some of your men to the med-bay. Is Theeka among them?

“No, sir. No serious injuries. Just some sprains and bruises.”

Was that a small sigh of relief? It was hard to tell, as Thadon was still busy arranging things on his desk.

“How close were you to the crash site?”

And there I thought you knew how to read maps. “Less than five clicks, sir.”

Thadon nodded slowly, then finally looked Nihlus in the eye and shook his head, unloading all his disapproval without saying a word.

Nihlus caved. “Sir, I know I screwed up big-time, and I'm sorry, but—”

Thadon lifted a hand to stop him. “This is out of my hands, Kryik. I can't protect you anymore. Take my advice and keep your mouth shut. Speak only when spoken to and for once in your life, don't call attention to yourself.” His mandibles worked with unspoken words. “Maybe it'll all just blow over,” he muttered.

Nihlus stared at him. And sure enough, now that he looked, he saw clear signs of anxiety on Thadon too. Whatever this was, it was big. Alright, he got that. But what the fuck was all that about *protecting* him? Thadon, protecting *him*? He almost laughed out loud.

But then the door opened behind his back and he hurriedly stepped aside to let the General through.

Nihlus liked the General. In that abstracted way you like an extranet celebrity who allegedly reads fanmail, but it's never *your* fanmail. He had that perfect, regal posture that Nihlus associated with authority, and the calm confidence of age and experience. He

smelled of expensive soap and freshly pressed clothes. Passing by, the General gave Nihlus a stern, no-nonsense look that he extended to Thadon too. They both saluted.

Following behind the General was a barefaced man. He wore a suit of light, off-white armor. Nihlus couldn't tell its make, which was a curiosity in itself. It was clean, but it had definitely seen combat. He also couldn't tell the make of the heavy pistols strapped to the man's hips, but they looked three generations ahead of standard issue sidearms. A velveteen, embroidered cowl was draped over the front of his crest. And what a fascinating crest it was! With the valluvian horns, a hereditary trait so rare Nihlus had only seen them on the extranet, once, and those belonged to the late General Desolas Arterius. Who had a younger brother, Saren Arterius. Who was rumored to be a Spectre.

A pair of mirror-like, steel eyes drilled into Nihlus from a hard, steel face with unexpected intensity. Like a physical force pushing him back. Nihlus stood his ground, but he exhaled with relief when the barefaced turned his scrutiny to Thadon. He then took his time scanning the room: the walls, the window, the scant furniture and at last, the ceiling corners, as if checking for surveillance. All the while he stood in the doorway, commanding attention. Even the General seemed to relax when he finally entered and let the door close behind him. The familiar odor of several days too many in a combat suit lingered briefly in his wake. And something else, disquieting and familiar, that Nihlus couldn't put his talon on.

"At ease," the General said. He inspected Nihlus from crest to toes and back, then stepped inside his personal space to peer closely into his eyes. Nihlus held his breath. "What have you been taking, son? Stims? Medigel?"

"Both, sir."

The General stared at Nihlus a few more seconds, then looked at Thadon, who gathered his mandibles and shook his head. The barefaced settled across from Thadon's desk and looked at Nihlus again.

"Eyes here," the General said, pointing at his own face.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"As you're undoubtedly aware, you've been recalled here because you were instructed to apprehend a krogan who ejected from the vehicle that crashed in the jungle, and bring him in alive. But instead your squad opened fire on him and had him shot. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir," Nihlus hurried to correct himself. "I fired at the krogan. The others observed the Major's orders."

"From what I heard, you were all involved in a battle with a gunship."

“Correct, sir.”

“But you’re sure it was your shot and not someone else’s?”

“Positive, sir.”

The General sighed and exchanged a glance with Thadon, who was standing at ease and silently watching. The barefaced kept his gaze fixed on Nihlus with unsettling resolve, like some cunning beast waiting for the perfect moment to pounce on its pray.

“Eyes on me, Sargent,” the General repeated with calculated annoyance.

“Yes, sir.” Nihlus felt like someone had turned up the heating inside his suit above the safety recommendations. Sweat began to trickle from under his crest. It was all he could do to stop himself from wiping it off.

“Tell us what happened.”

“Yes, sir. The engagement took place in an uncharted, illegal settlement on the south bank of the Ibiss, full of civilians. Mostly women and children, suspected to be slaves. A small spacecraft crashed into the jungle on the other side of the river, about five clicks north-west of our position. A few minutes after the crash, a parachute appeared right on top of the village. We cleared the area out of precaution. But the parachute wasn’t carrying the target. It carried an armed missile instead.”

The barefaced scoffed and everyone looked at him inquisitively. But he just shook his head and signaled them to go on. Nihlus hurriedly fixed his eyes on the General again.

“Go on, son.”

“We were all outside the blast radius, but it served its purpose as a diversion. The target maneuvered around us and might have gone undetected if—” he swallowed hard—“if he wasn’t accidentally discovered by a human child.”

The barefaced scoffed again, and waved everyone’s unspoken question off again.

“We had the krogan surrounded.” Nihlus deliberated on how to continue. No one there was interested in how horrible the experience of witnessing the murder of that child had been, or how it had affected him, but that was the foremost thing on his mind. “Maybe we could’ve overpowered him at that point. I’m honestly not sure, sir. I’ve never seen a krogan that old, that big, or that intelligent before. And he didn’t look like he had any intention of going down quietly.”

“What size is your unit?” the barefaced suddenly said. He had a deep, musical voice, but his inflections were arrogant and smug. Nihlus found himself feeling offended.

“Eight men, sir.” He straightened up, trying to look taller. “IIC’s finest.” For what that was worth.

The barefaced looked at the General, who shrugged and nodded.

Thadon shifted, moving his mandibles as if he had something to say. Something along the lines of “perhaps, if you look past the misconduct and count only the raw scores,” Nihlus guessed. The son of a bitch really did hate him. But thankfully, the General ignored it.

The barefaced had an utterly unreadable expression. He still stubbornly stared at Nihlus. “Go on.”

“Well, that’s when the gunship arrived.” Nihlus wasn’t sure who to look at anymore, so he switched from the General to the barefaced and back. “They opened fire and we fired back.”

“You carry heavy weapons, no?”

“Yes, sir. A Thunderstorm.”

“Why didn’t you use it to shoot the gunship down?”

“It was too close to civilian buildings, sir.”

The barefaced raised his browplates. Nobody moved or made a sound. Obviously it was the wrong answer, but Nihlus didn’t have any other. How was it wrong, though?

“I didn’t want to risk it crashing on the settlement,” he explained.

“Clearly,” the barefaced said. The overt annoyance made him appear darker, taller and even more imposing. There was something truly awesome about him. But that utterance was so drenched with condescension that he might as well have spit Nihlus in the face. It stung like a whiplash. Nihlus struggled to put aside the conflicting impressions.

“A Thunderstorm blast at that range would have put everyone at risk,” he said, but his voice had none of its usual strength. “Even your krogan, sir.”

“Pff. He’d have brushed it off like dry leaves on the wind.”

That was probably true. Nihlus dropped his eyes in silent defeat.

“Yet apparently he couldn’t brush off your shot,” the barefaced said after a while, as if thinking out loud.

“I only opened fire when he used biotics on us,” Nihlus said, sensing a potential opening. “I thought his shield would absorb the shot. I didn’t shoot to kill, I swear. I just wanted

to knock him out, so I aimed at the chest. He *should've* brushed it off, like you said. But his shields failed and... somehow the shot went in his neck."

"You mean, you missed."

"No, sir. If I intended to hit him in the neck, I guess I might've missed. But I was going for the center of mass, at close range. I think—" he glanced around at everyone, looking for moral support—"I think the uh... force? of his biotic attack altered the trajectory of the round." But they just stared at him with undiminished disapproval. "I don't even know if that's possible but—"

"It is," said the barefaced.

"—I know I didn't miss," Nihlus finished. It sounded pathetic, but damn, if there was one thing he could rely on in his sorry excuse for a life, no matter the circumstances, it was his aim.

The barefaced held his gaze for a few more beats, then sighed. "Either way, a krogan can survive that kind of injury unless he bleeds out." He turned to the General. "You said the Blood Pack took him?"

The General turned to Nihlus. "Kryik?"

Nihlus was trying to fend off a tide of disproportional relief. The barefaced believed him! Perhaps there was still a chance to get out of this relatively unscathed. He straightened up and cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. I didn't witness it myself, because the biotic attack knocked me out. But my men saw another krogan haul the body onto the gunship, which left in a hurry."

"To save his life," the barefaced said.

Nihlus wanted to say, *I certainly hope they failed!* But the hard edge of his anger was blunted. As long as the krogan lived, he could cling to the hope that the girl didn't die in vain.

"Even if his shields were busted, he should have had his barriers up," the barefaced mused. "What kind of biotic attack did he use?"

Nihlus felt blood rush to his face. "I uh... don't know the word for it, sir."

"Was it like a projectile? Describe it."

"It wasn't a projectile. More like a... cone-shaped... thing," he gestured, feeling intensely inadequate. "About six meters wide at the point where it struck me, some ten meters from him? But it went on for at least as much further."



That was surely the lamest description of anything ever, but the barefaced was nodding. "It just pushed you? It didn't burn your armor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which hand did he use for the biotic attack?"

"Um..." Nihlus closed his eyes, replaying the painful memory. "Left, sir."

"Did he carry a weapon in the other?"

"Yes, sir. A shotgun. An old model. I couldn't tell its make."

"Did he use his omni-tool?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes, sir. On his left hand, sir."

"Anything distinctive about his appearance?"

Nihlus hadn't thought about it, but—"Yes, sir. Insignia on his right shoulder-piece. A double heart."

"What else?"

"Uh..." Nihlus closed his eyes again. "Slight limp on the right side. The fabric of his armor was shredded around the waist. Possibly no longer space-worthy. Unusual skin tone?" He blinked. "I could draw his facial paint if that would help?"

"No need. I know how he looks." The barefaced studied him. His gaze no longer seemed predatory, but it was still making Nihlus's heart race. "You have a good visual memory."

"Yes, sir." It was a curse rather than a blessing. The dead girl's cyanotic face had joined the score of ghosts that haunted his memories together with the krogan's personal description. "Thank you," he added, remembering his manners.

"What would you have done to disable him, had the gunship not been there?"

Nihlus raised his browplates. Did he hear it right? He glanced at the General and at Thadon, but they looked equally surprised. It wasn't hard to remember his reasoning, though.

"I had two men flanking him in an obvious way, and another—Farril—was hidden further behind. He was supposed to make a sudden noise on my mark. When the krogan

turned toward it, Theeka was supposed to hit him in the temple with the butt of her rifle and knock him out while I covered her.” Nihlus felt unusually self-conscious. None of his COs had ever asked him about his field improvisations, especially the failed ones. “I know it wasn’t the most brilliant idea, but—”

“It was the right idea,” the barefaced said. “Likely the *only* right idea in that situation.”

The implied praise made Nihlus swell. “Thank you, sir.”

But the barefaced had already shifted his attention to the General. “I’m done here. I’ll need a transport to take me to the crash site, a terrain vehicle with a week’s worth of supplies, and all the intel you have on the location of the Blood Pack base.”

The General was nodding. “I’ll prep a ground unit to escort you.”

“No. I work alone.”

Nihlus held back a snort. Both the General and Thadon shifted awkwardly in their spots and the lack of an immediate acknowledgment created a tense silence.

“What?” the barefaced said.

“Saren,” the General uttered. Nihlus gasped, but not because of the unexpectedly personal address. It *was* him. “You know I have the utmost respect and admiration for your abilities. But you wouldn’t last a day in the jungle on your own, let alone a week. We train people in basic survival for six months here, and even so we suffer regular losses to things like quick-mud and swamp gasses. Please, trust me on this. If you won’t take a whole unit, let me at least find you a guide.”

The barefaced—Saren—seemed to weigh it carefully, but then waved his head for a negative.

Excitement peaked in Nihlus and he started speaking before he—or anyone else—could stop him.

“Sir? Take me and my men. Nobody knows that part of the jungle as well as we do. We’ve been tracking Blood Pack movements in that area for months and we know their routes and routines. And we’ve seen what your krogan can do. We’ll be ready for it if we face him again.”

“It’s out of the question,” Thadon said. “You and your men are under investigation, pending charges for insubordination. Sir,” he addressed the General, “I strongly caution against allowing this. Kryik is impulsive, strong-headed and unreliable. Not to mention unfit to go out in the field again due to injuries and exhaustion.”

“I’m as fit as I’ll ever be,” Nihlus muttered though his teeth. “Care to test it?”

Thadon's face darkened. He opened his mouth to reply, no doubt with some shitty remark on how this only proved him right. And in a way, it did. Nihlus cursed himself for losing control, and braced himself for the worst. But instead of Thadon, it was the General who spoke.

"Stand down, both of you. And keep your traps shut. No one asked for your opinions." He shot warning glances from Nihlus to Thadon and back. Finally, he turned to the barefaced. "I apologize on behalf of my subordinates. Normally I'd tell you to pay no heed to their bickering, but in this case, they both have a point."

"I don't have time to pick and choose," the barefaced said. He seemed conflicted. "I'll take you and your men," he addressed Nihlus. His eyes assumed that dangerous glow again. "But I won't tolerate disobedience, or any distractions. Do you understand?"

The world shrunk and there was nothing in it except that bare face and those cold, fiery eyes. Nihlus experienced a moment of pristine clarity and knew without a doubt that his life was about to take a strange turn, for better or for worse, and that there would be no going back.

He smiled. "Yes, sir!"

## Chapter 6 - The Boy

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Saren wasn't sure if he was pleased or annoyed with how the situation had developed. Perhaps a bit of both.

Baratus insisted on escorting him as far as the Trodar base, a small spaceport a hundred kilometers from Hierote proper. The sky-car ride took no more than half an hour even with the night traffic but sitting in silence the whole while with that boy, Kryik, staring at him in awe, was awkward. Baratus had reports to read and didn't even attempt to provide conversation. That was fine. He hated small talk and he wouldn't be comfortable speaking of private things in front of the boy. But if Baratus had nothing more to say to him, what was the purpose of his company?

Perhaps he too was irritated by the boy's presence. An entire menagerie of stench emanated from him. Sweat, smoke, dirt, oil, foliage, and more: alien scents native to Invictus he couldn't even name. As Saren looked at him, wrinkling his nose in an exaggerated display of discomfort, the boy averted his eyes. Good.

His bravado had waned considerably since the debriefing. Once removed from the offending presence of his CO, he started to show signs of acute exhaustion. Saren wondered at the wisdom of taking him along. He was sure he'd wonder about it many times again. But Baratus had left him little choice. To insist on proceeding alone would have attracted too much attention. And the boy *had* made an impression.

Disregarding the smell, he was not entirely displeasing to behold. He was tall, athletic and agile; dark-skinned and green-eyed. His colors were faint, but not so far as to conceal an intricate variation of the Borena design with several unique improvisations. The artistry was very fine. Exquisite, even, and certainly atypical for the lower tiers. It gave his face an air of refinement that stood in sharp contrast with the soiled uniform and the brash behavior.

Their transport was already waiting in the spaceport. Baratus took them through a labyrinth of shortcuts between the buildings on foot, to minimize exposure, but they were still greeted at every other corner with tiresome saluting.

"How far is the crash site?" Saren asked while walking.

"About seven hundred clicks north-west, sir," Kryik replied. "The ride will take two and a half hours."

"How long till daylight?"

Kryik brought his omni up for a brief glance. “Sunrise is in seven hours, sir. But it will be ten before daylight in the jungle.”

Saren grunted. All things considered, it was strange that he had never been to the famous jungles of Invictus before. He didn’t know what to make of everyone’s ominous warnings. Either the locals made it their business to hype it up as a show of colonial pride, or this mission was about to get even uglier.

A warm, dry wind slashed over the runways. The sand in it looked like orange rain, dancing in the headlights of the transport. Kryik’s men were loading bags and equipment in it with a remarkable lack of enthusiasm. Their ponderous movements reminded Saren of just how tired he was himself. Despite his rigorous training regime and the state-of-the-art hydraulics in his suit, he was feeling the high gravity. The short walk had given him a workout.

Baratus leaned close and spoke to him in a low voice. “Would you like to—”

Saren just shook his head. He didn’t want the boy to notice he was out of breath.

“Alright.” Baratus cleared his throat. “Kryik?”

The boy snapped to attention. “Sir!”

“There’s no time for a formal briefing, but I take it you understand what you’re supposed to do?”

“Yes, sir. Escort the Spectre from the LZ to the crash site and afterwards provide ground support in the search for the Shi—the Blood Pack base and the retrieval of the krogan target, who is hopefully alive.”

Baratus shot a glance at Saren, who answered with a nod.

“For the duration of this mission, you and your men are to follow Saren’s orders directly—and without questioning. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll have to brief your men on the way. Make it clear who’s in charge. You’re to treat this as a recon mission and avoid engagement unless ordered otherwise. No heroics, and no bullshit.”

“Yes, sir. I heard you the first time, sir.”

Baratus snorted and shook his head, but he was smiling.

Saren wasn’t. He hated goodbyes.

“I hope to see you again, old friend.” Baratus put an arm on his shoulder and squeezed, but Saren could feel nothing through the armor.

“As do I.”

Saren jerked, grabbed his seat for support, looked about wildly. Where the hell—

Invictus. Transport. Flying to the jungle with the boy and his squad. He had changed sceneries far too many times in the past few days and it was starting to show.

The dream—it had been a nightmare. He couldn’t remember what about, but his pulse was racing, hard and loud in his ears. Had he shouted out?

All the soldiers were sleeping, as far as he could tell in his bewilderment, so no, he probably hadn’t. The boy was awake, though. And watching him with rapt attention. Had he been watching him in his sleep too?

“What are you looking at?” Saren said in a haggard voice.

The boy started to say something, but then hurriedly looked away. Saren let go of the seat and cleared his throat. He had no sense whatsoever of how long he’d slept. The transport had no viewports, and the lights were the same yellow they had been when they had started the journey. He glanced at his omni but the local time made no sense to him yet.

“What’s our ETA?”

“Half an hour, sir.”

He surveyed the faces of the sleeping soldiers. A unit of eight, including the boy. Most of them seemed to be older, and with the exception of the young man with violet markings of distant Rubori ancestry whose armor still looked relatively new, all appeared more battle-hardened than Kryik. Appearances could be deceiving, though. Saren took the opportunity to study the boy’s face while he was gazing down at his dirty boots. He could have been, what? Nineteen? Twenty?

Saren could always look it up in his service record. He had downloaded it to his omni already. But he was too sleepy to read. He had also downloaded the file with basic intel on Okeer, to give the boy an idea of what he had gotten his squad into. But for the moment, it was irrelevant. Saren had to assume Okeer was dead no matter how much he hoped, and feared, otherwise.

“Is this the only unit under your command?”

The boy looked up. "Yes, sir."

"So someone else is securing the crash site?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who?"

The boy brought his omni up. "Uh... Lieutenant Dinara Olore, sir."

"Do you know her?"

"Yes, sir. Pretty well, in fact. In a professional way, of course." A blush darkened his neck. "I'm not... we aren't... we're just friends."

For a moment, Saren was speechless. *And then they wonder why I work alone.*

"Is she competent?"

"Yes, sir."

They sat in silence for a while. The heady droning of the transport threatened to put him to sleep again, so he busied himself eating some energy bars. The vat-grown food disgusted him enough to kill his appetite if it could not sate it. He hadn't had time to pack anything else.

He checked his pistols, checked the weather forecast, checked the small dent on his helmet, possibly created in the impact with his forehead back in space. At last there was nothing left to check and he tried to relax, studying his hands as they lay in his lap. Restlessness didn't become him.

"Sir?" Kryik said as soon as he settled down.

"Yes."

"I want to thank you for supporting me earlier. And for agreeing to take me on this mission." He paused, perhaps expecting some reply. "It wasn't at all how I imagined that debriefing would go."

Saren's silence seemed to unnerve him. He shifted in his seat, opening and closing his mandibles several times as if he couldn't make up his mind whether to say more.

"I uh..." he cleared his throat. "Not sure if it's my place to ask, sir, but uh... we were never properly introduced."

"I know your name," Saren said. "And you know mine." Unless you're retarded.

The boy smiled as if he'd heard Saren's thoughts loud and clear. "Yes, sir. But just to make sure — you *are* Saren Arterius, right?"

"What of it?"

The awe was back in the boy's eyes. "It's an honor to be at your service, sir. That's all."

Saren grunted. He had heard similar declarations countless times before, but few had been sincere. Kryik seemed genuinely starstruck. It was embarrassing.

To avoid furthering the conversation, Saren turned up his omni and started flipping through the map of the region they were flying over. There seemed to be nothing there to engage his mind. For miles unending, it was all the same: water, mud, trees. The terrain was sloping down at a steady pace in the direction of their flight. They had already passed the Kirreanean Mountains—the long, nearly straight range that kept the desert out of the jungle and the jungle out of the desert—and now they were well inside the drainage basin of the river Ibiss, where the Wisp had crashed.

A flash of light drew his attention. Kryik brought up his omni too, and a request for a shared channel started blinking in a corner of Saren's interface. Their eyes met, and Saren decided to accept the offer before the boy had a chance to start talking again. After a second, he found his maps were being updated. Kryik sent him raw reconnaissance data: defensible areas, natural cover, wildlife activity, suspected and confirmed enemy positions, anomalies in seismic and sonic scans and a myriad of other points of interest. The crash site was labeled, as well as the settlement where Okeer had landed, with a pin at the precise spot where the gunship battle had taken place and its flight path extrapolated a klick downstream. Saren couldn't remember when he'd last seen recon with this level of detail or quality.

"Too bad it's for the wrong side of the river," he said.

The boy flicked a mandible in a wry smile, catching the covert compliment.

Saren checked the time. Their ETA was ten minutes. The men were still sleeping. And then suddenly, they were not. Kryik sat straight up, reaching for his earpiece, and the soldiers all snapped awake at once in reaction to something Saren wasn't privy to. They started checking their straps, weapons and helmets.

"Jammed?" Kryik was saying. "How's that possible? Give me the ground team. Dinara? Dinara, I can barely hear you!"

"What's going on?" Saren said, putting on his helm. "Patch me in, damn you!"

"We're going in hot," Kryik said, and then there was a cacophony of sounds in Saren's earpiece. Mostly white noise with flicks and clicks of the jammer, but there was also a woman's voice coming through in discrete packages.



“Ship... power... locked out... watch for... shit!”

Another voice, presumably that of their pilot, joined in to say, “Sarge! The nav is fucked!”

“Switch to visual and land us immediately,” Kryik said.

“We’re halfway across the river. Do I turn back or...?”

“No. Go for the far side. But—”

“Shit! Incoming!”

A sudden change of direction yanked Saren off his chair. The straps tightened around his chest and waist with enough force to wind him, and then another change of direction slammed him back into the hard seat. He barely had time to register the sharp pain climbing up his spine when a detonation sent the shuttle reeling. Muffled yelling reached him through his closed helmet. It was close, but they weren’t hit. Lights went off and a few seconds of total deafness and disorientation followed before the starboard thrusters kicked in with another violent jolt. A shower of sparks sprouted from a blown service panel. For a moment Saren was weightless and inertia wrenched at his guts. The shuttle hit the treetops then, bouncing and shaking as if it was going to fall apart any moment. Deceleration piled him on top of the man sitting next to him. Wild rustling, scratching and snapping enveloped them from all sides like they were falling into an overgrown well. And then suddenly all sounds stopped. Saren braced for impact, but the touchdown was fairly gentle, considering.

Nothing happened for a few seconds as everyone struggled to get their bearings in complete darkness. Saren tried to switch to night vision, but his visor wasn’t responding. He lifted it up and smelled burnt polymer and torn foliage.

“Duon!” the boy said through the intercom. “Report!”

“We’re... Sarge! ...weren’t hit! Primary... undamaged. But... where we are, and... ground.”

“Ah, shit. Looks... jammed too. Casualties?”

The last word did not come over the intercom. Kryik had raised his visor, and the others were presumably doing the same.

“I think I dislocated a shoulder,” said a female voice.

“Anyone else? No? Good.”

“My visor isn’t working,” said a different female voice.

“Mine neither,” the boy said. An orange light flickered for a moment from the direction where the boy sat, then went out. “Nor my omni.”

Saren checked his own omni then, as did everyone else.

“Whatever jammed our nav is messing with the suits too,” said someone third.

“Farril, go see if Duon needs help. And tell him to get the emergency lights on.”

“Yes, sir.”

It sounded like Kryik and his men were unbuckling and getting up. Saren did so too. A bolt of pain shot up from his lower back but his grunt was lost among many just like it. He took a poorly thought-out step forward and collided with someone.

“Pardon me, sir,” the boy said. “I’m going to open the hatch and take a look outside. If you could just—”

Saren felt a pair of hands on his shoulders, trying to steer him clockwise. He stood his ground and spoke in a low voice. “What the hell just happened, Kryik?”

“I don’t know, sir. Looks like we were targeted by a missile, but the nearest AA gun managed to blow it up in the nick of time.”

“The Blood Pack?”

“That’d be a first. The day they start taking down planes, it’s open war. But who the fuck knows? They’re a bunch of crazy bastards. Uh. Pardon my language, sir. But I’ve also never heard of them disrupting equipment or jamming comms, at least not successfully. Tech isn’t their strongest suit.”

There was only one explanation. It had to be the Wisp, somehow. Okeer was certainly both crazy and skilled enough to set her up for something like this. It wasn’t a thing to expect from a supposedly crashed ship, though.

The hands on his shoulders tried to exert force on him again. “Sir?”

“Carry on,” he muttered and moved aside to let the boy through.

At least one more person moved past him and joined Kryik at the hatch. Rattling and clanking of manual override ensued, followed by a loud bang and cursing. But then the hatch hissed open and Saren could finally see something: a square patch of slightly lighter darkness to his left. A wave of damp, chilly air reeking of water and rotting plants broke in and Saren wrinkled his nose. He hated swamps.

“Got them lights, Sarge,” the pilot yelled from the cockpit. Strips of uniform red glow came to life on the floor and the walls, revealing a crowd of bulky, armored figures packed too closely in the cramped space.

“Awesome. Prepare to move out.”

For a moment, only the heads moved, looking around, and then everyone seemed to stir at once. But the boy had already gone out. Saren followed.

He looked skyward out of habit, only to remember just how long it had taken the shuttle to breach the canopy above them. A handful of objects in the immediate vicinity of the hatch were discernible by the ghastly outlines from the emergency lights: a low-hanging, twisted branch, the stem and several large leaves of some tall herb leaning over the hatch at an odd angle, and the restless shapes of two turians scanning the darkness around with the sights of their assault rifles. He lowered himself onto the ground.

“Watch your step, sir—” the boy said, and Saren was just about to bark something about being perfectly able to take care of himself when his left foot sank ankle-deep into mud, making him stumble forward. A strong hand caught him by the arm and prevented the fall. “The ground isn’t solid.”

“I can’t see,” Saren growled.

“Neither can we, sir. It takes a few minutes to adjust.”

“I know that!” He brushed off the helping hand. “Don’t you have flashlights?”

“Yes, sir. But we should avoid using them if we can.”

That actually made sense. *Someone* had shot at them, after all.

But then Kryik added, “Because of the critters.”

“Critters,” Saren enunciated, unsure if the boy had been serious.

“It’s no joke, sir,” said a new voice, coming from the direction of the hatch. Its owner carried two large bundles, one in each hand, but somehow managed to avoid stepping into the mud patch where Saren had got stuck, and landed both quietly and gracefully.

Saren realized he could see now. Mostly just the solid forms of the shuttle and the tree-trunks, and the diffuse mass of foliage that swayed in the barely perceptible wind, but that was more than before.

“There’s a species of bat in this region with wing-span of almost a meter,” the new man was saying. He put the bags on the ground and seemed to face Saren. “It’s stupid and harmless but it can knock out a grown man if it hits the headlight at full speed. And there are several kinds of disease-carrying mosquitoes in the swamp. Tree-bark slugs and mud-leeches are attracted to light too. The slugs are just an annoyance, but the leeches are sensitive to heat, and can crawl up the suit and get inside without you noticing.”

Saren started to seal his helmet half-way through the lecture, but the inactive visor would only cripple his vision even further. He could already hear mosquitoes buzzing around his face and leeches creeping up his legs from the mud.

“No need to worry about catching anything, though, if you got inoculated,” the man added as if he could sense Saren’s sudden discomfort. “You did get inoculated, right?”

“No need. I get Multivax twice a year.”

“Multi is ineffective against two dozen Invictus diseases, and as many imported ones that developed local adaptations. I’m surprised they didn’t stick you as soon as you landed.”

Saren reached for his omni to verify but remembered halfway through the motion that his omni was dead. Could it be that the medical department of the ST&R was unaware of this? Surely he wasn’t the first Spectre to ever set foot on Invictus.

The boy groaned. “Damn. I thought the General took care of that. Didn’t occur to me to ask. I’m really sorry, sir.”

“It’s no big deal, Sarge,” said the new man. “I can fix him up right away. An hour here or there won’t make a big difference.”

“Fix me up,” Saren echoed, weaving a warning into his undertones. He didn’t appreciate being talked about like he wasn’t present.

“Yes, sir,” the man said. “With a vaccine. I have a dozen spare shots.” He got down on one knee and started feeling one of the bundles he’d dropped, and then abruptly stood up again. “Pardon my manners, sir. My name is Pan Igravani. I’m the squad medic.”

Saren grunted an acknowledgment. In the meantime, another man jumped out of the shuttle, followed by a heavy bag that someone threw out behind him. He caught it and lowered it down, and then there was another. The boy was giving the two point men some instructions, but Saren couldn’t hear what.

“This vaccine,” he said at last, “does it affect combat readiness?”

“It’s not unheard of, sir, but the effects are mostly mild. You might get a headache or suffer a low fever. Nothing serious, though. Certainly nothing compared to the afflictions you’d risk without it. Some of which are deadly.”

Saren vacillated. “Does it affect biotics?”

Even after all the years in service, with all the confidence he’d accumulated and his inherent disinterest in the opinions of others, it was still hard to broach the topic when talking with the uninitiated.

“Uh... No idea, sir.”

Saren didn't need to see the man's face to know the expression on it. Alarm, anxiety, apprehension—those were the stock responses. Sometimes flavored with disdain, sometimes with distrust. For the most progressive culture in the Galaxy, turians were remarkably slow to get over the stigma of biotics. In part because the Cabals preferred it so, but Saren abhorred this policy. To tolerate prejudice was bad enough; to spread and support it was outright disgusting. But the damage had been done long before his day, and he was likely the last person in existence to try correcting it.

The boy, on the other hand, gasped with unguarded surprise. “You're a biotic?” Apparently, he'd managed to get himself back within earshot just in time to witness the exchange. “That's fucking awesome!”

Saren bit back a cutting remark. The sincerity in the boy's voice was disarming.

“Uh... pardon my language, sir. I've never met a turian biotic before, much less worked alongside one.” He coughed, or laughed. Saren couldn't tell in the dark. But he sounded genuinely excited. “Looking forward to seeing you in action. But please take the shot. I'm sure people who make them know what they're doing.”

“You'd be surprised.” He almost went on to educate the boy on the harsh reality of what sort of people ran the dextro pharmaceutical companies, but something *was* buzzing inside his helmet. He took it off and waved his hand in the air. Damn this place! “Alright.”

The medic crouched again and rummaged through his bag. How the hell could he see anything? By now Saren could see the men and the growing pile of equipment on the ground, silhouetted against a faint hint of diffuse light from up ahead. The river? With starlight above the water?

“Here we go, sir,” the medic said.

He stepped forward and felt Saren's neck with gloved hands. Saren clenched his mandibles and held his breath. Damn Baratus for failing to think of this back in the city! His heart was beating way too fast, and then it nearly stopped when the inquisitive, intrusive fingers brushed the amplifiers behind his jaw. But they went on with their examination without a comment, and then stopped about halfway down to the collar. There was a soft hiss from the subdermal injector, and a brief sense of unnatural warmth on his skin, and then it was over.

“Let me know if you experience anything... out of the ordinary, sir.”

Saren muttered an affirmative and replaced his helmet. It looked like the last of the men had evacuated the shuttle. They were strapping on their backpacks and communicating in quick, hushed bursts he couldn't catch. The medic stepped away and leaned over the

only person who was sitting down, presumably the female with the dislocated arm. Only one bag remained on the ground. Saren suppressed an annoyed sigh and picked it up. He hated teamwork.

“Sir?” said the boy, who was somehow right next to him again. “The river is that way,” he pointed ahead, “and the crash site is that way.” He pointed behind the shuttle.

“What makes you think so?”

“The lights, sir. This way. See?”

Saren followed the boy a few steps away from the shuttle, trying to copy his every move, since he could still make out nothing on the ground. Looking up, he saw that the trees and the shuttle were silhouetted in the direction of the boy’s outstretched hand by an indistinct orange glow.

It was possible. It fit with the map locations he’d memorized. And it didn’t look like they had much of a choice anyway. Staying put until first light was out of the question: it was still hours away, and they were sitting targets here.

“That’s where we go, then,” he said.

“Sir, we have to assume the site’s been compromised. I need to know what kind of training you have.”

“Advanced Combat, Advanced Tactical, Basic Space, but all that was years ago,” Saren said simply. No point in beating around the bush. He was no soldier, not anymore. “Spectre training, obviously.”

“Obviously.” The boy seemed to deliberate. “We’ll treat you as a non-combatant for now. That ok?”

Saren snorted. “Of course not. But there’s no time to argue, so I’ll let it slide.”

“Glad to hear it, sir, because it’d be a pain to try and adapt to a new rotation in these conditions. Uh... You ok with taking my orders during combat?”

The little bastard was on his own turf now and suddenly he was cocksure again. Saren could hear it in his voice. It was supposed to be unnerving, but he was amused. “Of course not,” he repeated. “But I’ll let that slide as well, for now.”

He could swear he heard the boy smiling.

“What of the shuttle, sir?”

“What of it?”

“We may not be able to find this place again unless we leave its locator beacon on, which might invite unwanted attention. And even if we find the place, the shuttle may not be here anymore. Lighter craft’s been known to sink in the swamps and disappear without a trace.”

“Charming.”

The boy laughed. “Yes, sir. That’s Invictus for you.”

“Do you propose to split your unit?”

“You mean, leave a team behind to guard the shuttle?”

Saren shrugged. He didn’t care. In his experience, it would all go to hell sooner or later regardless.

“I’d rather not, sir. We don’t know what’s out there.” Saren could see him gesturing in the direction of the crash site with his chin. “But it’s up to you. I just wanted to make sure you understand the situation.”

“Very well. Seal the shuttle and leave it.”

At that, a groan of sudden pain and a heavy curse, muffled by a closed helmet, reached them.

“I guess Theeka’s shoulder’s been fixed,” the boy muttered.

“Good. Time to move out. We’ve lingered here for too long already.”

In truth, it hadn’t been more than ten minutes since their haphazard landing. Kryik and his men were efficient. From the way they moved through near-perfect darkness one would never guess they weren’t using night vision. Only Saren was unsure of his footing.

After the talking had ceased, he became keenly aware of a myriad of alien sounds coming from all directions. Animal cries, some distant, some alarmingly close, occasionally rose above the background of the strangely melodious buzzing of the insects mixed with rhythmic night-bird calls on tireless repeat. His augmented hearing picked up the scurrying, scratching and milling of a thousand tiny creatures in a twenty-meter radius around their path. The unseen branches and shrubbery teemed with life. He fancied shifty glowing eyes staring at them through the foliage, and thought he was starting to see things until one of them suddenly flew into his face, struck him square in the nose and buzzed off. Insects.

The air was very still and moist and stunk of wet, dead things. Saren was out of breath and perspired profusely. The backpack he carried for the injured female on top of his bag must have weighed at least thirty kilos, and his back still hurt from his own mishaps during the landing. It was a hard, long trudge, even though the boy had claimed they were only about a klick from the crash site.

By degrees, however, the lights ahead started providing a semblance of illumination. Saren saw that two men were walking point and one of them was occasionally clearing the path for the rest of the squad using some sort of machete. Another two men followed, scanning their sectors with weapons at the ready, and then went the boy and himself.

They halted and crouched behind trees in pairs without any perceptible communication.

"It's too quiet," the boy said. "I don't like it."

"You suspect an ambush?"

"Perhaps." He turned to face Saren. "I'm worried about your armor, sir. It's, um... very nice, but it identifies you as a valuable target."

Saren glanced down. His outfit did indeed stand out. "It has a passive cloaking function," he muttered. "Normally its colors adapt to match the surroundings."

"Ohhh. The chameleon finish," the boy said dreamily. "I've read about it on the extranet but I didn't know there were working prototypes outside the Alliance labs." He absently touched Saren's left arm. "It's amazing."

Saren brushed his hand away. "Nothing that can be disabled this easily qualifies as amazing."

"Sorry, sir."

"Shut up. Let me think."

"Yes, sir."

Saren looked around. The ground was covered with a network of saplings, moss and roots, but it was wet. Everything was wet here. He tried to scoop up some wet dirt and smear it over his chest.

"Good idea, sir." The boy felt around a bit, then pushed his right hand through a soft spot and brought back a fistful of clingy, reeking mud. He then applied it to Saren's back and shoulders, while Saren worked on his front and legs. "There. Now you look and smell almost as bad as one of us."



“Shut up and move out.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” He signaled the order. To Saren he added, “You’re with me.”

The unit started to move forward in an overwatch pattern, two by two. Saren readied his pistol and copied the boy’s movements as close as he could. Muscle memory kicked in, from all the drills in basic training. Even as tired and weighed down as he was, he could still execute the tactic effectively, if not as smoothly as Kryik’s men.

Kryik moved with speed and ease, even though his backpack was twice the size of what Saren carried. But there was more to it than brute strength. There was an elegance in his motion, a predatory grace suggesting training beyond mere field experience. Once again, Saren wondered how old “the boy” really was.

When they reached the point from which the thorium flares that gave off the light could be clearly seen, Kryik gave a signal and half his men — a team of four — disappeared between the trees off to the right, presumably to flank the potential hostiles. The rest of them crept closer on all fours.

It was the crash site, alright. The Wisp had cleared and scorched a circle about thirty meters in diameter, but it could hardly be called a crater, and the wreckage appeared to be in far better shape than Saren would have expected. The flares kept the center of the clearing well lit, but outside of their effective range, they were more trouble than help, leaving white blanks and trails in their unshielded, darkness-adapted eyes. There were no bodies around the ship, and as far as Saren could tell, were no signs of combat either.

Kryik lifted his arm to signal for movement again, then froze in mid-motion when a creepy, yet strangely familiar bird call rolled over to their ears.

“Thank the Spirits,” Kryik said and rolled over on his back, visibly deflating. The other men with them suddenly relaxed too.

“What was that?”

“The hoobekay call, sir.”

“Right.” The hoobekay, a majestic bird of prey endemic to Palaven and the emblem of the Hierarchy, sang a mating song that no known sapient species other than turians could mimic. That too was taught in basic training, but Saren had forgotten it completely. It meant, *friendlies*.

Kryik cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and let out a reply-call, spicing it up with a rich selection of low order harmonics. It was quite the performance. Kryik was out to make an impression, and he was doing a decent job—if one disregarded the fact that a fine singing voice counted for exactly nothing in his line of work.

In Saren's, however, there was a use for every conceivable talent.

## Chapter 7 - Crash Site

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“Nihlus, is that you?” a familiar female voice called out from somewhere behind the wreckage.

“Dinara?”

At that, there was definite movement in the poorly lit growth on the other side of the clearing, and an un-helmeted turian head emerged into view. Nihlus got up and stepped out of cover, keeping his weapon politely pointed down.

“Nihlus, thank the Spirits it’s you,” Dinara said, going fully out of cover herself. Coming from one of the few surviving families from the first wave of colonization, she was short, bulky, and incredibly bossy. “I was afraid that damned torpedo blew you to bits.” She covered the distance between them in fast strides as she spoke, and touched the side of Nihlus’s helmet in a gesture of motherly affection. He smiled, but backed away as soon as he could.

“It sure looks like you were expecting someone else,” he said. The rest of both squads came forth from their hiding places and waved vaguely to each other. They were all formally stationed at Trodar, and Nihlus recognized more than a few faces. One of them was, in fact, intimately familiar. He tried not to stare.

“There’s too much going on under the trees tonight,” she said. “I had to be sure.” Her eyes were drawn to something behind him. He felt more than heard Saren approaching; his presence went in front of him like an electric field, tingling at the border of senses, invisible yet nearly tangible. Could it be his biotics?

“Where did that torpedo come from?” Saren said, directing it to nobody in particular.

“Who the hell are you?” said Dinara.

“A Spectre.”

“Ah. Should’ve guessed. You people follow trouble like thunder follows the clouds. Or is it the other way around?”

Nihlus froze, expecting some humiliating rebuttal from Saren. None came. He didn’t even look at her, busy studying the wreck instead. “The Wisp fired it, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

Nihlus turned to follow their stares. The Wisp was sitting at an odd angle, her nose deformed beyond recognition and stuck a good few meters into the ground; the wings

were burned to bare fuselage, and the midsection was charred and blackened. There was a prolate breach along the main seam running the top of the ship. Only the tail kept some of its hull plating and bluish paint. Nihlus thought he could see a part of a big asari letter 'p' under the smoke stains.

It was almost miraculous that the ship survived the descent in such a good condition. Judging from the shape of the wings, she was built for speed planet-side; surely she had reached a high velocity prior to impact. Nihlus looked up and around, and formed a theory.

"Must have grazed that ganut before hitting the ground," he said, pointing up with his chin. The giant tree guarding the perimeter of the clearing from the north had lost much of its lush crown, including two hollow branches wide enough for a grown man to crawl through, torn off from the trunk.

Saren looked in the direction of his gaze, then back to the Wisp. He said nothing.

Dinara shifted from foot to foot. "Who cares how she got this way? What matters is, she still has power and weapons, and something that's been jamming the hell out of all our equipment. If I called the shots, I'd just blow her to the sky and be done with it."

"I need to get inside," Saren said, ignoring her statement, though it was clearly intoned like a question.

"Well you obviously don't need *my* blessing."

Nihlus shot her a warning glance. But she didn't catch it, and Saren was acting like she didn't exist at all. "Get your techs to assist me." With that, he started toward the ship in carefully measured steps.

"Yeah? Shall I get you a glass of wine and a back-rub too?" Dinara murmured behind his back. "Arrogant, entitled prick." She turned to Nihlus. "What did you do to deserve such cruel and unusual punishment?"

Dinara was one of the few officers of IIC that Nihlus actually liked: for her courage and uncompromising attitude. Which had likely brought her to the pinnacle of her career prematurely. She could either stay there or decline; there was little hope for advancement. A situation marginally better than his own. They were both the sort of turian who would be better off not even hoping to climb past the first few tiers. But unlike him, she had a commission, a mate, and two children. A life to go back to after completing shitty missions. All he had were memories of failed ambitions.

He shook his head. "Lost control of the situation. Been told not to shoot, but shot anyway. Same old. I'm sure Thadon would've discharged me on the spot if not for that guy."

He cocked his head to indicate Saren. "So I uh... volunteered to escort him. Looked like the only way out, to be honest."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," she said. "That one's bad news, I tell you. Watch your back, Nihlus, and don't stick your neck out if you don't have to."

He made a non-committal noise in reply. Dinara would probably laugh her ass off if he was to tell her why he *really* volunteered for this mission. Spectres were the closest thing he had to coming-of-age heroes. You don't miss the opportunity to walk alongside your hero, even if there's no hope you could ever walk in his footsteps.

Mistaking his mood, she put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't let them grind you down, buddy."

Nihlus gave her a stiff smile. Why did he elicit this protective behavior in mature people? The ones who paid him a different kind of attention were always the restless, thrill-seeker types, like Theeka. And Iana.

He cast about as discreetly as he could manage. Theeka was sitting with Pan not far away. As fierce as she was in combat, she had a whiny streak when it came to injuries. Duon was standing next to them, conveniently looking his way. Nihlus pointed in Saren's direction and signaled a silent order.

"Iana?" Dinara exclaimed, turning left and right. Everyone looked up and Nihlus cringed. Theeka's features sharpened and when she looked at Nihlus, her expression was no longer worried. It was murderous. "Where the hell has she gone off to," Dinara grumbled. She went for her earpiece, then cursed and tapped her forehead.

"Here she comes," Nihlus said, struggling to keep from smiling. Iana was jogging over from under the starboard wing of the ship, where she had been busy using her wrench, or pretending to. She tried to avoid looking at him, but it didn't quite work out, and when their eyes met, both of them cleared their throats in highly suspicious sync.

Their thing was an odd one. Per her declaration, which was supported by multiple witness accounts, she didn't normally date men. But Nihlus was a lucky exception. Not that they were really dating, though. They arranged... wrestling matches. Iana was great at hand-to-hand, but unlike Theeka, she didn't mind submitting to a superior opponent. Being a superior opponent, Nihlus suspected, summed up his sex appeal in this case, but he didn't mind. They barely ever spoke outside their romps and only met when she called, which hadn't happened in a long while. It suited him just fine. He wasn't indifferent, though. It was nice to see her.

"Sorry, m'am," Iana said, a bit out of breath. "I was just—"

"Never mind. Go see what the Spectre wants."

“The Spectre?”

“Over there,” Dinara said. She clicked her fingers in front of Iana’s face, treacherously turned toward Nihlus, and pointed at Saren and Duon.

“Yes, m’am.” Iana smiled apologetically, put her wrench on the pile of other equipment, and jogged away.

Dinara huffed. “What do you think he’s after?”

“Hm?”

“The Spectre.”

“Oh.” Nihlus shrugged. His guess would be that Saren wanted to download the logs from the Wisp’s VI. But it was impolite of Dinara to ask. Even if he knew, he’d be obliged to keep a lid on it.

Saren and the two techs were standing several meters from what could have been the hatch of the Wisp’s airlock, and there was far too much gesturing on top of their conversation for comfort. Nihlus nodded at Dinara and walked toward them.

The smell of burnt wood rose from the ground everywhere, but as he approached the wreck, he could also pick up burnt plastics, rubber and paint from the plating, as well as the cryo-foam Dinara’s men must have used to put out the fires when they arrived. Carbonated bits and pieces, mixed with shattered glass and assorted misc debris crunched under his feet. The Wisp must have packed some state of the art engineering to remain structurally sound even after losing her plating and diving nose-first into dirt. Nihlus wondered what she had been used for. Despite the weapons, she hardly qualified as a warship. She was too small to carry smuggled goods or people, and too large to be a racer. Some rich bastard’s pleasure boat? Would that krogan qualify as such? Nihlus itched to know more, but it wasn’t his place to ask.

Saren was turned away from him. “Don’t you have a spare?” he heard him say to Duon.

“Yes and no. I can change the hardware, but it’s the software that matters. I have things on my omni that even an esteemed Spectre such as yourself wouldn’t be able to find replacements for. With all due respect, sir.”

“Duon!” Nihlus said, mortified. Dinara’s informality wasn’t his problem, but the conduct of the men under his command *was*.

Saren didn’t appear to be fazed at all, though, as Nihlus saw when he stepped into the circle, squeezing in between him and Iana, who was flipping through flickering screens on her omni. If anything, Saren looked tired.

“Sorry, Sarge,” Duon said, deflating. “Sorry, sir. But without my omni, I’m about as useful as a plugged asshole.”

Iana chuckled, and even Saren’s mandible twitched, if only a little bit. Nihlus relaxed.

“What happened to your omni?”

“I don’t know. Bumped it one times too many on our joyride back there, I suppose.” He spread his mandibles to dismiss Nihlus’s concern. The silver of his facial paint reflected the distant lights, taking on a golden hue. “I’ll get it fixed, don’t worry.”

“Ok, I’ve got it,” Iana said. She was typing into the haptic interface faster than Nihlus’s eyes could follow.

“What are we doing?” he said.

“Trying to isolate the frequency of the jammer,” Duon replied. “That’s the first order of business if we’re to make any progress. The Spectre wants to get inside the ship.”

“Getting in won’t be a problem,” Saren said.

“You have the entry codes?” Nihlus said.

“Yes.”

Interesting. Or maybe not. Nihlus found it difficult to imagine the level of access Saren must have wielded.

“Can’t you use the codes to shut down the jammer?”

“Not while my omni-tool is jammed, obviously.”

Nihlus shook his head. *Idiot*. But then he realized something didn’t add up.

“How come your omni works?” he asked Iana.

“It’s an antiquated piece of shit, that’s how. Like five generations behind the standard service stuff. Operates in a different range. I still get interference, but it’s workable.”

“Why would you carry such outdated hardware?” Saren asked.

“What Duon said, sir. Because I have shit on it that won’t work on newer models and can’t be replaced. Like this decryption thingie. Almost there. Almost...”

Duon stepped behind her to watch. His fingers were twitching, going through the motions.

“Let it run a few more iterations,” he murmured. “The closer you can get the better.”

“No shit. At this resolution, it’ll never converge. But fine, there, just for you.”

Saren clasped his hands behind his back and lowered his head. A gesture of patience? Impatience? Nihlus couldn’t read anything from his face.

“How come you didn’t do this as soon as you arrived?” he said to fill the silence.

“Uh... The jammer only kicked in an hour ago or so, *sir*.” She glanced at him over the top of the screen with a small, devilish smile. The yessir, nosir thing was... a thing, for her. Nihlus barely kept from reacting. “The ship is acting erratic... the VI probably malfunctioned but didn’t die, so it’s doing stuff at random when it can draw enough power... like auto-targeting anything large enough to be another ship. We started the scan immediately, but without a limit on the range, decryption can take hours. Good thing the Spectre could provide the limits.”

“You seem to know a lot about this ship, sir.”

Saren glanced at him, but didn’t offer an explanation.

“Gotcha,” Iana said, and made a triumphant jab into the interface. She tapped her earpiece then, and said, “We’re back in business, ladies and gentlemen.”

An echo of her words arrived through Nihlus’s earpiece with a small lag. Suddenly, there were orange lights flashing all over the clearing as everybody brought up their omnis, and the intercom was soon flooded with chatter. Duon and a few others pulled down the visors of their helmets for privacy. Nihlus did the same, and the first thing he saw on it was a request to switch to a private channel. From Saren. He took the call.

“I won’t tolerate questioning either.”

His voice was cold like dark space.

“Yes, sir. Sorry—”

The channel closed.

*Imbecile. Moron. Retard. Fool.*

Duon’s voice awoke Nihlus from an uneasy drowse. “Sarge? You better come over here.”

He sat up and surveyed the situation. Dinara was alert and keeping things tight. Neither Theeka nor Iana were around. He could just see them walking amiably away from the clearing to test each other’s hand-to-hand prowess with sharpened talons and bared teeth behind the bush. The local extranet would have a blast. *Two women sustain heavy injuries in a duel over a homosexual man.* Or, not to be so grim—*After a ritual duel over a*



*man, two women enter a committed relationship and adopt an elcor baby. An IIC official attending the adoption ceremony points out the stark contrast between reality and the malicious rumors of rampant discrimination in the turian army, perpetrated by the enemies of the Hierarchy.*

“Sarge?” Duon called again.

“On my way.”

Nihlus stood up gingerly, stretched, grunted at sharp pain in his abdomen. He was still not completely healed and the nap made him feel even more tired than he was before. It had been a good several hours now since Hierote, he reasoned, and administered himself a shot of stims. Ahhh. Much better.

The many comings and goings to and from the Wisp had created a sort of a path cutting across the clearing to the airlock. They had had to dig to free the outer hatch, which was near the nose; and when Saren had unlocked it, they had had to dig through the debris on the other side. Nihlus slid down the trench to the airlock and went in.

The interior was in far worse shape than the exterior. Everything was charred by the fires, and the fine, silver powder from the fire-extinguishers gave the scene an odd, black-and-white quality, like some ancient still-pic. The Wisp was a one-man vessel, consisting of a tiny airlock port-side, a cockpit with one seat, and a small room in the aft. She had an engine-access panel on the floor, and what could have been an array of lockers or a toilet on the starboard side, but the wall there and everything that had been on or behind it was melted and horribly deformed.

Saren was sitting in the skeleton of the pilot seat to Nihlus’s left, with his helmet in his lap, and Duon was standing behind his back. The cockpit was a mess of melted plastics, shattered glass and broken consoles standing and hanging at angles, cables and wires dangling everywhere like the entrails of a gutted animal. An auxiliary terminal in front of Saren shone with a faint light and faded colors, feeble signs of life.

“What’s up,” Nihlus said.

“We’ve got a problem, Sarge. A big one.” Duon turned to face him. “The VI is awake—sort of—and it intends to self-destruct. In... ten minutes.”

Nihlus took a second to process the information. It wasn’t much of a threat; in ten minutes, they could be half a klick away. “So what are we waiting for?”

“The download,” said Duon, indicating Saren with his chin. “The Spectre wants to download the logs. And that will take...”

“Fifteen minutes,” said Saren. His voice was as flat as ever.

Nihlus became cautious. “Why so long?”

“My guess, not enough power for efficient storage access.” Duon shrugged. “Also, there’s lots of it.”

“Can we stop the countdown?”

“No,” Duon said. “The VI was programmed to self-destruct after a time-out, but it seems the crash screwed with its higher functions. It kept the old command queue, but can’t take new commands. It also forgot some of the parameters and took defaults—hence the ten minutes. There’s really nothing we can do other than *move away*.”

At that, Saren let out a displeased grunt, but said nothing.

“Time’s wasting,” Duon added.

“Can we... turn the power off?” said Nihlus.

“That would stop the download.”

“Well, I guess we could wait a while... but, Sir, is this data really worth the risk? You can’t have it all anyway.”

“That’s not acceptable,” Saren said, and there, there was a hint of frustration in that stone-cold voice now. “I need all of it. Without the logs, we’ll never find Okeer. You don’t know what’s at stake. Billions of lives depend on this.”

Duon rolled his eyes and Nihlus frowned at him in turn, but there was no time to sort it out right now. He flicked on his omni and tapped into the Wisp’s intranet to watch the countdown. Already at 8:40 and going down fast. If only they could slow the time... if only...

“What if we slow the time?” he said, a crazy plan ghosting inside his mind. Duon cocked his head, like he suspected Nihlus was cracking under the pressure. Saren half-turned in his skeletal chair. “Come on, Duon, there’s got to be a way,” Nihlus insisted. “We just need to fool the internal clock to tick slower.”

“Huh,” said Duon, his face changing into problem-solving mode. Saren turned in full now to face them. “Huh,” Duon repeated. “I *could* inject some omnigel into the gain medium... the impurities will change the frequency... in theory it might work, if we can find the hardware. But there’s like fifty-fifty chance it’ll speed up the countdown instead.”

Nihlus looked at Saren askance. Saren held his gaze for a few tense seconds. “Do it.”

“Come on,” Duon said, immediately springing to action. He pushed past Nihlus, grabbed the locks of the engine access panel and yanked. It didn’t give. He looked up. “Together?”

Nihlus took over the port-side lock. They pulled together, but it wouldn't budge. He was becoming increasingly aware of the clock ticking, now at 7:55. Sweat trickled down his neck. If he could use both hands... but there was nothing to hold on to. He tested and scratched the edge in vain. At last he growled and took his gloves off, looking for purchase with his bare talons, and when he managed to push his claws under, Duon did the same. But even so, they couldn't move it a millimeter.

"It's stuck," Nihlus gritted. He would have to spell it out, wouldn't he. That they needed another pair of hands? But Saren got the message alright. He stood up and took his gloves off too. For a moment, the sight of his bare hands occupied Nihlus's entire attention. Saren wore his talons pin-prick sharp. It wasn't difficult to imagine him murdering someone with them. Hot damn.

He maneuvered around them and squeezed next to Nihlus in the small space. Under the odors of sweat and swamp, Nihlus caught a familiar scent on him. What was it? Some plate-balm, but where had he smelled it before? Damn, this was no time to dwell on nonsense. Saren gave a nod and the three of them pulled up in unison, grunting with effort. The hatch cracked open and came off clean.

Nihlus's heart hammered in his ears as he stepped back. Saren's talons had brushed his hand, leaving a trail of sensation and, sure enough, shallow scratches. He hazarded a look up, found Saren staring back and hurriedly averted his gaze again. A hot lump rolled down his stomach. What the fuck, Kryik?

"Ok, let's see..." Duon dove into the wires and twinkling lights below the deck. "It should be somewhere... here! I got it! I think... let me just... where does this go? Ok, ok... and where does this come from? Let's see."

He went on muttering to himself while Saren and Nihlus waited in silence. Nihlus kept his eyes fixed to the countdown, fighting to put aside the strange impressions, one by one. He had had one shot of stims too many, he decided. He counted. One earlier in the day, before the village. One in the HQ. One just now. Pushing the limits of health recommendations, and that on top of the medigel. Pan was going to skewer him.

At 6:15, Duon lifted his head up from the hole. "Ok. Ok. I did it! Sarge, what did I do?"

The countdown said 6:13, but they all had a good couple of bated breaths before it went down to 6:12. Saren sat back into the pilot chair with a barely audible sigh of relief. Nihlus wiped the sweat from his neck.

"Good job," he said, patting Duon on the shoulder. "You're the best. Go tell Dinara what went down. Everybody should pick up their stuff and move to a safe distance at once."

"Yes, sir."

When Duon went out, Saren glanced at him sideways. "Quick thinking there, Kryik," he said. "And original. It's a trick I'll remember."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now get out."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

Nihlus looked at the countdown and then at the download progress bar, filling up at a tantalizingly slow rate. He made a quick calculation. "Sir. You'll have no more than a minute to clear the blast radius. You don't know the terrain. You'll step into a soft spot, or catch in a strangle-vine. Let me help. That's what I'm here for."

Saren seemed to consider this. He looked at his bare hands and flexed his fingers nervously. "Fine," he said at last.

"Thank you, sir."

"For what? Letting you risk your life?" He snorted. "Any time, Kryik."

"You're risking yours too."

Saren didn't reply. He turned on his omni and a second later, a little sound in Nihlus's earpiece informed him that he had an incoming message. It was a dossier on the krogan, Okeer. Interesting. Saren was in no way obliged to share his intel with anybody but the Council, least of all with some random trooper. Nihlus lowered himself on the floor and started scrolling through the file. One thing caught his attention immediately.

"This guy fought in the Krogan Rebellions? But that was like... fifteen hundred years ago."

"Indeed."

Nihlus bit his mandible, trying to figure out if that made him regret shooting that child-murdering son of a whore. It didn't.

"He lives," Saren said, as if reading his mind. "The ship has been logging his life-signs. There was a gap some eight hours ago, but then they resumed."

"He switched to his secondary organs."

"Yes. And now the Blood Pack has him."

"I don't suppose the ship's been logging his location too."

“No.”

Stupid question. They wouldn't be sitting here if Saren could just read Okeer's coordinates from some log. Nihlus swallowed the embarrassment and focused on the file.

“Says here the other krogan don't have a lot of respect for his... ideas.”

“The traditionalists on Tuchanka, maybe. But mercenaries work for credits, not ideas, and he doesn't have the resources to pay them. All he can bargain with is the data he'd stolen from the salarrians.”

“Is that why you're after him?”

Saren nodded. “He must have promised the Blood Pack he'd grow them an army of offspring. Bring back the glory to the krogan. The old fool.”

Nihlus couldn't exactly read while talking, but the subtitles he skimmed through offered no clue for understanding what Saren had just said. “You mean... krogan offspring? Can he do that?”

Because that would make Saren's mission a romantic quest like the stuff Nihlus used to dream about as a teen: saving the Galaxy from some power-hungry madman with an army of mindless minions. Nihlus shooed the childish thought away, but not before it sent shivers up his plates.

Saren peered into him for a long time, his face an impenetrable mask. Deciding how much he can share? He'd already shared more than Nihlus had any right to hope for.

“He thinks he can,” he said at last. “And if he's really as brilliant as that intel paints him, perhaps he's right. But it would take years. Decades. Whatever he promises will be a lie. Krogan live long lives, but even among the eldest, few have the capacity to look beyond their muzzles. The Blood Pack won't settle for some distant future victories.”

“Gotta disagree, sir. Wortag isn't exactly wise and patient, but he has a good mind for business. If the data is valuable, he might simply take that as payment for protecting Okeer, and sell it to the highest bidder later.” Nihlus noticed that Saren's gaze went a bit blank. “Wortag is the alpha krogan on Invictus,” he explained. “He has a decent legal front, but I'm convinced that he's the de facto leader of the Blood Pack. Not what the General told you, eh?”

“We didn't discuss my mission.”

Nihlus swallowed. “But you're discussing it with me?”

Saren started to say something, then changed his mind and closed his mouth. “Baratus and I are old friends,” he said at last. “We spoke of personal things. Why would he tell me a different story about this Wortag, though? Isn’t he aware of your suspicions?”

Nihlus laughed. “The General never looked at me or spoke to me until this evening, much less took note of my conspiracy theories.”

“I’ll want to hear about your conspiracy theories, but our time is running out. Get ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

They both stood up, replacing their gloves and helmets. Nihlus pulled down his visor. The countdown lingered at 0:41 for a long time before going down to 0:40. He was too lazy to program the real-time countdown—but then, a real-time countdown started blinking in the message section. Now at 1:30.

Saren turned on his omni and checked the console one last time. “We can go now. The download will be complete before we’re out of range.”

Nihlus leaped out of the trench and turned to give Saren a hand. Saren took it, and then they were running over the clearing and into the bush. There was no trace of people or equipment. Nihlus turned on night vision, then thermal. It found turian signatures a hundred meters behind the treeline. The safest bet was to follow in their steps. As they passed the rim of the clearing, Nihlus focused on finding the quickest path, and the blue dot representing Saren on tactical started falling behind. He stopped and waited, his heart beating fast and loud with something close to panic. They were moving too slowly. The ship was still in clear view.

“Download complete,” Saren said over the intercom. The certainty seemed to inspire him to pick up the pace, and before long, Nihlus was the one lagging behind. He followed in Saren’s footsteps but that was all wrong, he’d—

Saren growled as his foot sank and he sprawled forward. And then the Wisp blew up.

Nihlus felt it first through the ground, the same way as when she had crashed. He threw himself over Saren just as the explosion went supersonic. The kinetic barriers of his suit flashed out of existence in an instant and there was a moment of mindless panic as the impact pushed all the air out of his lungs. Then everything went mercifully black.

## Chapter 8 - Unwelcome Guest

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Okeer woke up to the sounds of grunting and belching. His vision was swimming and he had only a very vague awareness of his body. When he tried to speak, some wretched, gurgling noise came out instead, and there was nauseating pain in his throat.

The fucking turian whelp shot me.

He sat up—no, he had to push himself up with his arms like a pregnant female. Disgusting. A small dark room came in and out of focus. There were no windows. It stank of mold and urine. Two young men were at a tiny table, drinking. When they saw Okeer was awake, they first froze, then exchanged a meaningful look, and finally one of them got out through the door. The other one faced Okeer with an absent stare so typical for his kind. Somebody had told him he wasn't supposed to fight, so he didn't know what to do.

"Where am I?" said Okeer. The words came out as a mix of hissing and gurgling.

"Your voice is fucked," the young krogan said and laughed. "Krago will come in a minute. Better not waste your breath."

Okeer looked down, as far as the throat pain allowed. He was still in his armor. Good. He touched his omni but decided against turning it on. Apparently Wortag had kept his word and brought him to the Blood Pack base, but that was far from what Okeer would call safety. He brought up his hands and felt his neck. The bandage was firm and dry, albeit crude. No matter. He'd recover soon enough.

"How long..." he started. He didn't continue. The young smartass was right, there was no point in wasting breath on him.

When the door opened again, muffled echoes of varren barking and someone yelling came through, carried on the smell of smoke and rubbish. If not for the pungent stench of the vorcha and all the moisture, it would have almost smelled like home. A large man wearing heavy armor and an impressive amount of weaponry stepped in and measured Okeer with beady eyes that indicated more intelligence than those of the youngsters, but just by a tiny degree. Krago was between three and four hundred, judging from the tone and roughness of his skin.

"Follow my fingers," Krago said, and started waving a hand in front of Okeer's face. Okeer snatched it and tried to accentuate the point by growling, which sounded miserable. Krago laughed. "So, you're really awake." He started to shake Okeer's grip and soon found he couldn't. "Let go, old man. Don't make me put you under again."

Again? Really awake? Okeer didn't like what he was hearing. He let go of Krago's hand and gestured a question.

"You have no idea what happened, eh? Not surprised. You were as good as dead when we picked you up. The turian cunts didn't give chase. You woke up in the gunship and made a fucking mess. You killed one of my men before I put you down. Pumped you full of medigel, but you lost too much blood. That's what happened."

So, the wound had been lethal, and his primary organs had failed. He slipped into a blood rage when the secondaries kicked in. The rest just made him angry. He was half a man now, that was what Krago was telling him. Lost too much blood. The primaries could not be salvaged, and his body would metabolize them into shit. His chances of living another five years, let alone another hundred, were cut in half by one fucking round shot by one trigger-happy turian little bitch.

"Yeah," Krago said. "I know the feeling. Lost my first liver two months ago."

You don't know shit, son. "When?" he managed to squeeze out. No pain, no gain.

"You've been out for ten hours. Not bad for an old geezer."

At that, Okeer pushed himself on his feet and head-butted unsuspecting Krago in one slick motion. Krago swayed. He didn't exactly fall, but he leaned against the door behind his back, and the youngsters laughed.

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point," Krago said, rubbing his forehead. "Apologies... warlord."

That was a bit better. "Where?" said Okeer.

Krago turned on his omni and produced a map of the area. He placed a pin some thirty kilometers north of the river. "We're here." Then he pointed out another place, about twenty kilometers south from the first. "That's where your ship crashed."

That was too close for comfort. Saren was surely out looking and sniffing already. Okeer's mind wondered back to the Wisp. Did the ship self-destruct as instructed? He had thought so after landing but he couldn't recall having seen solid evidence. His memory was a bit fuzzy. He'd realized that Saren was broadcasting logging worms during the chase, but hadn't found a way to disable them without screwing up the VI's higher functions. There hadn't been enough time. If the Wisp somehow survived...

No matter. Okeer only learned the location of the Blood Pack base now, so that information was safe. The only other thing of any value to Saren was his communication with Wortag. But that was Wortag's problem, not his.

"Wortag," he said. It hurt, but that was the best way to make the body try harder and heal faster.



“What of him?”

“Talk.”

“You want to talk to Wortag? That’s complicated. He’s not here, you see. Never set foot in the jungle, the fat bastard. And we don’t get to contact him—only he can contact us.”

“I’ll do it myself,” Okeer tried to say, but it was apparently too complex a thought for his throat and came out incomprehensible. He pointed to his omni, then to himself. How degrading.

“No no no. You can’t do that. They must have tagged your frequencies. No. Just wait. He’ll call during the day. I’m sure he’ll want to see the famous warlord Okeer.”

There were dozens of ways to get past the turian military tagging systems, but Okeer wasn’t in the mood to teach. He shrugged and lowered himself on the cot again. He knew how to wait.

“Right,” said Krago. “I’ll wake you up when it’s time. Come on, boys.”

The second the door shut behind them, Okeer sat up again and turned on the omni. He scanned the room for surveillance, then overrode the lock on the door so that nobody could come in without his permission.

It had been a hell of a ride getting here, with the priceless treasure attached to his hand, and he hadn’t had a single moment of peace to study and admire it. There was also a pressure to commit as much of it as he could to memory, because he’d done his homework, and he knew how Saren worked. He’d nuke the entire damn planet before letting Okeer get away with it.

He wasn’t giving up. Not at all. To admit Saren’s upper hand here, on a turian world, wasn’t surrender—it was laying grounds for an orderly retreat. If worst came to worst, he’d give up the data or destroy it—and then run for his life, run with everything that he’d have learned.

His pulse quickened as he listed the files. Where to begin? Should he follow their timeline, start from the beginning and see how their ideas developed, or look at the most recent entries first, and go backward only if he needed clarification?

One thing could be said about salarrians without a hiccup: they knew how to keep files. It was all so neatly organized that he’d have no trouble finding his way around—always the same forms, the same structures, the same strict compliance with the same, consistent standards. Okeer’s own work was messy, dirty, full of deviations, always piling up in no particular order, and he was the one person in the Galaxy who could sort

through it. In retrospect, it was safer that way. But also slower. He grinned, thinking how far his research could have gone if only he'd been a bit tidier, a bit more eager to accept new conventions and procedures—if he'd been a bit more of a sissy. Too old to change those habits now.

He opened a file at random. Columns of numbers. That's nice, but where are the pictures? Ah. That's better. Population versus time. Presumably, krogan population. The scale was microscopic, but there was a trend to it, no doubt. Okeer felt chills run through his body. A *growing* trend.

He scrolled lower, opened a more recent file of the same class. And there it was, the same trend again. No wonder they had a Spectre on the case. This was why the Spectres *existed*. He peered into the small letters. The trend seemed linear in both samples, but the time scale was too short for conclusions. There had to be a summary somewhere. He scrolled more, studied the file-naming patterns, found a good candidate. Indeed, this one covered a longer period and although it too appeared linear, the salarians had made predictions based on it. Okeer's eyes flared across the columns furiously until he found the fit and dragged it into the plot. Huh. It remained linear.

So his people were slowly adapting to the genophage.

He took a minute to digest the idea.

It wasn't exactly a confirmation of his own predictions. It wasn't exactly a refutation either. Okeer had witnessed his people's extinction; he was among the few surviving veterans of the Rebellions, and he hated the genophage with a teeming passion. But it wasn't the same sort of hate that most krogan felt, nor the same sort of sorrow upon seeing the stillbirths. He harbored a sorrow of a different kind—not for those who were supposed to live and didn't, but for those who lived when they should have died. The loss of potential lives was depressing, yes, but the loss of culture was what sat heavy on Okeer's hearts. The ideological profile of his people was turning from a sharp knife into a blunt toy, because the genophage made them act as if every individual was suddenly worthy by birthright.

If the genophage was to be taken out of the picture by whatever natural mechanism that was apparently at work... that would certainly help in rebuilding the krogan pride. But the growth was too slow. Centuries before the population doubled. And the salarians would find a way to stop it—these statistical studies were probably a part of an ongoing project to do just that.

Fascinating and invigorating as this was, it wasn't what Okeer was after.

He continued his search, looking outside the growth-related naming pattern. There was a whole section with reports from drug trials on varren. Of course the salarians were looking for the cure themselves—the best way to make sure nobody else would ever

find it was to discover it first, and then develop counter-measures. The trials showed varying degrees of promise; most were no different from what millions of laboratories in Council space and beyond were trying out every day. But some approaches bore the signature of malignant genius specific to the STG, and those Okeer looked into with some interest—but wasn't what he was after either.

He had spent over six hours going through the data, memorizing ideas and angles, when somebody tried to open the door from the other side. Although he had no luck so far, Okeer was far from hopeless—he'd only managed to skim through a tenth of the material. He put it down with a sigh and blinked the dryness out of his eyes before he lifted the override.

Krago stumbled in. "Wortag is waiting to speak to you."

Okeer was already feeling much better, but he tried not to make a show of it. If the Blood Pack decided to betray him at least he'd have a surprise in store for them. Not that he expected them to try killing him. But they might try to sell him. Saren would probably have no qualms about paying a lot to get his hands on him. Okeer hoped it wouldn't be his first line of thinking, though.

Being 'goods' wasn't a very opportune position. Being 'goods' with a fucked-up voice was even worse.

His cell opened into a long, dirty, concrete tunnel. Underground, but not very deep—there were grates on the ceiling at regular intervals, and jungle growth was dripping and winding through them. Okeer walked behind Krago, and the two youngsters who had kept watch over him earlier walked aft. A dozen doors, identical to his, lined the walls. Some were open, and Okeer made note of everything he could glimpse. Mostly, it was the chaos inherent to a krogan settlement. Varren pens that smelled like shit; people lying in the dirt, drunk or bleeding; people fighting; vorcha pens that smelled like shit. Okeer chuckled at his wit. He hated the vorcha. All krogan hated the vorcha. It was one of the few things that everybody agreed on. But they were useful, and when they weren't, they were tasty.

That reminded him he was hungry. He wondered if the Blood Pack grew their own food here, or if they had a supply line. Fucking dextro planet. He sniffed, hoping to make out a scent of something edible, but the smells of organic waste and wet greenery were overpowering. Just as he was about to ask about it, a large varren shot out of one of the rooms, carrying a vorcha arm in its teeth. It ran past them, and a second later, two krogan ran after it. Talk about a waste of breath. As they passed by the door, Okeer saw that the room behind was larger than the others, and had a fighting pit dug out in the middle. The unfortunate owner of the arm was lying there in a pool of blood, his remaining hand clutching a long knife. There was a noxious pile of body parts near the door—

some varren, some vorcha, some krogan. He wondered idly why there were no flies and other vermin swarming around it, and then he remembered. Fucking dextro planet.

“Food,” he said. His throat was better.

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll feed you as soon as Wortag is done with you.”

Okeer checked himself before attempting to growl. The disrespectful little bastard was starting to get on his nerves, and he had a pleasant fantasy about cutting him up in little bits and adding them to the pile in the pit room.

The tunnel ended in a T-intersection and they took a right turn, then entered a room to the left. This one was relatively clean and twice as large as Okeer’s cell. It even had its own grating on top and enough greenish gloom entered through it to render artificial lights unnecessary. A room with a view, he grinned to himself. There was nothing inside but a workstation and a chair. Krago instructed the youngsters to stand guard outside and gestured at Okeer to take the seat. The console came to life, projecting a large holo of some fancy place with a big glass window and turian furniture. Okeer inspected the console and set it up for manual input, should the need arise.

He waited for some seconds, and then Wortag filled the view, grunting and panting as he took a seat. He was a fat son of a bitch, clad in an expensive civilian outfit and wearing the totems of a tribe leader, no less. What a joke. Okeer had never seen Wortag in person, though they’d had several dealings in the past; all had ended well. We’ll see about this one.

“You look good for a dead man, Okeer,” Wortag said, huffing. “I heard you lost something. Several somethings.” He laughed in a series of short guttural bursts, then grew serious. “Well I’m fucking glad you did. What were you thinking, bringing a Spectre along? Like I don’t have enough shit on my plate without those fucks poking their noses into my business. You lied to me, Okeer. If I knew there was a Spectre involved...”

“My ship.” Enough crap.

“So, you can speak,” Wortag said to hide the confusion caused by the interruption. “They found it, of course. The Spectre led two teams to study it last night. They blew it up in the end. What of it?”

Okeer frowned. His words were too complex. “If the Spectre has the logs from the ship, he knows about our deal,” he typed.

Wortag’s face sagged down, changing from bored to annoyed to threatening as his greedy, shiny eyes flew over the text once, twice, thrice. “You messed up, old man,” he squeezed between clenched teeth. “Do you have any idea what kind of a shitstorm you just brought down on me? You do realize that there’s nothing you can offer now that’s

worth what you're going to cost me? Fuck! I knew I shouldn't have listened to your tall tales!"

"What's going on," said a turian voice from Wortag's end of the line. Its owner was hidden from the camera.

"The Spectre knows I dealt with Okeer," Wortag related.

"That's not good," said the turian voice.

"I'll make it worth your while," Okeer typed.

"Yeah, I heard that one before. Enough with the vague promises, then. Let's see what you've got."

"Not in front of your turian friend."

Wortag rolled his eyes, popped the joints in his fingers, and started typing himself. "What's it to you, old man? He can't see your text anyway."

"I don't trust turians. If you want to talk business, tell him to get the fuck out."

"Fine. Wait."

Wortag looked up and cleared his throat. "Let's continue this some other day," he said to his guest. "I have some... family matters to discuss with the warlord."

"This changes everything," the turian said. "You don't want to trust me with the details? Fine. But don't knock on my door when things blow up. I warn you."

"Yeah, whatever."

Okeer heard the door swish open, closed. He had no way of knowing if the turian had really left or not, but there was nothing he could do about it. "What was that all about?" he typed.

"He thinks I should just turn you over," Wortag said, shrugging. "It's the simplest option for me right now, although I already wasted resources on you. Risked exposure. Shit, Okeer. You were supposed to be the smartest badass out there."

"I am," Okeer said, and his haggard voice made Wortag jump a little. "Our deal is still good," he continued in type. "You get me off this rock, and I give you troops. Infinite troops. Young, healthy krogan. As many as you need, and more. It's a chance of a lifetime, Wortag. Be smart and take it."

“That sounds like a pile of crap. Besides, even if you can do that, I don’t have a century to wait for delivery. If you have something to trade, I’ll consider trading now. Not interested in buying visions.”

Which is exactly how dumbasses like you brought our species to the brink of extinction. “Fine,” Okeer lied. “I’ll give you the tech, and you can sell it for credits.”

Wortag huffed. Inclined his head, thinking, and Okeer could read the glacier-slow process right off his forehead: if I don’t want this tech, why would somebody else want it? How much would other groups pay for a krogan army? How much could I earn if I kept the army after all?

“Fine,” he said at last. “Send the data over.”

Okeer laughed, and it sounded like choking. “You’re out of your mind. I’m not sending anything till you get me a nice untagged ship I can use to get out of Council space. When I’m inside and sure that it’s all well and clean, I’ll send the data.”

“I can always take it from your dead body,” Wortag said, and Okeer heard Krago shifting from foot to foot behind him in anticipation. I’d like to see you try, son.

“You can’t,” he typed. “It’s encrypted and if I die, nobody will ever be able to recover it.” Bless Marash and his crazy, dead brain. “Just think, Wortag. Use your head instead of your quads for a second. This data is worth trillions of credits. Will you risk it just because of a little misunderstanding? After all, if I try to run with it, you can always shoot me down.”

“You may be a brilliant scientist, Okeer, but you suck at business. If you make me get you a ship and then make me shoot it down... that’s a lot of credits for something I can’t see or hear or smell. And you already owe me for dragging that Spectre behind you.”

“Kill the Spectre. Solves all your problems.”

Wortag seemed to consider this, pinching the meaty folds under his chin. “Yes. I guess I’ll have to do it in any case. And that will bring more of them. Shit. They’re a fucking pest, that’s what they are.”

Okeer nodded in sympathy. “Let me give you a taste of what you’re buying, to seal the deal,” he typed, then made a dramatic pause.

“I can give you the cure for the genophage.”

## Chapter 9 - Respite

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Saren paced up and down the overgrown colonnade. In bright daylight, the jungle outside looked pure, wild and tempting, like a promise of some idealistic adventure. Nothing like the blind man's nightmare from yesterday. It sprawled farther than the eye could reach, a calm expanse of uniform dark green, unmoved by the light breeze that tickled his crest. He could still catch the muddy, rotten stench of the swamps if he put his mind in it, but the air wasn't as humid here as it had been under the trees. The sun was still low and the scattered shadows of the ivy hanging from the ceiling were a strobe on his face.

Not having enumerated all of his daily annoyances yet, Sparatus hadn't taken note. The batarians were trying to stall the cybernetic warfare negotiations again. There had been a shooting in a siaristic temple in Madra on Taetrus. Four civilians were killed, including a human journalist, and the Alliance, determined to make the most of it, were raising a fuss in the media because the shooter was assumed to be a turian. The keepers blocked one of the Presidium elevators for the second time that week. On top of it all, his mate, Falais, was preparing an exhibition on Thessia, which put Sparatus under additional stress.

He let out a tired sigh. "Where are you, anyway?"

"Lomera," Saren said. "Between the Ibiss River and the Allerleigh Mountains."

Sparatus' life-sized face, projected from Saren's omni and tagging along, turned into a three-quarters profile while he looked it up. "It's not on the map."

"No wonder. It's a failed settlement site from the first wave of colonization." He stopped next to one of the concrete columns and touched its edge, rounded and smoothed by the elements. "Nothing here but skeletons of unfinished buildings, reclaimed by nature."

Sparatus snorted. "Invictus. A stain on the emblem of the Hierarchy."

"Okeer was wise to come here."

"Haven't had time yet to go through your report in detail. You're certain he still lives?"

"Reasonably so."

"Well. That should calm the STG down, at least for a while."

Saren hummed an acknowledgment. He had walked up to the sun-facing edge. Three stories below, a pair of Kryik's men lounged between their bags on a projecting balcony. The young one was named Lantar. The other one, Vezeer, was bulky and loud and had

chirpy yellow Spens markings. He was in charge of the Thunderstorm and he carried it with him wherever he went. They were playing some omni-tool game. The watch would be posted on the roof.

“How’s the local support?” Sparatus said.

“Decent.” Saren started to mention Baratus, but changed his mind. The shock of the reunion was still fresh in his memory and he wasn’t sure he could talk about it with a straight face. If Sparatus caught onto it, there’d be questions. He was likely acquainted with Baratus himself and he’d insist on having all the details. None of which had any bearing on the mission at hand. “I took a spec-ops team to lead me through the jungle.”

“On foot?”

“From what I’ve seen, it’s the only way.”

“That must be frustrating. What’s your next move?”

“Locate the Blood Pack base where they’re holding Okeer.” Saren resumed his pacing northward. Blurred by the distance, bald, rounded mountains rose from the jungle like an island from the sea. That was where the Wisp had been heading. “It can’t be far from where he landed, but that’s the only clue I have.”

Sparatus stroked his mandibles. “You’ve read the STG report. You realize what’s at stake?”

“Of course.”

“They’re anxious to save their research, which is understandable. But I think—and so does Valern—that it’s far more important to make sure it doesn’t... get out. You understand?”

Saren gave him a long look. They’d had this kind of conversation before. “I understand.”

“Good.” Sparatus nodded, then shook his head. “I feel for Valern. He’s being pulled apart by the STG from one, and the Union from the other side. What a mess to start one’s career with.”

Saren nodded thoughtfully, though there had hardly been a single sincere word in what Sparatus had said. For one, Valern had been inaugurated months ago, and he served as Councilor Aratralle’s assistant for three years before she retired. He was no rookie. And even if he was, Sparatus would’ve spared him no more sympathy than to a convicted batarian slaver. He enjoyed seeing his colleagues struggle with challenges he thought he would breeze through himself. ‘Being pulled apart’ by agencies with conflicting interests within the same government was as routine for a Councilor as risking one’s life was for a Spectre. Last but not least, the purpose of telling this to Saren wasn’t to convey infor-



mation, no matter how irrelevant. It was to remind Saren of how grateful he should be for having a friend in Sparatus. Naturally, he assumed that reporting to Valern directly would have been much more of a chore. And he was right. But Saren had many better reasons to nurture their friendship.

Long after the call ended, he kept gazing at the mountains. He was low on energy. The headache had retreated almost completely but he hadn't had more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep and he had no appetite.

Both he and Kryik had been lightly concussed by the Wisp's detonation. His memories of the hellish march that had brought them here were fuzzy and disconnected. The jungle made him fight for every step, with ground sinking under his feet, branches slapping his visor and vines catching on the fabric of his armor like tentacles intent on holding him back. More than once, Kryik's men had to cut through the secondary growth to make a path. And all the while his head had been ringing.

He sat at the foot of a column shrouded in ivy, to resume his work. He had been going through the Wisp's logs when Sparatus called. They were mostly junk, petabytes of useless information. There'd been no time to deploy a more specific worm during the chase and he'd gone for the brute-force solution. Every tick of the internal clock, every gram of consumed eezo, every minuscule course adjustment, the chaotic forest of nonsense that came through the external sensors during the relay jump—everything was there. But also, communications. Life-signs. And the leftover purchase info.

Saren studied the block of interest for a while before deleting it. This was the only copy of the data and there was no way to ever trace his changes or retrieve the deleted fragments. At least one loose end was tied.

Next he opened Kryik's service record.

The sheer size of it was staggering. Saren frowned and scrolled up and down to check if there was some glitch, but there wasn't. Kryik had been in active service for just under six years, yet he had a file larger than most veterans.

Year of birth: 2150. Eleven years Saren's junior. No, not a boy. Some would say, not quite a man either, but Saren knew better. At Kryik's age, he was already a Spectre.

Place of birth: Cordis, Attican Theta. The name was vaguely familiar, but it wasn't a turian colony. That would account for the accent.

Age of enlistment: 16. Older than usual, but not unheard of.

Training: advanced combat, advanced tactical, basic space. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Except his ability scores, which were off the charts. Saren wasn't surprised. He had seen enough last night to know Kryik wasn't average. His own scores prior to Spectre training had been better, but not by much. And he had been considered a prodigy.

But past an enthusiastic note from his first CO, half-way through boot-camp, Kryik's file contained no indication that anyone had ever noticed anything special about him. At least, nothing good. Saren expanded the red-labeled section and his frown deepened. Incident after incident, censure after censure, not a single promotion in five years, even after a good number of successful missions.

In fact—Saren checked again to make sure—*all* Kryik's missions had been successful. Such a spotless record was a rare delicacy, but buried under all the red stamps, it had garnered Kryik no recognition.

Saren skimmed through a few mission reports.

“Sergeant Nihlus S. Kryik, Fifth Fleet... while serving as squad leader with the 3rd Regiment... went back to the spinning wreck alone to search for two missing crewmen after general retreat was ordered... commendation request denied... Boarded the pirate vessel through the hull breach, ignoring electrical fires, and disabled its ME core while the rest of his unit feigned an attack through the airlock... surrounded the enemy and destroyed them, allowing the safe evacuation of the hostages... pending investigation for misconduct... transferred to the 27th Marine Division... opened fire without permission and shattered an ancient asari artifact of incalculable cultural and historical value... action diverted the attention of the suicide bomber who could then be safely executed... charges of insubordination... charges of sabotage and destruction of property after overriding the safety protocols and remotely setting an unmanned fighter on a collision course with the mercenary freighter carrying a large supply of minagen... assigned to Company G during the Logasiri Intervention... stormed across the clearing while completely exposing himself to enemy fire and singlehandedly overran the enemy position... moved with his men on his own initiative to flank the enemy... established a final line, not accepting treatment until this was accomplished... directly responsible for much of the company's success.”

Saren remembered that incident. Pressured into action by incessant human complaints, the Council had launched a small task force to investigate the allegations that batarian mining efforts were effected by thousands of slaves, some of them Council citizens. Upon discovery, a skirmish escalated into an all-out battle and the Hierarchy responded by landing troops under the guise of a rescue operation. It had been a bloody mess, followed by a political nightmare, and the closest the Hierarchy had come to open war since Relay 314.

The wording of that report indicated a positive sentiment, but instead of an award, Kryik got another reprimand: “For reckless disregard of protocol, disobeying direct orders

and putting himself, the men under his command and the whole operation in needless danger.”

Saren sighed. He had seen enough to picture the proud sons and daughters of the Hierarchy who had made sure Kryik would never advance far enough to upset their tidy worldview. Being an outsider in the turian army was probably even worse than being a biotic. As a rule, biotics received the dubious benefits of affirmative action, occasionally allowing mediocrities like Vyrnnus to rise above their station and embarrass everyone. But there were no cabals for the invisible people born on the wrong side of the Hierarchy borders. Only unchecked discrimination.

Stirred from contemplation by some sound, Saren looked over his shoulder in the direction of the east stair-well. Voices echoed from below, excited, and a clamor that sounded like close quarters combat. He rose silently from the ground and stalked toward the stairs, fondling the grip of his right-hand pistol. The noise got louder. A shouted curse, laughter, clapping of hands. He relaxed. But now he was curious, so he went on down.

Kryik and his men had made camp two floors below. Their things were strewn at the center of the open, parking-like space between the two staircases. Six of them were assembled half-way there. Pan, the medic, whose smoky green colors of Solemnis were a perfect match with the jungle palette; Mirene, the leader of the second fire-team; Theeka, the girl with the dislocated shoulder; the young man and the big man he'd seen from his perch earlier; and Kryik. Mirene and Vezeer were apparently engaged in a duel, while the others cheered.

No one had seen Saren come down the stairs. And they wouldn't, as long as he made no sudden movements. He had painstakingly cleaned his chameleon armor, and it was optimized for urban environments. For a while he stood still, observing, then slowly lowered himself into a crouch and sat down to watch.

Vezeer had an unfair weight advantage. A clip with his heavy hand would be enough to knock Mirene out. But she was small and fast and she circled around him, effortlessly evading his jabs. Finally he lost his patience and lounged at her with speed and agility Saren would not have expected of a man that large. His punch missed her by a millimeter as she threw herself on the ground to capitalize on his mistake by kicking his back leg from under him.

The floor shook when Vezeer fell down. The others erupted in applause and laughter. Mirene hopped up, light as a feather, and offered a hand to Vezeer, who lay stretched out as if he'd been shot point-blank.

“Get off your butt, pretty boy.”

He took her hand and she pulled him up. The top of her head barely reached his shoulder. "I'll never learn," he said. "I mean, what was I supposed to do? She was making me dizzy."

That was addressed to Kryik. "You had the right idea. Just need to work on the execution. She could take you down because your balance was compromised, otherwise she'd be toast." He turned to Mirene. "That was risky. Fancy as fuck, but dangerous. If he managed to land on you..." He drew the back of his thumb over his throat.

Mirene laughed. "The day he lands on me!"

Everyone else laughed with her, Vezeer the loudest. But not Kryik. "Underestimating an opponent twice your size is the worst mistake you can make in hand-to-hand. He could crush your skull with a single blow and you'd need to beat him for half an hour to knock him out bare-handed."

Saren found himself nodding. Kryik was right. And it would become acutely relevant once they found the Blood Pack lair. If that had been a krogan, her kick would've been completely ineffective.

He sighed and was about to get up and leave, when Vezeer said, "Show us, Sarge. You be the big guy and—"

"Me, me, me!" Theeka leaped in the center of the circle, putting her fists up in mock challenge.

Saren settled back. This might be interesting. In Kryik's file, hand-to-hand was checked as his foremost specialization.

"You sure?" Kryik squared his hands. "Your shoulder—"

"Fuck, yeah. Look." She made wide circles with her right arm, then threw a couple quick punches in the air. "All good. Pan, tell him."

The medic was sitting on the floor with feet tucked under his knees. He looked up at Kryik. "Well, you're not gonna twist her arms or anything. Right?"

"I don't plan to..." Kryik said. His back was turned to Saren so it was hard to tell if he was serious. "But when someone doesn't know when to quit—"

"I'll be good," Theeka said with a wide smile. More of a sneer, really. "I promise."

Kryik shook the shirt of his underweave off and tied the sleeves around his waist, then took position in the circle, finally stepping in Saren's view. He was built like a model. Perfect proportions. Saren leaned forward, squinting. Every curve, symmetric. Every

muscle, defined. And when he started moving, they rippled under his smooth, dark his skin like water.

Theeka wasn't as petite as Mirene, and Kryik wasn't as large as Vezeer, but he still had more reach. They circled each other briefly, maintaining eye-contact as tangible as if there was a wire stretched between them. Theeka tried a faint but Kryik didn't buy it. Then he tried a faint that she didn't buy. For now, they seemed about evenly matched.

Then Theeka lurched forward with blinding speed. For a moment it looked like she had Kryik by surprise, but he blocked her right jab, which had been a faint, and her left cross, which had been for real, and pulled back his own uppercut a split second before it reached her chin and knocked her out. She froze.

"Again," Kryik said and stepped back.

This time she tried a different approach, leading with a side-kick aimed at Kryik's temple, but he leaned back and swiveled behind her before her foot returned to the floor.

"Again."

And again and again she attacked and he evaded or blocked, but never retaliated. Not that she wasn't good. In most settings, someone with her skill would be considered a hand-to-hand specialist. She knew many good moves and didn't make any glaring mistakes, but she couldn't touch him. After a while, Kryik invited Lantar to join in and fought them both with equal ease.

Saren watched, fascinated, and his body twitched involuntarily, mirroring Kryik's moves. Low block, high faint, duck and roll, pivot and punch. It was almost exactly what Saren would have done. Kryik lounged at Theeka and she repeated the move Mirene had pulled on Vezeer, but Kryik's balance was impeccable and when her kick recoiled off his leg he threw himself forward instead of falling backward and landed on her back, making first solid contact. Lantar moved to grab him by the shoulders from behind and Saren almost yelled a warning. But Kryik knew. He lashed back with his right arm and stopped just short of breaking Lantar's jaw.

There was no cheering and applause this time. In the sudden hush, Saren could hear his own excited heartbeat.

"Always a pleasure to watch you show off, Sarge," the medic said. "But you make a shitty 'big man'. No way a krogan could move that fast."

Kryik got up and stepped away from Theeka with what seemed like exaggerated caution.

"She didn't give him much choice," Mirene said.

“Fuck you all,” Theeka said, still lying on the ground. She sprang up on her feet and looked at Kryik with murder in her eyes. “Fuck you, Nihlus.”

For a moment, Saren thought she’d attack again, and apparently Kryik had the same idea because he instinctively turned his profile to her. But she just showed him her teeth and stomped off in the direction of the other staircase.

Kryik shook his head. “Can someone please remind me never to spar with her again?”

“Can’t you just let her win sometimes?” Vezeer said.

Kryik laughed. “Yeah, right. She’d slit my throat in my sleep if I tried.”

“Then you should train her,” the medic said.

“What do you think this was?”

“A show for the Spectre?” The medic gestured in Saren’s direction without looking and Saren felt heat rise up his face. He had been sure no one had detected him.

Everyone looked his way now, and apparently the medic was not the only one who’d noticed him. Mirene and Lantar both glanced at him with a casual certainty of complete awareness. Vezeer had to turn and look over his shoulder, but didn’t seem to have trouble spotting him. Only Kryik’s eyes swept the space searchingly. Embarrassed out of proportion, Saren lifted his ungloved hand to cut short the awkwardness.

“Oh.” Kryik’s eyes became comically round. If he’d seen Saren sitting there, he was very good at pretending otherwise. “Ho,” he said and waved back.

The others burst in laughter. Saren shook his head, getting up. He motioned Kryik to follow him and went back up the stairs.

It was noticeably warmer on the fifth floor, despite the breeze. He unsealed his armor down the long seam from the right shoulder to the left hip, then picked up the water bottle from his bag and drank as if he’d been working out himself.

Kryik didn’t show up for several minutes and Saren was about to ping him over the intercom when he heard his careful steps coming up the stairs. He turned around and promptly forgot whatever it was he’d opened his mouth to say.

Kryik carried an armful of... fruit. There was a melon-sized thing with violet stripes, and a couple peach-like things of pale blue, something green and elongated, and several large purple berries. Saren glanced up at Kryik to find him staring at his half-open jacket with loose mandibles.

“What?” he said. It came out like a bark and Kryik jumped. One of the peach-things dropped from his embrace and rolled over to Saren’s feet.

“Sorry, sir,” Kryik muttered, and before Saren could stop him, bent down to pick it up, which inevitably caused all the other fruit he’d been holding to scatter around. “Aw, crap. Sorry!”

“No need—” but Kryik was already busy chasing down and collecting the fruit. Saren could barely hold back laughter. He leaned down to pick up the blue peach that had started the avalanche, but as his hand closed around it, Kryik’s hand closed around his. Hot and sweaty. They were both without gloves. The familiar discomfort sparked in Saren’s chest but Kryik backed off first, as if he’d sensed it.

“Sorry,” he said for the third time. He went on to mutter a mantra of self-deprecating adjectives as he carefully straightened up with his treasure secure in his arms. *Stupid, lame, clumsy ass.*

Saren rubbed the peach against his underweave, hiding a smile. “Wild-grown?”

“Yes, sir.” Kryik looked about ready to faint with embarrassment. “Safe to eat,” he added.

“Really?”

“Oh, yes, sir. We’ve been eating wild-grown things for years now and—” he deadpanned. “That was a joke.”

Saren smirked and bit into the peach. It was... not what he had expected. It was savory, squishy and sour. But it wasn’t bad. Not bad at all. He ate it in three mouthfuls. Kryik stood in front of him, sweating and shifting weight from one foot to the other like he was on an exam.

The peach had a woody, hairy, pebble-sized seed. Saren rolled it between his fingers a bit, then flicked it through the nonexistent east wall, giving it a tiny whiff of biotic lift. It ascended for a good twenty meters before it briefly hovered and started down. Right. High gravity. He’d expected it to make twice as much.

“Whoa,” Kryik whispered. Saren turned to see a wide smile of dreamy awe on his face. “That’s so cool.”

And just like that, Saren was again the embarrassed one. He cleared his throat. “Did you bring all of that for me?”

“Yes, sir. We’ve got plenty more.”

“Drop them in my bag.”

“Yes, sir.”

While Kryik was at it, Saren spied one of the berries still lying on the floor and picked that up too. He blew the dust off, then ate it whole. Sweet and juicy. “This is excellent. Thank you.”

“Any time, sir.” They regarded one another briefly. “I hope we didn’t wake you up?” Kryik gestured at the stairs behind him. “With the noise.”

“I was up already. And I hardly slept anyway.”

Kryik smiled. “My first few patrols, I couldn’t sleep either. Everything bugged me. The shadows, the noises... the smell. As soon as I’d close my eyes I could feel critters falling on me, crawling on me. And most times, they did.” He mimed a disgusted shiver. “Nowadays... I can fall asleep standing up. In the rain. With a snake in my collar. Well, ok. Might’ve exaggerated there a bit. But just a bit.”

“I don’t intend to stay here long enough to adapt.”

“Yes, sir.” Kryik laughed. “That’d be my choice too. If I had a choice.”

“No one’s forcing you to serve, Kryik.”

“Uh-huh. And what else would I do? Run with the mercenaries? Strip at a night-club?”

Saren raised a browplate.

“It’s what my ex CO suggested when she handed me the transfer writ.” Kryik shrugged, then slanted a mandible and gave Saren a seductive look. “What, you don’t think I could do it?” He shook his shoulders, rocking to and fro in a shockingly veracious imitation of an asari pole-dancer. To finish the show, he kicked out his left leg and crossed it over his right making a smooth, flashy pirouette. Then he just stood there, blinking at Saren with a silly smile. Waiting for applause?

After a few uncomfortable seconds, Kryik dropped his eyes, as well as the posture. “Sorry, sir. I tend to act inappropriately when I’m nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?”

“Uh... seriously?”

Saren shrugged.

“Ok...” He cleared his throat. “It’s mostly the stims right now? I have a bit of a... habit, and since they interfere with medigel, Pan locked me out for a day.” Kryik absently caressed his left wrist, where the omni-tool would be slotted on his armor. “Anyway, that kind of makes me sluggish and edgy at the same time, you know? And, well... talking to



senior officers has a way of getting me in trouble. Not that I've ever talked to any of my senior officers like this." He indicated awkwardly at the space between them. "Usually it's just push and pull. I'm told to do something profoundly stupid, I say nope, I get my ass ground down, after which I care even less, and so it goes, again and again. Though I guess there will be an end to it. These may well be the last days of my permanent employment. If they don't turn out to be the last days of my life."

He talked too much. Saren waited, trying for an expression of polite interest. Three... two... one...

"Probably just a matter of time, though," Kryik went on. "I haven't had an opportunity to disagree with you yet. Oh, wait." He laughed. "I guess I did, on the Wisp. But that wasn't... serious. Was it?"

"You can disagree all you like, Kryik. As long as you don't stand in my way."

"Yes, sir." He pressed his mandibles close and stared down. "I haven't forgotten, sir."

"Good."

That seemed to shut him up. Saren turned by a few degrees to face the breeze. There was some cloud cover now, but the heat was mounting and his underweave was wet. A large red insect settled on his shoulder, and he brushed it off, gently. Never kill without a reason.

"Competing in martial arts might make for a decent living," he mused. "More than decent, for top-ranked athletes."

"Excuse me?"

"I've seen you fight. You must have trained professionally."

"Oh, right." Kryik shook his head as if to clear it. "How long were you... watching us?"

"Answer the question."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. I uh... yes, I suppose I did train professionally. Before enlisting. It was a long time ago."

"What did you specialize in?"

"Mostly Hallori, sir."

Saren grinned, congratulating himself. He knew it.

"I was actually quite good at it, sir."

No doubt. But he wasn't going to attempt righting the silly misunderstanding. "Did you compete?"

"Uh... yes, sir. I won every local competition I took part in. Qualified for the Colonial Open in '65 as the first seed. But uh... I never got there. Enlisted instead."

Saren studied him. He didn't look nervous anymore, but he certainly didn't sound as enthusiastic about his accomplishments as could be expected. A good placement in the Colonial Open would have given him a chance to compete at the pan-cluster level, on Palaven, against the Hierarchy's best.

His curiosity piqued, Saren started to ask what had stopped him from getting there. But Kryik gave him a harassed, pleading look, and Saren closed his mouth. He could look it up later.

"Surely you didn't stop training altogether," he said instead.

"Not *altogether*. I train the standard stuff with everyone else. As much as I can." He smiled, gesturing toward the stairs again. "But it's—"

"Hard to find a partner for Hallori." It was hard enough in the upper tiers, let alone among the rank and file. Few considered it a martial art to begin with. Baratus didn't. Even Desolas had only pretended to take it seriously to humor his little brother.

"...yes, sir." Kryik's expression changed as understanding finally dawned on him. "Do... *you* practice?"

"Not as often as I'd like to."

"I knew it." Kryik's mandibles spread slowly into a victorious smile. "I fucking knew it! Sorry, sir. But I knew there was something familiar about the way you move. Last night, when we were approaching the crash site? I couldn't put my talon on it because there was too much going on, but I recognized... something. You know?"

Lacking the words to describe it, Kryik hopped a few steps away from the stairs with newfound energy and executed a pass from the second form. It was a quick, simple and elegant move that embodied the elusive fluidity of the Hallori better than any Saren could have come up with if pressed to give a demonstration. It was flawless.

It was irresistible. Saren held his breath, momentarily paralyzed. His mind was strangely silent, his body strangely tense. Eager! It had been years since he'd done Hallori himself and he felt a sort of stage fright. Before he could think himself out of it, he walked over to where Kryik was standing, took the starting position for warmup, and beckoned with his talontips, issuing a challenge.

After a moment's pause, Kryik took it. They exchanged the moves from the first form slowly, methodically, without breaking eye contact and without another word. Kryik assumed a studious countenance quite different from the frivolous persona he'd presented minutes before. His breathing became synced with the motion, deep, regular and relaxed. And so did Saren's. The headache, the exhaustion, the heavy burdens he'd brought with him to this mission, it was all put on hold while they performed the exercise. That was its nature, its attraction, its liberating power. But also its toll. It took perfect coordination and total commitment—else one or both participants got hurt.

Kryik was probably thinking the same, because they stopped in unison and did not start the second form. They just stood there, facing one another, in companionable silence. Kryik did not speak. He looked dazed. Saren felt dazed himself. He felt like laughing. But that would hardly be appropriate.

## Chapter 10 - Conspiracy Theories

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Nihlus could swear they'd been standing motionless for entire minutes while disconnected, dislocated thoughts bounced around in his head like those last few crumbs of cereal in the carton, refusing to get out through the designated opening in the corner despite all the shaking. What the hell had just happened? Had it happened? He considered pinching himself to make sure. According to human fiction, it was supposed to wake him up in case he was asleep down in the camp, having the craziest and most vivid dream of his lifetime. But would he want to wake up?

He had finally remembered what that scent was. Saren's underweave was saturated with it and Nihlus had almost fainted back there on the stairs, when recognition kicked in with all the grace and moderation of a charging krogan. Palaven rain pine. Not that Nihlus had ever been on Palaven or knew what an actual rain pine smelled like. But he knew this scent. It had been the plate-balm Dario wore that summer, in anticipation of receiving his colors and getting admitted among the grownups.

And then that dreamlike conversation. And Hallori, of all things. There had been a moment, about midway through the exercise, when the world faded out for Nihlus, the way it had used to, sometimes, when he had been a youth with a bright future, practicing for the great competition that was to change his life, and he trusted Dario, and himself, enough to let go, to turn off his brain completely and just *flow* with it. It had only lasted a few seconds now, and it had been brought on by the turmoil in his head, not by trust and confidence. But it *had* happened, and it conspired with the perfume to trigger a fall-out of long-repressed memories and feelings.

Nihlus gasped for air.

Saren nodded, as if there had been some communication. And perhaps there had, because he walked back to where his stuff was and returned with a bottle of water. He drank like he had been starving for days, but at last he handed the bottle over.

"Thanks," Nihilus said. Turned out he was just as thirsty. And by the time he finished the water off, he had mostly managed to piece himself together.

Saren cleared his throat. "The reason I called you here..." he paused, staring at something to the left of Nihlus, as if he couldn't remember. Then he brought up his omni and scrolled down a long listing. "I've been skimming through the logs from the Wisp. The name you mentioned last night—it came up at the top of the message stack."

Nihlus took a deep breath, marshaling his forces. The context gap stretched halfway across the Galaxy but he would bridge it, yes, sir. Last night, on the Wisp, he must have been blabbing about... "Wortag?"

“Tell me everything you know about him.”

“Oh.” He laughed. “That might take a while, sir. I thought you’d want to move out ASAP.”

“Welcome to the conversation, Kryik. Move out—where? There’s nothing here to indicate the location of the Blood Pack base. They only mention the river and something called—” he scrolled some more—“the Claw.”

“Ah.” Nihlus nodded. “It’s a rock formation north of here, easy to spot from the air. In fact—” He walked over to the north edge of the floor and pointed through the opening in the foliage. The Claw looked more like a knuckle from here, but it still stood out. “They probably told Okeer to eject when he sees it.”

Saren followed him and squinted at the distant landmark. “That can’t be more than ten klicks away,” he said. “The base must be near as well. And you were searching this area for it.”

“Yes, sir. But I’ve got next to nothing to show for it. The best I can do is a fifty-klick radius from the crash site, based on how long the gunship took to get there, and assuming it flew directly from the Shithole.” It was the most useless estimate ever. Why did he have to mention it? It had no place outside his tiny, stim-starved brain. *Stupid, clumsy, strung-out—*

“Shithole.” Saren’s left mandible twitched. “Appropriate. How long to search an area that size?”

“Ugh. Weeks. In good weather.”

Saren turned to look at him with a measure of that cold, hard intensity Nihlus remembered from their first meeting in Hierote. “Weeks? I don’t have *weeks*. If Okeer made a deal with them, they’ll smuggle him off-world within days.” He turned off the omni and squared his arms on his hips. “Is there no faster way to search? Imagine you had all the resources you could possibly need. What would it take?”

Nihlus had no trouble imagining it. He’d done it countless times to no avail. “There’s no helping it, sir. Mercs are crafty. They use sophisticated camo to hide from satellite surveillance, so you can’t see them from the air. You can’t fly a plane under the trees, and you can’t drive a tank over the swamps. Some mechs can navigate the jungle in good conditions, but larger predators mistake them for prey and take them down. We lost entire fleets of drones that way. And those that survived never reported anything of use so the HQ stopped requisitioning them after the last budget cut.”

Saren stared at him incredulously. “You could deploy more than one unit.”

“You could, sir. But landing troops in strength would not go unnoticed. You’d risk scaring them off and losing the opportunity for a surprise attack. Mercs are very quick to

abandon their lairs: they just leave everything, and *everyone* non-essential, behind. And launching a large-scale covert operation would take considerable preparations, which again means considerable time. Plus, it would present challenges of its own. IIC has only four spec-ops units and two are already in the area.”

“IIC,” Saren snapped, spitting it out like a curse. “What a joke. This could never happen on a proper turian world.”

Nihlus winced. If Saren thought Invictus so bad, whatever would he think of Cordis? Would he despise him for it like so many “proper turians”? Saren certainly seemed like the type to despise a great many things.

“So, Kryik. Start talking.”

“Yes, sir.” Nihlus swept the sweat from the back of his neck. Where should he start? Standing here, speaking with Saren Arterius almost as an equal, seemed even more surreal than the Hallori exercise. Just minutes ago. Had it really happened?

“When I got transferred here, two years ago, I was recovering from a spine injury and they gave me a desk job. As Thadon’s secretary. You remember, Major Eraquis? Well, at about the same time, there was a change of command; it’s when General Malivian took over the IIC. He had many new ideas and one of them was to upgrade the core VI, which had been online forever. The upgrade was near the end when I started, but there were still all sorts of problems because of it—whole subsystems going offline for hours, the comm buoy link was erratic, it was a mess.

“Anyway, with half the workstations down half the time, a lot of files went through my hands, going from floor to floor on data pads. Of course I read everything I had the clearance for. I was bored out of my fucking mind, riding that elevator up and down twenty times a day. And, well, one of the files happened to be a weapons delivery contract—with Forinthia.”

Saren’s eyes narrowed. “That’s in Hegemony space. There’s nobody on Invictus with the authority to export weapons to the batarians.”

“That was my first thought as well—but I was in no position to make sure. I had about the lowest clearance level necessary to traverse the building.” He snorted. “Haven’t made much progress on that account in the meantime.”

“You were right. Nowadays the Council might override Hierarchy policy, but two years ago the Hegemony was under level four embargo. Not even the cluster Primarch could have authorized that.”

“And imagine the credits one could make selling guns to them anyway.” Nihlus smiled nervously. “No competition, no quality assurance, you just lean back and name the price.

The in-between company was called 'Stellar Wind Trading' and their public records turned up clean like quarian teeth. I tried digging deeper, but the list of main shareholders was about the best I could do without raising flags. And guess who owns the good old forty nine percent."

"Wortag."

Nihlus nodded.

"Why didn't you report this?"

"I did, sir. I told the Major about it right away. He dismissed it and said it wasn't my place to run checks on upper tier contracts." Nihlus swallowed back the bile. It was incredible that this could still upset him, two years later. "The contract was mislabeled as on-premise, and the Major, being the sort of man who puts a lot of stock in rules and regulations, simply re-labeled the file without even looking at it. It wasn't my place to read it and it wasn't his place to read it, so it didn't exist."

"Ah, yes. A 'good' turian." To Nihlus's momentary amusement, Saren made air-quotes with his fingers. Then he raised a browplate, thinking. "Perhaps he was in on it? You should have gone to Baratus directly."

Nihlus sighed. "I was new, and I had a very bad record dragging me down as it was. I've done so many stupid things before. I thought I was being smart for a change, you know? Keeping my head down and my mouth shut. Besides, when the Major re-labeled the file, I could no longer access it. Just imagine the General, sitting for half an hour, listening to some random trooper blabbing about conspiracy theories."

Saren turned on his omni again. "The logs put Wortag in direct connection to the Blood Pack. No legal front can withstand that kind of evidence. I'm forwarding the relevant parts to your omni."

Nihlus touched his vacant left wrist. "What for? None of this helps us find the Shithole."

"Don't you want to take him down?"

"Me?" Nihlus laughed. "You're joking, right?"

The colorless eyes watched him, so steady he could observe his squirming reflection in them in all its inglorious detail. Saren wasn't joking. But what was he saying?

Nihlus shook his head. "Even if it *is* evidence enough... Wortag has his paw over more than eighty percent of all levo-imports. He has shares in every major offworld company doing business on Invictus. Everybody knows his credits keep the planet turning. There's simply no authority here ready to go against him in earnest."

“Is that so?”

“Well, I suppose the cluster Primarch...” His words died out as the realization sank in. Nihlus laughed again. “Right. *You’re* here.”

“I told Baratus I wasn’t here to police Invictus,” Saren muttered, gazing toward the Claw again. “But it looks like I may have to. And you’ll help me.”

Nihlus became aware that the drumming of his heartbeat was visibly shaking his ribcage. Escorting Saren and doing his bidding was cause enough for excitement; the notion of *collaborating* with him on a case of this magnitude, even in the most trivial of capacities, was overwhelming. Nihlus snapped to attention. “Yes, sir. Absolutely. Anything you need.”

If Saren told him to jump off the edge right now, he’d do it with a smile of gratitude. But Saren only twitched his mandibles. “Stand down, Kryik. We’re not on parade.”

“Yes, sir.” He widened his stance and clasped his hands behind his back. And then pinched his left hand with his right, hard enough to bruise. *Ouch*. Nope. Not a dream.

“You realize what this means, don’t you?”

Nihlus took a breath for an immediate affirmative, then shut his mouth with a click. It was a hugely broad question and all kinds of possible meanings popped up in his mind all at once. That I finally have a chance at life? That you’ll put in a good word for me in your report? Or even—oh, Spirits—recommend me to an ST&R recruiter? He searched Saren’s face for clues, but Saren let on nothing. It wouldn’t be about Nihlus, though, would it. That was just his self-centered, wishful thinking. It had to be something about the mission, something that actually mattered. Something about Okeer, Wortag, the Blood Pack...

“Oh.” *Ohh*. “If someone in the HQ is working with the Blood Pack—”

“—then the Blood Pack knows we’re looking for Okeer.”

“So much for our surprise attack.”

“Prey we don’t get surprised ourselves.”

“What?” Nihlus wanted to laugh but found he lacked the confidence. “They wouldn’t dare, sir.”

No merc org had enough firepower and manpower to openly challenge the turian army, not in Council space. Not even on Invictus. There had been precious few engagements between the IIC forces and the Blood Pack in the years of Nihlus’s service here and they



had been either raids or chance encounters. He had never heard of a military unit getting attacked by anything other than wildlife. It was insane to even contemplate it.

But Saren obviously contemplated it. His mandibles flicked impatiently. "It's what they want you to think. Let me guess." He took to pacing to and from the edge, glancing at Nihlus sideways. "They conduct their business quietly under the cover of the jungle? They run and hide if discovered and never attack on their own? Minimal loss of life and equipment when an armed conflict does occur?"

"Uh... Yes, sir. Pretty much."

"While no one knows where, how many and how well equipped they are. Convenient, isn't it?"

"You think... it's all set up that way? By the... traitor?"

Saren stopped, turning to face him. "If your intuition is correct, it's nearly a certainty. Such an arrangement would be extremely lucrative. Wortag and his collaborators might take significant risks to prevent a Spectre from ruining it. And making one squad disappear in the jungle isn't even that much of a risk."

"Not this squad."

He braced for some reproachful remark as he realized just how overconfident that must have sounded. It became hot all of a sudden and sweat trickled down his neck. Nervous tremors went through his muscles. It was way past his usual time for the day's first shot of stims.

But Saren just hummed thoughtfully. And when it became obvious he wouldn't say anything, Nihlus spoke again.

"Either way, sir, we *should* move out ASAP. If someone's after us, this would be the first place to look. Unless—" He glanced through the north wall down at the overgrown path that had once upon a time had the ambition of becoming a street, and recalled the layout of the skeleton settlement. He should have thought of it earlier.

"What?"

"Unless we *want* to be found. Set up an ambush—"

"—take prisoners, make them reveal the location of their base." Saren cocked a browplate, considering. "Not bad. But we might lose a lot of time lying in wait for an uncertain prize."

The compliment made Nihlus' heart leap. "Yes, sir." Having failed to keep the flutter out of his voice, he cleared his throat and wrung his hands into a painful knot to keep himself from grinning like an idiot.

Saren took no note, however. He looked around with a strange expression, almost nostalgic, and sighed. "Go, then. Get ready."

At the top of the stairs, Nihlus was so pumped with excitement and enthusiasm he felt like he could fly. By the time he descended two floors down, he was exhausted.

The others had broken camp and only his bedroll remained, with his weapons and armor piled up on top of it. He cast around for Pan, but couldn't see him. He'd totally beg for his stims right now. Kneel and lick his boots, whatever it took. Not that it would work. Pan had a chunk of rock in place of a heart. He had locked Nihlus out before, once or twice. On one of those occasions, Nihlus cried. For real. He sat on the soggy ground and tears streamed down his face and into his mouth, mixing with the funny-tasting rain of Invictus. Pan had laughed his ass off.

Someone approached him from behind while he was putting on his armor and he jumped a bit when he turned and saw Theeka. She was all dressed up—everyone except him was—complete with her asshole face, so Nihlus was on guard.

"What's up?" He bent down for the thigh piece, never letting her out of sight. A few months back, following another disastrous attempt at sparring, she had bitten his hand when he reached to wipe the blood from her split lip. Which almost cost her a cracked mandible. They hadn't spoken for a week after it.

"You were up there for an hour."

"Yeah?" The seals on the right were all accounted for. He couldn't remember if he'd checked the left, so he did it just in case.

"What were you doing?"

*The Spectre needed to blow off some steam*, the dickhead in him wished to say. At the same time, another part of him wished it had been true. Either way, it was a bad idea. They were heading into danger and didn't need stupid distractions.

"Tried to figure out where to go next." He picked up his chest-piece. "Help me?"

She wrinkled her nose at him, but lifted the back piece and held it for him while he sealed it up.

"So, where are we going?"

“To investigate the Claw.”

“Oh.”

The bottom left-hand seal was acting up again. Nihlus scratched and poked at it in vain. He couldn't reach it with his right hand.

“For fuck's sake,” Theeka said. “Suck it up.”

Nihlus grunted, murmuring his usual complaints about shitty standard issue suits under his breath. They were supposed to get replacements yearly, but everything moved at half the normal pace on Invictus, so this was the same suit he had gotten upon arrival. And it was getting tight. Sure, he had gained a lot of muscle mass due to high gravity, but the problem had nothing to do with his body composition. It was about his *proportions*. As embarrassing as it was, he was still growing.

He obediently sucked his stomach in, and Theeka forced the front and back parts closer until the seal clicked.

“Thanks.” He relaxed, readjusting to his second skin. “I'm uh... sorry I went so hard on you earlier.”

“Fuck you, Nihlus.”

But she was no longer angry. Her voice was the kind he imagined she would use one day to say, fuck *me*, Nihlus. And Spirits, was he ready and willing. But not while she slept with Thadon. Ugh.

“I wouldn't mind sparring more often if you weren't so intent on, you know, killing me.”

Even as he spoke, his thoughts drifted back to his exercise with Saren. He had tried to seduce Theeka into Hallori, but she wouldn't budge. It wasn't direct enough, she said. She wanted to break bones, not learn elaborate choreographies to *avoid* it. Never mind that the rate of fatal accidents was ten times as high in Hallori as in any of the other martial arts. Or that it was what allowed Nihlus to excel at those other martial arts with so little effort. Theeka wasn't the type to look far into the future.

“You really didn't see him?” she said.

“Hm?” He turned around. “See who?”

“Don't play stupid. *Him*. The Spectre. While we practiced.”

“Nope.” He picked up the shoulder guards and squeezed one between his legs while he fixed the other. Theeka seemed unconvinced, so he deadpanned and recited: “No, I really didn't see him. Why?”

Theeka chewed her mandible. “What Pan said. I thought you stomped on me to show off. And it got to me. Big-time.” She coughed and looked away.

Nihlus busied himself with the other shoulder, considering his options. That was almost an apology. An admission of weakness, and it touched him deeply. Theeka didn’t crack open her emotional cocoon often. He wanted to grab her and bury his face in her neck. But he had to stay cool, or she’d reset right back to hard-mode.

“Pan’s an asshole,” he said, going for the tried and true strategy of blaming someone third. “And anyway, if I knew he was watching, I’d trip over my feet and break both my arms or something. You know better than anyone what a trainwreck I am when I’m trying to impress.”

“Ah-ha! So you admit you’re trying to impress him.” She pointed a finger at him with mock accusation, trying, and failing, to keep a straight face. Was that a blush coming up her collar?

“Well, yeah.” His armor was assembled. Only weapons remained. “You should be, too. He’s friends with the General. I bet he could get you into Space Corps with a flick of the mandible.” *Unlike your boyfriend.*

Theeka picked up his gloves and toyed with them while he slotted his sniper rifle on his left, and his assault rifle on the right. “And what are you hoping for?” she said softly.

A damn good question, that. Let’s see. His wishes soared sky-high and beyond for sure, but hope required *belief*. Feasibility. Best he could *hope* for was... a commission? Or, ok—a promotion. Eh. Who was he kidding.

“Keeping my job would be nice.”

She started to say something, but suddenly there was commotion all around them. Duon and Farril came down the western stairs, engaged in a lively discussion, and Pan got in from the balcony. Nihlus waved at him with his most innocent smile, and made a begging gesture. Just in case. But Pan just rolled his eyes and turned to say something to Lantar, who followed him in. Mirene appeared at the fire-escape exit and squared her hands on her hips for *weren’t we supposed to move out ASAP?* And then everyone froze for a moment when Saren came down the eastern stairs and swept the room with his targeting lasers.

“Stop drooling,” Theeka said. She nudged an elbow in his side with enough force to send him stumbling. “And don’t forget your bedroll.”

## Chapter 11 - They Wouldn't Dare

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And so began another tedious march through the jungle. They were making decent progress and at first, it felt good to be on the move. It meant getting closer to Okeer and to the end of this mission. A dubious and difficult mission from the beginning, but Saren's eagerness to be done with it and gone from Invictus was rapidly evolving into a *need*.

As they left the river further and further behind, the marshlands gave way to firmer, intermittently rocky ground. There was much less secondary growth and no need for cutting to clear a path. But the heat was getting worse by the minute. Saren was sweating in sheets. He considered sealing his suit times and times again, but everyone else was walking with open helmets so he had to endure it too.

Theeka walked point, giving Lantar, who went close behind, various scouting tips. Twice they crossed game trails, and she named some of the creatures who had made them, and the predators that might stalk them. By description, one was a giant slug who killed by spraying its prey with paralyzing venom, then enveloped and consumed it over the course of weeks by slow osmosis of dissolved tissue directly through the skin. The fragile, silvery cobwebs hanging from the lowest branches of the ganuts were the dried slime left after its passage. Saren was briefly fascinated. He thought he could hear the creature slithering up a tree where they found fresh tracks and even turned up his audio implants above the safety recommendation in hope of catching sight of it. But after the conversation with Kryik, he had ordered strict radio-silence, which included his own extrantet link, so he couldn't look it up and find out more.

Kryik and he went next, and the medic had the rear. The other fire team moved on a parallel course, somewhat ahead and to their left, mostly invisible to the unaided eye. Trekking through the jungle was likely the activity that comprised most of this unit's normal duties. They moved through it with the confidence of seasoned hunters making rounds of their territory, even though Kryik had told him they had never been on this side of the Ibiss. The respite had put them in high spirits and there was a lot of intercom chatter.

Saren wasn't paying attention. He was almost out of water and every now and then, suffered shivers from an incongruous chill, as if running a low fever. It would be trivial to check but he didn't want to be seen doing it. Worse than that, however, was the mounting exhaustion. Nothing to wonder about after sleeping an hour a day on average since Sur'Kesh. The high gravity wasn't helping. His legs were heavy and clumsy and his joints lacked their usual spring. He kept stumbling on roots like a drunkard.

"Spit it up, Sarge," the medic said after an especially bad instance. "What did you put in the Spectre's water bottle?"

“Oh, nothing,” Kryik drawled. “Just a few drops of rynkol.” He turned to Saren and winked. “Mixed with water in good proportion it’s almost tasteless, but still packs a hell of a punch.”

“Listen to Sarge, sir,” said Mirene. “He knows his stuff when it comes to rynkol.”

Everyone laughed for some reason.

“It’s rude to make private jokes,” said another man’s voice, and Saren was reasonably sure it was the tech, Duon. “You should tell the whole story.”

“No she shouldn’t,” Kryik hurried to say. “Mirene, don’t—”

“Oh, but I must! Lantar hasn’t heard it either. Have you, knucklehead?”

“Nope.”

Another man, whose voice Saren couldn’t place, laughed. “It’s hardly educational.”

“It’s totally educational. So we were on patrol in the south, just under the Kirreneans—”

“Mirene,” Kryik warned. “Don’t make me order you to shut up.”

“Oh, come on, Nihlus,” Theeka said. “It’s not *that* bad.”

Kryik cleared his throat.

“Sir,” she added and chuckled. “It’s not that bad, *sir*. Sorry, *sir*.”

Saren glanced at Kryik, who turned his face away. It was an unmistakable reference to the way Kryik addressed him. But perhaps Kryik’s embarrassment came not so much from making fun of his formality as from Theeka’s familiarity. Saren wondered if they slept together and if the IIC had regulations regarding it.

“It’s bad. But fine.” Kryik sighed. “Go ahead... make me look even more stupid.”

Theeka, and a few others, made annoyed noises. Mirene just laughed. “It was Sarge’s second or third patrol with us and he was still showing off.”

Kryik snorted.

“We found a small lair of mercs. They were holed up in this... bunker thing. One can find them scattered throughout the jungle. Outposts securing supply lines for timber and water, built by the First Wave, abandoned and never reclaimed. Half of them are animal dens nowadays, and the other half, merc hideouts. Anyway, they knew we were sneaking around, and we knew they were pretty much untouchable in there. So Sarge here had the brilliant idea to uh—” she laughed—“talk them into letting us in.”

"It was a good plan," Kryik muttered.

"It was jackshit insane," said yet another male voice. Vezeer? Saren wasn't sure.

"But it almost worked, didn't it?"

"What was the plan" Saren said.

For a few seconds the silence on the intercom was pristine. He hadn't said a word since they'd moved out.

Mirene cleared her throat. "Well, sir, we waited till it was dark. You've seen how dark it gets at night under the trees. Sarge made Duon program his omni to create a fake krogan thermal signature. Then we ran around, yelling and firing our weapons while Sarge pretended to best us all in melee."

"He had me model a big-ass holo hammer," Duon said and laughed. "And went around swinging it like some old warlord from the Rebellions."

"We all sealed suits and cloaked one by one," Mirene continued. "It was supposed to look like he'd killed us. And then he just... went there and knocked on their barricade."

"He had me program a voice-altering filter for his omni too," Duon said. "One that'd make him sound like a krogan, har-har."

His imitation of a krogan laugh wasn't half bad even without any filters.

"I still have that," Kryik said. He typed something into his omni, and a second later a gruff krogan voice boomed in Saren's earpiece. "Come out, you pyjacks. They're dead, ha-ha!"

Everyone laughed, and even Saren couldn't stop his mandibles from twitching. "Did they?"

"Eventually," Mirene said. "They asked him who he was and where he came from and the bullshit he spun was glorious. I swear, no one in their right mind could think of such nonsense, *and* make it sound plausible."

"They were marinated," Kryik protested. "They slurred and belched and laughed like idiots. No one is that stupid."

You'd be surprised, Saren thought. Distracted, he stumbled again, but the others were too occupied to notice.

"It turned out that they'd been sitting on a shipment of rynkol for days with nothing to do but sample the goods," Mirene went on. "They were waiting for a contact, some slimy batarian who we'd found dead and half-eaten earlier. That's how we got a wind of them

to begin with. Anyway, after a few minutes of this hilarious conversation, they had the genius idea to shine a light on him and see who they were making fiends with. Sarge spun some more bullshit, about how it would mess with his night vision or something. I don't know if that made them suspicious or if it's a usual thing in krogan social interactions, but they handed him a bottle through the window and insisted he drinks with them while they work on removing the barricade. And smart as Sarge is on any other day, he couldn't figure out how to trick them on that one and just did as they asked!"

Scattered laughter bubbled over the intercom.

"I didn't know it was rynkol," Kryik said, gesturing defensively. "I can handle normal booze as well as the next guy."

"Don't sell yourself short, Sarge," said one of the men. There was more laughter. Saren glanced at Kryik again, but Kryik just shook his head.

"Anyway," Mirene said, "he took it like a champ."

"I only had one gulp," Kryik said. "Having no gag reflex certainly helped." He winked at Saren again, but only after several laughs, snorts and exclamations of disbelief followed over the intercom did Saren understand the joke. If it was a joke.

"Interesting," he muttered.

The intercom grew very quiet and Kryik turned deathly serious at the snap of the fingers. For a moment Saren thought that there was an enemy contact or some other alarm, but the unit kept moving.

And then he realized that what he'd actually said was *disgusting*.

Nothing could've been further from his sentiment. He didn't care one bit about the sexual applications of such a... talent, although these young people, unsurprisingly, cared for nothing but. But there were several ways to use it in his line of work, the most obvious being to hide things inside one's own body without the need for surgery. *That* had been on his mind when he made the comment.

He had no intention of apologizing or explaining himself, but slipping was unlike him. His head was muddled. If was the fever. From a heat stroke? Hardly. There was no headache. A reaction to the vaccine?

"Well," Mirene said after a long spell of awkward silence. "Like I said, the mercs eventually did get out of the bunker. There were two krogan and three vorchas in there. They were so drunk they couldn't shoot shit. We made short work of them." She laughed. "Too bad Sarge passed out and didn't see any of it. But we had some more quality entertainment stripping him naked and drenching him with water the next morning."



No one laughed this time.

“That’s it,” she concluded.

“So uh... what was I supposed to learn from this, exactly?” Lantar asked after a while.

“To keep your mouth shut,” Theeka said.

Kryik didn’t say anything. Nor did anyone else for a long time. Saren couldn’t quite see the reasons for being so morose. Despite the unflattering lead-up, the story painted Kryik in a positive light. The risk-to-reward value of his unorthodox plan was debatable, but he and his men had worked out the details of it meticulously and the execution obviously resulted in success. It was rather a story to be proud of.

But even if Saren cared for Kryik’s hurt feelings, telling him all that would take so many words. Just thinking about it made him want to lie down on the ground and never move again. His vision darkened. Fluorescent worms writhed in front of his eyes and he froze, grabbing the first thing in range for balance. It happened to be Kryik’s arm.

“What?” Kryik snapped. But when Saren could not respond immediately and the grip grew urgent, he spoke in a gentler tone. “Sir?”

The world came back in all its splendor of insect noises and countless shades of green as suddenly as it had receded. It had only lasted a second.

“Nothing,” Saren muttered. He let go and they moved on.

After a few steps, Kryik handed him a fresh water bottle.

“No rynkol in there, I presume?”

Kryik stopped short and bulged his eyes at him. “I’d never do that. Please tell me you didn’t take that crap seriously?”

“It was a joke, Kryik.” Served him right to even try. To demonstrate good will, he took the bottle and drank from it.

“Oh.” Kryik cleared his throat. “Sorry, sir.”

Saren kept drinking until there was no more. It was unbelievably refreshing, yet far from enough. Kryik watched him.

“Spent your own?”

“Way back.”

Kryik glanced at his omni, then spoke over the intercom. “Let’s take a break.”

“Thank Spirits,” Mirene muttered.

“Thank Sarge,” Kryik corrected her.

A choir of voices replied at the same time. “Thank you, Sarge!”

It was a good call. The Claw was another five or so clicks away, according to Saren’s visual estimate from Lomera. They might find nothing there. Or walk into a trap. Better be rested and alert.

They dropped their bags and sat on the grass in a small clearing around the gigantic stump of an ancient ganut, two meters tall and twice as wide. Saren leaned back with a long sigh. Judging from the groans, the others were no less exhausted. Kryik was the only one still standing, feeling for something in his backpack. He pulled out another bottle of water and offered it.

“I have a few more,” he replied to the unspoken question.

Saren took it with a grateful nod. Which reminded him. He gestured at Kryik to approach and rummaged through his own bag. It was full of fruit. Not what he’d had in mind, but since they were there, he quickly munched one berry. And another. The grenades were almost the same size and shape.

Kryik had taken a step forward, but now he just stood there. Still offended by Saren’s remark, no doubt. For all his yes-sir, no-sir nonsense, he was broadcasting an air of defiance so palpable Saren could feel it poking at his composure like a rude finger. No wonder he hadn’t gotten along with any of his COs if this was how he presented whenever he was told something he didn’t like.

“Come,” Saren said.

Kryik made a face but lowered himself on one knee.

“Take these.”

“Uh... got plenty of my own, sir.”

“You carry cluster grenades?”

“What?”

“These are biotic.”

The fretful expression on Kryik’s face was at once swept away by unadulterated, child-like awe. “Oh,” he uttered, then dropped the strap of his backpack and put up his hands.

Saren placed the two grenades carefully in his palms. "Suitable for triggering runaway dark energy reactions."

Kryik blinked at him, mandibles hanging.

"Biotic explosions," Saren explained. "They might come in handy when we engage the enemy. I imbued these myself. They should be quite potent. Throw them into non-transient—*lasting*—biotic fields for a large-scale effect."

"Oh, man." Kryik was staring at the grenades in his hands as if they were already primed.

"You'll know one when you see one."

"And if I don't?"

Saren shrugged. "On their own they're like normal frag-grenades. Waste of my energy, but that's a renewable resource." Though right now that felt manifestly false. "Don't overthink it."

"Yes, sir."

With practiced efficiency, Kryik re-slotted a pair of his own grenades from the left to the right side of his belt, put Saren's in the vacant spots and tested if they were secure. Before Saren could finish muttering *that's all*, Kryik had already rolled over next to him, with his back nested against the stump and eyes firmly shut. He was asleep within seconds.

Leaning his head back, Saren closed his eyes too. The strange pattern of canopy disengagement left white imprints on the back of his eyelids. But soon it turned into scorched earth and lava bubbled from the black cracks. The planet was doomed, he knew, because he had seeded a biotic singularity in its core and the inevitable release of dark energy could not be contained. By some horrible miscalculation (the mass increase wasn't supposed to be steep enough to require relativistic corrections) he was stranded on the surface. The air was turning to fire, on his face, in his lungs. Glancing down, he witnessed his left hand feeding the red flames. His flesh was vaporized and only charred bones remained.

He jolted. Strange faces loomed above him and he tried to back away but he was cornered. His left hand—still there, thank the Spirits, still whole—flared up for a reflexive biotic slash even as he remembered his whereabouts. One face belonged to Pan, the medic, and the other was Kryik's. They scrambled away at the first sight of blue sparks, but Saren held back in time.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that,” he snarled, pushing himself up. “Bad idea even on a good day.”

“Yes, sir,” Kryik said, a little breathless. “Sorry, sir. We were trying to raise you, but you wouldn’t wake up.”

Saren huffed, finding his balance. His breath felt hot in his head and his hand burned. Was it for real, or was it the dream, lingering behind? He looked around. Theeka was sitting on the ground, chewing a dry ration and observing the scene indifferently. There was no trace of Lantar.

“Sir,” the medic said, “you don’t look well. If you—”

“I’m fine,” he lied.

The medic cocked his head sideways. “No, sir. At the very least, you’re dehydrated, and that can be a lot more serious than it sounds in this weather.” As he spoke, a wild shiver broke through Saren’s body, as if invited. “And it looks like you have a bit of a fever too. Remove your helmet, please?”

Saren glared at him, hating his authority, but he didn’t have the energy to argue. He took off the damn helmet. Only when the breeze touched his skin did he realize just how soaked with sweat it was.

Meanwhile, Kryik had been standing by with an annoyingly concerned face, shifting his weight from one foot to another and waiting to be noticed.

“What is it?” Saren said.

“Not sure, sir. Got a bad feeling. I sent scouts out, just in case. But we should get ready either way.”

The medic was in his face. With massive reluctance, Saren turned away and let him feel the spot where he’d administered the vaccine last night. He flinched at the contact. It hurt.

“There’s a reaction,” the medic said. “Any nausea? Dizziness? Disorientation?”

“Some,” Saren admitted. He side-stepped out of the medic’s reach, feeling the painful spot himself. “What makes you think there’s trouble ahead?” he asked Kryik.

“The silence.” Kryik indicated the jungle with his chin. “Usually means something’s up.”

“Or that someone’s strung out on stims,” Theeka pointed out with a full mouth. When Kryik gave her the evil eye, she laughed, spraying crumbs.

“What are you doing?” Saren asked the medic, who was pointing his omni at him and frowning.

“Your armor is blocking my scanner, sir.”

“Working as intended.”

The medic lowered his hand and looked at Kryik with all the frustration he didn’t dare convey directly. Kryik in turn looked at Saren with a silent plea.

Grumbling, Saren called up his vitals on his own omni. Rather than any illness he could readily remember, the way he felt reminded him of states of serious blood loss or biotic debt. Even reciting the numbers—everything other than his body temperature was within acceptable limits—was too much of an effort. Instead he just stretched his arm out so the medic could see the report for himself.

Kryik drew closer and craned his neck over the medic’s shoulder for a peek. Saren was about to bark at them to keep their damn distance when his earpiece rang and everyone jumped.

“Sarge, contacts!” It was Lantar. His voice was a shrill whisper. “North from your position. Forty meters from mine. Stationary.”

Everyone was in motion in the blink of an eye, lowering visors and readying weapons. Saren quickly put his helmet back on.

“Cloak and hold position,” Kryik said over the intercom. “Duon? Anything?”

“Not yet—oh. Yeah. They’re holed up between those rocks.”

A new navpoint notification appeared on Saren’s visor and he called down the tactical overlay. The rock formation was less than half a klick ahead. It was a textbook spot for an ambush, assuming anyone would be stupid enough to walk straight down the shallow ravine that ended there. Which, of course, presented possibilities. Lantar’s position was east of it. Duon’s was west. The other fire-team was a close-knit triangle of blue dots near the western range-limit of his scanner.

Kryik and his men had crouched in the cover of the ganut stump. Saren lowered himself on one knee, unholstered his right-hand pistol and gave it a cursory inspection. Adrenaline had cleared his mind and the air-conditioning in the sealed helmet was a literal breath of fresh air.

“How many?” Kryik asked.

“At least a dozen,” Lantar said. “They’re all bunched up at the edge of my radar. No visual.”

"I got a visual," Duon said. "Can't tell their numbers. But I see some vorcha, and they have varren. It's the Blood Pack, Sarge."

"Hold on."

Saren tapped the icon for his private channel with Kryik before it had the chance to start blinking.

"How do we proceed, sir? We have the radar range advantage. If we make a wide enough circle, we could avoid engagement."

"I doubt that," Saren said. "The odds of an accidental encounter here, in the middle of nowhere, are negligible. They're waiting for us and they're likely not alone. Besides, we need prisoners."

"But how did they find us?"

"Good question." That Wortag character had instructed Okeer to land at the Claw. It wouldn't have been too hard to predict that Saren would head that way in pursuit, even for the thugs running the Blood Pack. But only under the assumption that they knew the Wisp had not self-destructed in time to erase proof of Okeer's communication with Wortag. And if Kryik's suspicions had merit, they could've learned this from a collaborator within the IIC.

Unless they had some other way of tracking him. Not for the first time, Saren wondered if Okeer was skilled enough to tag his omni without his knowledge. A glance at his left hand reminded him of the dream and another violent shiver reminded him of the fever. The prospect of exertion in imminent combat was faintly nauseating. But even if he believed an engagement could be avoided, he couldn't afford to wait for some random infirmity to pass.

He started to tell Kryik what was to be done, but changed his mind. "Options?"

Kryik's helmet stared at him motionlessly for a few seconds before he brought up his omni and started scrolling through the map. "Sir. We could... play bait and let Mirene flank them. Pretend we just walked into it. Or we can wait for Mirene to surprise them from the rear, make them face the wrong way, then follow up from this side. Or... no, never mind."

"Go on."

"Well... we could also try to lure them out. We know they're after you, sir."

"You propose *I* play bait?" That had actually been Saren's first thought, but he wanted to see Kryik squirm a little.

Instead, Kryik laughed. “No, sir. With all due respect, the Blood Pack has much more experience hunting in the jungle than you have hiding in it. It’d have to be me or one of my men. We’d swap omni-tools so I could transmit my position with your signature. Meanwhile you and the others cloak and ambush the pursuers along that ravine.”

He had a point. Saren was less apt at traversing the jungle than anyone in Kryik’s squad even without taking his illness in account. But he wasn’t *swapping* anything with anyone. Preposterous.

“You will come with me.”

“Sir?”

“Send the rest of this group to join Lantar, and the other—Duon. I’ll emit a fake distress call when everyone’s in position. Tell your men the goal is to take prisoners, not annihilate. Use grenades and heavy weapons only as a last resort.”

Kryik’s helmet hesitated more than long enough to spell out how he felt about Saren’s take on his brilliant plan. But at last he nodded. “Understood.”

“Good. Execute.”

The brief exchange exhausted him out of proportion. His breathing was short and guttural, his heartrate alarmingly elevated. While Kryik planned out the maneuver on the map and gave specific orders to the squad, he stole a glance at his vitals again. The fever was no longer mild. And all his major nodules were highlighted red on the tiny, low-res, but utterly dependable full-body snapshot. *Of course* the vaccine affected, and was affected by biotics, like every other detail of his body chemistry. How could it not be? He had been a fool to allow it. But had he refused, he’d likely be cursing himself for *that*, plagued by who knows what other affliction. Damn Okeer, and damn Invictus!

Kryik was efficient. He planned out the maneuver and briefed his men in minutes. They were just about to move out when shots were fired at a distance. A single, controlled three-round burst of the standard-issue turian assault rifle—then another, like the heartbeat of a startled hatchling.

“Who fired?” Kryik said over the intercom. Pan and Theeka, who had only made several steps eastward, crouched low in the grass and waited.

“Wasn’t us,” Mirene said.

“Not me,” Duon joined.

A few beats passed.

“Lantar?” Kryik said, doing a bad job at keeping anxiety out of his voice. “Lantar, report.”

There was nothing.

“They’re pouring out of their hole, Sarge,” Mirene said. “Toward Lantar’s last known position.”

Kryik cursed. “Change of plan.” He got up and set out after Pan and Theeka, catching up in three long strides and taking the lead. “We’re heading there, all four of us. You draw as close as you can and surprise them.”

“Got it.”

Kryik broke into a jog and by the time Saren hoisted himself up on his feet and started after him, he and his men had disappeared in the grainy dusk of the jungle already. He didn’t appreciate not being consulted, but he couldn’t be bothered to raise a fuss over it. Clearly, the plan they had agreed upon was no longer feasible, and trapping the enemy between the two teams was as reasonable a course of action as any. *He* wouldn’t rush into combat to save a man who would almost certainly be either dead or captured by the time he got there, but since it didn’t derail the mission, he didn’t care to argue the point.

The world had grown a few shades darker with clouds gathering above the crowns, and still a few more as Saren ventured under them. The shrubbery seemed intent to make his passage as difficult as possible, winding around his feet and whipping his visor. He struggled to keep up with Kryik and his men, who dashed and darted forward on his radar as they sought cover behind the trees. His heart thudded. Sweat broke all over him and his vision narrowed to a shady tunnel with a far-away circle of dim green in the end.

The low-pitched racket of the Blood Pack submachine guns drummed ahead, countered by the precise tic-tac-toc, tic-tac-toc of turian assault rifles. It was impossible to tell how far. The hollow trees wreaked havoc with the acoustics. There was still nothing on Saren’s radar, but enemy fire had slowed Kryik and his men down, and he finally caught up with them.

Kryik fired in the direction of unseen enemies from the cover of one tree while Pan and Theeka leap-frogged to another. Targets finally lit up on Saren’s radar, but not before he was clipped by a few badly aimed rounds. Nothing his shield couldn’t take, but it made his pulse race. He ran up to Kryik’s tree and leaned on it, desperately short of breath.

“You ok, sir? Took some fire there.”

“Fine.”



“Good thing the Blood Pack subscribes to the spray and pray philosophy in choice of weapons, eh?” Kryik shot two more bursts, taking out one red dot from the radar. “Ready to move?”

*Hell, no.* Saren readied his pistol and drew a deep breath. “I’ll go left, you go right.”

“Yes, sir.”

On some silent signal, Pan and Theeka opened fire from their new position. Kryik ran, half-crouched, for the next tree in the direction of the enemy. Saren followed after a second. He trusted Kryik’s men were trained well enough to not shoot him as he crossed their line of fire, but he didn’t entirely trust himself. Not in the state he was in. He moved cautiously, keeping low and lagging a few steps behind. Which possibly saved Kryik’s life.

A scrawny bush shook and rustled and a slick gray shadow leapt out. It was a varren, and at this range, its electric-shock attack would obliterate Kryik’s shield and likely make him jump right into crossfire. Saren lifted it together with a cloud of dirt and torn foliage in a knee-jerk reaction. How the hell did it manage to get so close without triggering the radar? He didn’t have the angle to shoot it and was about to call for an assist when a shotgun blast from behind tore its head off, a meter above ground, just as his field dissipated.

“Holy shit!” Theeka yelped, then laughed hysterically. “Fucking awesome!”

Saren couldn’t disagree more. The area of effect had been twice as wide, and the apex of the clumsy flight half as high as he intended. But that was the least of his worries. The simple mimetic sent burning sensations all along his left hand up to the nodule under the armpit, igniting it in brilliant, liquid pain. Stunned, he gracelessly stumbled ahead and finally rolled after Kryik until he hit something solid.

“Sir? What’s wrong?”

He got up on all fours, taking deep breaths and blinking tears out of his eyes. He hadn’t felt anything like this since puberty, when the dormant nodules had first stirred, as suddenly and violently as a dreamer from a nightmare.

“I don’t know,” he managed to force out just as a pattern of rounds etched itself into the dry bark centimeters above his head and rained splinters down his visor. He rolled over and sat up against the tree, breathing hard. Thankfully, he hadn’t dropped his pistol.

“You’re unwell,” Kryik said between shots. “Retreat back to camp. We’ll cover you.”

With every burst from his rifle, there was one less enemy on tactical. Saren remembered their first meeting and how overconfident the angry, young soldier sounded, swearing

in his aim. He grinned in the privacy of his helmet. *I'm as well as I'll ever be. Care to test it?*

"No," he said aloud. The dizziness was passing.

"You said you'd take my orders in combat."

"That was yesterday." He spun to the left, picked a target—a crafty vorcha clawing up a tree—and shot it. Another popped up above a fallen branch, with a grenade launcher. It fired at the same time Saren did, and his round blew the grenade in its face.

"Nice shot," Pan commented from behind.

The fire exchange intensified and the air became criss-crossed with trails and abuzz with rounds flying in all directions. More Blood Pack were coming. Saren wondered why the other team hadn't attacked their rear yet. He had no idea how much time had passed since they had left the clearing.

But then everything happened at once. Pan and Theeka were on the move, but another varren—no, it was a vorcha—had managed to sneak up under their radars and Theeka tackled it hand-to-hand—while more vorcha advanced now, drawing Pan's and Kryik's fire—from what? Saren squinted, zooming in, and there—towering almost a meter above the fleeting shadows of the vorcha and bobbing ponderously from side to side like a giant egg, a large krogan entered the scene.

Saren shot him once, twice, and after the third shot the krogan reeled back, but did not fall. Instead he roared and tilted forward. In the second it took Saren to realize what this meant, the krogan had begun a run-up to a charge and was already half-way to melee range, paying no heed to the hail of fire coming from all sides—and Theeka, who had won the duel and knelt on top of her fallen enemy, was right in his path.

Kryik yelled, "Get away, get away!" and she gritted, "Shit, shit, shit!" at the same time, moving to roll. But it was too late. Collision was imminent, and it would be fatal.

Bracing for another surge of pain, Saren lashed out with his left arm to seed a singularity in the krogan's path. But the pain almost took him out regardless. This time the liquid fire reached his spine and forked up into the back of his head and down into his groin. While he helplessly folded forward, he cursed himself for failing to give Kryik a heads up. What were the odds he'd remember the grenades?

But then the ground shook and the thunder of a biotic explosion cracked through the air. It pushed him out of cover and rolled him on his back, splashing grass, dirt and bloody bits of alien entrails over his visor.

Saren realized he was about to throw up. He took off his helmet and let it roll away. The pain had him in seizures. He dry-heaved, but only a bit of bile that tasted revoltingly

sweet in his mouth came out. He spat out, fighting the spasms, and tried to orient himself.

It was very quiet. The grenade combo had flung Kryik out of cover as well. He lay on the ground, not far ahead, and wasn't moving. The others were out of sight. It looked like the entire enemy force had been swept up by the explosion and the sounds of a firefight were distant. Someone *was* moving, though. A heavy, slow gait, closing in on Saren from behind.

He got up on one knee, heart drumming. His pistol was nowhere to be seen. He reached for the other one—and froze as the cold muzzle of a weapon touched the back of his head. The deep rumble of krogan laughter followed.

“You’re not half as dangerous as Okeer said,” the krogan drawled. “Look at you. Squirming in the mud like a worm.” He laughed some more.

Saren brought his hands up in slow motion. Stall for time. Till his head cleared. He was about to start speaking when the krogan’s armored fingers pinched his crest.

“What’s this, eh? You some kind of freak?”

Unable to stop the reflex, Saren raised his barrier. It was a mistake. The last mistake he would ever make. It burned from within, like a hundred incendiary rounds hitting his body at once. It also failed, bursting in a shower of useless sparks. And even if it had held, it wouldn't have saved him from a point-blank head-shot.

What saved him was sudden motion in front. Kryik leaped up from the ground as if electrocuted, armed with nothing but flailing limbs and a madman’s warcry, muffled by his helmet. The krogan’s weapon swished upward next to Saren’s ear and his body reacted before he could think about it. He caught the weapon—a massive, greasy shotgun—by the barrel just as it fired. They wrestled for it, but Saren was at a disadvantage, trying to fend off an opponent several times his mass from below. The krogan loomed over him, growling. His armor was burned to a crisp and a crack along the chest creaked and splintered when he leaned down. A feral orange eye peered at Saren from a large hole on his visor, burning with bloodlust.

The last thing Saren saw, or thought he saw, was Kryik, executing a jet-aided jump to pound the krogan from above. They all crashed in a heap and the world faded out.

## Chapter 12 - Not This Squad

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Nihlus could swear the ground shook when the krogan fell and he hoped to Spirits that the cracking noise wasn't from Saren's bones being ground to dust under his weight. He rolled sideways just in time to avoid being ground to dust himself as the krogan turned on his back and swung his massive arms. He was blinded by the glass from the visor Nihlus had smashed into his face, but he could still defend himself. Nihlus groped for the knife strapped to his right thigh, dodged one strike, then another, and finally sunk the blade under the krogan's chin through the crack in the armor. He had to lean into it with both hands before the krogan stopped thrashing.

"Oh, man," Pan said, darting past him. Theeka came walking from the same direction. She was unsure on her feet, barely holding onto her rifle, but it didn't look like she was injured. "Holy shit," she muttered.

"Any sign of Lantar?" Nihlus said and winced. His tongue was a swollen knot of pain. He had bitten it when the grenade combo sent him flying.

"Not that I've seen. But that's not a whole lot. My head's swimming. What the fuck was that... thing?"

"A biotic explosion." Nihlus surveyed the blast circle. Half a dozen dead vorcha were strewn about it haphazardly, some whole, some in parts. "I didn't know the AOE would be that big. He said like a frag grenade..." *on their own*. He closed his eyes. *Retard. Cretin. Imbecile. Fool.*

He wrenched his knife out, feeling mildly nauseated. Dark red blood welled out of the gaping wound, dense and bubbly and sickeningly warm even through his combat gloves.

"Sarge, find me something to put under his legs," Pan said.

Nihlus turned around and took a double take. Saren was lying on the ground with his limbs splayed at odd angles, obviously unconscious. "Fuck. Is he alright?"

"Does he look alright?" Pan's expert hands moved with lightning speed over Saren's neck, mouth and forehead, cracked open an eyelid and exposed an overturned eye. He pulled up his omni and started a scan, then glanced at Nihlus. "What the fuck are you waiting for? Fetch some rock or something. Quick!"

Nihlus jumped up, shook off a momentary dizziness, and looked around wildly. A sudden gust of wind made the ganuts sway. There was a fallen branch nearby, splattered with alien blood. He dragged it over and lifted Saren's feet on it.

Pan was busy stripping his armor. He cursed, yanked his own hands free of the combat gloves and lifted his visor.

“What happened?” Theeka asked, following behind Nihlus. “Was he shot?”

“No,” Pan said. “Looks like anaphylactic shock.”

“Like from an... allergy?”

“From the vaccine, more likely, but I can’t be sure because his bloody armor is blocking my scanner. *Working as intended*. Pompous ass. Sarge, gimme a hand!”

Nihlus quickly took off his gloves and felt for the seams and fastenings with unsteady hands. Saren’s suit was a reddish brown of the forest floor, smooth and cold like water. “I told him to go back to camp. I should’ve—”

“What? Nothing short of sedating him would’ve worked.” The jacket finally unbuckled and Pan pulled it open down a long diagonal seam. “I know the type. He could barely walk even before all this crap, but nooo. *I’m fine*.” Nihlus groped for the line of the underweave. Under it, Saren’s skin was ashen and clammy. Even through the air filters, Nihlus caught scents of sweat, kevlar and Palaven rain pine. The wind rose again and the jungle sighed while Pan continued his tirade. “...because he knows best, right. And if he dies, who they gonna blame, eh? Me. So long, residency at Central. So long—”

“He’s not gonna die, though. Right?”

“I gave him a shot of adrenaline and antihistamines, but—” Pan sat back on his heels and frowned at the readings on his omni.

“What?”

Pan shook his head. “I don’t know, Sarge. Never seen anything like this.”

Theeka went around them and crouched behind Pan’s back, looking over his shoulder.

“I’m not reading any common allergens or toxins,” Pan was muttering. “I don’t know *what* I’m reading.”

“What’s all this stuff,” Theeka said, pointing.

“No clue. Looks like some sort of... nano-cybernetics? It’s too small to resolve with the field scanner.”

“And that?”

“Biotic nodules.”

“Why are they red?”

“Inflammation. Lemme see...”

While they spoke, Nihlus lifted his visor and sniffed the air, heavy with inbound rain. He studied Saren’s pale face. Sleep had stripped it of distrust and slyness and it looked years younger. His chest was hard and warm under Nihlus’s bare hand. It rose and fell with the shallowest of breaths. And then it stopped. Nihlus stopped breathing too. Panic crept up his spine.

“Ah, shit,” Pan said. “He’s in arrest. Come on, Sarge! I’ll breathe, you push.” He fixed himself over Saren’s face, not waiting for a reply.

Nihlus leaned in with all his might. One-two-three, pause. One-two-three, pause. He was marginally aware that Pan consulted his omni, then administered another shot into Saren’s neck between breaths. One-two-three, pause. Theeka had backed off, giving them space. One-two-three, pause.

Come on. You can’t die of a fucking *allergy*! You’re a Spectre, for fuck’s sake! The toughest badass in the Galaxy. You can’t die like this. This is *stupid*. So come on! Breathe!

Was he supposed to say these things out loud? Some people did. Some people claimed they heard their loved ones calling them back from the brink of death, and if not for these voices, they would have moved on. What could *his* voice do for Saren, though? To him, Nihlus was just some common soldier whose name he’d forget within a week after he leaves Invictus.

If he lives to leave Invictus.

“Come on,” Nihlus whispered. One-two-three, pause. “Come on, Saren. Breathe.”

Pan was about to give another breath but instead he straightened up, feeling Saren’s neck. “Got a pulse! Wait.” He watched his omni for several seconds while Nihlus’s head pounded with his own crazed heartbeat. “Ok... ok, he’s breathing on his own again. Good job.”

Relief washed over Nihlus. He sat back and felt for the water bottle tucked in his pocket, absurdly self-aware and blushing. He knew Theeka was watching him. Had she heard his words? Spirits, he hoped not.

“He’s not out of the woods yet,” Pan said, still focused on his omni. “He’s burning up and there’s—”

The ground trembled. A split second later, they heard the ominous rumble of a far-away Thunderstorm detonation and exchanged worried glances.

“Mirene?” Nihlus said over the intercom. “How goes?”

“Well, Sarge,” she replied, out of breath, “I have good news and bad news.”

“Give me the good first.”

“That was the last of this bunch, plus-minus a few who escaped.”

Yeah. Thunderstorm had a way of finishing fights like that. “And the bad?”

“There’s more on the way.”

They regrouped at the clearing with the large ganut stump. Nihlus and Pan had carried Saren back, limp and heavy like a dead man. He had woken up for a moment, delirious, and mumbled something about the tide and the doors. When he started struggling, Pan sedated him. They laid him down between the bags and covered him with a dusty army blanket that sported disconnected dark stripes in places where the straps had prevented the sun from bleaching it.

Nihlus had not moved since. He sat on a bag by Saren’s side, mulling a squirt of medigel in his mouth and fidgeting. The weather was going foul. Wind rose in sudden gusts but it was so warm and moist that it didn’t bring any refreshment, and the clouds were getting thicker and darker by the minute. He felt pressed to move. But go where? And do what?

Mirene came back with cracked armor and Vezeer sported a light limp. Farril huffed and puffed, carrying most of their stuff. Duon had gone to look for Lantar.

“What happened to the Spectre?” Mirene asked.

Nihlus shook his head and spat out. “Invictus.”

He told her as much as he could. Pan was too busy looking at Vezeer’s leg and putting up with Theeka and her headache to come and explain. Not that he was sure of his explanations himself.

“Is he gonna be ok?” she said in the end.

“I hope so. But we can’t stay here, just waiting to be discovered.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Depends. What did you hear?”

“That this was a half of their ‘task force’. The other unit is somewhere in the area, and on their way. If my understanding of vorcha-speek is to be trusted.”

Nihlus hummed. In ordinary circumstance, he'd call for extraction. Get Saren to a hospital, request search-and-rescue for Lantar, and live to fight the Blood Pack another day. But someone in the HQ was after Saren's head. He was more certain of that than of his own last name. And even if that person failed to make the evac shuttle crash in some unlikely accident, or spike Saren's IV with some untraceable poison, Nihlus was sure Saren would be after *his* head if he took him back to Hierote and away from his mission.

No. They had to press on. Find the Shithole, and keep Saren safe until he was back on his feet. And to do that, they had to get rid of the Blood Pack 'task force'.

"It's back to plan A, then," he said at last. "Farril? Get over here."

When Farril approached, Nihlus gently lifted Saren's left arm from under the blanket. "I need to use his omni. Can you get it to work for me?"

Farril crouched next to him and turned Saren's omni-tool on. They inspected the tiny sigils of the strange log-in interface together. "I don't know, Sarge. This is way ahead of our stuff."

"I just need to send out a distress signal with his signature. Don't need to access any of his files."

"His signature *is* his file. Lemme see." He leaned closer and scrolled through a few screens, shaking his head. "I don't recognize half the functions. Let's wait for Duon—"

"You can do it, buddy," Duon said over the intercom. "The distress call shouldn't require a log-in anyway. You sure it's not on the lock-screen?"

"Lemme see..."

They engaged in a technical back-and-forth and Nihlus soon tuned out. He got up and gestured at Mirene. "Go back the way we came and find us an ambush spot within a few minutes from here."

"On it."

She started immediately, breaking into a jog as she passed by the trio of Pan, Theeka and Vezeer. Having apparently finished their doctor-patient business, they stalked closer to see what was going on. Theeka's gaze was especially predatory. She didn't appreciate being left out. The drunken wobble was gone from her gait and Pan had refused to give her anything but mild painkillers, sticking with his diagnosis of *nothing wrong with her* despite her efforts to convince him otherwise.

"What are we doing?" he said.

"What we planned earlier. Lure the fuckers into a trap."



Theeka looked after Mirene, who had already disappeared behind the treeline. “You sent her to scout out an ambush site, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I could’ve done that. And better.”

“You’re injured.”

“I—”

Nihlus grinned. He had her. She couldn’t claim she wasn’t injured because that’d mean she was a whiner who had been pestering Pan for no good reason. And Spirits forbid admitting a foul deed of that magnitude.

“Sarge,” Vezeer said, stroking his mandibles through the open visor. “How did they find us? The Blood Pack. It’s like they knew exactly where we were coming from, and where we were going. How’s that possible?”

Oh, man. Nihlus rubbed the back of his helmet. He owed them an explanation, but it was a complicated subject, one that could hardly be broached without mentioning—if not directly implicating—Thadon, and he didn’t need one more of *those* discussions right now. Theeka was on the edge already. Everyone pretended to be cool, but they weren’t. They bounced on their toes, flexed their fists and twitched at every sound. This had been the most intense combat situation they’d experienced in the two years of Nihlus’s service here, and they were a man down. It was no time to talk about treason.

“I’ll explain what I can, but not now.”

“You think someone in the HQ is dirty,” Theeka said.

Nihlus sighed. Of course she wouldn’t let him get away with it. What was he thinking?

“There’s gotta be,” she insisted. “That’s why you ordered radio silence.”

“The Spectre ordered it,” Nihlus said, avoiding her eyes and glancing at Saren instead. Talking about him like he wasn’t present, or worse, felt like a betrayal. And it was such a weak defense, calling upon someone else’s authority. But he preferred looking weak over having this develop into a full-blown argument.

“What did you tell him?” Her voice had become icy. “You told him you think it’s Thadon, didn’t you?”

“Don’t worry. If I actually had something on your boyfriend, I’d have come out with it long ago.”

“This is not a joke, Nihlus. *Your* boyfriend can ruin his life, or plain *end* it, with a flick of the mandible—” she aped his manner from their talk in Lomera—“if you keep feeding him... your *ideas*.”

“Theeka,” Pan said quietly, touching her elbow, but she shook his hand off.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Nihlus said. He had taken an involuntary step toward her. He knew she was baiting him, but he couldn’t let this go unanswered. With Saren right there! Heat rushed up his neck. “And I’m not *feeding* him anything.”

“Oh, but you’d like to.”

Nihlus inhaled, clenching his fists.

“I’m sorry.” She stepped back and lifted her hands up. “I’m sorry, that was cheap.”

“Damn right, girl,” Vezeer muttered. “What’s got into you?”

“Don’t listen to her, Sarge,” Pan said. “She must’ve hit her head harder than I thought.”

But she wouldn’t drop it.

“Nihlus.” She was looking at him pleadingly now, but it was far, far too late for that. “It’s *not* Thadon. I know him. He’s a *good guy*.” Her eyes searched his face for signs of softening but there would be none. He was *this* close to shutting her up *manually*. “You can’t let your personal opinions and... feelings... influence your judgment. Or, more importantly, his.” She indicated Saren with her chin. “Ok? That’s all I’m saying.”

He stared at her incredulously. She was saying a hell of a lot more. She thought he would villainize Thadon out of jealousy. That was how she saw him, she was saying. That was how little she knew him. How little faith she had in him.

It stung, deep and cold, like a paralyzing venom, but he couldn’t afford to be paralyzed right now. He shook his head and lowered his visor just in time to catch the first, fat raindrop and watch it zig-zag its way down through the dirt baked on it. Whatever she said after that was lost to the wind.

Configuring Saren’s omni turned out to be more of a challenge than Nihlus had expected. Farril and Duon had come up with some solution that involved a hard reset and a retinal scan, but he had forgotten to mention that he didn’t want a full-power signal. Last thing he needed was to inadvertently invite the evac shuttle of doom after all. A *fake* distress call, please. For the Blood Pack receivers only. It wasn’t difficult to set up, with Duon to walk him through it. But the interface was unfamiliar, his left hand was clumsy, he was tired and distracted and kept pressing the wrong icons.

The rain bombarded the upper stratum and its drumming sounded alarmingly like a nearby firefight. He kept glancing over the top of the rocky outcrop that was to serve as cover for him and Farril. The place Mirene found was far from perfect, but in present conditions, it was the most they could hope for. Its main feature was the pair of kotari bushes, left and right from his position. They were shit for cover, but good for hiding. Mirene and Duon were posted behind the right, and Theeka and Vezeer behind the left. They had hidden Saren in a dead tree a hundred meters east. Pan was alone with him.

No one had spoken in minutes. Nihlus was hyper-aware of the passage of time. It dragged, like when waiting for the water to boil. His muscles twitched with impatience.

What if the Blood Pack never showed up? What if Theeka was right and all his assumptions were plain paranoia? If it *had* been a chance encounter after all. It could've only *looked* like an ambush. Perhaps the Blood Pack had an outpost at the Claw, and 'task force' was just vorchaspeak for 'patrol'. Maybe that krogan had said something totally unrelated to Okeer while holding Saren at gunpoint and Nihlus hallucinated it. With everything that had happened in the last twenty hours, would it be a wonder? Yeah. He'd plead temporary insanity when time came to explain why he'd stolen Saren's omni and dragged everyone out here, wasting time and precious proxy mines. *Soldier dies of clinical exhaustion. Postmortem examination points to overuse of combat stimulants, leading to fatal withdrawal symptoms. Attending medical officer under investigation. Witnesses say the deceased was 'seeing things' for days, including an imaginary human girl.*

He pulled out the precious green stone from its sanctuary inside his armor and rolled it between his fingers. It looked black in the rainy gloom. How he wished he was crazy! If this was all some elaborate head trip, maybe the girl was still alive, and maybe Lantar was not lost. Maybe Saren was in full strength, kept safe from disease by sheer bloodymindedness. Maybe he was out there right now, hunting for Okeer with Dinara while Nihlus rolled around some padded cell in a straight-jacket. Maybe he saw Lana beat the shit out of everyone in a sparring session and called her up to test her gag reflex.

*Disgusting.*

Yeah. Not thinking about that. La-la-la.

He pocketed the stone and stared up at the angular design of crown shyness, waiting for the wind to whip them out of shape and grant him a glimpse at the low-hanging clouds.

Spirits, Lantar. I shouldn't have sent you. You weren't ready.

Duon had found no trace of him. Which was better than finding his dead body. But it was a tough pill to swallow. No one in the squad had ever heard of the Blood Pack taking prisoners. Which didn't mean that wasn't a thing. Just that it couldn't be a *good* thing.

Lantar had been assigned to them as a replacement for Petra, who resigned after taking over the family art supply business. Fresh out of training, Lantar had nothing but remarkable ability scores to qualify him for the IIC's toughest spec-ops squad. But Thadon liked them numbers. Not for the first time, Nihlus grudgingly wondered if Thadon had ever seen any combat himself. If he could've had it his way, none of them would ever see any either. But Nihlus made sure they did. Yes, sir.

Having joined just about the time when they had fallen in disgrace, Lantar had seen less of it than the others. But he was a good scout. Not as good as Theeka, but—Spirits. If Nihlus hadn't sent Lantar, he would've sent *her*. And perhaps she'd be the one missing now. The anger, still simmering inside him, did nothing to diminish the horror of the thought.

It was unfair to feel that way and he hated himself for it. She hated him for it too, because she didn't want to be treated differently because of the... *thing* they had. Didn't have. Whatever. And he tried. To not spare her. And he hoped to Spirits the rest of the squad knew that he tried. Because they sure knew about the thing. He was shit at hiding things. Soon enough, they'd know about the other thing too. The new thing.

Just for a second, he allowed himself to think about it, to cast the briefest glance into that weird, yet familiar headspace the Hallori exercise had put him in. An emotion he couldn't put a label on, something pervasive and exhilarating, pushed up from under his skin like panic or arousal. Saren's questions replayed in his mind, a perfect stranger *taking an interest* and poking holes in his carefully weaved shell of carefree numbness. And then the actual panic he had felt when he thought that Saren would die, propelling him to put his own life on the line, no questions asked.

Oh, yes. It was a thing alright. A thing that would, at best, end up a slowly decaying memory of what could never be. Theeka was at least a part of their thing. Saren was as untouchable as the core of a star.

Zap. Back in real life. Farril's helmet turned to look at him. He must have made some sound or—

"Contacts north-west," Theeka announced.

"Cloaks up, people," Mirene said.

Nihlus almost cloaked too, but then he remembered. He was bait. Suddenly his heart was thudding.

Duon muttered, "Here they come."

And Farril replied, "About fucking time."

Nihlus detached his sniper rifle and extended it with an aggressive jerk. The trees were impossibly fat in his sights. The ferns and grasses, impossibly close. Agitated into a soundless jitter by the rain, they made his hand twitch left and right at perceived motion.

And then he spotted them. “We’ve got... a pack of vorcha. Classy. And—” one, two, three—“four krogan.”

“Holy shit,” Theeka said. “They really opened up for us.” She laughed like a maniac. Nihlus smiled despite himself.

Vezeer said, “I’ve got something for them.” The power switch on the Thunderstorm whizzed through the intercom.

“Don’t charge it yet. The vorcha might hear.”

“Relax, Sarge. We got this.”

Nihlus looked up over the scope. The first of the vorcha were about to step into their mine-field. The mines were hidden under a shallow layer of earth, inactive and, for all intents and purposes, invisible. But the vorcha sensed something. Smelled them, maybe. They slowed to a crawl, then to a halt, and some of them crouched and sniffed the air. The krogan followed at a more confident pace, wrapped in heavy armor and feeling invincible. One was taller than the others and wore a suit in different colors. Another carried a coiled, silvery whip. He cracked it at the vorcha leader. It didn’t look like it could reach that far but the leader yelped and jumped forward anyway.

“Wait for it...” Duon whispered. “Wait for it... Now!”

Farril was ready. At the press of a button, the mines silently came to life—and then went off in a seemingly random sequence with deafening cracks, belching up clouds of dirt and smoke and shredded plants. The vorcha leader managed to roll away from one explosion right into the motion sensor of another. Bright red blood sprayed Nihlus’s visor as the vorcha’s arm, still gripping a heavy pistol, flew over his head and landed in the bush behind him.

“Fire at will,” he said, looking down the sights of his rifle again. Its thermal sensor confirmed what he already knew. All the vorcha were down. Textbook slaughter. The heat signatures of the armored krogan were too weak to be resolved over the smoking kill-zone. His men laid down a hail of fire, shooting blind.

“Vezeer?”

“On it, Sarge.”

As the wind stirred up the smoke, Nihlus shot the first lumbering egg-shape in his sights. Its shields flickered white and orange, but then it shot back and so did its buddies. Nihlus ducked. The others focused fire. He switched to his assault rifle. When he glimpsed over the cover again, the closest krogan was only twenty-something meters away. He fired and the burst was followed by the satisfying sound of shattered glass. The earth shook when the krogan hit the ground. Or it was the thunder, rolling in from the south. Where was *their* thunder, though?

“Fire in the hall!”

Nihlus crouched, his heart racing. A nauseating tremor went through the ground with a deep, submarine rumble, followed by a swish of hot air. Flames fanned above his head, lighting the scene in orange and red. The crowns of the phlegmatic ganuts were swept back like human hair in the wind, momentarily exposing a round patch of low-hanging, tumultuous sky. The rain enthusiastically battered the blood-soaked battlefield for a second, and then the branches swayed back in place, closing the gap. Like driving between tunnels on a rainy day.

Theeka was the first to report, and what she had to say was the last thing Nihlus wanted to hear. As usual.

“The fucker is still up.”

Duon hissed, “Watch out!”

Nihlus propped up to see what was going on. The Thunderstorm blast had made a circle of scorched earth and blackened the barks of the surrounding trees. The air was blurry with the heat still emanating from the ground and the charred remains on it. Ashes floated about in random motion, like black snow.

At the far rim of the crater, the big krogan stood. His armor was burned and splintered and he had no weapon that Nihlus could see. He didn’t need one. Enshrouded in flames of black and blue, he roared and heaved a luminous biotic projectile at the kotari shrub where Theeka and Vezeer were holed up.

The Thunderstorm had stripped down everyone’s cloaks and shields. Theeka was fast enough to roll away but Vezeer was hit. He groaned, and the others yelled, and Nihlus lined up a shot at the krogan’s head, but the biotic... thing... around him seemed to soak up his rounds like a barrier. Mirene and Duon tried to get his attention, but he stomped in the direction of Nihlus and Farril, shrugging off bullets like insect bites and laughing loud enough for everyone to hear, never mind his helmet and the rain. He was about to execute another biotic attack, but Duon leaped out of cover and launched himself at him, diverting his motion skyward at the last moment. The deadly wave ripped a hole in the tree crowns almost as big as the Thunderstorm detonation and showered them with torn leaves.

Staggered but still standing, the krogan flailed the fifty kilos of meat in his arm at Duon and sent him flying. Nihlus shot him again and this time he heard the glass in his visor shatter, but that wasn't enough to stop him. The krogan growled and charged, leaving behind a trail of blue vapor, to materialize on top of Duon with a sickening crash. Farril screamed and clambered up their cover, but before he could get far, Theeka ran up from the other side of the crater, jet-jumped and landed a crushing blow in the krogan's side, finally toppling him down. The biotic field around him wilted and died.

Farril kept shooting until his rifle overheated.

## Chapter 13 - Orderly Retreat

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Okeer had taken permanent residence in the communications room. The first time they had tried to dislodge him, he told them to shut the fuck up and get the fuck out in not so many words. They didn't listen. The second time, he ripped someone or another apart with a barely charged biotic shock. They grew quiet after that.

He needed the silence to work, to think. The ground was slipping under his feet and although it was not yet time to run, it was time to start walking. Wortag had agreed to his proposal easier than Okeer had expected. Why would he trade when he already had Okeer in custody? He was probably dragging it out while he looked for another buyer. Not that Okeer had ever had more than vague, wishful hopes regarding their deal. He offered collaboration to a krogan organization first as a familial courtesy, risking loss of time for the unlikely possibility that one of his kind would be wise enough to just *listen* to him. If Wortag had agreed to finance his research, Okeer would have stayed and kept his word. But Wortag was no different from other krogan: greedy, impulsive, aggressive, impatient. Whatever the secret behind his abrupt success over the last couple of decades, it sure wasn't intelligence.

Intelligence was Okeer's thing. And it was laughably easy to use it against his own kind. Not that he wanted to. They forced his hand. He had hacked Wortag's "secure" channels while they were still speaking. He chuckled when Wortag gave the order to go after Saren with two mixed units totaling forty men. Good luck with that! He chuckled again when Krago asked what was to be done with Okeer, and Wortag said, *don't let him leave*. Good luck with that too.

He shook off the laughs and glanced at the new message from his contact in the Blue Suns.

"Jerom doesn't have the balls to do what you're suggesting," Arnea wrote. "Talk to Jeddore instead. She's a whelp, but crazy in the right way. More importantly, she has the ear of the management. If anyone can bust you out of there, it's her. Provided you make it worth her time, of course. You may even like her. If not, fuck you. I consider my debt paid."

Good riddance. As an asari, Arnea had a better understanding of long-term commitments than all these scurrying, short-lived aliens. Like humans. How the hell had they managed get under everyone's skin so quickly? They weren't as smart as the salarians, nor as subtle as the asari, nor as practical as the turians, nor as formidable as the krogan. What then? Maybe a little bit of each? Balanced? Bah. Okeer wouldn't be surprised if one of these days a human strain of the genophage crawled out of the STG labs.



So hungry for progress, so eager to get an edge, they got on everyone's nerves. On the other hand, it was only a matter of time before one of them said yes to his proposal.

He started typing.

"I can give you the location of the main Blood Pack base and all their slave ranches on Invictus. I need to get off-planet and out of Council space. We can talk about other things later."

He was hungry again, which was a good sign. A couple hours back, a vorcha had come in and brought him a meal consisting of several dry-pressed rations and a glass of water. He looked at the vorcha, and the vorcha looked back. Okeer snapped its neck then, and ate its arm instead. He needed sustenance if his body was to recover fast enough for an effective escape. Now he ate some more of the back and shoulder. He didn't mind the company of the corpse. It wouldn't go bad even in the warm weather. Hehe. Dextro planet.

He intended to rest while waiting, but soon he discovered he was too nervous to sleep, and called up the salarian data on his omni-tool instead.

There was too much of it to cover in a systematic manner, and not enough time. He had skimmed through endless bundles with growing concern and failing patience. At one point, he caught himself skipping whole subsections in a hurry, and had to redo an hour's worth of reading. The things he was looking for were probably only of minor interest to the salarians, and although he clearly couldn't hope to read everything in detail, missing one heading could have meant missing his goal completely. Markers, markers, that was all he wanted to find. How to identify the tainted genes? A clue, a hint—anything to point him in the right direction would suffice. But if it was there, it was buried deep, and Okeer was feeling the pressure.

He deployed his search VIs with a disgusted grumble. He had never fully trusted the machines. The most important ingredients of good research—experience from other venues of existence and intuition, oh yes, intuition—were unavailable to artificial intelligence. Delegating it the task of looking for pointers was a desperate measure.

The results were just starting to come in when a clamor rose in the hallway outside. Tired of sitting anyway, Okeer opened the door just in time to witness the passage of a small band of injured men, groaning and limping. One young krogan was so badly burned with biotics that two vorcha had to half support, half drag him. They smelled of wet leaves and blood and roasted flesh, and worse still, of defeat. None of the onlookers offered any help. Krago went behind the group, wearing an appropriate appearance of foul mood.

"What's this?" Okeer said, although he had a pretty good idea.

“Waste of men and gear, that’s what,” Krago muttered. “But at least the Spectre is dead. Wortag will be pleased.”

“Show me the bones.”

It was a saying so old that Okeer wondered if Krago would know it *was* a saying, and not a literal request. Nothing is dead until you see its bones.

“One of my men had him on his knees and shot him.”

“One of those men?”

“No. He didn’t return.”

Okeer laughed. “A convincing story. I’m sure Wortag will agree.”

Krago straightened up for a good few inches of extra height. “We caught a prisoner who confirmed it. One of the turians in his escort.”

“Before or after your shooter met an untimely demise?”

“Before. What of it?”

Okeer blinked, trying to keep his face straight. “If you captured him before the Spectre was allegedly killed, how would he know about it?”

At first, Krago’s face was blank. Then he frowned. “You’re saying he’s not dead. And the turian cunt lied?”

Okeer shrugged. *He* wouldn’t believe the snake was dead until he saw the bones.

“I’ll kill that little piece of shit. I’ll pull every plate off his skin. I’ll make him eat his own—”

“No.”

Having worked himself up already, Krago growled and took a threatening step forward. But then Okeer straightened up as well, towering above him by half a head. “I don’t care what you do. But keep him breathing.”

Krago didn’t have the quads to challenge him, but he couldn’t just back down either. Too many ambitious young fools just like him were watching, eager to capitalize on any sign of weakness. Instead he grinned, showing brownish, sharpened teeth.

“Want to... ask him questions?” He made an obscene gesture, earning scattered laughs from the crowd.

“Maybe later,” Okeer said, although there was nothing he could hope to learn from the captive. He only wanted him kept alive as potential leverage should he be forced to negotiate with Invictus authorities.

Krago huffed and made to leave, but Okeer stopped him.

“Why didn’t you send the gunship?”

“You tell me, old man. You busted it with your damn biotics. Once it landed, we couldn’t start its ME drive again.”

Okeer hummed. “It was an antiquated piece of shit anyway. You’re better off.”

“Uh-huh. I’m sure Wortag will agree,” he drawled, miming Okeer and scoring some more laughs, then marched away.

One of the young men who had been standing around was looking at Okeer with peculiar zeal. Several such as he had approached him to express admiration and respect on his first day here, hoping to hear his tales about the Rebellions, but lost interest as he had been unable to speak. It occurred to him now that it might not be a bad thing to acquire a... follower.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Jorgal Dagnor.”

“Ah.” Okeer nodded knowingly. “Few remain who remember the courage and sacrifices of your Clan in the Rebellions.”

The young one inflated with pride. “Battlemaster. It is a great honor to be in your presence. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Okeer pretended to think about it. “You could relieve an old man’s boredom. Would you like to hear about the time when Overlord Kredak was imprisoned by Clan K’Ragh?”

The young one’s eyes widened. “You knew the Overlord?”

“Of course,” Okeer lied. He did know, however, that Clan K’Ragh was one of the traditional rivals of Clan Jorgal. He swung the door open and smiled. “Come in.”

A reply from Jedore arrived just as Okeer was wrapping up his story of the young Jorgal hero who helped the injured Overlord escape imprisonment at the cost of his own life. A glorious tale by any krogan’s standard. Fabricated to the letter, of course. But few remained indeed who could tell a true story about the Rebellions from fiction. The young

one soaked it up like a dry sponge. He probably heard more words and experienced more emotions in this half hour than he had in his entire life.

“I have to take a call,” Okeer said after the tale was finished and padded with a minute of considerate silence. “Help yourself to some vorcha.”

The young one looked at the partially eaten carcass and wrinkled his nose. The young ones preferred to cook their food because every one out of three was too weak to stomach raw meat. Yet they lived anyway. Disgusting.

“Go on,” Okeer insisted. “You deserve it.”

“Thank you, Battlemaster,” said the young one, thinking, correctly, that Okeer might be offended if he refused. He shuffled closer to the corpse and picked hesitantly at its meat.

Okeer turned on his omni-tool.

“I don't have the manpower for an all-out assault,” Jedore wrote. “Give me something I can use against the Blood Pack or no deal.”

Okeer sighed. Humans weren't especially smart, but they were obviously not stupid either. But he had foreseen this. In fact, he'd already laid down some groundwork. In his story, the Overlord sneaked out of Clan K'Ragh camp while the young Jorgal hero impersonated him, and got executed in his stead.

“Fine. Here,” he typed, and attached a bundle files. The slightly outdated turian IFF certificates he had found in Wortag's mail, and a branch of stolen STG research into things other than the genophage. There was a moment of uncertainty before he sent the reply, a moment of questioning, searching his soul for traces of guilt. But it passed, and he found none, and tapped the send command.

Jedore would need time to understand and verify the offering. Okeer pulled up the guard-duty roster from the workstation and studied it, then hacked into Krago's account. Falsifying orders would be easy with his electronic signature. Hehe. By the time anyone noticed the inconsistencies it would be far too late.

He got back to work with the salarian files. In the opposite corner, the young one was drowsing.

The reply arrived after an hour. It had only one word.

“Deal!”

## Chapter 14 - Fever

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The noise was insufferable. His heartbeat was lost in it. He didn't know if he was asleep or awake. Dead or alive. He tried to move and the blackness around him swirled into a wormhole, pulling him in. There was nothing he could do to fight it. He couldn't even scream.

*How's he doing?*

*It won't be much longer, Sarge.*

*Is there nothing we can do? Get him to a proper hospital?*

*Wouldn't change a thing. I'm sorry.*

*It's not your fault.*

*I'm sorry anyway.*

They were talking about him. It won't be much longer. Fear clutched him in an icy grip. He couldn't die, not yet. Too much depended on him. No one else knew! And by the time they learned, it would be too late. He couldn't have it. He had to wake up. Wake up!

Saren blinked. It was dark, but he knew there was someone with him. A figure stepped toward him and he relaxed. It was Baratus.

He looked different. Those white uniforms—hadn't they been redesigned years ago? Perhaps he kept it for sentimental reasons. Baratus was a sentimental man. He had indeed held on to Desolas's sword. It hung from his belt instead of the ceremonial saber.

He just stood there, unnaturally still. He wasn't blinking. He wasn't breathing. Suddenly Saren was sure it wasn't Baratus at all. It was someone else. Something else. He blinked again, and it was gone, and he sunk back into darkness.

An earth-shattering sound cut through the noise. It ripped a hole in the void and through the hole came a white light and the noise doubled, tripled!... before subsiding.

*Spirits, he's burning up.*

No, it didn't feel that way at all. The void was cold. Death's hunting grounds.

*Have you figured out what happened?*

*Broadly. The fever is from nodule inflammation. It started as a mild reaction to the vaccine, but it became acute when he started using them.*

*You mean the biotics. During the fight.*

*Yeah. And since then, these... things... have been multiplying like crazy.*

Things? What things?

*Are that the um... nano-cybernetics you mentioned before?*

*Yeah. And before you ask, I've no clue what they are, or what they're doing.*

The void became darker by a degree. Saren sensed proximity, motion. He tried to squirm away from contact but he couldn't move.

*What about that thing... there. Is that a... biotic thing?*

What thing? Where?

*No idea. This is way above my pay grade, Sarge. I only had biotics 101 and they sure didn't show us anything like this.*

Like what? What does it look like? Damn you people, talk some sense!

But the shapes in the void weren't people. Not anymore. They were memories. Smoky shadows. Their whispers and mournful sighs mixed with the noise, ebbing and flowing, waves lapping on the stairs of the Temple to announce the coming tide.

*Is he... awake?*

*Delirious. Remember that orori bite last year? You were like this for two days.*

*I don't want to remember.*

That. That was a good way of putting it. Well done, little brother. I'm reassigning your unit to my security detail. I want you to stay close, now. This is big, Saren. I can feel it. Can you feel it?

I feel... something. I don't like it. We should study it before—

There's no time for that. This is the break we've been waiting for. Don't you see? I see it so clearly. I want you to see it too. But even if you don't—do I have your support?

That's a non-question.

Answer anyway.

Always, brother. Always.

*I should go check in with Farril and—*

*Yeah. I'll stay here. Anything I need to know?*

*Moisten his mouth every now and then, but if he awakes, don't let him drink too much.*

*Got it.*

The ripping sound shook the earth again and the noise burst in like water through a broken dam. Water! What he would give for a bit of water!

*Here you go. Nice and easy.*

The rain had been falling so hard, it flowed down his face and into his mouth, it was cold and had a dirty, acidic taste flavored with the pine aroma from the plate-balm Desolas had given him. It went into his mouth and traced icy patterns down his scorched throat.

*Sir? Can you hear me?*

The crowd was quiet now, entranced. How had he managed to do it? The speech hadn't been *that* good. Their heads turned into the floor of skulls down below the Temple. I don't want to step on that. They aren't even *turian*.

The wormhole opened and he fell through.

When he woke next, it was strangely silent. The noise was gone. It was freezing and he was shivering. He opened his eyes and saw Desolas sitting at his feet.

He took a quick glance at the surroundings: a small tent, barely long enough to accommodate his prostrate form. He was naked, slick with sweat, lying on a soggy bedroll. There was just enough dusky daylight to tell things apart. His armor was piled on the floor to his right. Another bedroll, crumpled but vacant, was spread perpendicular to his.

Desolas was sitting on it with his back to the side of the tent and his knees up by his chest. He wore the uniform he had died in and stared straight ahead. It didn't look like he was aware that Saren had woken up.

Saren started to say something, but his throat was so dry that only a hiss emerged. Desolas turned. His face was completely expressionless, his eyes motionless. He did not breathe. Saren knew it was an apparition, like Baratus had been. But it was so real. So real! It was Desolas and Saren had no resources to fight the onslaught of emotion. He wept.

At that, some unspeakable shadow animated Desolas's features. He bulged his eyes at Saren, his whole face stretched as if pulled apart by invisible threads. From his gaping

mouth came a howl the likes of which Saren had never heard in his entire life, a feral, guttural “AAAAAA!!!” that shot him down as sure as if someone had fired a shotgun in his face at point blank range.

He scrambled backward in horror, tears rolling down his face, and as Desolas moved to put his giant hands on him, he acted on instinct to defend himself with biotics. The dark current ran through his tortured body like fire. The pain was unbearable and sparks started flaring up at random from every pore of his skin.

He blacked out—and came to right away, struggling against a great weight that threatened to rob him of his breath. Kryik hovered above him, holding his arms pinned to his chest. He looked as terrified as Saren felt.

“It’s ok!” he said. His voice was high-pitched with alarm, his breath hot and wet on Saren’s face. “It’s ok. You’re safe. You’re safe!”

“Kryik.”

“Yeah.”

“Let go.”

“Ok. Ok.” They were both breathing heavily, like after a race. Kryik slowly loosened his grip on Saren’s hands and backed off. “Spirits. I thought you’d fry me.”

“I probably did.”

“Huh.” Kryik turned his ungloved hands this way and that and Saren saw he had burns all over his palms. “Didn’t feel a thing. No matter. A little medigel will fix it.”

Saren let his head drop back down. The tent was turning about him in slow spirals and the sensation of falling returned with nausea. His heart was still hammering in loud, angry thumps that shook his chest and made his vision pulse. And the noise, the noise returned with a revenge.

“Can you hear that?”

“What?”

“That sound.” Saren waved a tired gesture indicating the world at large.

Kryik looked around. “The rain?”

“The rain.” Saren laughed until he coughed and tears streamed from the corners of his eyes. The rain.



Another wave of fever struck. This time Saren was mostly awake, thirsty, angry, and feeling like he was being cooked alive inside his carapace. Kryik sat with him, reading a datapad, wiping the sweat from his eyes and giving him water from time to time, but they didn't talk. He'd lost all sense of time. It could have lasted for an hour or a whole day. At last, he slept.

When he awoke, he knew he was getting better. The rain must have stopped and there was more light. Kryik was absent.

He sat up. The bedding under him was soaked. He probed the site of the vaccine injection on his neck. It was hard and painful, and so were the minor nodules that connected directly to the amps behind his jaw. Prompted by discomfort, he lifted up his left arm and looked under it.

His breath hitched.

An array of tiny blue lights shone from under the bruised skin of his armpit. Talon-long and about two millimeters wide, it ran from the swollen nodule next to the large, dark vein. Saren stared, holding his breath, fighting dizziness. He counted the lights: seven. They looked like minuscule diodes tucked just under the skin. After a while, he had to resume breathing. He ran a finger over the spot. It was tender, very tender.

A decisive prick with a sharp talontip, a hiss of pain, a drop of blue. Six tiny lights to go. There were only four on the other side. Five in the back of his right knee and three behind the left. He inspected his groin too, but there was nothing there. Yet. He didn't dare poke around the amps without a mirror.

The ordeal exhausted him. He found a piece of bandage and wiped the blood off, then took some water and went back to sleep.

The seal on the tent was guilty of the "ripping sound" from last night. It startled him, ending some unpleasant dream. He turned in time to see Kryik crawl out and seal the tent from the outside.

"Duon?" Kryik said, keeping his voice low.

"Yeah," replied the medic. "He's gone."

"Fuck."

Saren rose on his elbows, listening. Someone stomped a few steps away, slid in the mud, then hit something that crunched and splintered.

"Yeah. Go get your bones shattered, since I don't have enough shit to deal with."

“Fuck.”

Several other persons approached. Saren sat up, looked at his armor, but the very thought of getting out and being among people sapped the life out of him. He could pass this up and find out what he needed to know from Kryik later. He drained the water bottle and rummaged among the miscellanea strewn about on the floor for another one. No luck. But he did find his bag, buried under his armor. The fruit Kryik had brought him in Lomera was in remarkably good shape. His mouth watered at the sight of it and he realized he was famished. Where was his knife?

“You’re back,” Kryik said. “Anything?”

“No.” That was Theeka. She sounded profoundly exhausted. “Nothing. No blood on the scanner, nothing dropped. That whole section of the woods is trampled to hell and back so no tracks either. He’s gone.”

“That’s unacceptable. Go back and look harder.”

Saren had cut the melon-like fruit in half. Its aroma was alien but undoubtedly edible. He carved out a piece from the middle and swallowed it, barely chewing, with the crude urgency of starvation. It didn’t have much taste, but it was delightfully juicy.

“Sarge,” the other female said in a soothing tone. “It’s no use. Even if there’d been something to find, the rain washed it all away. We’ve done everything we could.”

“The hell we did.” More stomping ensued. “Fuck, I can’t believe this.”

“It’s not your fault,” the medic said.

“The hell it’s not. I signed us up for this. I sent him out there. He wasn’t ready. None of us were.”

“Bullshit,” Theeka said. “No one was readier than us.”

“Come on, Sarge,” the medic said. “You know shit can happen on any assignment. Other squads have gone through dozens of replacements just on account of disease and wild-life and stupid accidents. And unlike them, we were *looking* for trouble. I say we’ve been lucky so far.” He paused. “Lucky to have you as a leader.”

That was a good speech, Saren thought, chewing a new chunk of fruit. It rang true enough. But Kryik didn’t sound convinced.

“Fuck.”

Someone sat down on the ground, and soon others joined. Through the fabric of the tent, Saren saw their shadows morph from elongated to roughly circular. One of them remained on their feet, pacing to and fro.

“What are we gonna do with... the body,” Mirene said.

“We’ll bury him here,” the moving shadow said. It was Kryik.

“What?” Theeka said. “Why not call for a dustoff crew?”

“Because we don’t want to reveal our position,” the medic said. “Radio silence, remember?”

“So you still think Thadon’s out to get you.”

“Don’t start,” Kryik replied. “I’m not saying it’s *Thadon*. And I don’t think anyone’s after *me*. But someone’s sure after Sa—the Spectre.”

Saren froze in the middle of a bite, then resumed. It didn’t bother him. He wasn’t the only one to notice it, though.

“First name basis already, I see,” Theeka said. “You’re moving fast.”

Kryik laughed. “Look who’s talking.”

“If I was using Thadon to buck up for a promotion, you think I’d still be here?”

“Maybe you’re not bucking hard enough.”

“Fuck you, Nihlus.”

“Fuck *you*.”

“You two should fuck each other and get it over with already,” Mirene said.

Theeka laughed, but it was forced. “He can dream.” She stood up and her shadow started bobbing away.

“No one said you’re excused,” Kryik yelled after her. The shadow rose a hand in the air. Saren didn’t need to see the gesture to know what it was. He looked at his own hands, grimy and sticky with the fruit juice. He’d eaten the first half of the melon but it only tickled his appetite.

“I don’t need this crap right now,” the medic said and got up.

“What. She started it.”

“May I be excused, *sir*?”

“Whatever.”

Another shadow left. Kryik huffed petulantly. “She did, though. Right? Like, what the fuck was all that about? Do you know? ‘Cos I sure don’t.”

“Let it go, Sarge. She’s upset. We’re all upset.”

Kryik sat down. “Yeah. But why does she have to take it out on me?”

“Who else? You’re the biggest target. It’s not your *fault* that Duon died, or that Lantar’s missing. You didn’t do anything wrong. But it *is* your responsibility.”

They were silent a while. Kryik’s figure rocked back and forth.

“And I know it sucks,” she went on softly. “But you have to hold the fort, Sarge, or it’ll crumble. Farril hasn’t said a word since the ambush. He refuses food and water. You need to talk some sense into him before he collapses. He won’t listen to anyone else. And you have to make peace with Theeka. You’re both insufferable brats but this is no time to poke at each other’s weak spots. She’s your deadliest weapon, and you don’t want to be on the wrong side of it, ok?”

Kryik snorted.

“Most of all, you gotta keep your shit together, because we all depend on you to be the strong one.”

“You’re the strong one,” Kryik muttered. “You should be in command.”

Mirene got up with a grunt and slapped Kryik’s back. “What you lack is maturity, not strength.”

“Why, thank you so much. Just what I needed to hear.”

“Any time, Sarge.”

When he heard Kryik rise and amble toward the tent, Saren had the sudden impulse to lie back and pretend to be sleeping, but there was no time to hide the evidence.

The ripping sound of the tent seal made him wince even though Kryik had apparently tried to open it gently. His head poked in.

“Oh. You’re awake.”

“Get me some water.”

“Water. Yes, sir. Be right back.”

His head vanished and Saren heard him walk away. Chill, moist air came in through the tent flap, and a welcome sliver of gray daylight.

Saren gingerly checked his armpits, knees and groin. The punctures were barely visible. There were no new lights. The relief he felt was irrational but he embraced it. There was nothing he could do about this, not at the moment, and brooding on it would only distract him. He closed his eyes and used the last moments of privacy to carefully pack up his thoughts and feelings about nodules and nanites into a mental compartment labeled *later*.

Kryik returned with a water bottle in each hand and another under his left arm.

“Leave it open,” Saren said when he moved to seal the tent after crawling in. He grabbed the bottle Kryik offered and started to gulp it down.

“Don’t overdo it,” Kryik said. “Doctor’s orders.”

Doctor. Bah! Saren lowered the bottle with a grumble. “How long was I unconscious?”

“Half a day, give or take. About eight standard hours.”

“I could swear entire days have passed.”

“Yeah. I could tell you were in a bad place.”

“Did I speak?”

“Err... No.”

Saren snorted. “Lesson number one, Kryik. An effective lie always has a grain of truth in it.”

Kryik gazed at him, suddenly motionless, and Saren remembered the apparitions from his delirium. But after a few beats he swallowed loudly. “Yes, sir. I’ll uh... try to remember that. But really, you didn’t say anything... embarrassing. When I was bitten by an orori, they told me I recited entire scenes from my favorite porn vids.” He paused, perhaps waiting for some sign that Saren got the joke, but Saren wasn’t about to oblige him. “Which, you know, don’t really have that much dialog. Anyway—” he cleared his throat—“you, uh... well. You mentioned the General’s name a few times. And uh... your brother’s.”

Saren had started to lift the bottle to his mouth again but stopped and put it down, his heartrate rising. What else, he wanted to know? What else did I say? But a show of concern would only invite unwelcome curiosity.

Missing the meaning of his gesture by half a klick, Kryik put a hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry, sir. I meant no disrespect. Spirits!" He now covered his entire face with his hands. "What the hell is wrong with me," he muttered. "I'm sorry, sir. Can you please forget I said anything?"

Saren drank some more water. In truth, had someone else, in some other situation, dared mention Desolas and pornography in the same sentence, he'd cut out their tongue.

"He'd have laughed," he said. He wasn't sure why.

"Hm?" Kryik spread his fingers to peek at him.

"My brother. He appreciated... gutter humor." He would have undoubtedly found Kryik's clumsy honesty and endless awkwardness entertaining, maybe even endearing. Saren found it hard to navigate.

Kryik put his hands down. "That is seriously hard to imagine. I uh... studied his speeches," he added, registering Saren's surprise. "I was a boy at the time of the Incident, but his extranet appearances made a lasting impression. He was a great speaker. Very... stately." He smiled. "Like you are, sir."

Saren coughed. "We're nothing alike. He was 'stately' in the media, but with his men he was... like you are with yours."

"You don't approve."

"It can be good for the morale. Not so good for discipline."

"It's not working out for the morale either, to be honest." He sucked in a long breath. "I uh... We just lost a man. Our tech."

"Duon," Saren said. "And the young man, Lantar, is still missing. I heard."

Kryik nodded. "Would you um... If you're feeling well enough when we organize the burial... would you honor him with your presence?" His eyes were full when he looked at Saren again. "You're the ranking officer," he went on to explain in a changed voice, mistaking Saren's silence for hesitation. "And it will only take a few minutes."

"Alright."

"Thank you, sir." Kryik sighed and brushed his nose with the back of his glove.

Saren took another sip from the water bottle. There was only a little bit left. "How did he die?"

“That’s... quite the story.” Kryik straightened up and cleared his throat, interlacing his fingers into a tight, sweaty knot. “After you were incapacitated, another Blood Pack unit attacked. Fewer vorcha, more krogan. We lured them into a trap. Managed to wipe them all out. Except one krogan, who was a biotic. He had some sort of a... field? All around him?” He mimicked a rippling, wavering phenomenon.

“Annihilation field,” Saren said. Hardly a standard item in krogan curriculum, but not unheard of.

Kryik repeated the phrase slowly, committing it to memory. “His first attack was like a... large, slow projectile.”

“Warp.”

“Warp. Theeka managed to roll away from it, but Vezeer was hit. Farril and I opened fire from the other side and the krogan made this... sweeping motion.” The movement he performed as demonstration was almost a passable mimetic. Once again, Saren was impressed by the acuity of his memory and kinesthetics. “Like the thing Okeer did on the river.”

“It’s called shockwave.”

“Yes, sir. And, well, if it hit us, we’d have been toast. No shields, poor cover. So uh... Duon launched at him, to make him miss. But that krogan was five times his mass. When he struck back, Duon landed fifteen meters away. Broke his back. We showered the fucker with bullets, but he managed to charge before we could take him down. Pan says... the damage was too wide-spread. There was nothing to be done.”

Saren held his breath as a blurry memory bubbled up... of Kryik’s attack on the krogan with a greasy shotgun... following his suicidal diversion... after the cataclysmic grenade combo. But the effort to assemble the isolated images into a narrative only brought on a mild headache. Suddenly he was exhausted.

“Most men die for nothing, Kryik,” he said, lowering himself back down on the wet, cold bedroll. “Your man died to save his comrades. Take comfort in that.”

“Thank you, sir. But I’d rather take revenge.”

We will, Kryik. We will.

He closed his eyes. The fever was coming back.

The singing took him from whatever fever dream he’d been having right into the crispy memory of Desolas’ last rites. Everyone was there. Baratus stood by in his parade uni-

form, motionless and enduring like the bedrock of an ocean. Kryik and his men stood at attention, humming the main theme from the Litany of Anguish. Desolas stood next to the monument, pointing out something on it with a highly inappropriate grin, but Saren couldn't hear him.

He opened his eyes. The singing was real. Kryik did not wake him for the funeral after all. His voice rose above the others, clear, strong and rich with the undertones of grief. Saren listened, floating on the vestiges of his dream. He had heard the cherished melody countless times, performed by some of the best conductors and choirs in the Hierarchy, but he could swear he had never heard it come this close to perfection.

Someone passed right next to his head and he jerked. The person was outside the tent, moving through the shrubbery step by slow, careful step, as if trying to make as little noise as possible.

Sneaking.

Saren blinked the sleep out of his eyes. It was dark, but not completely, and he could still see. Kryik was asleep on his bedroll. His mandibles flicked but he didn't stir.

The steps continued for some twenty meters, then stopped. The person sat down and turned on their omni-tool. They probably thought nobody could hear them from that distance, but Saren's audio amps picked up the slight buzz with ease. He had no idea if it was dawn or dusk, but it was quiet enough to assume everyone was sleeping. Everyone but him, and the person outside.

For a while there was nothing. Saren remained alert, expecting the unwelcome sounds of someone relieving themselves, one way or another.

What he heard instead was a whispered curse. "For fuck's sake. Where are you?"

It was Theeka.

Saren propped himself on an elbow and perched his ears. Waiting for someone to blow off steam with? He glanced at Kryik again. But if it was he she had pinged, Saren would've heard it. And if she was trying to reach someone over the extranet, his own omni would buzz. He had set up comms monitoring when they left Lomera. But his omni could've been damaged in combat. He wondered what fate had befallen his helmet and the pistol he had dropped. The fight with the krogan started to replay in his mind again—the broken visor—the barrel of a shotgun—

The buzz of the omni startled him. Not the single gentle pulse, but the insistent vibration of an alarm.



“Shit,” Theeka muttered. The vibrations stopped—and something else started. Almost imperceptible even for Saren’s extended senses, but immediately recognizable. The faint hum of an extranet link.

He sat up, careful not to make noise, then rose into a crouch. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to walk so he tested his knees while still leaning on his arms.

Outside, Theeka was typing. Talking to someone over the extranet in spite of his orders.

The tent seal would make a lot of noise. It wasn’t likely she would hear, but he didn’t want to wake Kryik, yet. He started to pull, gently. It wasn’t as bad he’d expected.

It was dark and wet and cold outside. Saren slipped out of the tent but remained low. He waited a few seconds, fighting dizziness, then took off.

## Chapter 15 - Betrayal

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Nihlus awoke to the sounds of hurried steps and shouting. He jumped up, vision still blurry, hit the low ceiling of the tent and got a crest-blade stuck within a seam. Saren's corner was abandoned and the tent was unsealed. He cursed and fumbled to free himself.

"Sarge!" Vezeer said, stepping by the tent. "You better come over here. Quickly!"

"What is it? Argh! Talk to me, damn it!"

But Vezeer was already gone. Nihlus yanked, and something tore, but he was free. He crawled out on all fours and started stumbling in the dark after the sound of Vezeer's quick-paced footsteps. Flashlights were dancing ahead. Still half asleep, he caught on every bush and branch on the way. Something heavy thrashed about, crunching twigs. It sounded like a predator struggling with oversize prey. Nihlus ran.

"Get off her, or I'll shoot!" Pan cried.

"If you shoot, I'll kill her. And then I'll kill you too." Saren was breathless, but loud and clear.

"Son of a..." The click of the safety switch on Pan's pistol echoed through the dark, no doubt on purpose.

"What's going on?" Nihlus said. Silhouettes of his men moved aside to let him into the circle. His jaw dropped as he took in the scene.

Saren knelt on the ground, naked save for the iridescent glow of his biotic barrier, clutching Theeka in front of him in a vicious choke-hold. Obviously there had been a struggle and obviously the thirty kilos of Theeka's hard suit couldn't tip the scale in her favor. She was digging frenetically into Saren's arm, to no avail. Unyielding, corded muscle, it might as well have been a steel rod. Pan had his pistol trained straight at the back of Saren's head. Across the way from Nihlus, Farril stood with his assault rifle at the ready, but pointed down. Mirene and Vezeer hadn't drawn their weapons. Flashlights twitched from one face to another.

"Kryik. Order your men to lower their weapons."

Nihlus made a quick calculation. Worst case scenario: Saren had gone mad from the fever and attacked Theeka for no reason. In which case he could snap her neck no matter what Nihlus did. But if he *hadn't* gone mad, threatening him directly might push him to

do something he otherwise wouldn't. He didn't sound like he'd gone mad. And it didn't look like he was really choking her. He was just holding her put.

"Stand down," he said.

"What?" Pan never took his eyes off Saren, but Nihlus could see them widen in disbelief.

"Do it!"

Pan's breathing became so violent Nihlus could see his nostrils move. "Fuck!" He lowered his pistol.

"Saren, release her."

"I don't take orders from you, *Kryik*."

The strange emphasis made Nihlus realize he'd addressed Saren by first name. A heat-wave crashed into his face and he had to breathe in through his mouth. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." He took a deep breath. "Will you please tell us what's going on?"

Saren's barrier abruptly disappeared. A show of good will? He turned by a few degrees to face Nihlus. The silvery eyes shone dangerously in the dark. "Your friend is a traitor."

Theeka started thrashing, whimpering in the attempts to speak. Saren tightened his grip. A grimace of pain distorted her features and she stilled.

"Release her, sir. Please. So we can talk." Nihlus was feeling the pressure. His heart was pumping like he was in the middle of a wrestling match himself.

"She's not going anywhere until I find out who she was speaking to and what information she sent them."

"Speaking to? What do you mean?"

"You're testing my patience," Saren snarled. "Take her omni and see for yourself!"

Nihlus exchanged a glance with Mirene, who shrugged. The request was reasonable enough. He stepped forward. But as he reached down to take Theeka's hand, she started thrashing again.

"Calm down," Nihlus said, trying to sound calm himself. He knelt on the soaked ground, facing Theeka and Saren behind her. Close enough to feel either one's breath on his face. Saren's impatient glare was a tangible force, pushing against his skin. "Theeka. Stop it. What's got into you?"

She was defending herself. With each jerk to keep her arm out of Nihlus's reach, his hope that this was all some silly misunderstanding sunk deeper and deeper. Why

wouldn't she allow it, if she had nothing to hide? Saren tightened his grip again, and she started to choke. Nihlus grabbed her hand but couldn't keep her still.

"For fuck's sake," Mirene muttered and knelt next to them, forcing Theeka's arm open.

Nihlus brought up her omni with a trembling hand. The rest of the squad shuffled behind him to watch. He glanced at Saren. "What are we looking for?"

"Messages."

Nihlus tapped the icon and stared into the incriminating thing as the night turned darker by a solid shade. "A call to Hierote," he murmured. "Five minutes ago."

"Whom did she speak to?" Saren asked.

"Major Eraquis."

A hush fell over the gathering. Theeka seemed to have given up the struggle and kept her eyes closed. Nihlus glanced around at the others. They looked on with blank expressions.

"That's not treason," Vezeer said. "Is it?"

Pan stared from him to Theeka to Nihlus, then scratched his head. Farril shrugged. Mirene opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"She broke radio-silence," Saren said at last. "She may have revealed our position to the enemy. And I suspect it wasn't the first time."

"Thadon isn't *the enemy*," Theeka croaked. "He's our CO."

"*Someone* in the HQ is working with the Blood Pack," Nihlus said.

Mirene was scrolling down the message list on Theeka's omni. "Sounds about right," she said. "There was one yesterday, just before we left Lomera. And one the day before. And one each day, far as I can see. Theeka, what is this?"

Saren released the choke-hold. He seized and twisted Theeka's left arm behind her back, switching to a wrist-lock faster than Nihlus could say sex. Theeka coughed and wheezed.

"Speak," Saren said.

"I'm no traitor," she growled. "Thadon told me to report to him directly."

"Was it an order?" Nihlus said.

"You know better than that. There weren't any *orders*."

“Explain,” Saren said, addressing no one in particular.

“They’re a couple,” Vezeer said. “The Major and Theeka. They message all the time. Like everyone else.”

Saren turned to scrutinize him. “Do your personal messages normally include location and mission status?”

“Uh... no, sir. Of course not.”

“It wasn’t *messaging*,” Theeka volunteered. “Sure, there was that too. But he wanted regular status updates. And yeah, I never got any written orders, but I couldn’t say no. I mean, why the fuck would I? *He’s our CO.*”

“Since when?” Nihlus said.

“Since Wolta.”

“Spirits,” Nihlus whispered.

“Elaborate,” Saren said.

There was a pause before anyone replied. Everyone was busy calculating, just like Nihlus. Mirene was the first to speak.

“Wolta is an especially bad part of Hierote slums,” she said. “A bit over a year ago, the HQ got a tip that the Blood Pack were operating from an abandoned train station there. It was a big deal because everyone assumed the mercs ran large-scale operations from the jungle and the cities were clean. The HQ had to react immediately and the whole thing was a bit of a hodge-podge. We were deployed along with another spec-ops unit and we uh... distinguished ourselves, for better or for worse. Long story short, our orders were to hold a certain position but Sarge insisted we search another location instead.”

“It wasn’t on the map,” Nihlus said. He couldn’t help getting defensive. In retrospect, it had been the right move, but it had also been the worst move of his fucked-up career, and unlike most others, one to drag others down with him. “Somehow,” he made air quotes, “the IIC had outdated maps and there was a whole building in plain sight where there was supposed to be nothing. I just... had to.”

“Anyway,” Mirene continued, “it turned out to be a warehouse packed floor to ceiling with shipping containers that had obviously been used to transport slaves. With no actual slaves, mind you. Someone must have tipped the bastards off, because it sure looked like everything was abandoned in a hurry, what with the supplies left behind and all. But even so, this was huge. Before Wolta, no one had an inkling that slave trade was a thing on Invictus.”

"Yeah," said Vezeer. "We all expected to get promoted or something, but instead we started getting these shitty assignments. No offense, sir," he added.

"What do you mean, 'shitty'?" Saren asked.

"Looking for the Shithole," said Farill. His voice was rusty and he cleared his throat. "Sounds like a joke, but it isn't. After Wolta they kept sending us to the jungle."

"It all makes sense now," Nihlus said, and everybody turned to him. "All the times we could practically see the mercs sneak just outside our scouting zones. All the times I had the feeling we were sent out to totally random locations. All the times I set up traps and not one worked! And I thought it was my fault. I thought I was losing my touch. And you," he pointed at Theeka, "I told you about this and you said I was paranoid. Don't you see? He's been using you to sabotage us this whole time!"

Theeka burst in laughter. "Seriously? You *are* fucking paranoid. If Thadon wanted to learn our location or anything else about what we're doing, all he needed to do was *ask*. Sure, he's gonna ask *me* and not you, but that's because you're always a dick to him, not because of some sinister plot to mess with your head. You really think you're that important?"

"That's not it," Farril said quietly. "He asked you for the intel because he's not obliged to log personal messages. Anything he asks the Sarge goes through official channels and gets recorded."

"He's been tipping off the Blood Pack this whole time," said Mirene. "It'd explain everything."

"I don't believe that for a second," Theeka hissed. "You don't know him. He's a better soldier than any of you whining bitches."

"That's enough," Saren said. "Was this the first time he asked you to break radio silence?"

"Fuck you, freak."

Nihlus couldn't see what Saren did, but it made her twist and cry out. He winced. He was supposed to be angry at her. To feel betrayed and injured and offended. And perhaps in time he would. But right now, the fear of escalation made him numb to everything else. Saren had the authority to execute her at a whim.

"Don't make me be cruel," he said softly.

"Ok, ok!" Theeka sobbed. "Let up!" It took her some time to recover. Her face was wet with tears of pain and anger. "It wasn't the first time. There. Happy now?"

“What kind of information were you to report?”

“Encounters, plans, casualties. The usual. And anything unusual.”

“Such as?”

“Such as Nihlus deciding to ignore the objective in order to investigate whatever he thinks is more worth our while and then keep it out of his reports.”

“So I *am* that important after all.”

The disgusted look she gave him made him feel ashamed. “You’re an imbecile. He wanted to *help* you get over whatever brain damage makes you fight everything: your superiors, your men, yourself. Because he knows how good you are. He knows it better than anyone in the IIC.”

It was Nihlus’s turn to laugh, even though he felt no cheer whatsoever. “Yeah, right. He thinks so highly of me he wouldn’t trust me to tie his fucking bootlaces.”

“That’s exactly what you’d be doing if not for him. You’d be shining people’s shoes in the street.”

He gaped at her, as Thadon’s strange words, just before the General had walked into his office with Saren, came back to him. *This is out of my hands, Kryik. I can’t protect you anymore.* It wasn’t... true, was it? How could it be? It made no sense.

“Check if she sent anything else recently,” Saren said. “Documents, maps, scans?”

Nihlus nodded, grateful for a task he could focus on. He took Theeka’s hand again, now heavy and limp, and searched the comm log. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“Purge her omni.”

“Oh, come on—” Theeka started and abruptly stopped, hissing with pain.

Nihlus entered his CO override and executed the purge. “Done.”

Released without warning, Theeka almost fell on her face. She groaned as her left arm hit the ground beside her like a dead thing.

Saren stood up. A sheet of perspiration glistened on his pale skin. He was trembling. “Kryik. This location is no longer secure. Get ready to move out when this is resolved.”

“What do you mean, when it’s resolved? How do I resolve it?”

“I don’t care. Just get her out of my sight and out of my way.”

“Great,” Nihlus said, but Saren had already stalked away. “That’s just great.”

What was he to do? He counted his sadly diminished squad. Duon’s death was heroic; Lantar’s disappearance, unfortunate. But this... he didn’t know what the fuck this was.

“What do I do with you?” he muttered. “What the fuck do I do?”

“What *can* you do?” Theeka said, massaging her shoulder. “Execute me for treason?” She snorted, but she didn’t quite manage to mask the tremor in her undertones.

Vezeer said, “No one’s gonna execute you. Right, Sarge?”

“You can’t court-marshal me either. I was just doing what a superior officer told me.”

“Uh-huh,” Mirene said. “Bet you the Primarch’s crest-blade the Major would deny it if it came to court-marshal.”

“You don’t know shit about Thadon. Stop talking about him like you do.”

Farril paced around the perimeter. “And what if you’re wrong, huh? What if *you* don’t know him as well as you think. Maybe Lantar and Duon would still be here if you didn’t call in yesterday.”

“Let’s not go there, buddy,” Pan said. “It might look like this is all connected but we don’t know shit for sure. And why do I need to keep reminding everyone that we’ve been *looking for trouble*? For two years, not a day would pass without one of you thrill-seekers complaining how we’re not getting enough action. Well, we got some! What did you all think, huh? That it’s a game?” He stared them down one after another, but who could challenge him? He was right, and they all knew it. When no one spoke, he nodded and crouched behind Theeka’s back. “Lemme see that shoulder. Is it the same one?”

She sounded dangerously close to crying when she hummed an affirmative. Nihlus’s heart shrunk. Whatever was the truth behind this, he was sure she believed she had done the right thing. He couldn’t hate her.

“To be honest, I don’t see the Major being... dirty,” Mirene said, breaking a long, sulky silence. “He’s too... too...”

“Bland?” Nihlus offered. “Stupid? Boring?”

Theeka sniffed and spat out. By the sound of it, she missed his knee by centimeters. “You’re one sad character, you know that?”

“Alright, you two.” Mirene waved a hand between them. “Break it up.”

“Or get a room already,” Vezeer said. Everyone but Farril did their best to laugh.



Nihlus took a deep breath. "You can't come with us," he said. "And you can't stay here. Gather what gear you need and start south. Walk for three hours and then call for extraction. They can pick you up from that clearing where we camped yesterday. If you get in trouble, turn on your distress beacon." He mulled it over. If anyone could make it alone in the jungle, it was Theeka. This sucked but it could've been much worse. "If we weren't two men down already, I'd send someone to go with you, but—"

"Yeah." Theeka cleared her throat. "Guys, could you give us a moment?"

"Right," said Pan. "Take care, big girl."

Mirene tapped her good shoulder. "You'll be ok. See you in a few days, yeah?"

Vezeer leaned from the other side and kissed her on the cheek. "Stay out of trouble."

Farril turned around and walked away without a word.

For a while they sat in silence, listening to the screeching, scurrying and sighing of the jungle. It was almost completely dark now. Theeka was an indistinct gray shape in front of him.

"Thanks, I guess," she said at last. "That could've ended a lot uglier. I thought he was gonna kill me." She felt her neck with her hand.

"I wouldn't have let that happen."

"Yeah?"

Nihlus deadpanned in the dark. "Yeah, dummy. He was weak and unarmed. We were five against one. And I was close enough to knock him out with a single strike."

It was true, all of it. But he just barely believed it himself. Saren's performance in combat had been thoroughly intimidating yesterday, when he had been in even worse shape. And there was, of course, the matter of hesitation. If it had come to it, Nihlus would've probably been too slow to strike. Saren would've crushed Theeka's windpipe and dealt with Nihlus with some biotic attack or another, and the rest would've battled him over their dead bodies. He shivered.

"I don't think you could've," Theeka muttered. "But sure. I'll take what I can. I'm not gonna say I'm sorry, though. I don't think I did anything wrong."

"Yeah. Same."

"What would you be sorry for?"

Nihlus snorted. "For not getting that room."

She laughed a little. "Yeah. To be fair, we'd be one fucked up couple."

"You think?"

"We'd end up hating each other."

"Right. All the friend-zoning totally saved us from *that*."

They both laughed now, but it didn't last.

"I never told you," Theeka said, "that I got a transfer offer, oh, some six months back. For the Space Corps. And before you say something to piss me off again, it came through Dinara's sister. Thadon didn't even know."

Space Corps had been her dream, the way the ST&R had been his. "And you didn't take it because...?"

She shuffled closer, almost chest to chest. "Because... You know Invictus counts as a level-two hazard post, right? Three years here are one year off my retirement age. It's why I chose Invictus to begin with. And my previous post was level four, which is one-for-one. You know I'm 25. Two more years and..."

"What? Retire?"

"Well, yeah. What, you think I wanna do this for the rest of my life, like Vezeer, or your Spectre? Do you?"

Nihlus was no longer sure what they were talking about. "I don't know. Leave the army... and do what?"

"Have a family?"

"Oh, man." He laughed. "I thought we were having a serious conversation here. Family? In a few years? No way. Assuming... we're talking about... us. Are we? No, never mind. Don't answer that."

"Breathe, Nihlus. Nice and slow. In... and out."

This was no time for teasing. He threw a play-punch at her midsection, but she caught his hand. And held on to it.

"Besides," he said, "since when are you into settling down and shit?"

"Since always. Not the way you thought about me, huh?"

Nihlus realized he was shaking his head. He wondered what else he was wrong about. "Guess not."

"Why? Because I like to play rough?"

He swallowed. "You do?"

She laughed. "And there I thought we were having a serious conversation."

It was good to laugh. But time was ticking. There was a chance they'd never see each other again. He had to know. "If this is how you feel about me... why aren't you *with* me?" He squeezed her hand. "Why are you with... him?"

"Well, first of all, I *like* him. He's smart, and classy, and mature. And he makes me laugh."

Nihlus had to clench his jaw to stop himself from scoffing and making rude remarks. He had asked for it, after all.

"While you..." Her voice dwindled. "You drive me crazy. In every way, ok? You know you're incredibly fucking hot. And—" She sighed. "So does the whole Legion."

"Huh?"

"Oh, come on. Your exploits are legendary. You must've done every asari on the planet."

"What? No. For one, I've never set foot out of Hierote. And there are only—"

"Yeah. And like three dozen people from the Corps."

"You exaggerate." Nihlus paused, fighting panic while trying in vain to estimate how many people he had actually been with on Invictus. Even if he had taken his day off every week, which he hadn't, and gone out every time, which he also hadn't, and how many weeks were there in a year? No way it could've been that many. "Two dozen, tops. And only if you count the one-night-stands. But what does it matter anyway? None of it was serious. Like, that thing with Iana was the closest it got to serious and you know how 'serious' that is."

"Yeah, Nihlus—" She shook her head. "That's the problem."

"I don't follow."

"The only reason you have a thing with Iana is because she's not really *into* you. However the fuck you two make that work. And the only reason you're still interested in me is that I'm unavailable. Because I didn't want to be one of your conquests, alright?"

He was speechless. He wanted to say, *but you wouldn't be!* He wanted to say, *with you, it'd be different.* But she wouldn't believe it. And he wasn't sure he believed it himself.

“So, I stayed... waiting for you to grow up, I guess. But, you know what?” She came even closer and put her hands on his shoulders. Her breath warmed his carapace when she spoke. “Fuck that. You’re perfect as you are. Just not perfect for *me*, and I was wrong to want you to change. I get that now.” She lifted his chin and went on in a whisper. “Don’t ever change, Nihlus, for anyone but yourself. You hear me?”

She was so close. Close enough for their mandibles to catch. Close enough for their foreheads to touch. And they did, when he nodded, even though he had no clue what she was talking about. She leaned into it, and he closed his eyes, and the world collapsed into a whirlpool of joy and bitter regret.

And then she was gone.

When Nihlus returned to the tent, Saren was armed and dressed up, all but gloves and helmet. He was busy eating the fruit Nihlus had brought him in Lomera, a lifetime ago, and didn’t look up. Nihlus crashed on his bedroll and stared at his empty hands for a long time. The paint was starting to peel from the upper side of his left glove. The seals felt flimsy when he rotated his wrists. Likely no longer space-worthy, if they ever were. Infantry always ended up with scraps.

He could still taste her. But the warm pool of arousal in his stomach was cooling down, decaying into sadness. First Lantar, then Duon, now Theeka. Who was next?

He said, “I let her go.”

Saren grunted an acknowledgment. It wasn’t a satisfied grunt, or a dissatisfied grunt. Just a grunt. Some minutes passed before he finished with the meal and cleared his throat, calling for attention. Nihlus looked up through a haze.

“I can’t find my omni-tool.”

“Shit,” Nihlus said, clapping his forehead. “I’ve forgotten about that. No worries,” he hurried to add, seeing Saren’s browplates gather. “It’s safe. It’s with me. I uh... took it when you were unconscious and used it to set up that ambush.” He took the omni off his right wrist and carefully dangled it in Saren’s direction. “We uh... had to reset it so it’d take my input. But we didn’t touch any of your files.”

Saren snatched the omni, making Nihlus wince.

“Sir, I’m sorry. The Blood Pack was coming, and you were down, and Lantar was missing. It was either that or call for backup. And you sort of approved the plan earlier, so I thought—”

“Stop it.” Saren closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if holding back a massive wave of annoyance. “Lower your voice. I have a headache.”

“I’m sorry,” Nihlus whispered, miserable.

After a while, Saren looked at him again. “You said you wiped out the whole unit.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, no prisoners.”

“No, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.” Saren’s voice rose and his unrelenting gaze bore into Nihlus like the tip of a knife. “Stand behind your decisions, even if they were bad. And I didn’t say they were. Besides—” he finally blinked and looked away—“you wouldn’t have been in the position to *make* decisions if I hadn’t failed to recognize the severity of my illness. It’s myself I’m angry with. Not you.”

Nihlus swallowed a knot. For all the reprimands he’d taken in service, be it plain insults or fair critique, none had ever affected him like this. He didn’t dare speak, fearing he might cry, and just nodded.

“I see you found my helmet and my pistol,” Saren said after a while. “And I won’t forget what you did, back in the woods.” It looked like he was struggling with something he wanted, or maybe didn’t want to say. Thanks?

Nihlus waited for several seconds, but it didn’t come. “Any time, sir,” he said anyway.

“Did you investigate the Claw?”

“Yes, sir.” Nihlus took a deep breath, grateful for a chance to give a positive answer at last. “We found a staging area just north of it. A small landing zone under holo-camouflage. The enemy tracks led right to it. They landed there and traveled to the ambush spot on foot. Had to fly back for more troops. Means they only have one standard transport, probably because the other landing zone is tiny too.”

“The Shithole,” Saren said. “Camouflaged the same way.”

“Yes, sir. And they can fly about freely because—”

“—someone’s supplying them with fresh IFF certificates.”

Nihlus nodded. Otherwise the AA installments would take their planes down. And everyone in the HQ operated under the assumption that the Blood Pack didn’t, *couldn’t*, fly planet-side. That they did their smuggling through civilian spaceports and only had

ground-based supply lines. Supply lines Nihlus and his squad were supposed to track down. What a joke. He let out a bitter little laugh, and then it struck him.

“Wait.” He wagged a finger in the air, trying to get his thoughts together. “Wait.”

Saren waited for two whole seconds. “What?”

“I’ve got an idea. I think I know how we can find the Shithole. I don’t have access to this information, but with your help... If we can look into the Major’s command roster and see where he’s been deploying troops—”

“We can see where he *hasn’t* deployed troops,” Saren finished for him. He turned on his omni—and flinched when it lit up, illuminating the tent in a bright, aggressive orange. He kept it literally at an arm’s length while he logged in.

“Greetings, Agent Arterius,” the VI sounded, making them both jump. Saren grimaced and muted it. After a bit more fiddling, he managed to lower the brightness too and sighed with relief.

“Come,” he said, motioning Nihlus to sit next to him. It was no easy feat in the low-domed, cramped space. But after some awkward positioning, they managed to settle shoulder against shoulder. “Let’s see.”

“Ok... can you uh... plot drop-points for all regular and outstanding deployments during the last year?”

Saren picked through the options in an interface Nihlus had never seen before. It wasn’t turian army software. A silver winged sigil rotated leisurely in the top left corner: ST&R. The plates along Nihlus’s spine stood on end. The star-map zoomed in on Caestus, and then on the ponderous brown globe of Invictus, looking sickly, drab and dirty. Military landing zones lit up like a pair of loose necklaces twenty-plus degrees above and below the equator, with only a handful scattered between.

“Take a fifty mile radius around the crash site,” Nihlus said. Saren’s hand hovered reluctantly, then froze mid-air as Nihlus reached for the map himself. He zoomed in and scrolled westward until he found the Kirreneans, and then the Ibiss. “There. And we’re here.”

Saren initiated a search of the IIC database around the two waypoints. After a second, blue dots started popping up on the map.

“Add the scouting zone for each unit.”

“There,” Saren muttered. Nihlus nodded. On the map, a pattern was emerging, becoming more and more apparent with each additional point. It took the shape of... a ragged crescent, centered—

“North from here,” Nihlus said, impatient, and tapped the map to center the location for better view. Saren didn’t seem to mind the intrusion. He started another database search around the new location.

“Interesting,” Saren said as the dots started popping out again. The overlapping scouting zones made an irregular circle around an area on the lowest slopes of the Allerleigh Mountains. About twenty clicks from where they were now.

“Can’t believe it,” Nihlus said. “That must be it. The Shithole.” He shook his head to try a fresh perspective, make sure his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “But... how do you suppose no one’s ever noticed this?”

Saren shrugged. “This isn’t a war-zone. Few high-tier officers have the time or inclination to run obscure statistics on routine patrol deployment. And even if someone did, this would mean little without other evidence. Which is again circumstantial without this.”

The Shithole suspect wasn’t the only place that stood out. “Do you still have the survey data I sent you on the ride from Hierote?”

“I do.”

“Can you layer it over this?”

With the corner of his eye, he saw Saren’s mandible flick outward. Amused or annoyed? Nihlus realized he’d been addressing him very informally and his face heated up. But Saren said nothing. He dragged the local map with Nihlus’s annotations on top of the one with the deployment pattern. On the south side of the Ibiss, several ‘holes’ between yellow scouting zones were filled in with his own recon data, plotted red. The slave village was the largest one.

He tapped it. “This is where Okeer landed.”

Saren panned the map this way and that, inspecting Nihlus’s handiwork, but whatever he thought of it, he kept for himself. He said: “If the Major knew about all your... extra-curricular activities... why did he tolerate them?”

“Maybe it’s not him after all.” Nihlus bit his mandible. “But if it wasn’t Theeka’s report that gave away our position and heading from Lomera—”

“The Blood Pack could’ve assumed we would head for the Claw. It was the only landmark mentioned in Okeer’s communication with Wortag. And Lomera was an obvious starting point. You said so yourself.”

That... had not occurred to him. He was so convinced in his own theory, especially with recent events seemingly confirming it, that he never tried to consider any alternatives.

But even if it wasn't Thadon, only someone of same rank or higher could organize the evasive deployments. "You're friends with the General. How well do you know him?"

"Well enough to trust him with my life." Saren shifted, as if uncomfortable. "But nothing's impossible. No one incorruptible." There was a silence. "We might find further clues in the Shithole. How long to get there?"

"Hard to say, since I've obviously never been in that region. Fucking hell." He cleared his throat. "Sorry, sir. If the terrain keeps improving, we could make it in a day and a half? Less, if we force it. But," he tore his eyes from the incriminating circle on the map to study Saren's tired face. "Honestly, sir, I don't think you're well enough to move out at all."

"If we stay, we risk discovery. Now that we have a clear objective, another fight would be a waste of time and resources." Saren rolled his head back and his neck popped. "We move out at once and proceed as fast as possible."

Nihlus was once more the last to pack up. He took the rear and had Mirene walk point, with Pan and Vezeer flanking Saren, just in case. They passed Duon's shallow grave on the way north. Farril paused to kneel by the headstone—a large white rock they had painstakingly rolled up from a nearby stream and etched with Duon's name, rank, markings, dates of birth and death and the story of his sacrifice.

"He died to save our lives," Nihlus said, putting a hand on Farril's shoulder. *Most men die for nothing.* "We owe it to him to make the best of it."

"Yeah." Farril touched the stone with his forehead, sniffed, and got up. "Yeah."



## Chapter 16 - Gravity

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Saren spun on his toes, making a full-circle sweep with his arms extended sideways. The violence of the motion stirred the air like a fan. When he reached the apex he ducked and repeated the sweep in the opposite direction from a half-squat, while Kryik executed the mirror move centimeters above his head. It was the flashy, optional finisher for the second form, done by young athletes in competitions to impress the judges.

Saren felt neither young nor athletic. The entire exercise could have lasted no more than ten minutes, yet he was breathless. As he stepped back, Kryik spun one more time. Out of turn. A poorly thought-out improvisation or an honest mistake—it mattered not. Saren bent back at a hazardous angle and evaded Kryik's slashing hand a split second before losing an eye.

"Damn it, Kryik!"

"Fucking hell," Kryik echoed, stumbling away with both hands draped over his mouth. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," he snapped. It wasn't entirely true. The awkward movement had left his lats cramped and his neck and lower back aching. But what worried him more was the dizziness. He leaned on his knees, barely able to hear anything over the drumming of his heart. He resolved then and there that, should he survive this mission, he'd put twice as much time into training in high g than he had before.

"I'm sorry. I miscounted. Spirits, I'm so sorry."

"Stop it."

"Yes, sir." And then, not three seconds later, "You sure you're ok?"

Saren straightened up to prove it. He had meant to glare at Kryik with conviction, but seeing him standing there, shocked out of proportion, dissolved his anger.

"Your mind is elsewhere," he said. "I shouldn't have let you talk me into this."

"It won't happen again, I promise."

"You got *that* right."

Kryik was breathing heavily. A thin sheet of perspiration shone on his arms and shoulders. Warmed-up muscles twitched under his dark skin. No. He was shivering, and it had nothing to do with the exertion. He crossed his arms to hide it, but it did little to conceal the utter misery on his face.

Saren regretted being so harsh. Not so much because he cared about Kryik's hurt feelings, but because it had been a cheap bluff. He was still weak from the fever and momentarily annoyed, but if Kryik was to try and talk him into doing more Hallori later, he would put up only token resistance. It had been the most enjoyable thing he had done in a long time, and this narrowly-avoided accident aside, Kryik was a decent partner.

He cast about for his jacket. They were in a grassy clearing within shouting range from the camp. A tiny stream trickled over it into a shallow, muddy pond. The overcast sky loomed low above the surrounding treetops. Their things were in a heap next to a flat-topped rock. He started walking.

"Were you very close?" he asked. After a few steps, he heard Kryik follow him.

"Who?"

"You and the girl. Theeka."

"Oh."

They reached the rock and Kryik watched him put on his jacket with unfocused eyes, turned inward. He scratched behind his crest.

"You don't have to answer."

"No, no. I'm happy to. As soon as I figure out what the answer is." He flicked a mandible in an attempt to smile. "We weren't... sleeping together, if that's what you're asking."

It wasn't, but—"Does the IIC regulate fraternization?"

"Ha. No. They'd have to deal with all-out mutiny if they tried."

Saren hummed. Glancing down, he noticed a large white flower dangling just over his toes on the moist breeze. It looked like an untamed relative of the cialis, often groomed near burial sites on Palaven.

"Do the cabals regulate it?" Kryik asked. A current of curiosity barely held in check by caution vibrated in his lower harmonics. Saren couldn't decide if it amused or annoyed him.

"They try," he said. "They don't enforce it, but the idea that sex is bad is a part of their doctrine."

"Like, in general?" Kryik laughed. "How can it be bad?"

"According to their teaching, sex dissipates emotional and physical energy and therefore affects biotics adversely."

“Any... truth to that?”

Saren snorted. “Of course not. It’s just another way to make us feel special—by which I mean isolated—and prevent us from multiplying. Yes,” he added, before Kryik could say whatever he had opened his mouth to say. “They propagate the notion that biotics are hereditary despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. One of these days they’ll declare it a contagious disease, just wait and see.”

Having successfully wound himself up over nonsense, he took off his jacket again. The weather reminded him of rainy days in Cipritine spring when you couldn’t walk out without a coat, but you’d start sweating in it the instant you moved. Even the air had the same moldy smell.

“I see they didn’t manage to indoctrinate you,” Kryik said.

Saren knew very well that Kryik hadn’t meant *that* indoctrination. The dark connotations were his alone. But the word, dropped so casually, made him wince. To mask his reaction, he stepped around the white flower and climbed on top of the rock, where he sat and took a deep, centering breath.

“I was fortunate,” he said. “I studied with an asari before I was recruited. For them, biotics are the norm, not the exception.”

Kryik seemed to mull it over. “How come we’re ok with alien biotics—as a society, I mean—but not with our own?”

“The cabals prefer it that way. *The intangible is unstoppable*. That’s their slogan,” he explained when Kryik showed no sign of recognition. Suddenly the whole conversation struck him as ridiculous. Discussing cabal politics with some random trooper on Invictus was the last thing he would have expected when he launched on this mission.

A random trooper of exceeding aptitude, who had established himself as a reliable ally and had saved his life. Of course, that was his duty. But duty did not cover indulging Saren in one of his most obscure interests, bringing him fruit, waiting on him while he had been sick, or giving him the widely under-appreciated gift of undivided *attention*. Somehow, talking with Kryik was much less of a chore than talking with Sparatus, who had known him for years and was supposedly his equal.

“What about the man who died,” he said, breaking the pensive silence. “Duon?”

“What about him?”

“Were you close?”

“Oh.” Kryik shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “No. Don’t get me wrong: I miss him dearly. Lantar too. And Theeka. We’ve been practically living together for two years

now. Not to mention all the crap we've been through as a team. But I'm not *really* close with anyone." He paused. "Why?"

Saren stared at the treetops on the other side of the clearing. A flock of small, blue, bird-like creatures was diving in and out of the canopy, feeding on some unseen airborne feast. "I heard you singing, when you buried him. Unless it was another fever-dream."

"It wasn't." Kryik sighed. "It hit me pretty hard, is all. Like losing a limb or something. I still can't believe he's gone."

"You've never lost a man before."

"Correct, sir."

"That's quite an accomplishment, with your service history."

Kryik's head snapped in Saren's direction, a dangerous glint in his eye. "What's that supposed to mean?"

A poor choice of words. It was supposed to be a compliment. Saren picked out a small stone that had splintered from the rock he was sitting on and absently flicked it across the clearing with a touch of biotic lift. "You've seen a lot of combat for your age and rank," he said. "It takes exceptional luck to never suffer a loss in this line of work." Or exceptional skill.

Kryik's glare softened by degrees, but his mandibles twitched with some new annoyance. "So, you've read my file." He laughed. "I hope you found it entertaining."

"I found it puzzling."

"Yeah?"

Saren gave him a warning glance. He had done nothing to deserve this hostility.

"I'm sorry, sir." Kryik massaged his forehead. "I kind of hoped to be judged by my current merits, not my past mistakes."

"What makes you think you won't be?"

Kryik shrugged. "Experience." He too picked up a piece of splintered rock and tossed it in the air. Thanks to the flat shape, it flew farther than Saren's.

"There's much to be proud of in your service record."

"But much more to be ashamed of, right? Well, I'm not. Only a handful of things I'd do differently if I could go back in time. Though that would only make my file worse, not better. I'd kill a few scumbags I allowed to live, that's pretty much it." He paused, search-

ing the distant tree crowns for words. "I'd keep my mouth shut on a couple notable occasions, I guess. And pull back some punches."

Saren sent another small stone flying, with more purpose, and it overshot Kryik's.

Kryik grinned at him, found a new projectile, and leaned into the movement when he flung it. It reached about the same distance as Saren's. In response, Saren scratched out a bigger piece and launched it over the distant treetops, where it went out of sight.

"That's hardly fair," Kryik muttered, shielding his eyes from the light of the gloomy noon.

It *had* been a bit excessive. Saren rubbed his mandible, distractedly calculating the mass effect on the stone. Assuming a spherical shape of unit radius and the density three times that of water... It shouldn't have gone that far. Just like that grenade combo shouldn't have had an area of effect large enough to knock them both out.

*Later.*

"Any family?" he said aloud.

Kryik didn't reply at once. "Isn't that on my file?"

"The names of your parents are, but I didn't run checks on them."

"Well. They're dead. No siblings, no mates, no children—at least none I know of. No ties whatsoever. Free as free-falling stone."

The simile was quite apt. To Kryik, the forces keeping him bound to Invictus and his current status must indeed have seemed as impersonal and inescapable as gravity itself.

When he picked up another stone and lounged forward, hurling it with all his might, Saren gave it some extra lift. It shot upward like a bullet, in a straight line, breaking the sound barrier and leaving a misty blue trail behind. It would burn up in the atmosphere before it reached space, of course. But it certainly acquired the requisite velocity.

Kryik stared after it with loose mandibles. Saren took his stunned silence as a sign that he had understood.

After a while, he slid down on the ground and stretched, looking around. "Help me find me a rock."

"Huh?" Kryik blinked at him like a man woken up from deep sleep.

"Clawball-sized, three to five kilos."

"A rock. Yes, sir. Coming right up."

They searched the perimeter. Trees other than ganuts grew here, most notably a sort of tapered, blue-leafed fir, branching out near the ground from a thick, squat trunk. Last night's march had brought them to the foothills and the terrain was rockier than before, with ground rising at a mild westward slope.

It had been another grim trudge through the dark, made worse by Saren's recurring fever. By first light, when they made camp, everyone was so exhausted that they slept surrounded with proximity mines instead of posting watch. But a few hours of uninterrupted rest had done wonders. His illness had run its course and he was mostly himself again. The stone-throwing competition reminded him there was one more thing he needed to test.

"Something like this?" Kryik called after a minute.

He held a rock that looked to have the right mass. It was roughly cubical, all sharp edges and jagged surfaces. Hardly ideal for calibrations, but it would do.

"Put it down."

Kryik raised his browplates, but did as he was told.

"Step away," Saren said. "Further," he added when Kryik took literally one step back.

"What are you gonna do?"

"Parlor tricks."

"Sir?"

But Saren had put him out of his mind and focused inward. He took a deep breath and reached for the peculiar strength within, performing the simple mimetic for biotic levitation with the concentration and caution of an athlete going for the first run after a crippling injury. The rock rested on the ground some two meters in front of him. And then it floated at his eye-level. It didn't feel like five kilos. It felt like—nothing. Saren let it drop.

"Whoa," Kryik said. "All systems check, eh?"

Saren picked up the rock from the ground and weighed it suspiciously. In his hands, it felt heavier than five kilos.

"I need something bigger."

Kryik looked around. "Does it have to be a rock?"

"No."

Predictably, Kryik flashed a coquettish smile at him. "You can lift me! I had a lot of practice flying and falling these past few days. Not that you'll lose all that much even if I do break my neck. And I guarantee a solid hundred-fifty. If you're up for a challenge."

"This will do," Saren said, ignoring him. There was a large rotting trunk of a fallen tree a few steps into the woods.

"You're no fun."

Saren focused again. This time he used both hands for the mimetic, expecting some resistance. But the trunk lifted off the ground cleanly, quietly, and he held it in the air with no special effort. He could feel its weight alright, but it was more like holding a bag of groceries than like weight-lifting. In his peripheral vision, a congress of black and yellow spiders, centipedes and beetles scurried around in the dark patch of wet earth exposed beneath the trunk. Kryik walked backward, gaping. The trunk rotated around a perpendicular axis just above the ground, fast enough to sweep up dry leaves and pine needles. Saren twisted his hand and the rotation slowed down to a stop. He twisted his hand in another direction and the trunk stood upright. He planted it on the ground, where it remained in precarious balance when he released it. After a few seconds it tipped and fell with a thud he could feel through his feet.

For a while everything was still. Kryik walked to the trunk and glanced at Saren askance. He squatted at one end of the trunk and brought it up to hip-height.

"Holy shit," he grunted and dropped it. "I guess hundred-fifty wouldn't be much of a challenge."

"No."

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes."

More than *ok*. He felt strong. He felt like he could tilt the planet's rotation axis. A strange heat emanated from the sensitive spots of his body: the neck, the armpits, the groin, the hollows of his knees. The same heat he'd felt the day before yesterday on the battlefield, only now it wasn't painful. It was *hungry*.

Sensing an accumulation of surplus charge, he crouched and touched his talontips to the ground.

"While you were... feverish... Pan said there were some... nano-cybernetics in your bloodstream. At least that's what I picked up. Might be he said something else entirely." Kryik bit on his mandible. "Are there?"

Saren's heart was beating hard again, as if he was really weight-lifting. The medic had mentioned this while he had been delirious, but he had forgotten it. Saren would have to see his omni purged of the evidence.

"Yes," he said. Neither too fast, nor too slow to respond. A good lie is always rooted in the truth. "Leftovers from a trial with prototype technology."

"What for?"

"Intelligent medigel delivery system."

"Oh. Wow. That sounds brilliant."

"Only in theory."

"It doesn't work?"

"We're not quite there yet."

It did not particularly matter if Kryik would buy it. But in the unlikely event that the low-res images from the medic's field scanner got out and reached someone with an interest in nano-tech, it would be good to have a cover story ready. Might as well spin one right away.

"We? As in, the Hierarchy?"

Saren's tidy mental compartment could only take so much shaking. Things were crawling out of it. Fear, anger. He could not allow the sparks to fan into flames. Not before he had the time and privacy to think about the implications on his own terms.

"Enough with the questions. It's classified."

"Oh." Kryik sounded part dismayed, part disappointed. Just what Saren had intended. A boring lie in place of the unspeakable truth that was almost indistinguishable from it. "Sorry, sir."

Saren itched for more practice. And so did Kryik, judging by his restless bouncing.

"Come," Saren said, walking back to the middle of the clearing. "I'll teach you how to evade some basic biotic attacks."

When they got back to the camp they found Mirene turning an improvised spit over a low fire, with four things skewered on it that could've been small birds or large frogs. Loud snoring was coming from one of the two closed tents. Inside the third, Saren glimpsed Vezeer, the Thunderstorm man. The plates on his chest and shoulders were



cracked and flaking where the warp had eaten through his armor. A messy injury that would leave ugly scars. Still, he smiled looking up. Probably well-doused with medigel.

The roasting meat smelled delicious. Saren was hungry again. His body was requesting he made up for the past few weeks of uncharacteristic neglect. He took a sip of water from his bottle, wondering if it would be below him to commandeer half of all the food. He was a biotic, after all, and he did have the seniority.

But Farril returned from the recon mission before he had the opportunity to decide either way. Kryik called for war council and everyone sat in a circle around the holo-model of the Shithole projected from Farril's omni.

"All of this is underground," he said, pointing at the expansive T-shaped hallway structure connecting two dozen rooms, large and small. Typically for high-g worlds, it was all on the same level. "This is the LZ." He indicated the circular plateau on top of the complex. "It's large enough to fit three or four shuttles, but I only saw one. And that gunship that came for Okeer. There were men welding something inside and bickering about it. It might be broken, but best not to count on it."

Brows gathered and heads nodded.

Saren touched one of the two small buildings that appeared to be above the ground, at the ends of the T's bar. "What are these?"

"Guard towers. With machine-gun nests. No automated turrets, though. There's a service elevator at the base of each. And a workstation on top. That's where the holo-projectors for the camo are housed."

"Where's the entrance?" Kryik asked.

Farril stabbed at the base of the T.

"Heavily guarded?"

"No. Two krogan man the guard towers, one each, and there's half a dozen vorcha patrolling the perimeter. I got the impression they're all terminally bored. I was hiding here," he poked the holo next to one of the guard towers, "and I could hear the krogan in there snoring. He had a folding chair and all."

"How did you get all this intel?" Mirene asked. "Looks incredibly detailed."

"Their security is crap. I hacked into their intranet without a hiccup. Downloaded these plans, maintenance schedules, guard duty roster, you name it." He consulted his omni. "If we hurry, we might catch my boy... Drau Frigor before he wakes up."

"But not the comm logs?" Saren asked, just in case.

“No, sir. There was another network behind a firewall. Duon... would’ve made short work of it, but I didn’t dare poke at it and risk getting detected.”

Heads dropped in sudden silence.

After a while, the medic cleared his throat. “What’s this?” There was a waypoint in one of the smaller rooms inside the compound.

Farril bit his mandible. “I *think* that’s Lantar.”

Everyone got excited and asked what? how? when? all at the same time. Kryik had to wave his hands to calm them down.

“What do you mean, you *think*?” Saren asked.

“Well. Last year, the IIC started chipping people.” He had been speaking to no one in particular, but now he turned to Saren to explain. “Because soldiers, mostly rookies, go missing in the jungle with no trace or explanation at a steady rate of a dozen a year. So, they started injecting newcomers with locator microchips. They’re supposed to get triggered by anomalous metabolic states. When starving, injured, frightened and so on. None of us got them yet.” He turned to Kryik now. “But Lantar may have.”

“You caught its signal?”

“Wish it was that simple.” He scratched his crest. “Something blinked on my visor, once. It didn’t get recorded. I don’t even know what it said, but it had the IIC logo and someone’s service number and it was flagged urgent. When I tried to pinpoint it, I couldn’t find it again. So... Could be nothing. Or it could be Lantar.”

“Could be his dead body,” the medic muttered.

“Yeah.”

“The chip keeps emitting after you die,” the medic explained. “That’s the main point, if we’re being honest. To locate the bodies when people go missing, since no one really believes they go on living long after that. Give the families some closure and all that.” He waved a hand, drawing a clear line between himself and ‘all that’.

Kryik ended the thoughtful silence. “What do you think, sir?”

Saren gave him an irritated look. This did not concern him or his mission and he didn’t want to think about it. “It’s almost certainly your man. It is highly unlikely that he fell pray to some random jungle peril fifty meters from the Blood Pack position. And given that, even less likely that the Blood Pack are holding some other turian soldier captive.”

Kryik nodded, and so did the others, one by one.

“If they do have him,” Saren continued, “he probably lives. They wouldn’t carry him to their den just to kill him there. They would’ve done so at once.”

There were sighs of relief, as if his conjecture was solid proof of what they wanted to hear.

“However, unless he has a very rich family or very influential friends worth blackmailing...” He paused to see if there would be an affirmative. But Kryik shook his head. “The only reason to keep him alive is to use him for bargaining with me. And in that case, they might subscribe to a very narrow definition of *alive*.”

He gazed at Kryik, wondering if he needed to say more. He had read gruesome accounts of how hostile krogan treated captive turians, and witnessed a few cases himself. Krogan nurtured an unhealthy fascination with turian anatomy and were especially fond of peeling off plates as a means of slow, sustainable torture. And when information—or suffering for its own sake—weren’t of interest, a strong turian could provide days of entertainment in a fighting pit, pitched against varren, vorcha or even krogan, until utter physical or psychological collapse, whichever came first.

Kryik’s expression shifted by degrees. “You’re saying he might be... better off dead?”

No shocked gasps came from the others. They exchanged furtive glances or stared at the ground. Saren shrugged.

“I don’t believe that,” Kryik said. “Wounds heal. People recover from all sorts of trauma.”

With scars for life, and not only on carapace. But there was no point in arguing. “You asked my opinion. You got it.”

“Either way,” Vezeer said, breaking the awkward silence, “we’ll have to look for him. Right, Sarge?”

“Extracting Okeer is top priority,” Saren hurried to say before Kryik could support the notion of a valiant rescue. “You can look for your comrade after he’s secured.”

Kryik refused to look at him but didn’t dare protest. Good. It wasn’t open for discussion.

“So...” Farril said. “What’s the plan?”

“We can’t call for backup,” Kryik said.

“Why not?” Vezeer asked.

“Someone up the command chain is corrupt,” Mirene said. “Or several of them. They could warn the Blood Pack. Give them enough time to evacuate. Or worse.”

“Worse?”

“Send us to our deaths,” the medic said.

“There could be a hundred krogan and vorcha in there,” Vezeer said. “It’s a fortress. What can the six of us do on our own?”

“The *five* of you will provide a diversion while I extract Okeer,” Saren said. “Fake a frontal assault, take out the guard towers and disable the gunship. Then retreat to a defensible position and keep the Blood Pack occupied while I infiltrate the compound through the service elevator.” He pointed at the east guard tower.

“Let me come with you,” Kryik said. “Please, hear me out before you say no. You’ll need my help to get there unnoticed,” he went on without even a token pause to let Saren express his objections. “Cloak can’t hide you while moving through the bush, or muffle your footsteps. More importantly, it would be difficult—and risky—to adjust our tactics to a team of five. We’re trained to move in pairs and fours.”

Heads nodded while Saren held Kryik’s excited gaze, grasping for flaws in his logic. He couldn’t find any. “Go on.”

“I suggest we split in three teams. I’ll go with you. Pan and Farril enter the same way, but from the other side.” Kryik put a finger on the west guard tower, then moved it up and down the elevator shaft. “We could seal the elevators behind us. With them moving from this end and us on the other, there’s only one way for Okeer to run if they’re alerted to our presence. Mirene and Vezeer can find cover and lay low here,” he pointed at the area directly in front of the main entrance, “ready to provide backup, or a diversion, or apprehend Okeer if we don’t get to him first. As an aside,” his voice wavered, “the other infiltration team could try to locate Lantar.”

Everyone was looking at Saren now, awaiting judgment. Perhaps his fever was back, or it was the exhaustion, or the declining hope that this mission would end well, but Kryik’s plan sounded better than his own. In his rush to discard any help, he had failed to notice the rather obvious appeal of having all three exits covered. Besides, Kryik and his men have demonstrated nothing but competence so far. There was no reason to consider them a hindrance when in truth they were an asset. Two teams would move through the facility twice as fast as one, and with Kryik to watch his back, he could make better use of his biotics.

“Fine,” he said at last. “Make the preparations. We move as soon as possible.”

The overt gratitude in Kryik’s smile was unsettling. A part of him felt that this decision, whether good or bad, was entirely worth it. And that was even more unsettling.

## Chapter 17 - House in an Invictus Jungle

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They crawled to the edge of the rocky outcrop and peeked over. The east guard tower was ten meters ahead. It would be entirely possible to hear a krogan posted there snoring from here. But Nihlus could hear nothing.

“Change of watch?” Saren said. He lowered his visor. A moment later, Nihlus heard the delicate buzz of the optical focus. “There’s no one in there.”

Well, yes. The tower was a cube of concrete with a rusty iron fence encircling the top and a slanted roof to keep the equipment dry. There was no way to hide a krogan on it. Or anything, for that matter. A ladder with six rungs led up from the ground on the east side. A sturdy sliding door faced them from the south side. That would be the service elevator.

Everything was just as Farril had described it. Only his boy, what-was-his-name-krogan was missing.

“Team Two,” he said over the intercom. “We’re in position but no sign of krogan sentry. What’s your status?”

“Same,” Pan said. “No one here. I don’t see the vorcha patrols either.”

Nihlus didn’t have fancy optics in his visor but he had his sniper rifle. He extended it, cringing, as always, at the sharp click marking the final stage of autoassembly. Saren’s closed helmet turned a few degrees, expressing volumes of disapproval.

“Sorry, sir.”

He looked down the sights, adjusted the magnification. The LZ was an oval slab of reinforced concrete, blackened and polished to a dull shine by numerous landings and take-offs. Stubborn weeds thrived in the cracks that crept from the edges inward, showing for at least a few decades of age. The two guard-towers rose from the opposing sides of the south half of the oval. Overgrown walkways lined the north half, meeting at the ramp that descended underground and out of sight. That was the entrance. The familiar-looking gunship, with its hodgepodge camouflage of branches with limp leaves rotting on it, was parked east of it. Next to it rested a salvaged turian military transport in even worse state of repair. Likely what the Blood Pack had used to deploy their ‘task force’ at the Claw.

He froze mid-sweep, heartrate rising. “I see one of the vorcha sentries. Dead.”

“Shot?”

Nihlus zoomed in. “Broken, more like.” The vorcha’s body was twisted in the waist as if something had taken him by the arms and legs and wrung him. “Can biotics do that?”

“Let me see.”

Saren shuffled closer and reached for Nihlus’s weapon. And Nihlus couldn’t move, suddenly seized by internal resistance bordering on panic. He experienced the damndest flashback of a bizarre exercise that coach Ensiter had started him on when qualifications for the Colonial Open had become a certainty. He was supposed to close his eyes and let himself fall back as a plank—trusting her, or Dario, or whoever was around at the time, to catch him. The floor in the gym was padded and he took falls by the dozens daily, but nothing could mitigate that primal fear of *letting go*. The same fear he struggled to overcome now, for some fucking reason.

After seconds of hesitation, he extended the bipod and slowly rotated the rifle on it. Saren waited, still and silent, as if he knew exactly what was going on inside Nihlus’s head. When he accepted the grip and nestled the stock on his shoulder, Nihlus puffed out a lump of hot air and shook his head clear. Damn, that was weird.

“Subtle,” Saren muttered, looking through the scope.

“Sir?”

“A precision kill. Snapped the neck before the body hit the ground. And, more importantly,” he added, “before the victim could scream. This requires fine control. Hardly the work of a krogan biotic.”

Just like during the fight in the jungle, Saren sounded distant and detached, meditative almost, while next to him Nihlus vibrated with excitement.

“I bet the other sentries are dead too. It’s been too quiet too long. Could this be related to Okeer?”

“Of course it is. Lesson number two, Kryik: there’s no such thing as coincidence.”

Nihlus bit into his mandible to hold back a smile. He had been daydreaming about this, though he had been careful not to develop an *expectation* that there’d really be another lesson, let alone one confirming a commitment to a non-random numbering scheme. *What’s with the lessons*, he asked in the fantasy. And Saren replied, *would it kill you to learn something new?* And Nihlus would go all dark and serious and say, *I’d kill to learn from you.*

Out of nowhere, he became acutely aware that Saren’s shoulder was pressed against his and that they were close enough to bump their helmets if they turned to face one another at the same time. And the way he held Nihlus’s rifle, with the easy confidence of an experienced marksman—well, *of course* Saren was an experienced marksman; there

could be no doubt he excelled at every imaginable method of murder, but—there was something special about it. Something... sexy. Nihlus felt a flutter in his chest. When he said, “Yes, sir,” it was a breathless whisper.

Saren’s helmet turned to look at him. Almost touching now. “Nervous?”

“No, sir.” He strained to sound calm and remain motionless. “Not at all. Why would you say that?”

“All you need to do is shoot anything that moves, unless it’s Okeer. Nothing to it.”

“I’ve done this sort of thing before, you know.”

“I’ve met operatives who’d been in this business longer than ten of your lifetimes and still got nervous before a mission.”

Nihlus calculated. “Asari?”

“Huntresses were the first Spectres.”

“Right.” He knew that. He used to be a military history buff in school. But that was long ago and now his brain was shooting blanks. “Not you though? Getting nervous, I mean.”

“No.” Saren leaned away and returned Nihlus’s rifle to him. “Facing death brings out the best in me. Or the worst, as it may be. I find it... relaxing.”

Nihlus laughed. “Relaxing?”

But Saren was serious. “The world goes away. Everything becomes simple. Black and white. Do or die.” He shrugged rather effectively given his prone position. “It’s a relief.”

Nihlus tried to consider this, but it was all a bit too lofty for the current circumstance. “I like the world,” he muttered at last.

He peered through the scope and re-adjusted the magnification. Nothing had changed down there. He didn’t like it.

“Sarge?” said Mirene over the intercom. “Got movement here.”

Nihlus reflexively looked up. “Where?”

“They’re heading for the LZ, you should see them in a sec.”

“How many?” asked Saren. “Who are they?”

“Two. Looked like asari or drell. Dressed up like ninjas. Whoever they are, they sure aren’t Blood Pack. Good thing we’re late or we’d have stumbled right into each other.”

“Got a visual,” said Farril.

Nihlus returned to the sights of his rifle. “Yeah.” Two cloaked figures darted from the walkway, each toward a guard-tower. They appeared as colorful ghosts through the thermal scanner in his scope. To the naked eye, they were practically invisible against the dark backdrop of the LZ. “What’s that they carry?”

“Gas canisters. And that there’s a ventilation grate.”

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Cut the chatter,” Saren said, and finally, there was an edge to his voice. “Listen!”

Holding his breath, Nihlus perched his ears, letting the legion of jungle sounds he’d long learned to ignore, filter into his awareness. The layered, multi-periodic insect noises, frog calls and bird cries, the rustle of small creatures scurrying in the bushes and the creek of the trees in the wind.

That wasn’t wind. It sounded like—“A shuttle?”

They both looked up. The large pixels of the holo-camouflage that hid the sky stretched above them like dirty rags. The humming of a mass effect drive drew closer. Something blocked the light. Hot wind rose in a gust when the vessel dived under the holo and fired the landing thrusters.

It was an older generation civilian plane, salvaged from some junk-yard and reworked by the crafty merc techs into an all-purpose military vehicle. It was armed to the teeth and fit with patchwork armor, spray-painted in muddy greens and browns. The white, clear-cut insignia on the side stood out in stark contrast.

“That can’t be right,” Nihlus muttered, zooming in on it as the shuttle touched ground across the way from the gunship, west of the entrance.

“Blue Suns,” Saren said. “I didn’t think they had a foothold this far in Council Space.”

Nihlus snorted. “Name a merc org—they have assets on Invictus, guaranteed. But no one messes with the Blood Pack here, not openly.” The door of the shuttle had lowered and a dozen asari-shaped figures wearing blue uniforms poured out. They spread over the LZ in a loose formation typical for mercs and their half-assed training, setting up mobile barricades and shield generators.

Mirene’s voice on the intercom gave him a start. “Sarge? The front door’s opening. What do we do?”

He turned to Saren. “Time to start shooting anything that moves?”



“Not yet. I want to see how this will play out. Do not engage unless I say.” To Nihlus, he added in private: “I’m going to take a look at that tower. You stay here and observe.”

“Yes, sir.”

The first shots sounded from the LZ just as he relayed the orders. Nihlus looked through the scope. A couple vorchas ran up the ramp, right into the Blue Suns killzone, and got shot. One almost reached the cover of the gunship when a round got him in the leg. He started to drag himself toward the woods. The Blue Suns didn’t pursue. They focused fire from all sides on a krogan who, like the vorchas, ran out blindly and charged toward them. More vorchas and several varrens came out as well, but it looked more and more like they were running *away* from something inside rather than attacking the assailants outside. Two more krogans emerged, ignoring the Blue Suns’ fire. The first ran headfirst into a stack of empty fuel barrels, crashed on top of them and stayed down, trashing about as if a horde of flesh-eating larvae had entered his armor. The other threw his helmet on the ground, let out a broken war-cry and left a blue biotic trail behind as he charged straight into the nearest tree.

Nihlus flinched and looked up. “What the fuck?”

“They must have injected something in the ventilation,” Pan said over the intercom.

“Should make our job easier, no?” Vezeer said. “Look—they’re attacking each other.”

“Everyone, seal suits,” Nihlus said, lowering his own visor. His anxiety about Lantar peaked. Why weren’t they moving in yet?

Saren stood facing the elevator door, fiddling with his omni.

“Sir? What’s the holdup?”

“There’s a high-level security override on the door.”

“Same here,” Farril said. “I’m working on a bypass.”

“That’s why there aren’t any krogan guards,” Saren said. “Someone locked them in.”

Flames attracted Nihlus’s attention. Some of the Blood Pack vorchas had managed to break through to the gunship and were putting up a semblance of a fight. They had flamethrowers. The Blue Suns scrambled out of range. One, bigger and slower than the others—probably batarian—tripped over a varren dashing madly for the cover of the trees, and got his head beaten into a pulp by a krogan who used his shotgun as a club.

“Alright, this should do it,” Farril said. The labored screech of the rusted door sliders reached Nihlus a second later.

“Good work,” Saren said. “Kryik—”

“Sir?” Mirene cut in at the same time. “Got a visual on Okeer!”

“What? Where?”

Nihlus saw him too. He stood out like a broken toe, walking up the ramp unafraid and unperturbed by the chaos all around, his dignity alone making him tower over the other krogan in view, who raged and flailed like crazed beasts. He wore distinctive armor that immediately jogged Nihlus’s memory, complete with the tall helmet to house his millennial hunch.

“It’s him, sir,” he breathed. “He’s walking out the main door. Moving toward the Blue Suns.” He looked up, suddenly distrustful of his scope. “They’re not shooting. Shit.”

Of course Saren had been right. Okeer had been behind it all: the covert attack, the elevator lockdown. Failing to get the support he wanted from the Blood Pack, he had turned to another org. And he was getting away with it.

No fucking way. He looked for Saren, but there was no one near the dark mouth of the open elevator shaft. Gone to join the fray. Damn! “Sir? What do I do?”

“Improvise!”

Yes, sir. Can do. Adrenaline flooded his bloodstream. “Vezeer, lock on to that shuttle with the Thunderstorm. Quick, before they enter!”

“On it, Sarge.”

“Spirits,” Farril whispered. “Look at that shit.”

Nihlus saw it a split second later. A spear of dark energy hurling over the LZ, making the air ripple in widening blue circles around its path. The shockwave hit one of the barricades, sending it up it up in the air, and scattered the Blue Suns around it like toys. Okeer stumbled, but did not fall. His shield lit up four, five, six times as the rounds hit his chest and shoulders. Only then did Nihlus recognize the sound of Saren’s pistols.

Saren marched in the wake of his biotic attack, shooting as he went. The eerie azure glow clung to him like an adhesive liquid. Slow to recover, the Blue Suns opened sporadic fire, and his barrier flickered. He picked up his pace and launched into a sprint—then suddenly dropped on his knees—and Nihlus’s heart stopped dead in his chest—but Saren did not fall. Carried forward by momentum of his run-up, he slid on his knees for a good twenty meters as if the ground was made of ice. He managed to shoot half a dozen Blue Suns and Blood Pack left and right of his path before his slide finally slowed down and he got back up on his feet. But Okeer was almost at the shuttle.

“Locked and charged,” Vezeer said.

“Fire!” Saren said.

Nihlus sucked in a ragged breath. Saren was within the blast radius. He threw himself behind the remaining barricade and then Nihlus got blinded by the detonation. The ground shook and the air roared and rippled. When he opened his eyes, the west half of the LZ was painted bright orange and the tree crowns still swayed violently after the explosion. Black smoke roiled up from the charred remains of the shuttle and the Blue Suns who had been stationed around it. The barricade where Saren had taken cover had fallen on top of him. Fear welled up from Nihlus’s chest, but then the barricade bounced as Saren started to crawl out from under it. Thank the Spirits. Thank the Spirits.

But he wasn’t out of danger yet. The Blue Suns who had been covering the ramp opened fire now. Nihlus shot one. Another fell to a shot from the direction of the east guard tower. Then Mirene and Vezeer opened fire from the cover of the trees too. Feeling the pressure, the Blue Suns started to retreat to the other side of the LZ, seeking cover behind the parked vehicles.

Saren struggled up on one knee and started turning around, as if looking for something. *Shit, Okeer*. Nihlus had forgotten about him completely. He was still alive, as Nihlus hadn’t seen his corpse in the scorched area around the shuttle. But he hadn’t seen him walk away either.

“Sir?”

There was no answer. Saren stood up and faced him with uncanny accuracy. There was no way he could actually *see* Nihlus from there. After a second, he raised his visor and spoke. Nihlus saw his mouth move, but nothing came through the intercom. Still holding his pistol in one hand, Saren signaled *comms down* with the other.

“Aw, crap,” Nihlus muttered. The blast must have damaged Saren’s suit. “Can you hear me?”

*Yes.*

“But I can’t hear you.”

*Yes.*

“Sir,” Mirene called. “Okeer’s gone to the jungle. He stumbled down the west walkway. Looked injured or poisoned. Can’t have gotten far.”

Saren swiveled and set off toward the trees immediately. Damn.

“Mirene,” Nihlus said, “go back him up.”

“On our way.”

“What about us?” Pan said. “Do we go in?”

“What?”

“To look for Lantar.”

Nihlus bit his mandible. Saren was no longer in visual and had no way to object. But he had not asked for their assistance. And he had told Nihlus to improvise, which was another way of saying that he was free to do what he thought best, right?

“Go,” he said. “Good luck.”

“You too. Oh, and—” A low-priority notification blinked in the corner of Nihlus’s visor, letting him know that his stims were available again. “In case it’s not so good.”

Nihlus grinned. “I could kiss you right now.”

“I’ll hold you to that. Gotta go now. Our ride is here.”

“Right.” Once they descended underground, they’d be out of comm range too. He was on his own. “I’ll just... stay here and observe.”

On the LZ, things had only gotten more chaotic. With half the Blue Suns down, the vorcha and varren climbing up the ramp were getting through in larger numbers and soon the firefight turned into a bloody melee. Someone had managed to board the gunship and start it up, but instead of taking off, it crashed down with an awful racket from the altitude of three meters it had attained on thrusters only, billowing flames and smoke.

Rattling of machinery in immediate vicinity startled him. Light had come on inside the elevator shaft, and the cabin was gone. The greasy cables traveled down for several seconds, stopped, then reversed. Someone was coming up.

Nihlus shrunk lower. He slotted back his sniper rifle, switching to his assault rifle, and quickly took a shot of stims. Oh, that felt good. *So good. And* it was totally necessary. Half a dozen vorcha could fit in the elevator, and they might bring varren, who could sniff him out, and flamethrowers his shields and armor couldn’t stand up to. His pulse quickened, his vision sharpened. He was primed for a fight.

But when the elevator cage came up, there was only one figure in it. A huge, hulking krogan. He wore Blood Pack armor, but his head was bare. He carried a shotgun in one hand, like a pistol. Stepping out of the cabin, he peeled something translucent off his face. Although Nihlus couldn’t see him clearly in the waning light, he immediately recognized the self-satisfied chuckle.

“Yes, I’m out,” Okeer said, putting a hand over his ear. “No, there’s no one here. I told you it would work. Hurry up, now. I had enough of this place for five human lifetimes.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Nihlus muttered to himself. “Sir, if you can hear me,” he said through the intercom, “Okeer is here. I repeat, *Okeer is here*. Mirene, do you copy?”

“We’re in trouble, Sarge,” Mirene replied. She was winded. “Many Blood Pack here. And Blue Suns. Everyone’s shooting at everyone. I’ve no clue where the Spectre is.”

“Shit.”

Okeer paced leisurely, peeking around the corners of the tower at the LZ, where things were quieting down. “The east tower,” he said in reply to some unheard prompt. “Wherever. By the time they come around, we’ll be gone.”

Even though he knew better, Nihlus kept hoping for some response from Saren. He might not have heard. He could have been in the middle of a fight of his own, or disabled, or worse. Nihlus pushed the thought away—and then he realized he could hear that wind-like hum again. Another shuttle, coming to pick up Okeer while everyone was occupied chasing after his decoy. Shit!

What to do? Saren wanted Okeer alive. But there was no surer way to fail him than by letting Okeer go.

“Spirits help me,” Nihlus whispered and cocked the safety pin on his assault rifle, cringing, as always, at its loud click.

## Chapter 18 - Leave-Taking

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Okeer froze. The sound had come from behind. The safety on an automatic weapon, likely trained on him. Unless he'd managed to breathe in some of the toxin after all and was starting to hear things. The adhesive gas mask he had printed on the workstation in the communications room had already started to disintegrate on his ride up.

But then a shuffle followed, a faint breath of a released vacuum seal, and finally a turian voice. "Turn around, slowly, with your hands where I can see them."

Okeer snorted. The voice was familiar. He turned, slowly, to find a familiar face with fading white stripes staring at him from a rocky outcrop a few meters away, just a bit above him. "And so we meet again, skullface."

"Drop your weapon."

Okeer cocked his head to the side. "Or what?"

"Or I'll shoot you, again."

"I'm fresh out of spare parts, kid. Thanks to you. If you shoot me, I'll die, and your boss will be very unhappy."

A subtle change came over the turian's face and Okeer thought he'd nailed it, when a burst out of the turian's weapon made his hearts—his heart, damn it—seize in surprise. His kinetic barrier blinked out, his right hand burned and something heavy dropped on the ground next to his right foot. He looked at his hand on a reflex. A round had grazed his palm, burning through the soft fabric of the worthless piece of shit Blood Pack armor glove which was now going black with soaked blood. The smells of scorched kevlar and meat rose up in a tiny whiff of smoke. It was nothing. Just a flesh wound.

He looked down. The turian had shot his shotgun. It lay on the ground next to him, hopelessly bent out of shape.

"I can shoot you just fine without killing you."

"You little bitch," Okeer spat out. He loved that shotgun. It had been a good companion for well over a hundred years. "I'll tear you apart!"

He feigned a biotic attack with his wounded hand while actually charging the other one. The turian fired again, but he aimed at the wrong thing and although his shots were on target, they didn't save him from getting lifted. He flailed helplessly a few meters off the ground but curiously enough, did not drop his weapon. Okeer slammed him back down. He bounced off the edge of the rocky terrace with a satisfying crunch. Okeer released his

biotic grip and let the body drop and roll on its own until he stopped it with his foot. The turian lay still. He'd dropped his weapon *now*, the meddling, insolent little bitch.

Okeer kicked him for good measure, then took stock of his ruined right arm. It was shot bad, both wrist and hand. He had no feeling in his fingers. He hesitated, trying to weigh the pros and cons of taking medigel. It would dull his senses and slow his movement. The wound wouldn't get infected, not on a dextro planet. But he'd be risking permanent nerve damage, and the pain was a distraction. Damn.

"Okeer?" Jedore spoke in his earpiece. "What's up?"

*What's up.* Bah. Short-lived races and their ever-changing jargon. "Nothing. Where the hell are you?" The hum of her shuttle had been a constant for the past five minutes.

"I don't see shit through the camouflage. Don't want to land in the middle of a gunfight with this bathtub. Ping me with your exact location."

Bathtub? That didn't sound reassuring. He glanced at the landing zone. The fight was still going. Crazy krogan attacked anything that moved, including vorcha, varren, and other crazy krogan. The Blue Suns were regrouping around Wortag's ruined gunship. Saren and his turians were nowhere to be seen. In theory, Okeer could screw Jedore over and try to take off in that parked transport. But it looked barely space-worthy itself, and the turians had surely tagged it, and he'd have to fight the Blue Suns for it. No less a risk than Jedore's 'bathtub'. Probably more. Damn.

And how was he to do anything on the omni with his fucked-up hand?

"Hold on." He clubbed the omni until it released a dose of medigel into his arm. The wrong arm, however, as he missed the right button. No matter. It would do. He started to turn on the locator, but found it disabled on firmware level. That's right. He had disabled it before landing on Invictus because he couldn't be sure Saren's worms hadn't infected it. He'd have to do a hard reset to get it going again. "I can't ping you," he said. "Land between the control towers. It's safe enough."

"You daft or something? I can't see the fucking towers."

Okeer growled. I'll show you who's daft, you little shit. He looked up, but he could see her no more than she could see him. He cast around for landmarks, trying to get back into a rational mindset, while something like panic crept up from under his skin. He'd been standing here doing nothing for far too long. "The south edge of camo, then. Can you see *that*?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Then hurry the fuck up."

“Alright, alright. Jeez!”

Movement attracted his attention. The turian was waking. He tried to sit up, groaned with pain and doubled up on his side. Okeer kicked him on his back again. He wasn't fully conscious yet. His eyes tracked imaginary figures, showing whites from time to time. He posed no danger, but why risk letting him live? Okeer considered his options. The turian had a sniper rifle attached to the back of his armor but that was too complicated. His automatic was several steps away. Okeer fetched it. A fiddly little thing it was, with a dozen tiny moving parts. It took him for fucking ever to get a good grip on it with his clumsy left. Sweat broke on his face.

“Shot my fucking shotgun,” he grumbled to himself on the way back. “My fucking hand. My fucking *neck*. Gonna make you eat this, fucker.” He aimed down at the turian's mouth. “Gonna feed you the whole—”

“Okeer.”

He jumped. Of course. It had all been going too well to be true. The snake had caught up with him at last.

“Drop your weapon and step away from the hostage,” Saren said. He stood near the tower, to Okeer's left, with his back to the landing zone. His armor was almost black in the dying daylight but his eyes shone fiercely and his left hand glowed, charged and ready for a biotic attack. His right held a pistol trained at Okeer.

Okeer realized he had put himself in a bad position. Sure, he had a weapon in his good hand, but it was his bad hand that normally did the shooting. The hostage was at point-blank range, but there was no hope to target and shoot Saren before getting shot himself. And he didn't want to get shot again today, thank you very much.

“You drop *your* weapon or *I* shoot the hostage.” He didn't expect it to work. From all he had heard, Saren didn't care about collateral damage. But he needed to buy time for Jedore to land and get him out of this mess. He had lived a thousand and five hundred years to have his quads hang in the hands of some human pup. It was so ironic he could laugh. Now, where the fuck was she?

“Try it and you're dead.”

“Kill me and you'll never decrypt the data.”

Saren stared at him for several long seconds. “Give me the key and I'll let you go.”

Unlike his turian buddy here, Saren was quite apt at preventing his voice from betraying his intentions. He might have meant it. But it was highly unlikely.



“After all we’ve been through,” Okeer said, “you still take me for an idiot. You can’t afford to ‘let me go’. Why do you think I split in the first place?”

“Because you’re a double-crossing scumbag.”

Okeer laughed. “Please. You planned to dispose of me as soon as I delivered my part of the deal. You wouldn’t have tagged and disabled my ship otherwise.”

“I knew you wouldn’t keep your word. I had to take precautions.”

Okeer grunted, mulling it over. Could the snake be telling the truth? If he could escape with his life—even if the salarian research was taken from him now—he had learned so much from it already. He was leaps and bounds ahead of where he had been before, and had a clear vision of where to go with his work in the future. Perhaps...

“Think about it,” Saren said, as if reading his mind. “All I ever needed from you was that data. Why would I wish you dead?”

“Because of what I know. About you.”

Saren scoffed. “If you think anyone who matters would take your word over mine, you *are* as stupid as I thought.”

Although he knew he was being played, Okeer couldn’t contain the anger. To retaliate, he kicked the other turian hard in the side and sneered when the little bitch moaned. Saren glanced in his direction, but quickly censored himself and glared at Okeer with doubled malice.

“Now I regret knocking him out,” Okeer confided. “If I knew he was your boyfriend I’d put in a bit more effort to make our encounter memorable.”

The taunt apparently managed to press some button or another, because Saren looked down at his friend again and his face rearranged itself, though not in any way Okeer could make sense of in a pinch. Just then, the droning of shuttle engines became noticeably louder. He wanted to turn back and have a peek at the ‘bathtub’ but he didn’t dare take his eyes off Saren, who also looked up, above and behind him. A gust of wind rose when Jedore fired up the landing thrusters. She must have been pretty close. The air was hot and the noise, deafening. Also, she had to be close enough for the biotic attack Saren was mounting.

Okeer gaped. For a moment, he entertained the thought that Jedore was literally flying a bathtub with thrusters—he had seen people do crazier shit on the extranet—because nobody in their right mind, not even the most powerful biotics among the krogan and the asari, would go against a fucking *plane*.

A moment was enough. He realized it had been a faint as soon as he felt his gun moving in his hand of its own accord. The other turian was awake. He almost wrestled the gun out of Okeer's grip. Okeer fired, but the little shit held the barrel and the shots went wide.

Then he got blinded by biotic blues. His body reacted faster than he could think and raised a barrier, but the blast still punched the air out of his chest and made him stagger back. He dropped the gun. The other turian grabbed it and rolled away. To hell with it. It was a fucking toy anyway. With his good hand free, he would show Saren what grownup biotics looked like.

He struck back with all his might. And his might was fucking awesome. Dark energy made the concrete foundation crack and wrinkle. With the corner of his eye, Okeer saw the other turian struggling to stand up and failing hilariously as gravity waves, rippling outward, wrecked havoc with his weight and balance. The thunder of supersonic breakthrough drowned out the noise of the landing shuttle. Saren's shadow on the tower wall turned from a fuzzy blur to a crisp, black silhouette as the sparks of static electricity turned into forked discharge channels a meter long and growing. They left white trails in Okeer's vision so he wasn't quite sure at first but—

Saren was still standing.

Both his hands were up at chest-height and he was leaning forward as if pushing something with the entire weight of his body, while his feet slid back slowly under the force of Okeer's blast but—the fucker was standing! And not only that: he was pushing back. His own mass effect field formed a bow-shock around him, like a shield, and it was moving forward. Turning into a counter-attack.

Okeer couldn't wrap his mind around it. His blast should have pancaked Saren against the tower, liquefying his bones and vaporizing his blood. Turians didn't have the genetic makeup for powerful biotics. The strongest among them were like children compared to the asari, let alone the krogan. Even stupid humans outclassed them. No genetic deviation could explain this. Cybernetics, maybe. Implants. Perhaps Okeer had spent too much time in isolation and missed important technological breakthroughs in this area. He had never had a reason to take an interest in something as dull as turian fucking biotics.

Until now. He growled with effort and pushed harder, drawing from the deep, emergency reserves. Saren's bubble stalled, then started shrinking. About fucking time. Okeer couldn't keep this up for long.

"No!" cried the other turian. "Stop it! Stop it or I'll shoot, I swear to Spirits!"

Even through the light-show, Okeer could see Saren's eyes widen. "Nihlus, no!"

Nihlus, is it? Well he ain't shooting anyone ever again. Okeer grimaced in an attempt to sneer despite the strain, and abruptly turned away from Saren. *Someone* was getting pancaked.

His power was supposed to launch the other turian around the fucking world. But apparently he was ready for it and dodged just in time. The shockwave speared through the trees, splitting the jungle clean in half as far as the eye could reach.

And then Saren's blast hit Okeer and slammed him against the rocky outcrop behind like a train at full speed.

He blacked out.

"Hold his head up."

"Easier said than done. I can barely hold my own head up."

"Hold it still!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Something poked him in the eye. He saw some incomprehensible three-throated instrument. He heard himself groan but there was a missing link somewhere between his brain and his body. He couldn't move. A flash of red light, then darkness again.

"Is that it?"

"Verifying."

With the utmost effort, Okeer made his eyelids lift by a fraction. He still couldn't see a damn thing. Echoes of a dream haunted him. Or were they memories?

"Mirene, Pan, report."

Saren stood next to him at a very odd angle. Okeer had never seen him from *below* before. His face was weakly illuminated by an orange light. Omni-tool.

"Abandon pursuit. Yeah, we got him."

That was the other turian speaking. Somewhere to Okeer's right, outside of his inverted field of view. He remembered now. How they had tricked him, fucking cowards. He must have been out for only a few seconds or he'd be dead by now. Saren had decrypted the data and his life was forfeit.

"You did? Is he alive?"

Okeer tried to sit up but all he managed was to roll over. He was disgustingly weak. Went too far with the biotics, not a gram of juice left in his 600 stones. Concussed too, judging by the nausea.

Saren must have seen him move because his feet walked within a pace from Okeer's face. A shadow loomed above him, and then he heard clicking of metal and cracking of plastics. Something dropped on the ground and Saren crushed it with his boot. Okeer's omni. He closed his eyes.

"What are you doing?" said the other turian.

"What does it look like? I'm ending this."

So that was it. There was no slideshow speed-running his whole life in front of his eyes. Just the stink of failure. To be beaten so close to victory. He fucking deserved to be shot.

"Nah-uh," said a new voice. A human voice. "Put the gun down, nice and slow, yeah?"

Okeer pushed himself up on his elbows and looked. Jedore was twenty meters away, approaching step by cautious step. She had colorful heavy armor, well-worn but polished to a high shine. A visor glowed orange over her eyes. She was small even by human standards, but she had a ridiculously big gun, easily as long as she was tall, and its targeting laser was pointed at the turians. Some thirty meters behind her was the 'bathtub'. A fancy civilian racer, shaped like a silver bullet. Probably worth more than all the Blue Suns assets on Invictus summed together. No wonder she didn't want it scratched in combat. Hehe. Okeer wondered if he would even fit inside.

"I don't think so." Saren was already aglow with his biotic barrier. How the hell could he muster it? His biotic debt could have only been worse than Okeer's.

"I wasn't talking to you, dipshit."

Okeer hazarded a sidelong glance at the situation. Saren had a pistol aimed at his head. The other turian—what was his name again? Okeer couldn't remember—had his rifle aimed at Jedore. He also had a luminous red dot right between his eyes.

"What do you want?" Saren said.

"The old man, obviously. He's coming with me. Isn't that right, old man?"

Okeer huffed and puffed and hoisted himself up on his feet, taking care not to step in her line of fire. Saren's pistol tracked his head as if there was a physical connection between them.

"Sir?" said the other turian.

“She won’t shoot.”

“And neither will you,” said Jedore. “Come on, old man. That’s right. One foot in front of the other.”

It was supposed to be annoying, being hand-held by this... girl, but Okeer was too busy following her instructions and trying not to hope too hard. It sure looked like Saren valued his friend’s life more than he valued Okeer’s death, but he wouldn’t believe it until he was in that shuttle, racing away with the prize of his long life and the most unlikely bride. Hehe. Would he even fit? Hehehe.

## Chapter 19 - Confession

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Sand crunched under Saren's boots as he climbed the drawbridge and walked through the airlock. His own ship felt alien to him. As if he had been away for months, not one week. The stardock crew manager reported the Virial had been repaired, serviced and cleaned. Next to the damage sustained in combat, the Trodar engineers also took care of a small leak from the starboard coolant cell and replaced a depleted battery powering the internal clock. Remembering the Wisp, Saren hadn't been able to hold back a smile.

He walked around, touching the familiar objects and breathing in the familiar air. The stardock crew had left everything impeccable. Compliments of Major Eraquis, the manager had said.

The promotion would come through soon enough. After receiving Theeka's report about the Blood Pack ambush, the Major finally felt confident enough to take the many oddities in unit deployment, half a dozen harmful trade contracts and regular donations from Wortag's company to the attention of the Cluster Primarch. He had been aware of the strange deployment pattern long before Saren helped Kryik discover it, since all the orders were relayed through his office. Yet even now, he only acted because he reckoned he could rely on the support of a turian Spectre.

As Kryik's CO, he was well within his rights to take all the credit for locating the Shithole and uncovering overwhelming evidence of long-lasting and deeply rooted collaboration between the IIC's top brass and the Blood Pack. Neither Kryik nor any one of his men were mentioned in the Major's final report. He mentioned Saren just because he needed him to sign it off. And Saren had signed it off. He had no illusions about changing the policies of the turian army. There were better things for him to invest his time and influence in. But he made his will known in no uncertain terms about how the service Kryik's squad had rendered him was to be rewarded. And it better be, by the time there's a *Colonel* Eraquis at the head of the Invictus Legion.

Over nine hundred messages awaited his inspection. He hadn't checked them since the first day in the jungle, when he'd filed the report to the Council from Lomera. They could wait a little longer. Being unavailable was a luxury he could afford so very rarely. He peeled off his armor, cleaned his weapons, took a long shower and put on some comfortable civvies. He made tea and sipped it in silence, looking out the commons viewport. The slow, methodical traffic of military planes setting down and taking off whipped up clouds of orange sand, and then the wind patiently layered it back on the runways.

With a heavy sigh, he turned on the conferencing projector. Scrolling past the three dozen more recent messages, he played the one from Baratus.

“Saren.” The life-sized holo of his old friend gazed steadily at the camera. “By the time you see this I’ll be gone. You will have learned of my deeds, or misdeeds, as it may be. Will you have judged me, as surely everyone else has? It has been too long since we were... close. I cannot, and do not presume to know you now. Does anyone? Life of a Spectre must be lonely.

“Mine certainly has been, these last fifteen years. I suspect it will be doubly so for what remains of it. Even then, I didn’t know you well enough to be sure if you understood the depth of my loss. First, when the Temple fell; and then, once more, when you left. Both times, I was the one to inflict it on myself, for the greater good. I died for the cause that year, Saren, not once but twice.

“And what did I get for it? Hm? What was my reward for making the ultimate sacrifice? A retirement plan at the age of forty. And when I complained—a year of compulsory R&R, pending re-evaluation. And when I kept complaining—obligatory therapy. In retrospect, I should have done that myself. It helped me find a measure of peace. And it allowed me to stay in active service. With a desk job.

“You probably know by now that everything I told you when we first met in Hierote was the truth—just not the whole truth. I was a ‘special consultant’ on the board for decommissioning capital equipment with the military intelligence, since the dismantling of the Relentless made me ‘uniquely qualified’. Pfff. A grand-sounding title with little to no responsibility or power. It took me years to have my access level upgraded to the second-lowest security tier, and even that happened only because Tylenea Corix, who had been a Sargent Major under my command on Palaven, became head of the division. It was only worse in internal affairs. Boards, committees, endless meetings with meaningless voting to select members of other boards and committees. I don’t think I was a part of a single thing with even an atom of significance in the six years I was forced to waste there.

“I considered contacting you. Asking you to put in a good word for me. Help me get a position with some damn *agency*. I considered it almost daily. But I couldn’t get over my pride. It would’ve sounded like I was asking you to return the favor, and I’d have rather died and rotted under a pile of paperwork than have you think that.”

There was a long pause, and Baratus studied his feet. Saren stood still, barely breathing, a dull ache in his chest.

“Instead, I got contacted by Wortag. I had ample dealings with him during my time with the MI. For all I knew, he was a legitimate businessman, and if MI had any knowledge to the contrary, they didn’t care. He bought everything he could lay his hands on, from ships to utensils to outdated intel. More importantly, he was happy to sign a receipt for ten barrels of window-washing fluid and actually take one case of toxic waste. Such transactions are often necessary to keep the records straight. You know how it works.

“He said he’d been lobbying for larger investments into levo-industries on Invictus for some years and managed to make some influential friends, and if I was interested, he could find me a top-brass position, since we worked so well together in the past. I was reluctant at first. What would it entail, I asked? What did he expect in return? But when I learned I could become the *General* of the Invictus Legion, all my reservations fell off.

“You know I was raised on Invictus, right? Doesn’t make it any less of a cesspool, even in my eyes, but I saw it as a sign. I could do *good* on Invictus, Saren. That is why accepted Wortag’s proposal, not because I missed being in power. At the head of the Legion, I could *fix* things. Make it a better place. This precious dextro world, condemned to rot because the Hierarchy is too busy policing Council space to properly nurture its own colonies!

“And I *did* do some good here. Quite a bit of it, if I do say so myself. For the first time in a hundred years, the economy is showing growth. There were more settlers in the last year alone than in a whole decade before. Off-world companies are starting to invest in industries and services and the cities have never seen a lower crime rate.

“It came at a price, of course. Mostly it was little things. No worse than what’s done daily on other colonies and even Palaven to keep things running smoothly. Arranging for Wortag’s company to win bids, inventing compulsory services that required his products, maintaining double standards. You know how it goes. Naturally, one of the conditions was that the IIC would stay out of the jungle. That we should by all means shut down illegal mercenary operations—except the Blood Pack’s. I drew a line at slave trade, and he agreed. By the time I learned the Blood Pack was smuggling slaves by the hundreds anyway, I was already dug in too deep to back out.

“When you came... Well. After the initial shock, I had a choice to make. I could’ve served you Wortag, the Blood Pack, and this Okeer character on a platter. I considered making this confession then and there and putting myself at your mercy. Perhaps you’d have been willing to look over my transgressions, since they have always been in the best interests of Invictus and the Hierarchy, and allow me to keep my honor. But like I said, I cannot presume to know you anymore. Perhaps you would have made an example of me. Dragged me through court-martial and all that comes after with full media coverage. Maybe you would’ve had me executed me on the spot for treason.

“Instead, I chose to let it play out. With you in the jungle, I was at liberty to arrange for a quick exit, should it become necessary. There was a small chance you’d find your target and complete your mission without stumbling on any of this. That was the outcome I hoped for. But I was prepared for the other outcome as well. Had Wortag managed to kill you, things would’ve gone back to normal.

“And so, at last, I arrive to the main reason I wanted you to hear my side of this story.” He looked straight at the camera again, and somehow the holo was perfectly able to



transmit the intensity of his stare and make Saren's heart twist. "I want you to know that my only regret... is that I betrayed you. A better man, a braver man, would've told you all this when we met and then put a bullet in his brain. I regret not being that man anymore.

"Farewell, Saren, old friend. I doubt we shall meet again."

"Farewell," Saren whispered, a minute after the holo had blinked out of existence. His eyes stung and he closed them. Deep within his mental vault, the seals on a compartment failed and memories spilled out, as inconsequential and insuppressible as water from a dropped glass. The floor of skulls in the dungeons beneath the Temple. The monstrous thing Desolas had turned into. Those eyes... the lights under the skin... that precise shade of blue.

He had been eighteen, with barely a few combat missions under his belt. He wasn't even the leader of his cabal, and it was only through Desolas's nearly limitless wartime authority that he had been assigned to his security detail. But Saren certainly didn't partake in that authority. The orbital bombardment he called for needed the authorization from the Primarch, and could only be requested and executed by someone way above Saren's station. By the commander of Palaven's Spaceborne Legion. General Malivian.

It had been early summer. By late autumn he was on Menae, starting his Spectre training, with barely a thought spared for the man who had set him on that path, one of Desolas's best friends—and one of the very few true friends *he* had ever had. Tucked safely away in a compartment labeled *do not open*, together with that night in the Elanus tower, the crowd, the drink, the overwhelming gratitude. The...

He sniffed and straightened up, looking around. Things in the vault were shelved for a reason.

A finger of cold tea remained in his cup. He went to the kitchen to wash it out.

## Chapter 20 - Recapitulation

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Nihlus sat in the waiting room a long time. Hours, it felt. Not what the clock on the info-holo said, but he didn't believe a word it displayed. It said it was lovely outside. Warm and sunny. Nope. It was scorched-earth hot and the UV was high enough to make his plates spark. It had taken him half an hour to drive from one end of the base to the other because visibility was the whole of ten fucking meters due to sand. A nasty wind had whipped him with it from all sides. Every square centimeter of his clothes had been made crunchy and abrasive and his eyes still itched.

Warm and sunny my ass. And no way it had only been twenty minutes.

There was nothing to divert his mind. They had taken his omni. A stream of extranet headlines ran over the lying holo but there was nothing there he hadn't seen a million times before. Eezo prices were rising, batarians were sabotaging the cybernetic warfare negotiations again, vandals sprayed the front of the volus embassy on the Citadel with interspecies indecencies. Local economists speculated on the effects the abrupt change of military leadership would have on the tentative industrial growth. A class three sand-storm was predicted to strike during the night. No shit.

They'd taken his armor and weapons too, of course. It was a wonder they let him keep his damn underwear. The civvies he had found in his locker could have well belonged to someone else. His boots felt a number too small—could his feet have grown in the three months since his last leave? His trousers sported greasy stains, there were several tiny holes on his shirt, and his jacket missed a button. He smelled weird to himself.

He shifted in the hard plastic chair. There was no way to relax in it. He couldn't lean back because it was too near the wall to accommodate his crest. He couldn't lean forward and rest his elbows on his knees because it was too narrow. When he had stretched his legs in front of him some minutes back, settling into an almost prone position, the nurse behind the reception counter gave him a look that froze his spinal fluid so he didn't care to repeat that experiment. He crossed his legs, showering the floor with grains of sand. He crossed his arms too and tucked his head in. He had tried falling asleep before and it didn't work, but it wasn't like he had anything better to do.

As soon as he closed his eyes, his many anxieties, old and new, began closing in on him like a pack of klixen. What was he going to do? Where was he going to go? As much as he hated the army, it was the only home he had. There was no one else to turn to. They had disbanded his squad and his men scattered to the four winds. Theeka was off-world already. He had made no other friends, not here, nor anywhere else he had lived and served. In a fit of late-night despair, he had messaged Iana, but she was out in the field,

and she would've blown him off anyway. And he hadn't seen or heard from Saren since extraction.

He shifted again, switching sides. That should have been the least of his concerns but somehow it was the most pressing. It stung and burned and ate at him. It kept him awake at night and sleepwalking during the day. It occupied his whole awareness unless he actively focused on something else, and even then it kept running on a background thread. And there was this ancient human tune he'd picked up who-knows-where and when, that haunted him together with it.

*We never said goodbye with words,  
I died a hundred times,  
You're going back to her,  
And I go back to...*  
*I go back to black.*

He could just hear Theeka laughing her ass off at his misery. *What did you expect, silly?* And he'd say, nothing! in that childish, defensive tone he hated but couldn't rein in, betraying just how much he had allowed himself to expect. How much he still hoped for, despite knowing better. And he'd keep hoping and torturing himself and setting himself up for heartbreak until Saren left Invictus. Nihlus knew he was still here. Everyone knew. His ship was docked here at Trodar, no more than a klick away from where Nihlus was sitting right now. If not for the fucking sand, he could probably see it through the window.

It was a source of constant temptation. He could simply walk over there and ring the door-bell. He knew what he'd say. He'd been over it in his head a hundred times. I just came by to wish you safe travels, sir. Saren's eyes would tell him all he wanted to know. There might be guilt, for not being the first to extend the politeness. Or unburdened joy of meeting a friend again. Or sheer exhaustion after battling the bureaucracy beasts for three days straight. Or annoyance at being interrupted in the middle of something. And then there might be the blank stare of no recognition and Nihlus would just throw himself under the thrusters of the next scheduled landing.

Yeah. He couldn't go. He wouldn't. If he was in for a broken heart, he'd at least cling to his dignity. This suspense couldn't last forever.

But it definitely fucking felt like it. A part of him wished Saren was gone already. The rest of him was horrified of it.

A strange sound made him look up. At the far end of the hallway, past the reception, a human woman led a small child by the hand. A well-fed, chubby boy with dark hair and pink cheeks. He wore a bright blue jump-suit over everything—as sunscreen—and waved the matching, floppy hat as he tagged along. The woman carried a plastic box full of locally grown silver fruit, decorated with colorful ribbons. There was no similarity

between this child and the girl who had died by Okeer's hand a week ago, but Nihlus was reminded of her sweet smile so vividly his eyes watered.

His eyes watered a lot these days.

"Sir?"

He jumped. The nurse had come out of the office and stood before him, regarding him with a kind of pity that was always well meant but never really appreciated.

"You can go in now."

"Oh." Nihlus stood up. "Thanks. Where—"

"Third room on the left."

He nodded and made to leave.

"Sir? Don't... question him too much. It's for the best."

Nihlus looked at his filthy boots. "Yeah. I know."

"You have fifteen minutes."

"Ok."

He had no idea where to start counting the doors—they stacked one after the other along the left side of the hallway—but only one was open. His heart started beating faster as the hospital bed came into view. One leg under the blanket, the other in a translucent cast knee-down, held up by a pillow. One hand in bandages, the other laid peacefully over the sheets. When he stepped in and finally dared look up, he found Lantar staring right back.

"Hey." He smiled. He didn't have to work at it, thank the Spirits. It came naturally. "It's good to see you."

"Hey, Sarge."

Lantar didn't smile back. His hollow stare weighed heavy, like a shot-down carrier on an inevitable crash course, hanging low above the horizon. He didn't look *that* bad, for a man pulled back from the brink of death not three days ago. The bruising on his carapace was mostly gone and he didn't seem to have trouble moving his mandibles. All that was left of the gaping wound on his neck was a wide, pale scar. He could have it removed, eventually, as well as the burn marks, mercifully hidden under his hospital gown.

The psychological scars—not so much.

Nihlus swallowed. "How do you feel?"

"Pissed off, mostly."

He didn't sound pissed off. He sounded like he was reading extranet news aloud and it gave Nihlus the chills. He nodded anyway. "Has anyone else stopped by?"

"Sure." He sighed, and cringed a bit at the top of it. "Pan was around during all the surgery, and then he switched with Theeka while I was out. She cried when I woke up. That wasn't very helpful, to be honest. And later Farril came and briefed me in, sort of, so I figure she had a few other issues to cry about. Not just me." He looked around, slanting a mandible to indicate boredom. It was a bit forced, but better than nothing. "I don't blame you, if you're wondering."

That came out of nowhere. Nihlus coughed. "Glad to hear."

Not that he felt particularly guilty. He'd done what seemed appropriate at the moment and even in hindsight, he'd have done the same again. If he'd sent another man out instead of Lantar, he'd likely have another man in a hospital bed right now. Or worse. Lantar was a survivor. Someone of a gentler make, like Farril, might not have lived to have this conversation.

"Have a seat, Sarge."

Nihlus snorted. "Yeah. Gotta love these chairs." There were two under the window. He grabbed one and sat at Lantar's feet, on the side of his good hand.

"I remember." Was there a hint of a smile on his face? If there was, it was gone in an instant, like a feeble ray of sunshine behind a massive cloud. He referred to the incident from the first weeks of his service, when Vezeer was hospitalized for two days after getting burned by his own shield generator. Nihlus smiled back.

"Farril told me they were gonna disband the squad," Lantar said.

"Yeah. It's done already. They were mighty quick cleaning up this mess."

"So what's gonna happen to the others? I know only that Farril asked for a discharge."

Nihlus wiped the imaginary sweat from the back of his neck. "Well. He got his discharge, and a veteran-tier retirement plan. Frankly, I didn't think they'd let him get away with it, but it looks like Thadon was feeling generous." Except when it came to Nihlus. "Theeka got transferred to Space Corps. She's up on the Justice now but from what I hear, she'll be shipping out by the end of the week."

"Holy shit." Lantar smiled for real now. "That's fucking awesome."

"I know, right?" She got exactly what she wanted. Unless, of course, she wanted to settle down with Thadon or... something. From what Lantar had said it probably wasn't all flowers and sunshine. But Nihlus hadn't seen her since extraction either so he had no way of knowing. "There's more. Pan was offered a three-year tenure as a resident in Shastinasio Central. I haven't heard from him, so I don't know for sure if he'll take it, but he'd be crazy not to. And Pan's not crazy."

"Whoa. That's some great news. What about Mirene?"

Nihlus smiled even wider. "Mirene's going to the officer school on Adaxis."

"Wait. Isn't that the diplomatic training thing? With the fancy academic curriculum and whatnot?"

Nihlus nodded. "That's the one. Funded by the Council. One of the surest ways into the Spectre program, I hear."

"Oh, man. The Spectre. I forgot about him completely."

Wish I could, Nihlus thought.

"You think he arranged for all this?"

Nihlus looked away. Of course this had occurred to him. But he didn't want to believe it. Because if that was the case, it only made things worse. Unthinkable. "I've no clue," he said aloud, and it was the truth. He had no clue what Saren might think or want or do. He thought he had figured him out, there near the end, but he had obviously been wrong. "Anyway," he hurried to change the subject, "Vezeer is the only one going back to the jungle. Promoted to Staff Sargent. He promised to take us out for drinks when you're back on your feet."

That probably wasn't the best thing to say. Lantar's smile withered. His eyes became hollow again, fixed on something next to Nihlus, focused inward. Nihlus wouldn't presume to *know* what he was thinking, but he could do some fairly informed guessing. It might be a long time before Lantar was ready to face the world again, and he might never be ready to face the world he had been a part of *before*. Concerned friends and family members, pity on every familiar face, unspoken questions with unspeakable answers and everybody perpetually avoiding the subject of *what happened to him in there* while thinking about nothing else every time they looked at him. They'd have theories, which would be bad enough. But wondering how often and how enthusiastically they speculated about them among themselves when he wasn't around would be unbearable. After a while, everything and everyone around him would become relentless reminders of the very thing he was trying to forget.

So much easier to simply start over somewhere new, where no one knew you. Where you could pretend the worst experience of your life didn't have the power to change you forever.

"What about you, Sarge?"

Nihlus looked at him, wondering how long they'd been sitting in silence. "I uh..." *Lesson number one, Kryik.* "I asked for an extended leave of absence." *A good lie always contains a grain of truth.* "To consider my options. You know. Start somewhere new, perhaps."

"Same."

Nihlus lifted his browplates like it was news but, of course, he knew. One of his last duties as an NCO of the IIC was to write a spirited recommendation that Lantar be awarded the Silver Wing and honorably discharged per his own request. And judging by how the others had fared, he'd get what he had asked for.

They were silent for a while again. It wasn't uncomfortable. The sand outside must have settled and sunshine painted bright stripes on the walls through the angled window blinds. Nihlus's mind wondered off. *We never said goodbye with words...*

"Don't you wanna know what happened?" Lantar said at last.

Nihlus rubbed his mandibles, hoping to hide the sudden unease. "They told me not to question you. And I wasn't going to. But I'll listen to anything you want to tell me."

Lantar pushed himself a bit higher up his pillows. He seemed a lot more animated than when Nihlus had first entered the room. "I've been over it a hundred times in my head," he said. "Wondering where I made a mistake. The way I remember it, I did everything by the book. I was wide awake. My eyes were open. My combat scanner was on. But somehow the fucker sneaked up on me. A fucking varren. A bush rustled, and I fired, but it zapped me before I could call it in." He took a deep, shaky breath and winced at some pain it caused. Nihlus winced too.

"I dropped my rifle. The suit went into seizures. Comms died. Visor died. I couldn't see shit. It pounced at me. Punched the air out of my gut. I fell back. It was on top of me, going for the throat, but it couldn't quite figure out how to go about it." He gestured with his good hand, pointing out his collar. "Probably don't get to train with turians in full armor much."

Nihlus slanted a mandible, unsure if it would be ok to smile. His pulse was racing and there was actual sweat under his crest now.

"Eventually, I remembered that I have a knife. I stabbed at it blindly. With my luck it's a wonder I didn't stab myself in the leg or something. Got it after a few tries. Managed to roll it off me. But... fuck, Sarge. At that point I was out of my mind with panic. Time

seemed to drag but it must've been only a couple seconds, because my suit was still dead when I got on my feet. I lifted the visor and saw that the varren was about to pounce again. My rifle was nowhere in sight. I stepped backward and guess what."

Nihlus shook his head in surprise. Did Lantar really expect him to play the guessing game?

"Come on, Sarge. Guess."

"You uh..." He made an effort to think about it in earnest. "Stepped into a soft spot?" It was a classic.

Lantar nodded slowly. "I stepped into a fucking soft spot. My foot got caught in the roots. So when I fell over, the ankle snapped." He indicated his broken leg with his chin.

"Shit."

"You can say that again. Seconds after I went down, I heard footsteps, saw something coming at me, and bam!" Nihlus jumped. "They knocked me out."

"Shit."

Lantar shifted in the bed again. "See now why I don't blame you? Because it was my fault. Fear got the better of me. I acted like a damn noob and I had it coming."

He had evolved from animated to agitated and Nihlus didn't like it, but what was he to do? Placate him with pleasantries? Talk about the weather? Glance at the omni he didn't have and declare it was time to leave? He had said he'd listen, and he'd listen. Even if it was the last thing he wanted to hear about. He crossed his arms to contain the shivers, took courage, and looked Lantar in the eye.

"Go on."

But Lantar must have seen through his posturing, because he looked down and deflated. "Don't worry, Sarge. I won't burden you with the gory details. I don't remember most of it anyway. It's all blended in a blur."

If it was a lie, it was his lie to make, and Nihlus gave him a serious nod.

"He gave me medigel. That fat bastard, Krago. So I'd live through his fun. I was half-conscious. I think I tried to run at one point? Saw an open door and just bolted for it like an idiot. My leg was starting to heal but then I fucked it up good. Obviously, my 'escape plan' didn't work out. And after that, he kept me tied up. I remember when the commotion started—Farril said the Blue Suns pumped some neurotoxin in the air, but I think there was some fuckup with the change of watch even before that, because Krago bitched about it over the comms. He was alone in there with me. Some vorcha stumbled



through the door with another krogan chasing them. One of them had a flamethrower, and they used it. That was my chance to get away.” He lifted his bandaged hand. “It burned through the rope I was tied with. Cheap plastic shit melted all over me. But I was so numb I barely felt it.”

Nihlus swallowed hard. “The vorcha disabled the krogan?”

“Not quite. The fire blinded him. He managed to off one of them and the other... I don’t know. I guess he had a good few whiffs of that toxin too, because otherwise...” He shook his head. “You know the rest.”

He knew something. Pan and Farril reported finding Lantar lying unconscious next to a dead krogan six times his weight, nearly beheaded by the piece of polymer rope he’d apparently been strangled with. That was what Nihlus had written in his Silver Wing recommendation: *...where, despite serious injuries, he killed an armed and armored krogan in hand-to-hand combat.* Pan and Farril also told him that someone had posthumously gouged out the krogan’s eyes and cut out his tongue using crude, blunt tools. Possibly bare talons. They all agreed such details did not need to enter any official reports. If Lantar remembered doing that, he wasn’t going to brag about it. And the evidence was burned together with everything else in the Shithole, hypothetical survivors included, while they waited for extraction. On Saren’s orders.

*I died a hundred times...  
You’re going back to space,  
And I go back to...  
I go back to...*

After a long silence, Nihlus cleared his constricted throat. He was about to give Lantar a piece of his mind. Some unsolicited but well-meant advice along the lines of, don’t bottle this shit up. Talk to a professional. Or a friend. A hired escort with a kind heart. Hell, talk to me if there’s no one else. I can take it... I think. Just get it out, like you would a bad tooth, before it festers. It won’t go away. You won’t forget. Trust me.

But when Lantar looked at him, the searing fury in his eyes made Nihlus swallow back the unspoken words. He was glad to see it. It was a hell of a lot better than that vacant expression from before. But he didn’t dare challenge it and just dropped his gaze instead.

*Black...*

*Black...*

*I go back to...*

After a while, Lantar reached for the remote for the holo projector. "I want my omni back," he muttered, switching extranet channels. "You don't happen to have a spare, do you?"

Nihlus shook his head sadly, lifting up his left arm to prove it.

"Damn."

It was another ten minutes or so before the nurse decided to intervene and kick Nihlus out. They spent them talking about the prices of eezo, the possible outcomes of negotiations with the batarians, and last but not the least, the weather. It looked much nicer than it had been when he came, but the storm warning was still on.

He made no promises to return.

## Chapter 21 - Confrontation

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Saren brooded for a long time, sitting in the cockpit and listening to the slow, heavy beating of his heart. His omni-tool was laid out on the idle navigation panel, a wire to connect it to system VI dangling loose next to it. The salarian research data that Okeer had stolen from Sur'Kesh was still there.

He had reported to the Council right after extraction, of course. As far as they were concerned, it had been another mission successful. Access to the data had been restored, preventing years of research and investments from going to waste. With his ship and his omni-tool destroyed, Okeer could not have smuggled a copy of it on his person. Saren had scans to prove it, and the STG were quite confident that not a byte of it had escaped their extranet siege of Invictus. Any copies Okeer might have secured before Saren had become officially involved were their responsibility, not his. Nobody seemed concerned that Okeer had not been brought to justice.

"It's of no consequence," Sparatus had told Saren in private. "He's a wanted man and if we ever hear of him again he'll be a dead man. Don't worry about it. It won't reflect badly on your record."

Saren had thanked him, doing his best impression of a man who cared about his record.

He cared about loose ends, however. Not that Okeer was an especially dangerous loose end. What could he do? Point a finger at Saren and say, he made me do it? Nobody would ever believe him and there was not a shred of proof. Still, it made him uneasy. He had made many enemies over his years in service of the Council. Someone with the right mindset and enough resources, like that slimy human, Jack Harper, could, in theory, use Okeer against him. But it was far more likely that they would instead use Okeer to forward their own agenda.

No matter how he turned it, though, he couldn't find it in himself to regret allowing Okeer to leave with his life, and whatever he had learned from the stolen research. If it had been anyone else at the end of that woman's targeting laser, he would not have hesitated to shoot Okeer. But when it came to it, he couldn't let Kryik die.

Saren looked at the omni-tool splayed on the dark console. He had paged through some of the data, but it was too specialized for him to parse. He would need to hire a specialist in krogan genetics to study it. Preferably not a salarian. Perhaps he should've offered Okeer a permanent position. The old krogan had outsmarted him at every turn of the road. Saren had only prevailed in the end because the nanites had somehow upgraded his biotic abilities beyond anyone's expectations.

And against his will.

“Patch me through to Sovereign,” he addressed the VI in a haggard voice. “Text only, encrypted.”

“Establishing comm buoy connection... connection established. Light-time latency: five point sixty-three seconds.”

Saren leaned forward and brought up the haptic keyboard. He hesitated. One last time, he considered deleting the data. Lying to Sovereign that he had failed. Looking for a way to extricate himself from this madness and live the rest of his life, or the rest of this cycle—whichever lasted shorter—like all other mortals. Pretending he didn’t know. Pretending he didn’t care.

He shuddered and shook his head. He couldn’t. He had to try. He owed it to Desolas.

“I have the data.”

Five seconds later, came the reply. “GIVE IT TO US”

Saren nodded and connected the omni. He made the selection on the diagnostic panel with a shaking hand. This was the first act in his service of Sovereign that constituted definite, unmitigated treason against the Council. The internal friction was greater than he had expected. It made him sweat. His pulse drummed in his ears.

“Send selected files over the open connection.”

“Files sent.”

A weight rolled off his shoulders—the weight of a part of him that had just died—leaving a cavity behind. Familiar and horrifying, the sense of disembodiment, a hollowness worse than death, threatened to overwhelm him.

Fortunately, it didn’t take them too long to respond. “ANALYSIS COMPLETE”

Saren waited, but nothing else came through. “And?” he typed. “Can it be done?”

“ESTIMATED FEASIBILITY: 87%”

“How soon?”

“ESTIMATED TIME REQUIRED: 7 STANDARD YEARS”

“We’ll move faster once the base on Virmire is complete.” As if They needed encouragement. Sometimes Saren forgot who he was speaking to.

“ACCOUNTED FOR”

Of course.

“Am I needed there?” He held his breath.

“NO”

He exhaled. His palms were moist and he wiped them on his trousers. He had been obsessing over his next question since the night of the fever, yet he still didn’t know how to put it. After starting to type, clearing the input and starting over again half a dozen times, he sat back and fought panic.

“Comm buoy connection will be terminated due to inactivity in thirty seconds,” the VI warned him.

He growled, went back to the keyboard and just blurted it out. “When did you inject me with nanites?”

There was a long pause. Longer than what had taken them to analyze decades of salarian research.

“FIRST CONTACT”

Saren’s mind raced as his gut twisted. It had been *five years* since his first visit to the Reaper.

“Do they—” He gulped the air like a man drowning. “—effect indoctrination?”

“IF INSTRUCTED”

“Have you—” he started to type, but another message came in, unprompted.

“YOU ARE INTACT”

The hell I am, Saren thought, remembering the diodes under his arm. He had found more, later. On his neck. In his groin. He had popped them all and they had not regrown. But they might. At any time. He felt sick.

“Can they be disabled?”

“YES”

That was something. A feeble ray of hope.

“Remotely?”

“YES”

“Disable them now.”

“WHY”

“Because it’s not what we agreed upon!”

“THEY WERE THERE BEFORE THE AGREEMENT”

Saren stood up and started pacing behind the pilot chair. The space allowed for three steps in one direction. He wanted to punch something. He wanted to kill someone.

“Comm buoy connection will be terminated due to inactivity in thirty seconds,” the VI repeated.

“To hell with it!”

After a few more turns, he returned to the seat. His stomach was in a knot. His neck trembled and his eyes stung.

“I agreed to serve. Not to be a mindless tool. If you don’t disable them, I will kill myself and you’ll have to find another agent.”

He regretted typing it as soon as it went into the ether. Empty words. Would he really kill himself? Could he? He didn’t think he could. He was in his prime, the best of the best, destined for greatness and feeling more confident than ever. Like Kryik had said, people survived, and thrived, despite all sorts of trauma. There were worse fates than being mistreated by a machine god. Besides, suicide would only be a different manner of escape. Even if he *was* being manipulated, it was his duty to endure it. For the greater good.

He remembered Baratus and shook his head. No, old friend. Putting a bullet in your brain is not what that man you wish you were would have done. That man would have defended his beliefs. On that first evening, in that empty conference room—when I was off-balance, blinded by emotion—he would have killed *me* instead.

“OTHERS WILL FAIL WHERE YOU MAY SUCCEED”

He drew a shuddery breath. “Honor my wish, then, and disable them.”

“YOU WOULD LOSE THE AUGMENTATIONS. IT IS NOT ADVISED”

Saren sat back again. Somehow, this had not occurred to him. The *augmentations* were... useful, to say the least. Now that it came to it, he didn’t feel like parting with them. But were they worth the risk? The old conundrum, of whether Sovereign could be trusted or not, was as difficult as ever. If they told lies, then the nanites had likely been eating away at his psychological autonomy for years, in which case whatever decision he made was the decision They wanted him to make anyway. And if They told the truth, he would indeed be ill-advised to refuse the magnificent gift of power he had been given.

“Explain what caused them to activate now, when they haven’t in all these years.”

“IMMINENT TERMINATION OF BIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS”

Ah. When his heart had stopped that day, Kryik and his men were there to resuscitate him but Sovereign had no way of knowing it. And so They acted. To save his life.

His excitement suddenly wilted, leaving him drained. Again he struggled to find words, and again, he needed the time-out warning to force his fingers.

“I don’t want further augmentations or any cybernetics growing in or on my body without my explicit and informed consent.”

“WE AGREE”

Saren nodded. Now that he could frame it as his own decision, it no longer seemed so sickening. And They *had* considered his request, which was more than he could have hoped for.

After the connection timed-out, he erased the logs, leaned back and closed his eyes. He fantasized about taking tests to measure his augmented biotic abilities. Lifting and pushing heavy objects could only tell him so much. He was still in touch with his first biotics instructor, Olte. She had both the experience and the equipment for it. But of course he could never go to her with this. She would not be fooled as easily as Kryik.

Perhaps he could have additional amplifiers installed in the way of cover? A promising strategy in the long term. For now, though, the full extent of his power would be another secret for him to keep.

## Chapter 22 - Revelation

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Nihlus left the base on a public transportation shuttle. He could have taken the military subway but this way he got to see Saren's ship one last time, still parked in the spaceport, peeking through the sandy air like a faint star in the middle of a dusty nebula.

*You went back to what you knew  
So far removed  
From all that we went through*

And then it was over. He was out of Trodar for good. He would never see the distinguished turian Spectre again. His heart ached, but not as horribly as he had expected, and suddenly all those other, more urgent problems, came into sharp focus. For example, where was he going to sleep tonight? And what was he going to eat tomorrow?

The shuttle landed half a block from the HQ. Nihlus had never walked there before, nor tried to gleam the top of the spire from ground level. It was hidden by the sand-haze from twentieth floor upward. Oh well. He'd have plenty of opportunities to try it again, now that he was a full-fledged pedestrian. The wind sprayed the water from the fountains over the sidewalks and the dust on his boots turned to mud. There was a boot-cleaning bot by the entrance but he couldn't afford it. In his mind, he sneered at Theeka. See? No way I'll end up cleaning shoes. Those jobs are already taken.

*And I tread a troubled track  
My odds are stacked  
I'll go back to black*

In the meantime, Thadon had moved up in the world. He had preemptively taken residence in the ex-General's office. It was a very nice office, with floor-to-ceiling windows that undoubtedly offered a prime view of the sparse Hierote skyline when the weather allowed. The glass was shaded now, giving the large room a dusky atmosphere. A colorful workstation of a busy man faced the door. There was a comfy-looking couch with a couple of deep armchairs, a low table and what looked like a drink cabinet on the other end. Several packing boxes were arrayed in the middle of the room, resting on the lush green carpet. Some seemed half-empty, other had miscellaneous objects poking out over the top. Something that looked like an ancient musical instrument. A frame with a still-pic in it, matching the yellowish outline on the blank white wall behind the couch. A decorative lamp with faded floral motifs. A round, fluffy cushion.

Thadon was lowering a stack of hard-copies into one of the boxes when Nihlus came in. He looked up, then focused on topping the box with irregular crumbs of packaging foam,



closing and sealing it, without a word. Nihlus waited. At last, Thadon straightened up and dusted off his hands.

“The General left in a hurry,” he said, gesturing at his handy-work.

And the vultures sure wouldn't be late to the party, Nihlus thought. He just nodded, though.

“Have a seat.” Thadon pointed at a pair of chairs facing his new desk. “Would you like something to drink?”

Nihlus made a point of clasping his hands behind his back and staying where he was. “No, thanks.”

Thadon regarded him for a second, then nodded. “Suit yourself.” He walked to the desk and sat down. He pushed an envelope to the side and put a pencil inside a drawer, glanced at his screens and dismissed something that had been shining a red light on his face. Stalling.

“Sit down, Kryik. Please.”

Nihlus deflated. If not for the ‘please’, perhaps he could've dredged up enough energy to remind Thadon that he was no longer obliged to take his orders, blah blah blah. But he definitely didn't have enough energy to be plain rude. He sat down.

“So. What do you want?”

Thadon took a deep breath. “To apologize.”

Huh.

“I wronged you, Kryik. And I want to explain why.”

“Why not just... undo it instead? Reinstate me. Should be brain-dead simple, coming from this high up the chain of command.”

Thadon slowly shook his head. “I can't. I'd like to, but it wasn't my decision in the first place.”

Huh squared. “So you're saying, someone else relieved me of duty till further notice.” Nihlus was quite sure he had seen Thadon's signature on the orders.

“I'm saying that I was ordered to do so. But that's not what I want to apologize for. Please,” he hurried to say before Nihlus could go on with his next question, “let me explain.”

Nihlus leaned back and crossed his arms. “Alright. Explain.”

Thadon took a deep breath. "I don't know if you'll remember, but not long after you were transferred here, you came to me with a... suspicious document."

"The Hegemony arms trade deal with Stellar Wind Trading. Of course I remember."

"It was the first time you and I spoke. I remember every word of that conversation. And the look you gave me when I corrected the security label on it and passed it back to Administration."

Nihlus shrugged. He was never much into hiding his feelings, especially his dislike for stupidity.

"You assumed I never even looked at it. You assumed I acted like a textbook clerk with a pronounced case of tunnel-vision. You concluded I was as stupid as one can possibly be at this tier. Am I right?"

This was getting weird, fast. Nihlus kept his mouth shut and his face in check, struggling to hold Thadon's strange, intense stare.

"It's alright," Thadon said. "I wasn't offended. See, Nihlus—may I call you Nihlus?"

"Uh..." What the fuck? "Sure. Whatever."

"Thank you. See, being considered stupid is an incredibly strong position in our culture, yet few people make use of it. For obvious reasons." Thadon peered at him. "In hindsight, I was lucky to be dismissed by you so quickly and so completely based on that one incident. Theeka always insisted you were a good judge of character otherwise. I had to put in a lot more work into making others believe it. Especially the General."

"I don't follow. What—"

"General Malivian was in charge for just under a year when you appeared with that document. It was the first time something of that magnitude slipped, but I had my suspicions long before. It was paramount that he never suspects I suspected him until I had something solid. Otherwise he'd just have me demoted, transferred, or worse."

"That contract wasn't solid enough?"

"As evidence of corruption, certainly. As evidence indicating the General? No. There was no mention of his name in it, or in any of the documents trailing behind it." Thadon grinned. "By now you realize I did read it. Quite thoroughly. Saved a copy with multiple backups too. As a part of a growing body of evidence, all circumstantial. The General is by no means a stupid man himself."

Nilhus massaged the back of his neck. "Ok. So you made everyone believe you were just a bureaucrat with a stick up his butt, while in secret you spied on the General. Which is pretty sly and all, but what does it have to do with me?"

"I'm getting to it." He looked around and smoothed his crest with both hands. "I need a drink. You sure you don't want one?"

Like they were buddies all of a sudden. It was creepy as hell. Nihlus shook his head.

Thadon went to the drink cabinet and came back a minute later with a fancy glass and half a finger of some classy-looking blue liquor in it. Nihlus just watched him, mind strangely silent and devoid of speculation on the subject of their talk. He wondered, instead, if Saren's ship was still in the spaceport, and if he could catch it using the sight-seeing telescopes on the mess-hall balcony, what with all the sand. Nonsense. They wouldn't let him in there now.

*I go back to...*

*I go back to...*

"I'm sure you also remember Wolta," Thadon said after taking a sip. "That was when I realized your potential. Not sure how to put this without offending you, but I don't mean your success rates and your ability scores. I mean your... bloodymindedness. You probably think it's a virtue. But make no mistake: it's a flaw, and one that's easily exploited."

Nihlus shifted in the chair. Suddenly the air was too warm and stuffy and the room no longer seemed all that spacious. "What do you mean?"

"You were so bent on deviating from your orders." Thadon shook his head with that flammable mix of pity and concern on his face that had ignited so many of their stand-offs in the past. "No matter how trivial the task was, no matter how straightforward the instructions—you always had to *something* different. Something to make it your own. To somehow make it look like you're the one in control, and not—"

"Get to the point."

"The point is... you were predictable. I started to notice it fairly early, but it wasn't until Wolta that I realized how I might use it. Contrary to what you believe, Nihlus, I was never really bothered by your struggle for control. In some other circumstance, I'd have encouraged your independence and original thinking. But I needed you to *defy* me. As often and as loud as possible. I wanted everyone to know about it. Specifically, I wanted the General to know about it."

The weirdness was starting to take form. A monstrous form. Nihlus could see its spiked outline emerging from Thadon's shadow but too many details were missing to put together a complete picture. "First," he said, trying to sound calm and disinterested.

“Malivian is no longer a general. Stop calling him that. Second: explain about Wolta before you go on.”

Thadon leaned back in his chair, looking at Nihlus searchingly. “You really don’t see it?”

“No, I fucking don’t.”

“Alright.” He took a gulp of his drink. “Wolta was critical in many ways. The tip came from the police. Civilians reported armed krogan coming in and going out of that abandoned station. It went through so many hands on the way up here that there was no way for the Gene—for Malivian to maneuver around it. Of course, he took charge of the operation. I was relaying his orders to Dinara and you, and that’s when it hit me. It’s Kryik, I was thinking. If I tighten the leash enough, he’s bound to take matters into his own hands.”

*Is he baiting me?* Nihlus couldn’t tell. If it was on purpose, it sure worked. A bitter anger was starting to burn in his chest.

“I was supposed to get you to secure the west warehouse, and Dinara the east, while the police entered the main building. It looked like a fine plan on paper, and Malivian didn’t think a stupid bureaucrat with a stick up his ass would bother checking the satellite footage unless instructed to. But I did. And there was another building—”

“—to the north,” Nihlus said in unison with him. He remembered it as if it had been yesterday.

Thadon nodded. “I couldn’t tell you to go there and check it out, you understand. But I could tell you *not* to.”

“Spirits.” Nihlus swept a hand over his face. The anger retreated in front of astonishment. Could he have been so stupid? He couldn’t remember the orders word for word but they were *so* specific, so perfectly tailored to make him look like an incompetent idiot incapable of doing anything without being hand-held, that there was no fucking way he could’ve just taken them. In refusing to be used like a blunt tool, he had allowed Thadon to play him like a fine-tuned instrument instead. Way to go, Kryik, my man. Way to go.

“And you didn’t stop there, did you,” he said. “You manipulated the living shit out of me.” He laughed, surprising himself. How could he have been so blind? “All those stupid vectors and waypoints and arguments over directing my every fucking step. All the shitty missions in random parts of the jungle.” It was hilarious. “And still we somehow got to see more action than any other squad and—and I was stupid enough to think it was because I’m just so fucking good at it!”

Thadon watched him until the laughs subsided. “You *are* fucking good at it,” he said slowly. “Everything depended on you being fucking good at it. If I had the authority to send you north of the Ibiss, we would’ve found the Shithole months ago. But I didn’t. All I could do was deploy you to locations that wouldn’t arouse suspicion, *encourage* you,” he used air-quotes, “to deviate from the deployment pattern, and let you take the blame when the shit hit the fan.”

Nihlus stared at him a long time, unsure how he felt about any of it anymore. “Why couldn’t you just tell me? I could’ve helped you. More than I did, I mean. Like this.” He gestured helplessly.

“Tell you what, though? That I thought the G—Malivian was dirty? I didn’t have anything to show for it. And let’s face it: you hated my guts since the first time we spoke and the... situation with Theeka wasn’t helping. You’d have laughed in my face at best, and accused me of mutiny at worst.”

He had a point. But now a new thought occurred to Nihlus and made his skin crawl. “Did she know?”

“Spirits, no.”

Nihlus exhaled with relief. “Yeah, that would’ve been some act.” He laughed again, remembering. “If only you knew how many times we argued over you. She insisted you weren’t the dim fuckwit I thought you were. Hey,” he lifted a hand in defense when Thadon gave him a warning glance. “You’ve done that yourself, remember? Everything played out according to your tidy little script. You motherless bastard.”

Thadon tucked his mandibles in and crossed his arms over his chest. “Not everything.”

“Right,” Nihlus said, connecting the remaining dots. “Saren stole your thunder, didn’t he? He came out of nowhere and just messed everything up for you.” He struggled to hold back the hysterical glee. “But why were you so bent against me going with him?”

“Because,” Thadon sighed, “you’re an asset. A valuable one. Malivian couldn’t tolerate a Spectre sniffing around any more than Wortag could. Together, they stood a good chance of getting rid of him quietly. And you’d have gone down with him.” He paused. “And all your men too.”

Ah. Theeka. Indeed, not everything had worked out for Thadon. “Did you tell her all this after we came back? Is that why she left?”

“It wasn’t the only reason. But yes.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why tell her? I mean, you’re obviously an accomplished liar. You could’ve just... and why tell me?”

“Eh.” Thadon looked at his busy screens and pushed his envelope a bit more to the left, until it was neatly aligned with the edge of the desk. “I don’t *like* what I’ve done any more than you do. At first I wasn’t especially bothered. But after a few months of observing you... and of listening to Theeka’s incessant praises of you... I started feeling your resentment like a hand around my windpipe. I started to resent myself.” He fell silent for a moment, then laughed mirthlessly. “I was this close to telling you half a dozen times. But then you’d barge in, pissed-off and self-righteous, wearing that filthy hard-suit like a badge of honor and looking at me with murder in your eyes.”

That was a bit overboard, perhaps, but not untrue. Nihlus did enjoy harassing the paper-pushers in the HQ with his jungle manners, and never missed an opportunity to leave muddy footprints on their polished floors. And who knows what his face had looked like when he reported to Thadon, high on stims and simmering with testosterone, half his brain busy replaying his latest fantasy about tying Theeka to a tree and fucking her senseless, and the other directing a new one about smashing Thadon’s face into a bloody pulp before he could take half his monthly pay, once again, for some minor breach of protocol.

“Hardly a setting for civilized discourse,” Thadon concluded. “But I felt guilty anyway. You would’ve prospered under a different—a *better* commander. I wronged you. I wronged Theeka too, though in a different way. And I’ll pay for it, by losing you both. I’m telling you... in the hope you’ll learn something from it.”

Nihlus snorted. “Bullshit.”

Thadon’s browplates went up. “Excuse me?”

“You didn’t invite me here to enlighten me, but to gloat. After years of scheming in the background, you felt entitled to an audience at last. Someone to hear the epic tale of your heroic sacrifice and sympathize.” Nihlus looked around the lofty office, the couch and the armchairs and the antique drink cabinet. “My heart weeps for you, truly.”

Thadon became very still, obviously struggling to resist the taunt. Nihlus smiled at him patiently, while his mind wandered off. He didn’t know what time it was. If he left early enough, he could go back to Trodar and see if that cute guy, what was his name, still worked the third shift at the gates. Maybe Nihlus could get him to let him in and... and...

*Black...*

*Black...*

“I think we’re done here,” Thadon said after a long silence during which his mandibles must have cramped, the way he kept them pressed. “Thank you for coming, and for listening. I feared you’d be...”

“Pissed off?”

“You’d have every right to be.”

“Oh, I’m pissed off alright. It just hasn’t... settled yet.”

Something like alarm glinted in Thadon’s eyes and Nihlus grinned with unhidden malice. There you go, fuckwit. A hand on your windpipe to dream about, free of charge. Compliments of your marionette extraordinaire, Nihlus Fucking Kryik.

“For what it’s worth, Nihlus,” Thadon said, getting up, “I always admired and respected you. I know you won’t believe it, but I think we could’ve been friends in some other life. I hate to lose you.”

Nihlus stood up too. He wanted to say something ugly on topic of being friends, but he found he didn’t have it in him. “I’m not a fan of being lost myself, to be honest.”

The reality of having nowhere to go pressed down on him with renewed vigor. Would it be below him to ask Thadon for some money? The man *had* declared, several times during the conversation, an interest in Nihlus’s welfare, and he certainly wouldn’t miss a couple hundred credits.

As if reading his mind, Thadon gave him an incomprehensible half-smile and said, “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.” He then poked at his control panel and spoke to someone over the comm. “He’s ready. Come in.”

Nihlus heard the door open behind him and turned to see two expressionless MPs closing in on him.

## Chapter 23 - Honey Moon

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Okeer lounged in the massage chair. It was like a water bed, only it wasn't water but some kind of soft memory foam, and it molded to the back side of his body down to the pores on the skin. It poked and prodded in all the right places and shivers of pleasure went through him in a continuous stream. The only thing he'd change about it was the purring noises that reminded him of turian voices.

Jedore walked past him. Her silken robe brushed his hand and the trail of her fruity perfume brushed his face. Her long hair hung in heavy ropes, still wet after bathing. She had some snack in one hand and a tiny bottle of something that looked like turian face paint in another. Why the fuck was his every second thought about turians?

There was a large, leather sofa facing the chair from the other end of the brightly lit cabin, flanked by two armchairs arranged around a low tea table that looked like it was carved out of one monumental slab of jade. Her tiny bottle chimed when she set it down on the polished stone surface. She took a bite of her snack, then nestled herself between the pillows.

"Oh," she said with a full mouth. "You're naked."

"Never seen a naked man before?"

"Never seen krogan quads before." She took another bite and stared unscrupulously at his crotch while she chewed. "Not in person, anyway."

"Wanna take a closer look?" He wriggled his hips, sinking deeper into the foam.

"Eww."

Okeer laughed, stretching. His injuries and aches were but a distant echo. Jedore's ship—the real thing, not the 'bathtub' that was parked down in the hangar—was a pleasure yacht. Armed to the teeth, sporting frigate-class shields and a fleet of combat mechs, but still. The massage chair was only one of several amenities he'd tried out, and he was far from exhausting the supply. There was a small pool, a sauna, a shooting range, an overstocked gym where Jedore spent most of her time. Three or four implanted asari slaves. He found that a bit distasteful, but not enough to refuse their attentions. It was nice to be pampered. He had deserved it.

Having eaten her snack, Jedore shook the little bottle and started applying the paint on her baby-toenails. The paint was a bright red, the color of human blood. Okeer watched her while his chair purred. The snack had left a trail of white powder on her upper lip.



“So,” she said. “We’ve got another couple hours in FTL and then I’ll drop you off on this asteroid thing in Nelchior Beta. There’s a minagen lab there and the security is pretty tight. I told them to make you some space and provide you with any equipment you need. I’ll also leave you some pocket money in case they don’t have what you need.” She glanced at him, pausing her beauty work for a second. “What *are* you gonna need?”

Okeer laced his fingers behind his head and sighed, searching the ceiling for ideas. “I don’t know. Haven’t had the time to think about the practicalities yet. Pretty sure I’ll need samples, though.”

“What samples?”

“Krogan samples.”

Jedore finished one foot and lowered it carefully on top of her fluffy slipper, planting the other on the tea table. “You mean, like, fluids? Body parts? Or more like lab animals? The uhm... what’s the word.”

“Specimens.”

“Yeah. Specimens. Oh,” Jedore added after half a minute. “I guess that was kinda racist. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s what they are. Animals. The young ones, at least. The ‘new generation’. Bah.”

She made some mistake and cursed, then busied herself fixing it. “To be honest,” she said after getting the situation under control again, “I don’t know if that place is equipped to, like, hold live krogan. Maybe we stick to samples for now, hm? And later, when I find us a suitable place, I’ll get you as many live, young krogan as you want.”

“The most suitable place would be Tuchanka, but I suppose that’s off the table.”

“Yeah, that’d be tough. I can look into it, though. Very few things credits can’t buy, if your project shows promise.”

Okeer peered at her. “How come you’re so loaded?”

“What? Oh.” She laughed. “It’s not me. I’m just a messenger. Vido is the one with the money.”

“Vido?”

“Uh, yeah. You know. The head of the Blue Suns.” She stared at him, waiting for signs of recognition, but none were forthcoming. That slimy bitch, Arnea, who he had inadvertently saved from getting spaced by batarian pirates that tried to kidnap the freighter

taking Okeer to Omega, oh, some two-hundred-thirty years ago, was his only contact in the Blue Suns, and he hadn't had time to study the organization's brief but undoubtedly hilarious history yet. "Anyway," Jedore said, "his resources are pretty much infinite. But he doesn't like wasting them. So, uhm... when can we expect the first krogan babies?"

"I can give you one right now." Okeer wriggled his hips some more, but Jedore was unfazed. "Eh," he mumbled, straightening himself up as much as the chair would allow. "It's too early to tell. I know what I want to achieve but I only have a vague idea on how to go about it. I'll need to do some research before there are any... tangible results."

"Alright. And when might that be?"

Okeer deadpanned at her. He had expected questions like this, but being interviewed for a research grant by a half-naked human girl sporting sugar mustache while painting her toenails was bizarre beyond anything in recent memory. "In a year," he said. "Give or take. In ideal conditions."

She gazed at him for a few more beats. Then she nodded and focused on finishing her other foot in silence. Okeer mused. A year was probably optimistic, but he'd worry about that later. To begin with, he'd need as many DNA samples as possible. That was obtainable without acquiring actual owners of the DNA. On the other hand, he'd also need biomass, further down the line. And it might be interesting to compare his... offspring... to the 'new generation'. He'd devise tests. Not the kind that could be run in a lab, of course. He would build proving grounds. If not on Tuchanka, then some place equally hostile. Radiation, high gravity, thin air. Bad planets were plentiful. Like Invictus, ha! Oh, that would be glorious.

He was about to voice this new idea when Jedore spoke without looking up from her work. "Tell me, old man: how *did* you get your grubby hands on STG research?"

"Your ass is grubby."

Jedore laughed. She leaned back on the sofa and lifted her feet up on the tea table. "Oh, come on. I bet it's a great story. Who you gonna tell it to if not your partner in crime?"

"Hm." Okeer felt down the side of the chair for the control buttons and upped the intensity a bit. Oh, yeah. Right there. "Alright," he said. Why not. He did love telling stories.

Jedore clapped her hands in glee. She looked not a day older than fifteen. Okeer shook his head and took a deep breath.

"You remember that turian cunt from Invictus? The one with the silver face?"

"Saren Arterius, the Spectre."

“That one. He contacted me a bit over a year ago, and made me an offer that was just too good to pass up. I was to break into this lab on Sur’Kesh and steal this data. He was to take care of the security. Get me in and get me out again. We’d each take a copy of the data and go our merry way. Of course I agreed. It was the break I’d been waiting for my whole damn life.” He paused, remembering. “I never found out why *he* wanted it. And not for the lack of trying. I couldn’t dig up anything on him.”

“Well, yeah. That’s pretty much what *Spectre* means.”

Okeer grumbled. “Especially a dirty one. That’s why he needed me: to stay clean himself. He couldn’t just hire some random mercs because nobody would ever believe that some random mercs managed to pull it off without help from the inside. And he didn’t want anyone *looking* for help from the inside, get it? Because it was important that he stays clean. So important, in fact, that he made *double* sure of it. He found this aged salarian who defected from the STG years back and went to Tuchanka to ‘do good deeds’ or whatever. You know. Right their wrongs. Not the first, and probably not the last specimen affected with racial guilt. And rightly so. Anyway, Marash was to go with me and be seen, and be found dead later so that if anyone *did* look for help from the inside, they didn’t have to look far.”

“Devious son of a bitch.”

“My thoughts exactly. So why, I started wondering, would he go through all that trouble to hide his trail, only to leave a krogan-sized loose end behind?”

Jedore was nodding. “He meant to kill you.”

“He meant to kill me. We were supposed to meet in the Serpent Nebula, just out of the Pranas relay. But I just drove past the rendezvous point, hehe. Of course, I arranged for some safety measures first. I made Marash encrypt the data so it couldn’t be recovered if I got killed. And I modified the mass effect drive of the ship that Saren provided for me, so she’d fly faster than his old bucket. I went to Invictus, dragging him along. And the rest is history.”

“Wait,” Jedore said. “That mean he’s still on your tail?”

“Probably.”

“That’s not ideal, you know.”

Okeer shrugged. “It’s a big Galaxy, kid. How’s he gonna find me? I don’t intend to go around advertising.” Unless, of course, the Blue Suns proved to be as unsupportive as the Blood Pack. “Not that anyone who matters would take me seriously anyway, since I have no proof, just tall tales.” He snorted, remembering the conversation with Saren on Invictus. The snake had been right, of course. Regardless, he would have surely been

much happier if he had managed to off Okeer planetside and be done with it. Okeer knew his type. The pedantic, perfectionist, anal-retentive type. Knowing Okeer was still alive would be a thorn in his side for the rest of his sad, little life. Hehe.

“Don’t spread the word among your people,” he concluded. “Make up some name for me and say I’m some chemist working on a new drug, or something. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Stroking her chin, Jedore finally felt the sugar coating around her mouth and brushed it off. “I guess,” she drawled. “Oh, I know! I’ll call you Dave. Can I call you Dave? Dave was my favorite teddy-bear.”

Okeer chuckled. “Whatever turns you on.”

## Chapter 24 - Sanctuary

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Saren jumped when the doorbell rang. The setting sun painted the cockpit with dense, gold rays. Dust motes danced in them. Saren sniffed the warm, stuffy air. There was a floral scent in it. The glass-wiping fluid. Traces of wiping, likely no more than a molecule-thick, fogged the main control panel when viewed in this light, from this angle. He blinked his sticky eyes open and unglued his sweaty back from the pilot chair's overly enthusiastic embrace with a groan. How long had he slept? The light had been a completely different color the last time he'd seen it.

The bell rang again. He stood up and stretched, then tapped the unlock command on the control panel. He knew who it was. The outer hatch opened, then closed; he couldn't quite hear it from the bridge but he could feel it through the fuselage. The airlock cycle would take a few seconds. He straightened his shirt and took one last critical look around. The inner door opened when he was halfway up the stairs.

"Hello?" said a familiar voice.

Saren schooled his smiling face before emerging into the commons. Kryik was still inside the airlock, leaning on the doorway and looking around, wide-eyed.

"Come in," Saren said with half a day's silence rasp. He cleared his throat. A lump of nerves was coiling in his gut.

Kryik stared at him as if he had never seen him before. Probably caught off guard by Saren's civilian persona as much as Saren was by his. He wore faded cargo pants, a tight, sleeveless shirt and a pair of worn boots. A soft leather jacket was folded over the large, but rather empty-looking army bag that hung from his left hand. The casual clothing enhanced his youthful features. Smooth skin and long neck and sparkling eyes. He looked no older than twenty.

After what seemed a long time to think about it, he pushed himself away from the doorway and carefully stepped inside the commons. The airlock eagerly closed behind him, giving him a start.

"It's alright," Saren said.

Kryik looked back at the door. "Yeah. Been in the jungle too long. Damnedest things make me jump." He shook out his shoulders as if trying to relax, then faced Saren again and studied him. "So. How are you?"

Saren blinked, taken aback. He hadn't had time to think about what he'd say. He had planned to think about it once he returned to the Virial, as he'd been too busy during his

brief stay in Hierote. But circumstances had conspired against it. "I'm... fine," he said. There was an awkward pause. "And you? Have all your injuries healed?"

"Injuries? Oh, right. Yeah, I'm good. There was nothing serious. Just sprains and bruises. Which I have you to thank for. Not the sprains and bruises," he hurried to add, "but the 'nothing serious' part. I'm pretty sure I'd be dead right now if not for that bit of training with you before the Shithole. So uh... thanks."

Saren nodded, trying to think of a way to reply in kind and give Kryik his thanks without getting too personal. After all, much of what Kryik had done to impress him *had* been his duty, despite the persistent sense that there had been more to it. Going *beyond* the call of duty, to ensure the success of the mission and preserve his life, was what Saren felt grateful for.

But his deliberations took too long.

"Did you uhm... send for me?" Kryik said, cringing. "You did, right? Please tell me you did. If this was some sick joke, I'll strangle him, I swear to—"

"I did," Saren said. Kryik seemed determined to make this as awkward as possible. And Saren didn't know how to prevent him.

But Kryik closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief that was surely exaggerated. "Thank the Spirits," he said. "For a second there I thought... never mind." He cleared his throat and gave Saren a stiff smile. "Thank you. It's gonna sound weird but I uh... sort of expected it? Well, hoped for it. Ok, I *wished* for it." He closed his eyes again and shook his head, muttering something like, *shut up, Kryik*. "But then I stopped when... you know. Days passed and not a word."

"I was busy."

He could have said more. He could have told Kryik that he had been buried so deep in administrative duties these few days that what little time he had for himself, he spent sleeping like a corpse. That he had only taken his armor off a few hours ago. Not to mention the extraordinary stress this entire mission had put him through, and the unexpected emotional turmoil he had suffered in its wake. Yet throughout it all, he never stopped thinking about Kryik, about his remarkable intuition, composure in combat, and last but not least, the strange and pleasant sense of kinship.

But he didn't, and after a while, Kryik spoke to fill the silence. "Yeah. That must have been some mess to clean up." In a gesture that had become familiar, he rubbed the back of his neck. "And I know I don't have a claim on your time, so yeah. Forget I said that. Well, remember the thanks. I meant that. I just... It's been a rough few days, is all."

The tension radiating from him was affecting Saren too. He wanted to invite Kryik to sit and relax, but there was only one chair, behind the work-bench, and the couch facing the conferencing projector was much too low and soft for a professional conversation.

“What did the Major tell you?”

“Ugh. A bunch of stuff.” Kryik huffed and shook his head. “Some of it un-fucking-believable. Do you know—” he peered into Saren with a sudden and almost hostile intensity—“that he was using me? To get to the General? The ex-General, I mean. I bet the fucker bragged about it.”

Saren sighed. He had asked only because he wanted to know if the Major had given Kryik any clues on what to expect here, and now he regretted it. He didn’t want the conversation to stir anywhere near Baratus. He was far enough outside his comfort zone as it was.

“I know only as much as I could piece together on my own,” he said. “There was no bragging in my presence. In fact, the Major was remarkably reticent when it came to you and your mutual friend, Theeka. Both in person and in the official report. I let it slide. Otherwise there’d be a permanent stain on her record.”

“Her record,” Kryik echoed. “What about *my* record?”

“What about it?”

“Oh, come on. Don’t pretend you don’t know. Everyone got promoted or transferred or what have you, and I got kicked out. Relieved of duty until further notice. ‘I hate to lose you, Kryik, but it wasn’t my decision.’”

Despite obvious distress, Kryik managed a decent and quite comical impression of the Major.

Saren smirked. “Is that what he said?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what he said.” Kryik’s mandibles were drawn so tight Saren could hear them grind against his chin as he spoke. “And then a pair of MP dicks in hard-suits picked me up, tucked me in a sky-car, and drove me here, all with the emergency beacons. I think they’re still out there,” he pointed behind his back.

Saren had told the Major to bring Kryik to his ship, and the Major had followed the instructions to the letter. Literally. A parting gift for his favorite soldier. This at least answered the question of whether Kryik knew what to expect.

“So,” Kryik said when Saren didn’t comment. “Whose decision was it, then? Yours?”

“Yes.”

Kryik recoiled as if slapped. “But—why? For once, I did everything by the fucking book. I was so *hyped* about working with you. I was totally up for *dying* for you. You must know that.”

Saren nodded, and took breath to interject, but that didn’t prevent Kryik from carrying on.

“I thought we had a thing, you know? What with the Hallori and the lessons and—and then I thought I hallucinated it ‘cos you were leaving without saying goodbye and that was like the worst thing but I guess it’s not. This is—”

“Kryik.”

“—so much—”

“Shut up.”

And he did, for a moment, but then he opened his mouth to continue.

Saren held a hand up and raised his voice. “Kryik.”

He closed his mouth with a deliberate click. Silent taunts glinted in his eyes like hidden blades. If a random passer-by in the Wards looked at Saren that way he’d be liable to shoot them preemptively.

“I told the Major to relieve you of duty because you can’t take orders from the army while you’re under my command. It’s the only way to avoid complications with jurisdiction, apart from having you discharged.”

Kryik’s mouth opened and closed a few times while his free hand pointed hesitantly there and back again. “Under your command?”

“Yes.” Saren’s jaws ached with tension. This wasn’t the most promising beginning. “When I looked over your service record, I noticed that you filed multiple applications for the Spectre program, the latest dated two months ago. Assuming you’re still interested, I registered you as a candidate under my supervision. In hindsight—”

Kryik’s bag slipped from his fingers and hit the floor. It sounded heavier than it looked.

“—perhaps I should have—”

“Spectre training,” Kryik said. “With you?”

Saren closed his eyes and exhaled sharply through his nose. “Lesson number three, Kryik. I don’t like being interrupted.”

“Sorry, sir.” He shook his head as if he’d been punched. “Uh... was that a yes?”



Was it that difficult to imagine? Had he been so taciturn that *none* of his approval had come across? He needed to work on his execution. “Yes.”

“I can’t—I don’t—how did—” Kryik stopped the stammer by shutting his eyes for a few seconds and taking a deep breath. “Can you please explain this to me like I was a five-year-old?”

Saren searched his eyes for signs of mockery or mischief, but all he found was genuine bafflement. Yes, he should have definitely asked first.

“With experienced intelligence operatives or high-ranking military officers,” he started to explain, “candidacy takes the form of evaluation by a senior agent over a brief period comprising a few missions. Candidates of exceptional ability but with limited experience, such as you, are obliged to go through more extensive training. Several months at least.” He hesitated. “I was in training for nearly two years before appointment. But I was younger than you.”

Kryik’s mandibles hung loose. “But how will you—where do I—you realize I don’t have weapons or armor of my own? They took everything. I don’t even have an omni. This,” he kicked his bag, “is all I have to show for after six years of service. And I’m broke. Gambling debts.” He let out a shaky laugh. “I better shut up before you change your mind.”

The only thing he could say to change Saren’s mind, now that everything had been set in motion, was *no*. It didn’t look like he would refuse, but none of his many words had been *yes* either. In theory, Saren had the authority to conscript him. But no one had ever been forced to serve in ST&R. And the thought of forcing Kryik to do anything after all the injustice he had suffered during his brief but turbulent career was offensive. If this failed, Saren would see him reinstated at a post of his choosing and label parts of his file as classified, to protect him against further discrimination. But it wasn’t going to come to that. Was it?

“You would stay with me.” He gestured at the Virial. “This is where I live. There’s room enough. Any equipment you need will be funded through the Spectre program. In fact, I’ve placed some orders already. And there’s a monthly stipend, of course. Roughly equivalent to space corps lieutenant. No one expects you to work for free.”

Kryik laughed. “You want me to move in with you.”

Sudden embarrassment drove heat up Saren’s neck. He hadn’t thought about it that way. “Other arrangements are possible. But that’s the most practical.” He shrugged. “Yes.”

No longer able to keep his emotions under control, Kryik grimaced and turned his back to Saren, draping a hand over his mouth.

Saren bit his mandible. What now? He waited—for a long time, it seemed—trying to put his heavy heartbeat out of his mind. “It was a mistake to spring this on you,” he said, finally losing his nerve. “If you need time to think about it—”

Without warning, Kryik spun on his toes, closed the distance between them, and clung to Saren, hitting him with enough momentum to set them both off balance. Saren groped for the bulkhead behind him. Kryik’s face, warm and wet, lodged itself in his collar.

Saren held on to the bulkhead like his life depended on it. Taut as a drawn bow, he felt ready to snap clean in half.

“I didn’t hallucinate it,” Kryik said with a broken voice.

But then he laughed. Surprising himself, Saren laughed too. The tension drained from him as if someone had opened a tap on his soul. By degrees, he relaxed into Kryik’s clumsy embrace and finally released the bulkhead so he could clap his sweaty shoulders.

“No,” he said. “You didn’t.”

## Chapter 25 - Anchored

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Nihlus took a long shower. Real long. Half an hour, or more. It didn't matter, while they were docked, Saren had said. They'd be leaving soon, though. They'd talk about the details later, he said. He mentioned the name of the place but Nihlus had forgotten it within five seconds. His mind was all jumbled up. He couldn't recall that tune that had been on constant replay in his head for days, and he struggled to keep track of the damnedest things. Like whether he'd already washed under his crest or not. He looked at the soap dispenser, and—

Eventually, Saren had peeled him off and sat him down on the only chair in the room. The shakes were pretty bad, but he didn't care. He had questions, so many questions! Only, all his language had slipped away. So he just sat there, gaping around at... his new home.

The soap. It was there. What was he...? Oh, right. Wash under the crest. It had a gentle minty aroma. But that wasn't *it*. Every item in the tiny bathroom was a Palaven rain pine suspect until thoroughly sniffed. In his current state of mind, he'd forget about it by the time he's out of the shower. But he'd be reminded of it as soon as he found himself near Saren again. Which would be daily now. Spirits.

Saren had made him tea. Tea! Nihlus hadn't had tea since he had left Cordis. Mother used to keep it, but Father never developed the habit and after a while, she quit it too. This was unlike anything he had tasted before, however. It was bluish and bubbly and bitter. It created strange sensations in his mouth. But after half a cup, the shakes had stopped.

They spoke about Thadon then. Saren had a way of saying much in very few words. Not Nihlus, though! Once prompted, he repeated the entire conversation with Thadon down to the letter. With only a few embellishments, honest. Saren listened without interrupting, until at last, Nihlus had said, "He thought it would make a fine learning experience."

"And?" Saren said. "What did you learn?"

Even in this brand new context, it took Nihlus a while to shake off the resentment and think about it in earnest. It was hard, but he did it. For Saren.

"Well," he said, "that pretending to be stupid is an incredibly powerful position in our culture." He had left that line out from his retelling. He blushed, repeating it now.

But Saren seemed to like it. He nodded thoughtfully. "Something to keep in mind when we encounter extraordinarily 'good turians' in the future."

We.

Saren looked at Nihlus and sipped his tea. “Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. That I’m a stupid jarhead who’s easily manipulated.”

Saren didn’t laugh. “You were blinded by emotion.”

“What? Because I hate Thadon’s guts? I don’t think—”

“Not for him.”

“Oh.” *Theeka*. “You think... I couldn’t see him clearly because he was... close to her?”

Saren didn’t say anything. He just sipped his tea.

It made perfect sense. For a moment, Nihlus entertained the monstrous idea that Thadon had gotten close to *Theeka* for the express purpose of blinding him. The timing was right. They only started seeing each other after *Wolta*. He would never know for sure, now. But perhaps that was for the best.

“How *do* you avoid getting manipulated?” he said after a while. “I mean, no one’s manipulated *knowingly*. You’re unaware of it by definition. How can you defend from that?”

“By knowing yourself,” Saren said quietly. He finished his tea and put his cup down on the work-bench. “You must create and maintain a tally of your weaknesses. And never let yourself believe that it is complete, or indeed, finite. All mortal endeavors are flawed, and the inventory of the *self* probably the most.”

Nihlus stared at him, and tears welled up in his eyes again. That was some poetic shit.

“Matriarch *Benezia*,” Saren said. “From *Mapping the Unknown*.”

“Oh.” Nihlus felt irreparably stupid and even more ashamed of nicking Thadon’s line without giving him credit. On second thought, fuck Thadon. “Matriarch who?”

“Finish your tea,” Saren had replied.

Nihlus turned up the heat another notch. Had he...? Yes. The answer to all his personal hygiene questions was surely a resounding yes by now. He better got out before Saren came knocking on the door, imagining slit wrists, or who knows what. *Young Spectre candidate drowns in the shower on his maiden flight*. Or—oh yeah, he had a better one. *Cadet commits suicide by drinking copious amounts of liquid soap after failing first evaluation*. He chuckled, stepping out of the shower cabin. The ventilation fan droned at its maximum frequency but the vapor was thick enough to cut into cubes. He cast around for a towel, in vain. He’d forgotten to ask about that. How surprising.

After tea, Saren had given him a tour of the ship. The Virial. A something-class corvette. Nihlus had warned him right then and there that he'd have to repeat all those new words to him when he was a bit more himself. Saren said it didn't matter, but Nihlus got a sense that it did. There was a mean-looking terrain vehicle parked in the cargo hold, but Nihlus only got a glimpse of it. The 'this is off limits' room must have been where Saren slept because there wasn't a single bunk anywhere else.

Nihlus wiped the fog from the mirror. "Nihlus Kryik, Spectre candidate," he said aloud, and laughed. No way. No way this was happening. It was some weird, lucid dream. Perhaps he'd inhaled some of the toxin from the Shithole—though they said it was engineered to target specifically krogan—and he was still in the jungle, doubled up in the bush somewhere, twitching and drooling, while the fight went on without him. He wiped more of the mirror. It wasn't large, but it would do. Stepping back a bit, he could see all the way down to his waist. But of course, he had forgotten to bring his bag.

When they had gotten to the bridge, Nihlus was terrified that Saren would start explaining all the ship functions to him. Fortunately, Saren had run out of steam at that point too. Or something like it. It was as if someone had suddenly unplugged him. Like uttering another word would have sucked away at his very life. Nihlus inquired about the shower then, careful to ask only yes-no questions.

He opened the bathroom door and worried at the interminable expansion of the fog into the narrow hallway and further. The cold air that rolled in to replace it made him shiver. He was about to step out when he saw it. His bag was there, right next to the door. And—a towel. He picked it up, more convinced than ever that he was dreaming. It was large and heavy, a bit threadbare, with alternating lines of white and fading blue. Nihlus dived into it nose-first and inhaled. It smelled fresh and clean and it was the most thoughtful thing anyone had done for him since he had left home. The notion of what was happening to him threatened to overwhelm him again. The sheer size of it dwarfed stars and clusters and galaxies.

Now, now, Kryik, he censored himself. We had quite enough of that for the day, thank you very much. He draped the towel over his shoulders, grabbed the bag, and retreated into the relative warmth of the bathroom. The mirror needed more wiping. He used a corner of the towel, then devoted some undivided attention to unearthing his smallest, yet most valuable possession from the bag. It had been half a year since he had last refreshed his colors, and even then he had only done the face, because he hadn't had the energy for the rest. The pattern was barely discernible below the neck.

Not that he needed to see it in order to paint it. He applied himself this time. Little by little, the frenzy of his thoughts and newly-formed memories quieted down and his mind emptied. He did the face last. A new man emerged, no joke. "Nihlus Kryik, Spectre candidate," he said again. He didn't laugh this time. It actually sounded pretty damn hot.

The engines came to life just as he was packing his things back. He went out shirtless, to let the paint dry. It was dark in the hallway, with only the floor lights on. An appetizing smell was coming from upstairs, but he resisted it and went to the bridge. He left his bag where he had found it, next to the bathroom door. The question of where he'd sleep and keep his handful of personal items hadn't been broached yet. It didn't matter. He'd happily sleep on the floor.

Saren was already strapped in the pilot chair. He glanced at Nihlus reflexively, registering the motion, and was about to return his attention to the preflight sequence, when he realized something was different. The surprise on his face was priceless.

Nihlus smiled. "You like?"

Saren took his time to study the fresh markings. His gaze felt like a physical thing, tickling Nihlus's plates. "Did you design the pattern?"

"No, sir. My mother. She was an accomplished artist."

"I imagine it takes quite a bit of artistry just to apply it."

"Uhm... Yes, sir. I suppose it does." In truth, Nihlus would never trust anyone else to do it. But he didn't want to come across as pompous.

"Impressive."

"Thank you, sir."

Saren turned back to the controls. "Drop it, Kryik."

"Sir?"

"Saren will suffice."

"Oh." *Ohh.* Was that even legal? He could no more imagine casually saying 'Saren' than hearing Saren casually say 'Nihlus'. Just thinking about it made him blush.

"Sit down and strap yourself in. We're about to take off."

"Yes, sir."

Saren looked at him.

"Sorry, sir." Damn. He laughed. "I'll figure it out eventually."

The passenger chair was behind the pilot chair, in the corner by the door. It looked like it had never been used. Once seated, Nihlus could only see a sliver of Saren's profile. The interior lights went off and the western sky brightened in the viewports, a swat of rich

orange with thin cobalt clouds. A deep tremor went through the floor when the thrusters fired. The world started sinking, and Nihlus relished the sensation of being pressed into the seat, kept in place, getting rooted while reaching skyward. Transplanted from the dusky jungle into cultivated soil where he might actually *grow*.

There was a brief spell of weightlessness as the Virial's mass effect drive went through the calibration cycle. Nihlus struggled to keep his euphoria in check. They picked up speed, racing after the sun on a gentle upward slope. Craning his neck, Nihlus could see Trodar receding into a doll-house, a toy-model, a miniature. Those clouds weren't all that thin up-close. It took half a minute to tunnel through them and emerge above a golden cloudscape.

Nihlus gasped. "Holy shit. It's beautiful." He laughed, ignoring the treacherous tremble in his voice. "Never thought I'd say that about Invictus."

Saren's head turned by a few degrees to acknowledge, but he didn't say anything.

"Oh! Oh, I know just the thing. Sir..." He swallowed and took courage. "Saren."

Spirits, did that come out as husky as it sounded in his head?

Saren remained still. Only his hand, laid on the armrest, slowly curled.

"I'd like to read something to you. A short passage from this uh... book that I liked a lot." Nihlus waved over the auxiliary control panel to his right to wake it up and typed in a quick extranet search. Movement caught his eye while he waited. Saren instructed the ship to cruise at current altitude. Perfect.

"It's not terribly relevant," Nihlus blabbed on, scrolling through the text to his favorite spot. "Except in that the author's name sounds a bit like yours and..." There it was. "Well. It's profound? I can feel its meaning—" he tapped his chest "—but I'd have no idea how to *explain* it."

Saren looked at him.

"Yeah. I'm nervous again. Can't blame me this time, though. This is... important."

"Go on," Saren said.

Nihlus straightened up in the seat and cleared his throat. His heart drummed as if he was about to perform for an audience of thousands. But his voice rang loud and clear and soon he forgot about the fright.

"And as God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speechmaker. The latter has none of the skills of the former. He can only admire, love, take pleasure in the hero. Yet he, too, no less than the hero, is happy; for the hero is, so

to speak, that better nature of his in which he is enamored, though happy that it is not himself, that his love can indeed be admiration. He is the spirit of remembrance, can only bring to mind what has been done, do nothing but admire what has been done. He takes nothing of himself, but is jealous of his charge. He follows his heart's desire, but having found what he sought he wanders round to everyone's door with his song and his speech, so that all can admire the hero as he does, be proud of the hero as he is. That is his achievement, his humble task, this is his faithful service in the hero's house. If he remains thus true to his love, if he struggles night and day against the wiles of oblivion, which would cheat him of his hero, then he has fulfilled his task, he is united with the hero who in his turn has loved him just as faithfully, for the poet is so to speak the hero's better nature, ineffectual certainly as a memory is, but also transfigured as a memory is. Therefore no one who was great will be forgotten: and however long it takes, even if a cloud of misunderstanding should take the hero away, his lover still comes, and the more time goes by the more faithfully he sticks by him."

A long, peaceful silence ensued. Nihlus let the terminal go to sleep and folded his hands in his lap. They were shaking, but he felt calmer than ever.

Saren spun in the pilot chair and faced him. He regarded him a while before he spoke. "Do you fancy yourself the hero? Or the poet?"

Nihlus smiled. "Yes, sir."



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The cover is based on the image "Presence" by Jesus-Tks on deviantArt. The quote Nihlus reads in the last chapter is from Søren Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling", and the song he can't get out of his head in some of the final chapters is "Back to Black" by Amy Winehouse (he misremembers some of the lyrics).